



MARCH 2008

Middle East & Asia Religious and Security Intelligence Briefing

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The following reports are colour-coded: based on travel advice from Western governments, the countries are graded as follows:

Red: travellers are advised not to travel to the country in question (or specific regions in that country)

Amber: travellers should exercise caution

Green: no reported concerns

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Afghanistan

A TOP US military commander has expressed his confidence that the Taliban will not launch a spring offensive this year.

The prediction came from Admiral William Fallon as he was addressing the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee. He said that, instead of a Taliban surge, the momentum was now going in the direction of the coalition forces.

His comments came as it was confirmed that the US is to send another 3,200 troops to the strife-torn nation this year ahead of any more rebel activity with the warmer weather.

However, the Taliban are continuing to pose problems to the coalition, although last week it was reported that seven suspected insurgents had been detained during an operation of US-led Coalition forces in Garmser district of southern Afghanistan's Helmand Province, where most of the British troops are operating.

The seven are expected to be questioned on their involvement in Taliban weapon-facilitation operations as well as other extremist activities.

Over the past few weeks there have been continued arrests of suspected militants from insurgency-active southern and eastern regions, indicating a growing military action against the anti-government networks in the post-Taliban nation.

Travel alerts:

Western governments are advising against travel to Afghanistan. In particular, they advise against all travel to the provinces of Balkh (Northern Afghanistan); Ghazni, Kapisa, Khost, Kunar, Laghman, Logar, Nangarhar, Nuristan, Paktika, Panjsher and Paktya (Eastern Afghanistan); Helmand, Kandahar, Nimroz, Uruzgan, and Zabul (Southern Afghanistan); and Farah (Western Afghanistan).

Westerners are advised against all but essential travel to Kabul, not only because of the ongoing terrorist activity, but also because of the high risk of kidnap.

Since last July there have been restrictions on onward travel from Kabul, and foreigners leaving Kabul by road must be escorted by an armed escort.

Armenia

THE COUNCIL OF Europe has dispatched a diplomatic mission to Armenia as the political crisis there following disputed elections shows no sign of abating.

A state of emergency is in force after the Prime Minister, Serzh www.religiousintelligence.com

Sarkisian, won the presidential elections ahead of his rival Levon Ter-Petrosian, a former president, who claims that elections were rigged.

Street battles erupted and opposition activists set up barricades in the city centre in Yerevan. The government responded with force, announcing a state of emergency as police fought pitched battles with the protestors.

The Council of Europe sent former UK Deputy Prime Minister to Yerevan to meet with the outgoing and incoming Presidents. John Prescott had been in the country as an election monitor on behalf of the Council, and at that time declared the elections had been democratic, although he conceded that there were problems with the counting of votes.

The Council said the aim of the latest visit is to "assess the post-electoral situation ... and explore possibilities for defusing the current political crisis and promoting dialogue."

In the meantime, the failed candidate, Levon Ter-Petrosian, has been placed under house arrest and the European verdict on the elections has hindered his calls for a re-run. His rival has the support of the Armenian establishment and military, further hindering his status. However, observers believe that popular support for his cause might help his campaign in the long-run.

The latest violence has sparked fears of renewed tensions with neighbouring Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh — a disputed ethnic Armenian territory belonging to Azerbaijan occupied by Armenia in a war in the early 1990s. Earlier this month 16 soldiers were killed as violence flared.

Western governments have been united in calls for restraint in Armenia.

Travel alerts:

The US State Department is warning travelers to exercise caution near the Armenia-Azerbaijan border. They say that Armenia's land borders with Turkey, Azerbaijan, and the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan remain closed and continue to be patrolled by armed troops who stop all people attempting to cross. In addition, there are still land mines in numerous areas in and near the conflict zones.

Although there were street protests in Yerevan on March 1 following the disputed election, there are no reports of violent disturbances in other parts of the country, although opposition demonstrations may take place in other cities.

On March 1 the President declared a state of emergency in Yerevan which will last for up to 20 days. This bans meetings and demonstrations; imposes controls on the media, political parties and

NGOs; and provides some additional powers to stop and search vehicles. Some roads in Yerevan city centre are closed. Further incidents remain possible over the coming days.

Generally, there is a low threat from terrorism in Armenia.

The Canadian Government has an official warning for the country, in particular for Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding areas due to tensions resulting from the political situation and military presence.

The Australian Government says travellers should avoid all protests and demonstrations as they may turn violent.

Azerbaijan

With the crisis in Armenia grabbing international attention, neighbouring Azerbaijan has been urged to avoid any further violations of the cease-fire along the dividing line in Nagorno-Karabakh.

"We regret that there was a violation of the cease-fire along the dividing line in Nagorno-Karabakh," State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey said.

The two countries have blamed each other for a gun battle in the area that killed 16 soldiers, but Western governments have called for a diplomatic solution.

Meanwhile, the Azerbaijan government has embarked on a mission to encourage religious believers to take part in the political process.

"The key purpose is to encourage the active participation of the believers in the voting, as well as educating them in this field," the Chair of the State Committee Hidayat Orujev said at a recent workshop ahead of presidential elections in October.

Out of the 458 religious groups in the country only 31 are non-Islamic, and he conceded that some religious groups would try to 'use the religious factor for their own purposes,' however, he added that this might require a review of current legislation and called for a debate on what needed clarification.

The Chair of the Azerbaijan Central Election Committee (CEC) Mazahir Panahov said: "All citizens, regardless of their position, religion and political views, should take an active part in the voting in order to ensure that the elections are democratic. Religious communities should be active."

Travel alerts:

The Canadian Government, British Foreign Office and the Australian Government warn against all travel to Nagorno-Karabakh and the military occupied area surrounding it. They add that Azerbaijan faces a threat from terrorism. Attacks could be indiscriminate and against civilian targets and places frequented by foreigners.

The US State Department adds that as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenian forces control Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region, and a large portion of additional Azerbaijani territory surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh in the southwest part of the country, along the borders with Iran and Armenia.

They say it is not possible to enter the self-proclaimed "Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh," which is not recognized by the United States (or other Western nations), from other areas of Azerbaijan.

American citizens of Armenian ancestry considering travel to Azerbaijan should remain particularly vigilant when visiting the country, as the Government of Azerbaijan has claimed that it is unable to guarantee their safety.

The Australian Government also warns that the World Health Organization (WHO) has confirmed human deaths from avian influenza in Azerbaijan.



Bahrain

BAHRAIN has been applauded for moves to recognise the freedom of the press, but it has been warned that much more needs to be done.

The Gulf State won the accolade from the Reporters Without Border organisation after it reported that journalists there have much more freedom to report than in other countries in the region.

However, the Paris-based organisation also called for the decriminalisation of press offences, introduce more reforms and end the government monopoly on broadcasting.

A delegation from Reporters Without Borders recently visited the country when they met with officials, journalists and politicians as well as civic leaders.

In their report they say: "The Press freedom situation in the country is far from satisfactory.

"No journalist has been imprisoned since March 1999, but the Press still has many problems. Restrictive laws and veiled pressure from officials too often force journalists to censor themselves."

The delegation said they believed that officials were sincere in their desire to help develop press freedom, but pointed out that long-awaited reforms have yet to materialise.

They added that there were 18 press offences that were punishable under the Press and Publications Act, and they were concerned that these were open to very broad interpretation.

"Reporters Without Borders urges the authorities not to postpone fulfilling their promises to allow more Press freedom," says the report.

"Reform of the Press law must not be abandoned for lack of political determination, or because of pressure from the radical fundamentalists who form the majority in parliament."

They added: "Access to many websites is banned. It should be the job of the courts, not the government, to regulate the Internet," it says.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office warns that the general threat from terror-

ism remains as terrorists continue to threaten attacks in the Gulf region.

The US State Department says that travelers should maintain a high level of security awareness. Spontaneous demonstrations take place in Bahrain from time to time in response to world events or local developments.

Similar warnings are in place from other Western governments, while the Australian Government adds that the Bahraini weekend moved from Thursday-Friday to Friday-Saturday from September 2006.



Bangladesh

TOUGH ACTION has been promised by the Bangladeshi caretaker government against a group listed by the US as a foreign terrorist organization.

Although the leader of Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (HUJI), Mufti Abdul Hannan, has been caught, Bangladesh said it would take firm action against any clandestine activity undertaken by its supporters.

A government official admitted that there was no open activity by the group, but added that intelligence and law-enforcing agencies have been instructed to maintain a close watch on any activities of the Islamic extremists.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the leader of HUJI-Bangladesh signed the February 1998 fatwa sponsored by Osama bin Laden that declared American civilians legitimate targets for attack. Since then, HUJI-Bangladesh has been implicated in a number of terrorist attacks in Bangladesh and abroad.

So far, 64 militants of the organization have been arrested.

Meanwhile, UN has named Atiq Rahman, the Executive Director of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, along with Prime Minister Helen Clark and five other environmental leaders chosen as this year's Champions of the Earth by the United Nations Environment Programme for spearheading efforts to advance sustainable development and combat climate change.

The prize will be awarded at a ceremony in Singapore on April 22.

The other winners are Prince Albert II of Monaco; former United States Senator Timothy E Wirth; Balgis Osman-Elasha, a senior researcher at Sudan's Higher Council for Environment & Natural Resources; Liz Thompson, the former Energy and Environment Minister of Barbados; and Abdul-Qader Ba-Jammal, the Secretary-General of the Yemen People's General Congress.

"Today, we face environmental challenges of unprecedented magnitude. More than ever, our planet needs committed leaders and achievers like the 2008 Champions of the Earth who spur real, positive change and fuel innovative solutions to environmental problems," said UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner.

"These inspirational individuals demonstrate not only that action and different development

paths are possible but also the abundant opportunities arising as a result of a transformation towards a green economy."

Travel alerts:

Western governments advise against all but essential travel to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (this does not include the city of Chittagong) because of the risk of being caught up in clashes between rival tribal groups, settlers and the military. They say that if travellers propose to visit the Chittagong Hill Tracts they are required to give the Bangladeshi authorities seven days' notice.

On January 11, 2007, the President declared a state of emergency, which remains in force. While the situation in Bangladesh is currently calm, events can move quickly. Westerners are advised to avoid all rallies, demonstrations and large gatherings including "hartals" (political strikes), as there is the potential for violence.

The US State Department adds that elections have been postponed until late 2008. They say that the security situation in Bangladesh is fluid, and Americans are urged to check with the US Embassy for the latest information.

Additionally, the US Embassy has in the past received reports of incidents of kidnapping, arms and narcotics smuggling and clashes between local Bangladeshis and Rohingya refugees in areas near Rohingya refugee camps in the Teknaf, Kutupalong, Ukha, and Ramu areas of the Cox's Bazar district. The US Embassy also recommends against travel to these areas. Individuals who choose to visit these districts are urged to exercise extreme caution.

The Canadian Government adds that the interim government has deployed military troops in 64 districts across the country. Checkpoints could be set up in random areas and may cause traffic delays. Canadians should be aware that the Dhaka Metropolitan Police have imposed a ban on all gatherings of greater than five people.



Bhutan

THE HEAD of the EU election monitoring team in Bhutan has expressed optimism that the transition to democracy will be smooth.

"There's no doubt about the success of this new process," said Jos Javier Poms Ruiz, who is heading a EU Election Observation Mission to Bhutan.

"In our observations so far, most of the processes comply with international standards," he told reporters here.

"Unlike many countries, which opted for democracy following political and social unrest, Bhutan was introducing the process at a time of unprecedented peace and against the will of the people, who chose to be guided by the wise and visionary monarchs," he said.

The elections, on March 24, are being watched by a team of 15 observers from 13 EU countries, and they say that they intend to "observe, among others, campaign environment, role of media, work of election administration and women's participation in the historic elections."

Candidates of Druk Phuensum Tshogpa and Peoples Democratic Party are contesting for the 75-member National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament.

Travel alerts

Western government say there is a low threat from terrorism, but

add that travel restrictions are in place. For example, any visit to Bhutan must be arranged through an authorised travel agent. The British Foreign Office warns that those travelling independently on British passports are not permitted to enter Bhutan.

The Canadian government warns travellers to be aware of the possibility of unrest during the election period.

Brunei

THE SULTAN of Brunei has declared his desire to see a zero poverty level in the country by 2035.

At the opening ceremony of the fourth session of the legislative council, the Sultan said that in the 10 years since independence, the per capita income of the population has been encouraging. Ten years after independence, it shows an upward trend.

"Has it not crossed our mind that one of the aspirations of the 2035 vision is to achieve zero poverty in this nation? I am convinced that Brunei could achieve this aspiration and that the Legislative Council could play a role in achieving it," said His Majesty.

"No doubt, agriculture is a crucial field in economic diversification. Countries worldwide depend on agriculture in providing food, be it through producing or by importing.

"The objective of agriculture is to fulfil the needs of the population while at the same time be traded locally and globally in the form of commercial agriculture. The issue is, to what extent is our nation's agricultural growth? Are we experiencing a positive growth?" asked the ruler.

"Recently, we outlined a long term plan entitled Brunei 2035 vision. The plan outlines policies and development plan strategies for the next 30 years. I hope that with such a vision, our objective to generate highly knowledgeable and skilled Bruneians could be fulfilled in order to enjoy a dynamic and sustainable economy, which is our priority.

"In the context of economy, such a vision stresses on a profound upward trend and to provide job opportunities that are needed by the nation," he said.

Travel alerts

The British Foreign Office warns travelers to the Malaysian State of Sabah that they should be aware that we believe terrorists and criminal elements are continuing with plans to kidnap foreign tourists from the islands and coastal areas of Eastern Sabah. Boats travelling to and from offshore islands and dive sites are possible targets.

The US State Department says they are concerned that terrorist groups, such as Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), that have transnational capability to carry out terrorist attacks, may do so in various Southeast Asian nations, including Brunei. JI is known to have cells operating in Southeast Asia and to have connections with al-Qaeda, other regional terrorist groups and previous regional terrorist attacks.

Cambodia

A TARGET date of 2012 has been set by Cambodia and Vietnam to speed up the demarcation of the land border between the two nations, it has been announced.

The new date is several years later than



originally intended, as the work initially began in 2005, with hopes that it might be settled within two years.

"We planned to finish the border demarcation between Cambodia and Vietnam at the end of last year, but due to technical issues, such as unclear maps made during French colonial times and flooding, so far the project is about 30 percent completed," Var Kim Hong, who is the senior minister in charge of border affairs, said, adding that about 30 of the total 340 markers have been installed.

Meanwhile, it has been announced that Cambodia is seeking to stop the trade in an oil used in the production of ecstasy.

The oil, from the M'reah Prov tree, is keenly sought, but the general secretary of the National Authority for Combating Drugs said that legislation would allow them to impose 'heavy punishments' on traffickers.

The move follows complaints from Vietnam and Thailand, who both said that tons of the oil had been seized in their countries in recent years. There is an added interest in stamping out the trade, as the trees from which the oil is harvested are now under threat as the slow-growing trees are often cut down to extract the oil.

Ahead of a visit by the former Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, to help in rebuilding in the Asian nation, it has been revealed that Cambodia is seeking the support of the Japanese government for its peace-keeping mission in southern Sudan.

The 300 Cambodian peacekeepers are involved in removing mines from the south of Sudan, and although they have not come under attack, the Cambodian defence minister has said that the situation in the African nation is 'tense'.

The Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Tea Banh said: "Cambodia will continue to fulfill its duties in peacekeeping operations with the co-operation of Japan."

Travel alerts:

The British Government warns that there is an underlying threat from terrorism in Cambodia. However, the US State Department says that they are concerned that individuals and groups may be planning terrorist actions against



United States citizens and interests, as well as sites frequented by Westerners, in Southeast Asia, including in Cambodia.

Travellers are advised to avoid crowds and, in particular, political gatherings.

American citizens traveling to Cambodia are warned to exercise caution in clubs, discos, bars, restaurants, hotels, places of worship, schools, outdoor recreation venues, tourist areas, beach resorts, and other places frequented by foreigners.

Washington also says that national elections are scheduled for July 28, 2008. Political tensions have eased, and the current situation is relatively stable; however, Cambodian political activities have turned violent in the past, and the possibility for politically motivated violence remains.

Land mines and unexploded ordnance are found in rural areas throughout Cambodia, and especially in Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Pursat, Siem Reap, and Kampong Thom provinces. Travelers should never walk in forested areas or even in dry rice paddies without a local guide.

The Canadian Government points out that on July 29, 2007, one small bomb exploded and two other larger bombs were neutralized at the Cambodian/Vietnamese Friendship Monument in Phnom Penh. No one was injured in the blast. However, Canadians traveling in Cambodia should be cautious, avoid any political rallies or protests and monitor local developments.

