

## Large fall in UK asylum seekers

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair will announce this week that there has been a significant drop in the number of asylum seekers reaching Britain, a London newspaper reported Sunday.

Blair will use a press conference Thursday to announce a "dramatic fall" in the number of asylum seekers during the first quarter of 2003 and that the government is on course to meet its target of halving the number of new claimants by October, The Sunday Telegraph said.

Latest figures will show that around 5,000 asylum seekers came to Britain each month between January and March of this year, down from around 9,000 last October, the weekly said.

A Home Office spokeswoman confirmed the latest figures would be published Thursday but refused to be drawn on what they would show.

Blair promised in February to reduce the monthly number of asylum seekers entering Britain to 4,500 by October 2003.

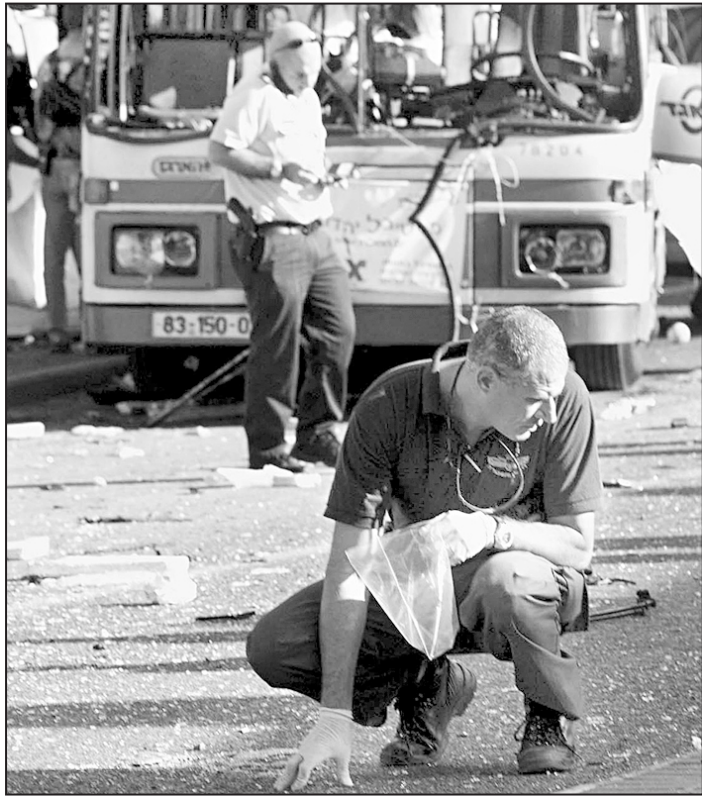


PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli investigator collects evidence in the place where a suicide bomber blew himself up in a passenger bus in East Jerusalem on Sunday. Seven people were killed and at least 20 injured in the suicide bomb attack in East Jerusalem early Sunday when a blast blew apart the bus just before the morning rush hour in the French Hill neighborhood of the city.

# Abbas urges Sharon to accept ME roadmap

## Emergency Israeli cabinet meet after double blasts

AFP, Jericho

Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas asked Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to officially accept the roadmap for peace during their meeting in Jerusalem, an official statement said Sunday.

Palestinian information minister Nabil Amr's statement was received by AFP here before a double suicide attack in Jerusalem killed seven people plus the bombers and prompted Sharon to put off a trip to Washington aimed at discussing the roadmap.

"Abu Mazen (Abbas) presented the Palestinian position the following way: We agree on all points of the roadmap and we urge the Israeli government to officially accept it," the statement said.

"We are looking forward to working together on the basis of a

common commitment to all issues," it said.

"We urge you to put an end to the siege on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and release prisoners in order to create a positive atmosphere for putting the peace process back on track," Amr's statement said.

"We also ask you to put an end to the closure on the Palestinian people, to settlement activity and military operations, and to stop building the separation wall" between Israel and the West Bank," he added.

"We are ready and we have the ability to deliver on our commitment to the roadmap, but we need you to do the same on your side. We cannot work on the basis of a partial approval," Amr urged Abbas as telling Sharon.

Sharon has not officially accepted the blueprint and was

expected to seek amendments to the three-phase plan during his trip to Washington for talks with US President George W. Bush.

The roadmap calls for an end to armed Palestinian attacks, an Israeli withdrawal to pre-Intifada lines of September 2000 and a freeze on Jewish settlement activity but has had little impact on the ground since it was published nearly three weeks ago.

Sharon's office released a statement overnight saying "the two parties were agreed that an end to terrorism is a vital step for making progress and the Palestinians have promised to make a real and sincere effort to bring this about."

Sharon and Abbas "agree to pursue their talks in the near future following Sharon's return from the United States," the statement concluded.

