

Pope pleads for peace

World celebrates X-mas amid terror alert

AFP, Vatican City

Pope John Paul II made an emotional plea for world peace yesterday as hundreds of millions celebrated Christmas under the long shadow of terrorist threats which have caused security alerts around the world.

"Too much blood is still being shed on the earth! Too much violence and too many conflicts trouble the peaceful coexistence of nations!" the pope said in his traditional midnight mass at the St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican.

The plea came as mayhem and bloodshed rocked Iraq and security around the world was stepped up to high alert against Christmas terror attacks.

Baghdad's Sheraton Hotel, which houses mostly foreign journalists and contractors, was targeted in a wave of mortar attacks Thursday morning after

four US soldiers and six Iraqi were killed in a series of bomb blasts on Wednesday.

Tensions were heightened after France cancelled six flights between Paris and Los Angeles Wednesday due to fears of a threat to the United States from passenger jets following a warning from the US embassy.

Security around the United States embassy in London was also beefed up due to the fears of a threat to US interests during the Christmas holiday.

Tight security was in place as Indonesian Christians flocked to churches across the world's largest Muslim-populated state to solemnly celebrate Christmas.

There was no report of violence by noon, including in Central Sulawesi's restive Poso district and in Ambon and Maluku, where sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians has con-

tinued intermittently despite state-sponsored peace pacts.

On Wednesday evening, churches were packed for services as almost 166,000 officers backed by 1,000 soldiers were reported to be deployed across Indonesia for the festivities -- more than 22,000 of them in Jakarta alone.

Jakarta police and the US embassy have warned of a high risk of seasonal terror attacks from the al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI).

Security was also increased in two other Asian countries where Christians live alongside Muslims and other religion followers -- the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

Philippine National Security Adviser Rollo Golez said military and police forces were on tight alert amid the Christmas season, guarding bus terminals and sea and airports to prevent a repeat of a series of bombings that killed

about 20 people in December 2000, officials said Thursday.

Golez said the alert was imposed even before the United States its alert level for possible terror attacks from "elevated" to "high" at the weekend, prompting tighter security and even some cancelled flights overseas.

"We have a security alert but no specific threat," Golez said.

In Sri Lanka, elite commando units were posted outside the home and offices of a leading Roman Catholic businessman implicated in the death of Buddhist monk. They were also guarding other Christian symbols in Colombo.

In the communist nations of China and Vietnam, however, Christmas Day was being embraced on a more optimistic note.



Pope John Paul II at the altar in St Peter's Basilica celebrates midnight mass Wednesday as part of the Christmas Day service in the Vatican. The 83-year-old pontiff attended the mass, seated on a special chair that Vatican workmen have adapted so that he can reach the high altar for the consecration of the communion bread and wine.

Spanish police 'foil train bomb'

BBC ONLINE

Spanish authorities yesterday said they foiled a Basque separatist plot to blow up a train at a Madrid rail station.

One powerful 25-kilo (50 lb) bomb was placed on a train travelling from San Sebastian to Madrid, Interior Minister Angel Acebes said.

A second bomb was seized before it was put on the same train, he added.

Two men were arrested on Wednesday in the Basque region, one of whom was carrying the second bomb in a rucksack, Mr Acebes said.

The train was stopped in the city of Burgos, before it could reach the capital.

Acebes identified the two people arrested as Gorka Loran Lafourcade and Garikoitz Arruarte Santacruz.

The Spanish capital is alive with people in streets and in train stations setting off to visit families for Christmas.

The macabre intention of the terrorist organisation was to explode a device on Christmas Eve, in a station crowded like Charnatin.

She said people hearing the news would be enormously worried.

One of bombs seized was timed to go off around 1555 local time (1455 GMT) in a central station which would have been packed with travellers, she added.

Court suspends Bush's pollution rules

REUTERS, Washington

A federal court Wednesday halted a Bush administration plan to allow power plants, oil refineries and other industrial facilities to make upgrades to aging plants without installing costly new air pollution control equipment.

