

US vows no retreat as blast kills 4 Iraqis

REUTERS, AFP, Basra

A bomb planted on a street in the southern city of Basra tore apart a minibus yesterday, killing at least four Iraqis and scattering body parts across the road in the latest deadly guerrilla attack in Iraq. Iraqi police said no British soldiers, who are in charge of security in Basra, were in the area at the time of the blast near a police checkpoint in the mainly Shiite city.

Southern Iraq has seen fewer attacks on occupying troops than Baghdad and the surrounding Sunni Muslim heartland. At least 153 US and 12 British soldiers have been killed in action since Washington declared major combat over on May 1.

The United States has been pushing for other countries to send troops to help secure Iraq, and is also trying to give more responsibility for security to Iraqi police and troops.

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Monday that Washington was not looking for an exit strategy, and that his top commanders had assured him the insurgency was under control.

The Pentagon last week announced a plan to reduce US forces in Iraq to 105,000 by next May, and has said the number of Iraqis serving in security forces will soon exceed the American troop presence in the country.

"The goal is not to reduce the number of US forces in Iraq," Rumsfeld said. "It's not to develop an exit strategy. Our exit strategy in Iraq is success. It's that simple."

Rumsfeld said top US commanders "feel that the problem is in control, which is not to say that a terrorist can't attack at any time, at any place, using any technique."

He said the United States was talking with 14 countries about providing troops to serve in Iraq, but did not

identify them. Turkey has reversed its decision to send troops after objections from the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council.

Rumsfeld and President Bush are coming under political pressure due to the mounting US death toll in Iraq and the failure to find any weapons of mass destruction.

A group of more than two dozen House of Representatives Democrats said Monday they had introduced a resolution urging Bush to fire Rumsfeld.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said Monday that tens of thousands of people expected to protest in London next week during a state visit by Bush should recognize Iraq was better off without former leader Saddam Hussein.

"Attack the decision to go to war, but have the integrity to realize that without it, those Iraqis now tasting freedom would still be under the lash of Saddam Hussein and his sons."

In Poland, debate over the country's troop presence in Iraq has intensified after guerrillas killed a Polish major last week. Poland leads a multinational force in central Iraq.

Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller, visiting Iraq, told troops in the multinational division Tuesday they were playing an essential role, despite the risks. "This is a costly process, often painful and for many people not yet understood, but it is needed and that is why we are here in Iraq," he said.

In Cyprus, United Nations staff pulled out of Iraq because of security concerns were due to begin a week of consultations to assess whether it would be safe to return.

An attack on UN headquarters in Baghdad in August killed 22 people, including head of mission Sergio Vieira de Mello.

'London more at risk of terror attack than NY, Washington'

AFP, London

London is more at risk from a terrorist attack by Islamic extremists than either New York or Washington, according to a study published here yesterday.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's support for the United States during the war in Iraq has helped increase the likelihood of a suicide attack in London, the Control Risk Group consultancy said.

Another factor making an attack on London a "serious possibility" is Britain's large Muslim population, it said in a report.

"London has become the pre-eminent terrorist target in Western Europe," said Jake Stratton, research director of the Control Risk Group's 2004 RiskMap report.

Previously the Islamic extremist threat had been a "vague, undefined war against the West", he said.

"But in the last year Britain has reinforced its position in the eyes of the Islamic world as the major ally of the US," he added.



Indian Information Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad (L) shakes hands with his Pakistani counterpart Sheikh Rashid Ahmed (R) at the inaugural ceremony of the Information Ministers conference for South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc) countries in New Delhi yesterday. Pakistan's Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed formally invited Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee yesterday to the Saarc summit to be held in Islamabad in January 2004 and called for the resolution of "basic issues" between the two countries.



Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (C) addresses media representatives yesterday after his party members of parliament met at the Parliament complex in Colombo. Wickremesinghe agreed to a meeting with his arch-rival President Chandrika Kumaratunga, but said they will talk about damage to the peace process as a result of her sacking three key ministers and not her offer of a unity government.

14 killed in Kashmir shoot-outs

AFP, Srinagar

Eleven militants and three civilians were killed in continuing separatist-related violence in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said yesterday.

Three rebels and two civilians, including a woman, were killed during an overnight gun-battle in Koel Muqam village, near Bandipora town, 60 km north of summer capital Srinagar, police said.

The encounter erupted when troops arrived in the area on a tip-off and militants hiding in residential houses opened fire.

Two houses were also damaged during the 12-hour long firefight.

