

IRON STRONG DAILY



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Ramadan: fasting, prayer, celebration

**Story and photo by
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Every year, during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, over one billion Muslims or submitters observe the Holy month of Ramadan.

It is believed to be the month in which the Qur'an was revealed to the Angel Gabriel, which was later revealed to the Prophet

Muhammad, said Abass Fadel Abass, a local Iraqi national.

"Ramadan is a time for Muslims to practice inner reflection, self-discipline and devotion to Allah," said Chaplain Samuel Lee, the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment chaplain.

"Rama means dryness," Lee said. "So Muslims are spiritually dry and they need to come closer to Allah by observing and fasting for more spiritual things rather than worldly things."

Ramadan is also a time for Muslims to

worship and do charitable deeds. For Muslims, Ramadan is the opportunity to spiritually gain by giving up desire, to prosper by living without and to mature spiritually by enduring weakness.

Purity of both thought and action is very important during Ramadan. All these things are done as a means of coming closer to God, Abass stated. That is why educating the Soldiers about the customs and practices of the Iraqi people are essential.

According to Lee, being well informed on cultural differences shows the U.S. respects the Iraqi people and that our intent is not to humiliate or to offend them.

"We make sure that our Soldiers do not disrespect the Muslims by drinking, smoking, chewing, eating or anything that may offend Muslims during the time of Ramadan," Lee said.

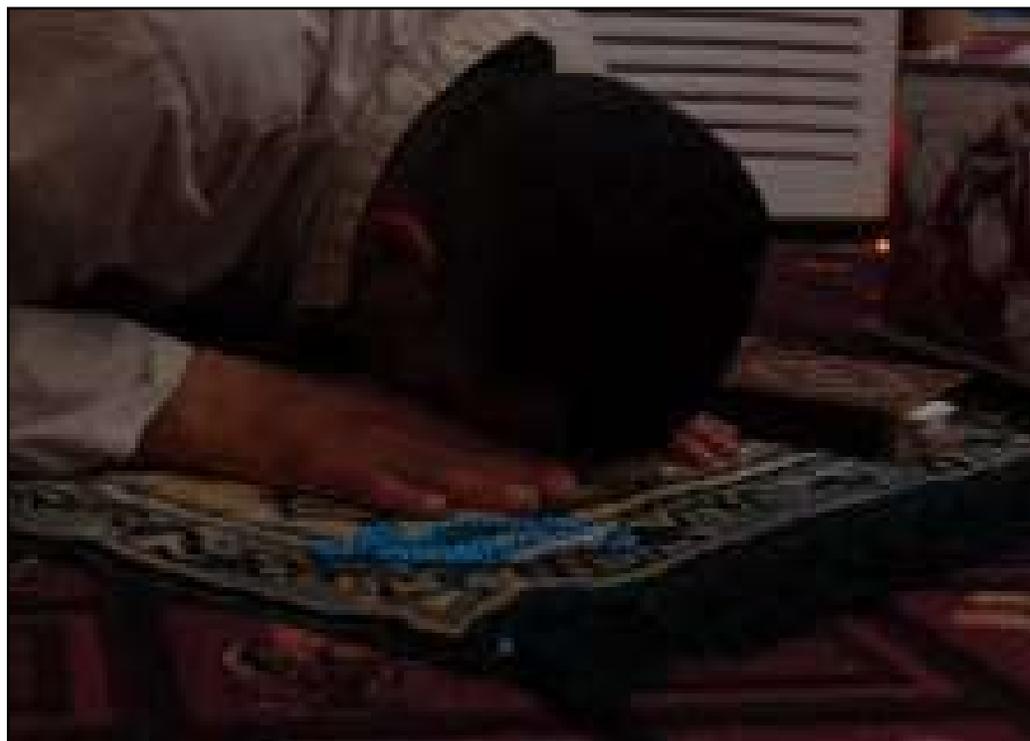
In addition to educating the Soldiers, 2SCR commanding staff has made changes as well.

"We've delayed some missions out of respect for Ramadan," said Lt. Col. D.A. Sims, the regimental deputy commanding officer with 2SCR.

"Also, 4th Squadron, 2SCR has opened an entire section of the city that's been closed for some time now, as part of the Ramadan observances," Sims added.

This year Ramadan began at sunset on August 30 and the last night will be September 29. According to Abass, celebrating Ramadan changes from year to year since Islam uses a lunar calendar, which months start with a new moon sighting.

