

# Homs assault triggers global outrage

*Iran stands firm behind Syria as US says all options open ahead of key meeting*

AGENCIES

The Syrian military pounded rebel-held Sunni Muslim districts of Homs city for the 20th day yesterday, despite international outrage over the previous day's death toll of more than 80, including two Western journalists, activists said.

Tanks pushed into part of the Baba Amro neighborhood which has taken the brunt of the bombardment, activist Abu Imad said.

The plight of Homs and other embattled towns will dominate "Friends of Syria" talks in Tunis today involving the United States, European and Arab countries, Syria's neighbor Turkey and other nations clamoring for President Bashar al-Assad to halt the violence and relinquish power.

Russia, which along with China has vetoed two UN Security Council resolutions on Syria, has said it will not attend.

The White House, which so far has been against military intervention in Syria, yesterday hinted that if a political solution were impossible it might

have to consider other options.

It issued a warning yesterday that all options are on its table if the international community fails to act decisively against the Syrian regime.

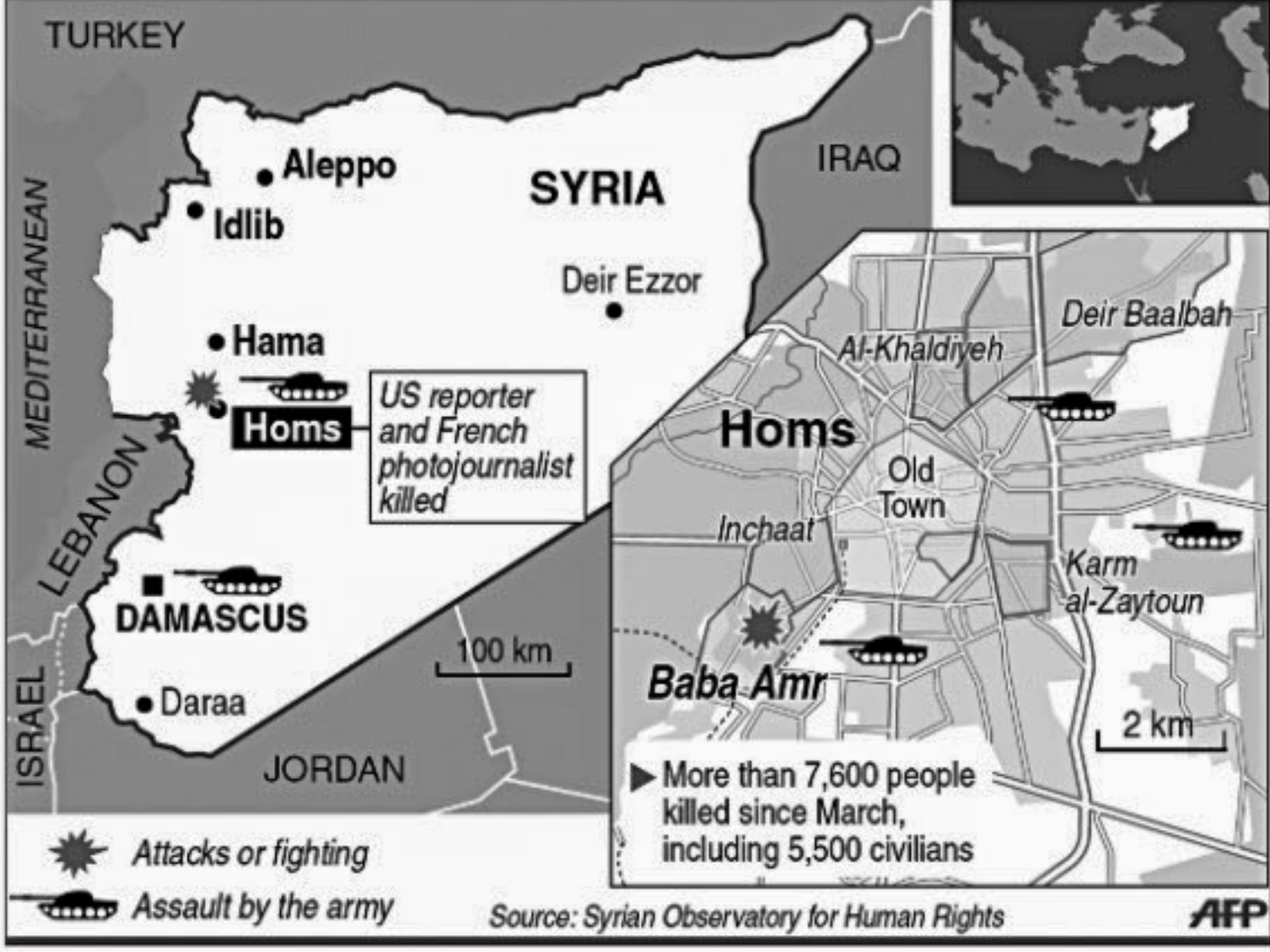
However, such a statement should not be seen as something that the US is looking at some military action, a White House spokesman said, adding that the Obama Administration still believes in use of diplomatic and economic measures to restore normalcy in the country.

