



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis returning from the Rafha refugee camp in northern Saudi Arabia wait to be processed upon their arrival in the port of Umm Qasr yesterday. A first group of 244 Iraqis left the camp, built at the end of the 1991 Gulf war after the Shiite uprising in southern Iraq which was brutally suppressed by Saddam Hussein's army and where some 5,200 Iraqi refugees still live. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expects more than 3,600 refugees to be repatriated by year's end following the ouster of Saddam Hussein in April.

India urges UN for slapping sanctions against terror

PTI, United Nations

Concerned over the ability of international terrorist groups', including al-Qaeda and Taliban, to finance their activities through drug trade and charities despite efforts by the international community to stop their nefarious designs, India has said there was need to apply new tools to make sanctions imposed on these networks more focused and effective.

The Indian suggestion came following a Security Council monitoring committee report that these terror groups continued to finance their activities and procure weapons and ammunition for their nefarious activities.

Diplomats said New Delhi is expected to take an initiative in the matter in coming weeks. Participating in a Security Council debate on the committee's report on Tuesday, Indian Ambassador V K Nambiar expressed concern that despite international community's efforts, al-Qaeda still has the ability to finance its activities through charities and drug trade and continued to procure weapons.

Myanmar may set Suu Kyi free by Oct: Jakarta

REUTERS, Bandung

Myanmar's military junta has promised to resolve an impasse over the detention of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi before an October summit of Southeast Asian nations, Indonesia's foreign minister said on Wednesday.

But the public comments by Hassan Wirajuda, at a meeting of Asian and African officials in the West Java city of Bandung, appeared to catch his Myanmar counterpart Win Aung by surprise.

Win Aung would only say Suu Kyi's arrest would not be prolonged.

Wirajuda told reporters Indonesia, which currently chairs the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations, was also "heading" in the direction of mediating Myanmar's political crisis.

"The Myanmar side has told Indonesia they hope that before the ASEAN summit, this problem will be resolved. We have received a guarantee that the Aung San Suu Kyi case will be over before the ASEAN summit," Wirajuda said on the sidelines of the Bandung meeting.

The 58-year-old Nobel Peace

laureate was arrested on May 30 after a clash between her supporters and pro-government groups, drawing international condemnation. This week the United States imposed fresh economic sanctions on the troubled country.

Campaign group Amnesty International said on Wednesday that rights abuses in Myanmar had risen sharply since her detention.

Win Aung told reporters he did not know why Wirajuda made his comments. He did not appear irritated.

Asked if Suu Kyi would be freed by October, Win Aung said:

"May I say there is only one thing that I will tell you, we don't have any intention to prolong that arrangement."

Wirajuda did not say if Myanmar's timeframe was acceptable to ASEAN, but made clear the organization could not ignore an issue that has stained its image.

ASEAN, which holds its annual summit on the Indonesian resort island of Bali on October 7-8, is one of few groups that accepts Myanmar as a member. Last month it gave Yangon an unprecedented rebuke over Suu Kyi.

Iraqis return after yrs of exile in KSA

REUTERS, Umm Qasr

Tears flowed and long-parted relatives embraced yesterday as more than 200 Iraqis set foot in their homeland again after 13 years of exile in neighboring Saudi Arabia.

"I feel like my soul has returned to my body," said Ali Salman, his eyes swimming with tears at the Umm Qasr border crossing in southern Iraq. "I can't believe I am actually home and that I will see my family again. I just can't believe it."

Like most of the 240 men, women and children who were repatriated by the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, Salman is a Shiite Muslim who fled to Saudi Arabia after a failed 1991 uprising against Iraq's now deposed leader Saddam Hussein.

Other returnees were former Iraqi soldiers who defected during the 1991 Gulf War.

The fearful refugees sought asylum in Saudi Arabia where they lived in relative luxury at the frontier Rafha camp. But the idea of returning

home remained a remote dream until US-led forces ousted Saddam in April.

The 240 returnees were among a group of 5,200 Iraqis in Rafha who had held sit-ins and hunger strikes to pressure the authorities and the UNHCR to repatriate them.

"Today marks the beginning of the end for the Rafha refugee camp," said UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner Kamel Morjane. "We hope to repatriate everyone as soon as possible."

Moments after stepping off the bus, Yacoub Ghazi spied his sister Fatima among the crowd of relatives straining against the customs area fence. He flung himself into her arms and sobbed like a child.

"Beloved, beloved, I didn't think I would live to see you," Fatima said, kissing her brother's graying head repeatedly.

A British soldier prevented Najm Ali from scaling the fence to embrace his son Mohammed, who sank to the ground to kiss his father's feet

through the bars.

