



Khobragade's UN application review still on

PTI, New York

The US is still reviewing the application for the transfer of senior Indian diplomat Devyani Khobragade to UN and issue the necessary documents for full diplomatic immunity, a top official said in Washington, giving no timeline for its decision.

"It is under review. We cannot predict when that review will be complete," said a State Department spokesperson on Monday in response to a question on the status of the UN request to grant full diplomatic status to Khobragade.

The State Department had received her application from the United Nations in New York on December 20. Normally, the State Department takes a decision on this very quickly, but this time the US is taking an unusually long time.

"We cannot compare this to previous requests as each request is evaluated on its own merits," the spokesperson said.

Khobragade was arrested on December 12 on charges of visa fraud and misrepresentation. At the time of her arrest, she was Deputy Consul General at the Indian Consulate in New York.

The US says, in this capacity, she did not have full diplomatic immunity.

Days after her arrest, the Indian government transferred Khobragade to the permanent mission of India to the United Nations, with the view that this would give her the necessary diplomatic immu-

S Sudan govt, rebels set for ceasefire talks

AFP, Juba

South Sudan's warring parties were set to open peace talks yesterday aimed at bringing an end to a nearly three-week-old civil war that has already left thousands dead.

Government and rebel officials confirmed their negotiating teams were preparing to fly to the Ethiopian capital, and diplomats said they expected negotiations on a possible ceasefire to begin later in the day.

"We are expecting them to arrive this afternoon," Ethiopian Foreign Minister Tedros Adhanom told AFP. Ethiopian government spokesman Getachew Reda said the talks would focus on "monitoring mechanisms for the ceasefire".

Fighting erupted in South Sudan December 15, when President Salva Kiir accused his former deputy Riek Machar of attempting a coup. Machar has denied this, in turn accusing the president of conducting a violent purge of his opponents.

The fighting has spread across the country, with the rebels seizing several areas in the oil-rich north. On Tuesday the rebels also recaptured the town of Bor, capital of Jonglei state and situated just 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of the capital Juba,

and fighting was reportedly continuing in the area yesterday.

Thousands of people are feared dead, UN officials say, while close to 200,000 civilians have been forced to flee their homes -- many seeking refuge with badly overstretched UN peacekeepers.

The conflict has also been marked by an upsurge of ethnic violence pitting members of Kiir's Dinka tribe against Machar's Nuer community, and the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) said that "atrocities are continuing to occur" across the country despite efforts to negotiate a ceasefire.

"UNMISS is gravely concerned about mounting evidence of gross violations of international human rights law that have occurred in South Sudan during the past 15 days," it said in a statement, reporting "extra-judicial killings of civilians and captured soldiers" and the "discovery of large numbers of bodies" in Juba, Bor and Malakal, the main town in oil-producing Upper Nile state.

The UN mission also said it is "actively collecting information" on the atrocities to be used for future official investigations. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has already warned that senior South Sudanese figures "will be held personally accountable" for

Israel, Palestinians talk tough ahead of Kerry visit

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the Palestinians sharpened their rhetoric as US Secretary of State John Kerry headed to the region yesterday hoping to nudge the two sides towards a peace framework.

The latest US quest for a long-elusive peace deal has shown little sign of progress since Kerry managed to revive direct talks in July, and this week leaders on both sides questioned the other's commitment to ending the decades-old conflict.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas warned Tuesday that his side would take "diplomatic and legal" action against Israel in order to halt the expansion of Jewish settlements on land the Palestinians want for their future state.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had earlier slammed the Palestinians for giving a hero's welcome to 26 veteran prisoners released by Israel as part of the US-brokered talks, all of whom were convicted of killing Israeli civilians or soldiers.

"Murderers are not heroes," Netanyahu said Tuesday after Abbas personally welcomed many of the prisoners at his Ramallah compound. "This is not how you educate for peace, this is not how peace is made."

Kerry plans to meet with both leaders starting today as he makes his 10th visit to Israel and the occupied West Bank since

WIKILEAKS' MEETING WITH ASSAD

Party did not 'know or approve' of visit

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

WikiLeaks has revealed it did not "know or approve" of its Australian political party's visit to Syria to meet Bashar al-Assad, amid criticism from both the government and Labor over the trip.

A WikiLeaks party delegation, reportedly including its founder Julian Assange's father, John Shipton, held talks with a number of high-ranking Syrian officials, with a picture released by the Syrian government of a meeting with the president himself.

Before the visit, the party stated it was going as part of its "peace and reconciliation" efforts, as well as warning over the dangers of western intervention into the bloody three-year Syrian civil war. Shipton said he wanted to show "solidarity" with the Syrian people and told a local TV station that

WikiLeaks would be opening an office in Damascus this year.

