

Blast at Shia mosque kills 42 in Iraq

A suicide bomber made his way into a Shia mosque north of Baghdad and blew himself up in the middle of a packed funeral on Wednesday, killing 42 people and leaving corpses scattered across the floor. The attack, the deadliest in six months, is likely to heighten tensions as Iraq grapples with a political crisis and more than a month of protests in Sunni-majority areas that have hardened opposition to Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

No group claimed responsibility, but Sunni militants often launch attacks in a bid to destabilise the government and push Iraq back towards the sectarian violence that blighted it from 2005 to 2008. The bomber struck at the Sayid al-Shuhada mosque in Tuz Khurmatu, 175 kilometres north of Baghdad, and targeted the funeral of a relative of a politician who was shot dead a day earlier. Niyazi Moamer Ogulu, secretary general of the provincial council of Salaheddin, which surrounds Tuz Khurmatu, put the toll from the attack at 42 dead and 75 wounded. Tuz Khurmatu lies in a tract of disputed territory that Kurdistan wants to incorporate into its autonomous three-province region against the wishes of the central government in Baghdad. The death toll from Wednesday's blast was the highest from a single attack since a series of bombings north of Baghdad on July 23 killed 42 people.

Netanyahu wins poll, suffers blow

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu, stung by a centrist electoral surge, yesterday pledged to seek a broad coalition focused on socio-economic issues, but faced new international pressure on the peace process.

After a bruising election that saw the centrist Yesh Atid party win a surprise second place, Netanyahu said the Israeli electorate had sent a "clear message".

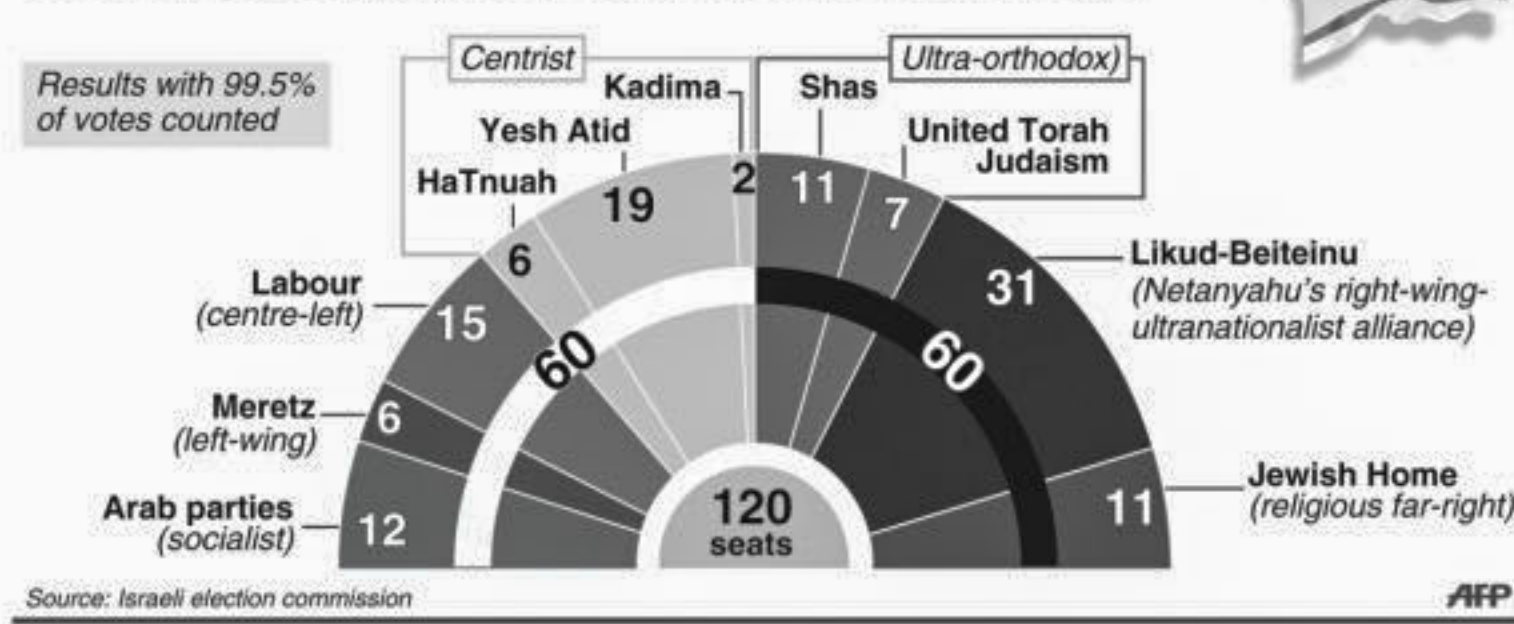
Netanyahu's rightwing Likud won 31 seats on a joint list with the hardline nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu of former foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman, but the Yesh Atid party led by former journalist Yair Lapid claimed second place.