The Australian Government advises caution and for travelers to monitor developments that might affect their safety in Cambodia because of the risk of civil unrest, violent criminal activity and terrorism.

In the past year there have been human cases of avian influenza in Cambodia.

China

RELIGIOUS belief under the guiding hand of the state can be a tool for promoting social harmony, the number four man in the Chinese Politburo said on Monday at the opening session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Beijing.

The chairman of the national committee of the CPPCC, Jia Qinglin's (pictured) comments come amidst rising tensions and expectations from China's rapidly growing Christian population. The state "should fully follow the policy on freedom of religious belief, implement the regulations on religious affairs, and conduct thorough research on important and difficult issues related to religion," Jia said on March 3.

"We should guide religious leaders and believers to improve their lives, and make full use of their positive role in promoting social harmony," he said. The state will also liberalize its control of the growing professional classes, he said according to a report released by the official China Daily. The CPPCC needs to "maintain close ties with members of the emerging social strata, such as private entrepreneurs, accountants and lawyers," he said and should "show concern for their interests, open up channels for them to articulate their views, and guide them to conscientiously assume social responsibilities and effectively promote socialist development with Chinese characteristics."

Founded in 1949, the CPPCC "consists of elite members of the Chinese society who are willing to serve the think tank for the government and for the country's legislative and judicial organs. As an open forum where the ruling [Communist Party of China], non-Communist parties and people without party affiliation discuss state affairs freely and on an equal footing, the CPPCC has been the man-

ifestation of China's socialist democracy," a Chinese government handout states.

The government minister stated that according to official figures kept by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) there were 10 million Protestants and 4 million Catholics in China. The Church Christian Council/Three Self Movement and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association are the country's only official Christian bodies and the statistics cited by Jia likely refer only to those groups.

According to the émigré organization, the China Aid Association, the number of unofficial Christians is 10 times as large. SARA director Yie Xiaowen reported there were 110 million Protestants and 20 million Catholics in China by the close of 2006. The news was given to briefings held at Beijing Universities and the Chinese Academy of Social Science last year for party cadres, academics and government officials.

At the close of the Chinese revolution in 1949 there were an estimated 750,000 Chinese Protestants, many of whom subsequently fled to Taiwan and Hong Kong following the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces.

Despite overtures from SARA, relations between the Vatican and the Chinese government remain frosty. Last month during a trip to Washington Yie Xiaowen and the vice president of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association Anthony Liu Bainian expressed the hope that Pope Benedict XVI might visit China during the Olympics. "The distance between the two sides is getting shorter and shorter,"

Ye said.

However three Catholic bishops have disappeared into the Chinese Laogias, the state's system of forced labour camps, while the remaining underground bishops are in forced isolation, the official Patriotic Catholic Association are kept under close watch, several bishops have died at the hands of the police and a large number of priests have been jailed. "If we don't arrive at a decent level of religious freedom, what can the Pope do in Beijing?" a Vatican spokesman told Reuters last week.

Persecution of China's "House Church" movement continues, the China Aid Association, and has seen a

marked rise as China prepares for the Olympic Games. The latest incident of persecution reported to the West occurred on Feb 18 when a police raid on a Bible class for House Church led to the arrest of 70 pastors in the city of Shangqiu in Henan province.

The Chinese government's evolving of policies toward religious freedom emphasizes the pragmatic benefits of a settled religious landscape, while seeking to stamp out individual or collective expressions of religious conscience outside of government-approved norms.

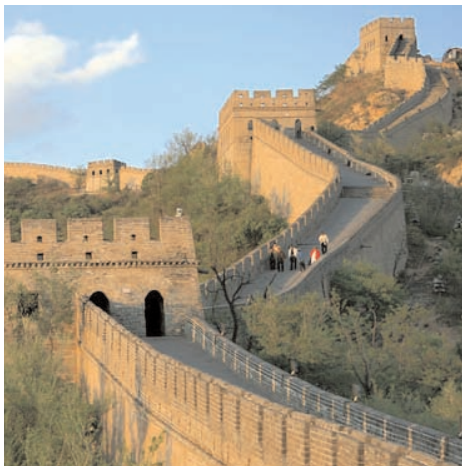
Ding Wenfang, a member of the CPPCC's national committee and vice president of the China Islamic Association told China Daily religious believers should strengthen national unity and promote religious harmony.

"The unity of the 56 ethnic groups in China and religious harmony are necessary to build a harmonious society," he explained.

Travel alerts:

Most Western governments say there is a low threat from terrorism in China, but travelers are advised to take sensible precautions.

The US State Department also warns about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning, after a number of fatal accidents involving American citizens. They also warn that security personnel may at



times place foreign visitors under surveillance. Hotel rooms, telephones, and fax machines may be monitored, and personal possessions in hotel rooms, including computers, may be searched without the consent or knowledge of the traveler. Taking photographs of anything that could be perceived as being of military or security interest may result in problems with authorities. Foreign government officials, journalists, and business people with access to advanced proprietary technology are particularly likely to be under surveillance.

They say that terrorism is rare in China, although a small number of bombings have occurred in areas throughout China. These have been of a criminal nature rather than linked to terrorism.

They add that business disputes in China are not always handled through the courts. Sometimes the foreign partner has been held hostage, threatened with violence, or beaten up.

Georgia

POLITICAL tensions in Georgia remain high, and were aggravated recently after Russia lifted trade restrictions on the rebel Abkhazia region.

"This is a very precarious provocation by Russia, intended to destabilise the regional situation and trigger uncontrollable processes," President Mikhail Saakashvili said on television.

"By doing so the Russians took the course to militarise the region. We will declare a zero-tolerance policy ... towards the militarisation of Abkhazia."

It is the latest development in stormy relations between the two nations following the arrest of alleged Russian spies. Moscow retaliated to that incident by cutting air and trade links with Georgia.

There has been some speculation that Moscow's latest move is directly linked to the declaration of independence from Kosovo. At that time Russia warned that this could lead to similar moves from other regions to declare independence.

Earlier this month Abkhazia called on the international community to recognize its independence. The fact that the majority of its citizens hold Russian passports is perhaps significant in the move by Moscow.

"This move (lifting sanctions) cannot be characterised in any other way than a barefaced attempt to infringe on Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, to encourage separatism, and a dangerous provocation aimed at deepening tension in the conflict zone," the foreign ministry said.

Meanwhile, the political situation within Georgia remains fragile, following a demonstration by around 5,000 people who are upset at

the presidential election result in January. They claim that the vote which returned Mikhail Saakashvili to power was rigged.

Saakashvili, who is pre-Western and is hopeful of both EU and Nato membership, called the January elections early after ordering a crackdown on protestors. Both sides are holding out against the other, with the protestors vowing to continue their actions.

Travel alerts:

The British Government warns against all travel to the separatist regions of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and also the upper Kodori Valley (also known as upper Abkhazia). They are also advising caution in the Svaneti, Pankisi valley, Zugdidi and Tsalenjika districts.

They say travelers should avoid all land borders with the Russian Federation.

Similar warnings are in place from other Western governments.

Washington adds that American citizens cannot legally cross by land, air, rail, or sea between Russia and Georgia, even if in possession of valid Russian or Georgian visas.

Georgia's armed forces have periodically conducted operations against suspected international terrorists, Chechen fighters, and criminals who have taken refuge in the Pankisi Gorge.

In the past, religious minorities in Georgia have been targets of violent attacks. The victims were primarily Jehovah's Witnesses, but also include Pentecostals, Baptists, and members of the Assembly of God. Incidents included the burning of literature, the destruction of private property and the beating (sometimes severe) of believers, including American citizens. Although Georgian authorities arrested, convicted and imprisoned the ringleader of the group responsible for these attacks in 2005, American citizens should remain cautious when engaging in missionary activity in Georgia.

India

FOREIGN missionaries have been blamed for helping to inflame religious conflict in the Indian state of Orissa.

The claim comes from the Rev Enos das Pradhan, general secretary of the Church of North India, said that such 'aggressive evangelising' was causing harm.

In an interview with the Ecumenical News Service he said that there were already deep divisions in society concerned with issues surrounding the conversion of Hindus to Christianity.

In addition, there were local grievances about the rights and benefits granted to Christian converts under the caste system.

But he added that the influx of missionaries from overseas, and also from South India, had worsened the situation.

Meanwhile, India has been hit by another avian flu outbreak. The latest development, earlier this month, came a month after authorities in eastern India had slaughtered four million birds in an effort to stem the spread of the disease.

Travel alerts:

There are warnings against travel to, or through rural areas of Jammu and Kashmir other than Ladakh; all travel in the immediate vicinity of the border with Pakistan (Northern and Western India), other than at the international border crossing



at Wagah; and all travel in the Manipur and Tripura (East and North East India).

The British Government advises against all but essential air travel to Srinagar (Northern India) and Imphal (East and North East India).

London says there is a high threat of terrorism throughout India. Attacks have targeted public places, including places of worship.

The US State Department says that a number of anti-Western terrorist groups (some of which are on the US government's list of foreign terrorist organizations) are believed to be active in India, including, but not limited to, Islamic extremist groups such as Harakat ul-Mujahidin, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Lashkar-e Tayyiba.

They also warn that political demonstrations are likely to cause disruption.

In addition, religious and inter-caste violence is unpredictable and occurs occasionally.

The Canadian government urges travellers to exercise a high degree of caution in the country. Travellers should maintain a high level of security awareness at all times and avoid public gatherings and street demonstrations.

They add that in response to the declaration of emergency rule in Pakistan on November 3, 2007, Indian security forces have been placed on high alert along the Indian-Pakistani border. Travellers to this region should be extremely vigilant.

The Australian Government warns of 'recent credible information indicates that Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai and Kolkata may be the targets of terrorist attacks and, more specifically, that terrorists are planning to conduct suicide attacks in Mumbai or New Delhi'. On 23 November 2007, bombs targeting local courts exploded in Lucknow, Farizabad and Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

They also advise travellers to reconsider their need to travel to the north-eastern states of Asom (formerly Assam), Nagaland, Tripura and Manipur because of the risk of armed robbery, kidnapping, extortion and terrorism related incidents.

Indonesia

THE INDONESIAN President is treading a delicate line in relations between the USA and Iran, it has emerged. It was revealed earlier this month that President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had rejected telephone calls from President Bush and President Ahmedinejad ahead of a UN vote on sanctions on Iran.

A spokesman said that the rejection of the telephone calls was intended to show that Indonesia would not negotiate on its independence in the crucial vote, but it came just days ahead of a visit to Iran by the Indonesian leader.

There was also concern that the phone calls could be used by lobbyists against Indonesia's bid to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council.

But a spokesman denied that the rebuff had not yet led to any negative fallout in relations between Indonesia and the USA.

"But there may be a problem in the future, it is only natural. But Indonesia's reason for not supporting the UN resolution was very clear," said the spokesman.

While Indonesia had voted in favour of the first round of sanctions, they were against the additional sanctions, arguing that it was too early.

This came ahead of a visit by the Indonesian leader to Tehran on a two-day visit aimed at boosting bilateral ties, particularly in the field of energy.

The National Iran Oil Company was expected to sign an accord with an Indonesian firm for the construction of a refinery in the province of Banten in Indonesia.

But Yudhoyono's spokesman, Dino Pati Djalal, said that the Indonesian leader was expected to urge Iran to be transparent and

to cooperate with the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Meanwhile, Jaukak Gulton, a 66-year old farmer activist who was active in the land struggle in Mariah Hombang village in North Sumatra was found dead last month.

His death is being regarded as assassination by the Peasant National League (STN) and the Peasant Forum of Nagori Mariah Hombang (FNMH).

They say that scars from a 'sharp object' were found on the back of his head, and on his lip and stomach. There were also burn marks on his body.

However, local police maintained that he died from a heart attack.

The North Sumatran STN strongly believes that Gulton's active involvement in the two-year conflict over land was behind his death.

Meanwhile, it has been reported that violence against women in Indonesia has steadily increased after nearly a decade of political reform.



The National Commission for Women's Protection said that State institutions both in central and regional governments were among the main perpetrators through their discriminatory regulations, the report said.

The sharpest increase in the number of reported cases of domestic violence occurred in 2005, with 16,615 reported cases, or almost four times the 4,310 cases reported in 2004.

Travel alerts:

The British Government warns against all travel to Central Sulawesi Province and Maluku Province, especially Ambon. Both provinces have been subject to outbreaks of internal violence and the security situation continues to remain unsettled.

Caution is also advised when travelling to Aceh, which is emerging from a long-running internal conflict.

London says there remains a high threat from terrorism in Indonesia. They say that terrorists continue to plan attacks, which could be indiscriminate, including in places frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers.

The US State Department says that due to the possibility of terrorist attacks directed against American or other Western citizens and interests, they urge American citizens to evaluate carefully the risks of travel to Indonesia.

The Canadian Government advises against non-essential travel to Indonesia, including Bali.

They add that heightened security remains in place in South Sulawesi Province including Makassar. Those who choose to travel to, or remain in, the Soroako region should take all necessary steps

to protect their safety and ensure they have confidence in their individual security arrangements.

Humanitarian aid workers who choose to travel to Aceh despite this warning should do so only in conjunction with well established and reputable organizations.

The Australian government advises travelers to reconsider their need to travel to Indonesia, including Bali, at this time due to the very high threat of terrorist attack. They say they continue to receive reports indicating that terrorists are planning attacks against a range of targets, including Western interests and places frequented by foreigners. They suggest those already in Indonesia, including Bali, and are concerned for their safety they should consider departing.

They add that there have been recent arrests of high level terrorist operatives in Indonesia, but they assess terrorists are continuing active planning of attacks.

Iran

LEGISLATION has been brought by the government of President Mahmoud Amadinejad before the Iranian Majlis that would mandate the death penalty for apostates from Islam. The law's reach would be worldwide, the legislation says.

The Washington think tank, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy reported on Feb 5 the proposed "Bill for Islamic Penal" law will be the first time that Iran has by statute mandated the death penalty for conversion from Islam.

The legislation used the word "Hadd — meaning that it explicitly sets death as a fixed punishment that cannot be changed, reduced or annulled. In the past, the death penalty has been handed down,

and also carried out, in apostasy cases, but it has never before been set down in law," the Institute's president, Joseph Grieboski said.

Islam's five major schools of jurisprudence, the Madh'hab, currently hold that converts from Islam must be executed. However, in the Middle Ages several leading Islamic jurists rejected the death penalty — as do a number of moderate modern scholars — noting that while the Koran condemns apostasy as a sin, it does not mandate a penalty.

However Islamic law distinguishes between apostasy of an adult and someone who has not reached puberty. The 'Umdat as-Salik wa 'Uddat an-Nasik (Reliance of the Traveller and Tools of the Worshipper, of the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence as practiced by the al-Azhar in Cairo rejects the death penalty for child apostates, as does the Hidayah, the Hanafi juridical work that guides Muslim jurisprudence in India and Pakistan.

The proposed Iranian law would enshrine the mandatory death penalty into the country's civil code for men. Women apostates would be imprisoned. Two types of apostasy are set down in the legislation: parental and innate.

Innate apostates are those whose parents were Muslim, declared

themselves as Muslim as an adult and then leave the faith.

Parental apostates are those whose parents were non-Muslims, who had become Muslims as adults, and then left the faith.

Article 225-7 states the "Punishment for an innate apostate is death," while Article 225-8 allows a parental apostate three days to recant their apostasy. If they continue in their unbelief, "the death penalty would be carried out."

Article 112 would give the law an extraterritorial jurisdiction, extending its mandate to cover those who renounce Islam both inside and outside Iran.

The law criminalizes heresy saying that anyone who claims to be a Prophet, or a Muslim who "creates a sect based on that which is contrary to the obligations and necessities of Islam, is considered an apostate."

Those who practice "witchcraft" shall also be "sentenced to death."

"The draft penal code is gross violation of fundamental and human rights by a regime that has repeatedly abused religious and other minorities," said Mr Grieboski. "This is simply another legislative attempt on the part of the Iranian regime to persecute religious minorities."

The proposed laws were "a legislative tool to consolidate power around the regime and extend its religious tyranny globally," Mr Grieboski said, and should be condemned by the international community.

In December 2004, the Prince of Wales convened a meeting of Muslim and Christian leaders at Clarence House to address the death penalty for converts. The Bishops of London and Rochester, the Archbishop of Kaduna, Nigeria, an Orthodox bishop and the director of the Barnabas Fund met with representatives of the London-based Al-Khoei Foundation, the Islamic Society of Britain, and Dr Zaki Badawi of the Muslim College in London.

Prince Charles' efforts proved unsuccessful however as the Muslim delegation said non-Muslims should not speak publicly about apostasy laws.

