

Struggling in polls, McCain regroups in Arizona

FLAGSTAFF (AFP) - With poll numbers slipping, Republican John McCain on Saturday struggled to inject fresh energy into his White House campaign a little over four weeks before the US presidential elections.

As the clock ticks down to November 4, McCain has yet to seize the upper hand from his Democratic rival Barack Obama and has been left trailing in the polls. Even a gutsy debate performance by Republican VP pick Sarah Palin late Thursday, in which she performed better than expected against her Democratic rival Joseph Biden, appears to not have been enough to turn the race around.

On Thursday the McCain campaign pulled out of Michigan, effectively surrendering the mid-western state to the Democrats, to focus instead on six swing states. And with more bad news on the economic front, McCain was to retreat to his Arizona ranch for the weekend, in a highly unusual disappearing act at the height of the campaign.

Missouri, where Thursday's debate was held, is one of the key states in play - along with Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Indiana and Ohio - and Republicans there acknowledged there was work to be done.

"Senator McCain has to win Missouri to win the White House. So there is a strong commitment from the McCain-Palin campaign to make sure that we deliver Missouri," said the party's state executive director Jared Craighead.

Obama meanwhile campaigning in Pennsylvania vowed to protect taxpayers and homeowners from the fallout of the Wall Street crisis.

"It had to see we finally got this dealt with," Obama told reporters after the House of Representatives gave final approval to the rescue plan under which the Treasury will buy billions of dollars in mortgage-related debt.

McCain called the financial bailout package passed by Congress Friday a necessary "outrage" and vowed to clean up Wall Street if elected.

"This rescue bill is not perfect, and it is an outrage that it's even necessary," he said. "But we must stop the damage to our economy done by corrupt and incompetent practices on Wall Street and in Washington."

Obama's dash back to Washington last week to try to get a deal on the table, Obama was widely credited with helping to break the deadlock among lawmakers.

Obama said he had lobbied a number of Democratic lawmakers who wanted assurances from him "as potentially the next president" that he would follow through on efforts to prevent foreclosures.

A slew of polls have put Obama firmly ahead both nationally and in key swing states such as Ohio, Florida and Pennsylvania ahead of the polls.

And they have suggested that voters blame Republicans for the country's economic woes and trust Obama more with fixing the downturn.

Law finally catches up with O.J. Simpson



O.J. Simpson and his sister Carmelita Durio (l) arrive in court after being notified a verdict was reached for his trial at the Clark County Regional Justice Center. Simpson and co-defendant Clarence "C.J." Stewart were found guilty on all charges after standing trial for crimes including felony kidnapping, armed robbery and conspiracy related to a 2007 confrontation with sports memorabilia dealers in a Las Vegas hotel. The verdict comes 13 years to the day after Simpson was accused of murdering his ex-wife Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman (AFP)

Thirty years after being cleared of the horrific murder of his ex-wife and her friend in a verdict that shocked the world, the long arm of the law has finally caught up with O.J. Simpson.

The 61-year-old American football legend was convicted of robbery and kidnapping on Friday, charges that stemmed from his ill-fated bid to retrieve personal items from two sports memorabilia dealers at a Las Vegas home.

Now Simpson - who in the court of public opinion got away with murder at his circus-like trial in Los Angeles in 1995 - faces years behind bars after being convicted by an all-white jury in the gambling haven known as "Sin City."

It could well be the final chapter of a rags-to-riches life-story that saw Simpson rise from humble origins to become a beloved household name before his later transformation into one of the most notorious figures in American life.

Born Orenthal James Simpson on July 9, 1947 in San Francisco, his father left him at age five, leaving him in his mother's care to grow up poor and suffering from rickets, a calcium and vitamin deficiency that warped his legs.

Unable to afford an operation to straighten his legs, his mother created crude braces by putting the wrong shoe on each foot and his legs grew stronger, so strong that eventually he was able to churn up 100 yards in 9.9 seconds.

He spent a week in detention for robbing a liquor store when he was 15. Upon his release, he was met by baseball star Willie Mays who urged him to stay out of trouble and told him to develop his talent.

But it was Hertz that boosted his finances and public recognition at a time when it was flagging by portraying him as a smiling businessman in a three-piece suit dashing through the airport.

