

US won't rewrite ME roadmap: Powell

Secretary of State Colin Powell said on Tuesday that the United States does not plan to rewrite or renegotiate its road map for Middle East peace. Powell said the document, accepted by the Palestinians but not by Israel, was "the only path" to peace. "They (the Israeli government) have some comments on the road map and we will listen to their comments but we do not plan to rewrite or renegotiate the road map," Powell told reporters in Amman on the third leg of a Middle East tour. Powell, unable to win overt Israeli approval of the road map, said on Monday he could settle for small practical steps while Israelis and Palestinians work out their differences in direct negotiations. "We believe the best way to get there is through the road map. Israel knows that the road map lays out the steps that have to be taken," he said before flying to the Saudi capital Riyadh. The peace plan requires Israel to accept an independent

Saudi blasts overshadow Bremer's first day in Iraq

But real progress could only be made if Israel showed flexibility as Palestinians took concrete steps to clampdown on suicide bombings, he said. "It's Israeli willingness to move down this path and Palestinian willingness and ability to deal with security issues that are uppermost in the minds of the Israelis." AFP adds: US Secretary of State Colin Powell strove to reassure the Palestinians over the future of the roadmap for peace Tuesday, even as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said the thorny issue of Jewish settlements was not on his agenda. Sharon reiterated Tuesday in an interview with the Jerusalem Post that this issue, a major stumbling block in any negotiations, was not even on his agenda. "It is not something today that anyone is dealing with," Sharon told the English-language newspaper, saying that the Jewish state was under no US pressure to take any action even against unauthorised settlement outposts.



Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (L) chats with his counterpart Emile Lahoud (R) after planting a cedar tree at the garden of Baabda presidential palace, 11 km east of Beirut on Monday. Khatami received a rousing welcome at the start of a landmark visit, which his Lebanese hosts placed under a banner of moderation rather than confrontation with Washington.

UN authority needed for new Iraq govt: UK

British Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said late Monday that the United States and Britain would need United Nations authority to set up a new government for Iraq. "I accept in order to change the nature of the system in Iraq towards a new government that is responsible to the Iraqi people, then there will ultimately have to be UN authority to achieve that," Hoon told BBC television. Asked if the US and Britain would lack such authority if a UN resolution was not passed, Hoon said: "We have prepared a draft resolution for the consideration of the Security Council. "It's highly likely, indeed almost inevitable, given the way in which Security Council resolutions are debated, that it will be amended." In New York on Friday, the United States, Britain and Spain released the draft text of a resolution under which Washington would be recognised as the occupying power in Iraq -- with "specific authorities, responsibilities and obligations" -- while the UN would provide a supporting role. Another report says, about a hundred Iraqis marched Tuesday in support of Iraq's long-abolished monarchy as around the same



A US tank passes in a busy street in Baghdad where garbage accumulates on Monday. City services have not been restored totally to normality one month after the US-led invasion that toppled the Saddam Hussein regime.

Arundhati sees US losing democracy

The United States government is waging "a spurious war on terror" that is costing Americans their freedoms and democracy, Indian writer and human rights activist Arundhati Roy said on Monday. Roy, who in October 2002 called for civil disobedience to oppose the US buildup to war on Iraq, said a campaign of "targeted civil disobedience" was needed now to thwart companies with rebuilding contracts in the Gulf country. "We need to target, we need to take a list of every single company that is taking a reconstruction contract in Iraq," Roy, 41, said at a New York news conference to discuss "War Talk," her new compilation of essays. "We need to isolate them, expose them and shut them down." Roy, whose 1997 novel The God of Small Things won the Booker Prize in Britain, said legislation like the US Patriot Act had damaged US democracy.

Taiwan struggles while Beijing controls SARS

Chinese officials said Tuesday new SARS infections were on the wane in Beijing but tougher diagnoses have boosted the caseload in Taiwan, where the army's biological research unit was mobilized. Beijing health authorities, eager to lift the cloud hanging over the capital that has emptied the streets and stretched hospital resources to breaking point, proclaimed the disease was under control in the city of 13 million. "Currently, we have indeed adopted a large number of effective measures. We can see the incidences of the disease have clearly been brought under control," said Han Demin, executive deputy director of the Beijing Municipal Health Bureau. "Everyday, the number of new cases are clearly dropping." Reports of new cases remained under 60 on Monday for the fourth straight day, after hovering around 100 for weeks. WHO officials, however, have cautioned that it was premature to say that the outbreak in the world's most affected city in the world has peaked or is in decline. Vital data remained flawed or missing, they said. Moreover, authorities have no idea where half of Beijing's 2,304 confirmed cases contracted SARS, WHO spokeswoman Mangai Balasegaram told AFP. "WHO's position is at the moment we can't say where the epidemic is going. There are a lot of missing factors. There are a lot of unknowns," she said. Beijing has recorded 129 SARS deaths and more than 10,000 people remain under quarantine from 24,000 initially isolated. Fears that Beijing's estimated four million migrant workers could have carried the virus as they fled to China's sprawling rural provinces were also compounded by official figures that show such migrants represent one in 10 infections by the pneumonia-like respiratory virus. WHO teams of experts fanned out across the provinces Monday in hopes of tracking and treating those returned rural workers, particularly those who live in provinces abutting Beijing and the southern province of Guangdong. In Taiwan, one more death and 13 infections were reported Tuesday. The latest figures followed a steady surge in fatalities and new infections, which officials have said is due more to better diagnostics than to an increase in the island's transmission rate already classified as "high" by the WHO.

