



An Iraqi man suspected of being a former Saddam Hussein bodyguard sits handcuffed in the back of a US military Humvee hours after he was nabbed from a house during an overnight raid in the village of Tai Maghar, some 20km south of the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk yesterday. Military authorities targeted him after they gathered intelligence that suggested he was a supplier of arms for anti-coalition insurgents in the region.

Koizumi tipped to win reelection in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's 103 million voters head to the polls today tipped to give Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi his first direct mandate for reforms needed to pull the world's second largest economy out of 13 years of stagnation.

Candidates were making their final pitches Saturday as official campaigning hours were due to end at 8:00 pm (1100 GMT) ahead of the start of voting at 7:00 am Sunday (2200 GMT Saturday).

Opinion polls published by major papers Saturday showed voters would prefer Koizumi's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to maintain its virtually unbroken 48-year grip on power in a coalition with the Buddhist-backed New Komei and New Conservative parties.

The Asahi Shimbun's poll of 1,041 voters over two days to Friday found 40 percent of them favoured the LDP-centred government against 33 percent who would back a government led by the largest opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ).

Powell backs alternative ME peace plan

Palestinian PM, Arafat reach security deal

AP, Washington

Frustrated by a stalemate in Middle East peacemaking, the Bush administration is encouraging Israelis and Palestinians who are trying to bypass their leaders with a peace plan that calls for large territorial concessions by Israel.

After dismissing the private, largely symbolic negotiations for weeks, the administration suddenly is eagerly endorsing the effort, and by implication the dovish terms.

Some American analysts said they view the surprising US move as a way of prodding Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to get busy on a moribund US-backed road map for peacemaking with the Palestinians.

"They are trying to send a message to

Sharon, without saying so explicitly," said former US mediator Dennis Ross.

"It does reflect a deep concern," former Assistant Secretary of State Martin Indyk said, referring to the virtual halt to any active US diplomacy.

There are two parallel, private efforts under way, and both suddenly have the administration's blessing.

One is a petition that Israeli Adm. Ami Ayalon and Palestinian professor Sari Nusseibeh have circulated. It calls on Israel to give up all the territory the Arabs lost in the 1967 Middle East war and turn the land over to the Palestinians for a state.

Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, in a speech in Washington this week, disclosed he had met with Ayalon and Nusseibeh. Praising their

campaign, Wolfowitz said, "As Americans, we know there are times when great changes can extend from the grass roots."

In a second, more significant effort, former Israeli Justice Minister Yossi Beilin and former Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo held private talks and came up with a plan for a Palestinian state on nearly all of the West Bank and Gaza. Most Jewish settlers would be uprooted.

The plan also would give Palestinians control of a disputed holy shrine in Jerusalem's walled Old City an elevated mosque compound that was once home to the biblical Jewish temples. In return, Palestinians would give up their demand for the "right of return" of about 4 million Palestinian war

refugees and their descendants to Israel.

Sharon has sharply attacked the Israelis involved in that effort, saying they had no right to go behind the back of the government to make concessions, even in a symbolic deal.

Reuters adds: Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei said yesterday President Yasser Arafat had agreed to a security deal that would split power between the interior ministry and the national security council.

Qurei had proposed that Hakam Balawi, favored by Arafat's Fatah faction for interior minister, cede control over Palestinian security forces to the council, a move hoped to satisfy reform requirements in a US-backed peace plan.

Turkey decides not to send troops to Iraq

REUTERS, Ankara

Reversing an earlier decision, Turkey said Friday it would not deploy troops to help the United States secure postwar Iraq after encountering strong opposition from the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council.

Political analysts said the move would expose the problems US forces are having in restoring order in Iraq but should not harm ties between NATO allies Washington and Ankara. Turkish financial markets shrugged off the announcement.

Turkey took its decision after Secretary of State Colin Powell rang Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul Thursday evening.

"After reviewing the situation Foreign Minister Gul informed Secretary Powell that the Turkish government would reconsider its offer to send troops," a Foreign Ministry statement said.

Washington admitted Friday that

Turkish troops might not add to stability in Iraq, where attacks on US-led forces are daily occurrences.

"Obviously, we would have preferred if this (had) all worked out very nicely to everybody's satisfaction but let's remember at this time what is stability in Iraq," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters.

"There is recognition, I think, on all our parts -- the United States' side, Turkish as well as the Iraqis -- that maybe this deployment at this time would not add to that goal in the way that we had hoped it would," he added.

Turkey's decision to dispatch soldiers to Iraq, once part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, was strongly opposed by Iraq's Governing Council and Iraq's Kurds, who have seen Turkish troops based in their northern mountainous region since the mid-1990s.

Washington admitted Friday that

Suu Kyi refuses to accept freedom: UN

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar's generals have freed democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest, but she is refusing to accept liberty until 35 colleagues are released from detention, UN envoy Paulo Sergio Pinheiro said yesterday.

"She will not accept to have any privilege or any access to freedom of movement until everyone detained since May 30 has been released," Pinheiro told a news conference.

