

US accuses Syria, Iran of plotting to topple Lebanon govt

REUTERS, Washington

The United States on Wednesday accused Syria, Iran and Hezbollah militants of plotting to topple the Lebanese government and warned them to keep their "hands off."

The United States has held up Lebanon as an example of emerging democracy in the Middle East.

"We are therefore increasingly concerned by mounting evidence that the Syrian and Iranian governments, Hezbollah, and their Lebanese allies are preparing plans to topple Lebanon's democratically elected government," White House

spokesman Tony Snow said in a statement.

He later told reporters, "We're making it clear to everybody in the region that we think that there ought to be hands off the (Prime Minister Fouad) Siniora government; let them go about and do their business."

Syria's embassy in Washington denounced the comments as "ludicrous" and "unfounded."

"What is happening in Lebanon is a purely domestic political issue," the Syrian Embassy said in a statement. "Syria fully respects the sovereignty of Lebanon and does not interfere in its internal politics."

The statement also urged Washington to stop meddling in Lebanese politics and "to stop instigating the Lebanese people against each other and against other countries."

US officials declined to give evidence for the accusations, saying the information was classified.

Hezbollah and its allies have been demanding a new government since a 34-day war between Israel and the Shia guerrillas ended in August. Hezbollah, backed by Syria and Iran, has been a fierce critic of Western-backed Siniora, whom it sees as keen to disarm its guerrillas.

Kerry says sorry for 'botched Iraq joke'

REUTERS, Washington

Democratic Sen John Kerry apologised directly to US troops on Wednesday for comments about Iraq that prompted a firestorm of Republican criticism in the final days of a bitter congressional election campaign.

"I sincerely regret that my words were misinterpreted to wrongly imply anything negative about those in uniform and I personally apologise to any service member, family member or American who was offended," Kerry said in a statement.

The Massachusetts Democrat was forced to cancel campaign appearances for Democratic candidates in three states after becoming engulfed in criticism over his Monday comments to students in California.



PHOTO: REUTERS
Governor of the Australian state of New South Wales Marie Bashir (L) presents the Sydney Peace Prize for 2006 to Irene Khan, the secretary general of Amnesty International, at Sydney University yesterday. The prize is awarded by the Sydney Peace Foundation.

Al's Irene Khan wins Sydney Peace Prize

AAP, Sydney

The first woman to lead the world's largest human rights organisation, Amnesty International, is this year's recipient of the Sydney Peace Prize.

London-based Irene Khan was awarded the prize for her courageous advocacy of human rights and her skills in highlighting violence against women as a massive injustice on Wednesday.

She has been the secretary-general of Amnesty International since August 2001 and is also the first Asian and Muslim to hold the post.

"The peace prize jury recognised the significance of Ms Khan's efforts to eliminate violence towards women, whether that violence was caused by poverty, by men's abu-

sive power, by cultural norms or religious traditions," Sydney Peace Prize foundation director Professor Stuart Rees said.

"We are also impressed by her diversity - someone who was brought up as a Muslim in Bangladesh, who has married into another culture, who was educated in three different countries and who has served the United Nations for Refugees for over 20 years."

Khan received her award and delivered the Sydney Peace Prize lecture in Sydney on Wednesday night.

Previous winners of the prize include this year's Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Arundhati Roy and Sir William Deane.

Saddam faces judgment day on Sunday

AFP, Baghdad

For 24 years he brooked no dissent, brutally crushing anyone who challenged his despotic rule. Now fallen Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein faces the ultimate penalty in a court run by his own people.

Rights groups have documented his ruthlessness and cruelty, and on Sunday the Iraqi High Tribunal is expected to pass verdict on whether he committed crimes against humanity in ordering the massacre of 148 Shia civilians.

If convicted, he faces the gallows.

Under Saddam's leadership from 1979 to 2003, the Baath regime ordered army deserters' ears cut off, sentenced foreign currency traffickers to death and was alleged to have beheaded dozens of women for prostitution.



PHOTO: AFP
Nobel Peace Prize winners, exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama (L), Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu of South Africa (C) and Betty Elizabeth Williams of Northern Ireland, read the Hiroshima peace declaration after a two-day international peace conference in Hiroshima yesterday.

China wants N Korea talks as soon as possible

AFP, Beijing

China called yesterday for the next round of six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear weapons programme to take place as soon as possible, after this week brokering an end to the diplomatic deadlock.

"It is our belief that it is better to hold this as early as possible," Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao told reporters.

"Since we have a consensus among the three parties - China, North Korea and the United States - it was agreed that the six-party talks would be held at a time convenient for all six parties."

Trapped coal miners in China dig their way to safety

AFP, Beijing

Sixteen miners trapped for 14 hours in a northwestern China coal mine have dug themselves out, state press reported Thursday.

The miners were trapped in the Deshun coal mine near Lanzhou city, Gansu province, mid-morning Wednesday when 1.4 million cubic meters (49 million cubic feet) of mud slid down a mountain and blocked the mine entrance, Xinhua news agency said.

"We were frightened at the beginning, but we soon calmed down because we knew we were not far from the ground surface," the report quoted a miner named Wang as saying.

4 more killed as Israel presses Gaza incursion

AFP, Gaza City

Israel kept up an incursion in Gaza yesterday, which has killed 12 Palestinians and a soldier in little over a day in one of its largest operations since militants seized a soldier in June.

Four Palestinians, including a 70-year-old man and two militants, were killed by Israeli fire in the northern town of Beit Hanun, which has been reoccupied by Israeli forces since they launched Operation Autumn Clouds early Wednesday, medics said.