He said the US will work with the "Friends of Syria" to help stand them up, to cement its organisational capacity, its unity, so that there is an entity in place as this inevitable transition.

Republican presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich advocated arming Syrian rebels.

"We need to work with Saudi Arabia and with Turkey to say, 'You guys provide the kind of weaponry that's needed to help the rebels inside Syria,'" Romney said.

The warning came as Iran, Syria's



main ally in the Middle East, said it would resist what it deems to be foreign interference by the United States to bring down Assad's regime.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran supports the Syrian government and will oppose those who act against Syria," Ali Akbar Velayati, a top for-

eign policy adviser to supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said in remarks reported by the Fars news agency.

"With the help of the Arabs... America has targeted the most sensitive area of the resistance axis, not knowing that Iran, Iraq and

Hezbollah are firmly standing by Syria," he said saying the attempt to topple the Syrian government will not become reality.

Meanwhile independent UN investigators called for perpetrators of crimes against humanity in Syria to face prosecution and said they had drawn up a confidential list of names of commanding officers and officials alleged to be responsible.

Rockets, artillery and mortar rounds rained on the Inshaat and Baba Amro districts, where Free Syrian Army rebels are entrenched. In the Khalidiya district mosques urged residents to take cover as mortar rounds started falling on the area.

Footage shot by activists in Homs shows smashed buildings, empty streets and doctors treating casualties in makeshift clinics in Baba Amro after nearly three weeks of bombardment.

Several hundred people have been killed in Homs by troops using artillery, tanks, rockets and sniper fire.

## Russia, China reject foreign intervention

AFP, Moscow

Russia and China yesterday rejected pressure to change their position on Syria after vetoing a United Nations resolution condemning the Damascus regime for its bloody crackdown on the opposition.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi to discuss the two powers' future strategy on the crisis, less than a month after the UN Security Council vote.

"The sides reaffirmed the joint position of Russia and China," the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement.

Moscow and Beijing seek "a speedy end to any violence in Syria and the launch of inclusive dialogue between the authorities and the opposition without preconditions for a settlement, and that excluded foreign intervention in Syrian affairs".

The Russian ministry did not spell out what future actions the two countries had agreed to take amid their continued resistance to any foreign military presence in the country.

Western powers have thus far refused to seriously mull military intervention but are considering humanitarian mission to help civilians that may require the protection of a small foreign force.

The decision by the two veto-wielding Security Council members to block the Western-Arab resolution earlier this month sparked widespread condemnation and was followed by renewed onslaughts by Syrian forces on the opposition stronghold of Homs.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev meanwhile called UAE counterpart Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahayan on his second day of telephone diplomacy with regional leaders who have been upset with Moscow's stance.

## Flaw found in fast neutrino story

AFP, Washington

A European experiment that in September showed particles moving faster than the speed of light has been exposed as a mistake due to a faulty wire connection, the US Journal Science said yesterday.

"A bad connection between a GPS unit and a computer may be to blame," said the report on the magazine's website section Science Insider, citing "sources familiar with the experiment."

The initial findings sparked intrigue and skepticism in the scientific community because the discovery, if confirmed, would have been at odds with Einstein's theory of relativity, which has held sway for more than a century.

The neutrinos arrived 60 nanoseconds earlier than the 2.3 milliseconds taken by light, in experiments conducted between the European Centre for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Switzerland and a laboratory in Italy.

Scientists blasted a beam producing billions upon billions of neutrinos from CERN, which straddles the French-Swiss border near Geneva, to the Gran Sasso Laboratory 730 kilometres (453 miles) away in Italy.

Neutrinos are electrically neutral particles so small that only recently were they found to have mass.

