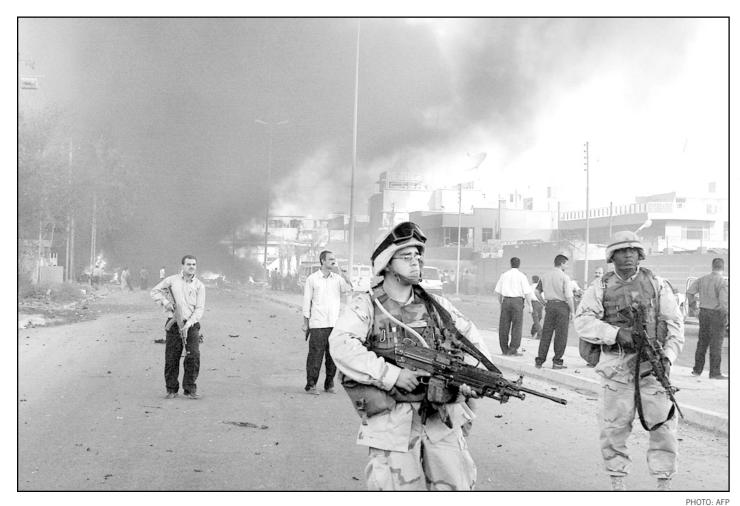
INTERNATIONAL



US soldiers and Iraqi policemen deployed at the scene of an explosion in front of the Baghdad headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Baghdad yesterday. An Iraqi hospital ambulance rammed into a barricade in front the ICRC, setting off a huge explosion.

Democrats blast Bush for his faulty Iraq policy

AFP, Detroit, Michigan

All nine Democrats seeking their party's presidential nomination traded barbs late Sunday at the most recent political debate here, but reserved their harshest words for incumbent Republican President George W. Bush's Iraq

"This president has done it wrong every step of the way," US Senator John Kerry said at the debate sponsored by Fox News and the Congressional Black Caucus Institute.

"He promised that he would have a real coalition. He has a fraudulent coalition. He promised he would go through the United Nations and honor the inspections process. He did not.

"He promised he would go to war as a last resort ... He did not," the

"Our troops are today more exposed, are in greater danger, because this president didn't put together a real coalition, because this president's been unwilling to share the burden and the task," Kerry added.

The war in Iraq has proved consistently to be one of the most frequently raised issues in the periodic presidential debates, providing fodder for attacks by the Democratic contenders against one another, as well as against the current US administration.

During the 90 minute forum Sunday, Democrats had especially sharp disagreements over whether or not it was a good idea to support Bush's recent request for an additional 87 billion to stabilize Iraq.

But Bush was the target of much of the invective about alleged US foreign policy miscues: The presidential hopefuls slammed the US president for a variety of policy missteps including everything from not tracking down terrorist leader Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan to failing to gain greater interna-

New York-based civil rights activist Al Sharpton advocated a speedy

"Bush was wrong to go in the first place. To delay coming out is not going to make it right. We need to not get into another Vietnam," Sharpton said. That view was echoed by Carol Mosley Braun, a former US senator from

"I stand with the mothers of the young men and women who are there, and believe that, as Americans, we have to bring our troops home but we have to bring them home with honor," she said, but only after rebuilding the

"We blew the place up, we have to fix it back," she said.

Retired Army General Wesley Clark meanwhile, accused the administration of a pulling a "bait and switch" ruse on US voters in waging the war to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"Right after Sept 11, this administration determined to do bait and switch on the American public. President Bush said he was going to get Osama bin Laden, dead or alive. Instead, he went after Saddam Hussein. He doesn't have either one of them today," Clark said.

"The failure of this administration was not to put the troops in to finish the job against Osama bin Laden. And you know why they didn't do it? They didn't do it because, all along, their plan was to save those troops to go after Saddam Hussein," the retired general said.

Asked whether as the former chief executive of a small rural state he possessed the foreign policy credentials to occupy the Oval Office, ex-Vermont Governor Howard Dean noted that "I have as much foreign-policy experience as George W. Bush did when he got into office -- and Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter," he said, citing the names of various former governors who succeeded in being elected president.

"I would submit to you that my foreign-policy experience might be more valuable in the White House today than the foreign-policy experience of many of the people who supported the Iraq war," Dean continued.

Israel blamed for breaching roadmap after legalising settlement outposts

Israel was accused vesterday of breaching the terms of the Middle East peace "roadmap" after granting "permanent settlement" status to at least five illegal outposts in the

A senior advisor to Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said the decision would allow the settlements to obtain grants for education and infrastructure projects as well as making them eligible for protection by security forces.

"We need to give the minimum services to these people who are on the ground, especially for security and education." Ron Sheshner senior advisor to Mofaz on settlements, told Israeli radio.

"These people must be able to survive and we will provide them a

The radio said several of the outposts set to be accorded "legal" status had earlier been dismantled

In addition the radio reported

sion would unlock Monday some 29 million dollars worth of funds to build apartments in West Bank settle-

tionally drafted "roadmap", Israel is obliged to freeze settlement activity in general and dismantle around 60 outposts in the West Bank that have been set up since Prime Minister Ariel Sharon came to power in March 2001. Since the roadmap was officially launched in June, the number of settlement outposts has remained largely unchanged.

