



PHOTO: AFP
Members of the Iraqi ruling Baath Party wave their Kalashnikovs as they march in support of their leader Saddam Hussein (portraits) in Baghdad on Friday marking the 12th anniversary of the breakout of the Gulf War or what the Iraqis call 'The Mother of all Battles'. Some 5,000 people took part in the demonstration.

Iraq utters conditions for Saddam exile

Blix wants explanations from Baghdad on chemical arms warheads

AFP, Berlin

Iraq has set out a list of conditions for the exile of President Saddam Hussein, including a complete withdrawal of US troops from the Gulf, Germany's Der Spiegel reported Friday quoting diplomatic sources.

It said the conditions also include ending UN weapons inspections and the sanctions regime, a pledge not to haul Saddam or his cronies before court and action to halt any Israeli development of weapons of mass destruction.

The newsweekly said its information came from a Western and two Arab diplomats in Dubai, adding that the Iraqi leader could go into exile in Africa.

But it said the United States had so far rejected the conditions and that Egypt was now trying to persuade Baghdad to compromise over its demands.

Arab diplomats in the region have already said that Turkey is working with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to convince Saddam Hussein to go into exile to prevent a US-led war.

Despite Arab and Turkish denials of having considered asking Saddam to step down and go abroad, the diplomats told AFP that such efforts were based on an initiative by Turkey, whose Prime Minister Abdullah Gul toured the region this month.

Speaking under cover of anonymity, they said the idea was that he would go into exile in return for assurances that he would not be prosecuted.

US President George W. Bush warned Tuesday that time was "running out" for Saddam.

The United States, which accuses Iraq of concealing weapons and programmes of mass destruction, is pouring troops into the Gulf, with 150,000 US ground, air and naval personnel expected to be ready to strike by mid-February.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said Tuesday on his return from a visit to Saudi Arabia that Arab states and Turkey were trying to find a formula to head off war which would be acceptable to both Washington and Baghdad.

Several nations, including Russia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Mauritania, have denied offering asylum to the Iraqi leader.

Meanwhile, chief UN inspector Hans Blix said Friday that he wanted "to have more explanations" from Baghdad about chemical warheads found Thursday.

Blix was speaking in Paris one day after his inspectors found 11 empty chemical warheads at an Iraqi munitions dump.

The Iraqis had claimed the find was not linked to any prohibited weapons, but the United States said it was not surprised, adding that chemical munitions were one of the areas of omission in Baghdad's December arms declaration.

At a press conference alongside French President Jacques Chirac, Blix said that he was not certain about whether the warheads were listed in the declaration. He added that the empty warheads would be destroyed.

AP adds: President Saddam Hussein, in a speech marking the 12th anniversary of the Gulf War, vowed Friday to defeat his enemies and said any attempt to conquer his nation will fail.

"Everyone who tries to climb over its walls ... will fail in his attempt," Saddam said.

He called on the Iraqi people to "let your guns wait in ambush for him" - a reference to the United States.

FM in mission to get Pakistanis off INS list

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri heads to the United States on Saturday on a mission to get Pakistan off a list of countries whose male nationals are now subject to rigorous scrutiny in the US.

"Our effort is to get Pakistan out of the list," he declared on state television on Thursday as he previewed his maiden trip to the US.

Kasuri told US Secretary of State Colin Powell by telephone on January 10 that Pakistan should be removed from the list in recognition of its critical role in the campaign to crush al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

Washington's decision last month to place Pakistan on a list of 20 suspect countries whose male nationals must register and provide fingerprints to the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) by mid-February was "unfair", Kasuri told AFP last week.

India's talks with rebels give hope to all: ULFA

AFP, Guwahati

A frontline separatist group in India's northeastern state of Assam said Friday ongoing peace talks between New Delhi and tribal rebels could help resolve other armed conflicts in the region.

The outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), fighting for an independent homeland, said it would join the peace process if the federal government was able to settle the tribal rebellion with the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

"ULFA does heartily wish for a peaceful solution of this decades' old conflict and if there is a peaceful solution we would definitely pursue the footsteps of the process where Naga sovereignty and independence would uphold," the ULFA said in its mouthpiece, the Freedom.

Aid groups complain about US obstruction

REUTERS, Washington

A major alliance of US-based humanitarian groups complained on Thursday that the Bush administration was too slow in issuing licenses to let them do preparatory work in countries neighboring Iraq in case of war.

InterAction, which has more than 160 members, said in a statement that a bureaucratic logjam was preventing many groups from sending assessment missions to Iraq and some neighbors.

