

5,000 Kurdish women, children taken hostage, await massacre

NICOSIA (Cyprus), Mar 13: Saddam Hussein's crack army units have crushed rioters in southern Iraq and set up a human shield to intimidate rebels in the north, the opposition claims, reports AP.

Iraqi opposition leaders meeting in Beirut conceded Tuesday that the Republican Guard, backed by tanks and helicopter gunships, have blasted their way back into the Shiite Muslim holy cities of Karbala and Najaf south of Baghdad.

Iran's official media said loyalist forces had used napalm to try to crush the rebellion in the southern port city of Basra, the flashpoint for the unrest that has plagued Iraq since March 1.

Rebel sources claim control of many towns and cities in the north, but their reports indicate many areas are seeing between government and insurgent control. It was impossible to determine precisely who controlled what.

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan claimed the government threatened to kill 5,000 Kurdish hostages, mostly women and children, who had reportedly been rounded up and taken to Kirkuk, a key oil center 100 miles (160 kilometers) north of Baghdad. Kurdish officials said the PUK and their allies, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, had seized large areas of the northern provinces and were poised to attack Kirkuk.

PUK spokesman Barhem Saleh said in a telephone interview from London that concern for the hostages was slowing the rebel march on the city.

"Our strategy is critically dependent on the state of the civilian population," said Saleh. "We wouldn't want to get involved in street fighting if we can avoid it because we don't want to cause large numbers of civilian casualties. We need the support of the people."

He said Interior Minister Ali Hassan al-Majid had given the order to use the hostages

as human shields in Kirkuk, a replay of a tactic Saddam had used in his confrontation with the allies.

After his invasion of Kuwait in August, Saddam ordered citizens of countries arrayed against him held as human shields at strategic sites to avert attack. But under international pressure, he allowed the foreigners to leave four months later.

Shiite and Kurdish sources

reported widespread defections by Saddam's troops in the north and south.

Saleh said up to 60,000 Iraqi troops have defected or laid down their arms in the last 10 days or so, in addition to 29 battalions of Kurdish militia which had been pro-government. There are several hundred men in an Iraqi battalion.

He said Saddam clearly appeared to be concentrating his

forces in the south in an effort to crush the revolt by Shiite Muslims.

The Republican Guard's success in the south and differences in the opposition ranks are major blows to the drive to unseat Saddam after his crushing defeat by the US-led coalition forces that liberated Kuwait.

The main purpose of the meeting in Beirut, attended by 325 leaders from 23 factions, was to tighten cooperation among the opposition factions and discuss the shape of government in a post-Saddam Iraq.

The Kurds demanded a democratic federal state that would guarantee them total autonomy in their mountain province. The leftists said they would back such a government, provided it is secular.

This is in sharp contrast with the Islamic state Shiite groups are seeking.

Conference sources said the differences have so far prevented any real progress toward agreement on the formation of a decision-making body.

Iraq's Kurds make up about 20 per cent of the country's 17 million population. The Shites, who live mainly in the south, form a 55 per cent majority.

Saddam's ruling elite is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, a sect which totals about 40 per cent of Iraq's people, including most Kurds.

Reuters says Iraqi exiles say President Saddam Hussein's forces are cracking down mercilessly on a two-week-old rebellion, leaving bodies piling up in holy cities where civilians fled for safety.

A Bush administration official said forces loyal to Saddam were using "very brutal and very bloody" tactic to quell the unrest that erupted after his army's rout in the Gulf war.

"At one point there were uprisings in like a dozen or more cities, and that has largely been repressed. The

indications we get are that it was very brutal and very bloody—a lot of civilian casualties," the official said.

The official, who requested anonymity, said there was no evidence to suggest that Saddam's loyalists were using chemical weapons against rebels either in Kurdish strongholds in the north or in the southern Shiite heartland.

Jalal Talabani, one of Saddam's leading Kurdish opponents, said in Beirut that Saddam's troops had taken 5,000 women and children hostage and said they would kill them if attacked.

As with previous atrocity claims by Saddam's opponents, there was no independent confirmation from a country now facing cholera, typhoid and other diseases associated with urban collapse and water shortages after weeks of bombing.

