

'Al-Qaeda testing germ weapons'

THE STRAITS TIMES/ ANN, Washington

The al-Qaeda terrorist network has been pursuing a sophisticated biological weapons research programme and is seeking chemical weapons, the Pentagon has told Congress.

Other terrorist groups and dozens of countries are also pursuing chemical and biological weapons, which could be used in a regional conflict or terrorist attack, the military said in a report.

"The relative ease of producing some chemical or biological agents has increased concern that their use may become more attractive to terrorist groups intent on causing panic or inflicting large numbers of casualties," the report said.

It also said that companies in Russia and China were the key suppliers of the know-how and equipment for countries such as Iran trying to develop their own biological and chemical weapons.

Taiwan turns down China's donation after WHO snub

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan authorities on Sunday rejected China's offer of medical protective gear and said Beijing could better help the island's people by not blocking its bid to join the World Health Organisation (WHO).

In a letter to its Chinese counterpart, Taiwan's quasi-official Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF) recommended that Chinese authorities keep their own battle against the SARS epidemic.

"As we have sufficient medical supplies, we suggest the materials be used on the mainland, in the hope the epidemic could be placed under control there and the cross-strait exchanges be gradually restored," the SEF said.

"Taiwan would like to help if there is any need from the mainland."

China's donation package included 200,000 protective gowns, 100,000 N-95 masks and five ambulances designed to transport SARS patients, according to the SEF.

US forces order Iraqis to disarm by mid-June

AP, Baghdad

The US-led coalition officially ordered Iraqis on Saturday to disarm by mid-June, part of a high-profile effort to get weapons off the streets and return public security to cities under American occupation.

Anyone found with unauthorized weapons after June 14 will be detained and face criminal charges, US Central Command in Florida said, quoting a "national order" from the top civilian administrator, L. Paul Bremer of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance.

"No one in Iraq, unless authorized, may possess, conceal, hide or bury these weapons," the United States said. "No one can trade, sell, barter, give or exchange automatic or heavy weapons with or to any person who is not an authorized representative of coalition forces."

During a 14-day amnesty period

that begins June 1, Iraqis will be permitted to turn in unauthorized weapons at "weapons-control points" throughout the country.

The Centcom announcement came a day after Lt. Gen. David McKiernan, commander of US ground forces in Iraq, said citizens would be instructed to disarm.

"The intent is not to completely disarm the Iraqi population of all weapons. That is neither practical nor necessary," McKiernan said Friday.

One group that may stay armed, at least on some level, is the peshmerga, a Kurdish fighting force that helped the United States during the war.

"The peshmerga are a little different story," McKiernan said. "The peshmerga fought with the coalition forces during this (war), and we are looking at leaving them with some of their weapons."

They would be permitted to

keep their weapons only in certain northern regions, McKiernan said.

"We have not decided exactly which weapons they will continue to possess," he said. "But they will be allowed to keep some weapons."

Coalition forces have been struggling to maintain order in postwar Iraq, and have identified an armed citizenry as one of the biggest obstacles.

Under Bremer's order, Iraqis must place unloaded, disassembled weapon into a clear plastic bag provided by coalition forces and walk slowly to the collection point, the United States said.

Collection points will be at police stations and other designated locations and will be jointly staffed by Iraqi and coalition forces. Weapons may only be turned in during the day, and guns turned in will either be destroyed or used by the new Iraqi army and police.

It's time for Israel to cede land: Sharon

Cabinet meet convened for vote on roadmap

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Hardline Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said in comments published on Sunday that "the time has come" to reach a land-for-peace deal with the Palestinians.

Sharon's remarks, published in the daily newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth, came as his Cabinet readied for a vote on the US-backed "roadmap" peace plan that the Israeli leader accepted on Friday.

"The time has come to divide this piece of land between us and the Palestinians," Sharon said in his first publicly published comments admitting a readiness to cede land for peace.

"No one is going to teach me about the strips of land that we will be asked to leave, I am no less connected to them from those who are speaking from up high," said Sharon, a long-time leading advocate of the Jewish settlement lobby.

"But you have to be realistic about what we can and cannot continue to hold," he added.

The road map sets out reciprocal steps leading to a Palestinian state by 2005 and a freeze on Jewish settlement expansion in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that Israel occupied in the 1967 Middle East war.

In the final stage of the plan, Israel will also be asked to disman-

tle some of the 145 settlements it built on lands the Palestinians seek for their state.

AFP adds: Prime Minister Ariel Sharon opened a cabinet meeting Sunday morning determined to win the government's approval for the internationally drafted Middle East peace roadmap, Israeli radio reported.

Sharon huddled with members of his right-wing Likud party ahead of what was expected to be a turbulent cabinet session, with some Likud ministers and other hardliners openly opposed to the plan, drafted by Washington, Moscow, the United Nations and European Union.

