



Saddam terms trial 'mockery of justice'

AFP, Amman

Saddam Hussein lashed out yesterday at his trial in Baghdad, charging it was a making a mockery of international and Iraqi law for the sake of "malicious" US aims, his defence team said.

In a letter sent to the presiding judge of the Iraqi High Tribunal, a copy of which his lawyers said they had received from Saddam, the former dictator explained why he was boycotting the trial.

"The tribunal is lacking in all procedures established by international and Iraqi law," it said.

"For this reason, it seems there is a wish to condemn us for malicious American intentions, supported by collaborators in Iraq who believe they can alienate us from issues affecting our country if we are found guilty of crimes against humanity."

Saddam signed the letter "president and commander-in-chief of the sacred armed forces".

"You and everyone else knows that we did not become Iraq's leaders through political or financial channels, and did not assume our responsibilities because of planes and tanks, but through the will of our great people and in line with conscience, historic wish and the decision of our people, as demonstrated in several referendums," the letter added.

Coalition forces kill 40 Afghan 'extremists'

AFP, Kabul

US-led coalition troops and Afghan security forces destroyed an "extremist safe haven" and killed more than 40 militants yesterday in southern Afghanistan, the coalition said.

An Afghan soldier was also killed and three coalition troops wounded in the operation in troubled Uruzgan province, it said in a statement.

"Afghan national security forces and coalition troops conducted a raid on a known extremist compound July 10, killing more than 40 extremists in the Tarin Kowt district of Uruzgan province," it said.

A purported Taliban spokesman confirmed the fighting but said only

five Taliban were killed.

Around 50 civilians were also killed in coalition bombing, Yousuf Ahmadi said. The coalition said it had no reports of Afghan civilians being hurt. The Taliban often issue exaggerated casualty figures to the media.

The security forces had opened fire on the rebels hiding in a compound in a village near the Uruzgan capital Tarin Kowt after they had come under attack with small arms fire and rocket propelled grenades, the statement said.

"The enemy frequently used the compound as a sanctuary to conduct operations against local Afghans, government officials and coalition forces," it said.

Uruzgan, where about 1,400 Dutch troops are setting up, is one of the four provinces in southern Afghanistan covered by the biggest coalition and Afghan operation against the Taliban since their hard-line regime was toppled in 2001.

Operation Mountain Thrust was launched in mid-May weeks after a surge in attacks by the Taliban, whom military officials admit are better organised and more determined than ever despite international attempts to end their insurgency.

Since then about 800 people, mostly rebels, have been killed in the violence, which is mainly in areas along the Pakistani border.

There was intense fighting as part of the operation in southern Kandahar province at the weekend when about 15 Taliban were killed, the coalition has said.

A Canadian soldier also died in combat, becoming the 17th soldier from that country to lose his life in action in Afghanistan.

"Afghan and coalition forces continue to make steady progress in eliminating extremists throughout southern Afghanistan, killing or capturing large numbers of enemy fighters and advancing progress, peace and economic development to the people of Afghanistan," the coalition statement said.



Flames rise at the crash site of a Pakistan International Airlines plane in Multan yesterday. The plane crashed into a field killing all 45 passengers and crew on board.

24 killed in Iraqi attacks

AFP, Baghdad

At least 24 people were killed in attacks across Iraq yesterday as sectarian bloodshed raged on in Baghdad, raising new fears that the country was sliding towards civil war.

Ten people were killed and 51 wounded in a car bombing and mortar attack in the capital's Shia-dominated slum district of Sadr City, police said, a day after 61 people were killed in apparent tit-for-tat attacks.

In the face of the continued violence, Iraq's Shia Prime Minister Muri al-Maliki vowed to "defeat terrorists and all those who insist on oppressing the political process."

The attack in Sadr City, a bastion

of fighters loyal to firebrand Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, came after 42 Sunni Arabs were gunned down Sunday in a deadly rampage in a Sunni district of Baghdad blamed on Shia militiamen.