Around a dozen were dismantled by the army in a blaze of publicity. but new ones have been since been set up by radical settler groups.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said the latest move illustrated that Sharon's government was determined to kill off the

"Israel is continuing to bury the roadmap." Erakat told AFP.

He called on the sponsors of the

roadmap -- the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia -- to pressure Israel to reverse its decision, which he described as part of a wider aim "to Under the terms of the internadestroy the peace process and the Palestinian Authority and prolong the occupation"

> Dror Etkes, of the leftist Israeli group Peace Now's Settlement Watch programme, said the move was a "blatant" breach of the roadmap.

"According to the roadmap they are expected to dismantle these outposts. Instead what we are seeing is that they are being integrated." he told AFP.

"They (the Sharon government) are very committed to the peace process -- on condition that they don't have to dismantle the outposts and end the occupation."

The decision comes just four days after Israel also sparked accusations of flouting the roadmap by inviting tenders to build more than 300 apartments in West Bank settlements.

Maoists extortion forces Top Hizbul Nepalis to flee homes

With violence surging across rural Nepal, villagers and political leaders opposed to Maoist rebels charge that the guerrillas have stepped up extortion and driven thousands from their homes.

Dhana Kumari Ghale, 82, is suffering from bronchitis. She says she and her farmer husband fled their village in eastern Nepal for an uncertain life on the road after Maoists demanded money to fund their seven-year "people's war."

"We have been forced by the Maoists to be refugees in our own country," said Ghale, interviewed by a state television reporter.

"At a time when we don't have enough to eat and the bitter winter is coming, how can we pay a huge amount of money to the Maoists? she asked.

The Maoists say their insurgency, which has claimed more than 8.200 lives, is aimed at improving the lives of villagers like Ghale by overthrowing the monarchy and the rest of the Kathmandu-based elite.

Last week the rebel leadership said it would not destroy infrastructure or public projects except those "run directly by the United States."

The Maoists also said they would stop political killings.

But Nepal's mainstream parties say their rural rank-and-file still live in a climate of fear, as they are particular targets of extortion and

The five main parties estimate around 400 of their activists have been killed by the Maoists since the start of the insurgency in 1996.

D.L. Paudel, the secretary of the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) in the Ramechhap district 268 kilometres (167 miles) east of Kathmandu, said Maoist intimidation was widespread in his part of the kingdom.

"Maoists knock on each and every village door and demand a contribution of between 5.000 and 50,000 rupees (67 to 675 dollars),' Paudel told AFP.

"They also demand from each family two young volunteers, be thev sons or daughters, to join the rebels 'People's Liberation Army," he said.

He gave the example of Katap Bahadur Basnet, a 68 year-old in his district who used to serve with the Gurkhas, the Nepalese regiment that has fought for two centuries with the British military.

commander killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The operations chief of Indian Kashmir's largest rebel group, Hizbul Muiahedin, was killed in a gunbattle in the summer capital Srinagar, police chief K. Rajindra said vesterday.

Hizbul Mujahedin commander Saiful Rahman was killed by security forces in a gunbattle Sunday evening in Srinagar's Palpora district, said Rajindra, the police chief for the Kashmir Valley around the summer capital. A police statement said Rahman

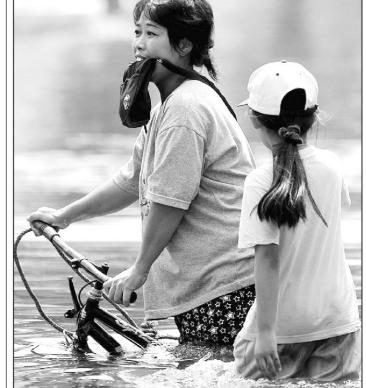
was a Pakistani from Rahim Yar

Khan in the eastern Puniab province

and served as Hizbul Muiahedin's

"chief operations commander" and "chief military adviser." It said police, after killing Rahman, searched his hideout and found an automatic rifle and 73 rounds along with one hand gre-

nade and a wireless set. Hizbul Mujahedin is the largest of the rebel groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir since 1989. The group is made up mostly of local men with the leadership based in the Pakistaniadministered zone of Kashmir.



Thai woman and her daughter walk in the flood on the street in Phetchaburi province southern of Bangkok yesterday. Thousands were hit Sunday by monsoon flooding along Thailand's southcentral coast, which has brought road and rail transport to a virtual halt and forced the evacuation of more than 700 people, authorities said.

Iraq to drop Saddam-era nat'l anthem, emblem

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq will soon have a new flag and national anthem as part of efforts to sever all links with the era of Saddam Hussein and his Baath party, a member of the US-installed Government Council told AFP on

"We have created a committee within the council to chose between different proposals to change the flag and the national anthem, Muwaffak al-Rubai said.