Abbas was accompanied by

minister of state for security affairs Mohammed Dahlan and parliament speaker Ahmad Qorei, while Sharon brought his top aide Dov Weissglas, General Yoav Galland and his legal adviser Shalom Turdman.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon summoned his cabinet for an emergency meeting later Sunday, following double suicide attacks which killed seven people plus the two bombers in Jerusalem, his office said.

"Sharon will confer with his cabinet at 6:00 pm (1500 GMT) following this wave of terrorist attacks," a statement said.

Sharon, who met with Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas Saturday night in the highest level Israeli-Palestinian talks since just after the outbreak of the Intifada, postponed a trip to Washington following the bombings.

## Russia for compromise over Iraq resolution

AFP, Moscow

Russia said Sunday it was seeking a compromise to a draft resolution that would lift UN sanctions on Iraq and allow the United States and its allies effectively to administer the country for at least a year.

Deputy Foreign Minister Yuri Fedotov told the ITAR-TASS news agency that Moscow hoped that "we will still be able to find a mutually acceptable solution" on Iraq.

His comments appeared more toned down than those issued one day earlier, when Fedotov said that Russia was not ready to back the draft resolution submitted by the United States, Britain and Spain.

He told ITAR-TASS on Sunday that "the last details of the resolutions have not yet been worked out."

But Fedotov, who holds the United Nations dossier within the Russian foreign ministry, added that "Russia has always stood in favor of the earliest possible lifting of the sanctions."

# Morocco sees global terror tie in blasts

THE NEW YORK TIMES, Casablanca

The Moroccan government said today that five suicide bombings here Friday night that cost 41 lives appeared to have been the work of a Moroccan organization with international terrorist links.

Mohammed Nabil Ben Abdallah, the minister of communication and the government's chief spokesman, characterized the suicide bombers as "young kamikaze commandos" mostly in their 20s, adding, "We are convinced that they are part of a cell with direct ties to an international network located on international soil."

As to whether that meant Al Qaeda, the terrorist network of Osama bin Laden, Ben Abdallah said, "While it would be premature to say that Al Qaeda was responsible until we have clear proof, my personal opinion is that we're talking about a network of this

scope."

Ben Abdallah, who spoke in an interview in Rabat, also cited a taped message, said to be from Mr. bin Laden and broadcast in February on Arab television, that included Morocco on a list of "apostate" Arab nations.

No one has taken responsibility for the attacks so far, but Mr. Ben Abdallah said investigators had concluded that the coordinated bombings, which also left about 100 people wounded, were the work of a cell of at least 14 Moroccan men who were divided into five teams.

Thirteen members of the group were among those killed in the attacks, and six of them have been identified. The 14th man is in police custody, he said.

Ben Abdallah also confirmed reports that shortly after the attacks the government made dozens of arrests of suspected

Islamic militants. In one raid, the police discovered a homemade bomb along with materials and a guidebook for making other bombs, he said.

He identified those arrested as belonging either to "sleeping cells" waiting for orders to strike or fundamentalist Islamic "warriors."

Most of the victims of the bombings were Moroccan, but two were French, two Spanish and one Italian, Ben Abdallah said.

The targets of the attacks, scattered across this port city of more than three million people, included the Hotel Farah, a Jewish community center and the Casa de España club and restaurant, witnesses said. Another bomb went off near the Belgian Consulate, although the Belgian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Didier Seeuws, said in Brussels today that the government had determined that the likely target was a nearby Jewish-owned restaurant.

## Al-Qaeda weakened but 'not idle': Bush

REUTERS, Washington

On alert after bombings in Morocco and Saudi Arabia, President Bush warned on Saturday of the threat still posed by al-Qaeda, which he said was weakened but "not idle" despite US military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Two weeks after declaring aboard a US aircraft carrier that "we have seen the turning of the tide" in the war against terrorism, Bush called the deadly bombings in Saudi Arabia "a stark reminder" of the dangers ahead.

His remarks were recorded hours before suicide bomb attacks in Morocco's biggest city, Casablanca, killed 41 people and injured scores. A Jewish community center and Spanish club were among the targets and US officials said the bombings could have been the work of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

In a statement late Saturday,

Bush condemned the attacks. "These acts of murder show, once again that terrorism respects no boundaries nor borders," Bush said. "These acts demonstrate that the war against terror goes on."

Bush said the United States was offering assistance to the government of Morocco to help "track down and bring to justice those responsible."

Bush said the United States was taking "unprecedented measures to defend the homeland," and was hunting al-Qaeda operatives from Pakistan to the Philippines to the Horn of Africa. Despite a global manhunt, bin Laden remains at large.

"The enemies of freedom are not idle and neither are we," Bush said in his weekly radio address, paying tribute to US soldiers on Armed Forces Day. Eight troops injured in Iraq joined Bush in the Oval Office to tape the address on Friday. The president was at the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland for the weekend.



PHOTO: AFP

Students walk in the garden of the Art Faculty of Baghdad University on Saturday. Iraqi students returned to their universities for the first time since the US-led war on Iraq to find new forces at work on their campuses after the ouster of Saddam Hussein.