In a nod to the shock showing, Netanyahu said he would try to form "a government which is as broad as possible."

Yesh Atid's performance, just nine months after its creation, has turned Lapid in Israel's newest

Israeli election results

The new Knesset is equally divided between the centre-left and the right



political star. But it is a blow for Netanyahu, who had sought a bulletproof rightwing majority that would give him freedom to manoeuvre on key foreign policy issues including Iran's nuclear programme and peace with the Palestinians.

Lapid's campaign emphasised economic reform and universal military service, but his party also favours negotiations with the Palestinians, and could force

Netanyahu to moderate his economic policy and take a new line on peace talks.

Israel has come under increasing pressure to seek renewed negotiations with the Palestinians, with French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius repeating that call yesterday.

But the Palestinians expressed caution over Lapid's showing. "I don't see a peace coalition or a peace camp emerging now and revitalising itself," Palestine Liberation Organisation official

Hanan Ashrawi told reporters. Coalition negotiations are expected to be delicate, particularly as the Knesset's 120 seats are evenly split between the rightwing and centre-left blocs, and Netanyahu is likely to reach across the aisle to Lapid.

With 99.5 percent of the votes counted, Israel's electoral committee said the joint Likud-Beiteinu had won 31 seats, while the far-right national religious Jewish Home claimed 11, as did the Sephardic ultra-Orthodox Shas.

The Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism faction won seven seats, bringing the bloc's total to 60.

On the centre-left side, Yesh Atid came away with 19 seats, ahead of the centre-left Labour party, which won 15.

The HaTnuah faction of former foreign minister Tzipi Livni carried six seats, as did the leftwing Meretz, while Livni's onetime party Kadima won just two.



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton prepares to testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC yesterday.

BENGAZI ATTACK Hillary testifies before US lawmakers

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned of the challenges posed by rising militancy after the Arab Spring as she appeared before US lawmakers Wednesday to be grilled about a deadly attack.

"Benghazi didn't happen in a vacuum," Hillary said at the start of a Senate hearing into the September 11 assault on a US mission in eastern Libya.

"The Arab revolutions have scrambled power dynamics and shattered security forces across the region," she told the Senate Foreign Relations committee called to review the lessons learned from the Benghazi attack, in which US ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans were killed.

She choked up as she described welcoming the fallen diplomats home, when their bodies arrived in flag-draped coffins at the Andrews Air Force base.

She warned lawmakers, however, that US diplomacy could not pull back in face of the new challenges posed by the evolving geopolitical landscape, saying the United States had to meet a "changing threat environment."

Hillary also highlighted "instability in Mali," saying it "has created an expanding safe haven for terrorists."

Her testimony to two congressional committees now comes on the eve of a Senate hearing to confirm her successor, Senator John Kerry, who is expected to be easily voted in and could take over within days as the top US diplomat.

Mali army accused of summary killings

Japan closes embassy as security fears mount

AFP, Bamako

A leading rights group yesterday accused Malian soldiers of summary killings and serious abuses in the course of a French-led assault against al-Qaeda-linked groups, as concerns rose over the conflict's civilian toll.