"For the national anthem, there is a consensus to go back to the one which existed before the early 1980s and which was called: 'My homeland, my homeland," he said. Saddam brought in a new song

glorifying his former ruling Baath party, entitled: "A country that has spread its wings to the horizon.'

"I also think that we will go back to the old emblem from the time of Abdul Karim Kassem which had a coawheel with wheat in the centre instead of the eagle now in use." he said, referring to the ruler of Iraq between 1958 and 1963.

Rubai also said "the majority of Council members, and I am one of them, want to maintain the current flag, but want to change the calligraphy of 'Allahu Akbar' (God is Great) which is written in the middle."

"Instead of Saddam Hussein's handwriting, we want to use the calligraphy of the Koran," or Muslim holy book, he explained.

Diana's butler hits back at princes

AFP, London

The former butler of Britain's late princess Diana on Sunday refused to back down over the escalating row caused by sensational revelations he has made about her most intimate

In an interview with the BBC. Paul Burrell said he would like to give Princes William and Harry "a piece of his mind" and told them to "grow up," after they accused him last week of betraying them and their mother.

Burrell claimed the two, the only sons of Diana and heir to the British throne Prince Charles, were being used as "emotional cannons" by the "grey men in suits" at Buckingham Palace.

to boost peace efforts

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee began a three-day trip yesterday to the isolated northeastern state of Nagaland to boost efforts to negotiate an end to the country's longest-running rebellion.

Vajpayee, the first prime minister to visit the state bordering Myanmar in six years, will meet state leaders as he tries to bridge the gap between Indian negotiators and National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) guerrillas.

He flew into Nagaland's trading hub of Dimapur but bad weather forced him to abandon a helicopter flight to the state capital Kohima.

Vajpayee instead was driven by car on the 100-kilometre (62-mile) road to Kohima, an official accompanying him said.

The main faction of the NSCN, the most influential of the 30 or so rebel groups in Nagaland, resisted decades of military action by India but entered an uneasy truce with New Delhi in 1997

The separatist unrest began with India's independence in 1947 and has claimed around 25,000 lives.

During his maiden visit to the state of two million people, Vajpayee will meet state leaders, launch Nagaland's first mobile telephone service and meet local tribal delegations.

Vajpayee in Nagaland N Korea contacts US on nuclear offer

North Korea has contacted the United States over an offer to give written security assurances in return for the communist state ending its nuclear weapons programme, Secretary of State Colin Powell said

Powell called it a positive sign, but warned that there are still "long days and nights" of negotiations ahead to end the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula.

"We would only enter into an agreement that can be verified," he

stance on Saturday when it said it was ready to consider President George W. Bush's offer of written security guarantees in return for scrapping its nuclear weapons

China, which has the closest links of any country with the isolated regime, immediately welcomed the North's move as a "positive ges-

Powell said North Korean officials contacted US counterparts last Friday but did not say where. Normally the two sides carry out unofficial negotiations through their

The secretary of state said that since the United States had said last vear it had no intention of invading or attacking North Korea the two sides have been "doing diplomatic dances" which gathered pace when President George W. Bush went to an Asia-Pacific leaders summit in Bangkok last week.

North Korea has demanded a full non-aggression pact but Bush reaffirmed his offer of some form of multilateral security assurances during talks with China's President Hu Jintao in Bangkok.



BJ Harty shields her face from the debris blown up by the Santa Ana winds as she surveys her home destroyed by wildfires in San Bernadino, California on Sunday. Harty said on Saturday she had used the ladder (in foreground) to climb on the roof and watch the flame on the hills, but when the Santa Ana winds came up without warning the flames raced down the hills and into the subdivision, sending families fleeing for their lives. California Governor Gray Davis declared 26 October states of emergency in four fire-ravaged counties in the south of the most populous US state

Mahathir hits back at critics

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad hit back yesterday against those who condemned him for saying that Jews rule the world

"Are we not allowed to say that we are anary with the Jews? Are the Jews some kind of creature who cannot be condemned in any way?' Mahathir asked when questioned by reporters about the fierce international criticism of his remarks.

He said he knew a lot of Jewish people and was not against them, the official Bernama news agency reported.

"I am against those Jews who kill Muslims and the Jews who support the killers of Muslims," he was quoted as saying. Mahathir said that he did not care

f the Europeans, who were among his major critics, did not like him. when they do something wrong, I

"I have European friends. But am going to tell them that it is

"You say that you are not under

the influence of the Jews and yet

when I criticise the Jews, the whole

of the European Union wants to

"But when somebody condemns the Muslims, calls my Prophet (Muhammad) terrorist and all that, did the European Union say anything? Which shows that they are

under the thumb of the Jews." US Christian fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell called Muhammad a "terrorist" in a television interview in September last year, sparking outrage in the Muslim

More recently, a United States general has been under fire for casting the war on terrorism as a Christian struggle against Satan, but retains his post as deputy undersecretary of defense for intelli-

Lieutenant General William Boykin recalled in a speech how a top lieutenant of Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aidid, Osman Otto, boasted on CNN he would never be caught because Allah would protect him.

"Well, you know what?" Boykin was quoted as saying. "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his