

Advani defends tainted colleague at launching of polls campaign

AFP, Raipur

Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani yesterday defended a cabinet colleague who resigned after allegedly accepting a bribe.

Advani described Dilip Singh Judeo, who quit Monday as junior environment minister, as "a man of integrity and honesty" and said the scandal would not hurt his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at key state elections on December 1.

Judeo quit after television footage showed him taking a wad of cash from a man, identified as a businessman named Rahul, who was seeking a mining contract.

The cabinet minister is seen touching the currency to his forehead and saying: "Money isn't God but swear on God, it's no less than God."

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee ordered Judeo's resignation and accepted federal investigators to look into the scandal.

Judeo had been projected to become the leader of the central state of Chhattisgarh if the BJP defeated India's main opposition Congress, which currently rules the province.

Lanka president, PM name panel to resolve crisis

AFP, Reuters, Colombo

Sri Lanka's squabbling president and prime minister yesterday named a panel of officials to work out differences between the two of them on "national issues," a joint statement said.

President Chandrika Kumara-tunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe met for 90 minutes at her official residence in their second meeting since a political power struggle erupted two weeks ago.

"A committee of officials was appointed to work out the details of future working arrangements under which the president and the prime minister could work together on these important national issues," the statement said.

It made no direct reference to the peace process involving Tamil Tiger rebels which Norwegian mediators put on hold last week saying they needed "clarity" as to who was in charge in Colombo.

"The President has followed the

cabinet reshuffle with a call for a government of National Reconstruction and Reconciliation to take forward the peace process with a strong degree of consensus," a statement from her office said.

The bid to end 20-years of war, has been in turmoil since Kumara-tunga sacked the defence, interior and media ministers and suspended parliament early in November. She accused the Prime Minister of conceding too much to the rebels.

Wickremesinghe has demanded that the President, who has wide constitutional powers over the army and heads the cabinet, hand back the portfolios or take over the peace process.

Neither side gave any ground in a first meeting last week.

"The second meeting has been arranged for Tuesday with them and their advisers," said Janadasa Peiris, director general of the president's Media Unit.

Parliament is due to resume work on Wednesday with the presentation of the

2004 budget, which was to have taken place last week. The presidential statement said it hoped a national government "would act as a catalyst to renewing the peace process".

Cabinet spokesman G L Peiris repeated on Monday Wickremesinghe's rejection of a national government, but said the Prime Minister was willing to form a consensus among political parties -- including the president's -- on issues related to the peace process.

Wickremesinghe's party has a slim majority in parliament.

The cabinet spokesman provided no details on how such a consensus would be reached.

Both sides are under pressure to compromise.

Norway, which brokered a February 2002 truce that has given the island its best chance yet to end a war that has killed 64,000, said it would suspend its role until their differences were resolved.

