

## Search resumes for missing Afghan minister's body

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's navy on Wednesday resumed searching for the body of an Afghan minister and two others still missing since their plane plunged into the Arabian Sea earlier this week.

"Our rescue parties resumed work early morning, but so far none of the remaining bodies have been found," navy spokesman Commander Roshan Khijal told AFP. "We will decide today whether to continue the search."

A privately-chartered Cessna 402-Blight aircraft carrying minister Juma Mohammad Mohammadi, four other Afghan officials, a Chinese mining executive and two Pakistani crew crashed shortly after taking off from the southern port city of Karachi in clear weather on Monday morning.

The bodies of three Afghans and the two Pakistanis were pulled from the ocean on Monday.

Mohammadi, Chinese mining executive Sun Chang Sheng and one Afghan official are presumed dead although their bodies have not been found.

The plane was heading to the south-west province of Baluchistan where Sun Chang Sheng was to show the Afghan delegation his company's copper, silver and gold mine projects.

# Sharon reaches deal with rightist coalition

## Arafat says those responsible for Rabin's murder are in coalition

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon reached an agreement yesterday on forming a rightist coalition that is likely to toughen Israel's stance against the Palestinian uprising, complicating peace efforts.

Sharon's Likud party said in a statement the deal would be signed later Wednesday with the centrist Shinui party, the ultranationalist National Union party and the National Religious Party (NRP), a champion of Jewish settlements on occupied land.

Sharon, whose Likud party won a general election on January 28 but failed to secure a majority in the Knesset, will now lead a coalition with 68 seats in the 120-seat parliament.

The inclusion of the right-wing parties will increase pressure on Sharon to take an even tougher line against the Palestinians and could make it even harder for international mediators to end 29 months of Israeli-Palestinian violence.

"Representatives of the Likud, Shinui, National Union and National Religious Party early this morning completed the formulation of coalition agreements and policy guidelines of the new government," the statement said, without elaborating.

"The factions agreed to meet later this morning in the Knesset in order to sign these agreements so that they may be presented before the Knesset clerk," it said, referring to official procedures for nominating a government.

Sharon, who turned 75 on Wednesday, is expected to present the coalition to the Knesset on Thursday. The government's main tasks are to tackle the Palestinian uprising for an independent state and mounting economic problems.

The Palestinians are wary of the proposed coalition because of the expected shift to the right.

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat said on Tuesday the "radical elements" in Israel responsible for the murder of the then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, with whom he signed peace accords, were "now participating in the government of Israel."

Sharon had tried to bring the centre-left Labour Party into the coalition to avoid being dependent on right-wing parties.

But Labour pulled out of negotiations last Sunday, saying it could not find a common basis with Sharon on dismantling some Jewish settlements and rousing the economy out of recession.

Labour's decision left Sharon lacking the more moderate partner he sought ahead of anticipated US pressure for concessions to the Palestinians after any war in Iraq.

Sharon had been widely expected to wait until the end of an early March deadline to form the coalition in the hope that he could use any war in Iraq to persuade Labour that Israel faced a national emergency and should form a "unity government."

Details of the coalition agreement and the policies agreed on were not immediately available but National Union member Benny Elon made clear reaching a compromise had not been easy.

"We tried to minimise the damage. It's not ideal...I would have expected something stronger in the political and social realms (of policy)," he told Israel Radio.

There was no immediate word of any fresh violence in the West Bank or Gaza Strip. A rare snowstorm which kept Jerusalem under a blanket of snow for the second successive day also hit the West Bank, helping to keep violence in check.

At least 1,873 Palestinians and 706 Israelis have been killed since the Palestinian uprising erupted in September 2000 after peace talks stalled.

# I will die in Iraq, says Saddam Hussein

AFP, New York

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein told a US television reporter that he has no intention either of going into exile or of setting fire to Iraqi oil fields.

"I was born here in Iraq. Whoever decides to forsake his nation from whoever requests is not true to the principles. We will die here," Saddam told CBS news reporter Dan Rather.