Travel alerts:

There are a number of travel warnings in place for Iran, with Westerners being particularly at risk. In addition, there are warnings not to travel to within 100km of the entire Iran/Afghanistan border or to within 10km of the entire Iran/Iraq border. The Pakistan border area is also insecure, and travelers are advised against any travel east of the line running from Kerman to Bandar Abbas, this includes all travel to Bam.

There is a general threat from terrorism in Iran. The British Foreign Office says that explosions have killed a number of people since 2005. Attacks could be indiscriminate, including in places frequented by expatriate and foreign travellers.

Western embassies are often the focus of protests.

London adds that a series of incidents in recent years have demonstrated that there is a risk of arbitrary arrest and detention by the Iranian authorities. In these and other cases involving foreign nationals, the Iranian authorities do not always fully meet their international consular obligations.

The US State Department also warns that the Iranian government has blamed the US and/or UK governments for involvement in the February 2007 bombing that killed Iranian military forces in Zahedan in the southeast and the 2005/2006 bombings in Ahvaz/Khuzestan in the southwest. A number of British firms were damaged in attacks in August and November 2005.

Iranian security personnel may at times place foreign visitors under surveillance. Hotel rooms, telephones and fax machines may be monitored, and personal possessions in hotel rooms may be searched. Photography near military and other government installations is strictly prohibited. You may be detained and face serious



criminal charges, including espionage, which carries the death penalty.

The Canadian government also warns against all travel to the Sistan and Baluchestan province in southeastern Iran as this region is regularly affected by ethnic conflicts and there have been a number of kidnappings involving foreign tourists in that province. For the same reasons, you are also advised against all travel to the Khuzestan province.

The Australian Government says that it continues to receive reports that terrorists are planning attacks against a range of targets in Iran, including places frequented by foreigners.

They add that political developments in the region may prompt large demonstrations.

Iraq

THE RECENT visit of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad to Iraq has raised speculation that relations between the two countries are moving to a different level.

Previously blamed by the USA for fomenting strife in Iraq, commentators in the region are speculating on what the future might now hold for the two neighbours.

Since the US-led action to remove Saddam Hussein five years ago, only two international leaders have visited Baghdad: US President George W Bush and Ahmedinejad. But while Bush arrives unannounced, the Iranian president received an official welcome.

The Iraqi leadership recently announced a 77 per cent improvement in security conditions in the capital. The Iraqi government has admitted that part of this is due to direct Iranian cooperation through border control, along with the clampdown on the military

activity of the Mahdi Army of Moqtada al-Sadr

And this month it was announced that while he will remain in charge of his Shiite movement, he is to step back from day-to-day control 'to pursue his religious studies'.

Sadr has "not ceased his contact with us and he remains in control of strategic decisions," the head of the movement's political bureau, Liwa Sumaysim, told AFP.

Meanwhile, the US has renewed accusations that Iran is still meddling in Iraq, saying that Tehran is involved in the training of Iraqi operative to direct militants in their homeland.

US Army and Navy officials have accused Iraq of destabilizing Iraq, while Iran has responded by saying the US has reneged on an agreement to hold further talks about security in Iraq.

And the row over Iran's nuclear ambitions continues to cloud the issue.

Travel alerts:

There are warnings in place against all travel to Baghdad and its surrounding area, the provinces of Basra, Maysan, Al Anbar, Salah Ad Din, Diyala, Wasit, Babil, Ninawa and At-Tamim (At-Tamim is often referred to as "Kirkuk Province"). Travellers are also advised against all but essential travel to the provinces of Al Qadisiyah, Muthanna, Najaf, Karbala, and Dhi Qar.

The British Foreign Office says the security situation in Iraq remains highly dangerous with a continuing high threat of terrorism throughout Iraq, violence and kidnapping targeting foreign nationals, including individuals of non-western appearance.

Travellers are strongly advised to seek professional security advice and make arrangements for their security throughout their visit. Even those working with dedicated protection teams should exercise extreme caution.





They warn travellers to the Kurdistan Regional Government controlled provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah (Note: this does not include Kirkuk) to be aware that there have been regular incidents of shelling on the Turkish and Iranian border areas of the Kurdistan Region.

Curfews exist in many areas of Iraq and may be lengthened at short notice.

The US State Department says that the risk of terrorism directed against US citizens and interests in Iraq remains extremely high. The Department of State continues to strongly warn US citizens against travel to Iraq, which remains very dangerous.

Remnants of the former Baath regime, transnational terrorists, criminal elements and numerous insurgent groups remain active throughout Iraq. Multinational Force-Iraq (MNF-I) and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) -led military operations continue, and attacks persist against MNF-I and the ISF throughout the country. Turkish government forces have carried out operations against elements of the Kongra-Gel (KGK, formerly Kurdistan Worker's Party, or Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK)) terrorist group that are located along Iraq's northern border.

The security environment across Iraq is dangerous, volatile and unpredictable. Attacks against military and civilian targets throughout Iraq continue, including in the International (or "Green") Zone.

They add that in addition to terrorist and criminal attacks, sectarian violence occurs often.

The Canadian Government advises against all travel to Iraq.

They add that there is an elevated risk of foreigners being kidnapped in Iraq. More than 200 foreigners, including journalists, humanitarian workers, contractors and soldiers, have been abducted since 2005. Many of the hostages have been killed or are still missing.

The Australian government adds that civilian and military aircraft are subject to attack from small arms fire and missiles. Further attempts to shoot down aircraft are likely. There have been security breaches at the civilian terminal at Baghdad International Airport. Australian government officials fly on aircraft with self protection capabilities whenever possible and take commercial flights to and from Baghdad International Airport when no alternative is available.

The road between Baghdad and Baghdad International Airport ("Route Irish") is extremely hazardous, with a high frequency of attacks against Coalition vehicles, civilians and foreigners. Heightened security measures are used when Australian officials travel on this route.

Israel

THE RECENT shooting at a Jewish rabbinical seminary in west Jerusalem that has left at least eight people dead and many more injured, has been condemned by the UN Secretary-General, who called it a "savagely attack."

The incident was attacked throughout the world, although there were reports of celebration in the Gaza Strip.

In a statement issued by his spokesperson, Mr Ban deplored the deliberate killing and injuring of civilians and offered his condolences to the families of those killed.

"The Secretary-General is deeply concerned at the potential for continued acts of violence and terrorism to undermine the political process, which he believes must be pursued to achieve a secure and lasting peace for Israelis and Palestinians, based on a two-State solution," the statement said.

But Ban Ki-moon also called on the Israeli Government to halt the expansion of settlements after it approved the resumption of the construction of 750 housing units in Givat Zeev in the West Bank.

"Any settlement expansion is contrary to Israel's obligations under the Road Map and to international law," Mr Ban said.

Addressing the parties in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Secretary-General re-emphasized the importance of fulfilling obligations under the Road Map, the peace framework drawn up by the Middle East diplomatic Quartet consisting of the UN, European Union, United States and Russian Federation.

Travel alerts:

There are a number of travel warnings in place regarding Israel, although most visits to Israel are trouble-free.

The British Foreign Offices advises against all travel to Sheba'a Farms and Ghajar on the border with Lebanon because of military operations. They also advise against all but essential travel to areas within 5kms of the Gaza perimeter, including Sderot, because of rocket fire from Gaza. Following recent events in Gaza, Israel has closed Route 10 (Israel/Egypt border) and prohibited access to sites 3km east of the road.

There is a high threat from terrorism in Israel. Attacks could be indiscriminate, including in places frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers. On February 4, 2008, there was a terrorist attack in Dimona, southern Israel, killing one civilian and injuring at least ten others.

A high level of vigilance is advised when travelling anywhere in Jerusalem

The US State Department says that American citizen visitors have been subjected to prolonged questioning and thorough searches upon entry or departure by Israeli authorities. Travellers (including American citizens) with Arabic surnames, those who ask that Israeli stamps not be entered into their passports, and unaccompanied female travelers have been delayed and subjected to close scrutiny by Israeli border authorities. American citizens have been detained and/or arrested at the airport and at other border crossings on suspicion of security-related crimes and members of religious groups have been monitored, arrested, and deported for suspicion of intent to commit violent or disruptive acts in Israel. In some cases, Israeli authorities have denied American citizens access to US consular officers, lawyers, and even family members during temporary detention.

US citizens, including tourists, students, residents, and US mission

personnel, have been injured or killed by terrorists while in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. Attacks have occurred in highly frequented shopping and pedestrian areas and on public buses.

There are live land mines in many areas in the Golan Heights and visitors should walk only on established roads or trails. Near the northern border of Israel, rocket attacks from Lebanese territory can occur without warning.

The Canadian Government says that while a cessation of hostilities remains in effect between Israel and Hezbollah forces, stability in the northern region of Israel could deteriorate rapidly without notice. Therefore, Canadians should maintain a high level of personal security awareness at all times.

In past years, security incidents have occurred in a variety of locations in Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beersheba, Netanya, West Jerusalem, and other major population centres. Incidents have occurred in areas frequented by foreigners, some of whom have been killed or injured. Canadians visiting urban areas should maintain a high level of vigilance, stay informed about the security situation, monitor local news reports, and follow the advice of local authorities, particularly during periods of religious holidays, such as Rosh Hashana, Ramadan and Pessah (Passover).

Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada advises against non-essential travel to the regions near the border between Israel and Lebanon.

The Australian Government advises a high degree of caution in Israel at this time due to the high threat of terrorist attack. They continue to receive reports that terrorists are planning attacks against a range of targets, including places frequented by tourists.

Stability in the northern region could deteriorate without notice. Rockets fired from Lebanon have exploded near the border towns of Kiryat Shmona and Shlomi in northern Israel. You should follow the security-related instructions of Israeli authorities.

Japan

SEVERAL hundred foreign workers staged a rally in Tokyo earlier this month in protest at the alleged discrimination they face.

Like many countries, Japan is dependent on migrant workers, but there is growing discontent at the wages and conditions they encounter. However, a more fundamental issue was raised in the rally, that of discrimination. Protestors at the rally carried banners reading: "stop discrimination against foreign workers" and "Japanese look at us like we're terrorists," they highlighted a lack of accommodation for their status.

The rally came as Nepal formally expressed its desire to send workers to Japan.



"We accepted the Japanese proposal to recruit Nepali workers and forwarded the letter to the Japanese government and Japan International Training Co-Operation Organisation (JITCO) through our mission in Japan," Shyam Prasad Mainali, secretary of the Ministry of Labour in Nepal, said.

At the beginning of this year, the government started diplomatic efforts to send Nepali jobseekers with varying qualifications — ranging from highly skilled to semi-skilled to Japan.

Japan plans to hire 1.3 million foreign workers from 16 different countries including Nepal, China, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Myanmar and Peru.

But the rally in Tokyo suggests that those workers might not be as welcome as they hope.

The rally was attended by protestors from the United States, Canada, South America, Europe, Asia and Africa

"In Japan, companies that hire foreign workers as cheap labour must stop," Ippei Torii, leader of the Zen-toitsu Workers Union, yelled to the group. "Chinese are brought here to work in farms and factories for only 300 yen (three US dollars) to 500 yen (five dollars) an hour."

Wage per hour in Japan averages 650 yen (6.3 dollars), but differs according to prefecture and industry.

"It's time we demand equality for foreigners, the disabled, women and workers of all employment types," said Louis Carlet, deputy secretary-general of the National Union of General Workers (NUGW) in Tokyo. "We can build a healthy society based on cooperation and compassion, not on unfair competition."

Travel alerts:

There is a low threat from terrorism in Japan, but Western governments warn travelers to be aware of the global risk of indiscriminate terror attacks.

Jordan

JORDAN has deported dozens of seminary students and Christian missionaries, it has been reported.

But Christian groups have warned that the action could threaten the country's \$2.3 bn tourism industry, as Amman heavily promotes their ancient biblical sites to Christians worldwide.

Since the second intifada in the Holy Land, many Christian pilgrims and tourists have instead chosen to visit Jordan, but Christian groups are warning that this is now under threat.

"The king has to realize there is a cost to this reaction. Christians are an important part of the economic well-being of Jordan," Keith Roderick, a Washington representative for Christian Solidarity International, said.

There is widespread concern in the Middle East country about the activities of Christian groups, fearing that Western, and in particular American, values are being imported.

But Awda Qawwas, for the World Council of Churches, commented: "They come as individuals, and they exploit the citizens of this nation, recruiting them for their interests."

Proselytising is illegal in Jordan, but it was a report from the evangelical group Compass Direct that provoked the latest storm. They reported in January that the students and missionaries had been expelled, but this was denied by the Jordanian authorities.

That prompted the Jordanian parliament to pass a resolution condemning the Compass article.

"We categorically condemn and reject the false report which is aimed at damaging Muslim-Christian relations in Jordan," the lower house of parliament said, but Compass said it was unclear what aspect of their report had been inaccurate.



The news service said the fact of Christians being deported was further verified as authorities on Feb 10 expelled an Egyptian pastor with the Assemblies of God church in Madaba — one of five evangelical denominations registered with the government.

They also quoted the case of an Egyptian Baptist pastor who had been returned to his homeland.

Compass reported that a member of the Council of the Church Leaders of Jordan, which includes clergy from the Catholic, Orthodox and Armenian churches, confirmed the deportations.

"The government said they have their own reasons to kick them out, but personally I don't know why," said council secretary John Nour.

Compass said the head of Jordan and Palestine's lay Orthodox council told Compass that the article was incorrect in its claims that religious freedom in Jordan was under threat.

"We Christians in Jordan have all the rights and freedoms of every citizen," Dr Raouf Abu Jaber said from Amman.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says that there remains a general threat from terrorism in Jordan. Attacks could be indiscriminate, including in places frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers. They also warn of the danger to women of sexual assault. They warn travelers to take extra care at the borders with Israel and Iraq. And particular care should be taken when using Jordanian service taxis to cross into neighbouring countries.

The US State Department says that the al-Qaeda in Iraq network in particular continues terrorist activities against US and Government of Jordan (GOJ) targets in Jordan.

They add that terrorists often do not distinguish between US government personnel and private citizens. Terrorists may target areas frequented by Westerners, such as tourist sites, hotels, restaurants, bars, nightclubs, liquor stores, shopping malls, transportation hubs, places of worship, expatriate residential areas, and schools. In light of these security concerns, US citizens are urged to maintain a high level of vigilance, to be aware of their surroundings, and to take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness.

Anti-American and anti-Western sentiment exists in Jordan and has been sparked on occasion by incidents in the region, particularly those related to Israeli/Palestinian issues and, to a lesser extent,

Iraq. This may lead to random acts of violence against Westerners. Travelers are advised to avoid any demonstrations or large gatherings of people. Many demonstrations occur near mosques after Friday prayers.

The Canadian government adds that security is good at Jordan's hotels, restaurants, and principal tourist sites, such as Petra, the Dead Sea, and Jerash, where normal standards of caution are recommended.

The Australian government advises travelers to exercise a high degree of caution in Jordan because of the high threat of terrorist attack. International hotels have been attacked by terrorists in the past and further attacks cannot be ruled out.

They say they continue to receive reports that terrorists may be planning attacks in Jordan against Westerners and places frequented by Westerners or associated with Western interests.

Kazakhstan

For some years, Kazakhstan has been demanding that non-Muslim religious communities complete highly intrusive questionnaires, Forum 18 News Service is reporting.

However, there has recently been an apparent increase in both the numbers of communities asked to complete the questionnaires and the pressure officials exert to get the questionnaires completed.

The questionnaires, which come in two basic forms, contain very similar questions. Amongst the numerous highly intrusive questions are: the ethnicity of congregation members, their profession, political preferences, "the most influential and authoritative people in the community," foreign missionaries, media contacts, "facts demanding attention on the part of state bodies," military service of congregation leaders, their foreign language knowledge, media articles written, and the full names of leaders' "close friends and comrades."

A State Programme, stressing increased monitoring and supervision of religious communities, has recently been adopted. Some religious believers, who wish to remain anonymous, have told Forum 18 that the KNB secret police have increased efforts to recruit spies inside religious communities.

Meanwhile, one of Kazakhstan's leading opposition parties has re-branded itself, with a new name and a leadership shake-up. Sources say that this is intended to inject new momentum into attempts to open up Kazakhstan's political system.

Over the past year, President Nursultan Nazarbayev's administration has tightened its hold over the country's political life. Parliamentary elections in August 2007 gave the pro-presidential Nur Otan Party a virtual monopoly of the legislative process and constitutional changes last year were implemented that gave the President the right to remain in office for the rest of his life.