A coalition of environmental groups and states sued to stop the new rules issued by the Environmental Protection Agency, saying the policy changes violated the federal Clean Air Act and would result in more emissions being spewed into the air.

Emissions from coal-fired power plants and refineries can aggravate asthma, chronic bronchitis and pneumonia.

The US appeals court in Washington, agreed to temporarily set aside the changes to the EPA's "new source review" rules and said they could not take effect until the lawsuit challenging their legality was finished.

EPA officials could not immediately be reached for comment on the ruling.

The Bush administration has been criticized by Democrats and green groups for relaxing several environmental protection rules at the behest of energy companies. The industry contends the changes simply reflect the administration's analysis of scientific evidence and costs.

First Japanese troops to leave today for Iraq

AFP, Tokyo

Japan said yesterday its first military contingent would leave Friday to prepare for a non-combat humanitarian mission in Iraq, as domestic protests continued against the mission.

"One part will leave tomorrow," the prime minister's spokesman Yu Kameoka told AFP, without specifying the size of the detachment or the branch of the armed forces they are drawn from.

A 40-strong advance party of airforce servicemen would leave Friday for Kuwait to prepare for the dispatch of 150 other airforce members in January, according to the online edition of the Yomiuri Shimbun daily.

The dispatch is part of Japan's plan to deploy a total of some 1,000 troops to the region for humanitarian and reconstruction work in Iraq.

After months of foot-dragging, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's cabinet formally decided on December 9 to send a maximum of 600 ground troops to Iraq on a mission to last until December next year.

It is the first time that a Japanese military unit will be sent to a country where fighting is still raging. Japan's post-war constitution bans the use of force in settling international disputes.

The deployment plan has provoked strong opposition at home and has aroused fears among neighbouring nations about Japan's militarist revival.

Some 1,500 people gathered at Tokyo's Harumi harbor to see off 520 activists who boarded a chartered cruise liner with the banner "Don't send soldiers" at the start of a protest cruise to Okinawa.

"A majority of Japanese people are opposed to the dispatch of Japan's Self-Defense Forces to Iraq. If we are really a democratic country, I think the government should consider that," Tatsuya Yoshioka, director of the Peace Boat activist group, which organized the trip told AFP, arguing the move contravenes Japan's pacifist constitution.

Two newspaper polls released earlier this week found that 52 percent of Japanese are opposed to the troop dispatch.

With concerns persisting that Japanese troops may be targeted for attack, Koizumi was due to give an interview Thursday to the Arab news channel Al-Jazeera to explain the rationale behind the deployment plan.

Defense Agency chief Shigeru Ishiba told Al-Jazeera earlier in the day that Japan's planned deployment was aimed at helping Iraqis set up their own government, Kyodo News reported.

Flu activity widespread in 45 US states

AP, Atlanta

Federal officials said Wednesday that flu activity has reached widespread levels in all but five US states.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the flu has reached widespread status, the CDC's highest outbreak level in 10 states since last week: Alabama, Alaska, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

Health departments in the District of Columbia and New York City also reported widespread flu activity, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. The agency said influenza-like illnesses are increasing overall, but are decreasing in some areas, including Texas and Colorado, two states that were hit particularly hard by the flu early this season.

CDC officials have characterized this season's outbreak as a likely epidemic, and are particularly concerned that the outbreak has killed at least 42 children.

Of the five states where the flu is not widespread, Hawaii has seen only localized outbreaks, while regional outbreaks have been reported in Florida, Louisiana, New Hampshire and Oklahoma.

Bush admn drawing up immigration plan

REUTERS, Washington

In what could be the biggest change in US immigration law in nearly two decades, the Bush administration is drawing up plans to help more immigrants find work legally in the United States, officials and congressional aides said on Wednesday.

President Bush is expected to outline the new programme next month, most likely before traveling to Monterrey, Mexico, on Jan. 12 for talks with Mexican President Vicente Fox and other Latin American leaders at a summit of the Organization of American States.

"The president has said that we need to have an immigration policy that helps match any willing employer with any willing employee," a White House official said. "The administration is studying the issue and will make recommendations to Congress in due course."

Bush said earlier this month that "this administration is firmly against blanket amnesty" for undocumented people living in the United States.