From sunrise until sunset, Muslims abstain from food, drink, smoking and sexual



A local Iraqi national takes time out for prayer during the holy month of Ramadan while at Forward Operating Base Warhorse located in the Diyala Province, Iraq, September. For Muslims, Ramadan is an opportunity to worship and do charitable deeds. "Ramadan is a time for Muslims to practice inner reflection, self-discipline and devotion to Allah," said Chaplain Samuel Lee, the 2nd Stryker Cavalry Regiment chaplain.

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Iraqi businesses resilient

**Story and photo by
1st Lt. Scott Marler
101st Airborne Division**

It takes money to make money. The Al Bayda center near Balad is a non-governmental organization that provides assistance in the form of micro-loans and education for small business owners, in and around the once restive city of Balad.

The loans capital is provided by the United States Department for International Development (USAID) to the Al Bayda Center operators. The funds are then made available to Iraqi's wishing to start up small businesses.

The micro-loans can be the deciding factor in whether a business survives.

Hawed Muhammad Ayid, a well digger from Muhatta, is a recipient of a micro-loan, and plans to keep his well digging equipment up to par with the money he is loaned.

"My wells provide irrigation for the orchards and the farms," said Ayid. "I will be able to buy drills and supplies to drill," he said.

Success stories are budding across the area, as Iraqis seek to take advantage of security gains by harnessing the spirit of entrepreneurship.

Recently a man who owned a restaurant sought help to get the business back up and running through the help of the loan program. "After my brother was killed, I shut down to take care of my family," said Hussein Muhammad Hadi.

The residual effects of the loans are being felt throughout the Balad area, as jobs are becoming available through the small businesses.

Muhammad Bahi's supermarket employs several Iraqis and has expanded thorough the use of the loans.

Farmers now have outlets to sell locally grown produce and manufacturers are now selling through local Iraqi retailers.

Balad's economy suffered greatly as a result of sectarian violence, which wracked the city in the summer of 2006.

Today, Iraqi Policemen and Security Forces patrol the markets that once resembled ghost towns.

The Al Bayda center provides micro-finance loans at 12 percent interest in addition



An Iraqi man receives his micro-grant at the Al Bayda center near Balad, Iraq. Since its inception, the center has processed more than 300 loans to local Iraqi nationals.

to providing Iraqis training in finance and management.

The hundreds of success stories across the greater Balad area are a testament to the resiliency of the Iraqi business spirit and the micro-loan program.

"For its loans, the Al Bayda center boasts a 100 percent repayment rate on more than 300 loans to date," said Capt. Daniel Kosters, the civil military operations officer for coalition forces operating in the area.

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intercourse during the entire month of Ramadan.

"I won't eat breakfast or lunch but I will eat the Futoor meal after sunset and I will get extra food so that I can eat the Suhoor meal before dawn in the morning," said Abass.

Fasting is only for those Muslims who are able though. Women who are pregnant or nursing, the sick, or anyone who might put their health at risk, the mentally handicapped and children who have not yet hit puberty are all exempt from fasting.

If a Muslim cannot participate in fasting, then they participate either at a later date or by helping others to prepare for Ramadan. This can be done by purchasing and preparing the food for the evening festivities or even

giving to the poor.

But who can last a whole month without eating? That is a common misunderstanding with Ramadan. Eating is allowed but only after sunset and before dawn. A method for calculating the right time to partake in food is as simple as a piece of thread.

"When you hold up a black thread and a white thread in the sun and can no longer tell between the two, that's when it is okay to eat," Abass said gesturing with his hands.

Food is a big part of celebrating Ramadan. Muslim worshipers around the world go to market and buy gifts, new clothes and lots of food so they can share with friends and family during the holy month.

Foods like dates, soup, coba, hot water with sugar, juice and lamb are served after the sunset hours of Ramadan, Abass stated. In this

time, Muslims gather to eat, play games, pray and recite the Qur'an.

The last week of Ramadan is the most important though. Muslims try to be as devout and charitable as possible. The night that the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, known as Lailat ul-Qadr, is generally around the end of the Ramadan celebration and therefore, most Muslims spend the entire day in prayer.

Ramadan ends with a great feast, but during the following month of Shawwal, Muslims are encouraged to continue the fast for an additional six days.

"Ramadan is a festival of giving," Lee stated. "It is a sacred time and a holy month for Muslims. We must remember that we are in their culture and by educating our Soldiers, we make fewer enemies and more friends."

