

China slams 'scheming' US plans for Iraq

AFP, Beijing

Official Chinese media stepped up the rhetoric against Washington Thursday, slamming "scheming" US plans for an Iraq after Saddam Hussein, which it said were illegal.

"Even if there has to be a war, no matter in whose name, the United States has no authority, legal or moral, over the fate of Iraq as a sovereign state," the English-language China Daily said in an editorial.

"Whether Saddam chooses to go into exile or the Iraqis decide to abandon him, it is none of the US president's business." The New York Times reported this week that President George W. Bush's national security team was assembling final plans for "administering and democratising" Iraq once Saddam Hussein is ousted.

This would include a heavy military presence in the country, military trials of senior Iraqi leaders and a quick takeover of the nation's oilfields to pay for reconstruction, the paper said, quoting administration officials.

UN plans to take Iraqi scientists abroad

REUTERS, Dubai

United Nations weapons inspectors plan to ask Iraqi scientists to leave Iraq soon to be interviewed in Cyprus on prohibited weapons, Time magazine reported on its Web Site.

The inspectors are scouring Iraq for signs of weapons of mass destruction but US officials have insisted their work would be incomplete without interviewing Iraqi scientists outside the country, the magazine said.

"The...inspection team plans to begin that process within days, when they will begin inviting an undisclosed number of Iraqi scientists to leave Iraq and be interviewed in Cyprus," the report on its Web Site www.time.com said.

Ivorian rebels ink truce with France but snub govt

AFP, Abidjan

Two rebel groups based in west Ivory Coast signed a truce Wednesday with French troops deployed to prevent clashes in the country and said they would attend peace talks due to take place in Paris next week.

The rebels stressed, however, that they would go on fighting government forces in a war which has split the African nation and also seen serious clashes involving the French soldiers.

"We have signed the cessation of hostilities with France but not with the government forces," said Guillaume Gbato, a spokesman for the Popular Movement of Ivory Coast's Far West (MFIGO).

A moderate tippie helps the heart

AFP, Washington

Men who drink alcohol three or four times a week are less likely to have a heart attack than those who shun the demon drink, according to the results of a 12-year study released Wednesday.

But although the study adds to a growing welter of evidence that says moderate drinking helps reduce the risk of heart disease, doctors are not yet writing out prescriptions for wine, whisky or beer.

The new study, carried out on 40,000 doctors and other health professionals, shows that it is the frequency of consumption, not the quantity or type of alcohol drunk, that reaps the cardiac benefits.

Top Chinese leader steps in to defuse student protest

AFP, Beijing

Chinese vice-president Hu Jintao has stepped in to defuse one of the biggest student protests since the bloody 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, reports said Thursday.

The intervention by China's next leader followed a 10,000-strong demonstration after three students were knocked down by a truck outside a university campus in eastern China.

According to the Wen Wei Po, a Hong Kong-based Chinese language newspaper close to Beijing, the protest was the largest by students since the crackdown against democracy campaigners in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989.

US Navy's daily patrols put squeeze on Iraq

Baghdad denies Saddam may go into exile

AFP, Off Iraqi Waters

It was another routine day for the US Navy in Gulf waters, but daily patrols by small armed teams in jet-powered inflatables have been invaluable in warding off potential smugglers of Iraqi oil.

"We act as a visual deterrent. If the boats see us whizzing about, at least they know we're here," boarding officer Lieutenant Sean Quirk told AFP aboard an inflatable with his eight-strong crew during a daytime patrol Wednesday.

Quirk's team is charged with "mapping the carpark", or logging and keeping track of the boats that are anchored up in a six-square-mile (20-square-kilometre) area just off Iraqi waters.

They are part of the Maritime Interdiction Force (MIF) which intercepts ships leaving Iraq to

guard against smuggling of oil products outside the confines of the UN oil-for-food programme.

The programme authorises Baghdad to export crude under UN supervision in return for humanitarian supplies.

The boats in the "carpark", ranging from huge Cypriot-registered container ships to a dilapidated Iraqi tugboat, have all just left Iraq with the proper UN papers and are in the staging area awaiting supplies or maintenance.

"We have no responsibility for them. The ships found to be breaking the embargo are sent to a holding area further south, where the MIF is bound to look after the health of the crew on board the quarantined vessels," said Quirk.

"The traffic and threat is certainly low," he said as the powerful inflatable circled an Indian container

ship, one sailor producing a videocamera to film the ageing vessel for the logbook.

The threat from these "friendly" ships may be low, but just miles from the Iraqi coastline and confronted with daily run-ins with ships loaded with cargoes of contraband Iraqi oil and dates, the sailors take no chances on their six-hour shifts at sea. Each is armed with a pistol, and one carries a close-range shotgun. "We're armed, we've got the speed, night vision, and spotlights. We're largely intimidating enough," said Quirk, a 25-year-old Boston native.

