

Protests in Australia as Bush defends Iraq war

REUTERS, Canberra

Heckled inside the Australian parliament and jeered by protesters outside, President Bush yesterday defended the Iraq invasion and war on terror, saying Australia and the United States had to lead by example.

Bush, wrapping up a six-nation Asian tour, told a joint session of parliament that Australia and the United States had a "special responsibility throughout the Pacific" to help keep peace.

The American president is on a whirlwind visit to Australia to thank conservative Prime Minister John Howard for helping in the US-led war on terror and in Iraq.

His 20-hour visit has triggered a massive security operation in the usually sleepy capital with armed air force jets escorting him into Canberra on Wednesday night with orders to shoot any unauthorized aircraft and patrolling over the city on Thursday.



PHOTO: AFP
US President George W. Bush walks into the Parliament House to speak in Canberra, Australia yesterday. Bush is on the final leg of his Asia-Pacific trip.

IAEA gets details of Iran's nuclear history

REUTERS, Vienna

The UN nuclear watchdog chief received what Iran says is a full declaration of its nuclear activities yesterday, eight days ahead of a UN deadline for Iran to prove it has no secret atomic weapons programme.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Mohamed ElBaradei told reporters at the agency's headquarters that he had received the files from Iran's IAEA envoy, Ali Akbar Salehi.

ElBaradei said Salehi had assured him the declaration was "comprehensive and full."

"It is going to take us time to go through all these documents," ElBaradei said.

"We have submitted a report that fully documents our past

activities, peaceful activities, in the nuclear field," Salehi told reporters.

The pile of paper documents filled a binder about one and half inches thick, an IAEA official told Reuters.

Submission of the report meets a key demand of the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency, which has given Tehran an October 31 deadline to clear up suspicions its nuclear program goes beyond power production to arms development.

Under an agreement brokered by the foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany in Tehran on Tuesday, Iran pledged to sign up to tough IAEA inspections.

An IAEA spokeswoman said earlier it would take at least several days to assess the contents of the

report, awaited with great interest by a Washington administration that views Tehran as a sponsor of terrorist activity.

Vienna-based diplomats on the UN agency's governing board, who will decide whether Iran has fully met IAEA demands, are anxiously awaiting confirmation from the IAEA that the report is what has been demanded of Iran.

"We will want to hear it from ElBaradei that this is in fact everything that they needed from Iran," a diplomat in Vienna said on condition of anonymity. IAEA experts are expected to subject the report to rigorous examination.

There are strong conservative forces in Iran that object to the IAEA's intrusive investigations and see them only as a U.S. bid to discredit Tehran.

The IAEA is particularly keen to have details about the origin of uranium enrichment centrifuge parts, which Iran says it bought on the black market and blames for contaminating two Iranian sites where the IAEA found traces of bomb-grade uranium.

Iran has always denied it seeks nuclear weapons and on Tuesday agreed to sign a protocol permitting intrusive, short-notice IAEA inspections and suspend uranium enrichment as part of a deal welcomed by President Bush.

Iran, however, made it clear that its suspension of uranium enrichment activities would be a voluntary and temporary measure, arousing concerns among some experts that it has not ruled out pursuing nuclear weapons at a later stage.

Train jumps track in India: 4 killed

AGENCIES, New Delhi

At least seven people were feared killed and over 53 injured when a Bangalore-bound passenger train jumped tracks near Palahalli gate in Karnataka's Mandya district last morning.

Railway officials confirmed the death of four women passengers, the bodies of which were recovered at the accident site. Unconfirmed reports, however, put the death toll at seven.

The incident occurred when four coaches overturned and one derailed soon after the "Push-Pull" train, running between Mysore and Bangalore for daily passengers, left the Mysore station at 6.30 am, Superintendent of Police, Mandya, R Hitendra said.

Rescue operation was on and the derailed bogies were being searched to find whether there were more casualties.

Union Railway Minister Nitish Kumar is on his way to Mandya, Kumar, on a visit to Bangalore, to ink an MoU between Karnataka government and the Railway Ministry on the Bangalore-Mangalore rail project, rushed to the mishap site soon after his arrival.

UK, IRA under pressure to reveal details on disarmament

REUTERS, Belfast

Britain and the IRA were under intense pressure to reveal details of the armed group's latest act of disarmament on Wednesday after a much trumpeted attempt to bring final peace to Northern Ireland ended in fiasco.

