



South African President Thabo Mbeki (L) attends the final executive session on the last day of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Abuja yesterday. Zimbabwe said on Sunday it was quitting the Commonwealth after the organisation extended its suspension of the country for violating its democratic principles. South Africa's Mbeki was one of the leaders in favour of lifting the suspension.

Al-Qaeda shifting to Iraq from Afghanistan

REUTERS, Washington

Al-Qaeda told the Taliban last month it planned to divert a large number of anti-American fighters from Afghanistan to Iraq and cut by half funding to Afghan fighter groups, Newsweek reported Sunday.

Three representatives of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden allegedly met with two emissaries from Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar in the Afghan mountains of Khost province near the Pakistan border in mid-November, the magazine said.

Newsweek cited Taliban sources as saying that bin Laden ordered the shift of resources away from Afghanistan to Iraq because he saw it as an opportunity for killing Americans and their allies in Iraq and neighboring countries such as Turkey.

Asked about the report, a US intelligence official told Reuters there did not appear to be a sizable reallocation going on. "There is no sign of significant shifts in that regard," the official said on condition of anonymity.

Pro-Putin parties score victory in polls

Russian election fails to pass democratic bar: Observers

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin's party and its allies triumphed in Russia's parliamentary election while liberal parties were shut out of the chamber for the first time in the post-Soviet era, almost final results showed.

Putin's United Russia led with 36.8 percent of the vote after 90.58 percent of the ballots had been counted, the head of the central electoral commission, Alexander Veshnyakov, told a televised press conference.

They were followed by the opposition Communist Party with 12.7 percent.

In third place stood the Liberal Democratic Party of nationalist firebrand Vladimir Zhirinovskiy -- a strong supporter of Putin -- with 11.8 percent, while another pro-Kremlin bloc -- Rodina -- stood in fourth with nine percent.

This meant that pro-Kremlin parties had about 60 percent of the vote in Sunday's elections, according to the party lists that decide half the seats in the 450-seat State Duma, the lower house.

"We can congratulate these parties on making it into the Duma," said Veshnyakov.

The other half is decided in single-mandate elections, leaving Putin with an opportunity to clinch a two-thirds majority that would allow him to alter the constitution and perhaps run for a third presidential term in 2008.

The president is limited to two terms under the current constitution. The state-run Channel One television said that according to forecasts,

United Russia alone would get 223 seats in the new parliament. The pro-Kremlin forces would need 301 seats for a constitutional majority.

Moreover both of Russia's liberal opposition parties failed to make it into the Duma.

The Yabloko group of Grigory Yavlinsky had 4.3 percent -- short of the five percent needed to automatically win Duma seats. "It's unlikely that anything will change for this party," Veshnyakov said.

The Union of Right Forces (SPS), which held 31 seats in the outgoing Duma compared to Yabloko's 17, fared even worse, with 3.9 percent of the vote.

The Agrarians, allies of the Communists, were in seventh place with 3.8 percent of votes.

Meanwhile, international observers said yesterday that weekend parliamentary elections in Russia failed to meet many democratic criteria and called into question Moscow's commitment to Western standards of democracy.

"The elections failed to meet many OSCE commitments and to the Council of Europe and other international standards," Bruce George, a top official from the pan-European OSCE rights and democracy body, told reporters.

"It's the shared and unanimous view that these deficiencies called into question Russia's willingness to move towards European and international standards for democratic elections," he added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's party and its allies triumphed in the parliamentary elections that crushed the Communists and shut liberal parties out of the chamber for the first time in the post-Soviet era.

US warns of upsurge of attacks in Iraq

REUTERS, Baghdad

The top US general in Iraq warned Sunday of an upsurge in attacks in the months before Washington hands over sovereignty in June, as insurgents killed an American soldier in a roadside bomb attack in the north.

Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez also urged Iraqis to help find fugitive former dictator Saddam Hussein -- whom he called a needle in a haystack -- and said US forces would keep up their offensive against insurgents using any weapon at their disposal.

"We expect to see an increase in violence as we move forward toward sovereignty at the end of June. We're going to have some periods where there will be an increase in violence in the coming months," Sanchez told a news conference.

In the latest fatal attack on US forces, guerrillas blew apart a Humvee with a roadside bomb in the northern Iraq city of Mosul, killing one American soldier and

wounding two.

