

US Senate calls for NATO, UN troops to Iraq

Attacks on invasion forces go on

AFP, Baghdad

The US Senate unanimously called on the White House to consider asking for NATO and UN troops to be sent into Iraq as former commander Tommy Franks said US troops may have to stay as long as four years.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell for his part conceded he was uncertain how responsive allies would be to sending troops into Iraq to back Washington and London.

In a 97-0 vote, senators said President George W. Bush "should consider requesting formally and expeditiously that NATO raise a force for deployment in post-war Iraq similar to what it has done in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo."

"We need more forces ... and we have to make it clear that we're not a force of occupation," said Senator Joseph Biden, top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

"There's a need to internationalize this and to bring in NATO in particular," he added.

Meanwhile final negotiations were taking place here on the formation of a transitional governing council for Iraq, which is expected to be announced within days.

Likely raising fears among Democrats of a drawn-out and costly post-war stay in Iraq, Franks, who masterminded the three-week war to topple Saddam Hussein, said it would be unwise to think difficulties faced by the coalition "will go away in one month or two months or three months."

"Anticipate we'll be involved in Iraq in the future," Franks told the House Armed Services Committee Thursday. "Whether that means two years or four years, I don't know."

On the ground, US troops stationed at a presidential palace in the flashpoint town of Ramadi came under mortar fire for the

third night in a row, witnesses said.

A military spokesman said Friday a US tank fired a shell for the first time since the war was declared over on May 1 during the clashes.

Sergeant Amy Abbott in Baghdad said there were no US casualties, and there was no report on any Iraqi casualties.

Qatar's al-Jazeera channel for its part said clashes with unknown assailants in two parts of the Ramadi, 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of Baghdad, went on until dawn and that US helicopter gunships fired towards the assailants.

Amid the unstable security situation, Powell cautioned late Thursday against illusions about the amount of help the US-British coalition would get from allies, in contrast to more upbeat statements recently from US defense officials.

"I can't give you the exact num-

ber of nations or how many troops are going to be committed," Powell said, appearing on a CNN program.

"The guts of the work will still have to be done by the United States, Great Britain and the original members of the coalition," he conceded.

For its part, the newspaper USA Today poured cold water Thursday on expectations of quick foreign help, saying many nations were "balking" at jumping into the Iraqi cauldron with both feet.

It said India, Pakistan and Portugal, which the Pentagon had hoped would deliver between 25,000 and 30,000 soldiers, were now insisting that the United Nations approve a UN mandate for the force first.

The Indian government has been mulling deployment of troops to Iraq following a request by Washington but has been unable to take a decision due to political opposition.

WFP raises alarm over Iraq's security situation

AFP, Baghdad

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) warned mounting lawlessness was affecting its ability to deliver monthly food rations to Iraq's civilian population, in a statement received by AFP here Friday.

The WFP "is alarmed by the rise in security incidents affecting its food aid operation in Iraq over the past month. The agency has registered an increase in shootings, looting of storage facilities and attacks on trucks bringing food into southern Iraq," the statement said.

The agency, tasked with providing food rations to a population rocked by the US-led springtime war on Iraq following a decade of economic sanctions, worried about security at its storage facilities.

"Since June 10, there have been at least 12 incidents of looting and shooting in or near these facilities," the agency said.

Last month, the WFP pulled staff from its Al Hurriyah warehouse in Baghdad after hundreds of looters ransacked the facility.