"He has changed so much in the last 13 years," an emotional Ali told Reuters as Mohammed processed his immigration papers. "I never thought I'd see him. Thank God that Saddam is gone."

Layla Hassan went to Rafha aged just three, but after living almost all her life in Saudi Arabia, the veiled 16-year-old was ecstatic to be in Iraq.

"I am home. I am Iraqi. I dreamed of this day," she said.

Cradling her one-month-old daughter, with two toddlers in tow, Ibtisam Nouri could not believe she was home. Overcome, the only words she could manage were: "Thank God, thank God."

In contrast with the bleak existence of many Iraqi refugees elsewhere, Rafha residents were given a monthly stipend by the Saudi government, food rations and air-conditioned homes.

US warns of fresh attacks

REUTERS, Washington

The US Department of Homeland Security has warned the airline industry that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network is planning new suicide hijackings and bombings in the United States or abroad, saying the danger ran until at least the end of summer.

"At least one of these attacks could be executed by the end of the summer 2003," the department said in an advisory sent out on Saturday and obtained on Tuesday.

"Al-Qaeda planners have primarily considered suicide hijackings and bombings as the most promising method to destroy aircraft in

flight as well as to strike ground targets," the advisory said.

"Attack venues may include the United Kingdom, Italy, Australia or the East Coast of the United States due to the relatively high concentration of government, military and economic targets," according to the advisory.

"The hijackers may try to calm passengers and make them believe they were on a hostage, not suicide mission. The hijackers may attempt to use common items carried by travelers, such as cameras, as weapons," the advisory stated.

No operatives are known to have been deployed to conduct the possible attacks, it added.

Myers asks Pakistan to send troops to Iraq

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan has been formally asked by the United States to consider sending its troops to Iraq for peace-keeping purposes.

The request was made by General Richard Myers, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, to his Pakistani counterpart General Mohammad Aziz Khan, during a daylong visit to Pakistan on Tuesday.

Myers had arrived in Islamabad on Tuesday at the head of a seven-member military delegation to discuss ways to strengthen military cooperation between the two countries.

"Professional matters and issues of mutual interest were discussed in the meeting," an Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) announcement said about the Myers-Aziz meeting.

Though Pakistan's response to the request was not immediately known, The News quoting official sources reported that since 34 countries are already providing ground forces, medical and financial support in Iraq, there would be no

problem for Pakistan in extending such a support.

On Tuesday, Myers described Central Iraq as still being a "war zone," allegedly contradicting President George Bush's May declaration that major combat operations in that country were over.

Sources said that the two generals discussed the regional situation, efforts to resolve Pak-Afghan border situation, the Iraq problem and other international security matters.

The US is currently trying to mediate between Pakistan and Afghanistan on the border issues through a tripartite group.

Earlier, before his arrival in Islamabad, Myers had told a press conference in New Delhi, "It's fair to say it (Iraq) is still a war zone. It's still a very challenging environment, a very hard environment."

On May 1, declaring victory in Iraq, Bush said that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended".

Myers said he was not contradicting the President, adding that Bush had used "specific language" to refer to "major conflicts" in Iraq.

Kumbh Mela kicks off

AFP, Nashik

More than half-a-million Hindu priests and devotees clad in saffron and white kicked off the hugely popular Kumbh Mela (Nectar Pot Fair) in western India Wednesday, as thousands of policemen and lifeguards kept watch.

The fair was launched at exactly 11:51 am (0621 GMT) when the Sun and Jupiter entered the constellation of Leo.

The launch was marked by the hoisting of a saffron flag in the presence of powerful priests and rightwing Hindu leaders after waiting for hours since early morning for the right planetary alignment.

Bush backs Sharon, riles Palestinians

AP, Washington

President Bush has given visiting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon broad support on key issues, backing off from overt criticism of a West Bank security fence and disappointing Palestinians in the process.

Sharon, who was to meet Vice President Dick Cheney on Wednesday morning before flying home, promised Bush that he would make sure to minimize suffering to Palestinians through whose lands the fence will run.

Last week, Bush hosted Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas and said the partially built barrier, which in some places cuts deeply into Palestinian territory and divides farms, was not helpful to peace efforts.

On Tuesday, Sharon argued that the fence was essential to stop Palestinian bombers and gunmen from slipping into Israel to carry out attacks. He said construction would go on.

"The security fence will continue to be built with every effort to mini-

mize the infringement on the daily life of the Palestinian population," Sharon told reporters as he stood next to Bush in the White House Rose Garden.

Bush echoed Sharon's call for Abbas to break up Palestinian militant groups so they no longer posed a threat to Israelis. If that were done, he added, the fence could become redundant.

