



Shiites mourn slain leader as world blasts car bombing

AFP, Najaf

Thousands of Iraqis yesterday angrily mourned the country's top Shiite Muslim leader, killed with at least 81 other people in the worst bombing since the start of the US-led occupation, while the attack was condemned around the world.

Thousands of mourners poured onto the streets of the holy city of Najaf, south of Baghdad, where the attack happened, and the southern city of Basra, crying for revenge and denouncing the failure of the US-led coalition to bring law and order to the country.

The United Nations and the White House also vigorously condemned the assassination on Friday, the Islamic holy day, of Ayatollah Mohammad Baqer al-Hakim, while analysts said it would deal a blow to efforts to rebuild the war-shattered country.

The blast, along with deadly attacks on the UN headquarters and Jordanian embassy in Baghdad, have created the impression the

country is spinning out of control five months into the occupation.

In Najaf, 180 km south of Baghdad, more than 2,000 mourners demonstrated, shouting: "We swear on Hussein to take the revenge of Hakim," and invoking the name of the grandson of the Muslim prophet Mohammed, one of the most venerated figures in the canons of the Shiite faith.

Gathered near the charred cars, heaps of brick and shattered glass from the explosion, they also shouted slogans against the United States over the death of their leader who discreetly cooperated with the US presence in Iraq.

Ammar Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, the son of Hakim's brother and Governing Council member Abdel Aziz, lashed out at the US-run coalition while addressing the demonstrators, saying it was not welcome in Iraq.

"We have told the occupation forces that Iraq is for Iraqis and not for them," Hakim's nephew said. He urged the Americans to hand over

security control.

In the southern port of Basra, more than 5,000 people marched from the local office of Hakim's political party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), to el-Ebla mosque in the heart of Iraq's second largest city.

"There is no God but Allah. Death for Israel. Death for Baathis," chanted the marchers, who also blamed the Americans for their leader's death.

"The responsibility of Hakim's death lies on the British and American forces because they neglected security," they shouted.

Even as demonstrators raged against America, rescue workers in Najaf combed the mountains of rubble for Hakim's body, which still has not been found.

But family members said one of his hands and some of his flesh had been recovered and that his funeral will be held Tuesday.

Moments before his death, Hakim had delivered his weekly sermon in the Tomb of Ali, in which

he denounced Saddam loyalists.

The car bombing, which wounded 229 other people, followed an August 19 suicide truck bombing on the UN headquarters in Baghdad, which killed 22 people, including top UN envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello, and wounded more than 100.

Earlier this month another attack at the Jordanian embassy in the capital claimed 14 lives.

UN staffers in Baghdad paid a final tribute Saturday to those killed in the attack on the UN offices, which has since led to a substantial reduction in the number of world body staff in the Iraqi capital.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan also strongly condemned the attack in Najaf and called on all groups in Iraq to refrain from violence and revenge.

US President George W. Bush denounced the bombing as "vicious" and said the United States would help hunt down those responsible.

Bag with 25 kg explosives found at Delhi railway station

AFP, New Delhi

A bag containing 25 kilograms (55 pounds) of explosives was found Saturday at New Delhi's busy railway station, a senior police official said.

The bag was detected by the police during a routine check between platforms six and seven, the official told AFP, adding that a bomb disposal unit was on scene to defuse the explosives.

At any given time hundreds of passengers are at New Delhi station, the major railway hub connecting northern India.

The Indian capital has been on high alert since twin car bombings August 25 in the financial capital Bombay that left dead 52 people.

Indian aid for Palestinians

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India has announced a ten million-rupee aid in medicines and 12 multi-utility vehicles to Palestine and increased the number of seats for Palestine foreign service officers to train in an Indian institute.

This was announced by a spokesman of External Affairs Ministry here after visiting Palestine Foreign Minister Nabil Sha'ath had a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee here Friday evening.

Sha'ath, whose visit will be followed by the trip of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on September 9, is understood to have briefed Indian leaders about the situation in West Asia and the latest status of the peace efforts.

The Palestine Minister also called on President A P J Abdul Kalam and held delegation-level talks with Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Minister Vinod Khanna.

Taliban ringed as Afghan clashes go on

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghan and US-led special forces have surrounded a group of Taliban fighters in the southern province of Zabul after another day of persistent bombardment of rebel positions, a senior official said yesterday.

As the operation to hunt down hundreds of guerrillas from the ousted Islamic regime entered its sixth day, provincial intelligence chief Khail Hotak told Reuters that at least 12 rebels had been killed in Friday's action, and eight captured.

"The operation is ongoing," he said from Zabul.

"Enemy forces are surrounded between Tangi Larzab and Chinaran," he added, referring to locations in the Dai Chopan district of Zabul province where fighting has concentrated.