Chechnya blast toll rises to 52

The death toll from a suicide attack in Chechnya on a pro-Russian government building rose to 52 Tuesday and was expected to move even higher as rescue workers searched the rubble for victims, the Russian emergency ministry said. Eighty-six people remained hospitalized, including 57 in critical condition, following the truck bomb blast in Znamenskoye, northern Chechnya, the ministry said, quoted by Interfax-AVN news agency. Rescue workers have pulled out alive 23 people from the rubble of the blasted government complex, which housed the local administration, police and FSB intelligence services, it added. "The great majority of the dead were civilians, including 22 women and children," the head of Chechnya's pro-Russian administration, Akhmad Kadyrov, told the ITAR-TASS news agency.

'Iran's resumption of ties with US is surrender'

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a speech that resumption of ties with the United States would be surrender, the state news agency IRNA reported. "Some are prescribing surrender to the US adventurers, but surrender to the enemy is no remedy," Khamenei told thousands of students at Tehran's Shahid Beheshti University. His tough words came the day after US officials admitted to ongoing contacts between the two nations and, a week after, 153 MPs in the 290-seat Iranian parliament signed an open letter calling for normal relations between Iran and the outside world, including the United States. "To go to the enemy is not the solution, since that would do nothing but to reinforce his morale, and make him more and more adventurous," the powerful cleric said. Khamenei, whose bloc of conservative clerics dominate the country, lashed out at Iranian reformists who wish to ease the country's strict laws and social customs. "To question the effectiveness of Iran's system, as well as our values and revolutionary beliefs, serves the American interests", Khamenei said. "Unfortunately certain elements, consciously and unconsciously, are helping the enemy to create the conditions for a (US) military or partial-military action." Khamenei criticized the reformist lawmakers for calling to turn the "US threat" to "an opportunity" through restoring diplomatic ties, which were broken off 23 years ago in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution. He warned: "The Americans know very well that any adventures in Iran will fail." He cautioned the US government not to mistake the simmering tensions between the country's conservatives and reformists as the beginning of the end for the Islamic regime. "Despite some dissatisfaction from certain parts of the government system, the people have trust in the officials and the young Iranians are ready to defend the country," Khamenei said.

It's time for Blair to quit: Clare Short

Former minister Clare Short Tuesday called on Tony Blair to prepare to step aside as British prime minister, a day after she offered her high-profile resignation as international development secretary. Following a scathing attack on Blair's policy on Iraq, Short said the ruling Labour party should organise an "elegant succession", apparently from Blair to Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown. In a joint interview with the Guardian and the Financial Times, Short said the Labour government must be "well led and true to its values". "The job is, without falling out into horrendous splits, to try and ensure we keep up the quality of the government and, indeed, organise an elegant succession." She added: "I think Tony Blair has enormous achievements under his belt and it would be very sad if he hung on and spoiled his reputation."

Victims of Iraq war to file lawsuit against US commander

Relatives of victims of the Iraq war are to file a lawsuit alleging war crimes Wednesday against US General Tommy Franks, the commander of coalition forces during the conflict, a lawyer said Tuesday. The plaintiffs, mostly Iraqis, will file the suit under a disputed Belgian "universal competence" law which allows charges to be brought regardless of where the alleged crimes took place. Their suit relates to about 20 alleged crimes during the Iraq war, including three cases where US troops are accused of firing on ambulances, said lawyer Jan Fermon. The plaintiffs include Dima Tabhub, the widow of a Jordanian correspondent for Qatar-based Arabic satellite broadcaster Al-Jazeera, Tareq Ayub, who was killed on April 8 in a US bombing, he said. The "universal competence" law, in force since 1993, allows Belgian courts to rule on alleged crimes under international law, regardless of where they were committed, the nationality of those accused of the victims. The impending lawsuit has already sparked alarm in the US government, which remains concerned about the controversial law despite recent moves by the Belgian parliament to limit its scope. The lawsuit shows "the danger of a judicial system that's open to politically motivated charges," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said last month. The Belgian lawyer said some of the allegations are backed up by witness statements by two doctors from a Belgian medical aid group, "Medecins pour le Tiers-Monde" (Doctors for the Third World). Fermon is also representing several victims of fragmentation bombs as well as civilians fired upon when US troops entered Baghdad, he said. The lawsuit will also relate to the ransacking of a cultural centre "under the eyes of American soldiers."

US army to step up policing in Baghdad

US Army commanders say they will increase the number of soldiers on patrol in the capital, where ordinary Iraqis are pleading for more security against criminals and other threats. The Army also is stepping up efforts to remove cluster bombs and other unexploded munitions that have posed hazards to Iraqi civilians, including children, since the war's major combat ended nearly a month ago, officials said. "They've made that one of their high-priority tasks", Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on Tuesday as he concluded an afternoon visit to US Army outposts around the city. "They'll stop almost anything else they're doing" to remove the unexploded munitions, which are "a big danger to the civilian population, particularly children, who might be fond of kicking the device." Myers flew on Monday to Brussels, Belgium, for two days of meetings with NATO military authorities. Myers spent Sunday and Monday visiting US and allied troops in Qatar, Kuwait and Iraq. Lt Gen William "Fuzzy" Webster, deputy commander of all allied ground forces in Iraq, said in a separate interview Monday that within two weeks an additional 1,000 military police would be operating in Baghdad. "Then it will quickly decline again," he said, because the 1st Armoured Division, which is scheduled to enter Iraq soon as a replacement for the 3rd Infantry Division, has fewer military police than the 3rd.



Several thousand people stage a demonstration Tuesday in Nice, on the French Riviera, as unions launched a day of strikes against proposed pension reforms. Much of France ground to a halt on Tuesday as unions launched a day of strikes and demonstration against pension reform.