The province's main Protestant leader David Trimble was in London for talks with ministers, a day after rejecting the Irish Republican Army's biggest ever weapons move as too secretive.

"Recovery would be very simple -- let the (British) prime minister (Tony Blair) put the information he has in the public domain," Trimble told the BBC.

"Let the republicans remove from (arms monitor General John) de Chastelain the limitations that have prevented him from giving a full report -- let him do so."

Trimble held a brief meeting with Gerry Adams, head of the IRA's political ally Sinn Fein, late on Tuesday night, and further talks were planned in the coming days.

NASA experts oppose ISS mission

REUTERS, Washington

NASA's decision to launch a fresh crew to the International Space Station came over the strenuous objections of mid-level scientists and physicians who raised safety concerns, The Washington Post reported yesterday.

The newspaper said two officials responsible for health and environmental conditions on the space station refused to approve the launch and instead signed a dissent that warned of risks posed by the deterioration of vital equipment aboard the orbiting laboratory.

The dissenters warned about "the continued degradation" of the environmental monitoring and health maintenance systems and exercise equipment vital to the astronauts' well-being, the newspaper said.

NASA Administrator Sean O'Keefe told the newspaper on Wednesday that, as he understood it, there is no immediate hazard to the crew, but that conditions could deteriorate in the next six months and force the crew to abandon ship.

Report on UN Baghdad HQ attack

Security breaches blamed for high death toll

AFP, United Nations

A damning independent report said mismanagement, incompetence and a string of security breaches added to the death toll from the August suicide bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad.

The report, ordered by Secretary General Kofi Annan, outlined a series of failures in the "dysfunctional" security system that contributed to the 22 dead, including top envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello, and 150 wounded on August 19.

"This is a wake-up call," Martti Ahtisaari, the former president of Finland who headed the independent inquiry commission, announced at a press conference to release the report.

"The UN management and staff failed to comply with standard security regulations and directives, and left the UN open and vulnerable to attacks," he said.

Ahtisaari said sufficient security would have been unlikely to prevent the attack but that the death toll would likely have been lower if not for blunders and miscalculations at every level of the UN operation.

"The current security management system is dysfunctional," the report said. "It provides little guarantee of security to UN staff in Iraq or

other high-risk environments and needs to be reformed."

Among the 40-page report's findings was that Annan, who pulled out almost all international staff after the attack, declined to heed earlier calls to reduce the number of personnel in Iraq.

Annan's office issued a terse statement saying that he "consistently has placed the highest importance on security of UN staff." The statement was later amended to take out a call for help in paying for security improvements.

While saying that the United States had ultimate responsibility for security as the occupying power, it laid no blame on US forces and praised them for their rescue help after the deadly explosion.

Instead, the report confirmed US claims that UN personnel had asked for security measures put in place by US troops to be removed because staff did not want to be seen as connected with the occupation.

But the report, which had been requested by the UN staff union, declined to blame particular officials for the "sloppy" lapses, which it said included a failure to meet minimum security standards or pay sufficient attention to warnings of attacks.

"This was not a name-calling

exercise," Ahtisaari said.

The union said the report "raises more questions than it answers with regard to the role and responsibility of senior UN officials" and called for further investigations.

"It is important to recognise that Iraq has turned out to be more difficult than perhaps anyone thought," Ahtisaari said.

The report said security alerts were slow to be acted upon, UN agencies misrepresented the number of staff they had in the country, and a changing security and political environment was not recognised by decision-makers.

It said many of the errors stemmed from a rush to get back into the country after Saddam Hussein was toppled, and that Iraqis often saw the world body as responsible for much of its suffering under his former regime.

"The UN system is viewed by many to be at the origins of the longest and most stringent sanctions regime ever, the deployment of the most invasive weapons inspection programmes and... for over a decade the UN system controlled much of the income of the oil production of Iraq," it said.

Two bomb attacks foiled in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Two bomb attacks were foiled in Baghdad yesterday, with police arresting a Syrian and a pair of Iraqis in an explosives-laden vehicle, a police officer told AFP.