Iraqis living in London appealed to Bush in an open letter to intervene to end what it said was an attempt by Saddam to annihilate his 14 million people.

The London-based Iraqi Solidarity committee, a group set up after Iraq's Gulf war defeat two weeks ago, said in a statement it was making the appeal on behalf of Iraqis everywhere.

It quoted witnesses as saying that as Iraqi troops tried to put down popular uprisings, "piles of remains beyond recognition are accumulating in the holy Shiite Muslim cities of Najaf and Karbala," and hundreds of women, children and elderly people were dying daily.

The open letter to Bush was sent from the London office of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Iraqi Shiite group coordinating the revolt in the south of the country.

The senior US official said the Kurds appeared to be faring well but Saddam had gone to great lengths to quell unrest from Shites and most of his administration are Sunni Muslims.

7 to die for kidnapping in Karachi

KARACHI Mar 13: A Pakistani court on Tuesday ordered the first public execution of kidnappers, sentencing seven men to hang for abducting an 11 year old boy, reports Reuters.

The Karachi anti-terrorism court is the first to invoke a tough new law introduced in December in an effort to stamp out a wave of abduction in southern Pakistan a 25-year life sentence was previously the maximum.

The seven have 30 days to appeal a government spokesman said.

Police said the men snatched Tariq Thehlo, son of a customs official in Karachi on January 1. They demanded more than two million dollars in ransom but the boy was recovered five days later without any money being paid.

The government set up six anti-terrorism courts last year to tackle and upsurge of kidnappings, killings and robberies in southern Sindh province.

Last Wednesday, the same court ordered the public hanging of four people accused of killing two policemen and robbing a petrol station.

PPP rally protests victimisation

ISLAMABAD, Mar 13: Supporters of former Premier Benazir Bhutto's party staged demonstrations Tuesday ahead of Senate elections to protest alleged victimisation by the Pakistani government, reports AFP.

About 3,000 members of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) rallied in Lahore, the provincial capital, while small demonstrations were also held in Rawalpindi, Faisalabad and Sialkot.

The PPP intends to hold demonstrations daily in Punjab

Window for peace opens in ME: Baker

JERUSALEM Mar 13: Secretary of State James Baker on Tuesday said a "window for peace" had opened in the Middle East, reports AFP.

"We have a window for peace, after solutions in the Gulf crisis," Mr Baker said following talks here with President Chaim Herzog.

"I'm very encouraged by the meetings I had here with Israeli leaders and in Riyadh," he added in reference to talks in Saudi Arabia on Sunday with eight Arab foreign ministers, including those of Egypt and Syria.

Mr Baker said he hoped to return to Israel soon.

Earlier he met separately with Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and with a 10-member Palestinian delegation to discuss the prospects of peace in the region.

Deputy Prime Minister Lal said openly what many members of the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) have been saying in private — that the last thing they want to do at the moment is face India's 500 million voters, the world's biggest electorate.

"Let there be a division (vote) on the dissolution of the Lok Sabha also," said the 76-year-old peasant leader, to laughter and applause.

His comments, in the earthy Hindi of north India, came after the house had taken its umpteenth vote in the past two days to clear urgent business.

US, Albania restore ties after 50 years

WASHINGTON, Mar 13: The United States and Albania will re-establish diplomatic relations Friday, restoring ties that were broken at the outset of World War II more than 50 years ago, the White House said Tuesday, reports AFP.

"We view the establishment of diplomatic relations with Albania as an opportunity to support democratic reform in that country and to encourage Albania to play a constructive role in Europe," said White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater.

The document re-establishing relations, which were severed in 1939, is to be signed at the State Department by Albanian Foreign Minister Muhamet Kaplani, a White House official said.

Mr Kaplani will not meet in Washington with either Secretary of State James Baker, who will be in the Soviet Union Friday, or with President George Bush, who will be in Bermuda, the US official said.

The Albanian Foreign Minister was quoted by AFG, the Albanian news agency, earlier as saying that relations with the United States would soon be restored.

Off the Record

Zhivkov's vanity and luxuries

SOFIA: Ousted Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov, who went on trial on Monday for corruption, was Eastern Europe's longest serving leader when he fell 15 months ago, reports Reuters.