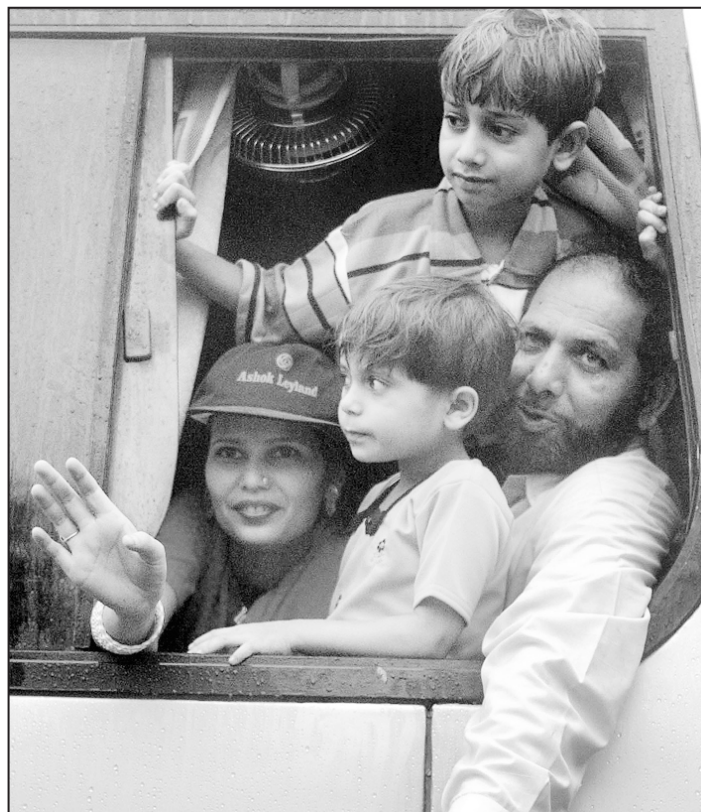


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Muslim Laik Ahmed (R), his wife Sajjada Begum (L) and two children wave while hanging out the window after boarding the Delhi-Lahore bus before its departure from Ambedkar terminal in New Delhi on Friday. The first bus to travel between India and Pakistan after an 18-month rupture in the service due to a military standoff between the arch-rivals departed here early Friday in drenching rains and amid protests by Hindu nationalists.

2 killed as bomb blast rocks Karachi

AFP, Karachi

A huge bomb explosion ripped through a multi-storey building housing international businesses in the southern Pakistani port of Karachi Friday, killing two people and injuring four others, police said.

"It was a bomb explosion and the device was placed near a pillar at the entrance to the 12-storey plaza," police officer Ajmal Magsi told AFP.

Two people were killed, he said, adding that four others were injured by flying shards of glass. "None of them was seriously wounded."

Police chief of operations in Karachi Tariq Jamil described the bombing as a "terrorist act".

"But it will be premature to speculate who could be behind the explosion and the motives."

The timed device contained 500 grams of explosives, bomb disposal unit official Mohammad Iqbal said.

The blast occurred before staff began arriving at work in the glass paneled building, which houses 120 business offices and is located on the main Sharae Faisal route to the busy Quaid-e-Azam International airport.

A security guard, who was asleep inside the building when the explosion occurred, said he was woken up by "an ear-splitting bang".



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese Foreign Secretary Madhuraman Acharya (L) shakes hands with his Pakistani counterpart Riyaz H Khokhar (R) before holding bilateral talks in Kathmandu on Friday. The fourth special session of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) standing committee concluded on Thursday with a decision to hold the 12th SAARC summit from January 04-06, 2004 in Islamabad.

UK to levy charges for immigration services

PTI, London

Foreign nationals living in the UK will have to pay the costs of the immigration services they use from August 1, resulting in an annual saving of 90 million pounds. Postal applications will cost 155 pounds, with a premium 'same day' service for personal callers costing 250 pounds.

The charges will apply to applications for an extension of stay in the UK, applications for settlement, and permanent residency stamps being put in new passports. "We continue to welcome the many foreign nationals who choose to study, work and live in the UK - they boost our economy and add to our thriving cosmopolitan society. Many apply, extend their stay each year, and it is right that they should meet the costs of that," Home Office Minister Beverley Hughes said on Thursday night.

Iraqi chemical weapons 'posed no risk': Expert

AFP, London

Iraqi chemical weapons posed no significant risk to the world in the run-up to the US-led war to oust Saddam Hussein, the former head of an international arms non-proliferation agency said Friday.

"Not really, no," said Ron Manley, former director of verification at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, when asked on BBC radio if Iraq's suspected arsenal of chemical weapons had posed a threat before the war.

Manley, who had first-hand experience in Iraq, said any agents produced before the start of UN weapons inspections in 1991 would be useless by now.

He also said there was no sign of the large factories necessary to produce chemical arms after UN weapons inspectors left Iraq in

1998.

"There were only two real scenarios which anyone considered - either there were weapons hidden from 1991 or they were manufacturing weapons after 1998," Manley said.