Asked if, should there be an invasion, he would set fire to Iraq's oil fields and blow up its dams, Saddam replied, "Iraq does not burn its wealth and it does not destroy its dams."

He added, "We hope, however, that this question is not meant as an insinuation, so that Iraqi dams and Iraqi oil wells will be destroyed by those who will invade Iraq in their possible invasion of the country."

Saddam also said during the interview he had no plans to leave Iraq.

"We will die in this country and we will maintain our honour -- the honour that is required in front of our people. I believe that whoever offers Saddam asylum in his own country is in fact a person without morals,"

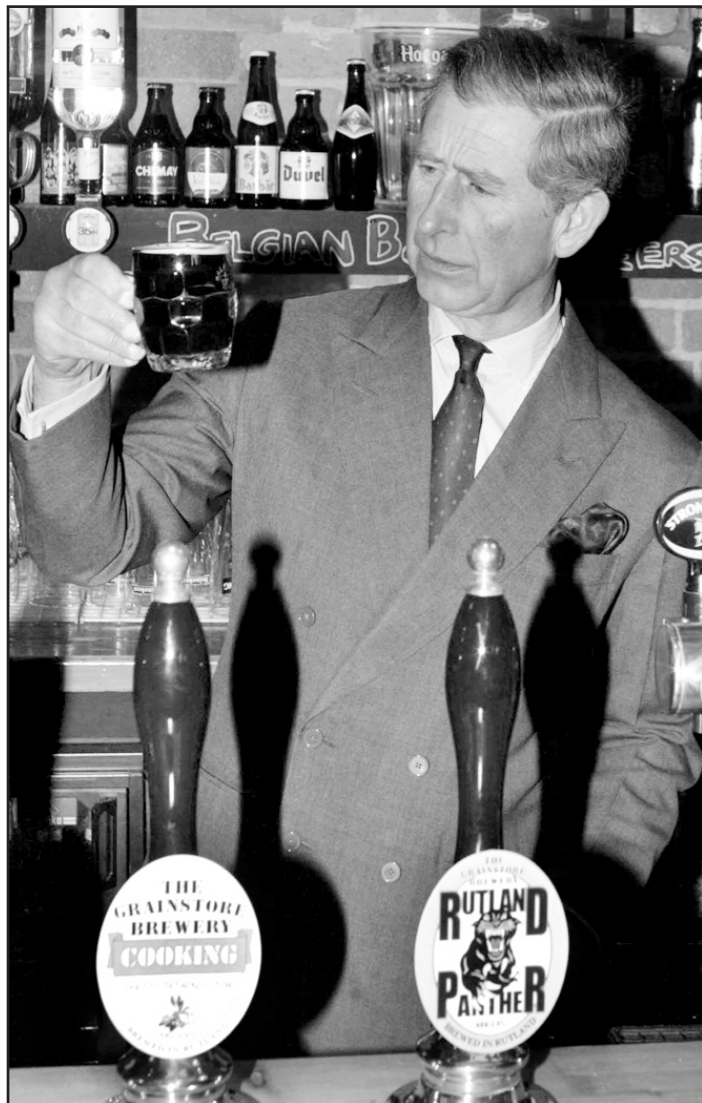
the Iraqi leader added.

The Iraqi leader also denied his country had any links with Al-Qaeda, the terror network that carried out the September 11, 2001 bombings in the United States.

Iraq "never had any relationship" with Al-Qaeda, Saddam said in the exclusive interview in Baghdad on Monday, to be fully aired on CBS's '60 Minutes II' news show late on Wednesday night in United States.



This image taken from a CBS News program and released February 25, 2003, shows CBS News Anchor Dan Rather (L) meeting with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (R) in Baghdad on Monday. Hussein knows an invasion is near but remains calm and believes he can beat the US, according to Rather, who interviewed the Iraqi president for the second time in 12 years.



The Prince of Wales inspects the first glass of The Rutland Welcome as he visits the Grainstore Brewery in Oakham, February 25, 2003. Charles will also visit Oakham Castle and follow the ancient tradition of presenting a horseshoe to the Lord of the Manor, who is currently Jos Hanbury.