The report in Science Insider said the "60 nanoseconds discrepancy appears to come from a bad connection between a fiber optic cable that connects to the GPS receiver used to correct the timing of the neutrinos' flight and an electronic card in a computer.

## US, North Korea hold nuke talks

BBC ONLINE

US and North Korean officials were to meet in Beijing yesterday for talks on Pyongyang's nuclear programme.

The talks are the first since the death in December of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

The US says it wants to find out if the new leader, his son Kim Jong-un, is willing to discuss giving up North Korea's nuclear weapons.

The long-term aim is to restart six-nation talks on disarmament which broke down in 2009.

The talks will be attended by Glyn Davies, the US co-ordinator on North Korea, and Kim Kye-gwan, Pyongyang's veteran nuclear negotiator.

Davies said he hoped to find out more about the direction in which Kim Jong-un planned to take the country.

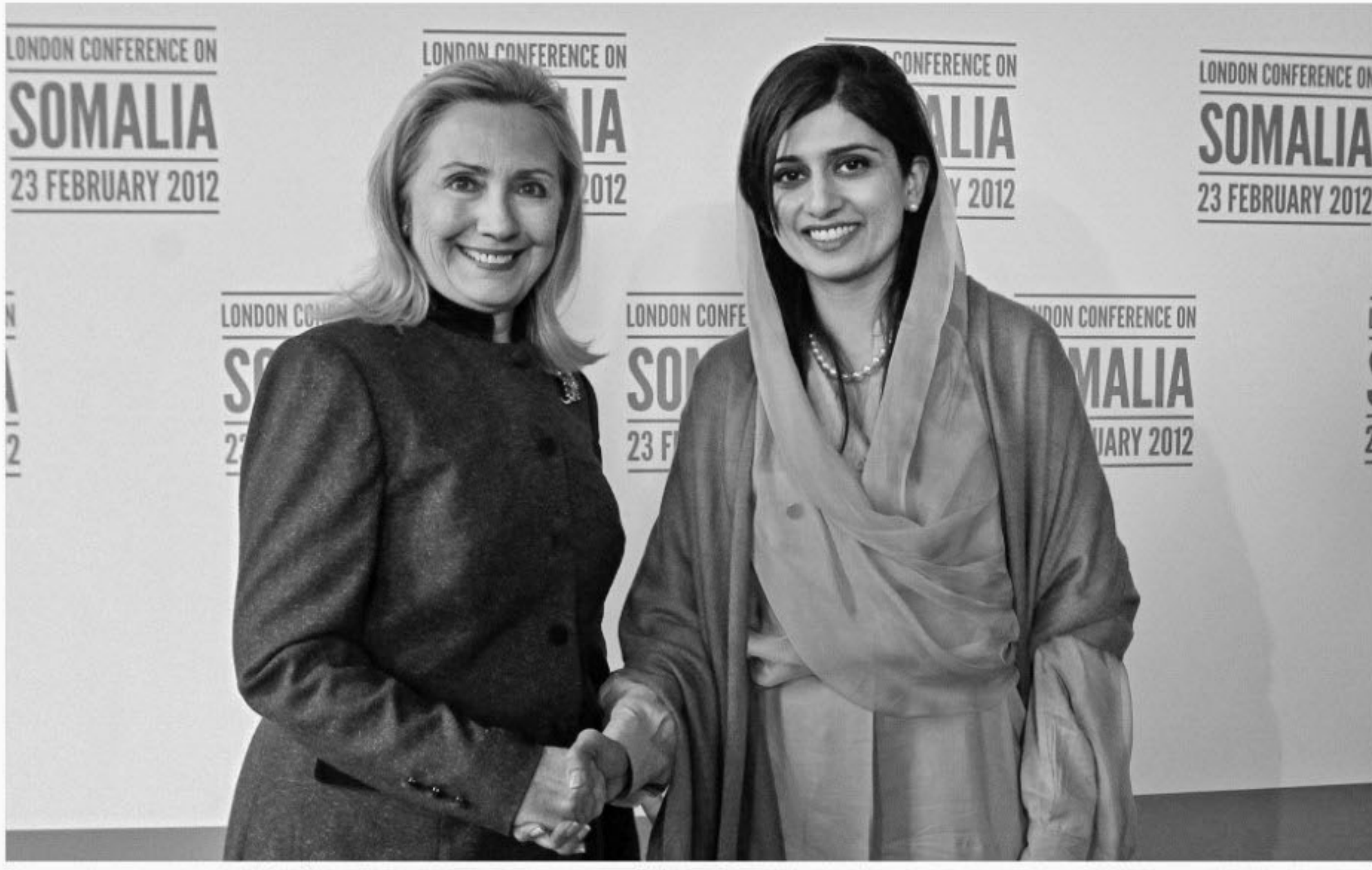


PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, left, poses for pictures with Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar during a Conference on Somalia at Lancaster House in London yesterday. International powers yesterday called for urgent action on Somalia in the meeting, warning that the world will "pay the price" for failing to tackle political unrest, Islamist militants and pirates.