Japan, which lost seven citizens in a deadly Islamist backlash in neighbouring Algeria against the French-led offensive, decided yesterday to close its embassy in Bamako citing a deteriorating security situation.

Nearly two weeks after France swept to Mali's aid to stop an Islamist advance towards the capital Bamako, reports emerged of atrocities committed by Malian soldiers and growing fears of attacks among light-skinned ethnic communities.

The International Federation of Human Rights Leagues said that in the central town of Sèvre at least 11 people

were executed in a military camp near the bus station and the town's hospital, citing evidence gathered by local researchers.

Credible reports also pointed to around 20 other people having been executed in the same area and the bodies having been dumped in wells or otherwise disposed of, the organisation said.

The organisation called for an immediate independent inquiry commission to "determine the scale of the abuses and to punish the perpetrators."

Meanwhile international moves to aid the operations have accelerated with the US military airlifting French troops and equipment from France into Mali.

Italy, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Arab Emirates are also providing transport planes or helicopters required to help move the African and French troops around Mali's vast expanses.

Thai man gets 11 yrs for Royal slurs

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai political activist was jailed for 11 years yesterday in the latest tough sentence under the kingdom's controversial royal defamation law, to the dismay of human rights defenders.

The European Union said it was "deeply concerned" by the punishment imposed on Somyot Prueksakasemsuk, 51, in connection with two articles that appeared in his magazine in 2010.

Amnesty International, which considers Somyot to be a "prisoner of conscience", described the ruling as "a serious setback for freedom of expression in Thailand".

'Let the elderly people die'

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Japan's new government is barely a month old, and already one of its most senior members has insulted tens of millions of voters by suggesting that the elderly are an unnecessary drain on the country's finances.

Taro Aso, the finance minister, said on Monday that the elderly should be allowed to "hurry up and die" to relieve pressure on the state to pay for their medical care.

"Heaven forbid if you are forced to live on when you want to die. I would wake up feeling increasingly bad knowing that [treatment] was all being paid for by the government," he said during a meeting of the national council on social security reforms.

The problem won't be solved unless you let them hurry up and die. Aso's comments are likely to cause offence in Japan, where almost a quarter of the 128 million population is aged over 60. The proportion is forecast to rise to



Taro Aso

40% over the next 50 years. The remarks are also an unwelcome distraction for the new prime minister, Shinzo Abe, whose first period as Japan's leader ended with his resignation after just a year, in 2007, partly due to a string of gaffes by members of his cabinet.

Rising welfare costs, particularly for the elderly, were behind a decision last year to double consumption (sales) tax to 10% over the next three years, a move Aso's Liberal Democratic party supported.

The 72-year-old, who doubles as deputy prime minister, said he would refuse end-of-life care. "I don't need that kind of care," he said in comments quoted by local media, adding that he had written a note instructing his family to deny him life-prolonging medical treatment.

To compound the insult, he referred to elderly patients who are no longer able to feed themselves as "tube people".

BRITAIN'S EU DECISION Cameron pledges in/out referendum

AFP, London

Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday promised to hold a referendum by the end of 2017 giving British people the choice of staying in or leaving the EU if his party wins the next election.

In a long-awaited speech in London, Cameron said he wanted to renegotiate the terms of Britain's troubled membership of the European Union before putting the new agreement to the people in a vote.

British people would face a "very simple choice" either to accept the outcome of the negotiations or to leave the EU altogether after four decades of membership.

"It is time for the British people to have their say," he said. Cameron pledged that if his party wins an outright victory in the general election in 2015, it would hold a referendum during the first half of the new five-year parliament, by the end of 2017.

He said disillusionment with the EU in Britain was "at an all-time high" and it was essential to reform the way it worked.

If such reforms were not ushered in, Britain could "drift" out of the 27-member bloc, he warned.