Landslides, floods kill 42 in China

AFP, Beijing

At least 42 people have been killed in landslides and floods caused by heavy rains in different parts of China, state media and officials said Saturday.

Twenty-one people were killed and nine were missing in northern Shaanxi province, which has been experiencing unusually heavy rain, the Xinhua news agency reported.

Thirteen of the victims were crushed to death in two landslides caused by rain, an official in Baoji city told AFP by telephone.

Others were washed away by floodwater, including two police officers who had been moving locals to safe places, Xinhua said.

Nepali PM under pressure as Maoists reject peace

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's major parties refused yesterday to join forces with beleaguered Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa who appealed for a united front after Maoist rebels broke a ceasefire.

Political observers said Thapa, appointed less than three months ago by King Gyanendra, could face pressure to resign after failing to make peace with both the Maoists and the parties.

Thapa, in an address Friday announcing that security forces were fully mobilized to ward off Maoist attacks, appealed to the parties to end months of protests to persuade the king to reverse his October 2002 dismissal of the elected government.

Accused web attacker under house arrest

AP, St. Paul, Minnesota

A Minnesota teenager known online as "teekid" was arrested and placed on electronic monitoring Friday for allegedly unleashing a version of the "Blaster" computer worm that infected thousands of computers.

US Magistrate Judge Susan Richard Nelson told Jeffrey Lee Parson not to access the Internet or any other network connection as a condition of his release. He did not enter a plea during his initial court appearance.

Parson, 18, admitted during an interview with the FBI and Secret Service agents that he had modified the original "Blaster" infection earlier this month and created a version known by a variety of different names, including "Blaster.B.," court papers said. At least 7,000 computers were affected by Parson's worm, prosecutor Paul Luehr said Friday.

Collectively, different versions of the virus-like worm, alternately called "LovSan" or "Blaster," snarled corporate networks worldwide, inundating more than 500,000 computers, according to Symantec Corp., a leading antivirus vendor. Experts consider it one of the worst outbreaks this year.

All the Blaster variants took advantage of a flaw in Microsoft Corp.'s flagship Windows software.

6 killed in Kashmir raid to hunt down top militant

AFP, Srinagar

At least six people died Saturday in a 10-hour gunbattle in Kashmir after Indian troops raided a building they believed housed a mastermind of the 2001 attack on India's parliament, officials said.

The bodies of two rebels and one soldier, Balbir Singh, were recovered after troops secured the house in the summer capital Srinagar, said a spokesman for India's paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF).

"We expect at least three more bodies to be buried under the rubble," the spokesman told AFP. "One of the bodies underneath could be that of Gazi Baba."

Baba, a Pakistani who is believed to be a leading commander of the Jaish-e-Mohammad militant group, allegedly played a key role in planning the December 13, 2001, attack on India's parliament that set off a military standoff with Pakistan.

The parliament raid left dead 15 people, including the five assailants. Baba, who is around 40, has since been among India's most-wanted militants.

The BSF said two women and four children were evacuated from the house in Srinagar before troops launched their final raid.

"The operation was so neat that all of them were saved," said Indian Kashmir's leader, Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed.

Jaish-e-Mohammad and another rebel group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, were accused of jointly carrying out the parliament attack. The two movements were founded in Pakistan but banned there in January 2002.

The two groups are among the most extreme movements fighting Indian rule in Muslim-majority Kashmir, which is divided between the South Asian rivals and claimed in full by both.

The tension between Indian and Pakistan set off by the parliament attack began to recede in April when Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Srinagar and offered Islamabad a "hand of friendship."

But Vajpayee on Friday ruled out talks with Pakistan until "normalcy" returns to Kashmir, following a three-day, violence-racked visit to the disputed province.



Indian Border security force personnel take cover as dust and smoke raises after troops blasted a house during a gunbattle in downtown Srinagar yesterday following a gunbattle with alleged Kashmiri militants. At least six Kashmiri rebels and an Indian soldier died during a gunbattle which ensued when troops raided a Kashmir building they believed housed a mastermind of the 2001 attack on India's parliament.

PHOTO: AFP

Exit of Blair aide prompts suspicion, little surprise

AFP, London

The resignation of Prime Minister Tony Blair's top media adviser Alastair Campbell on Friday prompted little shock in Britain's tight-knit political community, merely suspicion that his departure might be one last devious piece of spin.

Campbell, Blair's chief spokesman since 1994 and latterly his powerful director of communications and strategy, insisted he had long intended to stand down.

But it seems clear that Campbell's central role in a bitter row over allegations the Blair government hyped up the case for war

against Iraq made his supposedly backroom role impossible.