Administration officials declined to offer many details about the programme under consideration.

It is expected to include elements from immigration reform legislation proposed by US Sen. John McCain (news, bio, voting record) and Reps. Jeff Flake and Jim Kolbe, all Arizona Republicans.

That bill would create a new type of temporary work visa and an electronic job registry that would allow US employers to post jobs for Americans as well as foreign workers.

Under the legislation, new visa holders would have the same rights, wages, working conditions and protections as American workers. Visa holders could apply for lawful permanent resident status after three years in the United States.

Advocates say the program would help regulate the flow of workers across the US-Mexico border -- every year 400,000 more Mexicans cross the border -- but congressional aides acknowledged that reaching a consensus in Congress on immigration reform would be difficult.

Talks on an immigration deal with Mexico were high on the agenda at the start of Bush's administration but the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks pushed the issue to the back burner, to Mexico's frustration.



Well-wishers exchange paper tapes while a large banner to protest sending Japanese troops to Iraq is displayed beside the 31,500-ton passenger ship, "the Topaz" prior to her departure for around-the-world trip chartered by Japanese non-governmental organisation (NGO), PeaceBoat at the Tokyo port yesterday.

Mussa calls for Arab involvement in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Arab League chief Amr Mussa called on Arab nations to back efforts to rebuild war-torn Iraq after talking with members of the Governing Council, amid ongoing US efforts against anti-coalition insurgents in Operation Iron Grip.

The US-led coalition that administers Iraq also warned its members to be on heightened alert against attacks over the holiday season, as Christians in Baghdad celebrated Christmas Eve mass amid security fears.

"Coalition members are cautioned to be especially alert over the next 10 days and to take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness," said a notice from the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Regional Security Coordinator.

"We are seeing continuing indications following the capture of Saddam Hussein that elements are planning actions against CPA and Iraqi interests in order to demonstrate that they are still a significant force," the notice said.

Late Wednesday, explosions

sounded across Baghdad for a second night. AFP correspondents heard several explosions in the distance about 10:15 pm (1915 GMT), less intense than those which thumped like artillery rounds in the capital night earlier.

And a loud explosion also rocked central Baghdad near the Sheraton hotel Wednesday, but a US military spokeswoman said it was not clear if it was part of the Iron Grip operation which has used heavy artillery and aircraft fire.

"We have investigators checking out the explosion," she said.

Faint flames could be seen rising into the sky in the area Wednesday night and helicopters circled overhead.

The US military said it was sweeping for insurgents to make the most of vital intelligence obtained from former dictator Saddam Hussein, who was captured on December 13 north of Baghdad.

The Arab League meanwhile was entreated to play a key role in rebuilding war-torn Iraq Wednesday, by Governing Council member Iyad Alawi.

Iran vows to use missile if attacked by Israel

AP, Tehran

Iran's defence minister has said his country would strike back with its long-range Shahab-3 missile if Israel attacked its nuclear facilities.

Ali Shamkhani was responding to comments made last month by Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, who said Israel would not permit Iran to develop nuclear weapons - a hint it was prepared to take unilateral military action.

"We will strike Israel with all weapons at our disposal if the Zionist regime ventures to do so," Shamkhani said on Wednesday in comments carried by the official Islamic Republic News Agency. He said the Shahab-3, able to reach Israel, was one of the weapons that would be used.

The Shahab-3, officially deployed to the military in last July, has a range of about 1,300km. Israel is about 965km west of Iran.

Shamkhani's comments marked the second Iranian response in two days. On Tuesday, reporters outside Parliament asked Shamkhani and President Mohamad Khatami about Mofaz's statement. The minister responded, "No place will be safe in Israel."

The President, meanwhile, scoffed at the Israeli words. "Israel will make a damn mistake" if they attack Iran, Khatami said with a smile, in footage aired on state-run television.

Shamkhani said on Wednesday that Mofaz's statement proved that Israel was "an evil entity."



Palestinian gathers around the remains of a car that exploded late Wednesday night in the northern West Bank Nablus. Ilwam Beniawdi, 25, a member of the radical Palestinian group Hamas was killed when a car exploded in Nablus.

