

Iraq-US crackdown to tame Baghdad rebels

Thousands of Iraqi and US troops descended on the streets of Baghdad Wednesday as the authorities imposed a security clampdown as part of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's plan to thwart insurgent attacks.

The crackdown comes after Al-Qaeda warned of massive attacks to avenge last week's death of its leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in a US air raid and also a day after an unannounced visit by US President George W. Bush to Baghdad.

Iraqis in Baghdad were forced to double their commute time as new checkpoints mushroomed after the defense ministry announced that some 40,000 security forces, both Iraqi and coalition, would secure the city in Operation Forward Together.

Baghdad province is home to seven million people, a quarter of the country's population, and is one of the most unstable areas in the country.

There were traffic jams throughout the city as commuters waited in long lines in front of checkpoints that stopped most cars instead of waving people through as before.

The ministry did not specify how long the new security measures would be in place and the prime minister publicly asked for patience.

Checkpoints were being manned by different branches of the security services, with some handled by the police, some by the commandos or national police and others the Iraqi army.

US forces are also involved, mostly in a support role, providing air cover and roving patrols.

"We are supporting Iraqi security forces in this security plan and we are carrying out operations in the capital," said coalition forces spokesman Major William Wilboite, who declined to comment on how many US troops were involved.

Officers at the checkpoints were stopping drivers and checking their cars, registration documents and identity papers.

Single male drivers received special attention especially if they were driving vehicles without license plates in the BMW or Opel models favored by insurgents.

Cars with women and children and public buses were generally waved through.

The plan will also include house-to-house searches of areas suspected of hiding insurgents as well as a crackdown on civilians carrying weapons -- a tall order in militia-run Baghdad neighborhoods like Sadr City.

In fact, residents of that Shiite neighborhood of over two million said that no checkpoints had been set up inside their district, but only on the outskirts.

The nighttime curfew also has been extended two and a half hours so that it begins at 8:30 pm (1630 GMT) until 6:00 am (0200 GMT) while a vehicle ban will be in place during afternoon prayer hours on Friday.

However the new measures did not prevent at least two people being killed seven wounded in a car bomb targeting an Iraqi army patrol in Baghdad's northern Al-Qahira neighborhood.

On Tuesday Bush made a lightning visit to Baghdad to offer his unflinching support in battling Iraq's raging insurgency, but said the country's future was in its own hands.

Koirala thinks king should retain role

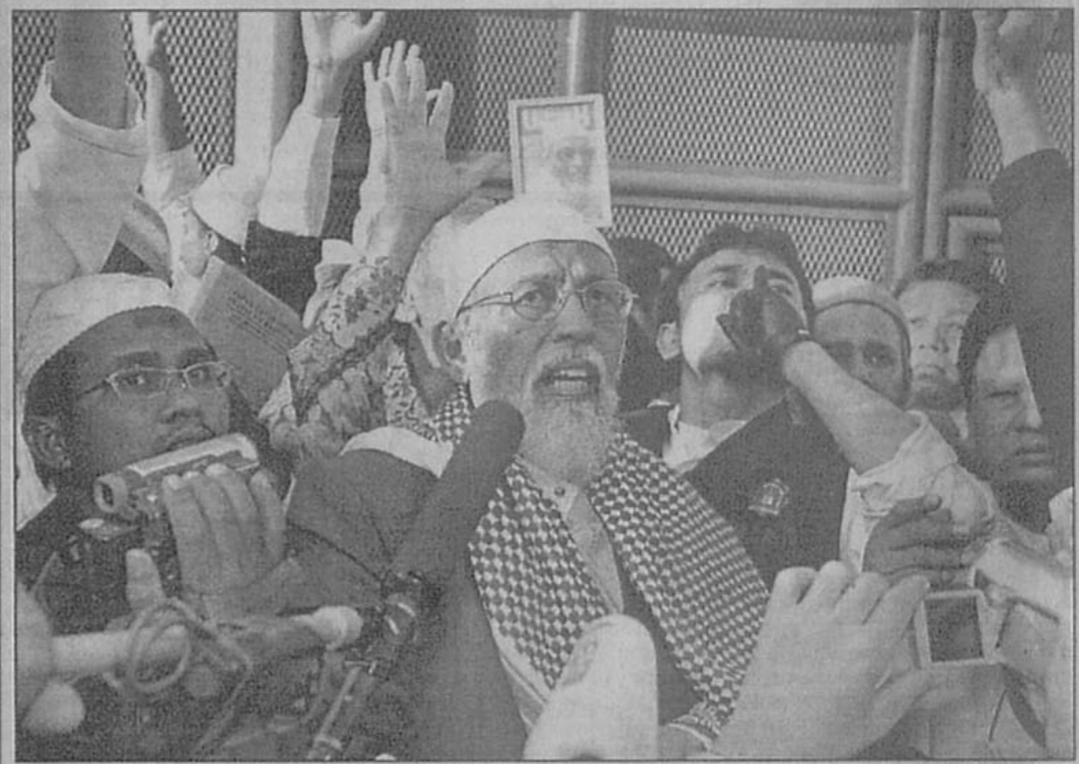
Nepal Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala believes sidelined King Gyanendra should retain a ceremonial role in the troubled Himalayan nation, party officials said Wednesday.