On Thursday, two Israeli helicopters hovered above the town. Smoke rose from several buildings amid sporadic rounds of machine gun fire and explosions.

In an Arabic-language radio broadcast, the army urged residents to stay indoors.

"The IDF (Israel Defence Force) has entered Beit Hanun and asks all the inhabitants to stay at home until further notice," it said.

Many residents were heeding the warnings.

"We haven't moved from here for two days," said Abu Luay Zaanin from his home on the outskirts of town. "They are shooting at anything that moves."

"It is one of the most difficult incursions that we've seen. During the previous ones, they didn't occupy the whole city. Today, they are everywhere," he said.

In all, 12 Palestinians, including seven militants, and an Israeli

soldier have been killed in the operation. More than 60 people, including three women and 10 children, have been wounded.

Overnight the army carried out an air raid and detained three militants in Beit Hanun, which Israeli commanders said had become a launchpad for militants firing rockets into the Jewish state.

General Yoav Galand told army radio that "our aim is to apply permanent pressure on the terrorists to make the firing of rockets more difficult."

But the incursion by infantry units, backed up by tanks and air support, has failed to stop the fire, with two more rockets hitting Israeli territory Thursday following eight the previous day.

Vietnam charges 3 US citizens with 'terrorism'

REUTERS, Hanoi

Seven people, including three Vietnamese-born US citizens, will be prosecuted on charges of plotting violence against Vietnam's communist government, officials said yesterday.

The prosecutor included charges against a US citizen whose 13-month-long detention has drawn attention in the United States before President George W. Bush's visit to Vietnam November 17-20.

US Senator Bill Martinez of Florida has linked the detention of Orlando, Florida resident Nguyen Thuong Cuc (alias Foshee Thuong Nguyen) to passage of a bill granting Vietnam permanent normal trade relations status. Martinez has said she should be charged or released.

US military sees Iraq edging toward chaos

REUTERS, Washington

US military commanders assessed two weeks ago that Iraq was edging toward chaos, according to a classified military chart published in the New York Times on Wednesday.

The chart titled "Index of Civil Conflict" shows a colour-coded bar with "peace" marked on the left and "chaos" on the right. An arrow puts the current situation inside the red area on the far right, much closer to chaos than peace.

US commanders have acknowledged violence in Iraq is at its highest level since US-led forces invaded in 2003 and toppled

Saddam Hussein, but they have repeatedly said a full-scale civil war can be averted.

The chart, however, indicates a steady shift toward chaos since the bombing of a Shia shrine in the town of Samarra in February. The graphic was prepared by US Central Command, which oversees operations in Iraq, and shown at a briefing on October 18, the New York Times said.

The chart also shows a slight shift toward chaos over the previous week. But White House spokesman Tony Snow said the graphic was only a snapshot taken at the height of violence during the Muslim holy

month of Ramadan.

"If you got the same report last week, you would have found out the national sectarian incidents from the 21st to the 27th dropped 23 percent, casualties nationwide dropped 23 percent, incidents of sectarian violence in Baghdad dropped 23 percent, sectarian killings in Baghdad dropped 41 percent," he said.

Central Command said it would not comment on classified material but a spokesman said its top commander, Gen. John Abizaid, and other leaders had been discussing "the reality of the situation in Iraq" for months.

'Iraq discontent drives US polls agenda'

AFP, Washington

A new poll has confirmed that widespread dissatisfaction over Iraq could spell the end of the Republican dominance of Congress, with voters saying they expect the Democrats to cut US involvement in Iraq.

The final New York Times/CBS News poll before next Tuesday's midterm elections showed a significant majority of Americans expect Democrats to reduce or end US military involvement in Iraq if they win control of Congress.

By contrast, they believe President George W. Bush's Republicans would maintain or increase troop levels to try to win

the war if they maintain power, the Times said in its online edition.

Only 29 percent of US voters in the October 27-31 survey approved of the way Bush is managing the war, matching the nadir of his ratings in a May-June poll.

Nearly 70 percent said the president did not have a plan to end the war, and 80 percent said his latest effort to rally public support amounted only to a change in rhetoric, not policy.

But, in the wake of an embarrassing gaffe by former Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Kerry, party leaders cautioned against over-optimism ahead of the November 7 midterm elections.

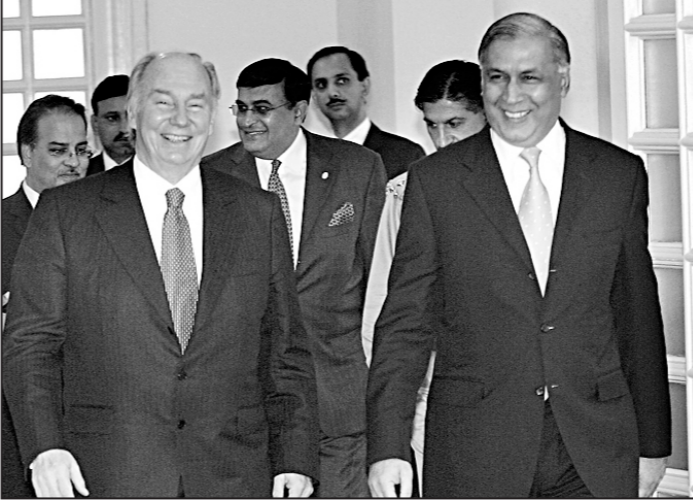


PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (R) escorts visiting Prince Karim Aga Khan (L) as they arrive for a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Khan, a billionaire and spiritual leader of the world's 15 million Shia Ismaili Muslims, arrived in Islamabad on Wednesday to hold talks with Pakistani leaders.