



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi youth stands before a destroyed commuter bus after being hit in a roadside bomb yesterday in Baghdad. One Iraqi civilian was killed and 21 others wounded, four seriously, when the bus was hit by the blast on a main route through central Baghdad, about five minutes after a US patrol had passed through about 9:30 am.

## Bus explosion kills and injures Iraqis

AFP, Baghdad

A bomb exploded in Baghdad Wednesday, killing an Iraqi and wounding 21 others, while the US-installed government moved to assert itself with a tough new set of guidelines for media covering the occupied country.

A bus was hit by a deadly roadside bomb in the capital while further north another two Iraqis were shot dead as they tried to escape a search of their village, witnesses said.

The blast hit the white minivan on Al-Imam Al-Adaam Street, a main route through central Baghdad, shortly after a US patrol passed through about 9:30 am, witnesses said.

The bus was heavily damaged and split open after it crashed into a tree on the road, lined with numerous shops and restaurants. The blast also shattered the windows of a second minivan.

Ahmad Shukair, a policeman at the scene, said one person was killed and 21 wounded, four of them seriously, in the explosion of the bomb, planted on

a divider in the middle of the road.

A spokesman for the US military confirmed the explosion but was unable to provide further information except to say no soldiers were involved.

"A minivan bus was hit by shrapnel and crashed into a tree in the middle of the road. The driver was killed on the spot and passengers wounded," Shukair said. He said people were also wounded in the second minivan.

Ziad al-Rubei, 42, owner of a nearby furniture shop whose windows were shattered, said American soldiers regularly patrol the street, located just a few hundred meters (yards) from a US base in the former presidential palace.

"The bomb was aimed at the Americans but by mistake hit Iraqis," he said.

Mohammed Saddam, 23, who works next door, said "the explosion went off a few seconds after an American patrol passed by on the other side of the street."

Ali Sattar, 37, said the US patrol was in front of a school about 100 meters

away when the bomb went off, "leaving a gaping hole."

The attack came as Western media expressed concern over new reporting rules issued by Iraq's US-installed Governing Council warning against coverage that could incite violence or comfort supporters of Saddam Hussein.

The rules barred media from coverage that could incite violence, disorder or religious or racial tensions, advocate the return of the Baath Party or represent Saddam's group directly or indirectly.

And the council vowed to keep a close watch to make sure news organizations toe the line.

"Whenever something goes wrong for a government they start blaming the press," said Robert Fisk, Middle Eastern correspondent for The Independent in London.

"The sewage is still coming out of the man-hole covers, there are still only 15 hours of electricity a day and the Governing Council roars like a lion -- against journalists!"

2 Iraqis killed, one wounded during US house search: witnesses

AFP, Baghdad

Two Iraqis were killed and another wounded after US troops opened fire while conducting a house-to-house search at a village near Baqubah, 66 kilometres (41 miles) north of Baghdad, witnesses said Wednesday.

Mohammad Ismail, a 25-year-old local farmer, said the three were shot after running away from the Americans during a search at al-Jizani, 20 kilometres (12 miles) north-west of Baqubah.

He said Mazen Shoukr and Adel Ismail were killed during the search conducted around 3:00 am Wednesday (2300 Tuesday). He did not know the name of the wounded Iraqi.

Hussein Ali, a 30-year-old clerical worker at Baqubah Hospital, said American soldiers had delivered the bodies of the two dead to the hospital at about 10:15 am (0615 GMT).

A US military spokesman said he had not received any details concerning the deaths.

## USAF official charged with espionage

AP, Washington

Military officials have charged an Air Force translator at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp for terror suspects with espionage and aiding the enemy for allegedly trying to send information about detainees to Syria.

The Pentagon's disclosure of the case against Senior Airman Ahmad al-Halabi comes three days after officials said a Muslim chaplain at the base had been arrested. The chaplain, Army Captain Yusef Yee, has not been charged.

The two men knew each other, an Air Force spokesman said, but officials said they didn't know if there had been any conspiracy to breach security at the prison camp.

The charges against al-Halabi, however, include an allegation that al-Halabi failed to report unauthorised contacts between prisoners and another member of the military. That other military member is not identified.

Al-Halabi, 24, of Detroit, is being held at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California. Air Force Major Michael

Shavers said Tuesday. The most serious charges against him, espionage and aiding the enemy, could carry the death penalty.

Al-Halabi worked for nine months as an Arabic language translator at Guantanamo Bay, a job that ended shortly before his July 23 arrest as he arrived in Jacksonville, Florida, on a flight from the prison camp.

When he was arrested, al-Halabi was carrying two handwritten notes from detainees that al-Halabi intended to turn over to someone travelling to Syria, the charging documents say. He was also carrying his personal laptop computer, which contained classified information about detainees and 180 messages from detainees al-Halabi intended to send to Syria or Qatar, the documents allege.

Al-Halabi is also accused of taking pictures of the prison camp and having unauthorised contact with the inmates, including giving them baklava desserts. He also is alleged to have had contacts with the Syrian Embassy to the United States which he failed to report as required.