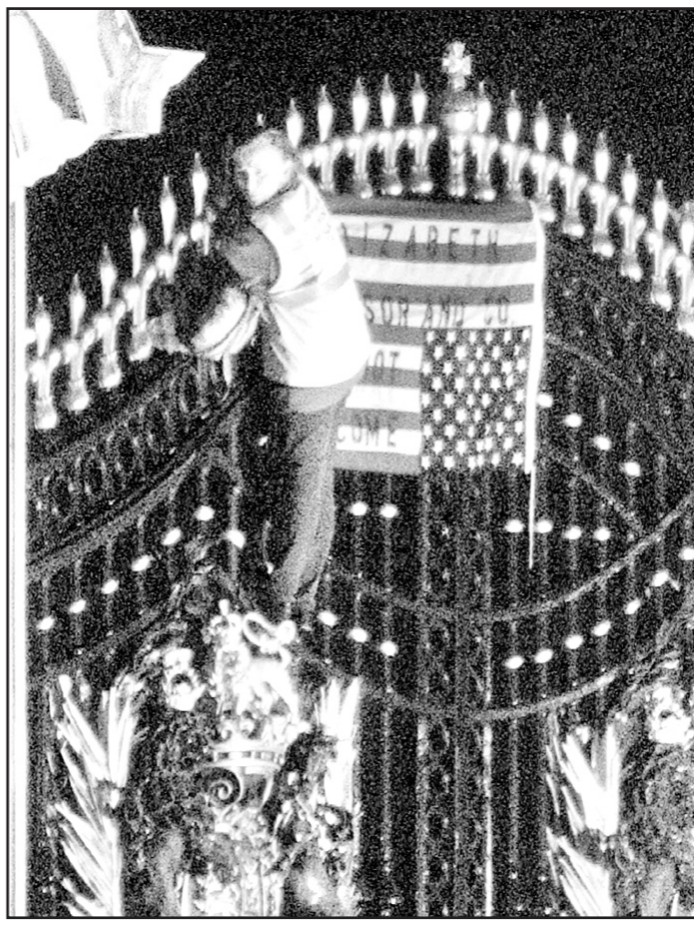


PHOTO: AFP

A woman protesting against the visit of US President George W. Bush clings to the front gate of Buckingham Palace in London as firemen attempt to coax her down. Bush is visiting London on four-day state visit and is haunted by protesters for Iraq invasion.

Protesters get ready for Bush encounter

AFP, London

British demonstrators angry at Anglo-American policy over Iraq said they will topple Thursday a giant home-made statue of George W. Bush in London's Trafalgar Square during a protest march against his three-day state visit.

"The idea is to highlight how fake the toppling of the Saddam Hussein statue in Baghdad was" on April 9, Liz Hutchins, spokeswoman for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), told AFP.

"The footage of the toppling of the statue has been exposed as a complete fraud in that it was US troops that help to topple it and the Iraqi people who were there were part of the entourage of the United States," Hutchins said.

"It was a symbol of victory for the US but in fact the occupation has turned out to be a total tragedy," she said.

CND and the Stop the War Coalition on Monday gained authorisation to march through Whitehall in central London, home to the government ministries and Downing Street, which houses the official residence of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Protesters also plan to march over

Westminster Bridge and past Britain's Houses of Parliament, before winding on through Whitehall to Trafalgar Square where the giant 6-metre (18-foot) statue of Bush will be unveiled and symbolically toppled at around 1715 GMT.

On Wednesday an "alternative procession" will poke fun at the fact that Bush, worried by the prospect of massive street protests, will not receive a royal procession that normally accompanies state visits of this kind.

A magnificent horse-drawn carriage pulled by two horses and driven by staff in ceremonial costume will leave the London Eye or giant wheel at 1100 GMT, explained Stop the War spokeswoman Tansy Hoskins.

Inside actors dressed as Britain's Queen Elizabeth II and President Bush will wave ironically to the crowds of protesters.

CND will also parade a huge inflatable nuclear missile carried by people dressed up as UN weapon inspectors in white suits and masks.

"We will make the point that we have now found weapons of mass destruction, not in Iraq but here in Britain," said Hutchins.

UN seeks \$3b to save 45m lives

AFP, Reuters, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan yesterday asked wealthy nations to donate three billion dollars in 2004 to save 45 million lives in 21 countries.

"Some 45 million civilians are struggling to survive displacement, loss, and severe disruption to their lives in the world's wars, conflicts and natural disasters," Annan said in a statement on the eve of the announcement.

"Most of them are children, women and the elderly."

Annan said that of the 5.1 billion dollars needed in 2003, only 66 percent had been received.

"I know that the world's wealthy nations understand their responsibility to help people in need."

"A world where -- amid increasing global prosperity -- millions still live in desperate conditions will not be a world at peace."