In a bid to regroup, the opposition party Nagyz Ak Zhol has changed its name to Azat (Freedom). In other developments Bolat Abilov, was elected the party chairman, while another former co-leader, Tolegen Zhukeyev, was elected secretary-general, and Oraz Zhandosov, although without an official post, is tipped to become deputy leader.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says there is an underlying threat from terrorism. They warn that while travel is generally permitted, travel to any "closed territories" or secure areas require advance permission from the relevant authorities. Some military/restricted areas are not clearly marked so care should be taken when travelling away from normal routes.

The US State Department says that supporters of extremist groups such as the Islamic Jihad Union, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, al-Qaeda, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement

remain active in Central Asia. These groups have expressed anti-US sentiments and may attempt to target US Government or private interests in the region, including in Kazakhstan.

They add that Kazakhstani security personnel may at times place foreign visitors under surveillance. Hotel rooms, telephones and fax machines may be monitored, and personal possessions in hotel rooms may be searched. Taking photographs of anything that could be perceived as being of military or security interest may result in problems with authorities.

The Canadian Government says that some areas along the border with China, the provinces of Zhambyl (Gvardeyskiy village, Rossavel village, Kulzhabasy), Qaraghandy (Priozorskiy village, Gulshad village), Qyzylorda (Baikonur, Karmakshinsky, and Kazalinsky regions), and West Kazakhstan (Bokeiordinsky and Zhangalinsky regions) are closed to travellers.

The Australian Government advises caution and to monitor developments that might affect travellers' safety in Kazakhstan because of the risk of criminal activity.

Democratic Republic of Korea

(North Korea)

THE ONGOING row over North Korea's nuclear programme shows no sign of abating. This month the US envoy to South Korea warned Pyongyang that promises to remove it from his country's terror and trade blacklist would only happen if they were open about their nuclear programme.

"When they're ready to do so, we'll be ready to deliver on our commitments," US ambassador to South Korea Alexander Vershbow said.

He added that there was a "sense of impatience" because North Korea had not yet fulfilled its promises to provide the relevant information.

For its part, North Korea said it had provided the information late last year, but the US said that this had not been "complete and correct."

The slow-moving talks have led to deadlock in the diplomatic process, although there was renewed hope last year when North Korea shut down and then started dismantling its main reactor.

But those earlier talks, which involved the USA, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea with their northern neighbour, now appear to be backtracking.

Travel alerts:

The US State Department warns that security personnel in North Korea closely monitor the activities and conversations of foreigners in North Korea. Hotel rooms, telephones and fax machines may be monitored, and personal possessions in hotel rooms may be searched. Photographing roads, bridges, airports, rail stations, or anything other than designated public tourist sites can be perceived as espionage and may result in confiscation of cameras and film or even detention. DPRK border officials routinely confiscate visitors' cell phones upon arrival, returning the phone only upon departure.

Foreign visitors to North Korea may be arrested, detained or expelled for activities that would not be considered criminal outside the DPRK, including involvement in unsanctioned religious and political activities, engaging in unauthorized travel, or interaction with the local population.

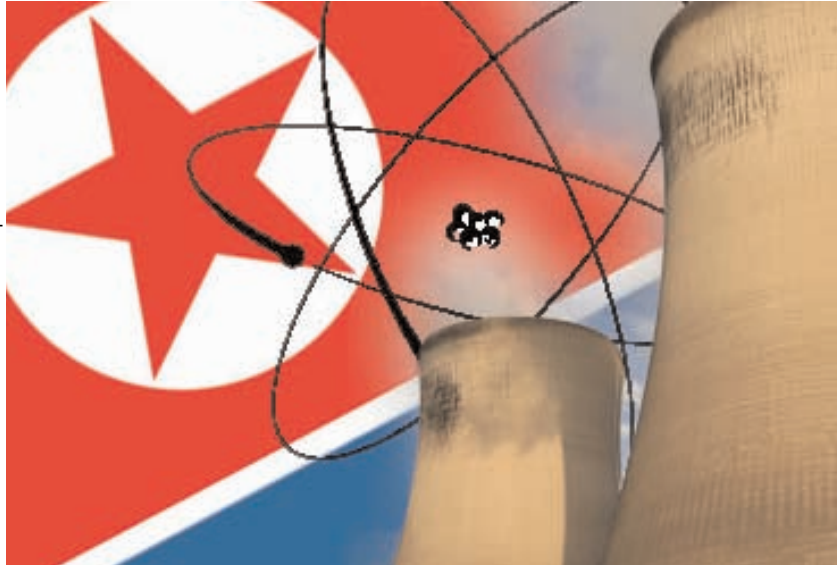
The Canadian government warns that their citizens should exercise extreme caution when deciding whether to visit the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). There are serious shortages of food, electricity, and clean water. Current conditions in the DPRK —

including the ongoing international negotiations over the denuclearization process, occasional border skirmishes with the South Korean armed forces, and a highly repressive regime — hold the potential for political and military instability.

They add that travel outside of Pyongyang is extremely difficult due to poor road conditions.

Involvement in politics and unsanctioned religious activity is not tolerated and can result in detention. Travellers should ensure they are not seen to be critical of the country's political or ideological system, including former and current leaders and governments. Written material of any kind in the Korean language should not be brought into the DPRK.

The Australian government warns travelers to exercise a high degree of caution in the country because of the risk that tensions on the Korean Peninsula could escalate with little warning.



Republic of Korea

(South Korea)

PLANS BY the President of South Korea to construct a cross-country canal project have attracted opposition from academics, politicians and religious groups.

The nation's largest Buddhist Order (Jogye) has staged prayer sessions to oppose the project under the theme of 'saving the river.' Buddhist leaders and laypeople claim that the project will harm the nation.

"Politicians and the powerful cannot see the disastrous results due to shortsighted benefits allowed to them," Ham Hyun, head of Bongam Temple, said earlier this month.

Meanwhile a group of nearly 400 professors from Seoul National University (SNU) also called for the cancellation of the project, denouncing it as a future disaster to the nation.

"The canal project requires an astronomical budget. Upon completion, it will become an irreversible disaster to the nation," Kim Sang-jong, professor of Biological Sciences at SNU, said.

Without conducting proper evaluation and examination by experts, the new government is pursuing the project in the name of boosting the economy, the statement said.

Civic groups have already protested against the canal project and it was the first time for a group of professors to take action.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says there is a low threat from terrorism. But travellers should be aware of the global risk of indiscriminate

terrorist attacks which could be in public areas, including those frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers.

The US State Department points out that in recent years, the US Embassy and US military installations throughout the Republic of Korea have taken steps to increase security at all facilities. The participation of Korean troops as part of the coalition in Iraq raises the potential for violent actions against Korean and US Government facilities and personnel in Korea. US citizens in the Republic of Korea should review their own personal security practices, be alert to any unusual activity around their homes or businesses, and report any significant incidents to local police.

While political, labour, and student demonstrations and marches have on occasion become confrontational and/or violent, the majority of these demonstrations were not violent in nature. Nevertheless, even demonstrations intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational and possibly escalate into violence.

The Canadian Government says there are no serious security or safety concerns.

The Australian Government advises travellers to be alert to their own security in the Republic of Korea.

Kuwait

EMERGENCY action was taken in Kuwait earlier this month after a string of bomb warnings, all of which turned out to be hoaxes.

The calls led to the evacuation of two aircraft and several buildings, including a hospital and the American University. Local authorities have not commented on the hoax calls, even although local newspapers have covered them in detail.

Meanwhile, two former MPs and three Shiite activists have been detained on suspicion of being members of an outlawed underground group.

The prominent Shiite cleric Sheikh Hussein al-Maatuq has been detained, prompting hundreds of his followers to stage a protest in the Gulf state. Their protest came to a quick end when special forces were called in.

The former MPs, Abdulmohsen Jamal and Nasser Sorkhouh, were arrested following a rally to mourn the Hezbollah military leader Imad Mughnieh, who was killed in a car bomb in Damascus.

Their lawyer said: "They were also accused of spreading false reports that weaken Kuwait's foreign position."

All of those arrested deny the charges. But their arrests have fuelled sectarian tensions in the region.

Meanwhile, Kuwait has been accused of denying other Shiites from Bahrain the right to travel through Kuwait on their way home after completing a pilgrimage to Iraq.

The Movement of Liberties and Democracy in Bahrain said some of the pilgrims stopped at the Al-Abdelli border crossing have been denied transit because their names were on a blacklist supplied by Bahraini security authorities.



Travel alerts:

www.religiousintelligence.com

The British Foreign Office warns that there remains a general threat from terrorism. They say that terrorists continue to issue statements threatening to carry out attacks in the Gulf region. These include references to attacks on Western interests, including residential compounds, military, oil, transport and aviation interests.

The US State Department says that Americans in Kuwait should exercise a high level of security awareness. The Department of State remains concerned about the possibility of further terrorist actions against US citizens and interests abroad, specifically in the Middle East, including the Persian Gulf and Arabian Peninsula.

They say that all US citizens in Kuwait should exercise caution, maintain a low profile, and avoid areas where Westerners are known to congregate. Heightened security awareness should be exercised at all hotels and residential complexes, as terrorists in the past have specifically targeted hotel chains perceived as Western and a variety of Western housing facilities. Military members, as well as civilians and contractors related to military interests, are also potential targets.

The Canadian Government says that there are credible reports indicating that terrorists may be planning attacks in the near future, possibly against Westerners and/or Western interests.

They add that Canadians should monitor local developments and register and remain in regular contact with the Embassy of Canada in Kuwait City or Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada at 613-996-8885.

Canadians should evaluate carefully the implications for their security and safety before deciding to travel to Kuwait. Random attacks targeted at Western interests, together with heightened tensions throughout the Persian Gulf, put Canadians at greater risk when they travel to that region.

The Australian Government calls for a high degree of caution in Kuwait because of the high threat of terrorist attack. They say they continue to receive reports that terrorists are planning attacks against a range of targets in Kuwait, including Western interests.

These reports include information about possible targets, such as US military and identifiably Western targets, including hotels, restaurants and symbols and buildings associated with the Kuwaiti government. However, they emphasise that attacks could occur at any time, anywhere in Kuwait.

They add that a group claiming to be an international terrorist organisation issued a statement in June 2007 pledging to continue attacks against Westerners on the Arabian Peninsula. In past statements, terrorists have called for attacks in the Gulf region against Western interests. These include references to attacks on residential compounds, military, oil, transport and aviation interests.

Kyrgyzstan

A HARSH new decree that would have brought in tough controls on religious groups in Kyrgyzstan has been dropped, but the Forum 18 News Service reports that a new version could be introduced as early as the end of this month.

Kanat Murzakhaliyov, Deputy Head of the State Agency for Religious Affairs, told Forum 18 News Service that his agency hopes to present a final draft of a controversial new Religion Law to the government by the end of March.

He refused to say if the draft will require 200 adult citizen members before a community can gain legal status, a provision in the latest publicly-available draft which is opposed by the Russian Orthodox, the Catholics, many Protestant Churches, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Baha'is. But he stated that registration will continue to be compulsory.

Boris Shumkov of the Council of Churches Baptists told Forum 18 that such harsh provisions "would lead to repression and persecu-

tion of our congregations”.

They marked March 5 as a day of prayer and fasting. “Our country has so many urgent problems — poverty, the lack of medicine, Aids, crime, corruption,” one Baha’i told Forum 18.

“Why don’t officials work on these instead of making life harder for religious believers?”

Travel alerts:

Since parliamentary elections in March 2005, there have been a number of demonstrations in Bishkek related to the internal-political situation. Political tensions remain high.

The British Foreign Office adds that tensions also exist over recognition of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek borders and you should only use officially recognised border crossings if travelling in the region. There is a risk that uncontrolled border areas may be land-mined.

They add that there is a threat from terrorism in Kyrgyzstan. Attacks could be indiscriminate and against civilian targets, including in places frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers.

The US State Department has similar warnings in place, but they add that in 2007, there were reports of attempted “bride-kidnappings” in rural areas. While foreigners are not believed to be intentional targets, an American female was held against her will for several days in one reported incident. In 2006, suspected Islamic militants attacked a border post on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, and ensuing skirmishes took place between the militants and Kyrgyz military forces throughout the southern Batken region.

There are currently restrictions for U.S. Government employees traveling to areas of the Kyrgyz Republic south and west of Osh and in rural areas along the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border because of the volatile security situation in these areas.

Supporters of extremist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), al-Qaeda, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement remain active in Central Asia.

Terrorist attacks involving the use of suicide bombers have previously taken place in neighboring Uzbekistan. Terrorists do not distinguish between official and civilian targets.

The Canadian Government says that recent violence in and around the city of Andijan in eastern Uzbekistan and the flow of Uzbek refugees into the Kyrgyz Republic have increased tension in the south of the country. Caution should be used if travelling to areas south and west of Osh, the Fergana Valley region, and rural areas along the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Many expatriates are living there, working with non-governmental and international organizations.

Laos

Concern about religious freedom has been raised after Christians from the Hmong ethnic group were arrested.

The US-based Compass Direct group is reporting that last month 15 Hmong families were arrested because of their Christian activities. That happened a day before nine Hmong church leaders were sentenced to 15 years in prison for holding services. Compass said that these “had grown beyond acceptable levels for communist officials”.

These were the latest actions against Christian minorities there after eight Christian families were arrested in Ban Sai Jarern village in Bokeo district and “at least” seven families from Fai village three miles away. “It seems they are rounding up all Hmong Christians from Vietnam to send them back to Vietnam,” said one Christian source. “What will happen to them is greatly feared and unknown.”

The fears among the Hmong ethnic group were recognized by the UN, who expressed concern about the forced repatriation of a small group of Hmong from Thailand back to Laos.

www.religiousintelligence.com

The UN’s concern is that the repatriation was forced, perhaps to help smooth relations between the two countries ahead of a visit by the Thai Prime Minister.

The Thai authorities maintained that the group agreed to return voluntarily, but the aid group Doctors without Borders said that one of the group was a woman whose five children were left behind at the camp, which houses nearly 8,000 Hmong refugees. The aid group said this suggested that the repatriation was not voluntary.

Kitty McKinsey, Asia spokeswoman for the UN High Commissioner of Refugees, said: “We are concerned because we are receiving a number of reports which called into question whether everyone volunteered to go.”

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says there is a low threat from terrorism in Laos, but they warn travelers to be aware of the global risk of indiscriminate terrorist attacks which could be in public areas, including those frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers.

They also warn people to be aware of and respect local conventions at all times. They add that unexploded ordnance in rural areas is an ongoing danger.

The US State Department says that in recent years there have been periodic attacks and other incidents of violence by anti-government forces.



There have also been reports from multiple sources of sporadic fighting between Lao Government forces and unidentified regime opponents and of increased movement by Lao Government forces in the area of Vang Vieng in northern Vietiane Province.

They say that to avoid trouble with the authorities, US citizens traveling outside of normal tourist areas or contemplating any unusual activity (including, but not limited to, engaging in business, extensive photography, or scientific research of any kind) should consider seeking advance permission from the Village Chief, District Head, Provincial Governor, or National Tourism Authority, as appropriate.

Travelers should be aware that over the past several years a number of Lao and Hmong-American citizens have been murdered in northern and northeastern Thailand near the border with Laos.

US citizens are also advised to exercise caution in remote areas along the border with Burma.

Bandits, drug traffickers, and other people pursuing illegal activities operate in these border areas, as do armed insurgent groups opposed to the government of Burma.

The Canadian Government warns that there are ongoing security concerns related to ethnic conflicts, banditry, and unexploded munitions when travelling in Laos. There have been civil disturbances, including bombings in the capital, Vientiane, and in northern areas.

Bus, bus stations, and markets have been the target of several attacks resulting in deaths and injuries.

The Australian Government adds that outbreaks of cholera have been reported in the Southern Lao province of Sekong.

Lebanon

LEBANON is on the edge of an abyss, according to Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Butros Sfeir.

Voicing concern for the Christian community in the country he said: "The situation in Lebanon has dragged the country to the edge of the abyss. We can say that disturbance in the country is due to political affairs with which ulterior motives and selfishness have interlaced."

"If the Christian presence diminishes, this will not be seen as a loss for the Christians only, but for all non-Christians too," he said. "The presence of Christians was and is still a factor of wealth for Lebanon and all countries where they reside along with their Muslim brothers in an atmosphere of solidarity and mutual respect."

"We do not want Lebanon to be isolated from the world, we want it an open arena for cultural and civilized dialogue," he said during a meeting with Britain's Ambassador to Lebanon Frances Mary Guy. "However, we do not want it an open arena for conflicts from here and there."

However, the recent threat of open war with Israel by Hezbollah has added to unease in Lebanon as the political crisis seems to be continuing with no resolution in sight. There has been no President in post since last November, prompting the US to call for a remedy.

"We would highly encourage those who are interfering from outside of Lebanon to cease and desist and allow the Lebanese to move forward and elect a president," White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said. "We are very concerned."