## Putin stages huge support ahead of polls

AFP, Moscow

Russian strongman Vladimir Putin yesterday issued a battle-cry to tens of thousands of supporters packing Moscow's largest sports stadium as he predicted victory in next month's presidential election.

Putin declared in a fiery and nationalist-tinged speech to 130,000 people in the Luzhniki stadium that Russians had victory written into their "genetic code" and would not allow foreigners to meddle in their country's affairs.

Despite the recent protests, Putin is still widely expected to easily win the election, with the main intrigue focused on whether he will be able to win over 50 percent on March 4 and avoid a second round.

## NEWS IN brief

### Cherie Blair sues Murdoch's firm

PTI, London

Cherie Blair, barrister and wife of former prime minister Tony Blair, has sued the now-defunct News of the World over hacking of her phone, joining a host of celebrities and others who have initiated legal proceedings against media baron Rupert Murdoch's company.

Cherie's solicitor Graham Atkins confirmed that a claim had been made "in relation to the unlawful interception of her voicemails" against News International and private investigator Glenn Mulcaire, who was allegedly hired by the closed tabloid to hack into phones of celebrities and others for information to be used in sensational stories."

### DSK freed after sex probe

AFP, Lille

Former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn walked free from a French police station on Wednesday after two days of questioning about a series of sex parties.

Prosecutors said that Strauss-Kahn, once considered the front-runner to become the next president of France, would be summoned to appear before magistrates in March.

His lawyer Frederique Baulieu said his client was "very satisfied" with the probe.

A source close to the inquiry said earlier he would be issued with a summons to appear before the investigating magistrates either to be interviewed as a witness or to face charges linked to prostitution and corruption.

### Actor Saif Ali Khan freed on bail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Bollywood actor Saif Ali Khan was arrested and freed on bail on Wednesday after being accused of breaking the nose of a South African businessman of Indian origin during a brawl at a luxury hotel restaurant in Mumbai.

Khan was released on bail after being questioned about the incident at Colaba Police Station in south Mumbai.

The 41-year-old actor was charged with voluntarily causing grievous hurt, which was a bailable offence.

Khan ran into trouble after the South African businessman Iqbal Sharma registered a case with the police, complaining that he was pushed and punched in the face by the actor at the Taj Mahal Palace hotel's Wasabi Japanese restaurant.

## NEW VISA RULES Foreign students may shun UK, report warns

BBC ONLINE

UK's top universities and schools are in danger of losing their appeal to foreign students due to a new set of visa rules, a report said yesterday.

It says planned government changes to student visas risk deterring legitimate students.

And it warns that students who may once have come to the UK could opt for the US or Canada instead.

A Home Office spokeswoman said the reforms would help stop students coming to the UK to work rather than to study.

The report, Education: A Great British Export, says the changes threaten an industry projected to earn more than £26bn a year for the British economy by 2025.

The authors welcome the crackdown on people who misuse the system, but say it is important to continue to attract legitimate students to the UK.

The changes restrict postgraduate employment in the UK to those with a top degree and a job with an accredited employer paying over £20,000 a year.

Details of the plans were announced last week by Immigration Minister Damian Green.

Hilary Moriarty, national director of the Boarding Schools Association, said: "There will be a knock-on effect on British boarding schools. It is a great shame that Britain isn't proud of offering education to the world.

## UN body bars Sri Lanka diplomat

BBC ONLINE

UN yesterday barred a controversial Sri Lankan diplomat from taking part in deliberations of a committee advising the United Nations Secretary General.

Major General Shavendra Silva led a division of the country's army during its civil war, and is the subject of a US lawsuit accusing him of war crimes.

He was chosen by Asian countries to sit on a UN committee about peacekeeping.

Sri Lanka's 26-year civil war ended in May 2009 with the military's defeat of separatist Tamil Tiger rebels.

Maj Gen Silva and Sri Lanka's UN mission appear to have made no public comment on the exclusion yet.