PHOTO: AFP

A wounded policeman is watched by a nurse and policeman at a hospital in Casablanca, Morocco on Saturday following a blast late Friday. Forty-one people were killed and scores injured in a wave of bomb blasts that shook Morocco's largest city Casablanca, leaving a trail of carnage as the world went on high alert for terror attacks.

## Annan for sustained campaign against terrorism

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called Saturday for a sustained international campaign against terrorism, following a series of bomb blasts in Casablanca, Morocco, that have left at least 41 people dead.

UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said in a statement that Annan "utterly condemns" the attacks and sends his "heartfelt condolences" to the government and people of Morocco and to the families of all the dead and injured.

"The secretary general especially condemns the deliberate targeting of civilians," Eckhard pointed out. "The callous fanaticism and intolerance of these acts is repugnant to all religions

and to the great majority of humanity."

The Casablanca blasts targeted a private Spanish club, a Jewish cultural centre, an international hotel and the area around the Belgian consulate.

"The secretary general considers that the recent wave of terrorist outrages, coupled with fresh warnings of further attacks being planned, underlines the need for the international community to give its full attention to the need for a broad-based and sustained campaign against international terrorism," the spokesman said.

A suicide bomb attack on a Western residential compound in the Saudi capital of Riyadh last Monday killed at least 34 people.

## Aceh peace talks resume amid Jakarta's ultimatum

REUTERS, Tokyo/Banda Aceh

Aceh separatists and Indonesian officials were locked in tense peace talks in Tokyo on Sunday with only hours left to avert war following a tough ultimatum from Jakarta.

Hopes of a deal looked slim as one rebel negotiator in Aceh province dismissed Jakarta's deadline for the separatists to give up their demands for independence by Sunday while a spokesman said the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was ready for war. "Of course we will not surrender, we will hold on, we will fight," rebel spokesman Sofyan Daud said in the local capital Banda Aceh, 1,060 miles northwest of Jakarta.

Delegates from both sides entered the site for the Tokyo talks, which are aimed at rescuing a landmark December peace agreement, without speaking to reporters.

Asked to describe the atmo-

sphere in the talks - the first time the delegates have met face-to-face since arriving in Tokyo on Saturday -- one of the mediators later replied: "Tense."

In Banda Aceh, however, there was no overt sign of tension. Families enjoyed the day off and men packed coffee shops playing cards. There was no sign of increased security.

The rebel negotiator scoffed at the government ultimatum.

"If it has to be by May 19, then that's impossible," said Sofyan Ibrahim Tiba, referring to a threatened Indonesian decree authorizing war that the government has said would be issued by Monday at the latest unless the rebels agreed to surrender arms and give up their demand for independence.

## Bremer for fighting lawlessness first

AFP, Mosul

The new US overseer in Iraq, Paul Bremer, pressed his campaign to stem post-war lawlessness Sunday, touring a police station and a courthouse on his first visit to Iraq's northern capital of Mosul.

He joined his British deputy John Sawers and local US commander Major General David Petraeus on a walkabout in a street market as he highlighted the coalition's promise to start getting life back to normal more than five weeks after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

On the flight in, Bremer was briefed on the security situation in the city, where a rich but sometimes volatile mix of ethnic communities, including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and Assyrian Christians, has sometimes erupted into communal violence.

He held talks with mayor Ghanim al-Basso and other members of a new multi-ethnic city council installed in US-organised elections on May 5 in a bid to stem

the unrest.

There was tight security outside the council building as two separate groups of protesters gathered -- former Iraqi army officers wanting back pay, and Arab villagers displaced by Kurds returning to their homes.

Bremer found strong support for his pledge to root out former officials of Saddam's Baath Party whom the coalition had initially kept in place in a bid to get Iraq back on its feet.

"The main threat to the coalition forces is the Baath party. They should be dealt with promptly and harshly," said city council member Humain al-Qaddo.

But he also heard complaints about the slow pace of US efforts to restore law and order and normal day-to-day life, and secure the distribution of essential supplies.

"Americans work hard but they are slow," said Qaddo. "They are helping but we have to wait and see."

"The priority right now in the city is benzene and propane," he said referring to the chronic short-

ages of both petrol and cooking gas which has plagued all of Iraq's major cities.

Bremer visited a petrol station, which was just receiving a fresh delivery under US army protection to cater for a large queue of waiting motorists.

On his walkabout, security was deliberately low-key with the military staying largely out of sight and just a small security detail escorting Bremer and his US and British colleagues around the market.

The coalition officials stopped several times to chat to traders and shoppers about their problems.

Bremer also visited US commanders at the main US headquarters in Saddam's former palace in this city of some 1.5 million people.

Mosul was the scene of one of the bloodiest incidents in post-war Iraq last month when shootings involving US troops left around 20 people dead and scores wounded.