

Murder of Japanese in Iraq complicates troops plan

Spaniards question 'high price' of keeping troops there

REUTERS, Tokyo

The murder of two Japanese diplomats in northern Iraq is certain to complicate Tokyo's decision to send troops to Iraq and is also likely to increase opposition to South Korean plans to commit more soldiers.

The rising violence had already prompted Japan to delay a planned deployment of non-combat troops, while South Korea is still deciding on the mix of non-combat and combat forces, including possibly special forces, it will send.

The two countries are among the United States' staunchest allies in Asia and need Washington's help to resolve a crisis over North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

But rising attacks in Iraq are piling on the pressure for Tokyo and Seoul, whose voters increasingly oppose sending troops into a war zone and risk seeing them come home in body bags.

Such opposition is also adding to the pressure on the Bush administration, which is trying to spread the load of taming and rebuilding Iraq ahead of next year's US presidential elections.

A South Korean Foreign Ministry official, who declined to be identified, said the ministry has asked its five-member mission in Iraq to step up security in light of the Japanese deaths.

There was no plan to withdraw from there yet, the official said. South Korea has had 675 medical and engineering personnel deployed in Iraq since May. The government is thinking of committing 3,000 more troops and President Roh Moo-hyun is believed to be close to deciding on the mix of forces to send.

AFP adds: The Spanish media yesterday questioned if the "high price" being paid by the country's troop contingent in Iraq was worth paying, a day after seven Spanish

intelligence agents were killed in a grenade and mortar attack south of Baghdad.

Stunned by the latest attack, which brought the Spanish death toll in Iraq to 10, the press pondered if Madrid would stay the course with most Spaniards bitterly opposed to the whole enterprise.

"What are we doing over there in the face of opposition from the majority of the Spanish population and all political parties save for the (ruling) Popular Party?" asked Catalan daily El Periodico.

El Pais, Spain's most widely read daily, provided a blunt editorial entitled: "Spain is paying a high price" for the decision of Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar to commit a 1,300-strong force to Iraq.

"This highest of prices (being paid) comes precisely in a deployment enjoying the least support of the population at large," said El Pais,

noting a recent opinion poll pre-dating Saturday's attack showed public opposition to Spain's presence in Iraq running at 85 percent.

"If Washington or London can turn their soldiers into an inevitable price to pay for this political and economic plan (for Iraq) this is not the case for Spain, which should never have let itself be dragged into Iraq."

Referring to a suicide bomb earlier this month on Italian forces in Nasiriyah, El Pais added: "The brutal attack on the headquarters of the Italian Carabinieri made clear that in this Arabic country anything can happen at any moment."

"Resentment against the invaders ... is growing exponentially."

El Mundo called for "explanations and reflection," while questioning "the very nature of our agents' mission."



US military police officer Nicole Bukowski frisks an Iraqi girl inside a house in the Baghdad predominant Muslim Sunni neighbourhood of Azamiyah early yesterday. Some 300 soldiers took part in the operation dubbed Iron Snatch, searching 400 structures for weapons and Improvised Explosive Devices (IED).

22 killed in Congo plane crash

AFP, Kinshasa

Twenty-two people died in the Democratic Republic of Congo Saturday when a passenger plane crashed in the north of the huge country, a government statement said.

The Russian-made Antonov 26 was on its way from Boende to the capital Kinshasa when it went down in Equateur province.

The plane was carrying 22 passengers who all died, the statement said.

The number of crew members or the cause of the crash were not immediately known, said the spokesman for the press and information ministry Vital Kamerhe.

The government also said that 18 people died in a road accident near Goma in the east of the country Saturday after their vehicle broke down.

On Tuesday 113 people drowned and 70 others went missing when an overcrowded boat capsized during a storm on Lake Maindombe in the west of the former Belgian colony.



Indian election officials (C) watched by a policeman unpack an Electronic Voting Machine at a state assembly polling station in Bhopal yesterday. India has deployed some 400,000 security personnel for elections today in the four states of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Rajasthan and New Delhi as six people were killed in scattered pre-polls violence. 550,000 Election Commission workers will staff the 102,056 polling stations in the four states.

