

Saddam spars with judge in court

AFP, Baghdad

Ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein angrily sparred with the judge during his trial on charges of crimes against humanity yesterday, saying he had been dragged back to court against his wishes after boycotting the last hearings.

"Down with traitors, down with Bush, long live the ummah (Islamic nation)," roared Saddam as he arrived under tight security in the Baghdad courtroom for the first time since January 29.

The trial of Saddam and seven co-defendants, which has frequently descended into chaos since it opened in October, was adjourned until Tuesday after only a few hours.

"I was forced into the courtroom," Saddam told chief judge Rauf Rasheed Abdel Rahman,

whose tough handling of the trial had triggered a boycott by all defendants at the last hearing on February 2.

"This is not a court this is a game," said Saddam, wearing a robe and heavy jacket rather than his usual smart suit, pounding on a podium in the dock.

"Shame on you Rauf, you are insignificant," he shouted at the judge, accusing him of being "ignorant of the law" and implementing "American law".

Abdel Rahman, who took over as chief judge only last month after the resignation of his predecessor, banged his gavel on several occasions as he sought to silence Saddam's efforts to discredit the tribunal.

The Kurdish judge warned the former dictator he would not be permitted to boycott the trial.

Nepali king faces exile or execution: Maoists

REUTERS, New Delhi

Nepal's King Gyanendra will ultimately be exiled or executed because he has closed the door to any political compromise since seizing absolute power a year ago, the reclusive leader of the country's Maoist rebels said.

"The king has taken steps that do not give any room for compromise," Prachanda told the BBC in an interview broadcast yesterday. "It would be correct to say that the path that he has taken is the road to hell."

The Maoists have been fighting since 1996 to overthrow the world's only Hindu monarchy and install communist rule, a revolution that has killed more than 13,000 people and shattered the tourism-and-aid dependent economy.

Prachanda, who has lived an underground existence for more than two decades, last year forged a loose alliance with the main political parties to topple the king and restore democracy.

"I believe that it (Nepal) will be a republic state in less than five years," Prachanda said in the interview, which the BBC said was the first he had ever given for television.

"The king, I think, will either be executed by the people's court or he might be exiled. For the king, today's Nepal has no future. We don't see a future for him and the Nepali people don't either. The king might be finished or he might leave."

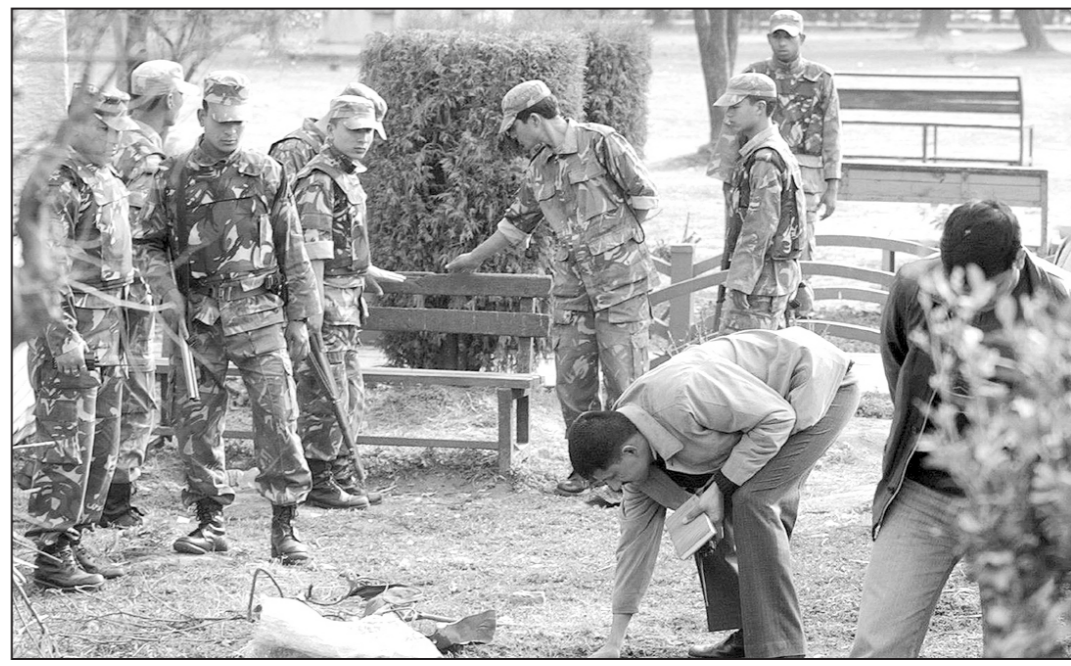
It was not clear where the salt and pepper-bearded Prachanda, who was wearing a Western jacket