The UN human rights envoy said he had been told by the ruling generals during talks in Yangon this week that Suu Kyi, detained after a bloody clash between her followers and government supporters, was no longer under house arrest.

Pinheiro, who talked with Suu Kyi for two hours on Thursday, said she demanded the release of 35 colleagues in the National League for

Democracy before she would consider herself free.

She also demanded an inquiry into the May 30 violence, which each side blames on the other, and for those responsible to be held accountable, he said.

"She wants justice, not revenge," the Brazilian academic added. He quoted her as saying: "Let's move forward. Let's work so it doesn't happen again."

However, Pinheiro said, the generals who have ruled Myanmar since 1962 "have not yet agreed" to his offer to conduct "an independent assessment" of the May violence and gave no indication on when Suu Kyi might move around again.

She has made similar pronouncements before during the long periods she has spent confined to her lakeside house in Yangon, including the last time when she emerged just weeks before the May violence.

Annan calls for overhaul of UNSC

AFP, Guayaquil

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan arrived here from Chile late Friday after telling a conference that the UN Security Council needed overhaul without delay.

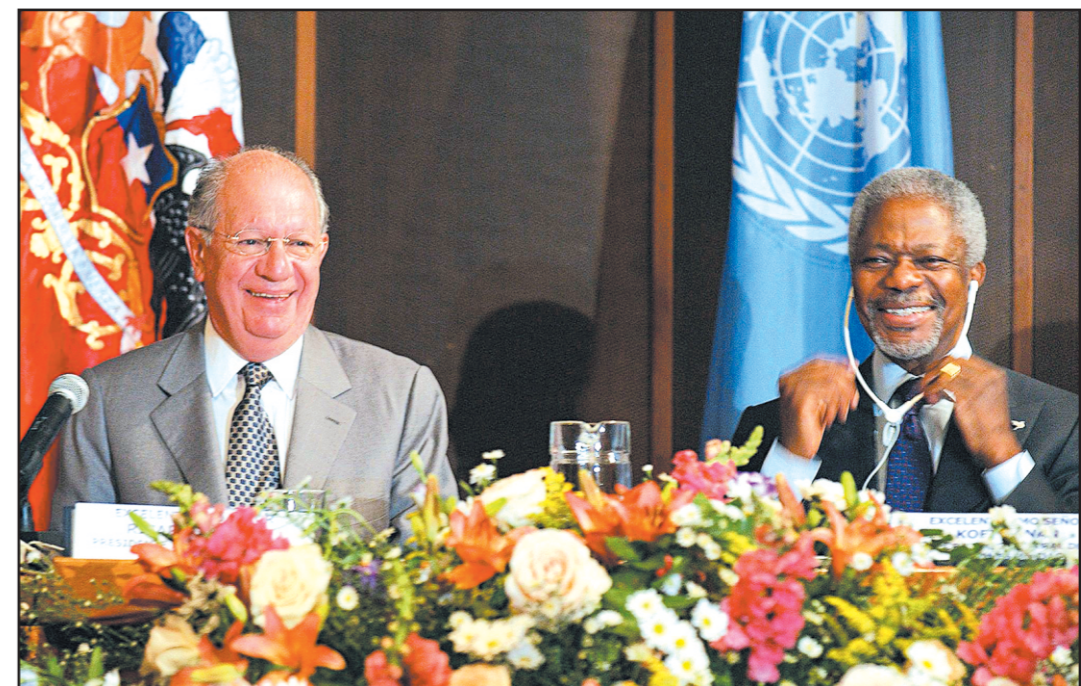
On his first visit to Ecuador, the UN chief was received with full military honors and greeted by the foreign ministry's protocol team.

Annan, traveling with his wife, made no statement on his arrival.

Before leaving Santiago, he told a conference on UN reform that "reform of the Security Council has been on the agenda for long time. But I sense a widespread feeling that we cannot keep putting this issue off."

Annan continued on his official tour of South America, which also includes stops in Peru and Bolivia.

"Now is the time to take a hard look at our inter-governmental institutions," said Annan.



Chilean President Ricardo Lagos (L) and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, smile during the Round Table to discuss today's international community and the reform of the Security Council on Friday in Santiago de Chile.



An overview of Manila international airport control tower early yesterday after it was seized by an ex-aviation chief and former navy officer armed with handguns claiming they wanted to expose government corruption. Police stormed the building and shot dead the two.

N Korea already has 'validated' nuke: CIA

REUTERS, Washington

North Korea appears to have built one or two nuclear weapons it could be confident would work even without a test nuclear blast, the US Central Intelligence Agency has told Congress.

"We assess that North Korea has produced one or two simple fission-type nuclear weapons and has validated the designs without conducting yield-producing nuclear tests," the CIA said in written replies to questions from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

The CIA's Aug. 18 statement was made public recently by the Federation of American Scientists on its website (www.fas.org/irp/congress/2003_hr/021103qfr-cia.pdf).

Some experts said on Friday they had expected Pyongyang to carry out a test blast just as India and Pakistan did in 1998 to show the world they were members of the nuclear club, but the CIA's statement suggests this is not necessary.