Lanka heading for snap election

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka looked headed for a snap poll as attempts to resolve a power struggle hit a dead-end, sparking new fears for the peace bid with Tamil rebels, political sources said yesterday.

Highly placed sources close to President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her rival Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said they could not rule out a dissolution of parliament anytime after voting on the national budget on December 18.

"The compromises that we have talked about are either not workable or desirable for the peace process," a source close to the premier said. "Not many in the present parliament want an election, but we have no other option."

The election prospect re-emerged after the premier's rejection Saturday of a compromise offered by the president to share

US, UK set to ink deal on Guantanamo detainees

AFP, London

London and Washington are set to strike a deal for the return to Britain of nine British "terror" suspects held by the United States at a naval base in Cuba, a lawyer for the detainees was quoted as saying in a newspaper published here yesterday.

Human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith added in a separate newspaper interview that one of the detainees had been forced to admit taking part in an al-Qaeda plot to attack Britain's parliament with anthrax in a bid to kill Prime Minister Tony Blair. Stafford Smith said the deal to have the detainees returned to Britain will be tied up by Christmas, ending a bitter two-year transatlantic row over the issue.

Sharon, top brass at odds over 'unilateral pullout'

AFP, Jerusalem

High-ranking army officials have harshly criticized the unilateral withdrawals Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is considering in the occupied Palestinian territories, the Haaretz daily reported Sunday.

The newspaper said Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon argued that dismantling isolated settlements in the Gaza Strip would be tantamount to rewarding terror.

"Yaalon has expressed reservations in private talks about proposals to unilaterally evacuate the Netzarim settlement in the Gaza Strip," Haaretz wrote.

Speaking to Israeli reporters on Thursday, Sharon scolded Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei for failing to take action against militant groups.

"I am not in favour of an arbitrary timetable, but our patience has limits. I may reach the conclusion that there is no reason to wait for another Palestinian government and another one, and I may take unilateral measures," he said.

According to Israeli political sources, Sharon could evacuate isolated Gaza settlements, while at the same time annexing large urban settlements near Jerusalem.

The proposition has also divided his coalition government, with the centre-right Shinui party threatening to walk out if Sharon does not dismantle isolated settlements and the ultra-nationalist fringe promising to do the same if he does.

Yaalon had already voiced his opposition to Sharon's policies towards the Palestinians earlier this month, warning that Israel could face a new wave of attacks if restrictions on civilians were not eased.

Meanwhile, top US Middle East envoy William Burns was due to meet Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom on Sunday as part of efforts to restart the stalled Middle East peace process.

Burns held talks Saturday in the Jordanian capital Amman with Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei at which he stressed that US President George W. Bush remained committed to the flagging internationally-backed peace "roadmap," which has been battered by continued Israeli settlement building and the refusal of Palestinian armed groups to agree to a truce.

"Both sides have obligations and responsibilities as they seek to renew hope for peace," said a statement from the US embassy in Amman after the talks.

Nations observe World AIDS Day today Asian states exposed to AIDS nightmare

AFP, Hong Kong

(WHO).

Ranging from coy displays of condoms in China to a radio talk show featuring a "buxom sex symbol star" in Japan, Monday's message attempts to tackle sexual issues, including in Asia's pervasive sex industry with its often low level of health awareness among workers.

Some of the most active campaigning will be in Japan where AIDS, like in many other Asian countries, was once considered a "foreign disease".

Ai Iijima, 30, an outspoken former porn star whose book about the country's sex industry has been a bestseller, will speak at a government-sponsored event at a train station in Shinjuku, the bustling entertainment district of Tokyo, where 15,000 condoms will be handed out.

A charity concert -- Act Against AIDS 2003 -- at a 2,000-seater stadium in Tokyo and 30-second messages at hundreds of cinemas across the country will drive home the safe-sex message.