In 1977, he met Nicole Brown, then an 18-year-old waitress in a Rodeo Drive disco when he was a superstar. He soon separated from his first wife Marguerite and he and Nicole began living together, marrying in 1985.

Friends and Nicole's family said that O.J. always wanted control over Nicole and that confrontations, often over his philandering and her flirting, began to escalate. In a 911 call on New Year's Eve, 1989, played at his murder trial, Nicole can be heard screaming, "He's going to kill me! He's going to kill me!"

After separating the couple were formally divorced in 1992. But on June 12 1994, Simpson's ex-wife and her friend Ron Goldman, were found murdered outside Brown's apartment in Brentwood.

Brown had been stabbed in the throat so savagely she had almost been decapitated. Simpson was immediately the prime suspect.

However when he failed to turn himself in for arrest, a manhunt began that led to Simpson being chased at slow speed down a freeway in a white Ford Bronco under the full glare of news helicopters.

Eventually apprehended and charged with double murder, the evidence against Simpson seemed strong as his trial began in early 1995.

DNA linking him to the crime scene had been recovered, and he had no alibi for his exact whereabouts on the night of the killings.

Top Qaeda planner of Baghdad bombings slain: US

BAGHDAD (AFP) - US forces have killed an Al-Qaeda militant who planned some of the biggest bombings in Baghdad and who killed a group of Russian diplomats in 2006, the military said on Saturday.

Mahdi Ahmad Mahmud al-Zubaydi, also known as Abu Assad or Abu Rami, was killed along with an unidentified woman in Baghdad's Sunni district of Adhmiyah on Friday, a statement said.

Intelligence reports led US forces to a building in Adhmiyah where Abu Rami was holed up.

The troops came under attack from inside the building and fired back, killing Abu Rami and the woman.

The troops later found explosives inside the building and detonated them, according to the statement.

The killing of Abu Rami has dealt a severe blow to Al-Qaeda in Baghdad, US spokesman Admiral Patrick Driscoll said.

"His removal from the AQI (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) network will send shockwaves through Baghdad's terrorist bombing networks," he said in the statement.

"Its ability to conduct grisly attacks against Iraqi civilians and coalition and Iraqi forces has been severely crippled by this precision operation."

The military statement said Abu Rami's group was responsible for suicide bomb attacks in Baghdad on Thursday.

In one incident, a man blew himself up at the gate of Al-Rafool mosque in the Jadida neighbourhood and killed 12 people.

A suicide car bomb on the same day in the Zafaraniyah neighbourhood killed eight people, including three Iraqi soldiers.

Abu Rami was reportedly also responsible for multiple car bombings and mortar attacks in Sadr City in 2006 and 2007, including the car bombings on November 23, 2006 that killed more than 200 people.

The latter attack, in the sprawling Shiite district of some two million people, was one of the deadliest assaults in Baghdad during the peak of sectarian violence across the capital.

Abu Rami was also alleged to have planned and participated in several kidnappings and executions.

"In a video recording from June 2006, Abu Rami is seen shooting one of four Russian diplomats," the statement said.

On June 3, 2006, a group of Russian diplomats were attacked by gunmen in the upmarket Baghdad district of Mansour.

One diplomat Vitaly Titov was killed in the attack and four others were kidnapped and later killed.

An insurgent alliance led by Al-Qaeda later claimed it had carried out the murders of the Russians after Moscow failed to heed an ultimatum to pull out of Chechnya and free Muslim prisoners from Russian jails.

Abu Rami had ties to senior leaders of Al-Qaeda in Baghdad and was also responsible for attacks in Baghdad, Salaheddin and Diyala provinces, the statement said.

Originally a member of Ansar al-Islam, Abu Rami joined Al-Qaeda in 2004 and became the group's head of Baghdad's Rusafa district in 2007.

The military said Abu Rami specialised in car bombings and suicide bombings and personally selected the targets.

He allegedly ordered and directed a car-bombing attack May 1 that killed one American soldier and wounded three soldiers and three Iraqi civilians. Detainee reporting puts him at the scene of the crime," the military said.

In a separate statement the military said its troops have detained 10 other suspected Al-Qaeda militants in raids across northern and central Iraq since Friday.

"Consumers are advised not to consume Kirin milk tea made in China," the organisation said.

The Australian food watchdog has already recalled White Rabbit sweets and Chinese-made Cadbury chocolate eclairs, while importers of Lotte Koolha Biscuits have undertaken a precautionary withdrawal of the product.