The king was stripped of his political powers and control of Nepal's army after he bowed to mass street protests in April and ended 14 months of direct rule.

"There are spaces for all political forces in a democratic system. The king's power has been removed but he should not be completely left out...he should be given a ceremonial role," Koirala was quoted as saying by Pitambar Dahal, secretary of the Nepali Congress party.

Koirala's comments mark the first time the premier has publicly advocated a ceremonial role for the king since he was re-appointed prime minister when the king restored democracy.

Koirala made the comments at a meeting with Nepali Congress cadres in his home town of Biratnagar 548 kilometers (342 miles) east of Kathmandu Wednesday, said Dahal.



Indonesian cleric Abu Bakar Bashir (C), alleged leader of radical Islamic group Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), talks to journalists after release from jail in Jakarta yesterday. He served nearly 26 months in prison for his role in the 2002 Bali bombings.

British 'torture victims' lose right to sue Saudi officials

A landmark ruling that gave four men the right to sue foreign officials who allegedly tortured them while they were held in Saudi Arabian jails was overturned by Britain's highest court on Wednesday.

The House of Lords allowed an appeal by Saudi Arabia against a Court of Appeal decision in October 2004 that effectively removed blanket immunity for officials from foreign states accused of serious crimes like torture.

Saudi Arabia had argued that its officials were protected by the State Immunity Act from proceedings brought in Britain.

Sandy Mitchell, Les Walker and Bill Sampson were arrested after a series of terrorist bombings in Riyadh and Khobar, eastern Saudi Arabia, six years ago and claimed they were tortured into admitting responsibility.

The fourth man, Ron Jones, was seized after being injured in a bomb blast outside a bookshop.

His treatment by captors, which included being beaten on his hands and feet, being suspended by his arms, deprived of sleep and forcibly fed mind-altering drugs, has been independently confirmed.

All the men were released after an attack in May 2003 in the Saudi capital by the Al-Qaeda terror network, which disproved official Saudi claims that the bombings were the result of an alcohol turf war among Westerners.



Palestinian government employees, one holding up a portrait of Marwan Barghouti, storm the Hamas-dominated parliament building in Ramallah yesterday.

Palestinian House stormed for non-payment of salaries

Palestinian government employees protesting against the non-payment of salaries stormed the Hamas-dominated parliament building in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday.

The demonstrators burst into the Palestinian Legislative Council chamber, which was in session at the time, forcing speaker Aziz al-Dweik to pronounce a halt to proceedings.

Some protestors ripped up documents on MPs' benches while others brawled with elected deputies in the parliament, which has been dominated by members of the ruling Hamas faction since last January's election.

Various MPs jumped up calling for calm and demanding that the interlopers leave the chamber.

