

Annan plans changes to oil-for-food programme

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan asked the Security Council on Thursday to enable him to take over the running of the oil-for-food programme in Iraq from Baghdad.

The programme, which allows Iraq to export oil and import humanitarian goods exempt from UN sanctions, is run as a joint venture by Baghdad and the United Nations. Its budget is close to 10 billion dollars a year.

The programme was suspended on Monday, when Annan ordered all international staff working for the United Nations to leave Iraq.

In a letter to the council, Annan recommended changes to the programme's mandate, adopted in April 14, 1995 in Council Resolution 986.

In an annex to the eight-page letter, he suggested elements for a new resolution, saying the changes were the "minimum" necessary for the programme to operate.

HIV epidemic to surge in E Europe: Study

AFP, Paris

The AIDS epidemic in the former Soviet Union is set to leap out of the social niche of drug users and spread through the wider population through heterosexual intercourse, said a study to be published on Saturday.

The study, which appears in the British weekly The Lancet, says there are now around a million people in 27 countries in eastern and central Europe and central Asia who have AIDS or the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), compared with only 30,000 in 1995.

The epidemic is concentrated mainly among intravenous drug users who spread the disease by sharing used syringes, it says.

But experience has shown that beyond a certain point, an epidemic jumps out of small social groups and into the wider population, propelled for instance by prostitution by drug addicts.

'US to remain in Afghan soil despite Iraq war'

AFP, Vienna

The United States said it will not be distracted from its operations in Afghanistan despite launching military strikes against Iraq, and will remain in the country as long as necessary.

"We will stay in Afghanistan as long as it requires," David Johnson, the US government's Afghanistan Coordinator since May 2002, said Thursday.

"This war is not over... and the recent events will not distract us from Afghanistan", he told a news conference in the Austrian capital.

The United States on Thursday launched military strikes on selected targets in Baghdad after the expiry of a 48-hour deadline issued by US President George W. Bush for Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to leave his country.

The same day, more than 1,000 US-led coalition troops launched a major air and ground offensive against extremists in southern Afghanistan, close to the border with Pakistan.

US ignores Cuban demand to return plane

AFP, Havana

Havana said Thursday that US officials had not responded to a demand for the return of a Cuban airliner and passengers hijacked to Florida a day earlier.

"None of the passengers has been returned to our country, neither the DC-3 nor its crew and not, of course, the terrorists who hijacked it," Cuban officials said in a statement.

The Cuban foreign ministry said it had sent a diplomatic note to US officials in Havana requesting the immediate return of the hijacked Cuban civilian plane.

US authorities detained six hijackers after the airliner they had seized at knife-point with 37 people on board was intercepted by US fighter jets and forced to land in Florida late Wednesday, an FBI spokeswoman said.

The twin-engine propeller plane -- scheduled to fly from Cuba's Isle of Youth to Havana -- was intercepted by F-15 jets over international waters as it headed from Cuba toward the United States and landed in Key West, Florida's southernmost island, some 150 kilometers (93 miles) from Cuba, officials said.

The alleged hijackers' motive was not immediately given.



Protesters carry banners as they march on a street in downtown Tokyo on Friday to protest against the US-led war on Iraq. About 50,000 people attended the peaceful demonstration.

Protests go on across globe

REUTERS, London

Tens of thousands of anti-war demonstrators staged huge marches across the world on Thursday, often clashing with police as they converged on heavily guarded US embassies.

Barely three hours after the first cruise missiles slammed into Baghdad, a wave of demonstrations started in Asia and Australia and rolled swiftly across Europe and the Middle East toward the United States, where anti-war activists planned hundreds of protests later on Thursday.

In the Arab world, thousands of protesters vented their fury at the start of the war to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, with demonstrators in Egypt and Syria demanding the expulsion of US ambassadors.

In Cairo, the Arab world's biggest city, riot police used water cannon and batons against hundreds of rock-throwing protesters who tried to storm toward the US embassy.

"This war is a sin," said 43-year-old Cairo taxi driver Youssef, as religious music blared from his car radio. "It's a sin because ordinary Iraqis will suffer. It's not a sin because of Saddam, who was too stubborn. He's got a head of stone."