Of the estimated 40 million people worldwide with HIV or AIDS, about 7.4 million live in Asia and the Pacific, according to the World Health Organisation



Thai children pose for the camera while playing around an AIDS sign at the main entrance of the Buddhist Prabat Namphu Temple in Bangkok's northeastern Lopburi province yesterday on the eve of the World AIDS Day. According to United Nations figures, from a population of 63 million at least 289,000 Thai children have lost one or both parents to AIDS and 21,000 children are infected.

Terrorism high on C'wealth agenda

AFP, London

Global terrorism will feature high on the agenda of the upcoming Commonwealth summit, with several of its member nations having felt the sting of violent attacks which claimed hundreds of lives.

"Terrorism will be discussed," Commonwealth spokesman Joel Kibazo told AFP in London before flying out for the start Friday of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) summit in Nigeria's capital Abuja.

The Commonwealth brings together Britain and its former dominions, colonies and protectorates, plus Mozambique.

The November 20 suicide bomb attacks on the British consulate and HSBC bank in Istanbul in which 30 people died, including three Britons -- one of them the British consul general -- will cast a lingering shadow over the summit.

Britain suspects the involvement of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network in the coordinated attacks, the worst on British targets since the Iraq war.

But Kibazo said: "Several Commonwealth countries have suffered terribly from terrorism."

"Let's not forget the first al-Qaeda bombs were in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 -- two Commonwealth countries," Kibazo said of the twin attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam which killed a total of 224 people.

Taiwan president eyes referendum in March

REUTERS, Taipei

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian aims to hold a referendum on the island's sovereignty alongside presidential elections in March in a move certain to infuriate China.

Chen faces a tough battle for re-election next year and analysts say the referendum is a key part of his campaign and is also aimed at trying to provoke an angry reaction from China to consolidate support at home.

"On March 20 next year, we can hold a referendum to safeguard national sovereignty, to defend national security," Chen told a campaign rally late on Saturday. His comments were broadcast on local cable news networks.

Taiwan's parliament approved a bill on Thursday allowing referendums on constitutional changes as well as a "defensive referendum" on sovereignty in the event of an attack from China or other national security threat.

Lawmakers dropped the most controversial part of the legislation -- a clause explicitly saying referendums can be held on independence or on changing the island's

'No impact of truce on Kashmir unrest'

AFP, Srinagar

The heavy guns may have fallen silent on the borders of Kashmir but in the rugged zone of the disputed state being administered by India smaller weapons are blazing away as lethally as ever.

Analysts believe the ceasefire between the rival armies which came into effect at midnight Tuesday will have little impact on an anti-Indian rebellion being waged by Islamic militants since 1989 at a cost of thousands of lives.

Police by late Saturday had reported at least a dozen encounters since the start of the ceasefire between Indian troops and Islamic militants, claiming the lives of at least 24 people.

The truce covers the 760-km de facto border -- the Line of Control (LoC) -- that splits Kashmir between India and Pakistan, the 230-km undisputed border, and another stretch of disputed border of about 110km further northeast called the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL).

Kashmir's leading analyst Tahir Mohiuddin pointed out that the truce covers only the border shelling and not the daily fighting

'No impact of truce on Kashmir unrest'

between Indian troops and Kashmiri rebels.

"There is unlikely to be any immediate impact of the ceasefire on the ground situation in Kashmir as it (the truce) is meant for border areas only," Mohiuddin said.

"The two are two different issues to me," he told AFP.

"It has definitely brought calm to the volatile borders as two armies are holding fire, but the violence within the state is continuing," he said.

Prior to the ceasefire, the rival armies skirmished almost daily over the LoC, shelling each other and killing dozens of civilians each year.

Both the rebels and the security forces have said the truce on the borders will not have any bearing on their ground operations.

"It is not like the ceasefire announced by India and Hizbul Mujahedin separately in the year 2000," said Mohiuddin.

In July 2000 the region's dominant group Hizbul announced a unilateral ceasefire which was reciprocated when New Delhi called off operations against the group.