and an open-neck shirt, was interviewed. Sitting against a black background, he spoke in Nepali through an interpreter.

BBC reporter Charles Haviland said the face of Prachanda, whose name is a nom-de-guerre meaning "The Fierce One", was until a few weeks ago known only through a single photograph taken in rural Nepal in 2001.

"The 52-year-old man I met ... was mild-mannered, shy, joking, laughing nervously -- more humorous than intimidating and without the overt charisma of some revolutionary leaders," Haviland said on the BBC's Web site (www.bbcnews.com/southasia).

Asked if the Maoists could take Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, by force, Prachanda said they had originally thought they could.



Nepalese policemen and investigators inspect the site of a bomb blast in the central Ratna Park near the Royal Palace in Kathmandu yesterday. A small bomb exploded in central Kathmandu on the 10th anniversary of the launch of the Maoists' "people's war", but caused no casualties and little damage.

LANKAN PRESIDENT SAYS

No homeland for Tigers

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse yesterday ruled out Tamil Tiger demands for a separate homeland in the island's north and east, but said he would rein in armed groups - a central rebel demand ahead of crunch talks.

"There's only one country, we can share power. Not a separate state. That idea must be taken off...it is completely out," Rajapakse told Reuters in an interview ahead of upcoming talks with

the rebels in Switzerland to avoid a slide backwar.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have threatened to resume an armed struggle that led to two decades of civil war that killed more than 64,000 people up until a 2002 truce unless the government gives them a separate homeland for ethnic Tamils.

Rajapakse, who has trodden a moderate line since taking power in November, said he would meet a rebel demand to rein in armed

groups. The Tigers accuse the military of helping a breakaway faction led by renegade commander called Karuna to mount attacks, which the government denies.

"If any group operates in our area, we will stop it. Any groups carrying arms will be brought under control, whether it is the so-called Karuna group or the LTTE," Rajapakse said.

"There must be a (Tiger) guarantee too...that civilians are not being harassed or not being killed."

India, France unlikely to ink nuke pact

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

France is more than willing to offer India its expertise in nuclear energy, but a formal civil nuclear cooperation pact may not be signed between the two countries when President Jacques Chirac comes this month.

The two sides will, however, ink a formal defence cooperation pact, which will include cooperation between their armed forces and

joint production of military hardware, and announce a deal on launching satellites for third parties.

Paris has also clarified that even if the two sides sign a formal pact on civil nuclear cooperation, its implementation will have to wait for the US and the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to alter their rules for transacting nuclear business in favour of India.

Mumbai don Dawood Ibrahim ready to stand trial: Aide

AFP, Mumbai

India's most-wanted man Dawood Ibrahim, blamed for a series of blasts in Mumbai that killed 257 people in 1993, is prepared to stand trial, an aide to the fugitive crime kingpin was quoted as saying yesterday.

A man claiming to be the legal consultant for Dawood -- widely known as the head of Mumbai's notorious D-company gang -- announced he was ready to stand trial in London, but did not rule out a return to India.

Meraj Siddiqui claimed the charges against Dawood were "fabricated" and "baseless" and said he would not get a fair trial in India.

"We are ready for a fair trial in London since all the charges against him are fabricated," the Times of India quoted Siddiqui, said to be speaking by telephone from London, as saying.

' Hamas will end armed struggle if Israel quits occupied territories'

AFP, Moscow

Hamas will end its armed struggle against Israel if the Jewish state withdraws from all occupied Palestinian territories, the radical Islamist group's leader told a Russian daily in comments published yesterday.