Palestinians delay peace meeting over Israeli raid

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian leaders, angered by an Israeli raid that killed nine people, on Wednesday postponed talks with Israel aimed at bringing about a Middle East peace summit.

In Bethlehem's Manger Square a Palestinian student choir sang and a visiting Korean pop band played to briefly lift spirits on another bleak Christmas for the town of Jesus's birth now encircled by Israeli forces.

Top aides to Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie and Israeli counterpart Ariel Sharon had been expected to meet in Jerusalem in continuing efforts to arrange a summit and revive a US-led peace "road map" battered by a resurgence of violence.

"The meeting has been put off in protest at Israel's killing of Palestinians in Rafah," a

Palestinian political source told Reuters, referring to Tuesday's tank and bulldozer incursion into a Gaza Strip refugee camp on the border with Egypt.

Israeli officials could not be reached for comment.

Israeli troops left Rafah on Wednesday after some of the fiercest clashes in two months. The army said it had uncovered a arms smuggling tunnel. Palestinian medics identified the dead as five militants, a policeman, and three bystanders.

The bloodshed again highlighted the failure of either side to push ahead with the road map, which has confidence-building steps meant to pave the way to a Palestinian state by 2005.

In Manger Square, lights twinkled festively from a towering Christmas tree and hundreds gathered to students singing carols

and Koreans playing pop tunes with dancers alongside.

But the festivities, followed by midnight Mass in the ancient Church of the Nativity built over the spot where Jesus was said to have been born, were a far cry from the thousands of pilgrims who would have once packed Bethlehem for Christmas.

Israel said it had eased travel restrictions in the West Bank to allow pilgrims to reach Bethlehem for Christmas.

After the Rafah raid, Palestinian militants vowed renewed suicide bombings in Israel.

Israel demands a Palestinian crackdown on militants as required by the road map, and has said that if the plan fails it will take unilateral steps that could cost Palestinians some of the territory they want for a state in the West Bank and Gaza.

Lankan navy nets 250 would-be illegal migrants

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's navy yesterday arrested at least 250 men who were trying to leave the island illegally in a fishing trawler bound for Italy, police officials said.

The trawler carrying the men, all Sri Lankan nationals, was stopped off Puttalam on the island's north-western coast after being detected by naval gunboats.

Police brought the first batch of 100 men to the capital Colombo by Thursday afternoon.

In a similar incident November 30 police arrested 60 Sri Lankan men at a fisheries harbour just north of Colombo.

More than 600 would-be illegal immigrants from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were arrested during July in what authorities here believed was a major human smuggling racket using Sri Lanka as a transit point.

Karzai presses for presidential system

AFP, Kabul

The wrangling over the future form of Afghan democracy was set to continue yesterday after President Hamid Karzai refused to compromise on his demands for a strong presidential system.

A committee set up to reconcile the conflicting views of Karzai and powerful faction leaders was itself split over whether the country should have a presidential or parliamentary system.

A member of the committee told AFP that it was not clear which side would emerge on top as negotiations continued over the most controversial clauses of the country's draft constitution. "Let's wait and see," Ayatullah Mohseni told AFP Wednesday evening.

"The reconciliation committee has not yet finished its work. There are 100 articles out of the 160 everybody agrees on so there's no discussion about them.

Pak blind child gets new lease of life in India

PTI, Chennai

A 16-month-old Pakistani blind child received a new lease of life when sight was restored in one of his eyes through a cornea transplantation at a renowned private sector eye hospital in Chennai.

The baby boy, Mohammed Talha Shahzad, underwent eye surgery at the Agarwal Eye Hospital on Tuesday and the child saw his parents for the first time on Wednesday, hospital director Dr Amar Agarwal said.

The parents of the child, who was born blind due to genetics disorder, had tapped all the hospitals in Pakistan unsuccessfully. Finally the child's grandfather asked the parents to try their luck in Chennai.

Taking the Lahore-Delhi bus route, the parents arrived in Chennai on December 14 but had to wait for donor eyes.