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'Salsa in the Streets'



(LEFT) Grupo Fantasma's own Matthew "Sweet Lou" Holmes, a Copperas Cove, Texas native, carries out a congas solo during the concert "Salsa in the Streets" which took place at the Main Gym in Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq. Grupo Fantasma, straight out of Austin, Texas, performed for the Soldiers along with comedian Joey Medina.

(RIGHT) Soldiers from Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq, got up and took the dance floor during the "Salsa in the Streets" concert which featured Grupo Fantasma and Latin comedian, Joey Medina, at the Main Gym. Medina and the guys from Grupo Fantasma entertained a gym full of Soldiers and Airmen for several hours.



(LEFT) Latin comedian, Joey Medina, entertains bleachers full of Soldiers prior to the performance from Grupo Fantasma during the "Salsa in the Streets" concert, which took place at the Main Gym in Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq. Medina, a Puerto Rican who was born and raised in The Bronx, New York, is ranked one of the top 10 Latin comedians in the United States.

(RIGHT) Vocalist and hand percussionist, Rodolfo "Kino" Rodriguez, plays the shaker during the "Salsa in the Streets" concert which took place at the Main Gym in Contingency Operating Base Speicher, Iraq. The concert featured Grupo Fantasma, out of Austin, Texas, and Latin comedian Joey Medina.



SHOULDER-TO-SHOULDER

NO ONE STANDS ALONE

Prevention of suicide should be everybody's concern. Suicide is a preventable tragedy for Service Members, Family, Civilians and the Military Community.

WHY DOES ANYONE THINK ABOUT SUICIDE?

Causes of suicidal feelings...

- Problems with personal relationships, especially divorce, cheating or keeping secrets.
- Overwhelming combat stress.
- Legal, financial or UCMJ problems.
- Death of a friend, spouse, child or other family member.
- People lose their sense of worth.
- Problems build up and it seems like there is nowhere to go for help.
- Depression or other medical problems are not treated.

People say to themselves...

- "My marriage is a failure...I'm a failure."
- "I just can't seem to do anything right. There is no way that I'm going to fix this."
- "I am in so much trouble that my life is over."
- "There's no way I can live my life without that person."
- "No one really cares if I'm here or not."
- "I don't care about myself or anyone else."
- "Nothing feels right; I don't understand what is happening. There is no hope of anything getting better."

WHAT ARE THE WARNING SIGNS FOR SUICIDE?

Someone has a "fatal attitude..."

- Saying that they hate – or don't care about – themselves, their spouse or family.
- Talking or hinting about suicide or a desire to die.
- Suddenly finalizing personal affairs, paying off debts or talking about "what you should do if I'm gone."
- Giving large gifts or giving away personal items.
- Making a suicide plan or arranging to be alone for no good reason.
- Obsession with depressing music, poetry or artwork.

Noticeable changes in behavior...

- Avoiding normal hobbies, fun activities or daily routines.
- Big increases or decreases in appetite.
- Wanting to spend a lot of time alone.
- Refusal to talk/email with friends, family or loved ones.
- Strange emotional outbursts.
- Failure to maintain uniform standards, hygiene or PMCS of personal equipment.
- Drop in duty performance or apparent skill level.
- Unusually dangerous, foolish or risky behavior, as if they don't care about their life.

IS THERE ANY WAY TO PREVENT SUICIDES?

Individuals...

- Keep in mind the Army Values
 - *Selfless Service*: make the effort to help someone else.
 - *Integrity*: be honest about the problem.
 - *Personal Courage*: admit that you or someone else needs help.
- Talk to your buddies about your problems.
- Listen to your buddies' problems. Don't judge.
- Be worried about someone with a failing relationship.
- **Be blunt!** Ask "Are you thinking about suicide?"
- If someone is suicidal, NEVER LEAVE THEM ALONE, even for a "just a minute."
- Get help immediately. Don't try to solve the problem.

Leaders...

- Look for warning signs in anyone with relationship, financial or legal problems
- Learn about the Army's suicide prevention strategies.
- Empower NCOs and Officers to get help for themselves and their Soldiers.
- Coordinate training, counseling and treatment.
- Involve Soldiers, Families and civilians in teamwork to build resiliency and support systems.
- Implement a suicide prevention plan, including a unit watch program.
- Take advantage of Behavioral Health assets.

HOW CAN YOU PREVENT A SUICIDE?

