

NEWSIN brief

Eid attacks kill dozens in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqis angrily blamed the authorities yesterday for failing to prevent attacks that killed 74 people as they marked the Eid-ul-Fitr holiday ending Iraq's bloodiest Ramadan in years.

The violence, which also wounded more than 320 people, was roundly condemned by the international community.

It was the latest in months of bloodshed that have sparked worries of a revival of the all-out sectarian war that peaked in 2006 and 2007 and left tens of thousands dead.

The attacks came just weeks after assaults on prisons near Baghdad, claimed by an al-Qaeda front group, freed hundreds of prisoners, including leading militants, prompting warnings of a surge in violence.

Iraqis voiced frustration with the government for failing to prevent the 16 car bombings and other attacks which killed 74 people on Saturday, 47 of them in the capital.

100 killed Sudan tribal clashes

AFP, Khartoum

Fighting between two Arab tribes has killed 100 people in Sudan's Darfur region, where hundreds had already died in worsening unrest this year, one of the combatants said yesterday.

The battle between a group of Rezeigat and the rival Maaliya tribe happened near Adila in East Darfur state on Saturday.

Inter-tribal and inter-ethnic fighting has been the major source of violence in Darfur this year, where an estimated 300,000 people were displaced in the first five months alone, the African Union-UN peacekeeping

Mugabe's poll win challenged

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Zimbabwean president Robert Mugabe's political opponents went to court on Friday to challenge his victory in last week's elections and demand an immediate rerun.

Lawyers for the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) filed papers at the constitutional court alleging that the polls were rigged in favour of 89-year-old Mugabe's ruling Zanu-PF party. Mugabe, Africa's oldest leader, won with 61% of the

Volcano erupts in Indonesia

CNN ONLINE

Six people, including two children, died Saturday morning after a volcano erupted on an island in south-central Indonesia on Saturday, government officials reported.

Mount Rokatenda erupted at 4:27am Saturday, spewing ash clouds of up to 2000 meters from its peak. The volcano is located on the island of Palue, in East Nusa Tenggara province. Indonesia's volcanology agency ordered people to stay at least 3 kilometers away from the summit.

Qaeda kills 5 Yemen soldiers

AFP, Aden

An attack by "Al-Qaeda elements" at a gas terminal in Yemen killed five soldiers yesterday, a military source said, as Washington kept its embassy in Sanaa closed.

Sunday's attack follows a wave of US drone strikes against suspected al-Qaeda militants in Yemen that has killed 38 people since July 28.

The latest strike hit late on Saturday north of the port city of Aden, killing two people and wounding one.

Netanyahu well after surgery

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was recovering yesterday after a hernia operation overnight in a Jerusalem hospital, his office said in a statement.

Surgery, at the prestigious Hadassah Ein Kerem hospital, was successful and lasted about an hour, it added.

Netanyahu, 63, was expected to be discharged yesterday afternoon.

Malians vote in poll run-off

AFP, Bamako

Malians yesterday voted in a watershed presidential election run-off expected to usher in a new dawn of peace and stability in the conflict-scarred nation.

Almost seven million voters have a choice between former premier Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and ex-finance minister Soumaila Cisse to lead Mali's recovery following a military coup that ignited an Islamist insurgency and a French-led military intervention.

Both candidates declared themselves confident of victory in the run-off, called after none of the 27 candidates in the first round

Belfast riot: Dozens of cops hurt

AFP, London

Dozens of police officers were injured during riots by pro-British Protestants in Belfast, in what Northern Ireland's police chief condemned on Saturday as "mindless anarchy".

A total of 56 officers were hurt, four requiring hospital treatment, when they were attacked with bricks, bottles and paving stones from the street on Friday night, police said. At least two members of the public were also hurt.

Seven people were arrested for offences ranging from riotous behaviour to hijacking, and Northern Ireland police chief Matt Baggott warned that many more arrests

EGYPT CRISIS Morsi loyalists defiant amid crackdown fear

AFP, Cairo

Supporters of ousted Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi called more rallies for yesterday to demand his reinstatement, amid last ditch efforts for reconciliation ahead of a threatened crackdown on protests.

Morsi loyalists, led by the Muslim Brotherhood, have kept up two huge protest camps in Cairo to protest against the Islamist president's ouster by the military on July 3.

They say nothing short of his reinstatement will persuade them to disperse, despite several warnings by the interim leaders that the camps will be dismantled after the Eid al-Fitr holiday which was to end yesterday.

The call for fresh rallies comes as Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's highest seat of learning, called for reconciliation talks in the latest of a string of attempts to find a peaceful solution to the political deadlock.

But the Muslim Brotherhood is unlikely to accept such an invitation after Al-Azhar sided with the military over Morsi's ouster.



Putin's Cold War stance chills ties, says Obama

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama complained Friday that Russia had adopted a frostier stance towards the United States since Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin, but both camps insisted ties have not broken down.