Under US legislation, such groups need approval from the US government to send money, equipment or personnel to Iraq, Iran and Syria because the three countries are on the State Department's list of "state sponsors of terrorism."

UN, Lankan govt, Tigers talk refugee returns

AFP, Geneva

The UN refugee agency has held talks with the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tiger rebels on how to handle the return of tens of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people after nearly two decades of civil war, a spokesman said here on Friday.

The meeting, earlier this week, focused on what role the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) could play in the return of an initial 100,000 internally displaced people, spokesman Kris Janowski said.

Kashmir govt to punish cops for fake encounter

AFP, Srinagar

The government in Indian Kashmir Friday set up a committee to decide punishment of policemen said to have fudged blood samples to cover up alleged killings of innocent Kashmiri men, a statement said.

"The job of the committee is to suggest action so that no guilty person escapes the stringent criminal liability," the government statement said.

The state cabinet, chaired by Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, Thursday decided to set up the three-member committee including his deputy Mangat Ram Sharma and two other ministers.

Saudi Arabia, others hoping to coordinate coup in Iraq

AFP, Washington

Concerned that the United States means business when it threatens to wage war against Iraq, neighboring Arab states are working to orchestrate a coup to topple Saddam Hussein instead, Time magazine reported Thursday.

Time said Saudi Arabia is actively working to convince Iraqi generals to overthrow the dictator in a military coup, in hopes of maintaining some stability in the region.

The plan would include an offer of amnesty to all but 100-120 senior Iraqi officials as an inducement to switch sides, Time reported.

"Riyadh fears that war in Iraq could lead to chaos, civil war among ethnic factions and military incursions by neighbors like Turkey and Iran," the magazine reported.

"They see a coup as offering a better chance of maintaining order and preserving state institutions necessary for providing public services such as security, health care, electricity and water."

The magazine reported that both Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Turkish Prime Minister Abdullah Gul met this week with Saudi Arabia's de facto leader, Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, to discuss the plan.

Saudi officials would not confirm the discussions, with Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Faisal saying only that Arab states want to try diplomacy before war.

"The concept is if you have a decision by the (United Nations) to go to war, give a chance for diplomacy to work before you go to war," the prince told the magazine.

Time, citing unnamed diplomats, said that Arab leaders fear the United States will not stay and clean up Iraq after a war and prefer a solution that leaves most institutions intact.

"If things go wrong, the troops will get back on their ships and leave," one Arab diplomat told the magazine. "We in the region will be left with the consequences. It will be a never-ending story."

Supporters of the coup option told the magazine that although Saddam has averted coups until now, the outcome may be different if generals believe the time is "truly now or never."

"What makes them collect around him?" an Arab diplomat told Time. "They feel that their fate is tied with his. You'd be surprised how quickly Iraqi loyalties can change."

El Nino effect to last for another 4 months

AFP, Geneva

El Nino, the weather pattern which has been blamed for bringing extreme conditions to many areas around the Pacific Ocean in recent months, should last until at least May 2003, the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) said on Friday.

WMO said progress of the weather phenomenon beyond that period "would be highly unusual based on historical records", but cautioned that it was not yet able to make an accurate forecast.

"Beyond the timeframe of approximately May 2003, predictions are sufficiently uncertain that additional guidance cannot be provided at this time," the UN's weather agency said in a statement.

El Nino is marked by periodic shifts in sea temperatures in the main Pacific currents, and can have an impact on climate patterns around the world.

Boy babies make for complicated births

AFP, Paris

Mothers who claim that giving birth to a boy is a tougher job than bringing a girl into the world have been backed by statistical evidence in a study published in Saturday's British Medical Journal (BMJ).

Researchers at Dublin's National Maternity Hospital sifted through a database of all births there from 1997 to 2000 involving mothers who were pregnant for the first time, went into labour on schedule and gave birth to a single child rather than twins.

During the study period, 4,070 boys and 4,005 girls who met these criteria were born at the hospital.

For boys, doctors were likelier to administer oxytocin -- a hormone that induces contraction -- use forceps or other devices to make a vaginal delivery or opt to carry out a Caesarean than they were for girls.

For instance, 76.5 percent of female deliveries were trouble-free, whereas the figure among boys was 71.2 percent. Caesareans were carried out in 6.1 percent of male births, but only in 4.2 percent of female births.