In Italy, where Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is one of

Washington's staunchest allies on Iraq, the three biggest trade unions staged a two-hour strike.

Italian cities were thrown into chaos as tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets, in many cases blocking train stations and highways. The biggest demonstration was a march on the US embassy in Rome.

In Germany, more than 80,000 schoolchildren, many with faces painted with "No War" or peace signs, protested in the capital Berlin and the cities of Stuttgart, Cologne, Munich and Hanover.

"Let's bomb Texas, they've got oil too," read one banner.

In Berlin, people lay in pools of red paint outside the heavily guarded US embassy to symbolize civilian casualties.

Swiss police clashed with hundreds of protesters, mainly students, who marched on the US diplomatic mission in Geneva, firing teargas into the air to disperse them.

Spanish police in riot gear fired rubber bullets at anti-war demonstrators, including well-known actors and celebrities, who gathered in central Madrid in protest at Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's support for the US-led attacks on Iraq.

Earlier they beat some demonstrators with batons in an attempt to move them on.

Violence also erupted in

Calcutta, eastern India, when about 1,000 protesters waving banners reading "US warmongers go to hell" tried to storm a US cultural center. At least 12 policemen and six demonstrators were injured when cane-wielding police drove them back, a senior police official told Reuters.

Thousands of British anti-war campaigners, enraged by the involvement of British troops in a war they see as an illegitimate grab for oil by Washington, blocked roads and scuffled with police as protests spread across Britain.

At the biggest rallying point in London's Parliament Square, police hauled away demonstrators, including many schoolchildren, who were sitting in roads and blocking access points.

"We're here for peace," said schoolgirl Tallulah Belly, 14, at Parliament Square. "We've walked out of school -- we are the future generation and they should be listening to us."

The only reported clash outside a British embassy was in the Lebanese capital Beirut, where around 1,000 protesters were sprayed with water from a fire truck when they crossed barriers outside the mission. Witnesses said police beat several of them.

In France, more than 10,000 people, mostly students, surged through Paris chanting anti-war

slogans, reflecting their government's rigid anti-war stance which has infuriated Washington and split the international community into two camps.

Huge protests also took place in Greece, Spain and Austria.

In the Gaza Strip, about 1,000 Palestinian women and children marched in the Rafah refugee camp, holding Iraqi flags and posters of Saddam and setting fire to Israeli and US flags. About 150 people marched in Bethlehem in the West Bank.

On the other side of the planet, protesters brought Australia's second largest city, Melbourne, to a standstill. Organisers put the crowd at 40,000, police said it numbered "tens of thousands." Australia is a staunch ally of the US and a supporter of the use of force to disarm Saddam.

Anti-US sentiment was also strong in Muslim Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan, where many saw the attack as the start of a US campaign to subjugate the Islamic world and seize oil.

In Pakistan there were scattered but peaceful rallies across the country against what some called "American terrorism," while in Indonesia some 2,000 people from a conservative Muslim party sang and chanted anti-American slogans outside the US embassy.

'US war on Iraq to unravel anti-terror coalition'

AFP, Riyadh

A prominent Saudi religious scholar has denounced the "reckless" US military campaign against Iraq, warning Washington that it would lead to the collapse of its vaunted "anti-terror coalition."

"I am confident that the US administration has committed a grave mistake by going into this unjust war which will harm its interests in the long term, starting with the unraveling of the so-called 'anti-terror coalition'," said Sheikh Salman al-Odah, a formerly dissident cleric, in a statement faxed to AFP.

Odah said the objective of the war launched by the United States Thursday was to install an Iraqi regime "that would project an acceptable image of democracy, albeit one tailored to American interests" with a "controlled" form of political participation.

Such a regime in Baghdad would "actively participate in future intelligence missions" and provide a springboard for "military campaigns against this or that (Islamic) country," he said.

The offensive against Iraq was aimed at ending "all forms of independence" and eliminating the means of "acquiring strength in the whole Islamic region," the cleric charged.

Lankan peace talks end without any accord

LTTE attacks Chinese trawler, 14 feared dead

AFP, Hakone

Sri Lanka's peace negotiators officially ended four days of talks here Friday without agreement on key human rights issues and amid reports of fresh violence at home, officials said.