But WikiLeaks has distanced itself from the trip, saying via Twitter that while peace brokering is a "good idea", it "did not know or approve" of the delegation's visit to Syria.

Julie Bishop, the Australian foreign affairs minister, said Syria was not a place for "political parties to pursue their political ends".

Labor has also criticised the visit, with Chris Bowen, the shadow treasurer, calling the decision "extraordinary".

Several former members of the WikiLeaks party have told Guardian Australia the trip has caused further consternation within the party, which was formed last year.

The WikiLeaks party has been contacted for comment on the trip but not responded.



No agreement on Iran nuke deal: US

CNN, Washington

The United States dismissed a report that an agreement had been reached between Iran and world powers to begin implementing a deal that requires Tehran to limit its nuclear program.

The announcement followed a report in state-run Iranian media that a deal had been reached in negotiations between Tehran and the six world powers, including the US, to begin implementing the agreement in late January.

A senior Iranian negotiator, Hamid Baedinejad, told Press TV that an agreement had been reached following two days of talks in Geneva.

The nuclear deal struck in November between the world powers, collectively known as the P5+1, and Iran calls for Tehran to limit its nuclear activities in return for a relaxation of sanctions that have crippled the Iranian economy.

Iranian lawmakers, however, last week drafted a bill that would force the government to enrich uranium up to 60% if new sanctions are imposed, state media reported yesterday.

The move came less than a week after bipartisan legislation was introduced in the US Senate that would authorize new economic sanctions on Iran if it breaches an interim agreement to limit its nuclear program or fails to strike a

DUBAI BREAKS GUINNESS RECORD

Fireworks explode from the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest tower, in Dubai yesterday to celebrate the new year. Dubai kicked off New Year with a dazzling bid for a new world record to cap those the Gulf city state already holds for its mammoth property developments. The glittering fireworks display that lasted around six minutes spanned over 100 kilometres of the Dubai coast.