Blair testified on Thursday before a judicial inquiry into the death of David Kelly, the government arms expert at the centre of the Iraq row, and faces a weekend of fevered press speculation about his future.

Thus, while many hailed Campbell as a tough and effective operator, some saw in its timing a final conjuring up of the spin doctor's dark arts to take the heat off his embattled boss.

"The timing of this announcement makes it look like a spin to end a spin," said Doug Henderson, a disgruntled MP from Blair's ruling

Labour Party.

"The real issue remains unanswered. What evidence did the government have to lead them to believe that (Iraqi leader) Saddam Hussein was a threat and that the country should go to war?"

Another notable feature of reaction to the news was that even those who praised Campbell most fervently made no bones about his infamously prickly character.

Blair himself called his trusted lieutenant "an immensely able, fearless, loyal servant" of the government but also conceded that he was "a strong character who can make enemies".

3 detained for UK port bomb alert

REUTERS, London

British police said on Saturday they arrested three men, called out the bomb squad and closed the southern port of Dover after discovering a suspect device.

"Three men are being held in custody at a station in Kent in connection with terrorism offences," police in the County of Kent said. "A bomb disposal unit is dealing with the device," a spokeswoman added.

The port was reopened early on Saturday morning and began the task of clearing the backlog of ships carrying thousands of passengers stranded in the English Channel after the discovery of the device in a car at Dover's eastern docks.

Myanmar announces democracy roadmap

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government announced a seven-point roadmap towards democracy yesterday that includes "free and fair" elections to be held under a new constitution.

"Free and fair elections will be held based on a new constitution spelled out by the national constitutional convention," newly installed Prime Minister Khin Nyunt said in his first speech since being appointed five days ago.

Khin Nyunt, who was appointed prime minister by Myanmar's leader Senior General Than Shwe, gave no timeframe for the elections or for

what he described as the "seven-point roadmap for democracy."

But he said the first step of the plan, the re-convening of a constitutional convention suspended in 1996 following a boycott by the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), should be done "as soon as possible."

The process leading to national elections to form a "government of elected members" would start with the drafting and passage of a new constitution, he said.

Myanmar has been ruled for the past four decades by the military, which in 1990 refused to recognise national elections that gave a land-

slide victory to democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party.

In late 1995, after the Nobel peace laureate's first period under house arrest, the NLD refused to join a new session of the national convention to draft the constitution.

The junta shortly afterwards suspended the convention, which the NLD had rejected as unrepresentative.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been held in detention since May, was mentioned just twice in the 80-minute speech, once when Khin Nyunt denounced her party for walking out on the convention.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of the Imamia Students Federation burn tyres during an anti-US demonstration in Lahore yesterday. The organisation blamed America for a blast inside the Shrine of Imam Ali in the central city of Najaf, 180 km south of Baghdad where a car bomb exploded just after Friday prayers and killed at least 83 people including top Shiite leader Ayatollah Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim.

N Korea says 'no' to more nuke talks

REUTERS, Beijing

A North Korean delegate to just-concluded six-way nuclear talks in Beijing said yesterday he saw no need for further discussions despite an agreement by negotiators to meet again, but analysts dismissed the threat as posturing.

US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly had told reporters earlier in the day the talks were productive but there was a long way to go before the crisis was defused.

"We had a nice visit and a productive start. We have a long way to travel and don't know when we will be back here or whether it will be somewhere else," Kelly said. "But a peaceful solution is something we are going to work on."

The three-day talks ended on Friday with no major breakthrough, but the two Koreas, the United States, Russia, Japan and host China agreed to meet again within two months. No place or date was set.

But the North Korean delegate told reporters at the airport further

talks were not necessary.

"There's no need to hold this kind of talks," the grim-looking delegate, whose identity was unknown, said. "We're no longer interested. Our expectations have diminished."

"We have concluded that the United States has no intention to switch policy but is trying to disarm (us) by using tricks," he said. "We have no other choice."

The head of the North Korean delegation, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Yong-il, did not make any comments and looked solemn, in stark contrast to his arrival on Tuesday when he smiled, waved at reporters and clasped his hands above his head.

Pyongyang has frequently used bluster when discussing its nuclear capabilities and analysts dismissed this latest threat as similar rhetoric.

"The contradiction is a maneuver and consistent with North Korea's pattern of behavior in the past," said Shi Yinong, an expert on international relations at the People's University in Beijing.



PHOTO: AFP

A man gets off his pirogue next to a patrolling French soldier of the Unicorn Operation Friday in Lake Koussou, central Ivory Coast, where two French soldiers were killed while patrolling in the area. The suspected killers of two French peacekeepers who were shot dead this week in Ivory Coast have been arrested by the French force in the country, the defence ministry said in Paris on Friday.