"I would hope in the longer term that the fence would be irrelevant," Bush said. "The fence is a sensitive issue. I understand that."

Sharon made a veiled allusion to the issue on arrival at the White House and signed the visitors' book.

"True friendship among allies can overcome every obstacle," he wrote. "No barrier can separate nations and leaders committed to peace, liberty and security."

Bush said Israel must consider the consequences of its actions on the peace process, but Israeli and US officials said the comment was a general one, not linked to any specific issue.

Palestinians were unsettled by Tuesday's White House talks.

"I had hoped that Mr. Bush would stand there next to Sharon and tell him stop it, stop building the wall," Palestinian lawmaker Saeb Erekat told The Associated Press in Jerusalem.

In Gaza, Hamas leader Abdel Aziz Rantisi said Bush's remarks showed that Abbas had failed to win US acceptance of the Palestinian position in his trip to Washington.

"The Bush statement reflects the total bias of the United States in favor of the Zionist enemy," Rantisi told the AP, "and it reflects also the failure of Prime Minister Abbas' visit."

Bush was trying to revitalise a US-backed peace plan launched last month in Aqaba, Jordan, that calls for creation of a Palestinian state by 2005. Although there has been a pause in violence, there have only been a handful of steps by each side to move the process forward.

Philippine intelligence chief resigns

AFP, Manila

The Philippines' military intelligence chief resigned yesterday, saying he wanted to end restiveness in the military after a failed rebellion but denying accusations by mutineers he had staged terrorist bombings.

Brigadier General Victor Corpus warned in his resignation letter to President Gloria Arroyo that "the current political crisis is far from over".

"There is still deep restiveness in the officers corps," said Corpus, whose resignation was demanded by rogue soldiers who occupied part of Manila's financial center for more than 20 hours on Sunday.

The rebel soldiers returned to their barracks and agreed to face disciplinary action only after Arroyo promised to look into their allegations of corruption in her government and the military.

Pyongyang considering talks: US

REUTERS, Seoul

Top US arms negotiator John Bolton told South Korea yesterday North Korea was probably thinking carefully about restarting talks on its atomic ambitions and he was not unduly pessimistic, a South Korean official said.

The Foreign Ministry official told Reuters that Bolton's talks with South Korean Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan were mostly about fathoming why North Korea had yet to respond to an offer of two-phase multilateral talks.

BJP-BSP alliance crisis over at least for now

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The alliance between India's ruling BJP and its ruling coalition partner Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the key state of Uttar Pradesh came closer to the brink of collapse Tuesday on the issue of controversial heritage corridor near the Taj Mahal, in Agra but the storm blew over following a patch-up.

The alliance was saved after Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati took back her demand for resignation of Indian Culture Minister Jagmohan in the face of some tough-talking done by the entire BJP top brass.

Mayawati, who had only two days back demanded the scalp of Jagmohan accusing him of conspir-

ing with her political rivals on the Taj corridor issue, was forced to retract after Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee made it clear that there was no question of removing Jagmohan from the cabinet.

Vajpayee's firm rejection of Mayawati's demand, coupled with several BJP MPs' demand for breaking the tie-up with BSP which would have threatened the stability of her government in Uttar Pradesh, won the day for BJP in the political showdown.

The patch-up between BJP and BSP followed Mayawati's telephonic talks from Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh, with Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani and a two-hour dinner meeting with the Prime Minister in New Delhi Tuesday.

Saddam jeers at US 'hunters'

AFP, Baghdad

The US military remained hot on Saddam Hussein's trail yesterday after a new audiotape attributed to the ousted Iraqi leader said insurgents would pursue their "holy war" against US occupation, following the example of his two sons slain in battle with US troops.

US troops launched raid after raid around the country in the hunt for loyalists of Saddam and outlaw gangs, hoping to end the guerrilla campaign against them and the crime wave threatening Iraq's reconstruction.

The instability has tried the patience of Iraqis, who expect the Americans to deliver on their prom-

ises of a better life than under Saddam, who subjected them to three wars and more than a decade of crippling international trade sanctions.

In a reminder of the high stakes, World Bank president James Wolfensohn, on a tour of Baghdad, hinted aid from his international body might not come before Iraq has its own democratically-elected government and constitution, which are thought to be at least one year away.

"At some point that (aid) will I'm sure happen but as you know there is a need first to have a constitution, to have a government, to reestablish Iraq as the Iraqi people would like to have it," he told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

A firefighting truck approaches a fire that has flared up again near La Motte, southern France. Firefighters struggled to contain fast-moving fires that have killed five people and ravaged large areas of woodland in southern France, as French President Jacques Chirac promised tough penalties for arsonists.