They staged the ambush a day after Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited and said operations were on the right path.

"We heard an explosion and ran toward it. I saw four US soldiers lying on the ground, with their Humvee destroyed," Mosul policeman Hamid Saleh said.

Sanchez said insurgents would seek to derail the handover of power, partly by attacking the political process itself.

Under an accelerated plan unveiled last month, the United States will hand over sovereignty to a transitional Iraqi government at the end of June. That government will be chosen by Iraqis selected in May via a series of nationwide caucuses.

"Their focus will be...conducting some kind of operations against the economic and political sectors primarily, while maintaining pressure on the military if they are to derail the process. We're prepared for that," Sanchez said.

Greek court convicts terror cell members

AP, Athens

A Greek anti-terrorism court yesterday convicted at least a dozen members of the November 17 terrorist cell, including its leader and hit man, for their roles in a spree of murders, robberies and bombings over nearly 30 years.

The rulings bring to a close one of the last trials in Europe against militant groups that took shape during the 1970s. The crackdown on November 17 was relief to authorities planning security for the Aug. 13-29 Olympics.

The three judges following a nine-month trial in a bunker-like courtroom issued multiple convictions Monday against Alexandros Giotopoulos, 58, who prosecutors described as the group's ringleader. The French-born academic steadfastly denied any links to the group, but others admitted their role in attacks some described as "political."

Others convicted included the group's hit man, Dimitris Koufodinas, and other high-profile members.

Bhutan deploys militia to evict ULFA rebels

AFP, Guwahati

The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan neighbouring northeastern India deployed about 600 militia members alongside regular troops at the weekend to evict Indian separatists based there, a report said yesterday.

"A total of 591 trained militia volunteers, including 20 women, have been sent to the southern districts as part of their training and familiarisation of duties," a Royal Bhutan Army spokesman was quoted as saying in the government-run newspaper Kuensel.

A second batch of 119 volunteers, including 17 women, will be deployed next week after they complete training, the report said.

Bhutan this year formed a government militia force to fight and remove Indian separatists holed up inside the kingdom.

Two separatist groups from India's northeastern state of Assam -- the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) -- have well-

entrenched bases in Bhutan.

The separatist Kamatapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) from West Bengal is also active there.

The militia was deployed in five areas of southern Bhutan where the three rebel groups have at least 22 camps, including their military training bases, the report said.

Indian intelligence officials have said Bhutanese troops, supported by the militias, were increasing pressure to force the rebels out of the kingdom.

Bhutan's 19-year-old prince, Jigyel Ugyen Wangchuck, who quit his studies at Britain's Oxford University recently to return home, was one of the 800 volunteers who signed up for the two-month militia training.

But it was not clear if the prince was among the 591 deployed in southern Bhutan over the weekend.

Bhutanese Prime Minister Lyonpo Jigmi Thinley met ULFA leaders last month at an undisclosed venue and asked them to leave the kingdom immediately.



Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao speaks to the media following his meeting with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (L) on Sunday at UN headquarters in New York.

China won't let Taiwan use democracy as cover for separatism

AFP, United Nations

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao warned that Beijing would not allow Taiwan to use democratic aspirations as a cover for separatism, after arriving Sunday in the United States where he met with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Wen, during his three-day official visit to the United States, is to seek assurances from the administration of US President George W. Bush that Washington will rein in Taiwan, viewed by China as a renegade province, the Chinese news agency Xinhua said.

The Chinese premier's arrival in New York came two days after Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian announced he would hold a referendum critical of China's missile threat to the island -- which Beijing views as a renegade province -- next March.

Palestinians work on new truce as Cairo talks fail

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Palestinian officials were seeking fresh truce talks with militants on Monday after Egyptian-brokered efforts to secure a comprehensive ceasefire failed, setting back hopes of reviving a US-backed peace plan.

Hamas, Islamic Jihad and three other Palestinian factions on Sunday rejected an Egyptian proposal they halt all attacks against Israelis to give new impetus to the road map to peace which envisages the creation of a Palestinian state in 2005.

But members of President Yasser Arafat's mainstream Fatah faction said they would not accept 'No' as the final answer and would try to persuade militant factions to change their minds.

"The dialogue with the factions will continue inside the occupied territories and the Palestinian cabinet will pursue its peace efforts despite the collapse of the Cairo talks," senior Fatah official Ahmed Gheimeh told Reuters in Egypt.