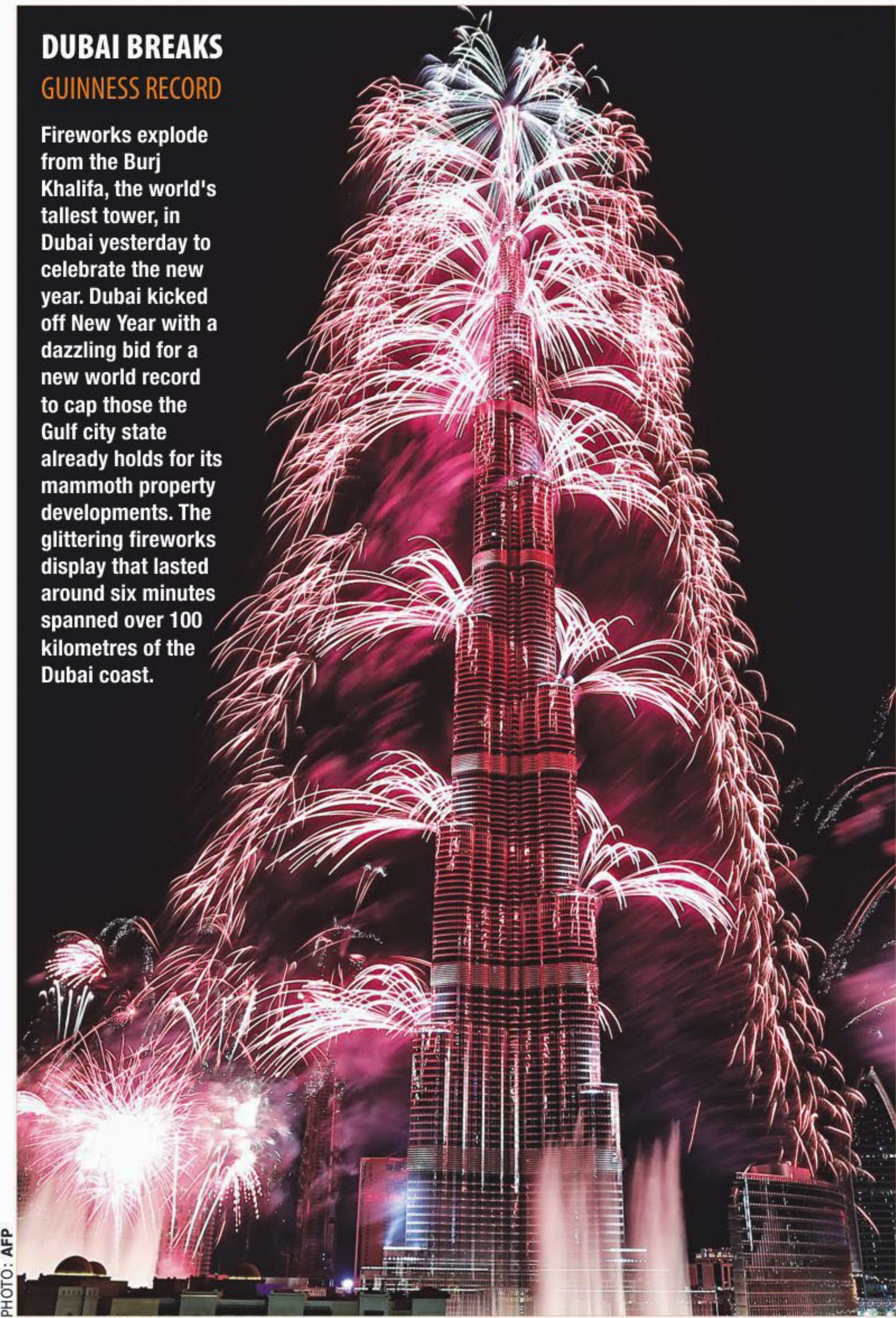


PHOTO: AFP

Tunisia to vote on new charter tomorrow

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly is to begin voting on the future constitution tomorrow, three years after the country's popular uprising and after five months of deadlock between the ruling Islamists and opposition.

The adoption of Tunisia's constitution would represent a crucial milestone in the birthplace of the Arab Spring, where hopes of a successful democratic transition contrast starkly with other countries in the region rocked by regime change.

But with revisions added after intense last-minute negotiations, a final draft had yet to be circulated two days before the scheduled scrutiny of the long-delayed charter, which is to be voted on article by article.

Ennahda, the ruling Islamist party, said the

text that was completed in June but rejected by the opposition will be submitted to MPs and will have an index detailing the revisions it thrashed out with the opposition in December.

"The compromises reached have not been integrated into the draft and separate articles can still be added... So we are not safe from last-minute surprises, on a religious amendment for example," warned Nadia Chaabane, an opposition MP with the Massar party.

Ennahda has repeatedly highlighted its decision in 2012 to renounce its demand that Islamic Sharia Law should be mentioned as a main source of legislation. In exchange, the party has been allowed several references to Islam in the text.

The deadline for adopting the new constitution, which has been a work in progress for more than two years, has been set for January 14, the third anniversary of the revolution that

Iraq militants free prisoners

Burn police stations

AFP, Ramadi

Militants freed more than 100 prisoners, clashed with security forces and burned police stations in cities west of the Iraqi capital yesterday, police and an AFP journalist said.

Gunmen attacked the headquarters in the city of Fallujah but gave the police a chance to leave, which they took, officers said, after which the militants freed 101 prisoners and stole weapons.

In Ramadi, farther west, security forces clashed sporadically with militants, who burned four police stations in the city, an AFP journalist said.

The journalist said four torched police stations in Ramadi, one of which was still on fire, and said two military vehicles had also been burned.

Clashes erupted in the Ramadi area on Monday as security forces dismantled the country's main Sunni Arab anti-government protest camp, which was located on a nearby highway.

At least 14 people, all but one of them militants, died in violence in the area on Monday and Tuesday.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said on Tuesday that troops would pull out of cities in Anbar province, of which Ramadi is the capital, in a move apparently aimed at defusing tensions in the wake of the camp's closure.

The AFP journalist said that soldiers had moved to an area west of Ramadi yesterday.

The withdrawal was one of the demands that 44 MPs made on Monday at a news conference during which they announced they had submitted their resignations.

In another move apparently aimed at placating Anbar residents, the cabinet decided on Tuesday to provide aid to the province.

The removal of the camp was a victory of sorts for Maliki, who had long wanted it gone and had termed it a "headquarters for the leadership of Al-Qaeda".

No-show for Musharraf in treason case

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf failed to show up for a hearing in the treason case against him yesterday, with his lawyers citing security threats.

The 70-year-old stands accused over his imposition of emergency rule in November 2007, but he and his legal team have dismissed the charge as politically motivated. Conviction could mean the death penalty or life imprisonment for the ex-dictator.

His defence team said he could not attend the special treason tribunal yesterday because security was inadequate.

The three-judge panel adjourned the hearing to today, asking Musharraf again to appear in person.

The Taliban have made repeated threats to kill Musharraf, who led Pakistan into its alliance with Washington's "war on terror". He lives under heavy guard at his farmhouse on the edge of Islamabad.



Thousands rally for Hong Kong democracy

AFP, Hong Kong

Thousands marched in Hong Kong yesterday to demand a greater say in how their future leaders will be chosen, expressing fears that China will limit long-awaited political reforms.