In an apparent revenge attack soon afterwards, 19 people were killed and 59 wounded when twin car bombs went off outside a Shia mosque in a largely Sunni district of the capital.

Baghdad has been swept by a wave of sectarian violence, much of it targeting mosques, since Sunni militants blew up a revered Shia shrine in Samarra north of the capital in February.

Another 14 people were killed across the country on Monday, including three who were blown up

by a roadside bomb in front of a restaurant near the central bank in Baghdad.

Iraqi and US troops also sealed off the capital's Sunni neighbourhood of Dura and state media announced a daytime curfew there from 2:00 pm (1000 GMT) until 8:00 am (0400 GMT).

The whole capital is already under a dusk-to-dawn curfew.

Dura residents reported hearing gunfire and said large numbers of armed men were out on the streets, a scene of repeated fighting and attacks on security forces.

Sunday's violence was the deadliest since a July 1 truck bombing in Sadr City, which killed 66 people, overwhelmingly Shias,

triggering a new wave of tit-for-tat attacks.

"We have no choice but to defeat those who want to plunge us in the darkness. We can only achieve this through national unity," Maliki said in an address to the Kurdish parliament in Arbil.

"We still face a lot of challenges and Iraqi blood is being spilt on our streets every day, but no and a thousand nos, they will not defeat us."

Iraq's former Sunni Arab elite accuses militiamen loyal to Shia parties that lead the national unity government of attacking Sunni civilians in retaliation for insurgent attacks on Shias.

Lanka mulls constitution change for ending war

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka said yesterday it was aiming to push through constitutional reform to bring an end to two decades of civil war, but analysts said it would probably not be enough to bring Tamil Tiger rebels to talks.

More than 700 people have died so far this year, some 280 in June alone, raising fears a 2002 ceasefire could collapse, restarting two decades of civil war with Tamil Tiger rebels who want a separate ethnic Tamil homeland in the north and east.

Both sides say they want peace but diplomats say that, so far, neither has been willing to make the necessary compromises. On Tuesday, the government will hold the first of a string of meetings aimed at discussing constitutional reform. "It is the launch of a process," government peace secretary head Palitha Kohona told Reuters. "Constitutional reform is an essential part of our approach to resolving the conflict. We don't have a time limit but we need it sooner rather than later."

Sri Lanka's current non-federal constitution gives little power to the northern and eastern provinces where minority Tamils and Muslims live. Some believe the government may be moving toward a more federal constitution such as neighbouring India's.

The meeting will bring together southern majority Sinhalese, Muslim and anti-Tiger Tamil parties as well as a 15-person committee of experts, including four Tamils, Kohona said. Some analysts say the committee is too hard-line to be credible. President Mahinda Rajapakse's manifesto last year pledged his support for a unitary state and his hard-line Buddhist and Marxist allies oppose any concessions.

Neither the Tigers nor their political proxies will be involved in the meeting, although the government says they were invited.

When they first emerged in the 1970s, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) wanted a separate state. Now they say they might settle for regional autonomy but suggest that they want full independence at least discussed and

not ruled out.

"Having these options on the table will increase the confidence of the Tamils in the fairness of the current peace process," wrote lawyer Viswanathan Rudrakumar in a report published on a pro-rebel Web site. "The best way to avoid partition is not to resist it."

In Tiger territory itself, most people say they believe the rebels are fighting for a separate state. Some diplomats worry the rebels believe open battle offers better chances than peace.

Violence has fallen since the beginning of July. Some hope that means the two sides have decided that neither can afford war, but others fear the Tigers are preparing a new, larger attack. They fear the Tigers will reject the new meeting.

"We still hope the LTTE will come," said Kohona. "But their usual practice is to wait for a proposal and then reject it for some spurious reason."

Some officials say that is not important -- it is enough if ordinary Tamils know the government is on their side and so become willing to switch their support from the LTTE.

Indian rocket disintegrates after blast-off

AFP, Bangalore

A rocket carrying India's heaviest satellite disintegrated in a ball of smoke and flame seconds after lift-off yesterday, dealing a crippling blow to the country's ambitious space programme.