Many of the protestors appeared to be supporters of president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah faction which was thrashed by Hamas in January's vote.

Some could be seen holding up a portrait of Marwan Barghouti, the leader of Fatah who is serving five life sentences in an Israeli prison after being convicted over the death of several civilians.

The vast majority of civil servants have not been paid since February owing to a serious financial crisis following Western aid cuts to the Palestinian Authority since Hamas formed government.

Friction between Hamas and Fatah has been steadily growing in recent days.

Followers of Abbas's faction set fire to the parliament late Monday after earlier torching part of the building housing the cabinet offices in Ramallah. Both fires were soon brought under control without causing extensive damage.

After Wednesday's storming of the parliament, the leader of Hamas's parliamentary faction accused Abbas of orchestrating the chaos and of contributing to the "siege" on the Hamas government.

"We are astonished to see the president say that he wants the prime minister to act as his right-hand man and then he imposes a siege on us," said Salah al-Bardawil who was taking part in the session.

The parliament protest came as Abbas and Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya held the latest in a series of meetings in a bid to resolve the disputes between the two sides.

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Pak forces kill five in raid on rebel base

Pakistani forces backed by helicopter gunships destroyed a rebel base in the restive southwestern province of Baluchistan, killing five militants and capturing seven, officials said Wednesday.

The six-hour operation was carried out Tuesday in the Daaman and Toba areas near the country's main gas installation in the troubled Dera Bugti district, they said.

Tribesmen loyal to separatist chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti have been involved in an insurgency for the last two years over demands for more autonomy and larger royalties from gas extracted from their land.

Bugti's Jamhuri Watan Party said the tribesmen shot down two helicopters and 14 civilians including women and children were killed by military jets, but officials denied the claims.

An official statement issued overnight said the operation was launched following intelligence that insurgents belonging to the outlawed Baluchistan Liberation Army were planning to destroy Loti gas field in the region.

"In the action five miscreants were killed and seven of them were arrested," the statement said.

It said the militants were using the base to direct sabotage including rocket attacks, laying land mines and blowing up gas and water pipelines and electricity pylons in the area.

The paramilitary forces also seized a cache of arms and ammunition dumped in the neighbouring Pir Koh area.

Mineral-rich but sparsely populated Baluchistan is in the grip of a tribal insurgency, with near-daily attacks on security forces and government installations.

London cops under fire for 'fruitless' anti-terror raid

Many London police officers have been shocked by an anti-terror raid in which two brothers were arrested, including one who was shot, before being freed without charge, a police officer said late Tuesday.

London's Metropolitan Police and its chief Ian Blair have come under fire for mounting such a large-scale but ultimately fruitless raid on a home of a British Muslim family in east London on June 2.

Officers spent a week scouring

the brothers' house in Forest Gate, reportedly looking for some kind of chemical weapon, but found nothing to support their suspicions.

Metropolitan Chief Superintendent Ali Dizaei, a Muslim and a member of the Black Police Association, urged people to await the results of an inquiry before making judgments.

"If clearly police officers have overstepped the mark and did not treat them properly then they will have to be called to account," Dizaei told BBC television.

"I am gravely concerned in the way this has been conducted ... in terms of the community confidence, in terms of the proportionality of the operation and so forth," Dizaei said.

"But I don't know the nature of the intelligence, I don't think many people do."

"When the investigation is completed about this we will be in a better picture to realise that."

Asked about morale in the force, he said: "We are going through a very difficult time."