"We know a lot of the boats we stop for smuggling goods. We largely send them back to Iraq."

"For the most part, the large ships carrying legitimate cargoes know the drill: when we make contact, they'll muster the crew and have passports, cargo manifest and

appropriate UN documentation ready," Quirk said.

But the US Navy leaves the boarding of non-compliant ships, which normally appear in attempted breakouts during darkness, to a crack team from the Law Enforcement Detachment of the US Coast Guard.

Meanwhile, three US strategic B-1 bombers headed for southwest Asia Wednesday amid fresh strikes by allied warplanes on Iraqi communications facilities as a top Iraqi diplomat rejected the possibility President Saddam Hussein would seek exile.

The deployment came as the United States continued its military buildup in the region in anticipation of a possible war to force Iraq to shed its ballistic missiles and nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programs.



Armed US Navy sailors from the USS Milvus patrol international waters in a rib boat after circling around the cargo ship Athanassia (L) of Limassol on Wednesday in the northern Gulf, some 20 km off the Iraqi coastline, as part of maritime interception operations (MIO). The primary mission of the USS Milvus is to enforce UN sanctions against Iraq, but the Aegis guided missile destroyer is also ready to respond to any threat from Iraq.

Israeli court overturns ban on Arab candidates

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel's Supreme Court overturned a ban Thursday on two Arab candidates for parliament in the January 28 election, a decision which some said will lead to greater Arab participation in the vote.

The court found against an elections parliamentary committee recommendation to bar Ahmed Tibi and Azmi Bishara from the ballot, a statement said.

It also rejected a petition by Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, a former chief of staff, to run for parliament. The court found that a mandatory cooling-off period since his retirement from the army last summer had not expired, disqualifying him from joining the legislature.

21 killed in US plane crash

REUTERS, Charlotte, North Carolina

A commuter plane crashed and exploded on Wednesday shortly after takeoff from Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina, killing all 21 people on board, police and US aviation authorities said.

The Beech 1900-D turboprop plane, US Airways Express Flight 5481 operated by Air Midwest, was headed to nearby Greenville/Spartanburg, South Carolina, when it clipped the corner of a US Airways hangar on the airport grounds and burst into flame, officials and witnesses said.

The twin-engine plane carried 19 passengers and two crew members, airport director Jerry Orr told a news conference.

"There were no survivors," he said.

Three workers on the ground were initially reported missing but

were later accounted for and no one in the hangar was hurt, he said.

Aviation officials said the pilot radioed to the control tower indicating an emergency on board moments before the plane crashed but the transmission was interrupted.

National Transportation Safety Board investigators recovered the plane's flight data recorder and said they would send it to Washington for examination.

"We think (we have) the flight data recorder. ... The voice recorder is in the same area but it wasn't obvious in the pile of wreckage," said John Goglia of the NTSB.

Witnesses said the plane had just taken off when it appeared to circle back toward the airport. It burst into flames when it crashed shortly before 9 a.m. EST (1600 GMT), sending a thick cloud of smoke over the field.

Orr said the airplane took off to

the south and veered left into the hangar. Fire crews doused the flames with foam and charred wreckage could be seen in a 100-foot-long (30-meter) area of debris just outside the hangar.

"It was an intense fire," Orr said.

Witness Benjamin Witkege told the Charlotte Observer he saw the plane rising at an odd angle from the runway.

"The plane was climbing too steep," Witkege said. "I knew it was crashing."

US Airways identified the pilots as Capt. Katie Leslie and First Officer Jonathan Gibbs, both of Charlotte.

It was the first commercial air crash in the United States since an American Airlines jet crashed in November 2001 in New York, killing all 260 people on board and five on the ground.

N Korea offers talks to South

US backs Seoul's mediation

AFP, Seoul

South Korea said Thursday North Korea had offered to hold high-level talks later this month, as the United States admitted verbal assurances that it has no plans to attack Pyongyang may not be enough to end the nuclear crisis.

The North's offer of four-day talks from January 21 came in response to a South Korean proposal for a cabinet-level meeting to discuss inter-Korean rapprochement and the nuclear issue.

"In accordance with time-old practices, it is highly likely that South Korea will accept the new date proposed by Pyongyang," a South Korean unification ministry official told AFP.

Unification Minister Jeong Se-Hyun said last week that South Korea would urge North Korea to scrap its nuclear weapons program at the talks.

The announcement came after an envoy for South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung said he

had received backing for mediation attempts after meeting US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld in Washington.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell also acknowledged that Washington may have to go beyond its previous verbal assurances that it has no plans to attack North Korea.

"We have made it clear we have no aggressive intent," Powell told The Washington Post. "Apparently, they want something more than a passing statement."