Protect them...

- NEVER LEAVE THE PERSON ALONE.
- Take away their weapon or whatever they might use to harm themselves.
- Do not "try to talk them out of it." Listen and tell them that you understand.
- Tell them that you know their problems are real and that you want to help them.
- Talk to them about why they feel the way they do.
- **BE PROFESSIONAL!** Do not joke around or belittle someone for asking for help.

Get help...

- Take the person to the chaplain, medic, 1SG or commander immediately. Follow your Unit Watch SOP.
- If needed, send someone else to get help. Don't leave them alone.
- Arrange for medical evacuation with an escort if help is not available locally.
- After they return from treatment, ensure that they go to their follow-up appointments.
- Keep tabs on people who have had problems in the past.
- Make time for unit-level education and discussion.

Understanding suicide can prevent it.

Army Suicide Prevention Week, Sept. 7-13

TEXAS



(AP) A Fort Hood soldier shot to death his lieutenant during a confrontation at his off-base apartment Monday, then killed himself, police said.

The lieutenant and a staff sergeant went to the Army specialist's apartment, and a confrontation ensued. Killeen police officers responded to a call of a man with a gun, and they saw the specialist hit and then shoot the lieutenant as they arrived at the scene, Killeen police spokesman Carroll Smith said.

The officers returned fire, but the specialist shot himself in the head, Smith said. Police are still investigating what started the confrontation, she said.

Autopsies have been ordered on the lieutenant and the specialist. The staff sergeant was not injured.

The identities of the men and their unit were withheld pending notification of their families.

The unit is training currently and not scheduled to deploy for several months, said Maj. Jay Adams, a Fort Hood spokesman.

Killeen police are leading the investigation, but Fort Hood's criminal investigators are coordinating with them, Adams said.

Adams said it was too early to say whether there were any previous problems between the soldier and his superiors.

HEALTH

(Reuters) Men who have never smoked are more likely to die from lung cancer than women nonsmokers, researchers reported on Monday.

They found that male nonsmokers were about 25 percent more likely to die from lung cancer than women nonsmokers even though they developed the disease at similar rates.

Men who had never smoked had a 1.1 percent risk of dying from lung cancer, compared to 0.8 percent for the women, the study found. This compares to about 22 percent among men who smoke and 12 percent of women who smoke.

The study in North America, Europe and Asia was the largest ever done on nonsmokers and lung cancer.

"Lung cancer is a significant public health and medical problem even beyond the overwhelming disease burden caused by tobacco smoking," Dr. Michael Thun of the American Cancer Society, who led the study, said in a telephone interview.

Thun said it is unclear why male nonsmokers are more likely to die from lung cancer than women.

"That's an interesting and unresolved question," he said.

In this study, a person was considered a lifelong nonsmoker if he or she reported never smoking, regardless of exposure to secondhand smoke, Thun's team reported in the Public Library of Science journal PLoS Medicine at <http://medicine.plosjournals.org/perlserv/?request=get-document&doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.0050185>.

The study also indicated that death rates among lifelong nonsmokers have remained stable over the past several decades.

Factors other than smoking are estimated to account for 10 to 15 percent of lung cancer deaths. In the United States, for example, that translates to between 16,000 and 24,000 of the more than 161,000 lung cancer deaths forecast this year.

Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in men and the second leading cause of cancer death among women worldwide, according to the American Cancer Society, with about 975,000 men and 376,000 women forecast to die annually.

Risk factors unrelated to smoking include workplace or environmental exposures to radon and asbestos, certain metals such as chromium, cadmium and arsenic, some chemicals, radiation, air pollution, coal smoke or indoor emissions from burning certain fuels, the American Cancer Society said.

The findings were based on combined data from 13 studies done from 1960 to 2004.

POLITICS

(AP) Listening to Barack Obama, it can seem like Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin is the main person standing between him and the White House instead of John McCain.

Obama is putting as much heat on Palin as he is on the man at the top of the GOP ticket, objecting to the Republican Party's portrayal of her as a reformer who can bring change to Washington.

That is supposed to be Obama's distinction, and he's not taking kindly to Palin trying to claim it. Especially when it appears the new star on the GOP ticket is helping boost its standing: McCain has jumped to a dead heat or narrow lead over Obama in the latest national polls since choosing Palin as his running mate.

Obama said last week's Republican National Convention did a good job of highlighting Palin's biography — "Mother, governor, moose shooter. That's cool," he said. But he said Palin really is just another Republican politician, one who is stretching the truth about her record.