The crisis surrounds a dispute between the Syrian-backed Shiite movement Hezbollah and its Christian allies against a coalition gathered around the government, which is backed by the United States, Saudi Arabia and France.

The deepening gloom in Lebanon has not been helped by the arrival of an American warship off the coast of the country in what many see as a warning to Syria and Iran.

And the crisis is affecting outside investors. The Euromoney magazine recently moved the country down 11 places in its list of risky countries, making it the 127th most risky country in the world.

Travel alerts:

Most Western governments advise against non-essential travel to Lebanon. The British Foreign Office says that those in the country should avoid public demonstrations and large public gatherings as the situation can change quickly and dramatically. This is a particular risk due to the current political crisis surrounding the election of a new President. They add that there remains a possibility of politically motivated violence, especially in Beirut where security is high.

They advise against all travel to all Palestinian refugee camps, which remain in a state of tension. And they warn against all travel south of the Litani River because of the risk of unexploded ordnance.

They add that following the death of Hizballah commander Imad

Mughniyah in Damascus on February 12, 2008 there may be an increased risk of tension between Hizballah and Israel particularly over Lebanon's southern border.

They say there is a high threat from terrorism in Lebanon. The most recent bombing was on January 25, 2008.

Similar warnings are in place by the US State Department, Canadian and Australian Governments.

Americans have been the targets of numerous terrorist attacks in Lebanon in the past. The State Department adds that the perpetrators of many of these attacks are still present and retain the ability to act. American citizens should thus keep a low profile, varying times and routes for all required travel.

Palestinian groups hostile to both the Lebanese government and the US operate largely autonomously inside refugee camps in different areas of the country.

The Australian Government report that recent credible information suggests terrorists may be planning attacks against international hotels in Beirut.

They say they continue to receive credible reports that terrorists are planning attacks against Western interests in Lebanon, including embassies and restaurants frequented by foreigners, including foreign military personnel. Terrorist attacks, such as bombings, and kidnapping of Westerners are possible. Militants have threatened attacks against Western interests in Lebanon, including against tourists. Commercial and public places frequented by foreigners are possible terrorist targets.

Recent credible reporting indicates terrorists may be planning to attack fast food restaurants in Beirut.



Malaysia

THIS MONTH'S elections in Malaysia caused shock when the ruling Barisan Nasional Party retained power, but lost its two-thirds majority.

While the Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, was returned to power, he expressed his disappointment at the results in an editorial for the Wall Street Journal.

"Although the size of our majority would be considered a landslide in most countries, the fact that it has significantly

reduced and we have had setbacks in five of our 13 states indicates that we need to do more for those who feel disaffected. Although some quarters have called for me to step aside, my party has given me solid support to carry on our nation-building agenda, something for which I am grateful," he wrote.

However, there have been calls for him to step aside. One of those calls came from Malaysia's Islamic party, which did well in the election.

PAS vice president Husam Musa said: "We are calling for his resignation not in the interest of PAS or any party. It is in the interest of the nation," he observed.

"We want to see a more stable Malaysia. Very weak leadership cannot bring progress to Malaysia," he added.

But Abdullah has already resisted calls by his predecessor Mahathir Mohamad to step down. In his Wall Street Journal article he vowed to build on his first term in office. "That will mean developing new and concrete initiatives, not just rhetoric, that bring our people together and ensure that no one is left behind as Malaysia

prospers, whether they are ethnic Malays, Chinese or Indians," he wrote.

He added that he intends to "protect the stability and security of our nation. For all of our citizens to share in the prosperity and opportunities our economy is generating, we must also continue our work to eradicate crime and corruption. The people's desire for law and order is as important in Malaysia as it is everywhere. The same is true of the need to make additional progress in battling corruption, which is both immoral and distorts competition in free markets."

He went on: "I have tried throughout my period in office to bring our country and our communities closer together. I have stood in firm opposition to those who have sought to divide us along racial, religious and ethnic lines. We are all Malaysians and we all must have a stake in building a progressive, united and cohesive country. This has always been my approach to government and politics. It is even more important now."

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says there is a general threat from terrorism in Malaysia. Attacks could be indiscriminate, including in places frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers.

They say they have intelligence suggesting that terrorists and criminal elements are continuing with plans to kidnap foreign tourists from the islands and coastal areas of Eastern Sabah. Boats travelling to and from offshore islands and dive sites are possible targets.

Likewise, the US Department of State remains concerned about the possibility of terrorist attacks against their citizens in Southeast Asia. Extremist groups in the region have demonstrated the capability to carry out transnational attacks in locations where Westerners congregate, and these groups do not distinguish between civilian and official targets. The United States Government has designated two such groups, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) as Foreign Terrorist Organizations. JI is linked to al-Qaeda and other regional terrorist groups, such as the ASG, and has cells operating throughout Southeast Asia.

They warn American citizens to evaluate carefully the risks of travel to the eastern islands and coastal areas of the state of Sabah.

The Canadian government advises against non-essential travel to

the islands off the east coast of Sabah, including Sipadan and Langkayan islands where the kidnapping of foreigners has occurred in the past. Malaysian authorities have increased security in the region in response to past incidents. Credible reports indicate that there continues to be a high risk of kidnappings of foreigners.

The Australian Government has similar warnings in place.

Maldives

THE ATTEMPTED stabbing of President Gayoom in January is continuing to stir debate in the Maldives. At the root of the concern is religious strife, as the assailant shouted an Islamic slogan as he tried to attack the President.

However, some observers in the Maldives speculated that the youth might have had links with the opposition. Although this has now been discounted, it highlights the tensions between the rival parties, with some comparing it to the strife in Bangladesh.

All of the parties denounced the attack, which was foiled by a boy scout, who was injured as he confronted the attacker.

The spokesman for the National Unity Alliance Dr Ahmed Shaheed condemned the attack "in the strongest terms and was relieved to hear that the President was safe and unhurt."

But a spokesman for the President seemed to blame the opposition for the attack: "Is this how those people who visited the island recently [the National Unity Alliance leaders] depose the President by attacking him?"

The attacker was described in local media as a 'very pious youth' who had claimed that the President is against Islam.

But despite the links with the opposition being discounted, the affair continues to excite local interest.

Travel alerts:

The US State Department warns against travelers getting involved in any political activity in the Maldives. Although there have been arrests for political activity, they point out that there has been little political violence.

The British Foreign Office warns that there is an underlying threat from terrorism. Last year, a small bomb exploded on the capital



island of Malé, injuring a number of foreigners including two British nationals.

Mongolia

SINCE IT was legalised in 1993, the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Mongolia recently reported that its membership has grown to 1,200.

Last month the church ordained two new ministers, both having been born in South Korea. Park NoYoung and Park SangBum were ordained at the Adventist's Ulaanbaatar Central Church.

There has been an increase in both membership and the number of ministers at the denomination.

Officiating at last month's ceremony were Paul Kotanko, director of the church in Mongolia, and Nyamdavaa Dovchinsuren, one of two ordained Mongolian Adventist pastors. There are now six Adventist priests serving there.

The first Adventist church in Mongolia opened in 1997, with just 26 members.

Church officials note that there were Adventists from Russia working in Mongolia during the 1920s and 1930s. However, the Adventist work ended with the advent of the Japanese invasions of mainland China.

Only with the end of communist rule were Adventists able to renew their work in Mongolia.

Travel alerts:

Although there have been no significant acts of terrorism, kidnapping, criminal incidents, or extremist activity against Westerners, travelers are advised to exercise caution in Mongolia.

The British Foreign Office warns that communications and health facilities in Mongolia, particularly outside Ulaanbaatar, can be poor.

There are only a few specified border crossings are open to foreigners.

The US State Department warns US citizens to avoid protests and street demonstrations that occur occasionally in Ulaanbaatar, as the demonstrations may become unruly.

Myanmar

THE SNAP elections announced by the Burmese government have been denounced by Church groups and democracy activists as a ruse to legitimise the military junta's hold over the country.

"Far from being a positive development, this timetable [for elections] will simply rubber-stamp the authority of this brutal regime," the Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) Mervyn Thomas said on Feb 11.

On Feb 9 state radio announced that a referendum would be held in May on a proposed constitution for the "Union of Myanmar", formally known as Burma, followed by General Elections in 2010.

The constitution will be prepared by a National Convention comprised of delegates endorsed by the military junta. None of nine pro-democracy parties that participated in the 1990 elections will take part in the drafting process, nor will representatives from the Karen and other ethnic nationalities be invited to take part.

A quarter of the seats in parliament under the proposed constitution will be allotted to the army, which will also hold veto power over its deliberations. The army will also have the right to appoint government ministers and may declare martial law if it believes the nation is faced with an "emergency."

Public criticism of the National Convention is illegal, the junta has said, while those who speak to the international press could be jailed for subversion. The "88 Generation Students", a group of leading dissidents from a failed 1988 uprising, have dismissed the move as a power grab by the army. In a statement released on the

internet the group said the "regime is attempting to legalise the military dictatorship with a sham-constitution."

"This is the declaration of war by the military regime against the people of Burma, who want to uphold the 1990 elections results and honour the will of the people," it said.

"The upcoming constitutional referendum will be a major battlefield between the military regime, which wants to rule the country forever, and the people of Burma, who want to be free from the military rule," the group said.

Leaders of the 88 Generation Students were jailed in August following protests over a government hike in fuel prices. The arrests prompted Buddhist monks to go to the streets, drawing over 100,000 people to demonstrations. Tuesday's statement was signed by three leaders of the 88 Generation Students who are in hiding within the country.

In a speech on Feb 12 celebrating "Union Day"—the national holiday celebrating independence from Britain—junta leader General Than Shwe warned that "subversive elements with negative attitude are resorting to diverse means and ways such as driving a



wedge among the national races, misleading the people, and aiding and abetting anti-government groups to weaken and break up the [country]."

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says that last September there were violent clashes between protestors and Burmese forces and the situation in Burma remains unsettled. Travellers should exercise caution, continue to avoid all demonstrations and large gatherings and avoid taking photographs or videos of the military, the police or demonstrations as doing so could be interpreted as provocative.

They also advise caution when travelling to border areas in Burma, particularly those close to the Thai/Burma border. Travel restrictions are in place in most border areas due to ongoing military activity and there is only a limited number of legal crossing points, which often close without notice. Travellers should not attempt to cross borders illegally or enter restricted areas without permission from the Burmese authorities.

They add that there is a general threat from terrorism in Burma. They warn that there are stringent restrictions on freedom of movement and speech.

The US State Department says that Americans in Burma should exercise caution in public places and be alert to their surroundings. Furthermore, Americans in Burma should avoid crowded public places, such as large public gatherings, demonstrations, and any area cordoned off by security forces. The Embassy also advises US citizens not to photograph or videotape the military or police.

They say that US citizens have been detained, arrested, tried, and

deported for, among other activities, distributing pro-democracy literature and visiting the homes and offices of Burmese pro-democracy leaders. Burmese authorities have warned US Embassy officials that those who engage in similar activities in the future will be jailed rather than deported.

The Canadian Government says that the political situation in Burma is fragile.

The Australian government adds that that protests and organizing assemblies of people are illegal in Burma.

Nepal

A NEW deal between the seven-party coalition that makes up the Nepalese government with the ethnic Madhesi movement has been hailed by the UN as a key step towards cooling rising tensions there.

"Its implementation will be an important contribution to the election of an inclusive Government Assembly in a conducive climate," Ian Martin said in a statement to the press in Kathmandu, the capital, after the agreement was signed by the Government and the United Democratic Madhesi Front.

The Madhesi movement, predominantly in the southern plains region, could now end their 16-day shutdown that has led to a state of near paralysis in Kathmandu. The general strike has led to a number of deaths and scores of injuries.

The UN Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) also said that under today's eight-point deal, quotas for party lists will be relaxed, which will allow for an increase in Madhesi candidates in many lists for seats to be elected through proportional representation.

Elections for Nepal's Constituent Assembly are now scheduled to be held on 10 April, after being postponed twice last year.

Once elected, Assembly members are supposed to draft a new constitution for Nepal, where an estimated 13,000 people were killed during the decade-long civil war that ended when the Government and the Maoists signed a peace accord in 2006.

Travel alerts: The British Foreign Office says that elections are to be held on 10 April 2008. It is very likely that there will be bandhs (shutdowns), rallies and demonstrations in the run-up. In January 2008 demonstrations, related to an increase in fuel prices, turned violent.

They say that the security situation in Nepal remains subject to change due to the political volatility in the country, which is likely to continue until the planned elections are held.

The shortage of fuel and cooking gas and other essential supplies, caused by the Terai bandh, continues to have a major impact on Kathmandu.

Travellers should avoid large gatherings and demonstrations. Bandhs, rallies and demonstrations can cause widespread disruption and can be called at short notice, leaving transport severely disrupted and blocking roads and major highways.

The USA has a travel warning because of concerns about the security situation there. They say that since early 2007, the Maoist Young Communist League (YCL) has harassed and attacked established tourist facilities and infrastructure, and has threatened Kathmandu-based personnel of a US non-governmental organization. In May 2007, YCL cadre attacked with stones a UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) vehicle carrying the UNHCR

Resident Representative and the US Ambassador in Jhapa District in the Terai.

The US Embassy strongly recommends against non-essential travel to the Terai, the southern region bordering India. Maoist splinter groups in the Terai as well as other violent Terai-based groups continue to kidnap and murder Nepalese citizens.

Since the ceasefire in April 2006, hotels and businesses frequented by American citizens have been the target of extortion demands and, in some cases, have become the focus of demonstrations. In November 2006, resident Americans reported that they were told that they would have to house and feed Maoists intending to participate in rallies in Kathmandu. In a few cases, local Nepali staff of the American residents were threatened or beaten when they attempted to resist this demand. The discrepancy between the Maoists' publicly stated intentions and their behavior, combined with their consistent anti-American rhetoric, remains a serious concern.

The Canadian Government says travelers should respect the restrictions imposed by curfews and general strikes (bandhs), which may occur on short notice throughout the country. Army and police checkpoints are frequently encountered, especially at night.

The Australian Government adds that the security situation in Kathmandu has deteriorated recently and remains unpredictable. Violent protests occurred across Kathmandu on 22 January 2008 and access to the airport was affected on 23 January 2008. Further disruption could occur with little or no warning.

They add that extortionists continue to approach trekkers and climbers demanding 'donations' or 'taxes'. Victims have been assaulted, detained or threatened with violence until they pay.

Oman

The British Foreign Office says the general threat from terrorism in Oman remains. Terrorists continue to issue statements threatening to carry out attacks in the Gulf region. These include references to

attacks on Western interests, including residential compounds, military, oil, transport and aviation interests.

Likewise, the US State Department remains concerned about the possibility of terrorist attacks against United States citizens and interests throughout the region. American citizens in Oman are urged to maintain a high level of security awareness. The State Department suggests that all Americans in Oman maintain an unpredictable schedule and vary travel routes whenever possible. Americans are also urged to treat mail or packages from unfamiliar sources with suspicion. Unusual mail or packages should be left unopened

and reported to local authorities. US citizens with security concerns are encouraged to contact local authorities and the Consular Section of the US Embassy in Muscat.

Canadians are advised to maintain a high level of personal security awareness at all times, as the security situation could deteriorate without warning. Exercise caution, particularly in commercial, public, and tourist areas frequented by foreigners. Canadians should monitor local developments and avoid crowds and demonstrations.

The Australian Government says that statements by international terrorists groups have called for attacks against Western interests in the Gulf region, including residential compounds, military, oil, transport and aviation interests. They continue to receive reports that ter-



rorists are planning attacks against a range of targets in the Gulf region.

Pakistan

AS Pakistan's new ruling coalition gets to grips with power, repeated suicide bombings continue to rock the country.

And there was more bad news earlier this month when the American Government ruled that human rights in the country worsened in 2007, despite promises by President Musharraf to foster democracy.

"Despite President Musharraf's stated commitment to democratic transition, Pakistan's human rights situation deteriorated during much of 2007," the US State Department's annual report on human rights said.

Last November the President, a key US ally in the war on terror, imposed a state of emergency, and then sacked 60 judges, just before the Supreme Court was to rule on the legality of his new presidential term. He won the nomination while he was still army chief, and it was the legality of that which was in question.

"Under emergency provisions, Pakistani authorities also arrested approximately 6,000 opposition political party workers, human rights advocates, lawyers, and judges," the report said.

By the end of 2007 "there still were 11 suspended judges and three lawyers under house arrest," it added, also highlighting restrictions on the media.

Last month's parliamentary elections delivered victory to the opposition parties, but there has been ongoing violence since then. The success of the opposition parties also puts a question mark over the continued rule of President Musharraf, although he has resisted all calls to quit.