However, Obama said it was appropriate for the US to pause and reassess its relationship with Russia, in the face of anti-America rhetoric and "backwards" thinking from President Putin.

Washington and Moscow are at loggerheads over the war in Syria, the fate of US intelligence leaker Edward Snowden, missile defense, nuclear disarmament and human rights.

And so great is the gulf between the former Cold War foes on many of these issues that Obama this week canceled a planned summit meeting with Putin next month.

In a near hour-long press conference at the White House, Obama was stark in his assessment of current US-Russian relations.

Obama said there had been more anti-American rhetoric since Putin returned to Russian presidency, which "played into some of the old stereo-

types about the Cold War contest".

"I've encouraged Mr Putin to think forward as opposed to backwards on those issues, with mixed success," Obama told reporters, before heading for his summer holiday at Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

He said that during his photocalls with Mr Putin, the Russian leader "has got that kind of slouch, looking like he's the bored kid in the back of the classroom". But he said their discussions in private had been constructive.

The president added that he did not have a "bad personal relationship" with Putin.

"There's been cooperation in some areas. There's been competition in others. It is true that in my first four years in working with President Medvedev, we made a lot of progress."

"What's also true is, is that when President Putin... came back into power, I think we saw more rhetoric on the Russian side that was anti-American, that played into some of the old stereotypes about the Cold War," Obama said.

"And I've encouraged Mr Putin to think forward as opposed to backwards on those issues. With mixed success," Obama added.

US SURVEILLANCE Obama pledges policy reform

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama pledged to overhaul US secret surveillance on Friday, promising greater oversight and transparency and insisting he had no interest in snooping on ordinary citizens.

Weeks after former US contractor Edward Snowden leaked details of widespread snooping on private Internet and telephone use, Obama stood firm in denying any abuse but acknowledged that he needed to address growing concerns.

"All these steps are designed to ensure that the American people can trust that our efforts are in line with our interests and our values," Obama told a news conference.

"And to others around the world I want to make clear once again that America is not interested in spying on ordinary people," he said.

Obama said he would ask Congress to reform one of the most controversial sections of the Patriot Act passed in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks -- Section 215, which gives the government access to telephone and other records of its citizens.

In a newly declassified memo, the Justice Department said the program recorded data -- such as duration and numbers -- of phone calls feared to involve "terrorists" but did not record the conversations.

Obama also called for the start of debate in the court that authorises surveillance, which now only receives requests from the government without hearing any counter-arguments as is customary in virtually all of the US judiciary.

Obama said the administration would make a greater effort at transparency, including by starting a website that describes intelligence activities.

And he said he would appoint a board of outside experts who will look more closely at surveillance programs and issue a report by the end of the year.

Controversy has grown since Snowden, a former US government contractor who fled to Russia, revealed some of the more sweeping aspects of US surveillance on citizens' Internet searches and telephone records.

Syria civil war

A Syrian man, left, mourns the deaths of six of his siblings who were killed in a bomb attack during fighting between rebel fighters and Syrian government forces in the northern city of Raqqa, the only provincial capital in rebel hands, on Saturday. Syrian regime air strikes killed more than 30 people Saturday in the Latakia province, bastion of the ruling Assad clan, and the northern city of Raqqa, a monitory group said.

PHOTO: AFP

Most US embassies reopen after terror threat

AFP, Dubai

A number of US diplomatic missions closed on August 4 over an al-Qaeda security alert reopened yesterday, while others stayed shut for the Muslim holidays following the Ramadan holy month.

Meanwhile, the US has ordered all non-essential government personnel to leave its consulate in the Pakistani city of Lahore on Friday.

A senior State Department official said the move was in response to a "credible threat" to the consulate.

The embassy in the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi, and the US consulate in Dubai reopened, as the holiday marking the end of the fasting month came to a close in the southern Gulf state.

The embassy in Libya also reopened yesterday.

In Saudi Arabia, the Riyadh embassy and the consulates in Jeddah and Dhahran remained closed, as did the US embassy in neighbouring Qatar. They are due to reopen on August 14, when the holidays end in those two nations.

In Bahrain and Kuwait, the American embassies are due to reopen today.

Washington closed off its 19 missions in the Middle East and Africa last week following a security alert.

Communications intercepts reportedly included an attack order from al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to Yemen-based al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The United States said on Friday that all of the embassies it shut would reopen this week, except the mission in Yemen.

ME peace talks clouded by new Israeli settlements

AGENCIES

Formal peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians will begin next week amid rising tensions over Israel's continued settlement building and the European Union's tough stance on funding for Israeli institutions with links to occupied territory.

The US State Department said last week that Israeli and Palestinian negotiators would resume talks in Jerusalem on Wednesday on ending their long-standing conflict. The talks will be preceded by Israel's release of the first batch of 104 long-term Palestinian prisoners, expected tomorrow.