## Sharon says prisoner swap needs cabinet nod

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Wednesday a prisoner exchange with the Lebanese Hezbollah militia would need cabinet approval and ruled out West Bank Fatah head Marwan Barghuti's release.

"I intend to put approval of the prisoner exchange deal, if we reach an agreement, before the entire cabinet plenum for it to decide," Sharon said in an interview, extracts of which were published Wednesday.

"This is a complex problem of the first order, an issue that is not simple, and a very difficult decision on a moral level. Therefore, in my opinion it should be brought before the entire cabinet ... Let there not be one minister who is not part of the discussion," Sharon told Maariv newspaper.

Sharon confirmed that the long-awaited deal was near but warned it was anything but wrapped up. "We are closer than before, but it is still far from being finished," he said.

Palestinian newspapers reported Tuesday that Israel would release 400 Arab prisoners as part of the deal, around 185 of them Lebanese, Syrian and Jordanian while the rest would be Palestinian.

In October 2000, Hezbollah captured three Israeli soldiers -- whom Israel believes are dead -- in a disputed border area. They also seized businessman Elhanan Tannenbaum, a reserve colonel who the guerrilla group alleges was a spy.

Sharon denied reports by Arab sources that Barghuti, a firebrand of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction currently being tried by Israel on 26 counts of murder, could be released.

"Barghuti cannot be a condition for this deal. Barghuti is responsible for acts of murder, and he is going to prison," the premier said.

The 44-year-old Palestinian legislator, considered to be the inspiration behind the intifada, is Israel's highest-profile Palestinian prisoner and was seen by many as a possible successor to

Arafat.

Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz and other Israeli officials have also ruled out the release of Barghuti, whom Israel accuses of founding and heading Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a radical offshoot of Fatah responsible for scores of deadly anti-Israeli attacks.

As part of the exchange, Israel would free Hezbollah leaders Abdel Karim Obeid and Mustafa Dirani, who were captured to be used as bargaining chips for the release of Israeli pilot Ron Arad.

"Dirani and Obeid did not bring any results. We have additional tools, not here with us, but they exist," Sharon told Maariv without elaborating.

However Sharon said it was not known whether Arad, captured back in 1986, was still alive.

He said that Tannenbaum was alive but insisted if the others were dead, preliminary DNA tests would be demanded before their bodies are handed over as part of a deal.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian woman passes in front of her demolished home, one of 21 houses destroyed by the Israeli army, 18 partially and three completely, in the early hours of yesterday in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. Also a 16-year-old Palestinian youth was killed as Israeli forces came under heavy fire during their operation in the area, witnesses and Palestinian medical sources said. At least 11 other people were injured, five seriously, during the operation around the Rafah refugee camp near the border with Egypt.

## 'Terminator' outlines his economic plan

AFP, Washington

Long criticised for lacking substance in his campaign for governor, actor Arnold Schwarzenegger outlined an economic plan to turn California's finances around, in a letter published Wednesday in The Wall Street Journal.

After slamming current California Governor, Gray Davis, for burdening businesses and property owners with "onerous regulations" and ever-increasing taxes, the self-made millionaire said his first move as governor would be to "reduce taxes that made our state uncompetitive."

After boasting about his past as a "penniless immigrant" for whom California was the promised land, his Mr. Universe title, his marriage with a Kennedy, and his successful acting career, Schwarzenegger vowed to help California "regain its status as a high-octane growth economy."



PHOTO: AFP

Republican gubernatorial candidate Arnold Schwarzenegger talks at an "Ask Arnold" town hall style meeting September 23 in Sacramento, California.

## Nawaz, Benazir can't return to Pakistan: Musharraf

ANI, New York

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has ruled out the return of two former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

Without taking names, Musharraf charged the duo of ravaging the country during their respective stints as premiers, the Online News reported on Wednesday.

Musharraf was addressing the Pakistani community here on Monday. Both leaders are currently in exile. While Bhutto alternatively lives in London and Dubai, Nawaz has been staying in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

This puts to rest speculations that Musharraf had entered into a secret pact with Bhutto to facilitate her return to Pakistan.

Last week, well-informed sources said that Musharraf would allow Benazir to return and also withdraw cases against her jailed husband Asif Ali Zardari, only if Bhutto downplayed her protest against his regime.

## France backs India for UNSC post

PTI, United Nations

Strongly backing India's candidature for a place in expanded UN Security Council, France has said India's "characteristics" make it a "natural candidate" for the post.

"It is very hard to imagine how one could exclude India from the possibility of having permanent seat in the Security Council given its characteristics... it is obvious that a certain number of countries are natural candidates,"

French President Jacques Chirac told reporters after his address to the United Nations General Assembly on Tuesday.

However, he added that "we can't prejudice the outcome. We have to wait for the dialogue to take place."

Chirac made a strong case for the expansion of the Security Council in his address to the Assembly but named only Germany and Japan.

## Microsoft shuts down its chatrooms

REUTERS, London

Microsoft Corp. announced on Wednesday it would shut down its Internet chat rooms in 28 countries, saying the forums had become a haven for peddlers of junk e-mail and sex predators.

"The straightforward truth of the matter is free unmoderated chat isn't safe," said Geoff Sutton, European general manager of Microsoft MSN, told Reuters.