# S Korea subway fire toll crosses 180

REUTERS, Seoul

The confirmed death toll from the South Korean subway arson attack has risen to 182 following the retrieval of 49 more sets of charred remains from the two trains destroyed in last week's inferno, officials said on Wednesday.

More than 300 people remain listed as missing, although some of them might be among the unidentified dead. The officials said 54 bodies had been identified and there were 128 charred remains.

But relatives of the dead and missing, already angered by a disaster that has led to the arrest of seven subway employees on suspicion of negligence, were incensed further when forensic experts found body parts in garbage bags.

"Hands and feet came out" of the bags filled by workers cleaning up the station in Taegu, 120 miles south of Seoul, 32-year-old Kang Sang-ho told YTN cable news.

"I don't know the exact number," said Kang, a relative who witnessed the search.

Relatives complained officials were too quick to clean up the city centre station and may have damaged remains of the dead as well as removing possible clues investigators might have followed up.

"This is unacceptable and we are calling for the overall investigation to be handled by a more comprehensive organisation than the Taegu city government," Kim Hye-jung, a representative of the missing, told Reuters.

She said scores of protesters marched through Taegu on Tuesday to demand the mayor resign. They held a candle-lit vigil for the dead and missing.

Officials said the chief of the Taegu underground system had been fired following the inferno, started by a man who set fire to a train at a subway stop.

Police have identified the apparent arsonist as a 56-year-old former taxi driver with a history of mental problems intent on suicide but unwilling to die alone.

The focus of their investigation is why the death toll was so high and whether more people could have been saved.

Police, investigating whether subway employees may have tried to cover up negligence, have seized voice and video tapes from the control room.

Six of those arrested are controllers and the other is the driver of a train that pulled alongside one already ablaze and remained stationary with its doors closed.

The majority of the deaths are believed to have occurred on the second train.

# US unmoved by N Korean missile test

AFP, Washington

US President George W Bush's administration sought to downplay North Korea's marking of South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun's inauguration by lobbing a missile into the Sea of Japan.

"Typically, at times of inaugural festivities, most nations send flowers or bouquets or visiting dignitaries. North Korea sent a short-range cruise missile," said White House spokesman Ari Fleischer on Tuesday.

US officials avoided taking the bait from North Korea, which has repeatedly sought to raise the heat in its showdown with Washington over its nuclear programme.

The anti-ship missile was launched from a northeastern coastal area, Japanese and South Korean military officials said, as the drama jolted stock markets and tested nerves in Northeast Asia.

But the projectile appeared to be a short-range tactical missile, not a ballistic version, which would have significantly escalated the crisis.

The Pentagon meanwhile denied a North Korean report that a US spy plane intruded into North Korean airspace on the same day as the missile launch.

"There is no truth to these claims," said Lieutenant Commander Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman.

# Labour 'rebels' to embarrass Blair over Iraq

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair faces potentially the biggest rebellion yet from within his ruling Labour Party in a parliamentary debate over his pro-American hawkish stance

amendments put forward by Labour "rebels" and opposition Liberal Democrats determined to embarrass Blair, who is staunchly backing US leader George W. Bush's hard line against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"Mr. Blair's spin that he is launching a last chance for peace and all that garbage, when everyone knows he and Bush are bent on war, has not worked," one Labour "rebel," George Galloway, told Reuters.



An Iraqi woman shouts anti-US slogans as a vehicle carrying disarmament experts pass by heading to Al-Faihaa farm in the area of Babylon, some 100 kms south east of Baghdad, for an inspection mission February 25, 2003.

Up to 100 of Labour's total 410 legislators (MPs) in the British parliament's lower chamber are backing an amendment -- for what is bound to be a fiery debate -- stating that "the case for military action against Iraq is yet unproven."

Aware of high domestic public opposition to an US/British-led war against Iraq without international endorsement, the government has put forward a carefully worded motion backing UN demands for Iraqi disarmament.

"Blair has hopelessly underestimated his opponents."

In a show of political boldness not in keeping with his prior reputation as a man governed by opinion polls and focus groups, Blair is clearly prepared to brave out disquiet within his party and sliding popularity among the public.