Japanese importer, meanwhile, began recalling Chinese chocolates suspected of being contaminated with melamine.

The western Japanese city of Osaka said a test showed the chemical had been detected in "Chocolate Pillows" imported from China by Osaka-based NS International.

While there had been no reports of health problems, the city ordered the importer to recall some 86,000 packages of the chocolates on the grounds that the company may have violated the food sanitation law.

A growing number of countries throughout Asia as well as Africa are banning products over the scandal but it has also hit Europe.

The European Union recently banned all imports on Chinese milk-related products for children such as biscuits and chocolate on top of a long-standing embargo on Chinese dairy products like milk and yoghurt.

Western intelligence agencies have warned that Somalia, a nation without a functional government since the 1991 ouster of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, risks becoming an haven for extremists.

On Wednesday, the HRW issued a 60-page report entitled "Why Am I Still Here?" investigating the fate of the detainees, and urged Addis Ababa to release them, some 15 to 21 months after they were first arrested.

"The dozens of people caught up in the secret Horn of Africa renditions in 2007 have suffered in silence too long," said Jennifer Daskal, human rights counsellor and Ethiopia press officer at HRW and author of the report.

The rights panel said that while most suspects were sent home when the interrogations ended, some remain abandoned in Ethiopia.

Seven of 19 Kenyans known to have been detained in 2006 are still missing. Two were released in Nairobi in 2007 and one fled custody in Ethiopia in February.

NEWS IN BRIEF

French FM to revive peace talks

JENIN (AFP) - French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner was meeting Palestinian officials in the West Bank on Saturday, the first day of a two-day trip aimed at reviving the Middle East peace process ahead of a year-end deadline for a deal.

On Sunday, he will get together with outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who is seeking to form a new coalition government following her election last month to head the ruling Kadima party.

Kouchner will urgently renew a call to Israel to reduce restrictions on travel in the Palestinian territories, which is stifling the local economy, a senior French diplomat said.

Top Russian officer dead in blast

MOSCOW (AFP) - A top officer was among seven Russian soldiers killed in a car bombing in the Georgian rebel city of Tskhinvali, Russian media reported Saturday, amid conflicting reports on the incident.

The death of Colonel Ivan Petrik, head of the Russian military's joint staff for the South Ossetia conflict zone, was first reported by Kommersant newspaper and confirmed to Interfax by a spokesman for Russian land forces, Ivan Konashenko.

"It's really the case. We're not hiding his death," Konashenko said. Earlier Russia's military said seven servicemen had been killed and seven others wounded in Friday's car bomb blast at the Russian forces' base in Tskhinvali, but did not identify the victims.

Mao's personal plane up for sale

BEIJING (AFP) - Mao Zedong's personal airplane has been put up for sale by the owner of a shopping centre in southern China to make more space for parking.

Wang Zhilei, general manager of property developer Ridong Group in Zhubai, a city in southern Guangdong province, confirmed the company had put the 46-metre-long plane up for sale.

"There are not enough parking spaces, so we decided to sell the plane," Wang told AFP.

But he would not comment further on prospective buyers or on the price Ridong was seeking for the plane, and referred to a report by the Southern Metropolis Daily, a Chinese newspaper.

38 killed in rebel-army fighting

ANKARA (AFP) - Fifteen Turkish soldiers and 23 Kurdish rebels were killed during a rebel attack on a military post near the Iraqi border, the Anatolia news agency quoted an army spokesman as saying Saturday.

Two other soldiers remained unaccounted for after Friday's attack on the post in Semdinli town in Hakkarî province, General Metin Gurak, the head of the general staff's press department, said.

Press revels in return of 'Prince of Darkness'

LONDON (AFP) - Britain's newspapers said Saturday that Prime Minister Gordon Brown had either pulled off a masterstroke or miscalculation that might backfire in bringing Peter Mandelson back into government.

The national dailies gave front-page coverage to the return of the former minister dubbed the "Prince of Darkness," who was sent to Brussels four years ago following his second scandal-tainted resignation from the Cabinet.

Brown appointed the 54-year-old European Union trade commissioner as his business secretary on Friday. Without a House of Commons seat, Mandelson will be made a lord and enter upper chamber in order to rejoin the Cabinet.