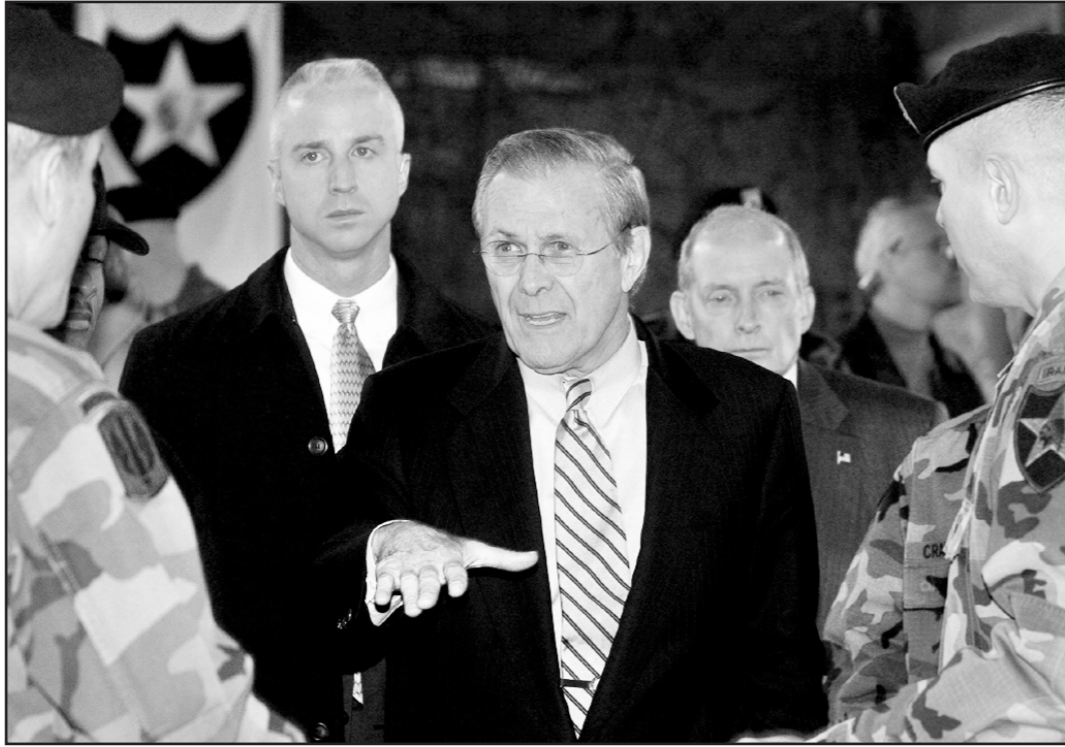


PHOTO: AFP

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (C) chats with US soldiers yesterday during his trip to the main base of the 2nd Infantry Division guarding the inter-Korean border in Dongduchun. Rumsfeld's front-line trip followed high-level security consultations between South Korean and US military officials.

First state visit to UK by a US president

AFP, London

More than 200 years and 43 presidents after the American Revolution, George W. Bush will be the first occupant of the White House ever to pay a proper state visit to Britain as he arrived yesterday.

US presidents have passed through London regularly, of course, but Bush will be the first to get the complete red carpet treatment during the three-day visit as the personal guest of Queen Elizabeth II.

Rich in pageantry, state visits are carefully choreographed to symbolize the close ties between two countries. For diplomats, they outrank everything else in terms of protocol.

Britain hosts no more than two state visits a year, with Russian President Vladimir Putin being the last one to get the honors -- including a ride down The Mall in a gilded horse-drawn carriage with the queen at his side.

Right time for Bush to visit UK: Blair

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair said it's the "right time" for US President George W. Bush to pay a state visit to Britain, as protests against the Iraq war got underway and police tripled the number of officers on duty.

With big street protests planned for later this week, and security forces on a heightened state of alert to avert a feared terrorist incident, Blair said the time was nevertheless right for Bush to come to Britain.

"I just want to say how strongly I believe that it is indeed the right time for the president of the United States to come here to this country," he told the annual conference of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI).

In the wake of bomb attacks in Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, Blair said, "this is the right moment for us to stand firm with the United States of America in defeating terrorism wherever it is."

"Now is not the time to waver. Now is the time to see it through," added Blair to loud applause from Britain's biggest employers group, which is meeting this week in Birmingham, central England.