He appeared in a Sofia court on charges of embezzlement — the first arraignment of a veteran East Bloc ruler since Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu was tried and executed after a December, 1989 revolt.

Zhivkov, 79, was overthrown after 35 years in power by reformists in his own Communist Party as democratic changes swept Eastern Europe.

In his decades as party leader, Zhivkov strove to mould Bulgaria into Moscow's staunch ally. But although he publicly embraced the reform policies of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, Zhivkov maintained a firm personal grip on power, removing potential reformers from authority.

Under Zhivkov, members of fledgling dissident groups — including current President Zhelev — were harassed, imprisoned or expelled for even daring to discuss reform.

The country's large ethnic Turkish minority were subjected to an assimilation program which included forcing them to change their Islamic names for Bulgarian ones.

Ham-fisted central planning by Zhivkov's regime reduced the national economy to chaos, leaving his successors with an 11-billion-dollar foreign debt and stagnant state industries propped up by lavish subsidies.

Less flamboyant than neighbouring Romania's Ceausescu, Zhivkov gained a reputation for petty vanity and for lavishing luxuries on family and associates.

His daughter Lyudmila, who died in 1981, was minister of culture. His son Vladimir held a number of senior political posts, and grandson Todor Slavkov was sent to an expensive Swiss university, allegedly at state expense.

A keen hunter, Zhivkov collected official residences, hunting lodges and a luxury yacht and private train, all of which were confiscated since his fall from power.

In an article entitled *The Insatiable Narcissist*, the official BTA news agency — once the mouthpiece for his views — described him as a shrewd man who indulged vanities but never at the expense of his own position.

"Todor Zhivkov lived his part of the good, but never missed a chance to cast a quick hawk's eye at his victims," BTA quoted a leading psychoanalyst as saying.

Born on Sept 7, 1911, in the Balkan mountain, village of Pravets outside Sofia, Zhivkov received an elementary education and then worked at a Sofia printing firm.

After a spell in the Communist Youth League, he joined the Communist Party in 1932, holding district level posts in the party hierarchy until World War II.

During the German occupation he was a main organizer of partisans in the Sofia area and helped in the Communist takeover on Sept. 9, 1944. After the war he rose to become a full member of the ruling party Politburo by 1951.

By 1954 he was party first secretary and seven years later succeeded in purging Stalinist leader Valko Chervenkov, the last obstacle to his grasping total power.

As Bulgarian leader, Zhivkov outlived four Soviet Communist Party chiefs — Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and Mikhail Gorbachev.

His close identification with Kremlin foreign policy made him the butt of jokes among East European intellectuals.

Replaced by his foreign minister Petar Mladenov, Zhivkov claimed he resigned voluntarily and accused his former colleagues of using him as a scapegoat.

"Did my colleagues forget that we kissed each other after my resignation?" Zhivkov asked in a recent interview. "Who, in this case, is Judas?"

Elizabeth world's richest woman

LONDON: Queen Elizabeth II is the world's richest woman, with assets worth £6.6 billion (about \$13 billion) according to a British magazine report, reports AP.

Harpers and Queen magazine said the Queen's personal wealth rose by 25 per cent last year.

"Rising prices for top-of-the-line jewelry and winning races-horses at stud have helped underlying asset values at the House of Windsor," the magazine said, "but most helpful of all is the Queen's exemption from taxes."

Buckingham Palace refused to comment.

Second in the list is Johanna Quandt, widow of the MBW car magnate, with £2.6 billion (\$5.1 billion).

Imelda Marcos, the former first lady of the Philippines, is ranked third. Mrs. Marcos, acquitted of racketeering in fraud charges in New York last year, is estimated to have property shares and an art collection valued at £1.5 billion (\$2.9 billion).

Only one of the top 10-German mail-order tycoon Grete Schickedanz, ranked 10th-made it with her own entrepreneurial skills. The others are the daughters or widows of rich men, the magazine said.