"When John McCain gets up there with Sarah Palin and says, 'We're for change,' ... what are they talking about?" Obama said Monday, arguing that they aren't offering different ideas from President Bush and they are just trying to steal his campaign theme because it seemed to be working.

"It was just like a month ago they were all saying, 'Oh, it's experience, experience, experience.' Then they chose Palin and they started talking about change, change, change," he said.

Obama's campaign seemed to be caught off guard by McCain's surprise pick of Palin on Aug. 29. Obama's spokesman initially blasted her as a former small-town mayor with zero foreign policy experience who wants to continue Bush's policies. But Obama quickly walked the statement back with more congratulatory words about Palin as a compelling addition to the ticket.

Voters, particularly women, seem to agree, according to new polls. An ABC News-Washington Post survey showed white women have moved from backing Obama by 8 points to supporting McCain by 12 points, with majorities viewing Palin favorably and saying she boosts their faith in McCain's decisions.



FOOTBALL

(AP)The New England Patriots have come back from injuries before, winning three Super Bowls and reaching a fourth despite losing Rodney Harrison, Richard Seymour, Junior Seau and Drew Bledsoe. Now they will try to do it without Tom Brady.

The 2007 NFL Most Valuable Player will miss the entire '08 season with a left knee injury that needs surgery, the team said Monday. That leaves the Patriots without one of the game's great quarterbacks and severely damages their hopes of a return trip to the Super Bowl.

Coach Bill Belichick would not say what the injury is, but the play, Brady's reaction and the prognosis all point toward a torn anterior cruciate ligament.

"As a team we all just have to do our jobs. That really doesn't change," Belichick said Monday, a day after Brady's knee collapsed under him when he was hit by Chiefs safety Bernard Pollard in a 17-10 victory over Kansas City. "He played one position, he played it very well. We have somebody else playing that position now."

The Patriots issued a one-paragraph statement that the two-time Super Bowl MVP will have surgery and be placed on injured reserve. That leaves them in the hands of a backup who's barely been tested — in part because of Brady's 128-game starting streak that was the third-longest for a quarterback in NFL history.

Matt Cassel, who guided New England to its 20th consecutive regular-season victory after Brady was hurt, will start Sunday at the New York Jets. It will be the first meaningful start since high school for Cassel, who backed up Heisman Trophy winners Carson Palmer and Matt Leinart at Southern Cal and spent the last three years holding a clipboard for Brady.

"I'm not trying to be Tom Brady. I'm just trying to be Matt Cassel," he said when subbing for Brady on his regular weekly radio show. "I don't know where that's going to take us."

Brady took the Patriots to three NFL titles since 2001 and led them to a perfect record in the regular season last year before a loss in the Super Bowl to the New York Giants deprived them of a fourth championship and an unprecedented 19-0 season. They had been favored to return — before Brady's injury.

"We're not going to tank it the rest of the season. That's not going to happen," defensive lineman Richard Seymour said in a somber and nearly empty Patriots locker room. Seymour was across from where Brady's locker remained stocked with equipment and personal items. "There's always a way to win. We're not going to have a lot of excuses about it."

Even without Brady, the Patriots remain a team stocked with veterans in a mediocre division, and with one of the most successful coaches in NFL history.

"The leadership on this team will take care of itself," offensive lineman Matt Light said. "I expect (Cassel) to do his job, and that's the same thing he expects from each one of us. There's nobody on this team that we don't have confidence in. You can't have a better mentor than Tom Brady."

The Patriots have just two quarterbacks on the roster: Cassel and rookie Kevin O'Connell. Matt Gutierrez, who signed as an undrafted free agent before the 2007 season and has thrown one career pass, was released in the final cutdowns before the season.

But Belichick denied media reports that out-of-work quarterbacks Chris Simms and Tim Rattay were headed to Foxborough to take physicals or to audition.

"In spite of what some people are putting out there, we haven't worked out anybody," he said. "We had a lot of people call us, I can tell you that."

For now, Cassel is his starter. "I'm happy for his opportunity to have a chance to play," said Leinart, who, ironically, is now a backup with the Arizona Cardinals. "I'm bummed for Tom. You just hope he can heal as well as he can and get back out there as soon as he can. But Matt will step up. I think he'll be all right."



Pollard, who apologized to Brady immediately after the play, said Monday that it was a normal play and prayed for Brady's speedy recovery.

