

Iraq row deepens as PM calls for VP handover

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's government marked its first anniversary yesterday in turmoil as its premier urged Kurd officials to hand over the Sunni vice president on terror charges, in a row that has raised communal tension.

Washington has urged calm, but Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki threatened to replace ministers belonging to the Sunni-backed Iraqiya bloc if they did not end a cabinet boycott, while Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, currently holed up in the autonomous Kurdish region, rejected claims he ran a death squad.

Lawmakers are also due to consider a call from Maliki to sack Sunni Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlak, who has decried the Shiite-led national unity government as a "dictatorship".

All this comes just days after US troops completed their withdrawal from the country, leaving behind what US



Nuri al-Maliki

President Barack Obama described as a "sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq."

"We call for the government of the Kurdistan region to... hand over Hashemi to the justice system," Maliki told a news conference in Baghdad. "We do not accept any interference in Iraqi justice."

Maliki also rejected Hashemi's calls for Arab League representatives to observe the investigation and any questioning, telling reporters, "We gave the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein

a fair trial, and we will ensure that a fair trial will also be given to Hashemi," referring to the now-executed Saddam.

He also warned Hashemi and Mutlak's Iraqiya bloc that he would replace the group's nine cabinet ministers if they continued to boycott government sessions.

"Ministers have no right to suspend their membership in the government because they will be considered resigned," Maliki said. "In the next cabinet meeting, if they do not come back, we will appoint replacements."

He added that "if we don't succeed to reach an agreement, we will move towards forming a majority government," as opposed to the current national unity cabinet.

Iraqiya, which has not pulled out of the government, holds 82 of the 325 seats in parliament and controls nine ministerial posts, and had earlier said it was suspending its participation in the legislature.



A young woman holds lottery tickets in front of the famous lottery seller "Dona Manolita" near the Puerta del Sol square in Madrid yesterday. Millions of crisis-hit Spaniards are snatching up tickets for the world's richest lottery draw today, which will shower winners with a record 2.5 billion euros in prizes.

PHOTO: AFP

Son sobs as 'millions' mourn Kim

AFP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday that millions of grief-stricken people turned out to mourn "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-Il, whose death has left the world scrambling for details about his young successor.

The North's propaganda machine has cranked into action to secure the late dictator's legacy and build up the same personality cult for his youngest son Kim Jong-Un, who inherits the world's last communist dynasty.

Television footage broadcast yesterday showed tears streaming down Jong-Un's reddened face as he stood before his father's body.

It lies in state in a glass coffin at Pyongyang's Kumsusan Memorial Palace, surrounded by red Kimjongilia flowers named after the leader.

Egyptians vote after deadly clashes

AFP, Cairo

Egyptians trickled into polling stations yesterday in the run-off of a staggered election marred by clashes between protesters and security forces that have left 14 people dead in five days.

Polling began at 8:00 am in a third of the country's 27 provinces with a visibly lower turnout than in previous rounds, AFP reporters said.

The run-off in the second phase of legislative polls, taking place over two days, will see the two largest Islamist parties go head to head for 59 seats in the lower house.

The ruling military has decided on a complex election system in which voters cast ballots for party lists, which will comprise two thirds of parliament, and also for individual candidates for the remaining third of the lower house.

Yesterday, voters are choosing individual candidates in nine provinces as well as party lists in three provinces where voting was postponed because of administrative problems in the opening phase.

The Supreme Council of the Armed

Forces (SCAF) has repeatedly pointed to the elections, the first parliamentary polls since a popular uprising ousted Hosni Mubarak in February, as proof of its intention to hand power to civilian rule.

The procedure to elect a full assembly ends in March, and presidential elections are expected by the end of June.

The elections have exposed a deepening rift among Egyptians: some see them as the first step to democratic rule, while others say the new parliament -- whose function remains unclear -- leaves control in the hands of the military.

The SCAF has also faced growing outrage over its heavy-handed tactics against demonstrators.

Deadly clashes that erupted on Friday pitting troops and police against protesters demanding an end to military rule have piled pressure on the SCAF, with liberals and Islamists uniting to condemn its handling of the transition.

On Tuesday, the military apologised for attacks on female demonstrators that had prompted local and international outrage.

4 Yemeni troops die in clashes

AFP, Aden

Four soldiers were killed in a third day of fighting in Zinjibar between the army and al-Qaeda-linked militants trying to take over the restive southern city, military officials said yesterday.