According to Harpers and Queen, the rich ones are:

1. Queen, Elizabeth II, 64, assets £6.6 billion (\$13 billion dollars).
2. Johanna Quandt, 63, £2.6 billion (\$5.1 billion dollars).
3. Imelda Marcos, 61, £1.5 billion (\$2.9 billion dollars).
4. Anne Cox Chamber, 70, American publisher's daughter, £1.4 billion (\$2.7 billion dollars).
5. M Barbara Cox Anthony, 67, sister of Anne, £1.4 billion (\$2.7 billion dollars).
6. Liliane Bettencourt, 67, French daughter of L'Oréal cosmetics entrepreneur, £1.3 billion (\$2.5 billion).
7. Jacqueline Mars Vogel, 51, American daughter of Mars, Inc. magnate, £1.2 billion (\$2.3 billion).
8. Alice Walton, 41, daughter of American retailer Sam Walton, £1 billion (\$1.9 billion).
9. Heidi Horton, 49, widow of German department store founder, £950 million (\$1.8 billion).
10. Grete Schickedanz, 78, German self-made billionaire, £900 million (\$1.7 billion).
11. Idina Garti, 54, daughter of wealthy Italian businessman and wife of another, £850 million (\$1.6 billion).
12. Madeleine Dessault, 89, widow of French aviator, £750 million (\$1.4 billion).
13. Margaret Cargill, 70, daughter of world's biggest grain trader, £650 million (\$1.2 billion).



Queen Elizabeth



Imelda Marcos

BRIEFLY

Bush to visit Kuwait: President George Bush plans to visit Kuwait sometime this year on a Middle East trip that could also include stops in Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other nations, the White House said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

It said no dates or exact itinerary had been established for the trip.

"The President wants to go to the Middle East. Kuwait is an obvious destination but we don't have any specific plans at the moment," spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said.

Asked if a Middle East trip was expected soon, Fitzwater said: "The president wants to go sooner rather than later but that doesn't mean it will happen."

Search for new UN Secy-Gen: The search for a new U.N. Secretary-General is on. The names of more than 25 candidates to replace the retiring Javier Perez de Cuellar are circulating among diplomatic missions, reports AP.

The lobbying among nations is expected to intensify this summer and peak in the fall, when the Security Council will make its choice and present it to the General Assembly.

A private memo originating at the top echelon of the U.N. Secretariat notes that the Security Council members seem reluctant to lead the selection process. It suggests a search committee be set up by the end of March.

The memo, obtained by the Associated Press, argues against following past practice of relying on a last-minute political compromise. It recommends that a wide slate of qualified candidates be identified.

3 killed in Johannesburg: Three miners died and 14 were injured in an accident at a gold mine, according to news reports Tuesday, reports AP.

The Monday night accident occurred at the Daggafontein gold mine near Springs, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) east of Johannesburg.

The Star newspaper reported a gas leak caused the accident. A police spokesperson told the Star it was unclear if the miners died from inhaling leaking gas or other causes.

Consolidated Modderfontein Mines, which operates Daggafontein, said the accident occurred as night shift workers were taking their places. It said 14 people were hospitalized.

Eight French troops hurt: Eight French soldiers were hurt, three seriously when a mine exploded in the southern Iraqi Desert on Tuesday, the army information office said, reports Reuters.

The blast occurred during a physical training exercise by members of France's 12,000 strong Daguet Division, the office said in a statement.

None of the injured was in a critical condition.

Two French soldiers were killed and 25 others injured during the Gulf war in which French jets took part in the air offensive and French ground troops played a frontline role.

US soldier killed in Athens: A member of the U.S. military died Tuesday after a remotely-controlled bomb exploded outside his home in the Athens suburb of Ano Glyfada, officials said, reports AP.

Police also reported bomb attacks against five tour buses Tuesday, but no injuries were reported.

A police spokesman, who requested anonymity, identified the man as 35-year-old Sgt. Ronald Steward, who had served at the Hellinikon Air Base for the past five years. The U.S. Air Force base is adjacent to Athens International airport.

A surgeon at the Hygeia hospital, north of the capital, told reporters Steward died during an operation to save his life. According to the police spokesman, the blast has apparently amputated at least one of the man's legs.

What's in the Soviet name?: The Soviet Union is considering changing its name for the third time since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Here's a brief history of the names, reports AP.

Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic: This is the name Russia took with adoption of the Soviet Constitution in 1918. It is still the formal name of the Russian republic led by Boris Yeltsin. During the civil war that followed the revolution, other Soviet republics were forcibly established in the Ukraine, Byelorussia and Transcaucasia.