Asked whether there was a formula that offered more than President George W. Bush's repeated statements that the US will not invade, Powell replied: "You've just bounded a problem. That's what diplomacy is about."

Kim's national security advisor, Yim Sung-Joon, said he conveyed South Korea's plans to take the initiative to resolve the standoff in talks with Rumsfeld and US counterpart Condoleezza Rice Wednesday.

"The United States expressed its support and understanding to this proposal," Yim was quoted as saying in Washington by Yonhap news agency.

Kim steps down on February 25 when he will be replaced by his political soulmate Roh Moo-Hyun.

Roh's Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) urged Pyongyang Thursday to accept a US offer for talks.

"North Korea should immediately declare dismantling of its nuclear weapons program and respond to the US proposition to talks for the purpose of stabilising peace on the Korean Peninsula and co-existence and co-prosperity," MDP spokesman Moon Seok-Ho said.

While the United States has offered to talk to North Korea over the nuclear issue, US officials are adamant they will not offer concessions and have reiterated that North Korea must close down its nuclear weapons programs.

"There's nothing that we are

going to extend to North Korea to get them to go back to meet fundamental obligations that they undertook," US Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton said in Manila Thursday.

"We are certainly prepared to talk to the North Koreans to explain what their obligations are, how they can come back to compliance with them."

South Korea has been floating a compromise deal after consulting China and Russia, the two countries deemed to be closest to the isolated regime in Pyongyang.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said Russia could play a key role in defusing the crisis as he headed to Moscow for talks with President Vladimir Putin.

"As far as I understand, Russia shares Japan's view that easing tensions on the Korean Peninsula is absolutely essential," he told the Izvestia daily.