"I can't change what happened," he said. "As soon as the play happened, I said, 'Oh, man.' When I heard him scream, I knew it was serious."

While not calling Pollard's play dirty, Belichick said his players are taught to hit quarterbacks between the knees and shoulders. Patriots defensive lineman Vince Wilfork complained that he was penalized and fined for a hit similar to Pollard's, but league spokesman Greg Aiello said supervisor of officials Mike Pereira determined it was legal.

BASEBALL

(AP) Ivan Rodriguez and Torii Hunter got into a bench-clearing fight in the sixth inning Monday night, when the Los Angeles Angels scored six runs on the way to a 12-1 victory over the New York Yankees that reduced their magic number to two for clinching the AL West title.

Brandon Wood hit two homers, and Vladimir Guerrero and Sean Rodriguez also connected for the Angels, who own the best record in baseball at 87-56.

The Angels are on track to wrap up their fourth division crown in five seasons by the earliest date in franchise history. They can do it Tuesday night with another win over the Yankees and a Texas loss at Seattle.

Last season, Los Angeles clinched on September 23.

Rodriguez took an openhanded swing at Hunter — and missed — after getting shoved in the back by the Angels star following a play at the plate.



The benches emptied and players spilled onto the field, pushing and shoving.

Hunter and Rodriguez were ejected. Moments later, after the game resumed, New York pitching coach Dave Eiland passed out in the dugout, manager Joe Girardi said. Eiland was helped to his feet by teammates and escorted by a trainer up the runway toward the clubhouse.

The 42-year-old Eiland was in the middle of the tussle as players pushed and shoved each other near home plate. Replays showed someone's hand scraping across Eiland's face, but the coach did not appear to get knocked down.

Eiland left the game after feeling dizzy and losing his balance in the dugout. He was examined by a doctor and later felt fine, a Yankees spokesman said. After the game, Girardi said Eiland was fine.

Jon Garland (13-8) retired 12 in a row after an up-and-down performance in the first 1 1/2 innings, getting bottom-of-the-lineup offensive support from unlikely home run hitters Wood and Rodriguez. Garland allowed one run and six hits in seven innings, striking out four and walking two.

Wood's third homer of the season broke a 1-all tie in the third when he hit an 0-1 pitch from Carl Pavano (2-1) into the visitors' bullpen. Pavano gave up five runs and six hits in 5 1-3 innings.

The Angels broke the game open with six runs in the sixth, when Yankees catcher Rodriguez and Angels slugger Hunter tangled. Sean Rodriguez led off with his second homer of the season, sneaking an 0-1 pitch just inside the left-field foul pole for a 3-1 lead.

Chone Figgins, who was hit by a pitch and moved up on Garret Anderson's single, scored on a groundout by Mark Teixeira that chased Pavano. Guerrero

greeted Dan Giese with a two-run homer, his 24th, extending the Angels' lead to 6-1.

Hunter singled and stole second and third against Ivan Rodriguez, but got hung up on Mike Napoli's grounder to third. Hunter came into the plate standing up and bumped the catcher, who applied the tag and then appeared to nudge Hunter with his left elbow before walking toward the mound.

Hunter turned, took a few steps and shoved Rodriguez in the back — hard. The catcher whipped off his mask and charged at Hunter, but was restrained by plate umpire Ted Barrett while missing on an openhanded swing at Hunter.

Both benches cleared, with players milling in a mass at the plate, pushing and shoving. Relievers came running out of the bullpens onto the field before order was restored. Angels manager Mike Scioscia led a shouting Hunter away, while fans chanted angry words at the Yankees.

Standing in the dugout, Hunter pointed his finger in Rodriguez's direction as the catcher waited near the mound while the umpires sorted things out. Both players were ejected, the first time this season for Hunter and Rodriguez's first with the Yankees.

After things calmed down, Wood singled in a run and Napoli scored on an error by right fielder Bobby Abreu, giving the Angels an 8-1 lead.

Los Angeles added three runs in the seventh on Guerrero's RBI double and a two-run double by Gary Matthews Jr., who replaced Hunter in center. Wood hit his second solo homer in the eighth for the Angels' final run.

The Yankees took a 1-0 lead in the first on Alex Rodriguez's RBI single. Figgins scored on Teixeira's sacrifice fly in the bottom half.