Bush was invited by the Queen, on Blair's advice, after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States but before the March invasion of Iraq by US and British forces.

Britain's large anti-war movement says he shouldn't be coming at all, and even right-wing commentators think the trip is little more than an opportunity to polish his image ahead of next year's US presidential elections.

To beef up what it describes as an "unprecedented" security operation, the Metropolitan Police said it was nearly tripling the number of officers on duty during the course of Bush's visit to 14,000.

That is virtually half of all of Scotland Yard's police officers, and in addition to several hundred US Secret Service agents.

Bihar govt seeks calm after ethnic clashes

AFP, PTI, Guwahati

Authorities in the violence-hit north-east Indian states of Assam and Bihar urged calm yesterday after one person was killed among 75 people were injured in ethnic clashes between people of the two provinces.

Assam was calm but tense after a 24-hour strike a student group called to protest assaults against Assamese train passengers in Bihar, provincial police chief V. Sumant told AFP.

"It is time for restraint for all and violence could only lead to more trouble," Assam's leader, Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, said separately.

Police said 25 people were injured during the strike as militants torched homes and beat up Hindi-speaking settlers, including from Bihar, who they accuse of altering Assam's demographic balance and taking away jobs.

Annan cautious about UN return to Baghdad

Reuters, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan promised to name a chief envoy for Iraq shortly but left open a return to Baghdad of UN political staff soon, suggesting they might operate outside the country.

Under pressure from the United States, Iraqis and others to send international staff back into Baghdad, UN officials said on Monday Annan was looking for a representative of stature. The chief envoy might not play an important role initially but could have major responsibilities after an Iraqi interim government takes over in June, they said.

Annan withdrew foreign political staff from Baghdad after the Aug. 19 bombing that killed 22 people, including his special representative, Sergio Vieira de Mello. He said he would name a replacement "in the not too distant future."

"So, if the situation improves, we will be ready to go back," Annan told reporters on Monday. "But we don't need to be

in Iraq 100 percent to do what we can do or offer assistance. So we are looking at what we can do outside and cross-border and eventually what we can do inside."

Since the United States and the Iraqi Governing Council announced last week they wanted an interim Iraqi Government in place by June, Annan has come under pressure to play a political role.

Calls for the United Nations to return to Iraq have come in the last few days from Secretary of State Colin Powell, Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin.

"I think it's time now with this new plan for the United Nations to determine whether or not circumstances will permit it to play a more active role inside the country," Powell said in Washington.

"We want the UN to play a role and it is part of our plan in moving forward," Powell added.

Annan said he also spoke to Jalal Talabani, the Kurdish leader who is this month's president of Iraq's interim Governing Council. Talabani told him the Governing Council would "need UN assistance and advice in implementing the new decisions which have been taken," Annan reported.

On Monday, the deputy US national security adviser, Stephen Hadley, came to New York to brief Annan on the new American timetable for ending the occupation.

But Annan repeated that an October Security Council resolution called on the United Nations to play a role in Iraq "as circumstances permit," a reference to safety conditions. He is under pressure from senior UN officials not to expose staff to harm.

The Bush administration's decision to speed the transfer of power won praise from Annan last week. He had long agreed with France, Germany and others in advocating quicker restoration of Iraqi sovereignty.

Tom Keys died days before his 21st

A grieving father's message for Bush

BBC ONLINE

A grieving father whose son died in Iraq said he would walk to London from north Wales just to tell US president George Bush what he thinks of his war effort.

Bush is the first US president to have a state visit to the UK since Woodrow Wilson in 1918, which means he is officially invited by the Queen and stays at Buckingham Palace.

During his visit to the UK, Bush wants to offer his prayers and tell the bereaved families their loved ones did not die in vain.

But Reg Keys, who lost his 20-year-old son Tom in June 2003, said he holds Bush and Tony Blair responsible for his death.

"I don't know how the man (Bush) has the nerve to show his face in his country after costing the lives of 53 British servicemen," said Mr Keys, of Llanuwchllyn, near Bala.