From October 14, the software giant will shut down its MSN chat services in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and much of Latin America, forcing millions of message board users to find alternative online forums to discuss the topics of the day.

In those regions, said Microsoft, the chat was free and unmoderated, giving rise to a nefarious element that bombarded users with "spam" mail, much of which was pornographic and, in some cases, allowing pedophiles to prey on

children.

The decision has triggered a heated debate among free speech advocates, children's rights groups and Microsoft rivals about the proper way to police online forums, which predate the Web itself and have been critical to the Internet's growth as a mass medium.

In the United States, Canada and Japan, Microsoft will introduce an unsupervised chat service solely for subscribers, who are considered more accountable because their billing details and identities are on record with the company.

"It's a signal that some of the joyful early days of the Internet have moved on a bit. Chat was one of those things that was a bit hippyish. It was free and open. But a small minority have changed that for everyone. It's very sad," Sutton said.

Microsoft said it would begin alerting users to the changes later this week. Users in the affected regions will still be able to chat online but must do so through Microsoft Messenger, the

company's instant messaging product.

"This is a decision based upon consumer experiences, child protection and our strategic investment to build up MSN Messenger," Sutton said. Microsoft competes with AOL Time Warner's Internet unit and Yahoo Inc. in the hotly contested instant messaging market.

The US software giant has been putting more weight behind its messenger service, including plans to license it to business customers and integrate it more closely with its money-losing MSN Web service.

Some applauded the move, saying other Internet companies should follow Microsoft's lead in pulling the plug on unsupervised, anonymous chat areas.

But free speech advocates, industry rivals and even some children's rights groups questioned whether this would drive the darker elements of online chat underground.

## Pope cancels weekly audience

BBC ONLINE

Officials at the Vatican say ill health has forced Pope John Paul to cancel his weekly general audience on Wednesday.

The 83-year-old pontiff is reported to be suffering from intestinal problems.

Officials said the ailment was not serious.

Correspondents say the Pope has cancelled his general audience on short notice only a handful of times during his 25-year papacy.

New concerns were raised about the Pope's health during a visit to Slovakia earlier this month.

During the trip, his aides had to take over many of his speeches and sermons. Observers said during public engagements he was clearly in pain.

The pontiff's speech has become extremely slow and slurred as a result of Parkinson's disease.

Although the Pope has been in ill health for some time, his appearance in Slovakia indicated a marked deterioration in his state, correspondents said.

## India asserts support for Palestinian statehood

PTI, New York

In a rebuttal to critics of India's growing friendship with Israel, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Wednesday unequivocally came out in support of Palestinian statehood and said that the violence in the region must stop.

Notwithstanding its friendly relations with Israel, Vajpayee asserted India's principled stand on Palestine and said, "We continue to champion the cause of the Arab world."

"An independent Palestinian state should be established, those who have been uprooted should be resettled and violence must stop," he said at an community reception hosted in New York by India's Ambassador to US, Lalit Mansingh.

Violence is no solution to any problem, and "whatever is happening there, we are against it," said Vajpayee, who is also expected to refer to the West Asia crisis in his address to United Nations General Assembly on Thursday.

Vajpayee praised Congress President Sonia Gandhi for meeting the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon when he visited India, ignoring the boycott call by some of her supportive political parties and the Third Front.

This was a good gesture on the part of Sonia Gandhi, he said. She has carried out her responsibility as Leader of the Opposition by meeting Sharon and "I thanked her," said Vajpayee.

Deplored the demonstrations and the boycott call, Vajpayee said that Sharon was a guest of India and he should have been welcomed by all.

Vajpayee said that when he was in the Opposition, he respected the convention that political parties should not politicise foreign policy and this should continue.

He said that among those opposed to Sharon's visit were some former prime ministers.

He also appreciated Sonia Gandhi for enquiring about him when terrorists attacked Parliament on September 3, 2001.

Soon after the strike, everyone enquired about each other, and Sonia Gandhi called him to find out where he was. "I informed her that I was at home and was getting ready to go to Parliament. I also enquired about her and she said she was speaking from home. This is the beauty of India's democracy."

Indian policemen hold their rifles as they stand guard at the entrance to the Akshardham Hindu Temple, Gandhinagar some 30kms from Ahmedabad yesterday. Relatives of some 33 people killed in an attack on the temple by Islamic militants on September 24 last year, have gathered at the holy site for prayers to commemorate the first anniversary of the attack.

PHOTO: AFP



## Taiwan asks China to help track hackers

AP, Taipei

Taiwan has sent a formal letter to rival China asking for help in tracking down computer hackers who allegedly sent a virus to a Taiwanese software company, officials said on Wednesday.

The letter alleged that on September 2, Taiwan-based Eha Technology Limited received an e-mail that contained a virus, said the Straits Exchange Foundation, a semi-official organisation that handles Taiwan's relations with China.

The e-mail came from four websites registered in the Chinese provinces of Fujian and Hubei, the foundation said. The websites were stockfound.com, Lsaerid.com, Feeledu.net and memoryfree.com, according to the foundation's letter.