Israel braces for setback at UN over WB barrier

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel braced itself yesterday for another setback in the United Nations ahead of a vote, which is expected to see a request for the International Court of Justice to rule on the legality of its controversial West Bank separation barrier.

Israel's deputy ambassador to the UN, Ariele Mekel, told public radio here that the resolution which was lodged by the Palestinian Authority's UN representative Nasser Al-Kidwa was likely to be approved by the General Assembly "thanks to the automatic majority" of the Arab countries.

A senior aide to Ariel Sharon said that the premier would hold talks with his Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom later in the day over how Israel should best argue its case.

"This initiative is unacceptable and risks creating a dangerous precedent in denying to Israel and

other Western countries the fundamental right to self-defense," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"Behind this text is a clear desire to deny Israel the right to exist."

At an earlier special session on the barrier, held October 21, the General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted a resolution deeming it illegal under international law and calling for Israel to "stop and reverse" construction.

Israel insists that the barrier, which at times cuts deep into Palestinian territory, is merely designed to prevent infiltration by Palestinian militants intent on carrying out attacks on its soil and has no political connotations.

But the Palestinians regard what they have dubbed "the apartheid wall" as an attempt to preempt the borders of any future two-state settlement and grab some of their most fertile land.

The international court in the

Hague can hand down its legal opinions in disputes but does not have any power to impose rulings or hand down sanctions.

But Yaffa Zilbershatz, professor of international law at Bir Ilaan University near Tel Aviv, told public radio that if Israel lost in the court of justice it could pave the way for senior government officials to face action at the hands of the separate International Criminal Court, also based in the Hague.

In a report to the General Assembly late last month, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said the barrier was seriously harming the Palestinian people and undercutting hopes for the internationally-backed "roadmap" peace plan.

Annan said he recognised Israel's "right and duty" to protect its people but added: "That duty should not be carried out in a way that is in contradiction to international law."

Jogi's tape issue rocks Indian parliament

PTI, New Delhi

The Jogi tape controversy on Monday plunged Lok Sabha into turmoil with an agitated BJP training its guns on Congress president Sonia Gandhi and demanding an explanation from her whether the former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister had taken her consent to split BJP Legislature Party, forcing adjournment of the House for nearly two hours.

The BJP, which has given a notice for breach of privilege against Gandhi, described Ajit Jogi's attempt to allegedly bribe the party MLAs to break the party as the "most shameful" episode in India's five decades of democracy.

Amidst strong protests by Congress members, BJP members Madan Lal Khurana, V K Malhotra, Kirit Somaiya and others wanted Gandhi's presence in the House and a statement on the issue.

Ebadi to cast off headscarf at Nobel ceremony

AFP, Tehran

Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi is to cast off her headscarf when she goes to Oslo this week to formally receive her award, with the laureate shrugging off the fact that such a move will only strengthen hardline opposition to her campaign for the rights of women, children and dissidents.

"I will not be wearing the hejab," Ebadi told AFP in an interview. "My actions have always irritated some people, but that is not important."

"I want Iranian women to be free to wear or not wear the hejab," she said of the Islamic dress code enforced in the 1979 revolution and a symbol seized upon by many feminist activists.



Armin Meiwes (L), a 42-year-old computer technician and self-confessed cannibal, waits with his lawyer Harald Emel for the start of his trial yesterday at a court in the central city of Kassel, Germany. Meiwes is accused of murdering a man who was apparently willing to be killed, carved up and eaten in front of a running video camera. Monday's session continues with the screening of the video showing the defendant's killing and partial consumption of his victim.

Cannibal seeks new victim on Internet

AFP, Kassel

A German cannibal on trial for murder said yesterday that he had been searching the Internet for another person to eat when he was arrested for consuming his first allegedly willing victim.

Months after killing, dissecting and eating a man he met via the Internet, Armin Meiwes wrote in an e-mail to a friend: "I hope I will soon find another victim, the flesh has almost all gone."

Meiwes, a 42-year-old computer technician, told a court in Kassel, central Germany, that his first victim, whom he claims volunteered to be killed, had "disappointed me in many ways".

The man, a 43-year-old Berlin engineer named Bernd-Juergen Brandes, had lied about his age, claiming in e-mails to be 36, and did not want to try to get to know Meiwes better before his planned death, the accused said.