Convinced of the moral rectitude of disarming Saddam, Blair believes public opinion will rally round if a second UN resolution is passed.

But he and Bush face a tall order to achieve that, given opposition from international heavyweights like France, Germany and Russia, and might eventually be forced to go it alone in what Washington has termed a "coalition of the willing."

That could be make or break for Blair, in power since 1997.

"If he gets the second resolution, then I think he is home and dry," pollster and political analyst Peter Kellner told Reuters. "If not, it could be extremely difficult. If he goes into war without clear public backing, then he absolutely needs a very fast, painless victory to recover."

Fortunately for Blair, while up to a quarter of his own party legislators are rebelling, the opposition Conservative Party -- which took Britain into conflict with Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War -- are backing him.

# Recovered tile could be key clue to shuttle disaster

REUTERS, Cape Canaveral

A piece of tile thrown off from the doomed shuttle Columbia as it re-entered Earth's atmosphere and recovered in Texas bears deformations consistent with the kind of hot plasma flow that entered the shuttle through a breach, investigators said on Tuesday.

The tile also appeared heavily scored and pock-marked on the side facing out, with mysterious orange specks embedded in the material.

A leading theory among outside experts is that Columbia was damaged about 82 seconds after liftoff on Jan. 16 when a piece of orange foam broke away from the shuttle's large external tank and smashed into the shuttle's left wing.

If a tile such as the one discovered in Powell, Texas, about 30 miles west of Fort Worth, had been loosened by that impact, then come off during re-entry, it would have exposed the bare aluminium of the shuttle's wing.

That space, about 1 foot square, is roughly the size of the breach that investigators believe opened and allowed plasma, or super-hot gases, to enter the orbiter's left wheel well, where sensors showed a sharp spike in temperatures shortly before the shuttle was lost.

Columbia disintegrated during re-entry on Feb. 1 after a 16-day science mission, killing all seven astronauts on board.

The tile could be the most revealing clue yet in the 15-day-old investigation, making sense of the mountain of data, some of it conflicting,

much of it inconclusive, and the more than 8,000 pieces of shuttle debris so far recovered.

Retired Adm. Harold Gehman Jr., head of an 11-member board appointed by NASA to unearth the cause of the disaster and recommend solutions, warned against jumping to conclusions.

"One of the riddles we have to work out is whether this damage was done while the tile was still

attached to the orbiter or whether this was done after the break up," he said.

The panel said the object almost certainly came from Columbia but did not necessarily break off it. It was possible it floated out of the shuttle's payload bay, which was opened on the first day of flight.

Meanwhile AP reports that a videotape salvaged from the wreckage of space shuttle Columbia

provides what is likely the final glimpse of the astronauts before the shuttle broke apart.

They are seen putting on their gloves and casually chatting unaware of the impending destruction.

NASA said the video holds nothing of investigative value, but it will allow the public to observe the astronauts and the inside of the shuttle moments before Columbia experienced the first sign of trouble. NASA plans to release copies to the media sometime this week.

Thirteen minutes of tape were preserved, despite burning that destroyed the rest of it, an official close to the accident investigation said on Tuesday night. The tape showed four crew members doing routine tasks in the cockpit as the shuttle zoomed over the Pacific Ocean on February 1.

The tape ends four minutes after the start of Columbia's atmospheric entry while the spaceship is still above the Pacific and flying normally. The first indication of trouble shows up in temperature monitors in the left landing gear compartment another four minutes after the end of the tape, the official said.

Commander Rick Husband, his co-pilot William McCool, flight engineer Kalpana Chawla and Laurel Clark were on the flight deck and reportedly caught on camera. The three other astronauts were on the lower deck.

Neither the official nor a NASA spokeswoman knew where, when or how the tape was found, but it was thought to have been recovered in Texas sometime during the past week.



Members of the Columbia Reconstruction Team examine pieces of debris in the RLV hanger at Kennedy Space Centre, FL. Over three thousand pieces have arrived and more debris is arriving every several days from Louisiana and Texas for cataloguing, layout and examination.