



PHOTO: AFP

An unidentified US citizen, a member of "US Academics Against the War" visits Monday Baghdad's Amiriya shelter, which was bombed by US-led allied forces during the Gulf War in 1991, leaving 400 people dead. The group of American Academics who oppose a war with Iraq began a fact-finding and humanitarian mission in Baghdad saying a conflict was illegal and unnecessary.

'War on terror stifling human rights in Asia'

AFP, Washington

The focus on security in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks in the United States has led to perhaps the worst marginalisation of human rights in Asia in decades, Human Rights Watch said in its annual report Tuesday.

The United States came in for particular criticism for its willingness to overlook human rights abuses in a bid to bring Asian governments on side in its ongoing war against international terror.

"When the planes crashed on September 11, they drove a large hole through the region's fragile human rights architecture," the New York-based rights watchdog said in its 30th annual report.

"Perhaps more broadly than anywhere else in the world, the United States muted its criticism of opportunistic repression in Asia so as not to offend governments otherwise cooperating in the war."

Many of the region's governments that sought to implement policies restricting human rights took advantage of the new political space provided by the war on terror, the report found.

"While there was a need in some countries for new laws to deal with issues such as money laundering, most proposed or newly enacted legislation was notable for limiting the rights of criminal defendants and narrowing civil liberties,

such as freedom of expression and freedom of association," the report said.

Protests by local activists over new legislation "fell largely on deaf ears".

The leaders of India, Nepal, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Singapore in particular "were pleased to accommodate the new security agenda, which neatly dovetailed with their aspirations to increase state power and marginalise political opponents," the report said.

Human rights activists meanwhile found that taking a stand against the actions of their governments left them in a difficult opposition to their once-allies in the West, and their donors, it said.

The report noted that even the ten-member Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) agreed to cast aside their policy of non-interference to cooperate on law enforcement and extradition matters -- a first in the history of the organisation.

The need for support in its war on terror from Asia even prompted the United States to propose Malaysia as the home of a new regional anti-terror body, despite the continued use of the country's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA), which can be used to detain people indefinitely without trial.

In October 2002, Prime Minister Mohammad Mahathir used the war on terror to defend the long-criticised ISA.

"Even the rich countries, the so-called liberal democracies, have decided that there is a need for some preventive action to stop people from doing things that are harmful. People have been detained in other countries now, just as we detain people because they are a threat to security," the report cited him as saying.

More than 70 Islamic militants, believed members of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) regional terror network, have been jailed under the ISA since mid-2001 in Malaysia, while neighbouring Singapore has rounded up 31 suspected JI members.

JI is blamed for the October 12 bombing on Indonesia's resort island of Bali that killed more than 190 people, and centred world attention on the region as the war against terror continued.

Human Rights Watch warned that the emphasis on security over human rights brought "serious risks to Asia".

"The year 2002 made it clear that Asian leaders and their Western patrons and interlocutors must be careful to walk the fine line between preserving security and maintaining popular legitimacy," it said.

Failure to do so, the group said, could lead to the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy: "Intolerant, backwards looking, anti-modern states that could one day slide into fundamentalism."



Nicole Kidman gets Hollywood Walk of Fame

AFP, Hollywood

Australian actress Nicole Kidman, whose Tinseltown career is soaring on the back of a string of hits, got her own star Monday on Hollywood's prestigious Walk of Fame.

The star of 2001's "Moulin Rouge," 1999's "Eyes Wide Shut" and "Batman Forever" (1995) saw her name cast in a bronze-inlaid stone slab unveiled in the heart of Hollywood.

"I love to act and (the star is) sort of the icing on the cake, really," Kidman, 35, said at the unveiling ceremony.

"I've never been so excited to have people walk all over me for the rest of my life."

The addition of Kidman's name to the four-decade-old Walk of Fame, which immortalizes legends such as Marilyn Monroe, Cary Grant and the Beatles, comes as her latest movie "The Hours" is being tipped as a hot Oscars contender.

Britain reserves right to Iraq action without UN

US denies specific timetable for war

REUTERS, London

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Tuesday that Britain reserved the right to take military action against Iraq without a second UN resolution.

