

Read Iraq arms report with care: Blair
AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said yesterday that an interim report of Iraq and weapons of mass destruction, due out later in the day in Washington, needs to be read very carefully.

"I think people should wait, just wait until you see the report," Blair said on GMTV television ahead of US weapons expert David Kay's progress report to the US Congress on the work of the Iraq Survey Group.

Blair stressed that the 1,200-strong group has only been in Iraq for two months, trying to track down signs of Saddam Hussein's pursuit of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs.

US takes over UNSC presidency amid Iraq debate

AP, United Nations

The United States took over the presidency of the UN Security Council, a stroke of good timing as it campaigns for approval of a new resolution aimed at getting more countries to contribute troops and money to Iraq.

US Ambassador John Negroponte began his month-long presidency on Wednesday by distributing the revised text to the other four veto-wielding council nations—Russia, China, France and Britain.

He also held separate meetings with some of the elected nonpermanent council members to promote the resolution, saying he would begin informal consultations on the draft this week with hopes of swift approval.

Immigrants march on Washington demanding better treatment

AFP, Washington

Some 900 immigrants laborers arrived in Washington Wednesday in a protest bus caravan from nine US cities seeking better treatment from the US Congress.

The caravan, sponsored by the AFL-CIO labor federation, included immigrants from Seattle, Washington; Portland, Oregon; San Francisco; Los Angeles; Miami; Chicago; Boston, Massachusetts; Houston, Texas, and Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Organizers said it was inspired by the "freedom rides" staged by the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

The labor federation said the protest aimed to highlight the difficulties of working immigrants, to seek a process for obtaining US citizenship for illegal immigrants and to allow family reunification.

Edward Said will be buried in Lebanon

AFP, Beirut

The Palestinian-American writer and intellectual Edward Said, who died last week in New York of leukemia, will be buried in the mountains of Lebanon, a close friend said yesterday.

"Edward Said wished to be buried in Arab soil, and had chosen Lebanon" as his final resting ground, Lebanese writer Elias Khoury told AFP.

After cremation in the United States, Said's ashes will be brought to Lebanon at the end of October for interment in the Protestant cemetery in the village of Broummana, the home of his wife's family located northwest of Beirut.

German, Spanish leaders still at odds over EU constitution

AFP, Rome

Germany and Spain admitted yesterday that they remain far apart over a controversial constitution for the European Union, setting the stage for tough talks when EU leaders meet in Rome this week-end.

After overnight talks here, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar each put the onus on the other side not to upset a consensus.

The text of the EU's first ever charter, due to be presented in Rome, is meant to streamline the often tortuous EU decision-making process when it expands next year from its current 15 members to 24 next year.

Schroeder reiterated Germany's insistence that the text, drawn up after 16 months of delicate talks by a convention headed by a former French president, is passed as it stands.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi waits outside his home as US soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division, Alpha company, enter to search it in the village of Alaiba, 70 km southwest of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul Wednesday. The soldiers confiscated a large quantity of weapons, including a canon, several mortars, and Kalashnikovs. Depressed by months of service in Iraq and under stress from daily attacks, many of the troops of the US 101st Airborne Division apparently now have only one dream: To go home.

France sees explosion of terrorism in postwar Iraq

AFP, Paris

Iraq has gone from being a terrorist-free country under Saddam Hussein to seeing an "explosion" of terrorism since the US-led war this year, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said yesterday in a speech directly contradicting White House assertions.

"There was no verified link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's regime, no terrorism before the regime fell," de Villepin told a Paris conference of diplomats, scientists and businessmen focusing on religion and politics in Asia.

"And yet, afterwards, there has been an explosion (of terrorism), an increase in opportunities (of attacks) and a more fragile situation," he said.

His comments were likely to rile White House officials who partly justified the war by claiming that Saddam had ties to al-Qaeda.

They have also since denied that Iraq has descended into chaos and insisted that the country has become the frontline in their war against terrorism launched after the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington.

The UN Security Council is currently examining a draft resolution by the United States which calls for other countries to provide military and financial support for its increasingly violent occupation, in return for a promise that Iraq would return to self-rule "quickly".

In his speech, de Villepin said that Paris was not going to withdraw its attention from the Middle East.

"We must make sure that each crisis on the international stage is well looked after, which explains the French position which strongly believes that, rather than treat the Iraqi crisis urgently and hastily, it would be better to first tackle a settlement of the Palestinian conflict," he said.

On Islam, de Villepin said: "We must try to avoid mixing everything together, because that leads to clashes and breaks. Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. The overwhelming majority of its followers hold close its values. But no religion is safe from fundamentalist currents."

'WB settlements, fences killing 2-state solution'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli plans to build hundreds of new homes in Jewish settlements and erect fences deep in the West Bank are killing chances for a two-state peace settlement, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said yesterday.

"This is not a security wall, these housing units are not intended for security," Erekat told AFP. "This is a land grab."

"They have chosen a policy of settlements and dictation rather than peace and negotiations. It kills the idea of a two-state settlement."