"His feud with Gordon Brown was so bitter that for years they barely spoke. So it shows the PM's desperation," said The Sun, Britain's biggest-selling daily.

"It is Mandelson's sensational comeback that could decide Gordon Brown's fate."

The Daily Mail said on its front page: "Arise Lord Sleaze" saying Brown had hauled his centre-left governing Labour Party "back to its worst days of sleaze".

Rice in India amid hitches with nuclear pact

NEW DELHI (AFP) - US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Saturday to showcase a historic bilateral nuclear deal, but last-minute hitches raised doubts that the pact would be signed on her trip.

In a signing delay would be another bump in a three-year roller coaster for an agreement aimed at lifting a ban on US-Indian civilian nuclear trade imposed after India's first nuclear test in 1974.

Rice, who was due to meet Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, said the problem was bureaucratic rather than substantive.

"There are a lot of administrative details that have to be worked out," Rice told reporters on her flight to New Delhi. "I'll let you know (if the signing is on) but the whole purpose of this trip is to move forward, not to look at where we are," she added.

Islamists slap Sharia law on Somalia town

MOGADISHU (AFP) - Islamists in a town in southern Somalia have imposed Sharia law in line with their vow to bring back Islamic theocracy to areas where they were ousted two years ago, a spokesman said Friday.

The Mujahideens of Southern Somalia, a group allied to the radical Sheebab movement on Thursday named a 23-member board to enforce the law in Celwaa, about 650 kilometres (400 miles) southwest of Mogadishu.

"This administration will govern the town using laws of the Holy Koran," its spokesman Mohamed Osmal Indhotor told AFP.

Celwaa, near the border with Kenya, is home to tens of thousands of people, boosted by refugees who have fled fighting in the rest of Somalia.

US envoy in China for talks on NKorea nuclear deal

BEIJING (AFP) - US envoy Christopher Hill held talks Saturday with his Chinese counterpart and stepped up efforts to salvage a crumbling North Korean nuclear disarmament deal, a US embassy spokesman said.

Hill briefed top nuclear negotiator Wu Dawei on the outcome of his talks with Chinese officials on Friday, a human rights official and police said.

"The government has confirmed to us that eight out of the nine Kenyans held in Ethiopia have been freed and they arrived back in Kenya today," Ali Amin Kimathi, a chairman of Kenya's Muslim Human Rights Forum (MHRF), told AFP.

"I can confirm they (Kenyans) have arrived home," a police official said.

Kenyan terror suspects released in Ethiopia, arrive home

NAIROBI (AFP) - Eight Kenyans held in Ethiopia without charge since 2006 on suspicion of ties to Al-Qaeda-linked Islamists have been released and arrived home in Nairobi on Friday, a human rights official and police said.

"The government has confirmed to us that eight out of the nine Kenyans held in Ethiopia have been freed and they arrived back in Kenya today," Ali Amin Kimathi, a chairman of Kenya's Muslim Human Rights Forum (MHRF), told AFP.

"I can confirm they (Kenyans) have arrived home," a police official said.

Government spokesman Alfred Mutua was expected to make a formal announcement on Saturday.

US and intelligence services interrogated several foreign nationals while they were being detained in Nairobi and Ethiopia, where they were denied access to legal counsel and their consular representatives, rights groups have said.

The rights groups said the detainees included men, women and children from more than 18 countries - including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Other detainees included Somalis, Ethiopia Ogadenis and Eritreans.

Kimathi, who led a campaign for their release or prosecution, welcomed their arrival home.

"It has been a very painful and tragic experience for the detainees and their families that should not be allowed to happen again," he said.

"The governments of Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia broke humanitarian, international and national laws in the treatment of these people," he said, accusing Washington of pressuring these African governments to violate rights.

Choi's Death Hits Ildong Pharmaceuticals

Top actress Choi Jin-shil's sudden death Thursday morning was sad for all, but those with business connections to the popular celebrity were quick to act to minimize the negative impact on their brand image.

Ildong Pharmaceuticals, which had a 12-month contract with Choi, 10 months of which had passed, immediately pulled down all online ads from Web portals and the company's Web site upon hearing news of the suicide.

Continued airing radio and television commercials for popular vitamin supplement Aromalin Gold and healing agent Mediflex. She has represented these products since 2005 on an annually renewed contract.

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Choi Jin-shil

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