"Four soldiers were killed and at least 20 others were wounded" in the battles to retake full control over Zinjibar from fighters of the al-Qaeda linked Partisans of Sharia group late Tuesday, they said.

A local official in the adjacent town of Jaar said meanwhile that nearly 10 extremists were killed in the fighting.

Yemeni government forces have been backed by tribal fighters and sometimes supported by US drone strikes in their fight against the Partisans of Sharia, which has controlled most of Zinjibar since May.

Nepal's 'Super Sherpa' to break Himalayan trail

AFP, Kathmandu

Apa Sherpa, the Nepalese climber who has conquered Mount Everest a record 21 times, announced yesterday plans to embark on a gruelling 1,700 kilometre (1,060-mile) trek across the Himalayas.

The 51-year-old father of three, dubbed "Super Sherpa", will set off in January on the 120-day walk with climber Dawa Steven Sherpa in a bid to raise awareness of climate change.

The expedition, the first official hike along the length of Nepal's Great Himalayan Trail since it opened in September, will take in some of the world's most rugged landscapes and see the duo ascending beyond 6,000 metres (19,600 feet).

"The Great Himalaya Trail is possibly the world's best long-distance walking trail," Apa Sherpa said, describing the adventure as a "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity".

The route extends along the length of



Apa Sherpa

the Himalayas in Nepal, passing in the shadow of eight of the world's 10 highest mountains.

The expedition has been dubbed the Climate Smart Celebrity Trek and the duo said they hoped to be accompanied along parts of their journey by Hollywood and Bollywood stars, although organisers admitted none had yet signed up.

Apa Sherpa, who was born in Nepal but now lives in the United States, first scaled 8,848-metre Everest in 1990.

He has spoken of the dramatic changes to Everest in the past two decades, and after an expedition last year said rising temperatures were making the mountain increasingly dangerous for climbers.

The climber has dedicated his last four ascents to efforts to preserve Everest, which the Sherpa people consider sacred, and this year climbed with a team removing tonnes of rubbish left behind by earlier climbers.

NEWS IN brief

Fukushima reactors may take 40 years to dismantle

AFP, Tokyo

Japan said yesterday that decommissioning the tsunami-wrecked reactors at Fukushima could take as long as 40 years, with melted nuclear fuel possibly stuck where it is for a quarter of a century.

A roadmap produced by the government and plant operator Tokyo Electric Power (Tepco) envisages engineers will use much of the next decade just trying to work out how to get at the fuel, which has partly eaten through its containment vessels.

Underlining the challenges involved in dealing with the disaster, the plan says that as-yet uninvited technology will be key to safely disposing of the waste left behind by the world's worst nuclear accident since

Rajoy sworn in as Spain's prime minister

AFP, Madrid

Spain's King Juan Carlos yesterday swore in new conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, who has vowed urgent action to rescue the country from an economic crisis.

"I swear to fulfil faithfully the duty of the head of government with loyalty to the King, and to safeguard the constitution," Rajoy said in a televised ceremony at the Zarzuela palace.

Rajoy has said he will announce the names of the ministers in his government yesterday evening.

Four killed, 100 rescued in Indonesia boat sink

AFP, Jakarta

Four passengers were killed but 100 others rescued when an overloaded boat filled with Indonesians going home for Christmas sank off the Maluku islands yesterday, a district official said.

"Four people were found dead: two women, an 11-year-old boy and a seven-month baby," Silvester Temmar, head of Maluku Tenggara Barat district in the east of the country, told AFP.

"The remaining 100 passengers have been rescued alive and no one is reported missing."

He said the wooden boat, with a capacity of about 50 passengers, was heavily overloaded and began to



PHOTO: AFP

Syrian regime supporters wave their national flag and hold pictures of President Bashar al-Assad as they celebrate the unveiling of the "Syrian Soldier" statue during a rally in Damascus yesterday.

CAIRO TALKS Palestinians mull reviving parliament

AFP, Cairo

Palestinian factions meeting in Cairo were mulling yesterday ways to reactivate their national parliament, which has been paralysed since 2007 following the split between the West Bank and Gaza.

All the main factions, led by the former rivals Hamas and Fatah, are meeting in the Egyptian capital to thrash out ways of implementing a reconciliation deal that was signed in May but has never been implemented.

Yesterday, they were discussing how to reactivate the work of the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), which has not passed a single law since 2007, when Hamas forced Fatah forces out of Gaza, splitting the Palestinian territories into two rival administrations.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas was to arrive in Cairo later yesterday, as was Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal, with the two expected to hold talks during the evening, officials said.