Straw reiterated that if Iraqi President Saddam Hussein defies an existing United Nations resolution on disarmament, Britain's preference was for the UN Security Council to pass a second resolution authorizing military action.

Britain's preference "is that we have a second Security Council resolution...which we want...we've had to reserve our rights if we can't achieve that," Straw told BBC Radio.

He recalled that the British Parliament late last year backed a motion that reserved "the right to deal with the matter without a United Nations resolution if that was the situation." The government's position has not changed since then, he said.

Britain and the United States say they know Saddam has weapons of mass destruction and say he must disarm or be disarmed by force. A United Nations resolution threatens Saddam with "serious consequences" unless he comes clean about suspected weapons of mass destruction.

AFP adds: The United States denied Monday having a specific

timetable for war as more US troops headed for the Gulf and Britain challenged Iraq's Saddam Hussein to "take the peaceful route and disarm."

Some 150,000 US ground, air and naval forces are expected to be prepared to attack Iraq by mid-February, but the White House insisted President George W. Bush had set no timetable for war.

Aides seemed to caution crystal-ball gazers against viewing January 27, when UN disarmament inspectors will report their findings to the UN Security Council, as a trigger date.

"The president thinks it remains important for the inspectors to do their job and that they have time to do their job. The president has not put an exact timetable on it," said Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher echoed those comments, saying the only issue that mattered was stripping Saddam of any nuclear, chemical or biological weapons. Baghdad denies having such arms.

"The issue is not some arbitrary period of time," he said. "The issue is Iraq's disarmament."

Bush, who has vowed to disarm Iraq by force if necessary, could further build his case for invasion during his annual "State of the Union" speech to the US Congress

and the nation, expected January 28.

Fleischer's comments came after International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Mohamed ElBaradei said in Paris that UN inspectors hunting for any weapons of mass destruction needed a few more months to determine whether Iraq has a secret weapons program in defiance of the world body.

ElBaradei and chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix are due to deliver a progress report to the UN Security Council January 27, and are coming under increasing pressure from Washington to show results.

The UN inspectors' field boss, Dimitris Perrikos, indicated his teams would soon begin surprising the Iraqis with unannounced searches of suspect facilities.

"It is true the Iraqis are opening the doors, but they are opening installations they know we are aware of. The test will be when we start going to facilities where they will be surprised," Perrikos said in an interview with Greek newspaper Ta Nea.

In London, British Prime Minister Tony Blair -- a key US ally -- challenged Saddam to "take the peaceful route and disarm."

"If he does not, he will be disarmed by force," Blair said.

Thousands of Fijians missing after cyclone

AFP, Suva

Thousands of people remained out of touch and entire villages submerged under water Tuesday as Cyclone Ami hurtled southeast away from Fiji into the stormy South Pacific.

Northern and eastern islands in Fiji's archipelago were the most badly battered by huge seas roiled by Ami, the second major storm to hit the low-lying islands in the last four weeks after Cyclone Zoe swirled through on Christmas Day.

Residents of Nayau island in the Lau group were confronted by 30-metre (90-foot) waves and forced to seek shelter in upland caves, a radio operator there reported.

Two children were missing and presumed dead in the village of Duadrua on Vanua Levu after the church they were sheltering in collapsed. The island's main town Labasa reported heavy flooding and suspended telephone service but no casualties, said the Disaster Management Committee.

A New Zealand air force Orion aircraft was Wednesday to set out on an assessment mission of the islands, many of which had been declared disaster areas to hasten the distribution of aid and assistance.

"We are very grateful to the New Zealand government for this quick assistance," Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase told AFP.

Nepali Maoists kidnap 80 students

AP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels raided a school and kidnapped about 80 students, a newspaper reported on Tuesday. Separately, police killed at least 15 guerrillas in a gunbattle.

The Kantipur newspaper said guerrillas stormed a high school and abducted students in Bhalchaur, a village about 400 km west of Kathmandu. The area is a rebel stronghold.

Education officials denied having any knowledge of the kidnappings.

However, the rebels, who claim to be inspired by Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong, have in the past taken students by force and trained them to fight government troops.

