

## Australian PM Accused Of Making Secret Deal

**CANBERRA, Australia, Feb. 27**—A leading businessman linked closely to Australia's ruling party has been encouraged to invest in nuclear power, Prime Minister John Howard said Tuesday, a revelation the opposition quickly denounced.

The Labor Party accused Howard's government of making secret deals to build Australia's first commercial nuclear reactor, even though federal and state laws currently prohibit nuclear power generation, AP said.

"Why is the government having secret discussions...about building nuclear reactors?" Labor Leader Kevin Rudd asked Howard in Parliament.

Australian Nuclear Energy Pty Ltd.—regis-

tered on June 1, 2006—was established "to examine potential commercial responses to future energy needs," a company statement said Tuesday.

Australian Nuclear Energy is led by ruling party backer Ron Walker. Howard told Parliament Walker approached him last year with the company's plans, and the prime minister responded that it was "a great idea."

Howard acknowledged his government began looking into the possibility of Australia introducing nuclear power and expanding uranium mining less than a week after Australian Nuclear Energy was registered. But he said there was nothing sinister in his relationship with Walker, and denied the government was involved

in any secret discussions.

The Herald Sun newspaper reported Tuesday that Australian Nuclear Energy has examined the viability of building a nuclear plant in Victoria state or neighboring South Australia state.

The company has raised its plans with the federal government and both state governments, the newspaper said, citing an unnamed company official. Nuclear energy is looming as a major issue at elections due late this year.

Howard's center-right government has recently become an advocate of atomic power as a solution to Australia's heavy reliance on coal, which makes it one of the world's worst greenhouse gas emitters per capita.

## Sarkozy, Royal Running Neck-and-Neck

**PARIS, Feb. 27**—A public opinion poll released Monday showed French presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy and Socialist rival Segolene Royal running neck-and-neck, each garnering 50 percent in a runoff, AFP said.

It was the first time since early January that Royal was seen on equal footing with Sarkozy, the candidate of the right-wing ruling party, and seemed to confirm the findings of a weekend survey that put her just one point behind.

But a second poll from IPSOS released Monday suggested Sarkozy would still beat Royal in a runoff with 53 percent of votes compared to 47 percent for her.

Sarkozy, 52, has been ahead in 29 consecutive polls released since he won the nomination for the governing Union for

the Popular Movement (UMP) on January 14.

The LH2 poll crediting the candidates with an equal chance of winning, showed Sarkozy ahead in the first round of voting with 30 percent of votes while Royal would get 27 percent.

The IPSOS poll gave Royal 26 percent of votes in the first round, trailing behind Sarkozy at 31 percent.

Royal, 53, who wants to become France's first woman president, has climbed back in the polls since a high-profile television appearance last week and a reorganization of her campaign to bring in former rivals and party heavyweights.

"Mrs Royal has things back in hand," said Francois Miquet-Marty



Nicolas Sarkozy Segolene Royal

of the LH2 polling firm. Centrist Francois Bayrou is credited with 17 percent of votes while far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen is holding steady at 13 percent, according to the LH2 poll.

Eight other candidates are seen as garnering less than 3.5 percent of the votes.

The LH2 poll was carried out on February 23 and 24 among a representative sampling of 1,005 people. IPSOS polled 957 voters on the same dates.

## 3 Frenchmen Killed in Saudi Arabia

**MEDINA, Saudi Arabia, Feb. 27**—Three French expatriates in Saudi Arabia were shot dead by masked gunmen Monday and a fourth was seriously wounded near the Muslim holy city of Medina, officials and doctors said.

The four men were among a group of French residents of the capital Riyadh returning from a trip to the historical site of Madain Saleh in northwestern Saudi Arabia, a popular destination for Western expatriates, AFP said.

French President Jacques Chirac expressed shock following the attack, the first in three months against Westerners in the oil-rich kingdom which was rocked by a spate of bombings and shootings blamed on suspected Al-Qaeda mil-

itants starting in May 2003.

Chirac "firmly condemns this hateful act," said a statement from the presidency that also offered condolences to the victims' families.

Two of the victims died on the spot when the group of nine were attacked in a desert area some 50 kilometers north of Medina, the director of King Fahd hospital in Medina, Mutawakkel Faleh Hajjaj, told AFP.

A third man wounded in the attack was driven by his wife to a nearby medical center but died there, Hajjaj said.

Women are banned from driving in conservative Saudi Arabia.

The 22-year-old son of one of the victims underwent surgery at the

hospital to extract a bullet lodged in his lung and was critical but stable, he said.

Dr Khaldoun Mounla, medical counselor for the French consulate in the Red Sea city of Jeddah who rushed to Medina along with French diplomats, said that according to the account of one of the survivors, an undetermined number of hooded gunmen got off a jeep and opened fire on the men in the group, who had stopped to picnic on their way back from Madain Saleh.

Saudi security men were posted at the hotel in Medina where the survivors and French diplomats were spending the night.

Between 4,000 and 5,000 French nationals live in Saudi Arabia, Mounla said.

## Russia Works to End Sanctions on Palestinians



Sergei Lavrov

**MOSCOW, Feb. 27**—Russia will push for the lifting of an economic embargo against the Palestinian government, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tuesday during a visit by Hamas political director Khaled Meshaal, reported AFP.

"We are striving to have the international community support the peace process and make it irrevocable, including helping end the blockade" against the Palestinian government,

Lavrov told journalists.

