

**NATION/WORLD DIGEST**

**Challenger Claims Victory In Iraq Election**

BAGHDAD (AP) — A jubilant Ayad Allawi claimed victory for his secular, anti-Iranian coalition as final parliamentary returns Friday showed him edging out the bloc of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who angrily vowed to fight the results.

The results, if they stand, will give Allawi the first opportunity to form a parliamentary majority and Iraq's next government. But they do not automatically mean that he will become prime minister, and the narrow margin sets the stage for months of political wrangling.

"On this occasion, I'd like to congratulate the Iraqi people and extend the hand of friendship to all neighboring and world countries," said Allawi, a secular Shiite politician and former prime minister who appealed across sectarian lines to minority Sunnis who have been out of power since the downfall of Saddam Hussein.

In comments to cheering supporters at his Baghdad headquarters, he spoke of his desire to help build a stable region that would help "achieve prosperity for (Iraq's) people."

Baghdad's Sunni neighborhoods, the site of vicious sectarian fighting just a few years ago, erupted in cheering, honking of horns and celebratory gunfire in support of the man whom they have endorsed as their own.

**SKorean Naval Ship Sinks Near NKorea**

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Word that a South Korean naval ship sank in the tense waters around the disputed maritime border with communist North Korea set off panic: The president convened an emergency meeting and the military dispatched a fleet of ships.

Five hours later, 58 sailors had been pulled to safety but some 40 others were missing, reports said. There was no indication early Saturday that North Korea was to blame for the ship's demise, but troops kept a vigilant watch.

Seoul's panic attack — hours after North Korea's military threatened "unpredictable strikes" against the U.S. and South Korea — highlighted the fragility of peace on the divided Korean peninsula.

The two Koreas remain locked in a state of war because their three-year conflict ended in a truce, not a peace treaty, in 1953.

**11 Are Killed In Tractor-Trailer/Van Accident**

MUNFORDVILLE, Ky. (AP) — A tractor-trailer loaded with auto parts crossed a highway median Friday and slammed head-on into a van carrying a Mennonite family, killing 11 people before dawn on a hilly stretch of interstate.

The dead included an engaged couple and several members of their family, whose house burned down in December. Two children in the van were the only survivors of the crash about 75 miles south of Louisville.

After the collision, the truck smashed into a rock wall and burst into flames. The driver, the lone occupant, was also killed.

A pastor for the family said they were traveling to a wedding in Iowa, and the engaged couple planned their own wedding for July.

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**U.S., Russia Agree To Slash Nukes**

Obama: Pact Set To 'Reset' Russia Relations; Needs 57 Votes For Ratification

BY ROBERT BURNS AND TOM RAUM  
Associated Press Writers

WASHINGTON — The U.S. and Russia sealed the first major nuclear weapons treaty in nearly two decades Friday, agreeing to slash the former Cold War rivals' warhead arsenals by nearly one-third and talking hopefully of eventually ridding a fearful world of nuclear arms altogether.

President Barack Obama said the pact was part of an effort to "reset" relations with Russia that have been badly frayed. And at home the agreement gave him the biggest foreign policy achievement of his presidency, just days after he signed the landmark health care overhaul that has been his domestic priority.

Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev will sign the agreement April 8 in Prague, where Obama gave a major speech on doing away with nuclear arms one year ago. The city is the capital of the Czech Republic, a former Soviet satellite and now a NATO member.

If ratified by the Senate and by Russia's legislature, the reductions still would leave both countries, by far the world's largest nuclear powers, with immense arsenals — and the ability to easily annihilate each other. Together, the United States and Russia possess about 95 percent of the world's nuclear weapons, according to the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation.

Still, Obama called the pact a step toward "the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." He said nuclear weapons "represent both the darkest days of the Cold War, and the most troubling threats of our time."

Agreed Russian Foreign



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MGT  
**President Barack Obama, flanked by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, speaks in the press briefing in the White House on the new nuclear arms-reduction treaty with Russia, a key first step in President Barack Obama's ambitious strategy aimed at ridding the world of nuclear weapons.**

Minister Sergey Lavrov, "Both parties see the ultimate goal in building a nuclear-free world."

No one sees that any time soon. But U.S. leaders noted that the agreement came shortly before Obama was to host an international

conference on nuclear proliferation in Washington.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called the treaty an "important milestone" and said he believed it would "add a significant impetus" to a U.N. conference in

May to review the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

"We have turned words into action," Obama said at the White House after completing the agreement in a morning phone call with Medvedev. The White House said it was their 14th meeting or phone call on the issue.

The United States hopes the 10-year agreement will lead to better cooperation on other issues, such as a unified U.S.-Russian stance against the development of nuclear weapons by Iran.

Ratification in the Senate will require 67 votes, two-thirds of the senators, meaning Obama will need support from Republicans, something he's found hard to come by on other issues.

Sen. Richard Lugar of Indiana, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, welcomed Friday's announcement. Lugar, who is influential among fellow Republican senators as an arms control expert, said he looked forward to receiving the treaty so that the committee could hold hearings and "work quickly to achieve ratification."

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**Another Warmer Than Normal Winter Reported**

WASHINGTON (AP) — It will probably come as a surprise to most Americans, but the winter just finished was the fifth warmest on record, worldwide.

Oh, sure, nearly two-thirds of the country can dispute that from personal experience of a colder-than-normal season.

But while much of the United States was colder than usual, December-February — climatological winter — continued the long string of unusual warmth on a global basis.

And parts of the United States did join in, with warmer-than-normal readings for the season in New England and the Pacific Northwest. Indeed, Maine had its third warmest winter on record, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reports.

NOAA's National Climatic Data Center reports that worldwide the average temperature for winter was 54.9 degrees Fahrenheit (12.7 Celsius).

That's 1.08 degrees F (0.60 C) above average for the three-month period.

Contributing to the warmth was an El Nino, a periodic warming of water in the tropical Pacific Ocean, which can influence weather over large areas.

However, worldwide temperatures have also been climbing in recent years, a warming attributed by most atmospheric scientists to chemicals added to the air by human activities since the start of the Industrial Revolution.

In February NOAA reported that the 2000-2009 decade was the warmest on record, easily surpassing the previous hottest decade, the 1990s.

The report for December-February also said:

—Warmer-than-average temperatures engulfed much of the planet's surface, with the exception of unusually cool conditions across Europe, parts of Russia and most of the contiguous United States.

—The Southern Hemisphere combined land and ocean temperature during the three-month season was the second warmest December-February on record, behind 1998.

—Most of Canada had warmer-than-average conditions during winter, resulting in the warmest December-February period since national records began in 1948.

—Much of Australia experienced warmer-than-average conditions during the Northern Hemisphere winter (Southern Hemisphere summer), with the exception of cooler-than-average conditions across the northern parts of the country.

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