



Iraqis inspect the debris of the destroyed headquarters of an Iraqi police unit, demolished by British forces yesterday in the southern port city of Basra.

## US forces net 2 Iranian officials in Iraq

British troops demolish Iraqi police station

AFP, Baghdad/Basra

The Iraqi government protested yesterday after US forces arrested a number of Iranian officials in Baghdad, allegedly because they were planning to incite attacks in the already war-torn country.

"Two people who were invited by the president to Iraq have now been apprehended by the Americans, and the president is unhappy with the arrests," Hiwa Osman, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's media adviser, told AFP.

"The invitation was within the framework of an agreement between Iran and Iraq to improve the security situation," he added.

Separately, a leading Shia lawmaker and imam, Sheikh Jalal

Eddin al-Saghir of the Baratha Mosque, told AFP that two Iranian diplomats had also been seized by US forces in Baghdad on Thursday last week, but later released.

"Two diplomats from the Iranian embassy came to see me at the mosque to offer condolences on the death of my mother," he said.

"After they left the mosque and were travelling back to the embassy they were arrested by the Americans, with two of their guards. I don't know why. I later heard that they'd been released," he said.

Confirmation of the arrests came after the New York Times, citing senior US officials, reported that several Iranians were arrested by US forces in Iraq last week on suspicion of planning attacks on

Iraqi troops.

"We continue to work with the government of Iraq on the status of the detainees," Gordon Johndroe, a spokesman for the US National Security Council, told the New York Times, according to its report.

Meanwhile, British forces shot dead seven Iraqi gunmen and demolished the headquarters of an Iraqi police unit yesterday in order to protect 127 prisoners they feared would be murdered by rogue officers.

Major Charlie Burbridge, a British military spokesman, said many of the prisoners held by Basra's notorious Serious Crimes Unit had been tortured and that intelligence reports suggested that they were to be killed.

## Indian opposition warns govt on Kashmir

AP, New Delhi

An opposition leader accused India's government Sunday of trying to settle the half-century old dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir by backing away from New Delhi's long held position that the Himalayan region is an integral part of its territory.

The statement came amid weekend violence in the divided region.

Four suspected guerrillas were killed and three policemen wounded overnight in separate shootouts in the Indian-controlled area of Kashmir, authorities said Sunday. At the same time, two children were killed near the cease-fire line when they picked up an abandoned explosive, police said.

"I would like to warn the country that the government is planning to make a major surrender on Kashmir, LK Advani, a Hindu nationalist leader, told a meeting of his Bharatiya Janata Party in the northern city of Lucknow.

Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf earlier this month said Islamabad was willing to give up its claim to the entire region if India agreed to jointly administer Kashmir, which would be granted significant autonomy.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh four days ago welcomed Pakistan's peace proposals, causing speculation that the two governments may be working on a deal.

There was no immediate reaction to Advani's warning from Singh's government.

India, which is predominantly Hindu, and Pakistan, mainly Muslim, have fought two wars over control of Kashmir, where most of the population is Muslim, since they won independence from Britain in 1947.

Nearly a dozen rebel groups have been fighting since 1989 for Kashmir's independence from India or its merger with Pakistan. More than 68,000 people, mostly civilians, have been killed in the conflict.

## Israel eases West Bank restrictions

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz yesterday announced an easing of restrictions on Palestinians in the West Bank, including dismantling roadblocks and allowing more people to cross into Israel for work.

"We have prepared a plan that we intend to implement immediately, which deals with the crossings and the movements of Palestinians and increasing the number of Palestinians working in Israel," Peretz told a news conference.

Israel, he added, would dismantle 59 roadblocks in the West Bank in two phases - 24 at first, and the rest later.

"The smaller the humanitarian Palestinian distress is, the smaller the terror potential is," Peretz said, speaking after a meeting of the parliamentary

foreign affairs and defence commission.

"Improving the Palestinians' standard of living is part of Israel's security concept."

The announcement of the measures follow a promise by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert during a weekend meeting with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas of "immediate and concrete steps" to improve humanitarian conditions for the Palestinians.

Peretz told reporters that certain Palestinian prisoners held in Israel would be released to mark Christmas and the upcoming Muslim feast of Eid-ul-Azha, due to begin at the end of December, depending on the sighting of the moon.