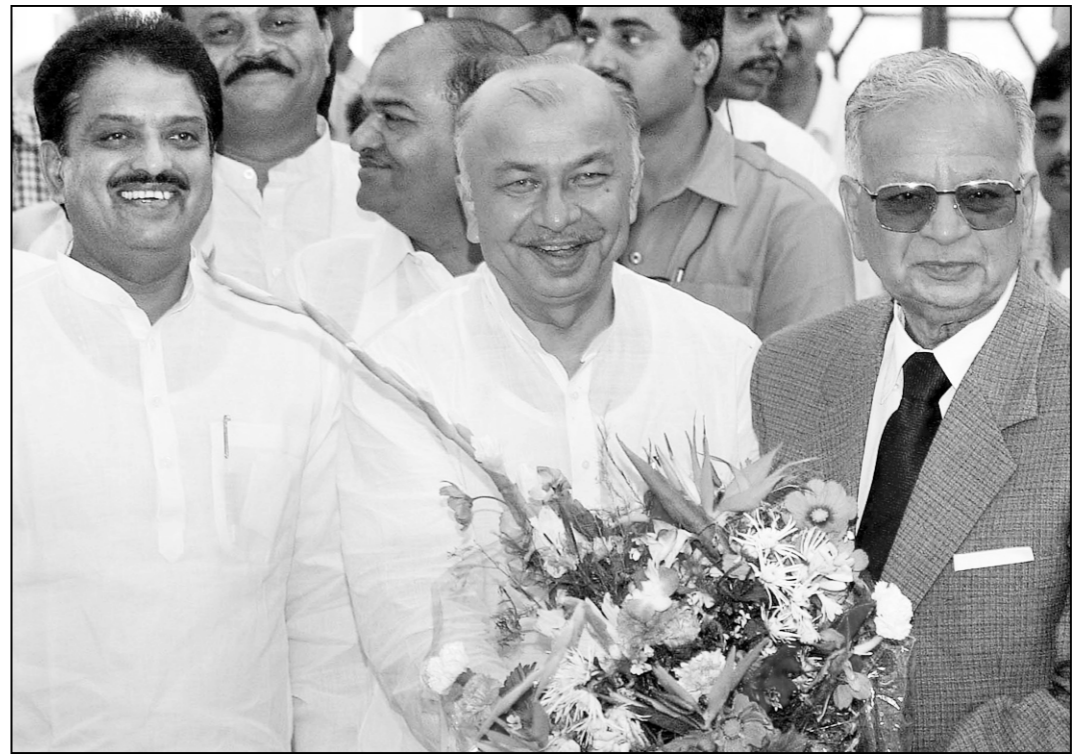


PHOTO: AFP
Newly elected Chief Minister of Indian western state of Maharashtra, Sushil Kumar Shinde (C) poses with Maharashtra State Governor Mohammed Fazal (R) and former chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh (L) in Mumbai on Friday. Former chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh was replaced by Sushil Kumar Shinde after coming under fire for what Congress insiders say has been a lackluster performance in office and for failing to unite the party.

Voting 'yes' to war on Iraq inconceivable: Germany

AFP, Ludwiggshafen

It is not conceivable for Germany to vote in favour of military action against Iraq at the UN Security Council, German Defence Minister Peter Struck said in an interview published on Friday.

A yes vote is "fundamentally no longer conceivable", Struck told the regional daily Rheinpfalz.

Germany, which became a non-permanent member of the Security Council on January 1 and takes over from France as its president on February 1, has so far studiously refused to say how it would vote on any possible resolution authorising a strike against Baghdad.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder on Tuesday spoke out publicly for the first time in favour of a second UN resolution being adopted before any military action can be launched against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

In November the Security

Council adopted resolution 1441, which sent UN inspectors back into Iraq to verify whether Baghdad has given up its programmes to acquire weapons of mass destruction. That resolution did not specify whether another Security Council vote was needed to authorise military action.

Schroeder's centre-left government has had a difficult time balancing German public opinion -- the latest poll showed that 81 percent of Germans believe the possible war on Iraq is unjustified -- and being a strong NATO ally of Washington.

Thousands of people took part in a demonstration on Thursday evening in the eastern city of Dresden against a possible war on Iraq, police said.

The German government has ruled out the participation of German troops in any Iraqi conflict but has given the United States permission to move its troops and aircraft from bases in Germany to the Gulf.

Struck downplayed the importance of any Security Council vote, saying the ultimate decision about a war against Iraq rested with US President George W. Bush.

The defence minister acknowledged that Germany's relations with the United States were currently strained.