"Democracy will prevail" read some banners as protesters sang and shouted slogans against the government of the semi-autonomous Chinese city, less than one month after the start of an official public consultation on a future electoral system.

"Because we are Hong Kong citizens, we must vote," said Sharon Tang, a 49-year-old trading company employee, adding that residents of the former British colony have the intelligence to choose their leaders.

Mainland Chinese tourists took pictures of the march as protesters chanted "End one-party rule!"

China, which took back Hong Kong in 1997, has promised that its people will be able to vote in 2017 for their next chief executive.

Currently the leader is elected by a 1,200-strong pro-Beijing committee.

But many fear that China will control the choice of candidates to secure the election of a sympathetic official.

One protester had red tape wrapped around her arms and covering her mouth to symbolise an inability to express one's views.

The marchers left Victoria Park -- named after the 19th century British monarch who oversaw Hong Kong's seizure from China -- in mid-afternoon and were to stage a rally in the Central financial district afterwards.

A huge poster depicting the city's current chief executive Leung Chun-ying with an egg plastered on his head was hung over the park lawn.

Organisers said more than 50,000 people were expected to take part in the annual New Year's Day protest, but turnout appeared lower than in some previous years.

Police estimated just 6,100 marchers left the park, although others were expected to join along the route.

Other issues, such as calls for more labour rights and

NEWSIN brief

Putin denounces 'abomination' of Volgograd attacks

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin yesterday called Russia's deadliest bombings in three years an "abomination" as he inspected the site of twin suicide strikes that killed 34 and raised alarm over security at the Sochi Winter Olympic Games.

The Kremlin chief laid a thick bouquet of red roses on a heap of stuffed toys and flowers assembled at one of the blast locations and exchanged commiserations with bandaged survivors at a hospital in the shell-shocked southern city of Volgograd.

He then convened an urgent pre-dawn meeting of local officials and national security chiefs aimed at finding the root cause of Islamist-linked violence that has

Lebanon arrests head of Qaeda-linked group

AFP, Beirut

Lebanese troops have arrested the leader of the Al-Qaeda linked group that claimed a double suicide bombing at the Iranian embassy in November, the defence minister told AFP yesterday.

Majid al-Majid, the "emir" of the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, "was arrested by the intelligence services of the Lebanese army in Beirut," Defence Minister Fayez Ghosn said, without specifying when the arrest took place.

"He was wanted by the Lebanese authorities and is currently being interro-

European labour market opens for Romanians, Bulgarians

AFP, Bucharest

Romanians and Bulgarians have the right to work in any of the European Union's 28 countries beginning yesterday but "no major increase" in emigration is expected, the European Commission said.

The lifting of work restrictions has prompted fears of an "invasion" in Britain

Stage crash ends Sri Lanka's five-star New Year bash

AFP, Colombo

Dozens of party-goers were hospitalised in Sri Lanka yesterday after a stage collapsed at the five-star Colombo Hilton hotel during New Year celebrations, organisers of the festivities said.

At least 30 people were hospitalised with fractures, cuts and burns following the collapse of the outdoor stage, hurling some 700 people to the floor a few feet below, sparking fires and smashing glasses,

Spectre of settlers' return looms over West Bank neighbourhood

AFP, Hebron

Before they were evicted, the Israeli settlers threw bottles of urine, attacked children and poisoned a horse, according to Palestinian residents in Hebron--who now fear their former neighbours will return.

When Israeli soldiers evicted the settlers in 2008 and took over the Rajabi building in the West Bank city--which is still home to hundreds of radical Israeli settlers--even the daily drag of inspections seemed civilised by comparison.

But the nightmare looks set to resume for Palestinians living near here and another flashpoint property called the Abu Rajab house, both of which have been claimed by settlers in the heart of the tense city considered holy by both

ODDLY enough

Bullet bounces off victim's face and kills mugger

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

A 16-year-old mugger has been killed after a bullet fired by an accomplice ricocheted off their victim's face and shot him dead.

The incident happened when a group of males accosted the man at a housing complex in San Francisco and demanded he hand over his possessions, police said.

The man complied, as the muggers were taking his valuables, one of them pulled a handgun and shot at him.

The bullet struck his face, bounced off, then hit one of the other robbers, 16-year-old Clifton Chatman.

When police arrived on the scene, Chatman was pronounced dead and the muggers' victim was taken to hospital with serious injuries. He is expected to survive.

The other suspects fled following the shooting, which happened at around 11pm on 14 December.

A second 16-year-old has now been arrested on suspicion of murder and attempted robbery. Police did not say whether they believe he was the one who pulled the trigger.

The remaining members of the group involved in the crime are being