But if he managed to secure terms that he was happy with, Cameron said he would campaign "heart and soul" for Britain to remain within the EU, which it joined in 1973.

He said the European bloc was grappling with problems in the eurozone, "a crisis of European competitiveness" and the gap between the EU and its citizens had "grown dramatically in recent years".

"If we don't address these challenges, the danger is that Europe will fail and the British people will drift towards the exit," he added.

Cameron has faced intense pressure from the eurosceptic right wing of the Conservative Party to take a stand on Europe, an issue that has long divided the party.

Cameron's promise to hold a referendum drew immediate warnings from Britain's main European partners.

"We can't have Europe a la carte," French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius insisted. "Imagine the EU was a football club: once you've joined up and you're in this club, you can't then say you want to play rugby."

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said Berlin wants Britain to be an "active" EU member but that membership was an all-or-nothing proposition "Cherry-picking is not an option."



UN sanctions spark North Korean fury

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council ordered expanded sanctions Tuesday against North Korea for a banned rocket launch, triggering a defiant pledge by Pyongyang to bolster its nuclear deterrent.

The Security Council added North Korea's state space agency, a bank, four trading companies and four individuals to the UN sanctions list, and threatened "significant action" if the North stages a nuclear test.

The resolution, proposed by the United States, was passed unanimously by the 15-nation council, including North Korea's only major ally, China.

The Security Council unanimously passed the resolution, which also expanded existing sanctions, on Tuesday. North Korea, in a statement early yesterday, pledged to bolster its "nuclear deterrent" and ruled out denuclearisation talks.

Pyongyang insists its December 12 rocket launch was a peaceful, mission-aimed satellite in space.

The UN resolution condemned it as a disguised ballistic missile test that violated existing sanctions imposed after the North's nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009.

US Ambassador Susan Rice said the resolution was a sign that North Korea will have "an increasingly steep price" to pay if it chooses confrontation.

China's UN envoy Li Baodong stressed that sanctions alone would fail unless they were supplemented by a concerted diplomatic effort to engage Pyongyang in negotiations. North Korea's foreign ministry quickly slammed the council and hinted that a new nuclear test could be planned.

"We flatly reject and condemn the UN Security Council's extremely unfair resolution," said a ministry statement. "We will take physical actions aimed at expanding and strengthening our self-defensive military forces, including nuclear deterrence."

North Korea's foreign ministry also ruled out any dialogue on the issue.

NEWS IN brief

Algeria Crisis: 5 foreigners missing

AFP, In Amenas

Algerian authorities searched on Tuesday for five foreigners still missing and tried to identify seven charred bodies, days after a bloody hostage crisis, a security source said.

Thirty-seven foreigners of eight different nationalities and an Algerian were killed in the siege by the hostage-takers, who were demanding the release of Islamist prisoners and an end to

Top US general cleared of charges

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon has cleared the top US commander in Afghanistan of wrongdoing over emails with a woman tied to the scandal that forced CIA director David Petraeus to resign, a US official said Tuesday.

The Defense Department's inspector general completely exonerated General John Allen, the outgoing chief of US-led forces in Afghanistan, over his correspondence, paving the way for his pending nomination to take up command of Nato forces in Europe, the official said.

BBC presenter charged with rape

AFP, London

British police on Tuesday charged veteran BBC broadcaster Stuart Hall with one offence of rape and 14 of indecent assault committed between 1967 and 1986.

The assaults involve 10 girls aged between nine and 16-years-old and the rape charge concerns a woman aged 22 when the alleged offence took place in 1976.

Lancashire Police arrested Hall earlier Tuesday. Hall has been a familiar face and voice in British broadcasting for half a century and was last year

Shooting on Texas campus injures 3

AFP, Chicago

Three people were shot after a fight at a Texas college erupted in gunfire Tuesday, sparking too-familiar images of frightened students escorted by swarms of police.

The shooting came as the United States is embroiled in a debate on gun violence in the wake of the horrific massacre of 20 first graders and six staff members at a Newtown, Connecticut

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