"We cannot deny that at the moment it's difficult," he said.

But he said the German-US relationship was sufficiently strong to overcome the difficulties.

"If we tell them: 'We're not going to follow you on this one', then that doesn't please them, but they'd like it even less if we beat around the bush," he said regarding the German-US disagreements over Iraq.

Only the five permanent members of the Security Council -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- have the power to veto any decisions.

US, ROK work on war plan 'North Korea ready to abandon nukes'

AFP, Seoul

The United States and South Korea are drawing up a new contingency plan for a war in the Korean peninsula as tensions mount over North Korea's nuclear ambitions, a newspaper here said Friday.

The defense ministry, however, dismissed the report as speculation and said the US-South Korea Combined Forces Command was merely engaging in routine review of existing defense planning.

The JoongAng daily quoted government sources as saying the combined forces were working on plans to beef up military defensive capability, especially around Seoul, just 50 kilometres (30 miles) south of the Demilitarized Zone, the world's most heavily fortified border.

It quoted an unidentified high-ranking South Korean official as saying General Lee Nam-Shin, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Leon LaPorte, commander of the US troops stationed here, had agreed to produce a new

plan by the end of July. LaPorte commands 37,000 US troops and under the US-South Korean military alliance, would have commanding rights over the combined forces including the South Korean military in times of war.

A spokesman of the defense ministry here said the combined forces command was merely "updating existing war plans."

However, the conservative JoongAng said a new plan was likely to include the provision to the military of more multiple rocket launchers, air-to-surface missiles and anti-artillery radar systems and other sophisticated weapons, the daily said.

South Korean Defense Minister Lee Jun told members of parliament on Thursday that a war on the Korean peninsula could break out if the United States launched a strike at the North's nuclear facilities.

"Should the United States strike the North, a war would become inevitable... The military is working on plans to prepare the highest level

of defense posture ... for this worst case scenario," a defense ministry official quoted Lee as saying.

The newspaper said US air strikes at the North Korean nuclear facilities would probably trigger a cross-border attack by the North's troops on the South, which would be led by a barrage from 11,000 artillery pieces.

Seoul would be especially vulnerable to these artillery pieces which are deployed close to the border, the paper said.

Meanwhile, North Korea will respond to diplomatic pressure and abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions as it seeks to open up to the outside world, South Korean president-elect Roh Moo-Hyun said Friday as a top Russian envoy headed for Pyongyang.

Roh, who takes office on February 25, said fears that unpredictable North Korea would resort to armed force in its standoff with the world community over its nuclear weapons were misplaced.

Indonesia decries US terror-risk tag

REUTERS, Jakarta

Indonesia, an ally in the US war on terror, lashed out Friday at its inclusion on a list of countries whose citizens must register and be fingerprinted when visiting the United States.

The requirement, which applies to males 16 years old and over, is part of a controversial US anti-terrorism program and has been applied to visitors from various countries, most of them Muslim.

Thursday, US Justice Department officials said Indonesia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait would be added to the list.

Asked to comment on the move, Indonesian Foreign Ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa said it was discriminatory.

"We find it difficult to comprehend, and we deeply regret this decision as it is discriminatory in the sense that it targeted certain countries without a clear reason," he said.

"It also has potential to cause problems to individuals who had nothing to do with the terrorism issue."

Indonesia is the world's fourth most populous country and the most populous Muslim country.

A bomb attack on the Indonesian holiday island of Bali in October killed more than 190 people, most of them foreign tourists.

The attack was blamed on Muslim militants suspected of having links with Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network.

Indonesia was criticized by some analysts as getting off to a slow start in the anti-terrorism fight after the September 11 attacks in the United States in 2001.

But it has won praise in the wake of the Bali bombing for a series of arrests, many of suspects linked to the attack. Some of the suspects had ties to Jemaah Islamiyah, a regional network of militant Muslims linked to al Qaeda.



PHOTO: AFP
US space shuttle Columbia lifts off with her seven person crew on Thursday from launch pad 39-A at Kennedy Space Center, Florida. STS-107 is on a 16-day mission devoted to research and will include more than 80 experiments that will study Earth and space science, advanced technology development, and astronaut health and safety.



PHOTO: AFP
Kobe residents pray for victims during a memorial ceremony in Kobe early Friday to commemorate the eighth anniversary of the 1995 massive earthquake in Kobe, western Japan. The killer quake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale struck the city at 5:46 am (2046 GMT) and killed 6,433 people and injured some 43,700.