The Israeli housing ministry earlier said a tender had been launched for the construction of more than 550 new homes in Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

The announcement came a day after another controversial decision by Israel to approve the construction of the next phase of its controversial barrier with the West Bank, which it says it needs to prevent infiltrations by Palestinian militants.

The Jewish state will leave a gap over the most controversial section of the barrier, but build smaller fences to protect settlements deep in the territory which are expected to ultimately be connected to the main fence.

Erekat said he would contact the sponsors of the Middle East "roadmap" for peace -- the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia -- to put pressure on Israel not to go ahead with either project.

He accused Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government of trying to impose "a fait accompli".

The "roadmap" calls for an independent Palestinian state living side by side with a secure Israel by 2005.

However, the blueprint has floundered in the face of renewed violence.

Meanwhile, Palestinians are ready for a ceasefire with Israel, but only if foreign observers were in the region to monitor the process, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said in an interview published here yesterday.

"Even now we want to cease all hostilities with Israel. But we cannot do without foreign monitors who would watch over such a treaty's implementation," Arafat told Russia's Izvestia daily.

However, Arafat also reiterated his condemnation of Israel's "terror" and "occupation" of Palestinian territories, charging Israel with "violating the UN resolutions and the roadmap plan's conditions."

Arafat even hinted that extremist groups such as Hamas would be welcome in the Palestinian government.

"The government is open to all who are ready to act for the Palestinian people's sake and for the sake of peace. We welcome all who fight Israeli occupation and terror," Arafat said.

Reuters adds: The Palestinian Authority appealed yesterday to world powers steering Middle East peacemaking to stop Israel from going ahead with plans for new barriers deep inside the West Bank.

Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat said letters to the "Quartet" -- the United States, Russia, European Union and United Nations -- called for urgent action after Israel approved a major new phase of the controversial project Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa (C), receives the full report from the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) Expert Committee co-chairpersons, Sir Cyril Chantler (R) and Professor Sian Griffiths (L), at the government offices in Hong Kong yesterday. No specific government departments or ministers were blamed for mishandling the response to the SARS crisis in Hong Kong in the long awaited inquiry report submitted yesterday.

Turkey, US agree on 'action plan to purge Kurdish rebels'

AFP, Ankara

Turkey and the United States have agreed on an "action plan", including military options, to purge northern Iraq of armed Kurdish Kurd rebels, a Turkish diplomat said yesterday.

"We have agreed on an action plan," Nabi Sensoy, the deputy under-secretary of the foreign ministry, told reporters following talks between US and Turkish officials here.

About 5,000 armed members of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has waged a 15-year war for self-rule in southeast Turkey, are believed to be hiding in Iraq's mountainous north since 1999 when the group announced a unilateral ceasefire and withdrew its guerrillas from Turkish territory.

The group, which is considered a terrorist organization by both Ankara and Washington, called off the truce last month.

Asked whether the "action plan" included military options, Sensoy said: "No option is ruled out for PKK's eradication from northern Iraq. Everything is in."

He said Turkey was ready to "make any contribution" to help the United States cleanse northern Iraq of the rebels.

"The related ministries and agencies will carry out the necessary work from now on the action plan," Sensoy said, declining to give further details.

Joseph Cofer Black, the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism, headed the US delegation at the talks, the second round of meetings the two sides have held since last month on the issue.

Turkey has repeatedly called for the US army to crack down on the PKK since it occupied Iraq.

The chief of the powerful Turkish army, General Hilmi Ozkok, said Wednesday that there was no link between sending Turkish troops to Iraq, a plan that Ankara is currently considering, and fighting the PKK.

But US action against the rebels could help the government here convince MPs to vote for the sending of troops to help the Americans in Iraq, according to observers.

Bush seeks \$600m to hunt Iraqi WMD proof

THE NEW YORK TIMES, Washington

The Bush administration is seeking more than \$600 million from Congress to continue the hunt for conclusive evidence that Saddam Hussein's government had an illegal weapons programme, officials said Wednesday.

The money, part of the White House's request for \$87 billion in supplemental spending on Iraq and Afghanistan, comes on top of at least \$300 million that has already been spent on the weapons search, the officials said.

The budget figures for the weapons search are included in the classified part of the administration's supplemental appropriations request, and have not been made public. The size of the request suggests the White House is determined to keep searching for unconventional weapons or evidence that they were being developed under Mr. Hussein. The search so far has turned up no solid evidence that Iraq had chemical, biological or nuclear weapons when the American invasion began in March, according to administration officials.

Counting the money already spent, the total price tag for the search will approach \$1 billion.

The money is intended specifically to pay for the activities of the Iraq Survey Group, made up of teams of troops and experts who are managed by the Pentagon but whose activities are coordinated by David Kay, a former United Nations weapons inspector who reports to the director of central intelligence, George J. Tenet.

Officials said the money for the Iraq Survey Group comes under the classified intelligence part of the Pentagon's budget request. A Pentagon spokesman declined to comment on the classified category.

The request for increased funding comes just as Mr. Kay is scheduled to brief Congress in closed sessions on Thursday on an interim report of the Iraq Survey Group's findings so far.