Representatives of the Sri Lankan government and the rebel Tamil Tigers at the Japanese-hosted talks concluded their bargaining Thursday and went into a brief session Friday to finalise a joint statement, officials close to the talks said.

"This is a session where we were unable to achieve what we had set out initially," said government negotiator Rauf Hakeem. "But, we agreed to mechanisms to safeguard human rights when we meet next month."

Norwegian peace brokers said there was no breakthrough at the latest talks, the sixth round for the two sides since their first face-to-face contact in September.

"There is no breakthrough... but there was a lot of hard work and there will have to be many more sessions of hard work before we get to a settlement," said Norwegian

diplomat Erik Solheim.

Sri Lanka's chief peace negotiator, G. L. Peiris, said the government and the Tigers had taken up the contentious issue of power and revenue sharing under a federal system that is to be the basis for a final settlement.

As the talks were entering the final phase before a joint press conference, a defence ministry official in Sri Lanka said a Chinese fishing trawler had been attacked off the island's northern Jafna peninsula.

Meanwhile, fourteen crew of a

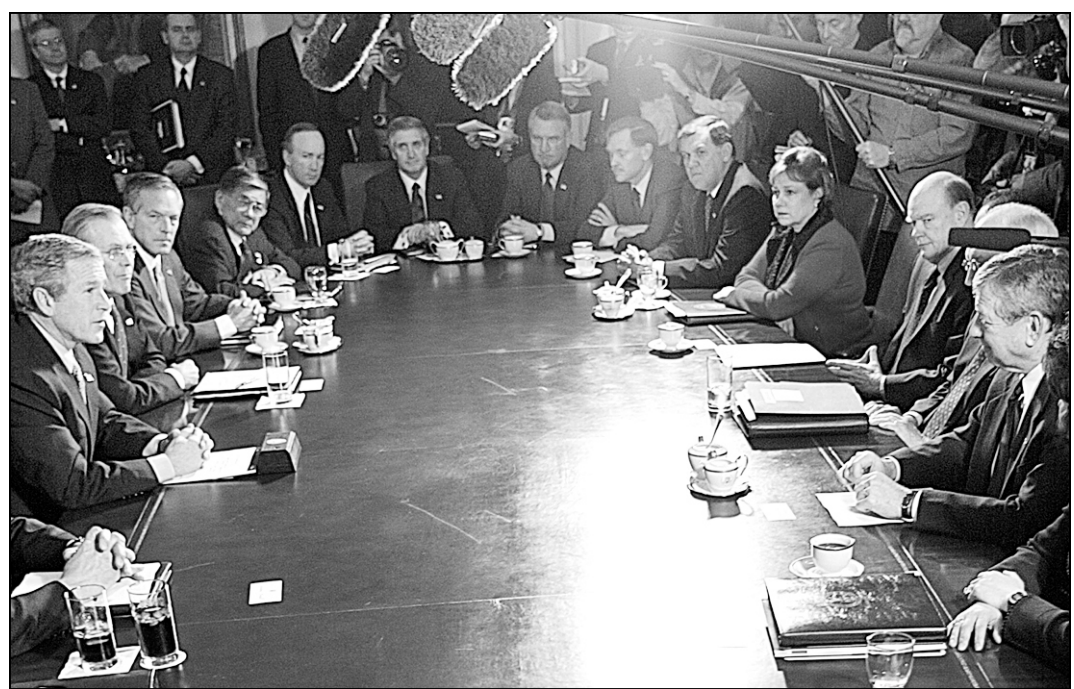
Chinese trawler are believed to have died when the boat was sunk off the east coast of Sri Lanka in an attack suspected to have been carried out by Tamil Tiger rebels, a defence official said Friday.

The trawler Ufauan-u 225, with 23 crew, was sunk 16 kilometres (10 miles) east of the town of Chundikulam early Thursday morning, the official said.

A naval spokesman who did not want to be identified said nine of the crew members were rescued by a second trawler in the area, Ufauan-u 226, which had not come under attack.