All eyes are now on the new parliament, which was due to meet on March 17, with observers warning that this could set up a new confrontation with the President.

Travel alerts:

Western governments advise against all travel to areas where there are reports of military or militant activity. This applies particularly to: northern and western Balochistan, including the Sui/Dera Bugti and Kohlu areas; the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, including Waziristan; Swat, North West Frontier Province (NWFP); and all border areas except for official crossing points. Travellers are also

advised against using the rail network across the whole of Pakistan.

The British Foreign Office also advises against all but essential travel to Quetta (Balochistan) and they advise against using bus services in the whole of Balochistan because of the unsettled security situation.

They add that there is a high threat from terrorism and sectarian violence throughout Pakistan.

The US State Department adds that a number of extremist groups within Pakistan continue to target American and other Western interests, high-level Pakistani government officials, as well as members of minority indigenous and religious groups. Terrorists and their sympathizers have demonstrated their willingness and capability to attack targets where Americans are known to congregate or visit. Terrorist actions may include, but are not limited to, suicide operations, bombing — including vehicle-borne explosives and improvised explosive devices — assassinations, carjacking, assault or kidnapping.

Karachi and the southern parts of Punjab Province have experienced protracted political or sectarian violence that poses a potential danger to American travelers.

Women are advised to dress conservatively, with arms and legs covered, and avoid walking around alone. It is unwise for anyone to travel on the streets late at night.

They add that the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Afghan border, and certain areas within the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), are designated as tribal areas and are not subject to normal government jurisdiction.

In Kashmir, while direct military hostilities between India and Pakistan across the Line of Control (LOC) have ceased, militant groups engaged in a long-running insurgency on the Indian side of the LOC are reported to have bases and supporters operating from the Pakistani side. Most of these groups are anti-American, and some have attacked Americans and other Westerners.

They add that in Sindh Province, the security situation is hazardous, especially for those engaged in overland travel. The Province of Balochistan, which borders both Iran and Afghanistan, is notorious for narcotics and other forms of cross-border smuggling. Members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda are also believed to be present there. Armed battles between clans are frequent.

The Canadian Government advises against non-essential travel to Pakistan. Canadians who choose to travel to Pakistan despite this warning should evaluate carefully the implications for their security and safety. Canadians already in Pakistan should consider leaving if their presence is not necessary, as means of transportation may be disrupted or become limited without notice.

Palestinian Authority

THE PALESTINIAN issue was top of the agenda at the 11th summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference taking place in Dakar earlier this month.

"I think that a strong message will be delivered to support the Palestinian people's inalienable right to found its own state, on its own land, with East Jerusalem as capital," the OIC secretary general said.

The recent upsurge in violence in the Middle East has led some to speculate that it is the start of another intifada.

The United Nations Human Rights Council has labelled Israel's response to recent rocket attacks from Gaza a war crime and "collective punishment against the civilian population" in a resolution that also called for an end to such military actions and to



the "firing of crude rockets by Palestinian combatants."

The resolution, submitted by Pakistan, received 33 votes in favour and one against (Canada), with 13 abstentions. The vote followed a general debate on the human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories, which was preceded by statements from High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour, as well as representatives of Israel, Palestine and Syria.

"I am deeply alarmed about the death of civilians," Ms Arbour said, repeating her condemnation of rocket attacks by Palestinians as well as what she called Israel's disproportionate use of force.

She urged all parties to conduct law-based, independent, transparent and accessible investigations into the killings of civilians, to make the findings public and to hold any perpetrators accountable.

"All human rights are equal for all human beings and no party can claim that, in defending its own population, it is allowed to disavow the rights of others," Ms Arbour stressed. "On the contrary, all parties have obligations not only towards the rights of their own people, but for the rights of all."

Introducing the resolution, Mahsood Khan of Pakistan said that the serious situation caused by the incessant Israeli military attacks in Gaza required an instant response by the Human Rights Council.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office, the USA, Canada and Australia advise against all travel to Gaza. And they advise against all but essential travel to the West Bank (except Bethlehem, Ramallah and Jericho where they do not advise against travel, although warn against doing so during the hours of darkness).

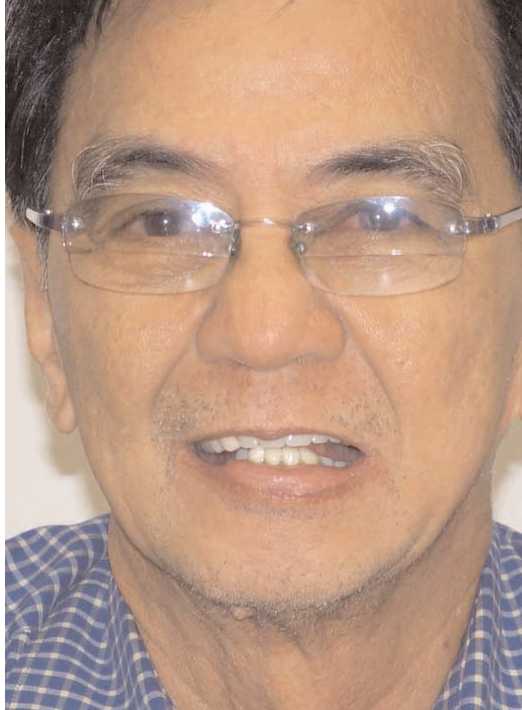
The US State Department says that in the past, armed gunmen have kidnapped foreigners, including several Americans, in Gaza and the West Bank. Gunmen in negotiations with the Palestinian Authority have sometimes used such foreign hostages as bartering tools. The threat of hostage-taking remains a primary concern for Americans and foreigners within the Gaza Strip.

In the West Bank, and Gaza demonstrations or altercations can occur spontaneously and have the potential to become violent without warning. If such disturbances occur, American visitors should leave the area immediately. In Jerusalem's Old City, where exits are limited, American visitors should seek safe haven inside a shop or restaurant until the incident is over.

Bethlehem, one of the most important cities to followers of the Christian faith, is a significant stop for many pilgrims to the Holy Land. Recently, the Israeli and Palestinian ministers of tourism have met to discuss ways to facilitate tourist travel to important locations in the West Bank such as Bethlehem.

Canadians of Middle Eastern origin may be subject to restrictions at border crossings, which may affect their ability to enter and exit Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. There are live landmines in certain areas, including in parts of the West Bank and along Israel's borders. Some minefields have not been clearly marked or fenced. Visitors should walk only on established roads or trails.

Terrorist attacks have occurred on Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, near the tourist destination of Eilat, which borders southern Israel.



The Australian Government adds that since the Palestinian terrorist organisation Hamas took defacto control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007, the security situation in the Gaza Strip is dangerous, unpredictable and could deteriorate at any time as a result of Israeli military operations or intra-Palestinian armed conflict.

Philippines

AN OUTBREAK of murders and kidnappings by Muslims targeted at Christians has led to bishops, priests and other church figures being given military protection on the island of Jolo.

Earlier this year Fr Rey Roda, pictured left, was shot dead by suspected Muslims on an island that is considered a stronghold of the Abu Sayaff (Bearers of the Sword) guerillas, an Islamic jihadist group that the international community and the Filipino people consider to be terrorists.

Alongside the major acts of violence there are also repeated, although minor expressions of prejudice aimed at the Christian population there.

Nationally, the Roman Catholic Church, which is politically powerful in the country, is increasingly divided over the role played by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

There have been mounting calls for her resignation, which began following claims that she rigged the 2004 elections, but it was claimed recently that she had sought the support of the Church by giving cash handouts to religious groups.

Some observers pointed out the significance of a meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference last month that declined to back calls for her removal as President, although the meeting did condemn corruption.

Despite that, church leaders have appeared increasingly divided over the President's fate.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Offices advises against all travel to Mindanao because of ongoing terrorist activity. There are frequent terrorist attacks against civilian targets throughout Mindanao. Most recently, on 22 November 2007, a bomb exploded in a shopping mall in Kidapawan City, reportedly killing one and injuring at least six others.

They also advise against all travel to the Sulu archipelago including Basilan, Tawi-Tawi and Jolo, where there are ongoing military and police operations against insurgent groups.

They warn that there is a high threat from terrorism throughout the Philippines. Terrorist groups continue to plan attacks and have the capacity and the intent to carry out these attacks at any time and anywhere in the country. And they add that there is a threat of kidnapping throughout the Philippines. The Foreign Office believes that terrorists and criminal elements plan to kidnap foreign tourists from islands and coastal areas in the southern Philippines — ie Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. The most recent kidnap of a foreign national occurred in June 2007. Kidnappings from other parts of the Philippines cannot be discounted, with boats travelling to and from offshore islands and dive sites possible targets.

The US State Department adds that kidnap-for-ransom gangs

operate in the Philippines. The New People's Army (NPA), another terrorist organization, operates in many rural areas of the Philippines, including in the northern island of Luzon. While it has not targeted westerners in several years, the NPA could threaten US citizens with extortion methods, especially those citizens engaged in business or property management activities.

Terrorist groups, such as the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Jema'ah Islamiyah, and groups that have broken away from the more mainstream Moro Islamic Liberation Front or Moro National Liberation Front, have carried out bombings resulting in deaths, injuries and property damage.

The Canadian Government says that continuing reports suggest that there is an ongoing terrorist threat to Westerners and Western interests in the Philippines. Philippine authorities have warned that there may be bomb attacks in Manila and other key cities. Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada advises against all travel to the Sulu Archipelago, Basilan, the Zamboanga Peninsula, Zamboanga del Sur, Sarangani, Davao del Sur (excluding urban areas of Davao City), South Cotabato, North Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat and Maguindanao unless they have critical or compelling business or family reasons.

The Australian government strongly advises travellers not to travel to Mindanao, including mainland Mindanao, the Zamboanga Peninsula and the Sulu Archipelago, due to the very high threat of terrorist attack, including kidnapping and related counter-terrorism operations. Kidnap for ransom gangs are also active. If you are in these areas, you should consider leaving.

Credible information indicates terrorists may be in the advanced stages of planning attacks. The attacks may be imminent and could occur at any time, anywhere in Mindanao.

Qatar

THE OPENING of a new Christian Church in the Gulf state of Qatar has led to calls for a referendum on whether such buildings should be allowed there.

Until a ruling by the Emir seven years ago, Christians had to attend services covertly, but so far five churches have been allowed to open places of worship.

Although the new church, Our Lady of the Rosary, is situated in a remote desert location, Christians are nevertheless worried about the reaction it will spark, given that the majority Muslim state is hostile to Christian influences, partly stoked by allied action in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The opening of the new church earlier this month sparked debate in the country's press, with some calling it an 'offence'. Although there is nothing on the exterior to identify it as a regular church building, it has sparked a debate about catering to religious minorities.

Part of the problem facing the country is the influx of foreign workers, mainly from the Philippines and other parts of south Asia. Many of these are Christians, and the ratio of the population is now 200,000 native Qataris against 700,000 foreign workers.

THE QATAR-based al-Jazeera TV station is to be banned in Israel for inciting terror.

Earlier this month it was revealed that the Israeli Foreign Ministry is to send an official letter to Qatar demanding an investigation into the international broadcaster.

Israel was angered over what they say is the station's unfair portrayal of the Israel Defence Force's action in the Gaza Strip.

"The Foreign Ministry has held discussions on the matter, and decided to embargo the station," Deputy Foreign Minister Majali Wahabe said, adding: "These reports are untrustworthy and they hurt us, and they arouse people to terrorist activities."

There were also claims that the station had co-operated with Hamas during the recent period of military escalation in the Strip.

The claims of Hamas support were echoed by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah movement. Mohammed Dahlan, a Fatah leader, recently launched a lawsuit against al-Jazeera for its alleged support for Hamas.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says the general threat from terrorism in Qatar remains. Terrorists continue to issue statements threatening to carry out attacks in the Gulf region.

However, the US State Department adds that incidents of violence are rare in Qatar, although attacks against Western targets have occurred. American citizens in Qatar are strongly encouraged to maintain a high level of vigilance, be aware of local events and take the appropriate steps to bolster their personal security at all times.

They say that al-Qaeda and affiliated organizations continue to



plan strikes against Western targets; these attacks may employ a wide variety of tactics which include assassination, kidnapping, hijacking and bombing.

Saudi Arabia

An independent United Nations expert has hailed progress in Saudi Arabia on advancing the status of women but urged more action to prevent gender-based violence and raise their profile in public life.

"Women of Saudi Arabia, in full respect of their societal values, appear ready to embark on a new stage of engagement in contributing to the advancement of their society and that of the coming generations of women and men," the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences, Yakin Ertürk, said after visiting the country last month.

"Supporting them on their endeavour requires vision, courage, leadership and a firm commitment from the highest levels of the

state and the involvement of all sectors of government in consultation with civil society actors.”

The expert stressed the variety of experiences among Saudi women. “There were those who have expressed contentment and satisfaction with their lives. Others have raised concerns of serious levels of discriminatory practices against women that compromise their rights and dignity as full human beings and undermine the true values of their society. And still others shared with me the domestic abuse they systematically encounter with little prospects for redress.”

She noted a number of positive developments, particularly improvements in women’s access to education, but said this has not been met with a comparable increase in their labour force participation.

“Women are particularly excluded from decision making positions,” she observed, while adding that the private sector, on the other hand, “appears to offer women potential for greater autonomous space for self actualization.”

Some professional women and officials said the policy of sex segregation at the work-place constrains them, while others argued that the creation of private sections for women in public space fosters greater participation.

“Whatever the preferred modality may be, the infrastructure for women’s equal participation in all government institutions and private businesses needs to be set in place and women’s participation in decision making processes needs to be ensured,” Ms Ertürk said.

She hailed the recent demystification of the taboo around violence against women, praising a number of State initiatives to address the problem and promote awareness raising, referral, and care and protection for victims of violence, including access to shelters.

At the same time, the Special Rapporteur said women are prevented from escaping abusive environments because of their lack of autonomy and economic independence, practices surrounding divorce and child custody, the absence of a law criminalizing violence against women, and inconsistencies in the application of laws and procedures.

Meanwhile, Dannelene Noach, a 53-year-old South African nurse, has arrived home after nearly three months in a jail in Saudi Arabia accused of witchcraft.

Her family in South Africa had no idea what had happened when she was arrested in November because Noach was allowed no contact with the outside world for several weeks.

She said her arrest was “a mistake” but declined to elaborate.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says there is a continuing high threat of terrorism in Saudi Arabia. They say that terrorists are planning further attacks, including against Westerners and places associated with Westerners in Saudi Arabia. Aviation interests and oil infrastructure remain possible terrorist targets.

They add that Islamic law is strictly enforced throughout Saudi Arabia.

The US Department of State continues to warn American citizens to defer non-essential travel to Saudi Arabia due largely to targeted

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attacks against American citizens that have resulted in deaths and injuries.

The US mission continues to receive reports suggesting that terrorist actions against US private and official interests in Saudi Arabia are a strong possibility. Terrorist groups continue to target housing compounds, hotels, methods of transportation, and commercial establishments where Westerners can be found. In addition, American citizens are urged to avoid contact with any suspicious, unfamiliar objects, and to report the presence of such objects to local authorities. Vehicles should not be left unattended, if at all possible, and should be kept locked at all times. American citizens are urged to park their motor vehicles in protected areas with restricted access and to inspect the vehicles before using them, looking underneath, inside the engine compartment, and inside the trunk.

The Canadian Government says that although there is no evidence to suggest specific targeting of Canadian citizens, they should take all possible security precautions and avoid large gatherings and crowded places.

The Australian Government advises travellers to reconsider their need to travel to Saudi Arabia at this time due to the very high threat of terrorist attack.

Singapore

SINGAPORE authorities are continuing to search for the escaped Jemaah Islamiyah leader Mas Selamat Kastari. They say they believe he is still in the country as there is no evidence to show he has managed to leave Singapore.

The terrorist escaped from Whitley Detention Center in Singapore at the end of last month, where he had been detained under the Internal Security Act since 2006 for involvement in a plot to crash a hijacked plane into Changi Airport.

A nationwide search is under way, but the terror suspect remains at large. However, during the search more than 10 immigration offenders had been caught and arrested.

Travel alerts:

The US State Department warns about Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a terrorist organization with links to al-Qaeda, which planned attacks in Singapore against government and private targets associated with

the United States, Singapore and other countries. These plans were disrupted and the JI organization in Singapore was dismantled. However, Singapore remains a target of interest for terrorist groups. The Department of State remains concerned because extremist groups in Southeast Asia continue to demonstrate the desire and capability to carry out attacks against locations where Westerners congregate. Americans residing in or traveling to Singapore and neighboring countries should therefore exercise caution, especially in locations where Americans and other Westerners live, work, congregate, shop or visit.

