



Protesters carry a coffin towards the Philharmonic Hall as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice attends a concert in Liverpool, England. The US Secretary of State is visiting the North West of England with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. Her arrival has divided Muslim opinion and a planned visit to a mosque in Blackburn was scrapped after protests.

Rice meets Muslim leaders in Britain amid protests

REUTERS, Blackburn

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met Muslim leaders in north-west England yesterday in a trip during which protesters expressed anger that an architect of the Iraq war was on their home turf.

About 200 noisy protesters waited for Rice and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw at town hall in Blackburn, chanting "Condoleezza Rice Go Home" and "No War."

"They (protesters) have their freedom of speech and I'm glad they did it," said Mayor Yusef Janvirmani, who shook hands with protesters before formally welcoming Rice.

Rice waved at supporters and protesters alike on her arrival and seemed undeterred by chanting demonstrators, who were kept behind barriers by dozens of police, some on horseback.

Haniyeh issues warning after Gaza fighting

3 killed in factional clash

AP, Gaza City

The Palestinian prime minister said yesterday he would try to get gunmen off the streets of Gaza, warning that factional fighting provoked by the assassination of a top Hamas-linked militant had created a "dangerous situation."

Abu Yousef Abu Quka's death in a car bomb Friday posed the first direct threat to the Hamas government, just two days after the Islamic group assumed power. The militant's followers blamed the attack on security forces loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah movement.

The killing set off gunbattles that

left three people dead, wounded 36 and raised the possibility of wider clashes.

Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh said it was "a dangerous situation and shouldn't happen again." He said security forces would try to "pull our civilian gunmen off the streets," though he did not specify which armed men or elaborate on a plan.

Abu Quka was a senior commander of the Popular Resistance Committees, an umbrella group of about 200 gunmen linked to explosions of Israeli tanks and a deadly attack on a US diplomatic convoy in 2003. About half the group's gunmen are allied with Hamas and the other half with Fatah.

Hamas has pledged to restore order in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which has been plagued by increasing lawlessness, with gunmen roaming the streets with impunity.

Hamas, however, has little control over most Palestinian security forces, which are affiliated with Fatah and have been involved in some of the violence.

Abbas, a moderate who favours peace talks with Israel, is a vocal critic of violence but has struggled to gain control over the security forces since his election last year.

On Friday, Haniyeh ordered an investigation and urged calm. "I want to stress the need not to

slide toward civil war," he said in a televised interview. "Let us not direct our arrows at each other."

Hamas' interior minister, Said Siyam, who is in charge of several security agencies, promised to bring Abu Quka's killers to justice.

The Popular Resistance Committees initially blamed Israel, which denied involvement, and then pointed to the Preventive Security Service.

Gunfire broke out at the funeral. Hospital officials said three people were killed, including two bystanders and a PRC member who had joined the procession. Thirty-six others were wounded, six critically, they said.

Manmohan to lead tough fight against Maoists

Delhi rules out sovereignty talks with Ulfa

REUTERS, PTI, New Delhi/ Guwahati

India pledged on Friday to step up the fight against Maoist rebels after several major attacks, with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to chair a high level meeting on the threat in two weeks.

Critics say the Indian government has been slow to wake up to the threat posed by the Maoist or "Naxal" rebels, whose insurgency is killing people almost every day and has spread to huge swathes of the country's rural south, centre and east.

On Friday, Home Secretary V.K. Duggal tried to downplay the threat, but warned against complacency.

"The broad impression is that this violent Naxal movement is by and large under control," he said after a meeting of top officials and police chiefs from 13 affected states.

"But it has the potential to grow

unless continuous effective steps, as are enshrined in policy, are not pursued."

On April 13, Singh will step in to chair a quarterly meeting of chief ministers from the 13 affected states, usually presided over by the country's interior minister.

Manmohan yesterday also ruled out any discussions with the insurgent outfit Ulfa in Assam on the issue of sovereignty.

Manmohan asserted that there would be no changes in the territorial structure of northeastern states without their consent.

"The question does not arise. We are all servants of the Constitution of India and the Constitutional position is quite clear on this," Singh said when asked whether the government would hold talks with Ulfa over its sovereignty demands.

"If Ulfa wants to talk they are open to raise any issue they want but that does not mean all issues are

open for negotiations," the prime minister added.

Asked about the perception that there were differences between the Centre and the state on tackling the Ulfa problem, he said, "we want peace to prevail. We want to ensure that the state develop in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity."

With tensions along the border with Pakistan easing and separatist insurgencies in India's restive northeast "somewhat under control", the prime minister's attention had turned to the Maoist problem, Duggal said. "Obviously it a matter of concern."