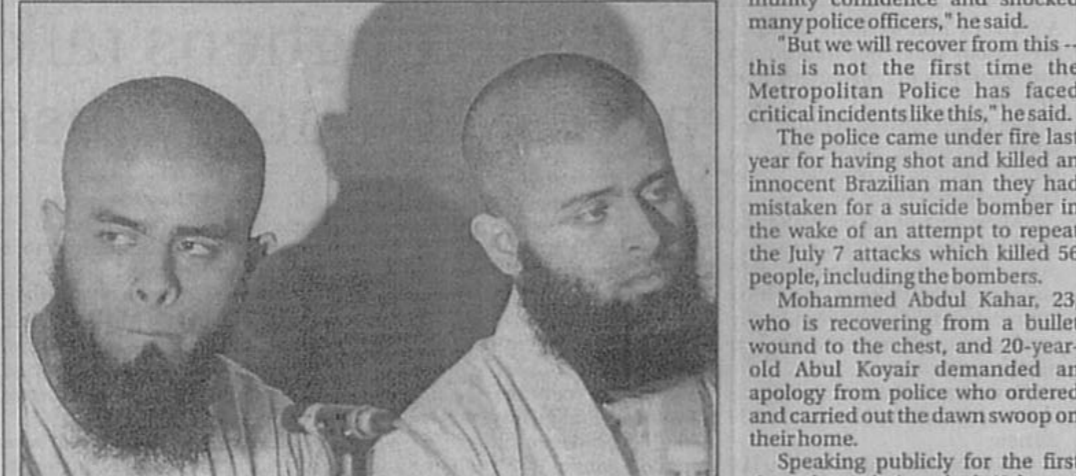
"We have had two critical incidents which have shocked community confidence and shocked many police officers," he said.

"But we will recover from this -- this is not the first time the Metropolitan Police has faced critical incidents like this," he said.

The police came under fire last year for having shot and killed an innocent Brazilian man they had mistaken for a suicide bomber in the wake of an attempt to repeat the July 7 attacks which killed 56 people, including the bombers.

Mohammed Abdul Kahar, 23, who is recovering from a bullet wound to the chest, and 20-year-old Abul Koyair demanded an apology from police who ordered and carried out the dawn swoop on their home.

Speaking publicly for the first time about their ordeal, Kahar, of Bangladeshi origin, told reporters Tuesday: "The only crime I have done in their eyes is being Asian and with a long eye of beard."



British Muslim brothers Abul Koyair (L) and Abdul Kahar. They were released without charge after being arrested in an anti-terrorist raid in East London on June 2.

European states partners in crime in US rendition: AI

Amnesty International on Wednesday accused seven European countries of complicity in US rendition of security suspects and demanded that the EU launch an immediate crackdown.

The London-based human rights organisation urged the European Union to commit to ending renditions -- the extrajudicial transfer of a suspect to US jurisdiction -- on the continent at the 25-member bloc's summit in Brussels which kicks off today.

Amnesty said Britain, Germany, Italy, Sweden and non-EU members Turkey, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were all implicated in six rendition cases detailed in its report, "Partners in Crime: Europe's Role in US Renditions."

Such countries were accused of adopting a "see no evil, hear no evil" approach to rendition flights set up by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

"Europe often presents itself as a beacon for human rights," said Claudio Cordone, Amnesty's senior director for research.

"The uncomfortable truth is that without Europe's help, some men would not now be nursing torture wounds in prison cells in various parts of the world."

"European states should end their 'see no evil, hear no evil' approach to rendition flights and instead take active steps to end the practice in their territories."

"European states must not hide their complicity in US renditions behind the cloak of their intelligence agencies. Some states have even handed people over to the CIA and thus bear responsibility for the subsequent torture and other abuses suffered by those people."

A report last week by the continent's human rights watchdog, the Council of Europe, said 14 European countries colluded in or tolerated the secret transfer of terrorist suspects by the United States.

Amnesty said that under international law, states that facilitate transfers to countries where they know or should know that there is a risk of serious human rights abuses are complicit in these abuses and individuals complicit in abduc-

tions, torture or "disappearances" should be held criminally responsible.

The organisation said the US rendition programme highlighted that US secret services can operate covertly in Europe outside the rule of law and without accountability.

"The EU should ensure the development of a regulatory framework governing the activities of national and foreign intelligence agencies," Amnesty said.

In the six cases they detailed, men were allegedly bundled onto planes and transferred to detention sites where they were all tortured or otherwise ill-treated.