"If Israel recognizes our rights and pledges to withdraw from all occupied lands, Hamas, and the Palestinian people together with it, will decide to halt armed resistance," the radical Islamist group's supremo Khaled Meshaal said in an interview with the Nezevisimaya Gazeta daily.

In earlier statements Meshaal had only said that Hamas could agree to a "long-term truce" with Israel if it were willing to return to the 1967 borders and recognise the rights of Palestinians to self-determination.

However, Meshaal added in his latest comments that Hamas did not feel bound by the international Middle East roadmap for peace since, in his view, no

one else was abiding by it.

"Since no one is abiding by the dispositions of the roadmap, the Palestinians also feel it is not expedient to adhere to it," said Meshaal, who lives in the Syrian capital Damascus.

He said Hamas was prepared to talk with everybody, including the United States. "We are open to dialogue with the whole world. Hamas has set no limitations whatsoever on contacts with the United States," Meshaal said.

Hamas won a surprise landslide victory in January's parliamentary elections in the Palestinian Authority but has since come under international pressure to renounce violence against Israel.

Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin extended a controversial invitation to Hamas to visit Moscow for talks on the future of the Middle East peace process, an idea accepted with relish by the Islamists who are poised to form the next Palestinian government.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L), Communist Party of India-Marxist Leader Sitaram Yachuri (2L), Communist Party of India (CPI) General Secretary A. B. Bardhan (2R) and CPI Secretary D. Raja (R) chat during an United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-Left Coordination Committee meeting in New Delhi yesterday.

Left rules out no-trust vote against UPA govt

PTI, New Delhi

The Left parties on Monday ruled out moving or supporting any no-confidence motion against the UPA government.

The Left leaders, including CPM Joint Secretary Prakash Karat and CPI General Secretary AB Bardhan, conveyed this to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi at a 90-minute long meeting of the UPA-Left Coordination Committee.

"The Left leaders have made it clear that they are not contemplating either moving or joining anything resembling a no-confidence motion in Parliament," Finance Minister P Chidambaram said.

He said the Left leaders have informed that they will seek a discussion on the Iran issue in Parliament and the Government was ready for any such exercise.

"They told us they will raise the issue in Parliament. If a discussion is

raised, the Government will welcome it and respond to their concerns. Government will take the opportunity to make its stand clear," he said.

The Minister said the Government has explained to the Left leaders why it had voted in favour of a resolution moved by the US and other countries at the IAEA meeting.

He said it was decided to hold another meeting of the UPA-Left Coordination Committee before or after the Union Budget.

The Left's assurance that it would not support any no-confidence motion comes as a great relief to the Government as the Samajwadi Party along with Telugu Desam has threatened to move a no-trust vote on March six against the Government over the Iran vote. "We have explained why we voted...We are committed to pursuing an independent foreign policy," Chidambaram said, adding "it (Iran) is difficult issue but we have to proceed carefully."

EU seeks to ease cartoon crisis

AFP, Jeddah

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana expressed Europe's respect for Islam yesterday on a visit to the Middle East meant to ease the global crisis over cartoons depicting Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM). "(In) the European Union we feel a profound respect yesterday, today and tomorrow and we never had wanted in any case to offend their feelings," Solana said, following his meeting in Jeddah with the Organisation of the Islamic Conference's (OIC) secretary general Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu.

"This is not our intention. This has not been our intention, and will not be out intention," he added.

The EU chief was sounding a conciliatory note over the cartoons

depicting the Prophet Mohammed, first published in Europe, that have triggered a wave of violent protests across the Muslim world.

Solana said he had conveyed this message to the OIC chief over the phone but wanted to transmit it in person.

But the head of the pan-Islamic body called upon the EU through the European parliament, to pass legislation to combat what he termed as "Islamophobia".

"Unfortunately, what is going on now ... people in the Muslim world are starting to feel this is a new September 11 against them," he said, invoking the attacks on the United States in 2001.

Solana arrived surrounded by tight security in the Saudi Red Sea port city of Jeddah where the OIC is based.