The 49-metre (161-foot) rocket was launched at 1205 GMT from an island off the coast of the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh, but veered off course and disintegrated about 30 seconds later, live television pictures showed.

"A mishap happened in the first stage of the separation and it will be some time before we know what went wrong," Madhavan Nair, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) mission chief, told reporters at the launch site.

"We have to analyse the sequence of events to see what happened."

Chechen warlord Basayev killed

AFP, Moscow

Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev, the most wanted man in Russia who claimed responsibility for the Beslan school hostage massacre and was blamed for many other attacks, has been killed, Russian news agencies said Monday, quoting the FSB security service.

Basayev was killed in an overnight operation by Russian special forces in the southern Russian province of Ingushetia in the volatile North Caucasus bordering Chechnya, where Russia is engaged in its second war against Chechen rebels in the past 11 years, Interfax and RIA Novosti said.

FSB chief Nikolai Patrushev reportedly announced the news but an FSB spokesman contacted by AFP said he was in a meeting with President Vladimir Putin and declined to confirm the information.

The news agency quoted



Patrushev as saying that Basayev was among a group of militants killed as they prepared to carry out an unspecified "terrorist act" in Ingushetia designed to compromise the Kremlin in the run-up to the Group of Eight summit later this week in Saint Petersburg.

The agency reports said Putin had congratulated "all members of the special services who planned and executed this operation."

Former Serb president goes on trial for war crimes

REUTERS, The Hague

Former Serbian president Milan Milutinovic, a close ally of late Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, went on trial in The Hague yesterday with five others also accused of war crimes in Kosovo in 1999.

Milutinovic, 63, and his co-accused are charged with the persecution of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, the forcible deportation of about 800,000 civilians and the murder of hundreds of civilians by Serb forces.

"The evidence in this case will show that these six accused... were co-participants with Slobodan Milosevic and other Serbian political, military and police officials in a joint criminal enterprise," prosecutor Thomas Hannis said in court.



A Palestinian girl sits with women as they stage protest holding portraits of their sons being held in Israeli jails during a rally inside the Red Cross office in Gaza City yesterday.

Fighting flares in Somali capital: 60 dead

REUTERS, Mogadishu

New fighting erupted yesterday between Somali fighters loyal to defeated warlords and the country's Islamists militias, and the death toll tripled to at least 60 since Sunday, a hospital official said.

"I am sure that more than 60 have died so far," Abdikadir Sheikh, a medical official at Mogadishu's Madina Hospital, told Reuters by phone as artillery and gunfire crackled behind him.

Residents of Mogadishu's Kilometre Five area said the death toll had risen by at least 40 and nearly 100 had been wounded since Sunday's heavy street battles broke out at dawn in the neighboring Kilometre Four area.

Missile test fails, says India

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's test-firing of its longest-range nuclear-capable missile, the Agni III, was unsuccessful after the projectile crashed into the sea despite a smooth take-off, a defence ministry official said yesterday.

The launch of the ballistic Agni, which means "fire" in Sanskrit, took place on Sunday morning from the well-guarded Wheeler island off India's eastern coast.

Soon after the launch of the missile, which has a range of more than 3,000 km (1,870 miles), another defence official had said that it had been a successful test-firing.

But on Monday, the defence ministry official in New Delhi confirmed Indian media reports which said the two-stage missile plunged

into Bay of Bengal after going up for 12 km (8 miles) and then losing height.

The missile was in the air for about five minutes, at least 10 minutes less than expected.

"The take-off was successful but there were some problems later," Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee was quoted in The Times of India as saying.

"It will take some time to analyse the data about the flight performance," said Mukherjee, who witnessed the launch.

India, which has estimated 100-to-150 nuclear warheads and staged tests in 1974 and 1998, is developing a range of missiles including the Agni series as part of a defence strategy against neighbours China and Pakistan, also armed with atomic weapons.