"If there were weapons from before 1991 hidden in Iraq, knowing what we know about Iraqi agents and the chemistry of their agents, these weapons would be useless by today because of decomposition," he said.

"If they were manufacturing after 1998, then I think the question is where?"

"You can't make chemical weapons of military significance in a small room. You need big chemical infrastructure, and that sort of infrastructure would be seen," he said.

Manley said he and other experts believed there was "no

Bush takes 'war on terror' message to East Africa

REUTERS, Entebbe

President Bush took his "war on terror" message to Uganda on Friday, aiming to boost security in an unstable region. Washington fears could become a home to groups like Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda.

Bush also hoped to polish his anti-AIDS credentials in Uganda, which has been hailed as an African pioneer in fighting the killer disease.

The East African country borders war-torn Sudan and Kenya, scene of two al-Qaeda attacks in the past five years.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni is hoping the visit will restore some of the lustre he has lost on the international stage, due partly to flawed elections in 2001 and his country's involvement in conflicts in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo.

Palestinians hold security talks with Israel

'Sharon wants to help Abbas, free prisoners'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israelis and Palestinians continued Friday to advance haltingly along their roadmap to peace, but the latest high-level security talks failed to yield any breakthroughs on the key issues.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas were expected in Washington at the end of the month for meetings with US President George W. Bush which could give peace efforts new momentum.

Despite earlier uncertainty due to deep divisions within the Palestinian leadership, Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz met Palestinian minister of state for security affairs Mohammad Dahlan Thursday evening at the Erez crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

Mofaz pressed Dahlan "to act

more quickly against radical groups so the peace process can continue," Israeli public radio reported.

"The meeting was short and serious," a Palestinian security official said. "The issue of the release of all (Palestinian) prisoners was addressed."

The US-backed "roadmap" for peace had been picking up momentum after a Palestinian truce announcement and the Israeli army's withdrawal from much of Gaza and the West Bank city of Bethlehem, but the process has since stumbled on the issue of the release of Palestinian prisoners.

The Palestinians demand the release of all 6,000 prisoners detained by the Jewish state, but Israel has agreed to free only 350 and in any case would not release any members of the radical groups Hamas or Islamic Jihad.

Meanwhile, an Israeli official said Sharon had been invited to the White House for talks with US President George W. Bush at the end of July.

Israeli public radio reported Abbas could be in Washington at around the same time in a bid to break the deadlock in the implementation of the roadmap.

An Israeli political commentator said on television Thursday that the Jewish state could possibly review its criteria on release of the prisoners to include members of radical groups who had not participated in any killings.

But the commentator said no prisoner releases were likely before the next meeting of Sharon and Abbas, who was forced to cancel talks planned for last Wednesday following sharp criticism of his policy within the Palestinian leadership.

Koreas try to find ways to reduce nuke tension

AFP, Seoul

Delegates from North and South Korea struggled to find common ground at high-level talks here Friday on ways to reduce tensions over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons drive.

Chief delegates delayed a final wrap-up meeting as working-level officials haggled over the wording of a joint statement expected to be released later Friday.

"Each side perceives the nuclear issue in a very different way," said a South Korean unification ministry official close to the closed-door negotiations.

Seoul's chief delegate, Unification Minister Jeong Se-Hyun, held informal talks overnight with his northern counterpart Kim Ryong-Song to urge Pyongyang to agree to multilateral discussions involving the United States and other countries to resolve the nuclear crisis, he said.

"The North's side gave no immediate response," the official added.

A final session of talks between

Jeong and his North Korean counterpart was put off for several hours as working-level negotiators debated the wording of the joint statement. The North's team is to return home early Saturday.

Pyeongyang has been holding out for one-on-one talks with Washington, but showed some flexibility recently when it said that the dialogue format would no longer be an obstacle if the United States dropped its "hostile" policy.

But North Korea has yet to agree on multilateral talks, which the United States says must also include China, Japan and South Korea.

The nuclear crisis erupted in October when the United States disclosed North Korea had admitted to developing nuclear weapons in violation of a 1994 agreement that froze its atomic facilities in return for economic aid and other benefits.

South Korea used the high-level talks to put pressure on North Korea, stressing the urgency of holding multilateral nuclear talks.