On Tuesday, delegates had agreed to set up a new electoral commission and also set a deadline for the formation of a caretaker cabinet of independents as envisaged in the May agreement.

During the talks, the factions agreed to form a nine-member Central Election Commission under the committee's current head, Hanna Nasser.

Nato convoy bombed in Afghanistan

AFP, Ghazni

A bomb exploded alongside a Nato convoy in southeastern Afghanistan yesterday, inflicting an unknown number of casualties among troops, a senior police official said.

"At around 11:30 am this morning, an IED exploded next to a foreign military convoy in the Rawza area of Ghazni city," said Ghazni province police chief Dilawar Zahid.

"There have been some casualties but we don't know the exact figure," he added.

A spokesman for Nato's US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) said only that he was "aware of an incident" in Ghazni.

Putin ally heads Russian parliament despite rallies

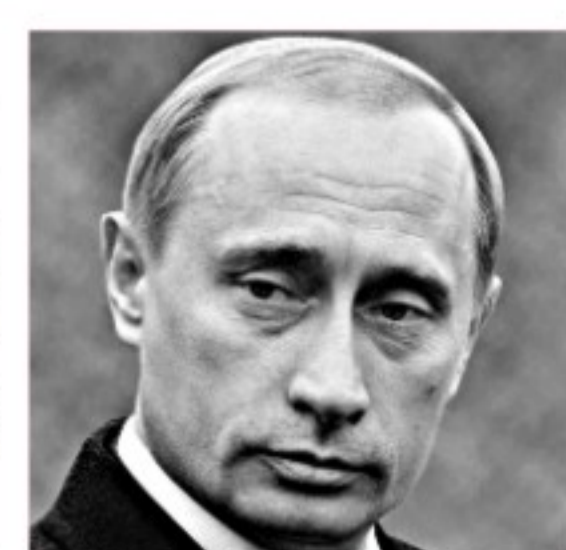
AFP, Moscow

Russia's lower house of parliament yesterday elected a close ally of Vladimir Putin as its new speaker, in defiance of mass protests sparked by opposition claims it was elected in rigged polls.

The State Duma voted in the candidate of Putin's ruling party, the former Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Naryshkin, as its president in its first session of the new parliament.

However after United Russia won less than half the vote in December 4 parliamentary elections and lost 77 seats, while still retaining its majority, the Duma is expected to be somewhat less pliant than in previous years, when it served as a mere rubber stamp for the Kremlin.

The mild-mannered Naryshkin, who like Putin hails from Saint Petersburg, pledged the Duma would operate through consensus



Vladimir Putin

as he faced a barrage of questions from an opposition emboldened by its electoral success.

"I would like to stress: a parliamentary majority is by no means a monopoly," Naryshkin said. "I am in favour of parliamentary debate."

His predecessor, the dour-faced United Russia chairman Boris Gryzlov, who quit the post earlier this month following the mass rallies, was once notoriously quoted as saying that "the Duma is not a place for discussion."

A total of 238 parliament members supported Naryshkin's candidacy in the Duma, where United Russia has 238 out of 450 seats. Eighty-eight voted against him.

Claims of vote fraud in the polls brought tens of thousands out into the streets across Russia earlier this month in the largest show of public anger since the turbulent 1990s.

SYRIA UNREST Opposition urges UN action over 'massacre'

AFP, Damascus

The opposition Syrian National Council urged the UN Security Council and Arab League yesterday to hold emergency meetings after regime forces "massacred" more than 200 people in two days.

Syria, which held war games on Tuesday to test preparedness against an invasion, accused the opposition of pushing for foreign intervention and of trying to sabotage an Arab-brokered deal that allows observers on the ground, but ignoring calls for dialogue.

Reacting to reports of hundreds of civilians being killed this week, the SNC called for an "emergency UN Security Council session to discuss the regime's massacres in Zawiya mountain, Idlib, and Homs, in particular."

It also appealed for an "emergency meeting for the Arab League to condemn the bloody massacres... and cooperate with the United Nations in taking the necessary measures to protect Syrian civilians."

The SNC, a major umbrella group of factions opposed to President Bashar al-Assad, reported "250 fallen heroes during a 48-hour period."

It urged the Security Council to declare the cities and towns under attack "safe zones" that enjoy international protection; and force the regime's forces to withdraw from said areas."

France denounced what it said was the "unprecedented massacre" and urged Russia to accelerate talks for a UN Security Council resolution on the crisis.