## Japan builder eyes space elevator

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese construction firm claimed Wednesday it could execute an out-of-this-world plan to put tourists in space within 40 years by building an elevator that stretches a quarter of the way to the moon.

Obayashi Corp claims it could use carbon nanotube technology, which is more than 20 times stronger than steel, to build a lift shaft 96,000 kilometres (roughly 60,000 miles) above the Earth.

The company said it would carry up to 30 passengers at a time and travel at a speed of 200 kilometres per hour for a week, stopping off at a station at 36,000 kilometres.

Tourists would stay there, but researchers and specialists would be able to travel all the way to the end, said Satomi Katsuyama, the project's leader.

"Humans have long adored high towers," she said. "Rather than building

## Attacks on Shias kill 60 in Iraq, raise sectarian fears

REUTERS, Baghdad

Simultaneous early morning attacks on mostly Shia targets across Iraq killed at least 60 people and wounded dozens yesterday in the one of the bloodiest days of violence since US troops pulled out in mid-December.

The attacks that appeared to pitch al-Qaeda-linked Sunni Muslim insurgents against Shias raised fears of a return to the widespread sectarian carnage that tore Iraq apart and cost thousands of lives in 2006 and 2007.

The violence breaks weeks of relative calm as Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and Sunni leaders have sought to resolve a political crisis that followed the US withdrawal.

At least 32 people were killed in blasts in Baghdad where 10 explosions tore through mainly Shia neighborhoods during rush hour and other attacks targeted police patrols, commuters and crowds gathered in shopping areas.

More than a dozen blasts and attacks hit other cities across Iraq from Mosul in the

north to Hillah, south of Baghdad, many of them targeting police.

The violence was aimed at Shia neighborhoods and security forces, a frequent target of Sunni insurgents. Iraqi officials had predicted such groups would try to stir sectarian tensions with attacks after American forces went home.

Iraq's political crisis erupted after Maliki moved against two senior members of the Sunni-backed Iraqiya political bloc shortly after the US troop withdrawal in December.

Tensions eased as Sunni, Shia and Kurdish blocs tried to negotiate an end to the crisis. But a week ago a panel of judges detailed 150 attacks they said were carried out by death squads under Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi's command. Maliki sought Hashemi's arrest in December.

The crisis was followed by a wave of attacks in December and January on Shia neighborhoods, including a suicide bombing on a Shia funeral procession that killed 31 in Baghdad and an attack on Shia pilgrims that left 53 dead in Basra.



## Gillard calls ballot on leadership

BBC ONLINE

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday announced a ballot for the leadership of the Labor Party amid a bitter tussle with Kevin Rudd.

The move comes hours after Rudd, who was ousted as PM by Gillard in 2010, resigned as foreign minister.

Gillard said she would "go to the backbench" and renounce future bids for the leadership if she failed, and called on him to do the same.

Speaking to reporters, Gillard said the ballot would be conducted at 10:00 AEDT on Monday (2300 GMT Sunday).

"We need a leadership ballot to settle this question once and for all," she said, adding that "Australians are rightly sick of this".

She said she anticipated that Rudd "will also be a candidate in this ballot", and said she expected to win both the ballot and the next election, due in 2013.

Rudd announced his resignation at a snap news conference late on Tuesday night in the US capital, where he had earlier met US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton.

The vote call comes after weeks of speculation that Rudd's supporters were planning a leadership challenge. Rudd became prime minister in 2007 in a landslide election win, but he was ousted by Julia Gillard, then his deputy, in June 2010.

it from the earth, we will construct it from the space."

However, while Obayashi says the plan could work, there are presently no estimates for the cost of the structure, nor any idea where to build it, or who

would pay for it.

Obayashi is just days away from completing work on Japan's tallest structure, the Tokyo Sky Tree, which will stand 634 metres (2,080 feet).

The tower will serve as a digital broadcasting antenna as well as a sightseeing attraction that allows uninterrupted views of the Japanese capital and beyond.

"We were inspired by construction of Sky Tree," which will open for business in May, she said. "Our experts on construction, climate, wind patterns, design, they say it's possible."

When Obayashi is not drawing up plans to conquer space it works on a number of projects from building corporate head-

quarters, bridges and power plants to renovating ancient temples.

Among its portfolio are the Dubai Metro in United Arab Emirates, Universal Studios Osaka, Japan, and Stadium Australia, which was used for the Sydney Olympics.