Turkish Official Killed

A Turkish security official was killed on Tuesday during clashes with the outlawed Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) in southeastern Turkey, the semi-official Anatolia news agency reported.

News in Brief

Russia to Send More Troops to Georgia

Russia's Defense Ministry on Tuesday announced an increase in peacekeeping forces to two Georgian separatist provinces in response to what it called aggressive moves by Georgia.

"The development of events has created the need for an increase in the peacekeeping contingent in the conflict zones" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the ministry was quoted as saying by state-run RIA Novosti news agency.

Russia maintains a peacekeeping force in both areas under agreements with Georgia in the 1990s following wars in which separatists broke from Georgian control and established close ties with Moscow. The defense ministry, which accused Georgia of massing troops near the rebel areas, did not say how many extra soldiers were being sent. About 2,000 Russians serve in Abkhazia and about 1,000 in South Ossetia.

Blast Near Italian Embassy In Yemen

An explosion went off Wednesday near the Italian embassy in Yemen's capital, Sanaa, but the apparent attack caused no injuries, a security official said.

The embassy in central Sanaa is next to a government building and the headquarters of the opposition Socialist party and it was not immediately clear what the target was, AP said. The explosion was caused either by a hand grenade or a bomb, the security official said.

Security forces sealed off roads leading to the area of the explosion, said the official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not allowed to speak to the media.

Yemen is a key US ally in the Middle East but also the ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden and it has been the site of violence against foreigners before.

Earlier this month, three projectiles hit a foreigners' housing complex in Sanaa but caused no injuries. The complex is in an upscale neighborhood that also houses UN buildings.

Afghan Forces Trade Fire With Gunmen

Security forces traded gun and rocket fire with unknown assailants holed up in a Kabul house on Tuesday, officials said.

A spokesman for the intelligence service, Saeed Ansari, said the troops wanted to capture the suspects alive, but gave no details on who was targeted.

Zemerai Bashary, the Interior Ministry spokesman, described the suspects as An Associated Press reporter at the scene said that both sides were trading rocket-propelled grenade and automatic gunfire. The gunmen appeared to be holed up inside a house, in a densely populated area in western Kabul near a popular park, Babur's Garden.

Egypt Finds Fuel Tunnels to Gaza

Egyptian security forces have discovered five tunnels used to smuggle petrol and goods into the Gaza Strip, a security official said on Tuesday.

Two of the tunnels contained plastic tubes 850 meters long that were used to pump black market petrol into the isolated territory, AFP said.

No one was arrested when the tunnels were discovered north of the Rafah border crossing on Monday evening.

Israel has repeatedly accused Egypt of doing too little to counter alleged arms smuggling through tunnels dug from Gaza into Egypt. The accusations have been vehemently denied by Cairo.

Palestinian groups are meeting in Cairo on Tuesday to discuss an Egyptian-mediated truce with Israel aimed at ending the Jewish state's punishing blockade of Gaza since Hamas took over there in June.

Turkey Easing Free Speech Limits

Turkey's Parliament has softened a law restricting free speech that has been used to prosecute Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk and other intellectuals.

The Parliament voted 250-65 Tuesday in favor of a government-backed proposal to make changes to Article 301 of Turkey's penal code, AP reported.

Thousands of people have been prosecuted and 745 were convicted under the law and its precursor since 2003.

The government says that amending the law will enhance Turkey's bid for membership in the European Union, which has long criticized the measure for curbing free speech.

Critics say the amended law leaves in place many other restrictions on free speech.

Berri Awaits Response To Dialogue Offer

Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said Tuesday that he was awaiting the response from the ruling coalition to his dialogue initiative, Xinhua reported.

"The speaker is waiting for the majority to respond to the dialogue initiative in order to set the date and invitations," a statement released by the information office said.

Sources close to Berri said Tuesday that the speaker will be the sponsor and host of the dialogue, and talks with the opposition would be held with Christian opposition leader MP Michel Aoun, said the statement.

On late Monday, the ruling March 14 forces announced to assign MP Saad Hariri to discuss with Berri ways to ensure the election of a new head of state on May 13, which is the 19th attempt to choose a president.

The majority linked their return to the negotiating table to the "unconditional election of a president" on May 13. The ruling coalition previously rejected Berri's dialogue initiative, accusing him to be an opposition leader who can not sponsor dialogue, and they refused to open dialogue before electing a new president.

Pakistan Leaders Pledge to Restore Judges

Pakistani leaders were set for last-gasp talks Wednesday on how to meet their pledge to restore judges ousted by President Pervez Musharraf.

The US-backed president purged the Supreme Court last year to stop legal challenges to his continuation in office. The parties that routed Musharraf's allies in February elections and now form Pakistan's new government have promised to reinstate the judges by the end of April, AP said.

But on deadline day they remain deadlocked over how to do it, triggering speculation that the government could crumble--and grant a reprieve to the embattled president.

The coalition is led by the parties of Asif Ali Zardari, who is the widower of assassinated ex-leader Benazir Bhutto and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Party officials said the two men would meet Wednesday in Dubai after their lieutenants failed to resolve the issue in marathon talks. Sharif said ahead of the talks that he wants to keep the coalition intact.

Iraqi Refugees Reluctant to Return

Newly-returned Iraqi refugees from Syria wait at a hall in the Al-Mansur hotel to receive the financial aid promised by the Iraqi government to the returning refugees.

Only 4 percent of Iraqi refugees surveyed in neighboring Syria have plans to return to their homeland, the UN refugee agency said Tuesday.

According to AP, nearly 90 percent have no plans to return, while the remaining 6 percent don't know, said Jennifer Pagonis, spokeswoman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

Most of those who plan to stay away--61 percent--said they are under direct threat in Iraq. Others said the general insecurity in the country is the reason they want to remain abroad, she said.

Most of the Iraqis interviewed left Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion. Of those, the majority have left since 2006 when sectarian violence became worse.

The survey, conducted March 2-18 for UNHCR by the IPSOS market research organization, found that many of the refugees are in touch with others who have returned and reported back that conditions were unsatisfactory, Pagonis said.

More than a third have visited Iraq themselves once or twice in the past year.

Syria hosts the largest number of Iraqi refugees, about 1.5 million.

White House Caution

Meanwhile, White House officials this week privately cautioned lawmakers not to go too far in restricting US aid to Iraq, warning that doing so might only prolong the war, now in its sixth year.

The Bush administration did not slam the door on proposals in Congress that would insist Iraq do more to pay for its rebuilding efforts. In the meantime, independent investigators conclude in a report that substantial US support continues despite Baghdad's anticipated $70 billion windfall in oil revenues.

The soaring cost of fuel prices and duration of the war have spurred the latest effort in Congress to get the Iraqis to pay more toward rebuilding efforts. Democrats and even some Republicans say American taxpayers are footing too much of the bill, including an expensive and painfully slow operation to train and equip Baghdad's security forces.

"There's going to have to be some honest-to-goodness pressure" to get the Iraqis to take charge, said Rep. Ike Skelton, chairman of the House Armed Services committee.

Push Into Sadr City

Dozens of fighters ambushed a US patrol in Baghdad's Sadr City, firing rocket-propelled grenades and machine gun bursts as the American push into the city increasingly faces pockets of close urban combat.

US forces struck back Tuesday with guided rockets that devastated at least three buildings in the densely packed district that serves as the Baghdad base for the Mahdi Army group.

The US military said 28 militiamen were killed as the US patrol pulled back.

Local hospital officials said dozens of civilians were killed or wounded as the result of US strikes.