Cook attacks Blair's 'palpably absurd' war justification

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's justification for war has begun to appear "palpably absurd", former British foreign minister Robin Cook said Friday.

"In March Tony Blair dismissed the claim that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction as 'palpably absurd'. This week it was admitted that his government now accepts that claim is true," Cook wrote in The Independent daily newspaper.

"It is the justification for war that begins to look 'palpably absurd'," said Cook -- who quit the government over its decision to join the US-led war in Iraq.

Cook's comments came after Blair insisted Thursday that proof of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction would be unearthed, as the furore over the run-up to the US-led war raged on.

"We were assured that Saddam

had weapons of mass destruction and he had some ready for use in the next 45 minutes," Cook said.

"If we are told that those assurances are now ... inoperative, then the need for urgency crumbles and the case for war that was built upon it collapses. No weapons of mass destruction, no justification for war," Cook said.

There is considerable doubt in London and Washington over the strength of the US and British case for ending UN arms inspections and launching the March 20 invasion to topple the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

"I predict that we will soon see determined efforts to shift the justification for war to regime change rather than disarmament," Cook said.

"This was a war made in Washington, pushed by a handful of neo-conservatives and pursued for reasons of US foreign strategy and domestic politics."

Democracy, reconciliation 'beyond reach': Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Democracy and reconciliation in Myanmar remain "far beyond reach" despite UN efforts, the country's official press warned Friday as it fired its latest salvo against detained opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The article in the New Light of Myanmar, published in the midst of a series criticising Aung San Suu Kyi for her role in events leading up to her May 30 detention, claims the junta pushed for democratic change in recent years.

"The question now arises as to why national reconciliation and harmony between the present government and (opposition) National League for Democracy (NLD) has not yet been realised," article author Kyaw Myint Naing wrote.

"This is in fact due to the misconception that only when an authoritarian system has been eliminated can democracy prevail," he wrote, before launching

into a stinging broadside against democracy activists.

"They accuse the government of violating human rights and suppressing democracy and make the government appear to be a dictatorship. And then they try to convince others that they are fighting for democracy."

"Consequently, no matter the numbers of UN envoys who come to discuss and mediate ways and means for a peaceful transition and national reconciliation and harmony, these goals still remain far away beyond reach."

United Nations envoy Razali Ismail brokered landmark secret talks between the junta and Aung San Suu Kyi in October 2000 aimed at shifting the country to democracy. They have now collapsed.

Razali met the charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi on June 10 during his tenth mission to the country and remains the only outsider to have seen her.

He is expected to report to UN secretary-general Kofi Annan on

his latest visit before the end of July.

The leader was placed under "protective custody" following attacks on her convoy by a junta-backed mob during a political tour in northern Myanmar that according to eyewitnesses left dozens dead.

Since then, NLD offices nationwide have been shuttered, the senior NLD leadership in Yangon has been placed under house arrest and an unknown number of members have been arrested.

Although the junta said it was a temporary measure, it has given no indication of when Aung San Suu Kyi might be released despite intense international calls for her freedom.

After a spell at Yangon's notoriously tough Insein prison, she is now being held at an undisclosed location.

Her NLD party won 1990 national elections by a landslide but has never been permitted to rule.

Court asks Bihar to put an end to excrement disposal by low caste

AFP, Patna

A court has ordered the impoverished eastern Indian state of Bihar to put an end to the age-old custom of low-caste people taking away human excrement for disposal, judicial officials said Friday.

A provincial high court bench in the state capital Patna on Thursday faulted Bihar's government for laxity and asked for a report within three weeks on how the administration is eradicating the illegal and unsanitary practice.

The court order relates to the Bhangis, the lowest rung of the lowest caste in Hinduism, who for generations have cleaned latrines and hauled the excrement away from areas inhabited by the high castes.

Thousands of Bhangis clean toilets across India for the most meager salaries, despite repeated efforts to end the tradition.



PHOTO: AFP

Nilima Deka, 23, walks through flood waters after she filled two buckets with drinking water at a hand pump near Kalamgpara village on Friday some 49 km east of Guwahati, the capital of Assam state. The death toll from flooding in eastern India is at least 43, with more than 1.5 million people displaced from their homes.