

BRIEFS

WORLD

JERUSALEM

Israeli Cabinet appoints first Muslim minister

The Israeli government overwhelmingly approved the appointment of the country's first Muslim Cabinet minister Sunday, billing it as an important step for a long-suffering minority.



MAJADELE

But the appointment of Raleb Majadele, mired for weeks in political infighting and charges of racism, drew renewed criticism from hard-liners who said the move was little more than political expediency. Even Arab lawmakers dismissed the development, saying the government has little real interest in improving the lot of Israel's Arabs. Majadele said that his goals as a Cabinet minister would be "promoting coexistence between the two peoples inside the state, and promoting dialogue between the Palestinians and the Israelis toward negotiations and political agreement."

Majadele, a parliamentary backbencher from the Labor party, says his appointment is meant to give representation to Israel's Arabs, who make up about 20 percent of the country's 7 million citizens. He has predicted that in the future, every Israeli government will be obliged to include an Arab minister.

DUBLIN, Ireland

Sinn Fein votes to back Northern Ireland police

Sinn Fein members overwhelmingly voted Sunday to begin cooperating with the Northern Ireland police, a long-unthinkable commitment that could spur the return of a Catholic-Protestant administration for the British territory.

The result, confirmed by a sea of raised hands but no formally recorded vote, meant Sinn Fein, once a hard-left party committed to a socialist revolution, has abandoned its decades-old hostility to law and order.

The vote, taken after daylong debate among 2,000 Sinn Fein stalwarts, represented a stunning triumph for Sinn Fein chief Gerry Adams, the former Irish Republican Army commander who has spent 24 years edging his IRA-linked party away from terror and toward compromise.

It strongly improved the chances of reviving power-sharing, the long-elusive goal of the 1998 Good Friday peace pact, by Britain's deadline of March 26. "Today you have created the potential to change the political landscape on this island forever," Adams told the conference.

TEHRAN, Iran

Iran wants to review U.N. plan to halt sanctions

Iran said Sunday it needs time to review a plan proposed by the head of the U.N. nuclear watchdog agency that calls for holding off on imposing U.N. Security Council sanctions if Tehran suspends uranium enrichment.

The International Atomic Energy Agency chief, Mohamed ElBaradei, proposed the simultaneous time-out plan during the World Economic Forum in Switzerland in an effort to end the standoff between the West and Iran over the Islamic republic's suspect nuclear program.

"Time should be allocated to see if the plan has the capacity to solve the (nuclear) case," Ali Larijani, Iran's top nuclear negotiator, told reporters during a joint news conference with Russia's national security adviser, Igor Ivanov. He did not elaborate.

The Security Council last month voted unanimously to impose limited sanctions on Iran after it ignored demands to halt enrichment. Iran faces the prospect of additional sanctions unless it stops enrichment within a 60-day period that ends next month.

THE WAR IN IRAQ



AP PHOTO

People carry a wounded Iraqi soldier in Zarqa, northeast of Najaf, Iraq, on Sunday, after fighting between Iraqi forces and gunmen. Iraqi officials said at least 250 insurgents were killed in a fight aided by U.S. helicopters. One American helicopter crashed killing two Americans.

U.S. helicopter crashes

Two Americans dead; Iraqis say 250 insurgents killed during fight

By ROBERT H. REID
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

U.S.-backed Iraqi troops on Sunday attacked insurgents reportedly plotting to kill pilgrims at a major Shiite Muslim religious festival, and Iraqi officials estimated some 250 militants died in the day-long battle near Najaf. A U.S. helicopter crashed during the fight, killing two American soldiers.

Mortar shells, meanwhile, hit the courtyard of a girls' school in a mostly Sunni Arab neighborhood of Baghdad, killing five pupils and wounding 20. U.N. officials deplored the attack, calling the apparent targeting of children an unforgivable crime.

Two car bombs exploded within a half hour in the northern city of Kirkuk, killing 11 people and wounding 34, police Brig. Gen. Sarhad Qader said. Three ethnic groups — Arabs, Kurds and Turkomen — are in a bitter struggle for control of that oil-rich area.

In addition to confirming the two Americans killed in the helicopter crash

near Najaf, the U.S. command announced three combat deaths from Saturday, one Marine in the Sunni insurgent stronghold of Anbar province and two Army soldiers in the Baghdad area.

Authorities said Iraqi soldiers supported by U.S. aircraft fought all day with a large group of insurgents in the Zaraq area, about 12 miles northeast of the Shiite holy city of Najaf.

Col. Ali Nomias, spokesman for Iraqi security forces in Najaf, said more than 250 corpses had been found. Iraqi army Maj. Gen. Othman al-Ghanemi also spoke of 250 dead but said an exact number would not be released until today. He said 10 gunmen had been captured, including one Sudanese.

Provincial Gov. Assad Sultan Abu Kilel said the assault was launched because the insurgents planned to attack Shiite pilgrims and clerics during ceremonies marking Ashoura, the holiest day in the Shiite calendar commemorating the 7th century death of Imam Hussein. The celebration culminates Tuesday in huge public processions in Karbala and other Shiite cities.

Officials were unclear about the reli-

gious affiliation of the militants. Although Sunni Arabs have been the main force behind insurgent groups, there are a number of Shiite militant and splinter groups that have clashed from time to time with the government.

Iraqi soldiers attacked at dawn and militants hiding in orchards fought back with automatic weapons, sniper rifles and rockets, the governor said. He said the insurgents were members of a previously unknown group called the Army of Heaven.

"They are well-equipped and they even have anti-aircraft missiles," the governor said. "They are backed by some locals" loyal to ousted dictator Saddam Hussein.