Truce boosts Ivory Coast peace hopes

REUTERS, Abidjan

Hopes rose in war-fractured Ivory Coast for peace talks in Paris to end a four-month conflict after two rebel groups signed a truce meant to silence the guns across the world's top cocoa producer.

But President Laurent Gbagbo appeared in no mood to soften his line ahead of Wednesday's talks in the former colonial power, repeating his offer of an amnesty for the insurgents while ruling out the early elections they demand.

The war in what was once seen as turbulent West Africa's haven of stability blew up from a failed coup on September 19. It has left hundreds dead and split the country of 16 million along ethnic lines.

France has stepped in with a 2,500-strong force to try to stop the crisis spiraling further and has pressured three rebel factions, government officials and political parties to agree to join the meeting in Paris.



PHOTO: AFP

Hindu pilgrims worship the sun as they immerse themselves in the water off Sagar Island, 120 km south of Kolkata on Tuesday in West Bengal state. Some 300,000 pilgrims are taking part in the "Ganga Sagar" festival held at the holy confluence of the Ganges river and the Bay of Bengal. The devout bath in the water to purify themselves and to seek the blessing of the gods.

US, N Korea now seek compromise

China offers to host talks

AFP, REUTERS, Seoul/Beijing

North Korea and the United States appeared to be reaching out for compromise Tuesday as South Korea suggested the three-month-old nuclear crisis could be easing.

US envoy James Kelly, who leaves Seoul later Tuesday for Beijing, met top advisors to President Kim Dae-Jung following a meeting on Monday with Kim's successor, president elect Roh Moo-Hyun.

At the one-hour meeting with Roh, Kelly was eager to reassure South Korea that Washington was not considering military action against North Korea, while a military buildup was under way against fellow "axis of evil" member Iraq.

"We don't have to be too concerned about the nuclear issue because envoy Kelly made it clear in the meeting with the president-elect that dialogue should be pursued to resolve the nuclear issue," said Roh's top advisor Choung Dae-Churl on KBS radio.

"On the Korean peninsula, where the two sides are so close, the tactics which are being applied to Iraq will not be applied," added the aid said Pyongyang, which Kelly said admitted to running a nuclear programme in October, is a bigger threat to world peace than Iraq.

That revelation by Kelly sparked a standoff that has left in tatters the 1994 Agreed Framework under which Pyongyang promised to freeze its nuclear ambitions in return for international aid to overcome an acute energy crisis.

Since December North Korea has prepared to reactivate its moth-balled Yongbyon nuclear plant, expelled UN monitors and withdrawn from the nuclear Non-

Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Pyongyang has also said it may end a moratorium on long-range missile tests.

North Korea has repeatedly accused the United States of planning a preemptive nuclear strike on the country and has demanded a non-aggression pact before it will discuss scrapping its nuclear programmes.

Washington, which believes Pyongyang already has one or two nuclear bombs and could make sevits nuclear schemes.

Roh and Kelly discussed a compromise way out of the crisis whereby North Korea would abandon its nuclear weapons drive and Washington would deliver some form of security guarantee, a long-standing demand of North Korea, Choung said.

Roh, elected on December 19 on a wave of anti-Americanism, is a strong advocate of engagement as a way of resolving the three-month nuclear standoff.

Reuters adds: China said Tuesday it is willing to host talks between the United States and North Korea to resolve their nuclear standoff as Australian officials flew to Pyongyang to explore chances of a diplomatic solution.

Senior US envoy James Kelly headed for the Chinese capital after wrapping up talks on the crisis with South Korean leaders.

Earlier, North Korea reiterated a demand for bilateral talks with the United States, a statement that appeared to hint that it, too, was looking to defuse the crisis after weeks of fiery anti-American rhetoric. Washington accuses Pyongyang of covertly developing nuclear weapons, a charge it denies.



PHOTO: AFP

Formerly conjoined twins Maria Teresa (L Front) and Maria de Jesus Quiej Lopez (R Front) are pushed in strollers by their parents Wenceslao Quiej Lopez (L) and Alba Leticia Alvarez (L) during press conference announcing their release from Mattel Children's Hospital at UCLA in Los Angeles, California on Monday. The girls, once joined at the head, were released from their hospital, five months after doctors separated them.