AUSTRALIA



(AFP) Australian koalas are dying by the thousands as a result of land clearing in the country's northeast, while millions of birds and reptiles are also perishing, conservation group WWF said Sunday.

The environmental body warned that unless urgent action was taken to stop trees being felled, some species would be pushed to the brink of extinction.

In an annual statement, Queensland state last week revealed that 375,000 hectares of bush were cleared in 2005-06 -- a figure WWF said would have resulted in the deaths of two million mammals.

Among those that perished as a result of loss of habitat would have been 9,000 tree-hugging koalas, WWF Australia spokesman Nick Heath said.

"It's a horrifying figure," Heath told AFP. "Two million mammals and that's all sorts of kangaroos, wallabies. We couldn't come to an exact figure on the birds, but I would say it would be over five million."

Heath said WWF's figures were based on earlier scientific assessments of animal density in each area of the state combined with the amount of land cleared over the 2005-2006 period.

He said the animals that died in the largest numbers were reptiles, including lizards and turtles.

Of particular concern was the impact on the koala, an iconic marsupial found only in Australia and which is most populous in Queensland state.

"There is scientific debate about whether koalas are on the verge of extinction or not... I don't want to enter into that debate," Heath said.

"All I say is, whether they are endangered or not, killing 9,000 koalas is unacceptable.

"People want koalas to exist, they don't want them to be on the endangered

list. And if we kill 9,000 a year, even if they are not on the endangered list now, they will be if we don't stop."

Heath said that turning native bush into grazing paddocks meant that many of the animals killed died in fires set by farmers to clear debris after bulldozers cut down the trees.

"So these animals die horrific deaths," he said. "They are either dead from being run over or falling from a tree, or if they survive that, they are burnt alive."

The Queensland government has set up a task force to help conserve koala populations amid greater urban development in the state's southeast.

SOUTH KOREA

(AFP) South Korea's President Lee Myung-Bak, a devout Christian, on Tuesday apologised to the nation's Buddhists following nationwide protests against alleged religious bias by his administration.

Lee was speaking at a cabinet meeting which approved regulations banning religious discrimination by public servants.

"It is deeply regrettable that some government officials offended the Buddhist community -- even if they did not mean to -- with such words and behaviour as could cause misunderstanding about a religious bias," he said.

Leaders of the country's 10 million Buddhists -- outnumbered by 13.7 million Christians -- had threatened more mass protests unless Lee apologised.

The largest Buddhist order, the Jogye, said his remarks represented "a more sincere attitude" by the government. But it repeated demands for the sacking of the national police chief over an alleged insult to its head monk, Jigwan.

The Buddhist protests, rare in a country that guarantees freedom of religion, followed months of street rallies against US beef imports which rocked Lee's administration.

Buddhists have been uneasy over what they see as a Christian bias since Lee, a Presbyterian church elder, came to power on February 25.

The Jogye lists 23 cases of alleged favouritism, including the appointments of Protestants to major government posts.

An online map published by two ministries, showing Seoul's churches but not major Buddhist temples, also sparked anger.

In early July seven activists wanted by police following the beef protests took refuge in Seoul's Jogyesa temple. Tensions grew in

late July when police stopped a car carrying Jigwan outside the temple and searched the boot.

Police chief Eo Cheong-Soo, himself a Christian, apologised and disciplined two senior officers. But Buddhists accused police of treating the head monk like a criminal and called for Eo's resignation.

Tens of thousands of Buddhists, including thousands of grey-robed monks, rallied in late August. A few days after that, worshippers gathered at some 10,000 temples across the nation to voice anger.

Lee told ministers to ensure officials stay neutral in religious matters but made no mention of demands for the sacking of the police chief. However, he instructed Eo to visit the Jogyesa temple to apologise personally.

"Regardless of the motives behind the search, the police chief has to visit Buddhist leaders and offer an apology. He must also promise to prevent the recurrence of similar incidents," said Lee.

Chief monks of the Jogye Order, after meeting to discuss Lee's remarks, called for Eo's sacking, a law banning religious discrimination and "measures for grand national harmony".

Jogye officials said this meant police should not arrest the protesters taking sanctuary in the temple.

Spokesman Park Jeong-Kyu told AFP: "The core demand is Eo's resignation. Whether the government will sack Eo or not will be a yardstick to test the sincerity of Lee's apology."

The president was expected to reiterate his determination to maintain religious neutrality during a 100-minute "town hall" meeting starting at 10 pm (1300 GMT) and to be televised live.