Three more rebels were killed Tuesday in the border village of Kreeer in Rajouri district, 180 km west of the winter capital Jammu, as they were trying to cross into Indian Kashmir, police said.

"The moment the Indian soldiers, guarding the LoC (Line of Control), spotted three militants having sneaked into the Indian territory they were ordered to halt," a spokesman said.

"The rebels opened fire and the troops retaliated killing all the three on the spot. Large quantities of arms and ammunition were recovered from the slain militants."

Three other militants were killed Tuesday by Indian troops in Mughal Maidan in the Kishtwar area of the southern Doda district and two were killed in the southern district of Poonch late Monday, police said.

Meanwhile, suspected rebels shot dead civilian Zahoor Ahmed in the village of Haripari, near Tral town, 40 kilometres (25 miles) south of Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

"We are ascertaining why he was targeted," he said.

Muslims rebels fighting Indian rule in Kashmir have increased attacks on political workers and alleged police informers since Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed completed one year in office on November 2.

Since then five political workers, including three from Sayeed's Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), have been killed.

Saudi forces detain Riyadh bombing suspects

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi security forces arrested suspects in a suicide bomb attack on a housing complex in Riyadh.

"A group of suspects in the bombing was detained. The campaign to chase the culprits started immediately after the bombing. Some were also detained and released after interrogation," the diplomat close to the investigation told Reuters. The arrests took place in Riyadh and the outskirts.

"The campaign to hunt down those responsible is continuing," the source said.

Saudi-born Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network is suspected of staging Sunday's suicide attack that killed at least 18 and wounded 120 in the capital Riyadh. In May, a triple suicide bombing on a housing complex in Riyadh killed 35 people.

India, Nepal plan border fencing to stop smuggling

AFP, Kathmandu

Indian and Nepalese are considering erecting barbed wire fencing along their border to prevent smuggling.

"Current studies are being made into erecting two km of barbed wire at each of the four Nepalese major customs offices (on the border with India)," said Krishna Hari Baskota, director general of Nepal's Customs Department after talks between the two sides Monday.

"The vulnerable situation near and around these four customs offices where there are illegal settlements means there is regular leakage of customs revenues," he said.

Officials are also looking into moving the offices to new and more secure locations, they said.

About 70 per cent of Nepal's total customs duties -- on trade with India and other countries -- are collected from the four customs offices at Birgunj and Biratnagar in southeastern

Nepal and Bhairahawa and Nepalgunj in the southwest of the country.

Trade between India and Nepal was 81.35 billion rupees (1.09 billion dollars) in 2002-2003. Of that, Nepal's exports were worth 38.9 million dollars and imports were at 708.9 million dollars.

Customs leakage costs Nepal at least 202 million dollars each year, an official of the Federation of Nepal Chambers of Commerce and Industry said.

Meanwhile, at least 34 people, including eight members of the security forces and a civilian, have been killed in a fresh outbreak of clashes with Maoist rebels, an army source said Monday.

One army serviceman was killed and four seriously injured Sunday when an army truck carrying 45 soldiers was destroyed by a boobytrap set up by Maoists at Sanbarsa in Parsa district, south of Kathmandu Sunday, the source said.

Saudi king raises 'iron fist' against militants

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia went on the offensive yesterday warning Islamist militants they will be crushed with an "iron fist" after deploying thousands of security troops to the holy cities of Makkah and Medina to protect Ramadan pilgrims.

King Fahd warned overnight of "stiff retaliation" after a devastating suicide attack that killed 17 people at a Riyadh housing compound.

The Saudi monarch told a weekly cabinet meeting that the country "would hit hard the criminals who commit this type of act and those who command them."

"The retaliation will be stiff", he vowed. The kingdom "will act with an iron fist against all those who threaten the security of the country, its citizens and those who live there."

The declaration came after a security source told AFP at least 5,000 soldiers and police had been deployed in

Makkah where as many as 2.5 million Muslims were expected to celebrate the last 10 days of the fasting month of Ramadan.

The decision to deploy extra forces to the holiest city in Islam was reached after security forces smashed a suspected al-Qaeda cell last week and announced it had been preparing an attack on the faithful in Makkah, said the security source who refused to be named.

"In total there will be no fewer than 5,000 soldiers and police reinforcements in the Makkah region," he said. Press reports said the security contingent had been doubled compared to previous years.

Some two million foreign pilgrims and 500,000 Saudis were expected to throng Makkah over the last 10 days of the Muslim fasting month, which was due to conclude around November 24-25.