Abu Kilel said two Iraqi policemen were killed and 15 wounded, but there was no word on other Iraqi government casualties.

A U.S. statement said the American helicopter went down while "conducting operations to assist Iraqi Security Forces" in the attack. It said two crew members died and their bodies were recovered. The statement did not give any information on why the aircraft crashed.

Key to Iraq's success lies in support from neighbors

By JOHN DANISZEWSKI
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DAVOS, Switzerland

Iraq's leaders are facing a test in coming weeks as the Iraqi and U.S. military launch their new security program to flush out militants and death squads district by district.

But to Iraq's government, the real key to long-term success is its neighbors: Will they begin to give their genuine support, and can Iran and Syria be persuaded — or pressured — to end the conduct that Iraq says is giving oxygen to insurgents, militias and death squads inside Iraq?

These were among the themes expressed by a number of Iraq leaders and foreign policy experts circulating at the World Econo-

ANALYSIS

mic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, this week. Among them were Iraqi Vice President Adil Abdul-Mahdi, Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari and Adnan Pachachi, a former foreign minister and Sunni elder statesman.

All were painfully aware that patience for the war is ebbing among the U.S. public, and that they must move quickly to solidify their authority and stamp out violence.

One initiative now being pushed aggressively by the Iraqi leadership is to convene in Baghdad a regional meeting of foreign ministers from Iraq's neighbors, including the Gulf countries, Syria, Turkey and Iran.

They say it will demonstrate that the region is behind their government and recognizes that it must be strengthened, because there is no good alternative to holding Iraq together as a pluralistic, integrated and democratic country, Zebari said.

"We are building a strong case that if you care (and) if you want to help the people of Iraq, the elected, legitimate Iraqi government, you should show some tangible support," he said.

"It will send a good signal to ... ease this tension, this violence, and it will send a message to the insurgents, the terrorists, who will see that Iraq is managing to deal with its neighbors constructively" and that the region is "unified to help this country recover," Zebari said.

Afghan president wants more U.S. troops to train forces

By JASON STRAZIUSO
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KABUL, Afghanistan

The Afghan president told House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that his security forces need to be stronger as the two discussed possible U.S. troop increases on Sunday, days after the Pentagon extended the tour of 3,200 soldiers, an Afghan official said.

President Hamid Karzai stressed his desire for increased training and equipment for Afghanistan's fledgling army and police forces, the Afghan official



KARZAI



PELOSI

said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to release the information publicly.

Pelosi, D-Calif., and Karzai discussed plans announced last week by the Bush administration to ask

Congress for \$10.6 billion for Afghanistan, a major increase aimed at rebuilding the country and strengthening government security forces still fighting the Taliban five years after the U.S.-led invasion.

About \$8.6 billion would be for training and equipping Afghan police and soldiers; \$2 billion would go toward reconstruction.

Pelosi, D-Calif., led a delegation of six other congressional Democrats to Afghanistan to meet with military and government leaders after traveling to Iraq and Pakistan.

The trip comes two weeks after Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., visited the region. Clinton, who entered the 2008 presidential race a week ago, said this month that U.S. leaders should be talking about increasing troop numbers in Afghanistan instead of Iraq.

The Pentagon last week said a brigade of U.S. soldiers would stay in Afghanistan four months longer than planned, an effective troop increase of 3,200 soldiers. That announcement came only days after a visit here by Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

Pentagon trying to end troop extensions

Defense secretary wants new plan by end of February

By PAULINE JELINEK
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

In an action branded a backdoor draft by some critics, the military over the past several years has held tens of thousands of soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines on the job and in war zones beyond their retirement dates or enlistment length.



GATES

It is a widely disliked practice that the Pentagon, under new Defense Secretary Robert Gates, is trying to figure out how to cut back on.

Gates has ordered that the practice, known as "stop loss," must be minimized. At the same time, he is looking for ways to decrease the hardship for troops and their families, recruit more people for a larger military and reassess how the active duty and reserves are used.

"It's long overdue," said Jules Lobel, vice president of the Center for Constitutional Rights and lawyer for some in the military who have challenged the policy in court.

Gates has asked the chief of each service branch for a plan by the end of February on how they would rely less on stop loss.

The authority has been used off and on for years and was revived by all services to some extent after the attacks of Sept. 11.

As an example, the Army revived it in early 2002 to keep people with some skills or specialties deemed critical to the fight against terrorism and later used it to retain whole units, according to an Army chronology of the policy.

Pentagon officials provided no figures on how many people the policy has affected. Yet just in the Army, it is in the tens of thousands.

The Army Times newspaper reported in September that 10,000 soldiers were being held in the service at the time. That compared with 25,000 at one point in 2003, according to the account.

The Navy stopped a few hundred sailors from leaving during the year after the terrorist attacks and used the policy again after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The Marine Corps used it from January through August of 2003 and at the high point had some 3,400 active duty troops and 440 reservists held in service under the authority, said 1st Lt. Blanca E. Binstock, a spokeswoman.

The Air Force did not have statistics immediately available.

The Defense Department says the main reason for the policy is to keep units whole for deployments, regardless of whether service time is up for some individuals in the unit.

"It's based on unit cohesion," former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld once said when a soldier questioned him about the policy during Rumsfeld's visit to the staging area in Kuwait that is used for troops going into Iraq.

"The principle is that, in the event there is something that requires a unit to be involved in, and people are in a personal situation where their time was ending, they put a stop-loss on it so cohesion is maintained," he said.

Rumsfeld said the policy was "something you prefer not to have to use in a perfect world." He said it was basically a sound principle and well understood among soldiers.

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