But the approval on Thursday by Israel's defence ministry of plans to build more than 800 new homes in West Bank settlements prompted a warning from Palestinian negotiators that such moves could scupper talks.

And Israel's housing ministry yesterday said it is inviting bids to build over 1,000 settler homes in the West Bank, including

east Jerusalem.

Israel and Palestinians resumed direct negotiations in Washington last month ending a three-year hiatus after painstaking US mediation.

The last talks in 2010 broke down on the issue of settlement building.

Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian chief negotiator, wrote to the US secretary of state, John Kerry, the driving force behind the renewed peace process, to demand he take action to stop continued construction.

The state department spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, said US officials had expressed its concerns to the Israeli government. "We do not accept the legitimacy of continued settlement activity," she said in Washington.

The interlinked issues of borders, territory and settlements are the top priority for Palestinian negotiators, who insist that the pre-1967 line should be the basis of their future state. The US shares this position but Israel has refused to sign up to it in pre-talks discussions.

India-Pakistan border ceasefire under strain Kashmir under curfew after clashes

REUTERS, Jammu

India and Pakistan exchanged more gunfire across the disputed border in Kashmir yesterday, Indian border guards said, as a 10-year ceasefire frays over accusations of killings of soldiers deployed on the frontline.

One Indian border guard was wounded after Pakistan Rangers opened fire on a post in Kanachak, some 40 km (25 miles) southwest of Jammu, the winter capital of India's Jammu and Kashmir state, the Border Security Force said.

There was no immediate comment from Islamabad.

Tensions along the 740-km Line of Control that divides Kashmir rose on Tuesday when an Indian army patrol was ambushed and

five soldiers killed in the Poonch region. New Delhi blamed the attack on the Pakistan army. Islamabad denied involvement.

The two armies also exchanged heavy fire on Friday in the Poonch region, Indian authorities said, straining the ceasefire that has largely held on the border since November 2003.

Underscoring Indian worries over renewed unrest in Kashmir, clashes in the Jammu region erupted after a large group of stone pelting protesters unfurled a Pakistani flag, shouting pro-Islam, pro-independence slogans after offering Eid prayers.

Three people were killed in the violence on Friday and the situation remained tense with a curfew imposed in six out of 10 districts of Jammu, state officials said.

Don't oppose Islam as a country!

Australian poll candidate's gaffe goes viral

BBC ONLINE

An Australian election candidate has made the wrong kind of headlines after a gaffe-strewn interview in which she mistook Islam for a country.

Stephanie Banister, a candidate with the anti-immigration One Nation Party, clocked up multiple mistakes in a TV interview with Channel 7 News.

The 27-year-old also confused the term "haram" (forbidden) with the Koran and suggested Jews worship Jesus Christ.

"I don't oppose Islam as a country, umm, but I do feel that their laws should not be welcome here in Australia," Banister told Seven News reporter Erin Edwards.



Ms Banister, who is standing for the parliamentary seat of Rankin in Brisbane, also claimed that 2% of Australians "follow haram" when presumably she meant the Islamic text, the Quran.

Haram is a Muslim term used for something that is forbidden or punishable. Banister then repeatedly used the word haram when she apparently meant to say "halla".

When subsequently asked if she opposed the Jewish laws of kosher as well, the would-be MP replied: "Jews aren't under haram. They have their own religion which follows Jesus Christ."

Even before this interview Banister was regarded as a rank outsider to win her seat.

Ethnic violence raises fear in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan police lifted a curfew on a Colombo neighbourhood yesterday after a Buddhist-led mob attack on a mosque raised religious tensions and left the Muslim minority fearing further violence.

Hundreds of police, including anti-riot squads and elite Special Task Force commandos, remained on alert in the Grandpass district following overnight violence which wounded at least four people.

There was no immediate reaction from the government to the violence, but the US embassy in Colombo expressed concern and urged authorities to prosecute those responsible.

Local Islamic clerics expressed concern in the wake of Saturday's attack, which followed Buddhist objections to the opening of the new mosque.

Seventy percent of Sri Lanka's 20 million population follow Buddhism while Muslims are the second largest religious minority with just under 10 percent after Hindus who make up about 13 percent. Others are Christian.

ODDLY enough

Real-life Tarzans found in Vietnam forests

STAR DESK

40 years ago, during the Vietnam War, Ho Van Thanh was seen running into the woods with his then-infant son Ho Van Lang.

During the war, a bomb exploded in his home, killing his wife and two other children, and eye-witnesses reported seeing him grab his two-year-old son Ho Van Lang and running into the forest.

But just a few days ago, the impossible happened. Two villagers ventured 40 kilometers into the lush jungle looking for



firewood noticed a strange bird-nest-like hut built in a small clearing, near a stream.

Curious about its origin they decided to investigate and found two men living inside. The weak 82-year-old man could communicate in the in the Cor ethnic minority language, but his 41-year-old son, who was wearing a loin cloth made from tree bark, only spoke a few words. Authorities later confirmed their identity.