This would be in line with Israel's policy each year of freeing prisoners to mark the two festivals, he added.

"This humanitarian gesture

should not delay the release of Gilad Shalit (an Israeli soldier captured by armed Palestinians on June 25) and I hope on the contrary it will speed up (the release)," he added.

"They are humane gestures and ... are designed to create a positive dynamic," Peretz said.

Israel has until now refused to free Palestinian prisoners before Shalit is released.

A senior Israeli official said Israel's prison service and the Shin Beth internal security service were drawing up a list of Palestinian prisoners, mostly women and minors, who could be released immediately.

The announced measures are seen as an attempt by Israel to bolster Abbas and his Fatah movement in the face of a bitter power struggle with the radical Hamas-led Palestinian government.

## Ethiopian plane bombs Mogadishu airport

AFP, Mogadishu

Ethiopian warplanes yesterday bombed Mogadishu's airport and a southern town a day after Addis Ababa acknowledged its military was fighting the Islamist forces in the lawless nation. As rival forces pounded each with heavy artillery on several frontlines, witnesses said the planes bombed the runways at airports in the capital Mogadishu and Baledogle, about 90km to the northwest.

"I have seen a jet dropping a bomb on the runway, everybody in the airport was scared when the explosion was heard," Mahad Alasaow, a Mogadishu airport employee, told AFP.

"I have seen an Ethiopian military plane firing a bomb at Baledogle airport," said Mohamed Ade Nur, a resident told AFP. Islamist officials confirmed the attacks, saying one person was wounded in Mogadishu.

Addis Ababa said it carried out the attacks to stop "unauthorised flights" some of which the Islamists were waiting for.

"Unauthorised flights have been forbidden by the TFG (Transition Federal Government), but some unauthorised flights were observed and that is why the bombardment took place," said Solomon Abebe, the foreign ministry spokesman.

Officials said Sunday Ethiopian troops were heading to Baledogle, from where Islamists received supplies.

The government in Baidoa, which is the only major town it controls, ordered the closure of Somali land, sea and air borders, but it remained unclear how that would be done.

As heavy artillery duels were reported near Baidoa, in the central south of the country, Islamists warned civilians to avoid potential targets of airstrikes.



Indonesian villagers use boat and wade through their flooded village in Pelawi, Sumatra yesterday. Two years after the devastating tsunami, Indonesia's Aceh province was grappling with more tragedy after flash floods killed more than 90 people and left thousands waiting to be rescued.

## Manmohan greets Vajpayee on his birthday

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In a gesture fraught with political implications, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday went to the residence of his predecessor and senior BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee to felicitate the latter on his birthday.

Singh met Vajpayee and presented him a bouquet and spent about 15 minutes at his house Monday morning.

The gesture by the prime minister came a day after Vajpayee at a public meeting in his parliamentary constituency in Lucknow, capital of the politically key state of Uttar Pradesh, attacked the Congress-led federal government as well as the state government headed by Mulayam Singh Yadav-led Samajwadi Party for their "failures" on national security, economic policies and law and order fronts. Vajpayee had recently also criticised the US Congress' legislation on India-America civilian nuclear deal.



Christians gather for a "Peace in Palestine" concert outside the Church of the Nativity, believed to be the birthplace of Jesus Christ, in the Biblical West Bank town of Bethlehem on Sunday night.

## Pope appeals for 'just, lasting ME peace'

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI yesterday made a fresh appeal for a "just and lasting peace" in the Middle East during his traditional Christmas "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) message.

"With deep apprehension I think, on this festive day, of the Middle East, marked by so many grave crises and conflicts, and I express my hope that the way will be opened to a just and lasting peace, with respect for the inalienable rights of the peoples living there," he said from the balcony of Saint Peter's Basilica.

"I place in the hands of the divine Child of Bethlehem the indications of a resumption of dialogue between the Israelis and Palestinians, which we have witnessed in recent days, and the hope of further encouraging developments," the 79-year-old pontiff added.

Hopes for new peace talks after years of violence and a diplomatic

standstill were raised with a summit Saturday between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas, during which Olmert promised "immediate and concrete steps" to ease the humanitarian conditions of Palestinians.

Benedict made an equally strong appeal for "an end to the brutal violence" in Iraq.