"Testing would confirm (the existence of a nuclear capability) but it's not changing what they already believe," said Daniel Pinkston, a North Korea expert at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Monterey, California.

North Korea is widely reported to have been carrying out nuclear weapon-related tests, short of blasts, since the 1980s to develop what it now says is a nuclear deterrent that is ready to use.

"Pyongyang at this point appears to view ambiguity regarding its nuclear capabilities as providing a tactical advantage," the spy agency

said. A test nuclear explosion could spark an international backlash that would isolate the reclusive Communist state further, the agency added.

Robert Norris, who has tracked North Korea's nuclear program at the Natural Resources Defense Council, said it was not surprising Pyongyang had reached this point.

"They've been working on this for several decades," he said.

David Albright, a physicist who is president of the Institute for Science and International Security, said the CIA statement suggested a belief the North had already "weaponised" a nuclear device that could be dropped from a plane or delivered by missile.

North Korea's envoy in Britain told Reuters in an interview Thursday the North possessed a "nuclear deterrent capability... powerful enough to deter any US attack."

The latest crisis in US-North Korean relations began in October 2002, when US officials said the North had been pursuing a clandestine nuclear-weapon program that violated its international commitments.

The State Department said on Friday it was optimistic about chances for a fresh round of six-way talks on North Korea's suspected nuclear arms program after Secretary of State Colin Powell met a key Chinese diplomat.

The Chinese official, Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi, told reporters after his talks with Powell that Beijing was working to set up a new round of discussions among officials from the United States, the two Koreas, Japan, Russia and China.

US mulls creation of new int'l peacekeeping force

REUTERS, CARLISLE, Pennsylvania

The US government has begun internal discussions about the possible creation of a US-led international force capable of taking on peacekeeping duties in world hot-spots such as Iraq and Afghanistan, a senior Army officer said.

"We are having a dialogue with other elements of the government on this," said Col. Michael Dooley, acting director of the US Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute, a military think-tank charged with studying post-combat operations in war-torn countries.

"At this point, we have only limited capability to assist. But we do have some thoughts on the subject and we're exchanging those thoughts and ideas with other elements of the government," he told Reuters in an interview this week.

The Army had announced in January that it would close its Peacekeeping Institute, at the Army War College in

Carlisle, in central Pennsylvania.

The Pentagon has since found itself facing a rising tide of deadly guerrilla attacks in Iraq that have claimed the lives of more Americans since May 1 than died during the six weeks of major combat operations before then.

Military analysts and sources at nongovernmental agencies say senior Bush administration officials, hard pressed by the difficulty of raising foreign troops for Iraq, have proposed creating a new international force consisting of troops from developing countries as well as the United States.

Washington suffered a new setback on Friday when Turkey said it would not help secure the country.

Some analysts and sources have suggested the force would be largely trained and supported by the United States and operate outside the purview of the United Nations or NATO.

Pentagon officials had no immediate comment on the issue.

Dooley did not elaborate.

"It comes down to resources -- who's going to assist others. Some countries have the desire but absolutely no resources," he said.

Preparation for post-combat Iraq is one thing the institute was in no position to help Army commanders with last spring. At the time, the 10-member, \$1 million-a-year group, then known simply as the Peacekeeping Institute, was scheduled for elimination under a Pentagon cost-cutting initiative.

Critics blame the Bush administration for jettisoning any policy initiative imbued with Clinton-era notions of peacekeeping, nation building or multilateralism.

But soon after the ouster of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, US officials appeared caught unawares by widespread looting and lawlessness that dominated daily life in Baghdad.

Al-Qaeda may use cargo planes in attack: US

REUTERS, Washington

US authorities said on Friday they had received intelligence in recent weeks suggesting that al-Qaeda was interested in using commercial cargo planes to attack American facilities.

While the information was not so specific as to identify a date, time or place for such an attack, it indicated that Osama bin Laden's network was interested in using cargo planes against American targets, possibly inside the United States.

"There is threat information pointing to that as a possible means they might use, including in this country," the official told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

"There is nothing specific, but there is interest on their part in possibly using this (cargo plane) as a means to launch an attack against US facilities," he said.

A Department of Homeland Security official confirmed the report, saying it came from a single source whose reliability was being checked.

"While it is difficult to assess the veracity of these warnings, we remain interested in al-Qaeda's ability to carry

out threats against critical infrastructure such as bridges and dams," the official said.

The source said the group may try to use cargo planes in such attacks, the official said.

Al-Qaeda is blamed for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in which hijacked planes were rammed into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon, killing about 3,000 people.

Homeland Security department spokesman Brian Roehrkasse said his department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation were preparing to issue a new advisory aimed at "sustaining awareness."

"The US intelligence community remains concerned about information indicating al-Qaeda's desire in carrying out an imminent terrorist attack against US interests overseas," Roehrkasse said in a telephone interview.

He said a domestic attack could not be ruled out.

The cargo plane threat was revealed a day after the State Department updated its warning on travel to the Middle East to say that ships and planes could be hijacked in the region.