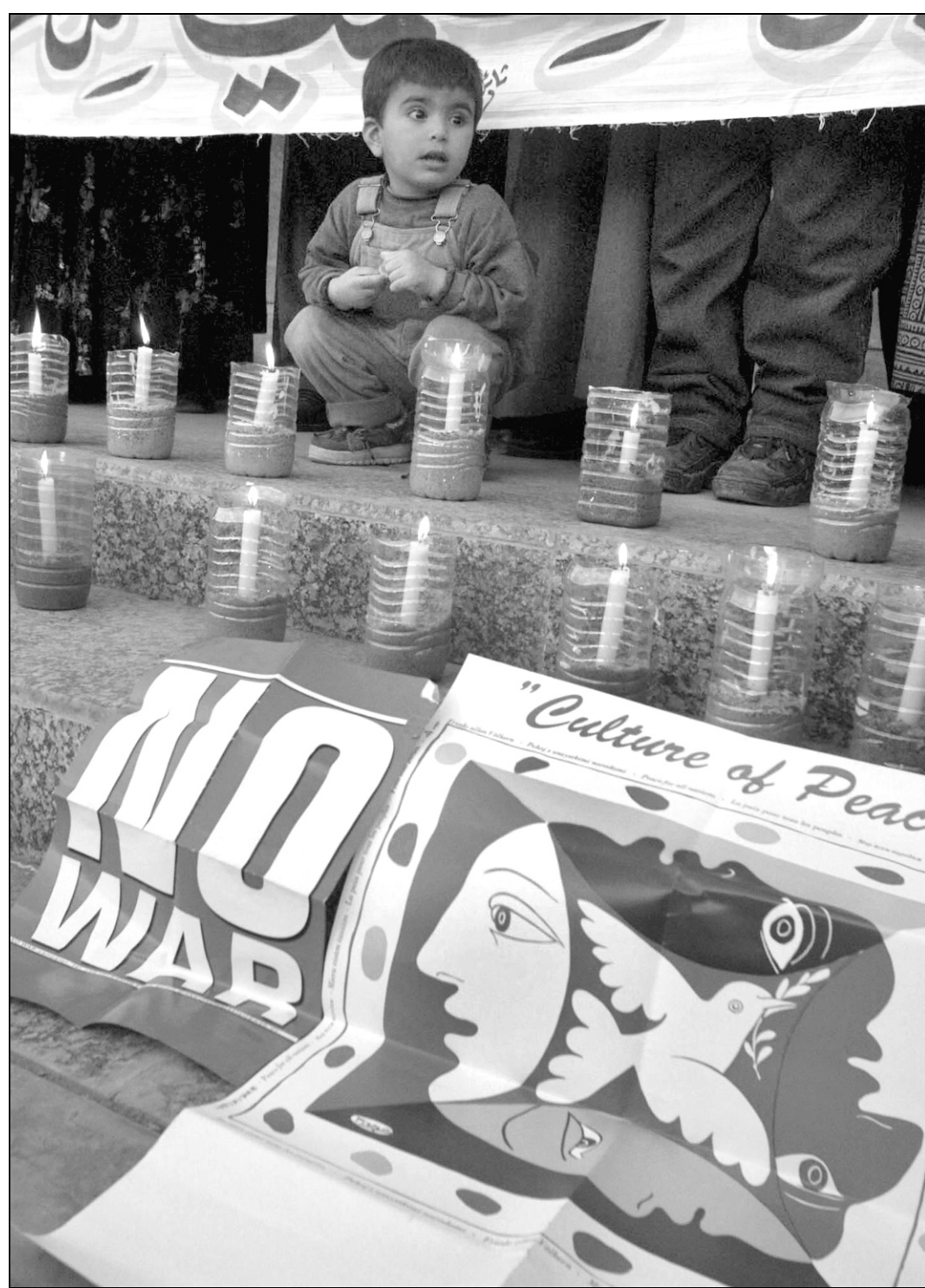


PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi child sits near candles on Wednesday during a peaceful protest by the relatives of victims of suicide attacks on the US September 11, 2001, at Baghdad's Amiriyah shelter, which was bombed by US-led allied forces during the Gulf War in 1991, leaving approximately 400 people dead. Four Americans members of the campaigning organisation September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows are on a week-long visit to Iraq to oppose their government's threats to lead military action against Iraq.

Israeli forces kill 3 more Palestinians

Sharon lashes out at graft allegations

AFP, Nablus

Israel said its forces gunned down a member of an armed commando infiltrating the country Wednesday, hours after killing two Palestinians in a growing crackdown on militants in the wake of a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv.

Amid the violence, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon counter-attacked politically against stinging corruption allegations that have damaged his image just three weeks ahead of general elections.

Israeli soldiers patrolling near the borders with Jordan and Syria killed an unidentified man and captured another after they had infiltrated the country, Israeli military sources said.

The gunmen opened fire on a patrol in the Hamat Gader area, a spring beside the Yarmuk river marking the border with Jordan and some 15 kilometres (nine miles) from Syria, the sources added.

But Syria's official Sana news agency quoted a military spokesman as saying a Syrian police officer was killed in the UN-monitored

border zone separating Syria from Israel.

A second policeman went missing during the incident, when the two officers and a third man crossed into the border sector in an attempt to bring back water from a nearby river, Sana said.

"One of them was killed and the other went missing following gunfire that came from the Israeli side," the spokesman said.

"A Syrian patrol that was nearby returned fire at the Israeli side," he said, adding that shooting at civilians in the border zone was a violation of an agreement between Israel and Syria following the 1973 Israeli-Arab War.

Earlier, the Israeli army shot dead an 18-year-old civilian in the northern West Bank village of Sa'ida, Palestinian witnesses said. He was said to have been standing on a roof near a house soldiers were demolishing when one of them opened fire on him. But an army spokesman said Israeli forces had responded to Palestinian fire and that the youth had been armed.

Another Palestinian was killed during an exchange of fire with soldiers in the southern Gaza Strip town of Khan Yunis, a few hundred meters (yards) from the Jewish settlement of Neve Dekalim, Palestinian witnesses said.

Following a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv Sunday that killed 22 people, Israel further tightened restrictions on Palestinian movement. It confined senior officials to their cities and barred all other Palestinians under 35 from leaving the territories.

A top-level Palestinian delegation was also prevented from travelling to London for talks next week on internal reforms with other regional and international interlocutors, at the invitation of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The United States, which has long called for a change in the Palestinian leadership and the overhaul of Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority, did not condemn the Israeli ban although Russia called for Israel to revoke its decision.

Snows, big freeze cause deaths, chaos in Europe

AFP, Moscow

Europe's severe winter weather claimed more lives Wednesday and wreaked havoc on road, rail, air and sea traffic, freezing the Russian port of Saint Petersburg and dumping snow across central Europe.

Six people died in Moscow overnight as temperatures plunged to levels considered extreme even for the Russian capital, bringing this year's death toll from cold there to 239, mostly among the elderly and the inebriated who have fallen asleep outside.

Sub-freezing weather also claimed three fatalities in Lithuania overnight, and three other people died Monday from the cold in Slovakia, authorities there said.

Moscow thermometers dipped to minus 32 degrees Celsius (minus 26 Fahrenheit), compared to average winter temperatures which normally hover around minus 10 degrees, the Russian meteorological service said.

During Russia's Orthodox Christmas holiday Monday and Tuesday, 10 Russians died from cold and 66 were hospitalized with frostbite, ITAR-TASS reported.



PHOTO: AFP

A woman pushes her children on a makeshift chair sleigh, on a frozen lake in Beijing on Thursday as they join visitors and residents enjoying the winter season. China's capital Beijing recently experienced its longest period of snow in 161 years, when the capital city of 13 million saw five consecutive days of snow for the first time since meteorological officials started keeping records in 1841.