



US distances itself from prison raid

AFP, Sydney

The United States yesterday distanced itself from Israel's raid on a West Bank prison, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice saying the US had never been responsible for security at the Jericho jail.

Israel sparked unrest across the Palestinian territories on Tuesday when it raided the prison and seized six jailed militants shortly after US and British monitors left.

In her first comments on the incident, Rice said that under a 2002 agreement between the United States, Britain, Israel and the Palestinians, security at the prison was the responsibility of Palestinian forces.

American and British officials were there simply to monitor the jail, she told reporters in Sydney.

"Over the last year it has been increasingly difficult for the monitors to play their role and we... were increasingly concerned for the safety of these monitors," she said.

PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian young men throw stones at Israeli soldiers during an army operation in the West Bank town of Jenin yesterday. An Israeli soldier was killed after exchanges of fire broke out during the operation in the northern West Bank town military sources said.

US tags Iran as biggest security threat

Tehran ready to hold talks with Washington on Iraq

AFP, Washington/ Tehran

Making no apologies for the war in Iraq, the United States warned states like North Korea and especially Iran yesterday that it will take preemptive military action if necessary to protect itself.

"We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran," the White House said in a blueprint called the "National Security Strategy" of the United States, a copy of which was obtained by AFP.

North Korea "presents a long and bleak record of duplicity and bad-faith negotiations" the document said, warning: "We will continue to take all necessary measures to protect our

national and economic security against the adverse effects of their bad conduct.

In other areas, the United States warned Russia that its relations with the West depend on pursuing democratic reforms and urged China to follow economic opening with political freedom -- while saying that Washington would "hedge" for the possibility that Beijing does not do so.

The document made clear that Washington does not view the failure to find the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) at the core of the public case for the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a blow against its strategy of preventive war.

That strategy was fleshed out in

the 2002 version of the document, which built on US President George W. Bush's position that the September 11, 2001 terrorist strikes made Cold War deterrence obsolete and required bolder action.

"The place of preemption in our national security strategy remains the same," the White House said on Thursday. "We do not rule out the use of force before attacks occur."

Bush had made Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of chemical and biological weapons and pursuit of nuclear arms the centrepiece of his case for war, but no such weapons have been found.

"There will always be some uncertainty" about banned weapons programmes, the White House said.

"We have no doubt that the world is better off if tyrants know that they pursue WMD at their own peril."

Meanwhile, the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani said yesterday that Tehran was ready to negotiate with its archfoe, the United States, to resolve problems in Iraq.

"We agree to negotiate with the Americans," Larijani told reporters after making a closed door speech to parliament.

"Iran accepts the demand of (Iraqi Shia leader Abdel Aziz) Hakim to resolve the Iraqi problems and issues with the goal of creating an independent (Iraqi) government," Larijani said.

Iraq parliament meets without govt deal

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Three months after a landmark election, Iraq's new parliament convened for the first time yesterday amid worsening communal violence and little sign of a deal on a government of national unity.

But the inaugural session lasted just 40 minutes and was adjourned after all 275 members of the national assembly were collectively sworn in.

Adnan Pachachi, 83, who as eldest member presided over the new assembly,

said the session would adjourn until political parties could agree on who was to be elected speaker.

"It has been decided to leave the session open pending political agreement on the designation of a speaker and his two deputies," said Pachachi, a former foreign minister.

Political parties remain deadlocked in their talks on forming a national unity government after the December 15 election to choose the first full-term parliament following the US-led war that ousted Saddam Hussein in 2003.

UN creates new rights council

REUTERS, United Nations

The United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly on Wednesday to create a new UN human rights council, despite a definitive "no" vote from the United States.

Even Cuba, which had prepared several amendments, was among the 170 countries that voted in favour, including US allies in Europe, Canada and elsewhere. Of the four opposing the resolution, Israel, the Marshall Islands and Palau joined the United States. Belarus, Iran and Venezuela abstained.

Taliban chief vows more violence

REUTERS, Kandahar

Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar vowed a ferocious offensive against US-led forces in Afghanistan, saying yesterday they would soon face unimaginable violence.

An insurgency that has killed more than 1,500 people since the start of last year has intensified in recent months with a wave of suicide bombings, including at least 12 this year.

Ten US troops have been killed in

combat this year and US commanders have said they expect violence to increase in coming months as the weather warms, snow on mountain passes melts, and Afghanistan's traditional fighting season begins.

"With the arrival of the warm weather, we will make the ground so hot for the invaders it will be unimaginable for them," Omar said in his message, read by Taliban spokesman Mohammad Hanif over the telephone from an undisclosed location.