Other Western governments advise travelers to exercise caution and monitor developments that might affect their safety in Singapore, because of the risk of terrorist attack.

Sri Lanka

An Anglican priest has become the latest casualty in Sri Lanka's civil war.

On Feb 17 the Rev Neil Samson, priest of the diocese of Kurunagla, was shot to death outside his home. At approximately 9:30 in the evening two gunmen riding a motorbike shot the 39-year-old priest and his wife while they were out walking with their family.

Fr Samson died in hospital, while his wife remains in critical condition. Their child was unharmed. Police have arrested three men in connection with the killing, the Sri Lanka press reports. Two of the men are members of the government-raised civilian militia deployed against Tamil separatists, the Civil Protection Committee, and are being held by the police for questioning.

The Bishop of Colombo, the Rt Rev Duleep de Chickera condemned the killing, calling the dead priest a victim of the war culture that had overtaken the country in the midst of the 20-year conflict between the government and the separatist Tamil Tiger guerillas. He added that the "absence of a neutral monitoring body" to mediate between the opposing sides had encouraged "impunity and a continuing disregard for acceptable ethical and humanitarian norms easily facilitates the occupation and destruction of places of worship."

Speculation the murder was politically motivated has been fuelled by a media frenzy in Sri Lanka surrounding the purported arrest of two Tamil Christian ministers carrying an explosive suicide-bomb vest. Bishop de Chickera said if the jailed ministers "are guilty they must be dealt with under the law," he said, adding that in "such an event it will also be necessary for the particular Church concerned to offer a public apology, and for all Churches to review their procedure of selection and training for the ministry to prevent a repetition of such happenings."

However, if "on the other hand these pastors are innocent they must be released and they and their Church publicly exonerated," he said.

Meanwhile Sri Lanka has defended its human rights record at the United Nations.

Mahinda Samarasinghe, the Human Rights Minister, told reporters that most of the countries present at the UNHRC session had understood Sri Lanka's position on its war against terrorism and its efforts to find a political

solution to the island's long running dispute with Tamil Tiger rebels.

"We were able to convince the countries that Sri Lanka's human rights record has improved and not deteriorated," Samarasinghe said.

"We told the governments that military action was not our objective," Samarasinghe said, referring to the military campaign against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the accusations of rights abuses that go with the campaign.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says there is a high threat from terrorism in Sri Lanka. Fatal attacks have become more frequent this year. They have occurred in Colombo and throughout Sri Lanka, including in places frequented by expatriate and foreign travellers. Further attacks may occur at any time. There is an increasing risk of British nationals being caught up in an attack.

They advise against all travel to the north and east of Sri Lanka, and to Yala National Park and the areas around it.

The US Department of State urges American citizens to carefully evaluate the risks of travel to Sri Lanka and specifically warns Americans against travel to northern and eastern areas of Sri Lanka.

In light of attacks against civilian buses and trains, American citizens are strongly cautioned against traveling by bus or train in Sri Lanka.

Tourists should be aware that the LTTE has the capability to operate in several national parks in the North and East of Sri Lanka.

Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada advises against non-essential travel to Sri Lanka unless you have critical business or family reasons to do so. Travellers should be aware that incidents of violence can occur without notice throughout the entire country and is not restricted to the north and east of Sri Lanka.

The Australian Government urges travelers to reconsider their need to travel to Sri Lanka at this time because of the very high risk of politically motivated violence.

They add that due to the on-going conflict, the international airport could be closed without warning and commercial aircraft could be at risk, particularly at night.

Syria

STRATEGISTS say that there is an internal struggle going on in Syria, which was demonstrated by the recent assassination of the



Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyah in Damascus.

Observers say that there is evidence that Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon suspect that Syrian elements were involved in the assassination. There is also speculation that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is now targeting his brother-in-law, Asef Shawkat, who heads up the Syrian Intelligence organization.

At the time of his death, blame was apportioned on Mossad, but last month Hezbollah allegedly kidnapped a group of Syrian workers, and they interrogated them to extract information about the movements of Mughniyah.

If there is a power struggle, it could pose a threat to the delicate balance of power in Syria between the President's family, the Alawite religious minority and the ruling Baath party.

Travel alerts:

Syria is included on the US Department of State's List of State Sponsors of Terrorism. A number of the terrorist groups that have offices in Syria oppose US policies in the Middle East. Security personnel may at times place foreign visitors under surveillance. Hotel rooms, telephones, and fax machines may be monitored, and personal possessions in hotel rooms may be searched. Taking photographs of anything that could be perceived as being of military or security interest may result in problems with authorities.

The British Foreign Office says there is a general threat from terrorism. Attacks cannot be ruled out and could be indiscriminate, including in places frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers.

They add that travellers should not attempt to enter Iraq via the Syrian border, which is subject to restrictions on both sides.

The Canadian Government adds that ongoing conflicts in Lebanon, Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and the Iraq situation continue to have an impact on public opinion in Syria and have raised the possibility of demonstrations. Canadians should monitor local developments and avoid demonstrations and large gatherings.

The Australian Government advises travelers to reconsider their need to travel to Syria because of the high threat of terrorist attack and volatile security environment in the region.

Taiwan

AHEAD OF a presidential election on March 22, the international community was watching developments on the island nation with keen interest.

The current president has spoken of declaring independence, but the two candidates vying to succeed President Chen Shui-bian have both declared their desire to establish stronger links with China. Observers say that it is likely that independence moves will be sidelined after the vote, irrespective of who wins.

However, the two candidates, Ma Ying-Jeou and Frank Hsieh, have different agendas on the economy, but their views on relations with mainland China are significant. In recent years the separatist movement has made strident steps forward.

A rebuilding of links with China will help to smooth regional tensions and international relations, as few countries presently recognize Taiwan.

The polls currently suggest a win for Mr Ma, a Harvard-educated lawyer. His party, also known as the Kuomintang, ruled Taiwan until Chen was elected in 2000.

But Chen is not going without a fight: he has vowed to hold an

election on plans to join the UN under the name of Taiwan, rather than 'Republic of China'. However, there appears to be little support for the referendum and the opposition has promised to boycott the plebiscite.

Travel alerts:

Most Western governments say that there are no specific safety or security concerns, but travelers are warned to be aware of the global risk of indiscriminate attacks, which could be against civilian targets, including places frequented by foreigners.

Tajikistan

More than half a million Tajiks could soon face food shortages as a severe winter turns to flooding and an appeal for \$25 million remains only one-quarter funded, a United Nations spokesperson has said.

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), long-awaited warmer temperatures have replaced snow with intense rains and avalanches, mudflows and floods threaten much of the country.

At the same time, the eastern areas and mountains continue to experience the harshest temperatures seen in decades, which are expected to continue at least until the end of March.

Herders and farmers have sustained losses of around \$250 million, according to an assessment made by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in co-operation with the national agricultural ministry.

During April and May a number of UN agencies are planning to conduct an in-depth assessment of livelihoods and food security in the country while setting up a structure that could be expanded to deal with possible future emergencies.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office advises against all but essential travel to Tajikistan until the energy situation improves. They say that much of the country (including most hotels) is without electricity. Dushanbe has a severely rationed electricity supply.

They add that there is a general threat from terrorism in Tajikistan. The overall security situation in Tajikistan is currently stable but tourism, health and transport infrastructure in country is poor and travel requires careful planning.

The US State Department says that supporters of terrorist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), al-Qaeda, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement remain active in Central Asia, as do anti-Western, anti-Semitic extremist organizations such as Hizb'ut-Tahrir. These groups have expressed anti-US sentiments and may attempt to target US Government or private interests in the region, including in Tajikistan. Terrorist attacks involving the use of suicide bombers have previously taken place in neighboring Uzbekistan. Taliban resurgence and successful operations in Afghanistan, including attacks in the north, could also affect the security situation in southern Tajikistan.

Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada advises against all travel to Tajikistan because of the energy crisis. They suggest that Canadians consider leaving if their presence is not necessary.

A similar warning is in place from the Australian Government.



Thailand

THE RETURN of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra last month has put the spotlight on the country's political make-up.

Although his party was popular, allegations of corruption led to him being overthrown in a military coup while he was out of the country. That was where he stayed until his return, and when he landed back in Thailand he was immediately arrested.

In his absence elections were held, which were described by the US as "generally considered free and fair." They added that the referendum on a new constitution was "an important benchmark in Thailand's return to democracy." Others have complained that the new constitution weakens democracy.

But now Thaksin is facing a court battle on the corruption charges, together with a five-year ban on political activity. He is also facing a battle with his former colleague Samak Sundaravej, who is now Prime Minister. He has ruled out an early amnesty for Thaksin. Tensions are likely because the latter has been describing himself as 'the real prime minister'.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office advises against all but essential travel to, or through, the far southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and Songkhla. There continue to be frequent attacks, including bombing and shooting, due to insurgency and civil unrest in these areas.

They add that there is a high threat from terrorism in Thailand. They say that the King endorsed the new Thai Government on February 6, 2008, but the political situation in Thailand remains uncertain.

The US State Department says it is concerned that there is an increased risk of terrorism in Southeast Asia, including in Thailand. American citizens traveling to Thailand should therefore exercise caution, especially in locations where Westerners congregate, such as clubs, discos, bars, restaurants, hotels, places of worship, schools, outdoor recreation venues, tourist areas, beach resorts, and other places frequented by foreigners.

Travelers should be aware that over the past several years a number of Lao- and Hmong-American citizens have been murdered in northern and northeastern Thailand near the border with Laos.

They add that tourists should also exercise caution in remote areas along the border with Burma.

The Canadian Government adds that Martial law remains in effect in approximately one-third of the country.

They say that, while we have received no reports that would suggest the timing, methodology or location of attacks in southern

Thailand, there have been reports to suggest that such planning is being undertaken. Armed attacks, arson, and bombings have occurred in schools, places of worship, shopping districts, open markets, government offices, police stations, military posts, and an entertainment venue. These attacks have resulted in numerous deaths and injuries.

The Australian Government suggests a high degree of caution because of the high threat

of terrorist attack. They continue to receive reports that terrorists may be planning attacks against a range of targets, including tourist areas and other places frequented by foreigners.

Timor-Leste (East Timor)

THE PRESIDENT of East Timor has thanked medical staff who treated him after he was shot last month.

Jose Ramos-Horta, who was seriously injured in the attack, was shot during an ambush in Dili. Rebels also targeted Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao, who escaped unharmed.

The attack was orchestrated by fugitive rebel commander Alfredo Reinado, who was killed by presidential guards.

Mr Ramos-Horta did not issue any political statements, but used his first public appearance since the attack to express his gratitude to those who helped save his life.

Doctors said he is expected to make a full recovery and arrest warrants have been issued for 17 people suspected of involvement in attacks on leaders in East Timor.

Australia has sent 200 troops to Dili because of fears of further unrest, adding to the troops they and Portugal, Malaysia and New Zealand had sent there in 2006.

The former Portuguese colony voted to secede from Indonesia in 1999 and became independent three years later.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office advises against all but essential travel to East Timor, because of the uncertain security situation. A State of Siege (Emergency) is in place and all travel from 2200 to 0600, demonstrations and public gatherings have been prohibited.

The US State Department is urging Americans to defer travel to Timor-Leste.

Timor-Leste has experienced successive outbreaks of politically related civil unrest, and the risk of such violent unrest continues.

Gang violence in Dili is less widespread than it was during the period from May to October 2006. Nevertheless, criminal violence remains more pervasive than it was prior to April 2006. While the overwhelming majority of gang-related criminal violence has been Timorese on Timorese, foreigners have been caught up in such violence and there were credible reports of anti-Western attacks, most recently during a surge of violence in Dili in and in Baucau in August 2007.

Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada advises against non-essential travel to Timor-Leste (East Timor) and Canadians without essential reasons to be in this country should leave. Canadians are strongly advised against using taxis.

The Australian Government adds that during March 2008, changes to food distribution in Dili may lead to increased tension.

Turkey

THE TURKISH parliament has given its preliminary approval to a government-backed constitutional amendment that would allow women university students to wear Islamic headscarves in classes.

Lawmakers from the ruling Islamist AK Party along with an opposition nationalist party backed the amendment that would repeal a 1989 headscarf ban for students in higher education. The vote was 401-110. Turkish lawmakers early Thursday voted to approve a constitutional amendment to allow female students to enter universities wearing Islamic headscarves.

Turkey's judiciary, military and university leaders have opposed the relaxation of the ban, which they see as an attempt to overthrow Turkey's secularist constitution. The main opposition party, the



secularist CHP, has vowed to take the issue to the Constitutional Court to block the amendment.

Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan has long advocated lifting the ban, saying it is a matter of religious freedom, but has also sought to mollify the military, which in 1997 ousted an Islamist government from power.

On Feb 2 tens of thousands of supporters of Turkey's secular constitution held a rally in Ankara at the tomb of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish secular state.

Secularists fear lifting the ban would force all women to wear the headscarf and lead to the veil, citing the politically inspired movement in many Muslim countries and in Muslim communities in the West to adopt the veil. The military also views the headscarf as a symbol of radical Islam and a threat to modern Turkey.

Foreign Minister Ali Babacan told a news conference last month that the government had the support of the EU in lifting the ban on the headscarf in schools. Lifting the ban was part of the democratic reforms designed to foster free speech and minority rights, he said.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says there is a high threat from terrorism in Turkey. They say that international terrorist groups, as well as indigenous ones, are currently active in Turkey. Targets have included Mediterranean and Aegean tourist areas, Istanbul and Turkey's South East. Attacks have taken place against government and security targets, and also in restaurants, public transport and other public places frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers.

The US State Department says that the possibility of terrorist attacks, both transnational and indigenous, remains high.

The Canadian Government adds that the recent incursion of the Turkish armed forces into northern Iraq has resulted in heightened security concerns across Turkey. Canadians should remain alert to the risk of random terrorist attacks, which could target security, military and civilian interests anywhere in Turkey. In the last few weeks, an increasing number of car torchings have been reported in Istanbul and other cities.

The Australian Government says that domestic terrorist groups (some with links to international terrorists) have recently staged attacks.

They say they continue to receive reports that terrorists are planning attacks against a range of targets, including places frequented by foreigners. Foreigners have been killed and injured. Terrorist attacks can occur anywhere at any time in Turkey. Possible targets include Turkish and Western government interests and commercial interests, including banks.

Recent credible reports suggest terrorists are planning attacks in Turkey, including in response to Turkish military action against terrorists and their bases in northern Iraq.

They also advise travellers to reconsider their need to travel to provinces in the southeast of Turkey, including those in the border region between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, due to the unpredictable security situation.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has promised to amend its Religion Law, but work on this has not started, Forum 18 News Service is reporting.

Shirin Akhmedova, Director of the state National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, claimed the process of amending the Law would be "transparent" and would involve "international experts."

However, she said that the views of local people would be listened to only after Forum 18 specifically asked about this.

She refused to say what parts of the Law are likely to be amended, when a draft Law may be produced, or if there would be public

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discussion. She insisted that the country has a "new government" and denied that religious believers face any problems in practising their faith.

Religious believers have told Forum 18 that no fundamental changes in religious policy have yet taken place. Many have stated that restrictions they face include not being able to: build or open places of worship; publish or import religious literature; travel abroad (including on the haj pilgrimage to Mecca); share their beliefs; or - for communities the authorities particularly dislike - gain legal status.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says there is a low threat from terrorism. Travellers should also register with the State Service of Turkmenistan for the Registration of Foreign Nationals if they are staying for more than three days.

The US State Department says those considering travel to Turkmenistan should take the country's proximity to regions of past and current instability into account before making any plans. The Government of Turkmenistan has designated many areas throughout the country as "restricted zones," particularly the border areas next to Iran, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan, the entire region of Dashoguz (including Dashoguz city), and areas of the Caspian coast. Travel to these areas by foreigners is forbidden without special permission from the Government of Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan Airlines, the national airline, will not sell a ticket to any traveler who intends to travel to a "restricted zone" without proof of permission from the government.

Security personnel may at times place foreign visitors under surveillance. Hotel rooms, telephones, and fax machines may be monitored, and personal possessions in hotel rooms may be searched. Taking photographs of anything that could be perceived as being of military or security interest, such as government buildings, may result in problems with authorities. Visitors should ask whether buildings may be photographed.

Supporters of extremist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, al-Qaeda, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement remain active in Central Asia. These groups have expressed anti-US sentiments and may attempt to target US Government or private interests in the region, including in Turkmenistan. Terrorists do not distinguish between official and civilian targets.

The Canadian Government says that although the situation is currently calm, Canadians are requested to remain vigilant and to monitor local developments carefully before traveling to Turkmenistan.