He is to testify before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. The CIA is expected to publicly release a declassified statement based on Kay's testimony after the briefings, officials said.

CIA and other officials said last week that Kay's report would be inconclusive, suggesting that he will not say that he has found strong evidence of the existence of illegal weapons in Iraq.

Since the fall of the Hussein government, the failure to find evidence of illegal weapons has been a major political embarrassment for the Bush administration.

After the initial military-led effort to find such weapons came under fire, President Bush turned to the CIA to oversee an expanded search. In June, Tenet asked Kay to act as his personal adviser on the issue and to provide strategic advice to the weapons hunters.

Officials familiar with the request said that if the administration gets all the money it is seeking, it will provide funding for a staff of 1,400 for the Iraq Survey Group. It currently has more than 1,200 members.

Annan spells out need for fundamental UN reform

PTI, United Nations

Stressing on the need for fundamental reform of the United Nations to meet new multiple challenges including terrorism, poverty, disease and climate change, Secretary General Kofi Annan has appealed to lawmakers around the world to press their governments to advance the interests of the entire planet.

"The time has long since arrived to look hard at the institutions of the United Nations -- and, if necessary, to make radical reforms," Annan told the 109th Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly in Geneva in a message delivered by Sergei Ordzhonikidze, Director General of the UN office.

"A central challenge is to enhance their authority by making them both open to more voices and more effective in taking action," Annan said.

The decisions for change rest with Member States, Annan said, pledging to do everything possible to help them make the UN a better instrument in the service of the peoples of the world. "Indeed, I appeal for your help. If the reform agenda is to succeed, it will require states to promote their national interest by advancing the global interest," he said.

"You as parliamentarians can do much to mobilise public opinion and encourage governments to do just that. The IPU itself, recently granted observer status in the General Assembly, can also make vital contributions to deliberations on these issues in the United Nations," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian olive pickers wait behind the controversial West Bank barrier early in the morning yesterday near the town of Tulkarem to get permission from Israeli troops to cross into the other side. The farmers cross every morning from the Palestinian side into Israel where their olive groves are situated. The Palestinian Authority's representative to the United Nations has asked the UN Security Council to move quickly to halt Israel's construction of the separation barrier, following Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's decision this week that the wall will take in the Jewish settlements of Ariel and Kedumin, despite US opposition.

Hollywood stars come out against Schwarzenegger

AFP, Los Angeles

Screen heavyweight Arnold Schwarzenegger may be convincing voters that he is the right man to run California, but a constellation of appalled Hollywood stars begs to differ.

While opinion polls this week showed 40 percent of likely voters in the October 7 recall poll, aimed at toppling and replacing Democratic Governor Gray Davis, would elect the "Terminator," many of his famous friends and colleagues are coming out against his Republican political ambitions.

"He's a really nice guy and I believe he has nothing but the best intentions," said superstar and friend George Clooney who starred with Schwarzenegger in 1997's "Batman and Robin."

"On the other hand I could not disagree more with most of what he wants to do. I certainly couldn't vote for him and that's not a particularly nice thing to say and I'm his friend, you know?"

A Republican, even a moderate Republican with star power of his own like Schwarzenegger, is a tough sell in overwhelmingly Democratic and liberal Hollywood.

US sees new al-Qaeda terror chief in Gulf

AP, Washington

US officials believe they have identified a young former bodyguard of Osama bin Laden as al-Qaeda's new chief of terror operations in the Persian Gulf.

Abu Hazim al-Sha'ir, a 29-year-old Yemeni now believed to be living in Saudi Arabia, is one of a new crop of al-Qaeda operatives who are trying to fill the roles of senior bin Laden lieutenants who have been captured or killed since Sept. 11, according to US officials.

"Capable replacements appear to be emerging, many of whom have demonstrated their ability to see previously planned operations through to fruition," according to one US intelligence report.

Abu Hazim is just one of the top al-Qaeda leaders now at large, according to officials from US counterterrorism agencies, who discussed intelligence on the terror network on the condition of anonymity.

Officials acknowledge there may be other emerging leaders they don't know about or leaders participating in terrorist planning they are unaware of. The CIA and FBI, for example, did not learn that Khalid Shaikh Mohammed was the mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks until well after they took place.

Abu Hazim appears to be taking the place of Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, a key organizer of the USS Cole bombing and the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings, officials say. Al-Nashiri was detained in the United Arab Emirates in late 2002.

Abu Hazim is on Saudi Arabia's list of 19 most-wanted al-Qaeda operatives, listed under his real name of Khalid Ali Bin Ali Al-Hajj. He is believed to have trained in al-Qaeda's Afghan camps in 1999 and later to have served in bin Laden's bodyguard. Before Sept. 11, he traveled frequently to the Arabian peninsula, to southeast Asia and to Afghanistan.

US counterterrorism officials also tie him to the May 12 bombings of residential complexes in Riyadh and possibly to some Saudi-based planning of operations targeting the United States directly.

There isn't hard evidence tying him to ongoing attacks on US forces in Iraq, however.