Tom Keys died days before his 21st

birthday. He was one of six military policemen shot dead in Al Majar al-Kabir last June.

The servicemen were chased into a police station and shot.

The British Army said all the deaths were murder.

Keys said other nations had the "backbone" to stand up to waging war on Saddam Hussein.

Keys said: "I haven't had an invitation for an interview with Mr Bush, if I did I would literally walk from Wales to London to meet the man, look him in the eye and tell what I think of him."

"They didn't die for a noble cause, they died for Bush's political reasons, they were just sacrificial lambs."

Keys has demanded to know why his son and his fellow officers did not have back-up.

And the acting rector Heather Fenton of the family's local church, St Deiniol's, has said the circumstances must make it harder for the family to come to terms with the death.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian youths block a road in the West Bank village of Al-Khader after Israeli troops entered the area searching for gunmen who shot at a major military barrier along the road called "the tunnels" yesterday. Two Israelis were killed when Palestinian gunmen opened fire at the southern entry to Jerusalem, Israeli military radio reported.

Schwarzenegger Sworn in as California governor

AP, Sacramento

Arnold Schwarzenegger, who arrived in the United States 35 years ago as a bodybuilder dreaming of fame and fortune, was sworn in Monday as governor of California and said he was ready to take on the "massive weight we must lift off our state."

With his wife, Maria Shriver, holding a Bible, Schwarzenegger took the oath of office from California's chief justice on the steps of the state Capitol.

The 56-year-old Hollywood action hero then gave a 12-minute speech in which he invoked Presidents Kennedy and Reagan and called himself, like JFK, "an idealist without illusions."

US pounds insurgents' position in Iraq

Reuters, Baquba

US forces used bombs, mortars and artillery to try to break guerrilla resistance in Iraq yesterday while President Bush and his secretary of state sought help in Europe for their troubled campaign.

The US military said it had new information one of Saddam Hussein's most feared lieutenants was involved in some of the attacks that have killed at least 177 US soldiers since the official end of major combat in Iraq on May 1.

US troops have responded to an escalation in the insurgency against them by deploying in the anti-American heartlands to the north and west of Baghdad heavy and high-tech weaponry rarely used since Saddam's ouster

in April.

Faced with growing criticism at home of the invasion and occupation, Bush was due to lean on his closest ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, on a state visit to London.

In Brussels, Secretary of State Colin Powell was expected to woo more skeptical members of the European Union.

Neither faced an easy task. Several EU states, led by France and Germany, were resolutely opposed to the war as was much of the British public. Up to 100,000 people are expected to gather in London to protest against Bush and his policies.

Underlining the gravity of the security situation in Iraq, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan left open an early

return of political staff. He said they might operate outside the country.

But he did pledge to name a replacement soon for his special representative Sergio Vieira de Mello, who was among 22 people killed when their Iraq headquarters was bombed on August 19.

In Baquba, some 60km north of Baghdad, two F-15 fighter jets flew from the Gulf state of Qatar to drop four 500-pound bombs on farmhouses and other sites suspected to have been used by guerrillas.

"We had taken action on these targets before, but this is to demonstrate one more time that we have significant firepower and we can use it at our discretion," said ground commander Lieutenant-Colonel Mark Young of the 4th Infantry Division.

Washington sniper found guilty

Reuters, Virginia Beach

A jury on Monday found Gulf War veteran John Muhammad guilty of two counts of capital murder in last year's string of sniper shootings that killed 10 people and terrorized the Washington area.

Muhammad was convicted of one of the killings and also on conspiracy and a weapons charge. He faces the death penalty or life in prison without parole.

The 42-year-old former soldier stood as the verdicts were read after six and a half hours of deliberation, then sat impassively at the defense table, leaning his chin on his hand.

After a break, the jury began considering Muhammad's punishment.

"All in all, we reserve the ultimate punishment -- the death penalty -- for the worst of the worst," prosecutor Richard Conway told jurors. "Folks, he still sits right in front of you without a shred of remorse."