The so-called Middle East diplomatic Quartet—Russia, the United States, the European Union and the United Nations—imposed the sanctions after Hamas took control of the Palestinian government in elections last January and refused to recognize Israel or renounce violence.

Meshaal met Lavrov on the second day of a visit to Moscow aimed at marshalling support to lift

the crippling sanctions, and said Russia was the next logical destination after Hamas and rival party Fatah struck a power-sharing agreement in Mecca earlier this month.

"From the very beginning we wanted to make Moscow the first place we visited after the talks in Mecca in order to consult with you about steps that need to be taken after the Mecca agreement," Meshaal said.

Meshaal's visit, his second to Moscow since the January 2006 elections, comes amid disagreement among the four Quartet powers on how to deal with the prospect of a Palestinian unity government involving both Hamas and the more moderate Fatah.

Russia is the only member of the Quartet that maintains diplomatic relations with Hamas.

## Ukraine Uneasy About US Bases

**KIEV, Ukraine, Feb. 27**—US plans to deploy a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic could hurt Ukraine's relations with its neighbors, the premier's office said Tuesday.

"We believe that deploying a missile defense system in Poland and Czech Republic will not benefit relations between our countries," Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich told the German newspaper, Handelsblatt, according to his press service.

AP quoted Washington

as saying that in January that it wants to put a radar system in the Czech Republic and a missile interceptor site in Poland—plans that have angered Russia.

Some Ukrainian officials have condemned the initiative, saying it poses a threat to Ukraine's security because it could make Ukraine's neighbors targets. Others have asked the United States to provide more details about its plans.

US military experts will visit Ukraine in early March to explain them.

Washington says the

installations are meant to deal with a potential threat from Iran, but Moscow has rejected the assurances, calling them an effort to strengthen US military might in the region.

Ukraine is roughly divided between the Western-oriented western part of the country and the largely Russian-speaking east and south, where people are more sympathetic toward Russia and are deeply skeptical about NATO membership—an aspiration of President Viktor Yushchenko, whose



Viktor Yanukovich

efforts to turn the country toward the West have been countered by the more Russia-leaning Yanukovich.

### World News In Brief

**Darfur Suspects**  
THE HAGUE—The International Criminal Court's prosecutor on Tuesday will name suspects accused of crimes against humanity in Darfur, the first time the court has unveiled details of its investigation.

**New PM**  
N'DJAMENA—Chad President Idriss Deby Itno named Delwa Kassire Coumakoye as the country's new prime minister, officials said. Coumakoye succeeds Pascal Yoadimnadiji who died in a Paris hospital on Friday of a brain hemorrhage at the age of 56.

**Military Build-Up**  
BEIJING—China hit back on Tuesday at criticism from US Vice President Dick Cheney that its military build-up was worrying to the rest, insisting it was only interested in peace.

**Peacekeeping Mission**  
ADDIS ABABA—African Union representatives are in Mogadishu ahead of its anticipated peacekeeping mission of some 8,000 troops to war-torn Somalia, an AU official said. The mission of civil and military officials was due to stay in Mogadishu for five days.

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**Conservatives Will Form Next British Gov't**

**LONDON, Feb. 27**—Britain's main opposition Conservative Party has opened an 11-point lead over the governing Labour Party, enough for a 100-

scat majority in parliament, an opinion poll suggested Tuesday.

According to AFP, the Communicate Research survey for The

**Koreas Resume Talks**

**SEOUL, South Korea, Feb. 27**—North and South Korea resumed high-level meetings Tuesday for the first time since the North tested a nuclear bomb in October, paving the way for a resumption of aid to impoverished Pyongyang after it pledged to start dismantling its atomic weapons program.

As South Korean officials arrived Tuesday afternoon in the North Korean capital, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun said in Seoul that it was important to show North Korea that it would get more for abandoning its nuclear weapons than keeping them, AP reported.

"We have to keep sending signals (to the North) that their security will be guaranteed and they could get profits through reform and openness," Roh told a news conference.

Roh also said he believed North Korea would not use its nuclear weapons unless attacked first, saying it would be something "only mental patients can do."

The Cabinet-level meetings—the highest channel of dialogue between the Koreas—are the first concrete sign of eased tensions on the divided peninsula since Pyongyang's February 13 agreement at international arms talks to shut down its main nuclear reactor within 60 days.

During the talks, the two sides will discuss how to cooperate in implementing the February 13 agreement, South Korean Unification Minister Lee Jae-joung said Tuesday before his departure for the talks that run through Friday.

That agreement calls for a separate forum on bringing peace to the Korean peninsula, which has remained technically in a state of war since the 1953 cease-fire that ended the Korean War.

Independent newspaper said support for Tony Blair's Labour was unchanged at 29 percent, while David Cameron's Tories were up six points in the last month to 40 percent.

The smaller opposition Liberal Democrats fell four points to 17 percent.

The poll of 1,001 adults also suggested the Conservatives could rely more on their natural supporters than Labour or the Lib Dems: 91 percent of people who said they identify with the Tories intended to vote for them.

In comparison, only 76 percent of Labour's core supporters said the same. For the Lib Dems, the figure was 83 percent.

Of floating voters, 43 percent said they would vote Tory; 28 percent would vote Labour; and 19 percent Lib Dem.

Britain's next general election is due by May 2010, May 2009 is touted as a likely date, although analysts have not ruled out a snap election in 2008 soon after finance minister Gordon Brown takes over from Blair as prime minister.