There continues to be intense scrutiny and questioning at ports of

entry and departure in Turkmenistan. Foreign nationals in the country may also encounter increased security measures within Turkmenistan, and some have been detained by the authorities. Canadians in the country should remain highly vigilant and avoid situations where political violence and demonstrations may occur.

The Australian Government strongly advises travellers not to travel to the region bordering Afghanistan because of ongoing political and civil unrest in Afghanistan.

UAE

A PAN-ARAB agency for regional and international relief has been proposed by the United Arab Emirates.

The call came from Rashid Al Hajri, head of Information and Public Relations, at the Zayed Higher Foundation for Humanitarian Care. He said that such an organization was essential for a quick response to natural catastrophes.

He added that programmes for management of emergencies in Arab World should be developed to meet challenges.

He made his suggestion at the final session of the fifth Arab Forum for Administrative Development, meeting in Cairo.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office says that most visits to the UAE are trouble-free, but add that there is a general threat from terrorism. Terrorists continue to issue statements threatening to carry out attacks in the Gulf region; and may be planning to carry out attacks in the UAE.

The penalties for drug trafficking, drug smuggling and drug possession of even residual amounts of drugs are severe. There is a zero tolerance policy towards drugs, including any found in the system. Care should also be taken about the import of prescription drugs and some over-the-counter drugs.

The US Department of State remains concerned about the possibility of terrorist attacks against US citizens and interests throughout the world. Americans should maintain a low profile, vary routes and times for all required travel, and treat mail and packages from unfamiliar sources with caution.

Taking photographs of potentially-sensitive UAE military and civilian sites, or foreign diplomatic missions, including the US Embassy, may result in arrest, detention and/or prosecution by local authorities. In addition, engaging in mapping activities, especially mapping which includes the use of GPS equipment, without coordination with UAE authorities, may have the same consequences.

On several occasions in the past three years, small groups of expatriate recreational boaters were detained by the Iranian Coast Guard for alleged violation of Iranian territorial waters while fishing near the island of Abu Musa, approximately 20 miles from Dubai. The UAE and Iran have had a long-standing dispute concerning jurisdiction of Abu Musa. Fishing or sailing in these waters may result in seizure of vessels and detention of passengers and crew in Iran.

The Canadian Government says there have been credible reports that terrorists may be planning attacks in the UAE, possibly against Westerners and/or Western interests.

The Australian Government advises travellers to exercise a high degree of caution in the United Arab Emirates because of the high threat of terrorist attack.

Statements by international terrorist groups continue to call for attacks against Westerners on the Arabian Peninsula and in the Gulf region. These include references to residential compounds, military, oil, transport and aviation interests. They say they continue to receive reports that terrorists are planning attacks against Western interests in the Gulf region. Commercial and public areas frequented by Westerners are possible terrorist targets.

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Uzbekistan

UZBEKISTAN has been accused of violating legal procedures throughout the country.

The claim came from the chairman of the Chairman of the Initiative Group of Independent Human Rights Activists (IGNPU), Surat Ikramov, who made the accusation in an open letter to the President, Islam Karimov.

He stressed that his group was not aligned to any political groups or movements and was established in 2000 to promote "democratic changes, development of a state based on supremacy of the law and the observance of human rights." He said they merely monitors criminal trials in Uzbekistan.

Among the complaints he highlighted are banning families of suspects from attending trials, although they are officially described as 'open'.

Ikramov said this was a direct violation of Article 19 of the Penal Procedure Code.

The IGNPU requested a meeting with Chairman of the Supreme Court Mustafayev to address the matter but the request was turned down. Appeal to the Supreme Court mailed on June 6, 2007, was never acknowledged.

They are now calling on the President to instruct all courts, district, municipal or regional, to: create no obstacles for the presence of suspects' families and others as observers at open trials; establish control over compilation of trial schedules that are expected to be made available to general public; and ban the use of the police and other similar structures to disperse suspects' families and others wishing to attend the trial as observers.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office advises against all but essential travel to areas bordering Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan other than via authorised crossing points. Uzbekistan's borders are potential flash-points and there is a risk that uncontrolled border areas may be land-mined.

They add that there is a general threat from terrorism in Uzbekistan including in places frequented by expatriates and foreign travellers.

A US State Department Travel Warning remains in effect for Uzbekistan. The US Government continues to receive information that indicates terrorist groups may be planning attacks, possibly against US interests, in Uzbekistan. Supporters of terrorist groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, al-Qaeda, the Islamic Jihad Union, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement are active in the region. Members of these groups have expressed anti-US sentiments and have attacked US Government interests in the past, including the US Embassy in Tashkent, and may attempt to target US Government or private American interests in Uzbekistan. In the past, these groups have conducted kidnappings, assassinations, and suicide bombings.

Canadians travelling to Uzbekistan are advised to exercise a high degree of caution by their Government. Recent reports indicate that terrorists may be planning attacks in this country. These attacks could occur at any





time and anywhere. Exercise caution, especially in areas frequented by foreigners.

Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada advises against all travel to areas bordering Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, including the city of Andijan, due to the unstable security situation. Incidents of violence have occurred in the mountainous border area where Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan meet. Some areas near the Tajikistan border are mined. Canadians should contact the Consulate of Canada in Tashkent for further information. The border between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan on the road between Tashkent and Samarkand is closed. Before travelling to the Tajikistan border, please contact the Consulate of Canada for up-to-date information.

The Australian Government says they continue to receive reports suggesting that terrorists may be planning attacks.

Vietnam

VIETNAMESE officials have denied that religious persecution is taking place in their country, despite being presented with documentary evidence by a Christian human rights group.

The evidence presented by the Jubilee Campaign documented the case of Kpa Kloh, a member of the indigenous Montagnards people of Vietnam's central highlands, who died last month after allegedly being tortured because of his religious beliefs. The officials told the Jubilee Campaign delegation: "If anyone is punished, it is for his crime, not for religious activity."

A spokesman for Jubilee Campaign said:

"The Vietnamese constitution does guarantee freedom of religion. Some Vietnamese Christians and those of other faith are allowed to worship. This is something the staff member mentioned to the delegates, by commending them for recently registering one church, and for allowing another group to again use their church building.

"Also, as our staff member noted to these officials, the law provides restriction against torture, and restriction against punishing anyone before his trial is completed.

"However, against this backdrop of constitutional provisions and assurance of delegates is a trail of tears — the report of one Montagnard after another who has been brutally tortured for his faith. Many who are tortured die in prison or are released to their families on the brink of death with broken ribs, extensive bruises, internal injuries, and other unspeakable infirmities."

The spokesman added that other methods are used against religious believers, including the breaking-up of meetings and the forfeiture of animals.

Travel alerts:

There is a low threat from terrorism in Vietnam, but the US State Department says that official US personnel and tourists are sometimes not authorized to travel to the Central Highland areas without prior consent from the Government of Vietnam. These travel limitations may hinder the ability of the US Government to provide assistance to private US citizens in those areas.

They add that US citizens have been detained after traveling in areas close to the



Vietnamese borders with China, Cambodia and Laos. These areas are not always marked, and there are no warnings about prohibited travel. Travelers should avoid such areas unless written permission is obtained in advance from local authorities.

Large gatherings, such as those forming at the scene of traffic accidents, can become violent, and should be avoided.

The Canadian Government adds that there is a heightened threat of terrorism throughout Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. Because of this, a high level of personal security awareness should be used at all times as the security situation could deteriorate rapidly without notice.

Yemen

AN AL-QAEDA leader wanted by the US is free in Yemen.

Jaber Elbaneh was sentenced to 10 years in jail in absentia for fighting against allied forces in Iraq. Although he surrendered himself to President Saleh, the American has yet to be imprisoned. Earlier this month he was granted bail by a Yemeni court. At an earlier hearing he was released without any bail conditions.

The Americans want him because of his involvement with the al-Farouk training camp in Afghanistan, but it appears that his court hearing in Yemen centred on the Iraq charges. But this has not been recognized in Yemeni courts, who have accepted the defence that fighting in other countries can be justified as jihad.

Previous al-Qaeda suspects who have appeared in Yemeni courts have negotiated deals which puts them under house arrest instead of jail for the remainder of their terms.

Travel alerts:

The British Foreign Office advises against all but essential travel to the Governorates of Sa'dah, Ma'rib and Hadramaut due to the threat of terrorism and tribal violence.

They say there is a high threat from terrorism in Yemen including against Western, and British, interests. They believe that terrorists continue to plan attacks.

There have been a number of kidnappings of foreign nationals since mid-2005, with the most recent incident taking place in the governorate of Shabwah, on August 31, 2007.

There have been disturbances in Aden which have resulted in closures of the Aden-Sana'a road.

The US State Department says it is concerned that al-Qaeda and its affiliates are actively engaged in extremist-related activities in Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula.

On July 2, 2007, suspected al-Qaeda operatives carried out a vehicle-borne explosive device attack on tourists at the Belquis Temple in Marib, which resulted in the deaths of eight Spanish tourists and two Yemenis.



Jaber Elbaneh

Yemeni government security organizations have arrested and expelled foreign Muslims, including Americans, who have associated with local Muslim organizations considered to be extremist by security organs of the Yemeni government. Americans risk arrest if they engage in either political or other activities that violate the terms of their admission to Yemen.

Travel by boat through the Red Sea or near the Socotra Islands in the Gulf of Aden presents the risk of pirate attacks. Other potential hazards to travellers include land mines and unexploded ordnance from the 1994 civil war. This is of particular concern in areas where fighting took place in the six southern provinces. However, most minefields have been identified and cordoned off.

Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada advises against non-essential travel to Yemen. Canadians should carefully consider the security situation and assess the risks of travel at this time. The situation in Yemen is uncertain and could deteriorate rapidly.

The Australian Government advises travellers to reconsider their need to travel to Yemen at this time because of the very high threat of terrorist attack.

They also continue to receive reports that terrorists are planning attacks against Western interests in Yemen.

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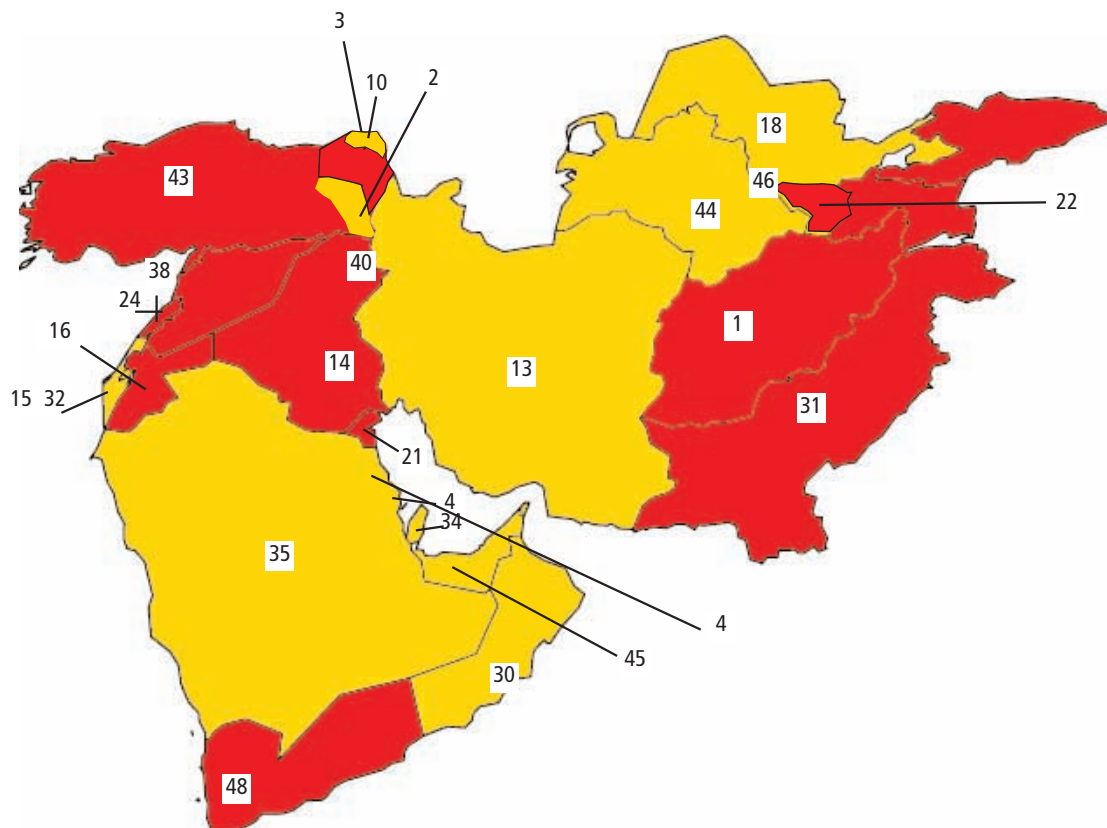


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Religious Intelligence Ltd, Central House, 142 Central Street, London, EC1V 8AR

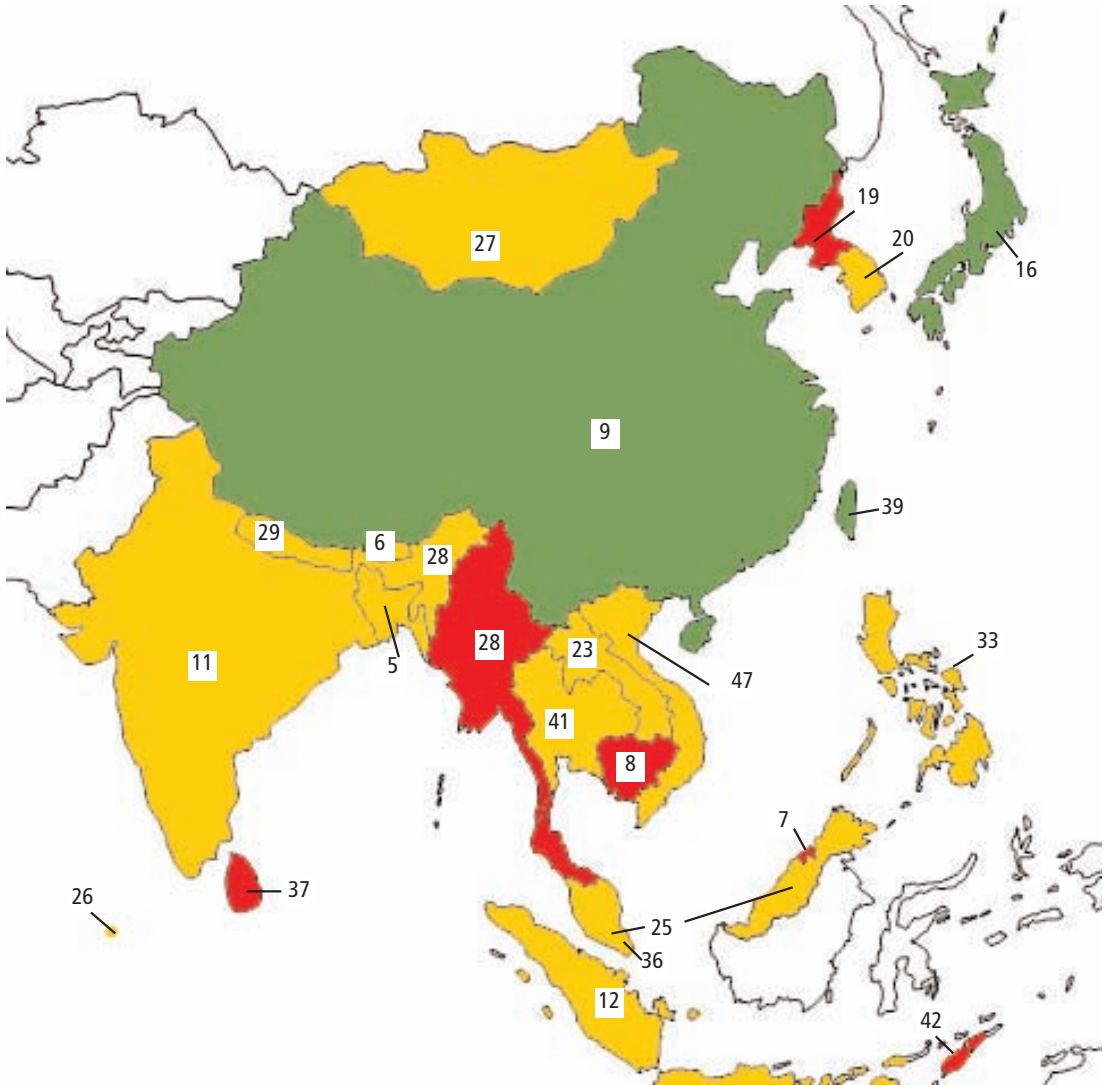
asiadesk@religiousintelligence.com
middleeastdesk@religiousintelligence.com

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