More reinforcements would also be

deployed in Medina, the second holiest site in Islam, the source added.

Deputy Hajj or Pilgrimage Minister Hatem Qadi Tuesday told Al-Hayat there had been no reduction in the numbers of pilgrims flowing into Makkah, which he estimated already at 1.5 million, despite the bloodshed.

Makkah has already been the scene of deadly clashes between suspected al-Qaeda gunmen and security forces.

The authorities said November 3 they had foiled a plot to attack pilgrims in the holiest city in Islam where two "terrorists" were shot dead.

The alleged plot was hatched by fighters of the al-Qaeda militant network headed by Saudi-born Osama bin Laden, who planned to kill pilgrims during Ramadan.

In mid-June police carried out a series of raids on suspected militant hideouts in Makkah, killing five men and arresting 12 others, five of whom were wounded.

Jaya files another defamation case against The Hindu

PTI, Chennai

Undeterred by waves of nation-wide condemnation of Tamil Nadu Assembly order sentencing six journalists of The Hindu in a breach of privilege case, Tamil Nadu Government on Monday filed a defamation case against four staffers of the daily for an article published in it on April 30 last.

The defamation case, filed before the First Additional Sessions Judge, cited as respondents the Editor N Ravi, Executive Editor Malini Parthasarathy, Publisher S Rangarajan and V Jayanth Chief of Bureau, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

The judge took the case on file and posted it for hearing to December 22 next.

The case, filed on behalf of Jayalalitha by the city public prosecutor, said the article was aimed at bringing disrepute to the Chief Minister. This is the 18th defamation case against the daily.

Top US court to hear case of Guantanamo detainees

REUTERS, Washington

The US Supreme Court said on Monday it would decide whether foreign nationals can use American courts to challenge their incarceration at the US military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the first cases it will hear on the Bush administration's war on terror.

The justices agreed to rule on whether US courts have the power to consider challenges by a group of Afghan war detainees to their continued confinement without access to families or lawyers, and with no charges brought against them.

The nation's high court will hear an hour of arguments in March, with a ruling due by July in a pair of cases that could decide the judiciary's role to review certain government's actions in the war on terror.

The justices said in a written order

they would decide whether US "courts lack jurisdiction to consider challenges to the legality of the detention of foreign nationals captured abroad in connection with hostilities and incarcerated at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba."

The high court agreed to hear appeals by two British, two Australian and 12 Kuwaiti nationals. They are among about 660 detainees from more than 40 nations at the base in Cuba following their capture during the war in Afghanistan.

The detainees were seized during the US-led campaign against the Taliban government in Afghanistan and against Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The first detainees arrived at Guantanamo in January 2002.

US officials defended the government's policies.

Iran produced small amount of plutonium: IAEA

No atomic bomb programme found

REUTERS, Vienna

The UN nuclear watchdog said in a confidential report on Monday it had not found evidence of an atomic bomb programme in Iran, but that Tehran had dabbled in activity often associated with arms like plutonium production.

The United States has accused Iran of using a civilian nuclear energy program as a front to build a bomb. Iran denies this and says it was forced to hide some nuclear activities because of decades of sanctions, which it says were illegal.

"To date there is no evidence that (Iran's) previously undeclared nuclear material and activities referred to above were related to a nuclear weapons

program," the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said in the confidential report, which was obtained by Reuters.

"However, given Iran's past pattern of concealment, it will take some time before the agency is able to conclude that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes."

On September 12, the IAEA Board of Governors gave Iran an October 31 deadline to come clean about its nuclear program. To meet the deadline, Iran made a number of admissions about having hidden activities that could be connected to weapons production.

"Iran has admitted that it produced small amounts of low enriched uranium using both centrifuges and laser enrich-

ment processes... and that it had failed to report a large number of conversion, fabrication and irradiation activities involving nuclear material, including the separation of a small amount of plutonium," the report said.

Enrichment is a process of purifying uranium to make it useable as nuclear fuel or in weapons. It can be done in several ways, including with centrifuges that separate the fissile uranium atoms through high-speed spinning or with lasers.

In contrast to Tehran's previous denials, the IAEA said Iran also acknowledged some "tests using small amounts of (uranium hexafluoride) had been conducted in 1999 and 2002 at the Kalaye Electric Company."



South Korean activists hold an anti-US demonstration in Seoul yesterday demanding an end to the security alliance between Seoul and Washington. US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is to visit Seoul next week for a security meeting.