"I appeal to all those who hold in their hands the fate of Iraq, that there will be an end to the brutal violence that has brought so much bloodshed to the country, and that every one of its inhabitants will be safe to lead a normal life," he said. The pope also spoke of his hope that "a democratic Lebanon, open to others and in dialogue with different cultures and religions, will survive and progress."

He said he prayed for peace in Sri Lanka, and "that in (the western Sudanese region of) Darfur and throughout Africa there will be an end to fratricidal conflicts."

## Asia remembers tsunami victims

AP, Jakarta

Two years after a devastating tsunami crashed into coastlines, villagers in hardest-hit Indonesia were preparing for future disasters, with thousands expected to flee their homes by foot and car in an early warning drill.

Elsewhere across the tsunami disaster zone, survivors and other mourners will visit mass graves, light candles along beaches and listen to temple bells chiming to mark the moment the waves hit two years ago Tuesday.

"We hope this will be part of the healing process for those who lost loved ones," said Chamroen Tankasem, a government official in southern Thailand, a tropical paradise that was turned into a graveyard in a matter of minutes.

"It will also help us remember what happened, what we have

learned since ... and what more needs to be done for the people affected."

The magnitude-9.0 earthquake that ripped apart the ocean floor off Indonesia's Sumatra island on Dec. 26, 2004, spawned giant waves that fanned out across the Indian Ocean at jetliner speeds, killing an estimated 230,000 people in a dozen nations.

Walls of water two stories high swept entire villages to sea in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, submerged luxury resorts and fishing communities in Thailand and destroyed thousands of homes in India.

Indonesia, which is prone to seismic upheaval due to its location on an arc of fault lines, accounted for nearly two-thirds of those killed. It will mark Tuesday's anniversary by preparing for future deadly waves.

## UN sanctions not to affect Pak-Iran ties

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA, Islamabad

Pakistan has said the UN Security Council resolution slapping sanctions on Iran will not affect economic ties between the two countries.

The Dawn newspaper quoted Pakistan foreign ministry spokeswoman Tasneem Aslam as saying here, the resolution will have no impact on Iran-Pakistan economic relations because "we do not have any transactions with Iran in the nuclear sector."

"Our economic ties with Iran will continue," she categorically added.

The spokeswoman ruled out the possibility of the sanctions affecting the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline project.

On Pakistan's stand on the resolution adopted by the UNSC against Iran, Ms Aslam was non-committal and said, "We are still examining it."

However, she said, "We still want to see a negotiated settlement of the issue."

The spokeswoman declined to comment on Iran's reaction to the sanctions or the US calls for tougher sanctions.

Pakistan, which has faced a lot of sanctions has consistently maintained that such steps are counterproductive.

Apparently the nuclear issue was one of the key topics of discussion at Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri's meetings with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, his Iranian counterpart and Iranian chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani

during his recent visit to the country.

The Iranian leadership strongly defended Tehran's right to peaceful use of nuclear technology, making it clear that nothing could deter them from pursuing it.

Pakistan has been advocating a negotiated and diplomatic settlement of the issue within the IAEA framework, saying it is strongly opposed to any coercive measures or the use of force against Iran, as it would endanger regional security and stability.

Pakistan's position has been that all parties should adhere to their international obligations and their rights should also be respected and has also stressed the need for a negotiated settlement of the issue.

## Bihar low caste girl pays bloody price for hunger

REUTERS, New Delhi

A hungry 10-year-old girl from India's lowest Hindu caste had all the fingers of her right hand chopped off by an upper-caste landowner for taking a few spinach leaves from his field, the Hindustan Times reported on Monday.

The attack took place in a village in Bhagalpur district last week in impoverished eastern Bihar where caste prejudice against Dalits -- formerly called "untouchables" -- is widespread and sometimes results in violence against them.

Police in Bhagalpur said they would soon arrest the upper-caste landowner who used a sickle to wound the girl whose name was given as "Khushboo".

"We will get results. This is terrible," Superintendent of Police JS Gangwar was quoted as saying in the newspaper.

Khushboo's father said that he and his wife -- both labourers -- had nothing to eat in their house so they sent their daughter to collect herbs that grew along a railway line.

"She just strayed (to the landlord's field) and plucked a few leaves," Sukho Ram was quoted as saying.