Devi Lal challenges MPs

Congress destabilising India, says Advani

NEW DELHI, March 13: India's mutually-hostile communist and right-wing parties urged the electorate Tuesday to help defeat former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's Congress (I) Party in general elections.

Their calls came as the nation waited in suspense for an announcement by President Ramaswamy Venkataraman dissolving Parliament and setting a date for snap elections which observers expect will be held in May.

The Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI-M), India's most powerful leftist group, ruled out an alliance with Mr. Gandhi's party in the polls necessitated by Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar's abrupt March 6 resignation.

Harkishen Singh Surjeet, a senior member of the CPI-M Politburo, told the Press here that leftist parties wanted the electorate to defeat the Congress (I), which has been subtly covering communist support.

Mr. Surjeet said communist

parties would fight the polls together with their centrist ally, the National Front led by former Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh.

The right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian People's Party), a bitter opponent of the communists, separately lashed out at the Congress (I), which propped up Mr. Shekhar's minority government for 117 days.

"By nature, by temperament, by inclination and by proclivity the Congress (I) is the biggest testabilities force in Indian polity," BJP leader Lal Krishan Advani said.

Mr. Shekhar's resignation was prompted by a Congress (I) boycott of Parliament which effectively deprived him of a working majority. The boycott was announced to protest alleged police surveillance at Mr. Gandhi's house.

Mr. Advani said the Congress (I)'s conduct showed it could not stake a claim for power on the plank of providing stability to the nation, dogged by constant political

uncertainty following the 1989 vote which produced a hung Parliament.

He predicted the electorate would relegate the 104-year-old Congress to third place in the polls.

Maverick Indian politician Devi Lal challenged members of Parliament on Tuesday to vote frankly on whether they endorsed their leaders calls for an early general election to settle political turmoil.

Deputy Prime Minister Lal said openly what many members of the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) have been saying in private — that the last thing they want to do at the moment is face India's 500 million voters, the world's biggest electorate.

"Let there be a division (vote) on the dissolution of the Lok Sabha also," said the 76-year-old peasant leader, to laughter and applause.

His comments, in the earthy Hindi of north India, came after the house had taken its umpteenth vote in the past two days to clear urgent business.

Bhatarai terms suspicion as baseless

Nepal won't fall under Indian security regime

KATIMANDU, Mar 13: The Nepalese Prime Minister, Dr. Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, has termed as "baseless" suspicions that the Himalayan Kingdom would fall under the security regime of India, reports PTI.

"No official of the government of India has ever spoken about this," he told a symposium on the "forthcoming general elections in Nepal" here Monday.

Dr. Bhattarai, who is also President of the ruling Nepali Congress, said the forthcoming general elections on May 12 would end 30 years of injustice.

He said talks were being held with the United Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) for formulating a code of conduct to hold peaceful polls.

The Prime Minister said the election manifesto of the Nepali Congress would be published in a few days.

AFP from New Delhi adds: India's Parliament empowered

the government Tuesday to prolong federal rule in Punjab as seven more people died in Sikh separatist violence in the troubled northern state.

Parliament approved a constitutional amendment to extend by six more months New Delhi's direct rule in Punjab with the Upper House giving the final go ahead to a bill passed earlier by the lower chamber.

The approval was granted as President Ramaswamy Venkataraman was expected to dissolve the elected Lower House and order fresh polls.

New Delhi imposed direct rule on Punjab in May 1987 after dismissing an elected Sikh moderate government and has extended its control every six months. The next extension is due on May 11.

The government has rejected demands for state polls citing continuing separatist violence in the region bordering Pakistan.

Sikh militants have been fighting since 1983 for a homeland called Khalistan (land of the pure) in Punjab despite severe security measures to crush the campaign.

Another report says: Sikh militants campaigning violently for an independent homeland in India's Punjab state are ready for peace talks with New Delhi, Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar said today.

Mr. Shekhar, 63 told Parliament that "several militant groups" had expressed readiness to end their campaign by holding talks with the government within the framework of the Indian Constitution.

He said the government would give all facilities to the militant factions who want to come to the negotiating table. If they come from abroad, we will ensure that they go back even if the talks fail."

The Prime Minister, however, did not name the groups ready for talks.