The top negotiator of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Anton Balasingham (L) answers a question while Norwegian deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen (C) and Sri Lankan chief negotiator G. L. Peiris (R) look on during their joint press conference after their four-day peace talks at Japan's mountain resort Hakone, 150 km west of Tokyo on Friday.



US President George W. Bush (L) meets with his cabinet at the White House in Washington, DC, on Thursday. US-led forces began military operations against Iraq late Wednesday.

7 in 10 Americans back decision to go to war

THE WASHINGTON POST, Washington

A substantial majority of Americans support the war with Iraq, but the public is divided over whether Iraqi President Saddam Hussein must be killed, captured or merely removed from power for the United States and its allies to be successful, according to a Washington Post-ABC News poll.

More than seven in 10 endorsed the decision of President Bush to wage war on Iraq. A similar proportion expressed confidence that the United States and its allies are right to use military force to topple Hussein and rid Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction. And two out of three said they believe Bush had worked hard enough to try to find a diplomatic solution before ordering the attack.

"I didn't vote for George Bush, but I strongly support him, and if anything I think he should have acted sooner," said Rick Jackson, 31, a manager at an engineering

company in Bradenton, Fla. "I think he exhausted all channels to appease those who don't agree with us."

But one in four Americans disagree, including Julie Fanselow, 41, a travel writer in Twin Falls, Idaho, who attended an antiwar vigil yesterday evening. "I would rank this as among the saddest days of my life... The whole idea of striking at another country that has not attacked us, and the idea of waging a war that we don't even know the cost of, at a time when we're facing such economic distress here at home -- it all pains me, it really does."

The survey also found that about half of those interviewed said Hussein must be captured or killed for the war to be declared a success, while more than four in 10 said it would be sufficient if the Iraqi leader were removed from power. "I feel he has to be captured or killed," said Ross Bethard, 60, a Ford Motor Co. employee who lives

outside Cleveland and is cautiously supportive of the Iraq invasion. "I feel that he is going to reappear someplace else if they don't capture him."

A slight majority -- 53 per cent -- said the war would be justified even if troops failed to uncover weapons of mass destruction -- Bush's major rationale for the war. But more than a third said the United States and its allies need to find banned weapons to validate the decision to use force against Iraq.

"They need to find them. If they came out and showed us that he had all these weapons, then I could say to myself that we were justified going to war," said Charlene Boudreau, 65, a retired receiving clerk in Enfield, Conn., who said she is opposed to Bush's decision to go to war.

A total of 506 randomly selected adults were interviewed last night. The margin of sampling error was plus or minus 5 percentage points.

Pak Muslims call anti-war strike, rallies

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's main Islamic opposition alliance called a nationwide shutdown for Friday to protest against the war in Iraq and planned anti-war rallies after mid-day prayers.

But shops and markets opened normally and public transport was running early on Friday in the capital, Islamabad, the nearby city of Rawalpindi and the southern port city of Karachi, although it was too early to tell if the strike had failed.

The strike and rallies were organized by the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a grouping of six hardline Muslim parties that has brought tens of thousands of Pakistanis on to the streets in recent weeks against the US-led war.

There were scattered anti-war protests across Pakistan on Thursday against what some called "American terrorism."

Demonstrators set fire to tires in some rallies and carried a coffin draped with the US flag in Rawalpindi.

But there were no reports of violence.

The MMA also plans a "million-man march" against the war in the eastern city of Lahore on Sunday, when Pakistan celebrates republic day.

'Palestinians, Israelis must show restraint'

REUTERS, Brussels

The conflict between Israel and Palestine remains of great concern to the European Union and both sides should show the utmost restraint, draft conclusions from a meeting of EU leaders said on Friday.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in particular, remains a cause of great concern. Both sides should act with the utmost restraint," the draft text said.

The draft said the Iraq crisis highlighted the need for the Middle East conflict to be resolved and called on Israel to reverse its settlement policy in the occupied territories and on Palestinians to continue their reforms.



Indian garment vendors catch up on the latest news of the Iraq conflict in their Kolkata shop on Friday. Governments around the globe condemned the US-led invasion of Iraq, claiming it will destabilise the region, and the world.