The charges levelled at the states implicated included allowing airports and airspace on their territory to be used, participating in the arrest or abduction of people and handing them over to US authorities.

Such actions contravened their obligations under international law, Amnesty said.

It cited the case of Bisher Al-Rawi, 38, and Jamil El-Banna, 44, who were arrested after flying from Britain to Gambia in November 2002, according to the report.

Amnesty said they were handed over to American security officers and transferred to the Guantanamo Bay US naval base in Cuba via a US airbase in Bagram, Afghanistan.

The report claimed that their travel arrangements were passed on to the United States and as a result Britain was "instrumental" in their detention.

Both men continue to be held at Guantanamo, Amnesty said.

"Persistent denials from European states of their involvement in renditions and the lack of any meaningful response from the EU apart from the parliament, pose a serious problem -- not only for the credibility of the EU, but ultimately for the effectiveness of the counter-terrorist effort itself," said Dick Oosting, director of Amnesty's EU office.

Amnesty also urged the Council of Europe to continue its work towards uncovering the practice of rendition by setting up a commission of inquiry and working to ensure that any shortcomings in legislation are addressed regionally and by states individually.

Smokers with wrinkled faces more at risk of lung disease

Middle-aged smokers who have heavily wrinkled faces are five times likelier to suffer from chronic lung disease than smooth-faced counterparts, according to a study published on Tuesday.

Smoking is notorious for causing premature ageing of the skin, as well as causing emphysema and bronchitis, which block the airways and restrict the flow of oxygen around the body.

British researchers wanted to find out whether the extent of facial lines could be a telltale of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), as this group of ailments is called.

They studied 149 current and former middle-aged smokers, 68 of whom had COPD.

All were asked to breathe into a machine to measure their lung capacity, and their faces were assessed for wrinkles.

Eighty percent of the group had no or few lines, whereas the remaining 20 percent had extensive wrinkles.

After ironing factors such as age and the number of years as a smoker, the researchers found that the "wrinkly" group were five times likelier to have COPD than non-wrinkly counterparts.

Facial wrinkling was also associated with triple the risk of severe emphysema.

The study, lead-authored by respiratory specialist Bipen Patel of the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust in Exeter, southwest England, is published online by Thorax, a journal of the British Medical Association (BMA).

The findings could provide a fast-track tip for doctors who are diagnosing patients, the researchers say.

"Extensive facial wrinkling may be a marker of susceptibility to the effects of cigarette smoke and should promote the screening of affected individuals for airflow obstruction," they say.

US suspends all military trials at Guantanamo

Hearings for some detainees were previously suspended pending a ruling from the top US court, but other sessions had continued. A decision is expected this month.

The Supreme Court heard oral arguments in March in a pivotal case brought by Guantanamo detainee Salim Ahmed Hamdan that could determine the fate of the tribunals.

President George W. Bush's administration has come under pressure from human rights groups and even allies to close down Guantanamo.

Human rights groups said the suicides showed the inmates were in a state of despair because of the indefinite nature of their detention.

Before the three successful suicides Saturday, the US military had reported 41 suicide attempts by 25 detainees.

The attorneys for the three dead detainees -- two Saudis and a Yemeni -- chided the military Tuesday for failing to notify them

about their clients' demise for three days.

The Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), which said it represented all three detainees found dead in their cells Saturday morning, called for an "emergency, independent inspection" of the Guantanamo facility to confirm the cause of their death.

The three were the first inmates to die at the detention center since its inception.

Earlier, the Pentagon rebuffed calls by human rights groups for an outside investigation into the suicides.

"I wouldn't expect that," said Bryan Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman. "The United States is very capable of reviewing its own procedures to determine whether or not any changes need to be made."

He said the incident "will be looked into appropriately."



A Poltmore Tiara worn by Britain's late Princess Margaret on her wedding day. The tiara, one of 800 pieces of jewelry belonging to the Princess auctioned in London on Tuesday, was sold for 926,400 pounds (1.697 million dollars).