Duggal said 157 people had been killed in Maoist-related violence this year, up from 114 in the first quarter of 2005, driven by a jump in civilian deaths in the central state of Chhattisgarh.

Thousands of Iran quake homeless seek shelter

AFP, Brujerd

Iranian authorities were battling yesterday to provide shelter and aid for thousands of people left homeless by a 6.0 magnitude earthquake in the west of the country that killed 73 people.

Amid fears of aftershocks, survivors of Friday's pre-dawn earthquake in the west of Lorestan province -- which also injured at least 1,265 -- spent the night in the cold open air as they awaited the distribution of relief items.

Around 500 people from villages under the city of Brujerd's jurisdiction protested in front of the city's governor office, demanding blankets, tents and food, state news agency IRNA reported.

Most of the parks in Brujerd and the provincial capital, Khoramabad were packed with people who had dragged blankets and other necessities with them in the expectation of enduring more aftershocks.

"Unfortunately we were not able to furnish all those affected by the quake with the needed tents," the head of the local Red Crescent, Mohammad Ali Drekanvandi told IRNA, adding he hoped everyone

would have shelter by Saturday. Local women were seen sitting in a circle, crying as they waited for the loss of their loved ones, covering their heads with mud, and scratching their nails into their tear-stained faces.

Such mourning ceremonies are unique to the area.

"I wish I were killed with my sheep and cows," shouted the wailing Hossein Mousivand, 60, from a village close to the city of Brujerd.

According to local officials, the areas hit most by the quakes were villages between Brujerd and Doroud, which have the population of around 200,000 people. About 330 villages suffered 40 to 100 percent damage, according to officials.

"I lost all my livelihood, I had 140 sheep and cows, now I am left with a destroyed farm and only 50 animals," Mousivand, hitting his head against the only standing pillar in his ravaged farm, told an AFP photographer.

Polls boosts Lankan peace

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse's ruling coalition dominated local poll results on Friday, boosting his hand in a peace bid with the Tamil Tigers after his hard-line Marxist allies fared worse than expected.

Rajapakse's United Peoples' Freedom Alliance won control of

225 of 266 councils, while the Marxist JVP -- who back him in parliament but are opposed to concessions to the rebels and ran independently -- boosted their share of the vote but won less than expected.

"Sri Lankan voters have shown they do not support hardline or extremist parties," said Jayadeva Uyangoda, head of political studies

at Colombo University. "This is good news for President Rajapakse."

The JVP won 65 percent more local government seats than it took in at the last vote in 2002. But against some expectations, they only retained their sole council and were placed a distant third behind the main opposition United National Party (UNP).

Tens of thousands flee conflict in Iraq: IOM

AFP, Geneva

Tens of thousands of Iraqis have fled their homes in the face of surging violence in recent weeks and are in desperate need of aid, the International Organisation for Migration said on Friday.

Jemini Pandya, spokeswoman for the international body, which looks after people displaced within their own countries as well as migrants, said that 30,000-36,000 Iraqis had left their homes.

Most of them were from Baghdad, as well as the Anbar and Diyala regions, Pandya told reporters.

"More than one million people are now displaced in the country as a result of three decades of conflict and the on-going violence," she said.

The IOM is handing out food, as well as other supplies including mattresses and blankets, and providing clean water and medical assistance.

However, many of the people who have fled also lack proper shelter, said Pandya.

The IOM needs 10 million dollars (8.3 million euros) to fund a year-long emergency programme

for people who are either living with family or friends or who are squatting in public or abandoned buildings, she said.

In a separate operation, Pandya said, the IOM has sent 150 patients to other countries for medical treatment after the Iraqi health ministry asked it to restart its medical evacuation programme.

At least 6,000 Iraqis are currently on the ministry's list awaiting life-saving treatment abroad for conditions including cancer, heart disease and neurological disorders, said Pandya.

Many of those on the list are children injured by bomb explosions or mines or those who have medical conditions which Iraqi hospitals are unable to treat due to lack of staff, equipment or medicines, she added.

The IOM's programme, which is also in need of funds, matches patients with hospitals abroad that are prepared to give free medical assistance. The previous programme, from 2003-2005, assisted almost 300 patients, said Pandya.



Michael Jackson 'Most Foolish American'

AFP, Los Angeles

Faded pop superstar Michael Jackson was Friday crowned as America's most foolish person in 2006, narrowly beating out trigger-happy US Vice President Dick Cheney for the title.

The 47-year-old "King of Pop," who is living in exile in Bahrain following his acquittal last June on child sex charges, snatched the dishonour for the fourth year running, according to a survey by a US public relations consultant.

Sixty-nine percent of the 1,045 people polled in a random telephone survey ahead of Saturday's April Fool's day said the singer had "done something foolish" in the past year that merited the title, the poll showed.