A white Toyota had been spotted driving outside a former compound of ousted leader Saddam Hussein's family, now used by the US military, and was stopped by police who found the vehicle packed with explosives, said Colonel Abbas Nasser Hussein.

A team of US military experts were brought in to blow up the car in the city's southern Dura district.

Two of the men inside the car were Iraqi and the third, according to the New Iraqi Army, was a Syrian, Hussein said.

One of the men said he had been paid 200 dollars to carry out the attack.

"There will be no security while Saddam's followers destabilise the country," Hussein said.

He added that another bomb was also found and defused near a school and busy market in Dura.

Since August, Iraq has been hit by a wave of car bombings that have claimed the lives of more than 100 people, including top UN official Sergio Vieira de Mello and Shiite politician and leader Ayatollah Mohammad Baqer al-Hakim.

In Baghdad alone, 17 people have been killed this month in car bomb attacks.



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi protesters hold up national flags (two in front) during a demonstration in Khaldiya, 100 km west of Baghdad yesterday. Thousands of Iraqis demonstrated near a US base demanding the release of three women arrested by US forces. The women were arrested three days ago instead of their husbands when US soldiers looking for the men accused of anti-US attacks came into their homes but failed to find them, according to local security sources. White flag in the back has Islamic calligraphy on it from the holy Quran, which reads: "There is no God but God and Mohammed is his prophet."



PHOTO: AFP
Concorde is seen after taking off from London Heathrow Airport on route to Cardiff yesterday. Concorde is completing its week-long UK tour before being retired from commercial use today. During the British Airways Concorde's final week of service it has flown to Belfast, Manchester and Birmingham.

Adieu to Concorde

AFP, London

Concorde's last fare-paying flights were taking to the skies Thursday, giving ordinary passengers a last taste of supersonic travel a day before the needle-nosed plane retires with a series of VIP-only trips.

The last-ever paying flight, a British Airways service to New York, is to take off from London's Heathrow airport at 6:30 pm (1730 GMT), landing -- thanks to its supersonic speed -- an hour before it took off by US clocks.

"The vast majority of the passengers will be avid Concorde fans," a

BA spokeswoman said.

That will leave Concorde to bow out of 27 years of service with a trio of special trips on Friday, all of which are to arrive at Heathrow at around 4:00 pm (1500 GMT) in front of a crowd of around 1,000 Concorde aficionados.

Packed with celebrities, BA staff and competition winners, one service will travel from the Scottish capital, Edinburgh, while another will be a round trip over the Atlantic from Heathrow.

Flight BA002, the return leg from New York, will be the final Concorde to land, marking the end for what is

regarded as one of the greatest technological feats of the 20th century.

Joining well-known Concorde fans such as actress Joan Collins and TV personality David Frost will be an American who paid 60,300 dollars (51,100 euros) in a charity auction for a return trip to London including a place on the final flight.

The day would one of "mixed emotions" said Lord Colin Marshall, chairman of BA, the only airline apart from Air France to fly Concorde. Air France retired its planes at the end of May.

Kofi Annan, UN win EU rights prize

AFP, Strasbourg

The United Nations was yesterday awarded the European Parliament's prestigious Sakharov human rights prize in honour of UN staff killed trying to bring peace to the world.

Parliamentary leaders said they were awarding the 2003 prize to "UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and all staff of the United Nations, in special memory of Sergio Vieira de Mello and many other UN officials who have lost their lives in carrying out their work for peace in the world".

Vieira de Mello, the UN's special representative for Iraq, was killed in a bomb attack in Baghdad in August.

The Brazilian diplomat, 55, was UN High Commissioner for Human Rights when he reluctantly agreed to go to Iraq on a temporary mission as Annan's personal envoy.

Blair govt rejects inquiry call into Diana's death

PTI, London

A day after it was revealed Princess Diana had feared that a plot was being hatched to kill her, the British government on Tuesday turned down a demand for a public inquiry into her death.

Diana reportedly wrote in a letter to her former butler Paul Burrell in October 1996, 10 months before her death in Paris car crash, that someone was "planning an accident in my car. To make the path clear for Charles to marry". The letter was published by 'Daily Mirror' on Monday.

"Everybody knows there has been an exhaustive investigation by the French authorities into the circumstances surrounding Diana's death, and there will be nothing to be gained from repeating that here," the Prime Minister's spokesman said.