Queen's man in Australia quits

AFP, Sydney

Australian's embattled Governor-General Peter Hollingworth announced his resignation Sunday, saying "misplaced and unwarranted" allegations had forced him from office.

The representative of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II had been under fire for weeks over allegations he covered up child sexual abuse while Anglican Archbishop in Brisbane in the 1990s and he stood down earlier this month when it emerged he faced a rape allegation dating back to the 1960s.

While the rape claim was dismissed Friday, Hollingworth released a statement saying he feared ongoing public controversy was damaging the office of governor-general.



PHOTO: AFP
Angry residents are held back by security forces as Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika passes by on Saturday in the Bourmerdes neighbourhood devastated by the May 21 earthquake. Angry residents booed and threw stones at Bouteflika touring the ruins of buildings that were shattered in Wednesday night's quake, with dozens of plainclothes police holding back hundreds of people shouting "Rulers, murderers!"

Hope for survivors dwindles in Algeria

Quake toll tops 2,000

AFP, Algiers

The death toll from the killer earthquake that struck Algeria jumped over 2,000 Sunday, with chances of finding anyone else alive as fears rose over a looming epidemic.

Grief has given way to anger among Algerians, who blame the government for a shoddy rescue effort and for the massive loss of life caused by corrupt building practices.

Hundreds of protesters hurled insults and some stones at President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on Saturday, forcing him to abort a visit to Bourmerdes, leaving after just a few minutes.

"Rulers - killers!" they shouted. "Get lost, get screwed!" one cried. "Tents! Water! We need everything!" shouted others.

The interior ministry on Sunday said 2,047 people had lost their lives in the massive quake, and more than 8,600 people were injured in the tremor, the worst to hit the north African country since 1980.

Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia said on state radio he feared no further survivors would be found from the deadly tremor, which struck around the capital last Wednesday.

"Rescue operations are continuing, but there comes a moment after which the operations will begin to become hopeless," he

said. The premier made the comments hours after four further survivors were pulled from the rubble, nearly three days after the earthquake.

A mother and child were rescued from the ruins of their home in Bourmerdes, 50 kilometers (30 miles) east of Algiers, where a 10-year-old girl was also reportedly saved. A 21-year-old man was unearthed from a destroyed hotel in Zemmouri, 20 kilometers further to the east, more than 52 hours after the quake brought it down.

Meanwhile, hundreds of aftershocks have rattled buildings and further frayed the nerves of residents. While there were no immediate reports of the aftershocks causing any damage, it was feared the tremors could cause already dangerously unstable buildings to collapse, leading to further casualties.

The epicenter of the strongest aftershock to hit the region Saturday -- it measured 4.1 on the Richter scale -- was located some 60 kilometers east of the capital. Wednesday's quake topped out at 6.3, the Algerian seismological institute said.

Liberal newspapers and opposition politicians have joined in the chorus of criticism against the government's response to the crisis, while fingering a corrupt construction industry for the heavy death toll.

Koizumi calls for international conference on Iraq

AFP, Dubai

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi called Sunday for an international conference to be held focused on rebuilding Iraq.

"The Japanese government thinks it necessary to hold an international conference with a large number of countries and organisations taking part to help (reconstruction in) Iraq," Koizumi told Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper.

"Peace in the Middle East is the key to stability in this part of the world," he said, adding that the United Nations should play an "active role" in any conference on Iraq.

Koizumi, who was to visit Saudi Arabia later Sunday, said talks with Saudi officials would focus on "peace and stability in the Middle East in light of the end of the main military operations in Iraq."

"We now have a great opportunity to advance the Mideast peace process," he said.

Talks in Saudi Arabia would also broach rebuilding Iraq as well as bilateral relations, and relations between Japan and the Arab world, the prime minister told the Saudi-owned paper.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian youths throw stones at an Israeli armoured personnel vehicle on Saturday during clashes between the Israeli army and Palestinians at the Balata refugee camp near the West Bank city of Nablus.

Ex-NY Mayor Giuliani weds for 3rd time

REUTERS, New York

The weather outside was damp and dismal, but the bride and groom were radiant as former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani returned to New York's official mayoral residence to marry his girlfriend, Judith Nathan, on Saturday.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg performed the 15-minute ceremony around 7 p.m. EDT (2300 GMT) at Gracie Mansion, beneath a white tent on the lawn overlooking the East River.

Security was tight and reporters were barred from the wedding, which was attended by 400 guests, including former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, New York Yankees baseball great Yogi Berra, media magnate Rupert Murdoch and property tycoon Donald Trump.

"I conducted over 200 weddings and I'm worried that I don't start doing the ceremony myself," Giuliani told reporters as he arrived. "I feel terrific, absolutely terrific."

Giuliani's 17-year-old son Andrew was his best man. His daughter Caroline, 13, and Nathan's teen-age daughter Whitney, who was scheduled to sing for the couple, also attended.