

BRIEFLY

Israelis asked to don masks: Israel radio in Jerusalem announced the country was under missile attack and ordered residents to don gas masks early today and seek shelter in rooms sealed against a possible Iraqi chemical weapons attack, reports Reuter.

French planes to prepare way: When a ground assault is launched against Iraqi forces, French warplanes will prepare the way for French troops by striking the enemy ahead, the commander of the French air force in Saudi Arabia said in an interview published in Paris, reports AFP.

The French aircraft would be part of a general "air cover" to protect advancing troops, General Claude Solanet told the newspaper journal *Le Dimanche*.

French planes would "handle" targets about 30 kilometers (20 miles) ahead of France's Daguet division, Gen Solanet said.

Blast damages banks in Cyprus: A bomb damaged the offices of Britain's Barclays Bank and American Express in Larnaca on Saturday in what appeared to be the first incident of its kind in Cyprus linked to the Gulf war, reports Reuter.

There were no injuries. A police spokesman in Nicosia said a man had been launched but declined to give further details.

Police said the bomb went off around 8 PM (1800 GMT) in the centre of Larnaca, a port town 32 KM (20 miles) from the Cypriot capital.

The device was placed in a flower bed in the pavement outside the adjacent offices, shattering windows.

The island hosts a large British garrison involved in supporting troops in the US-led coalition fighting Iraq.

Anti-war rally in Britain: Thousands of demonstrators, calling for an end to fighting in the Gulf, marched through London on Saturday in the biggest anti-war protest in Britain since hostilities broke out 11 days ago, reports Reuter.

A spokesman for Scotland Yard police said an estimated 18,000 people took part in the march but organisers put the figure at more than 20,000.

"We are accused of not supporting 'our boys' in the Gulf. The best possible support we can give to our members of the armed forces is to stop this war," Bruce Kent, a Vice President of the campaign for nuclear disarmament, told a rally in Hyde Park in London.

A retired German admiral said before the rally that the war was being fought to smash Iraq not free Kuwait.

Qayyum deplores Saddam: The President of Pakistan's state of Azad Kashmir denounced Iraqi President Saddam Hussein as "an enemy of Islam" on Tuesday and said he backed the liberation of Kuwait, reports AP.

Sardar Abdul-Qayyum, president of the Azad Kashmir state in Mecca said the largest political party in Pakistan the Muslim League as well as other political forces, support Saudi Arabia.

His remarks were made in context of recent pro-Iraqi demonstrations in Pakistan which he said largely took place because "many people in Pakistan do not know the nature of the Baathist ruling party in Iraq."

Counter demonstrations will be organized soon in Pakistan "to tell the people the truth," he said.

He contended that in the latest elections, the Pakistani people voted in favor of the Islamic representatives rejecting the secular Pakistan People's Party.

4 Iraqi soldiers desert: Four Iraqi soldiers, three between 15 and 16 years old deserted and crossed Allied lines to give themselves up to the US army on Friday, senior division officers in Saudi Arabia said on Saturday, reports Reuter.

The deserters, the youngest reported so far in the Gulf war, said their company was taking two or three casualties a night from allied bombing. A company usually has a little over 100 men.

They said, They were losing about 30 soldiers a week, said a senior officer in the 2nd armoured division.

Several other Iraqis in the company had deserted before them but had headed to Baghdad and other cities in the hope of hiding with their families the boy soldiers were quoted as saying.

3,500 flee to Iran: A total of 3,500 people from 20 nations have fled to Iran from neighbouring Iraq since the start of the Gulf war January 17 and 1,600 more refugees are expected soon, a UN official in Tehran said Saturday, reports AFP.

Omar Bakhet, a senior emergency manager in Iran to coordinate UN efforts to meet refugees and help them continue their journeys, also said that 400 Sudanese would be returning home this week.

UN and Iranian authorities have made preparations to accommodate 100,000 refugees fleeing Iraq, he said, the official IRNA news agency reported.

He said 200 camps and guest houses had been set up for those who might seek asylum, IRNA reported.

PLO's appeal to world body: An official from the PLO's Fatah movement yesterday called on the world community to intervene to put an end to the worsening health conditions in the occupied territories as a result of the curfew imposed by Israeli authorities, reports Xinhua from Cairo.

It is incumbent upon the international organizations to move at once to stop the suffering sustained by Palestinians in the territories, said Zohdi Qadra, Cairo-based representative of the Fatah movement, the mainstream of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Reports said, the curfew, which has been in force since the Gulf war started on January 17, has disrupted the daily life of the Palestinians, bringing industrial production and other economic activities in the occupied lands to a standstill.

Rafsanjani dismayed: Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani expressed dismay Saturday at alleged allied bombing of civilian targets in Iraq, but reiterated that his nation intends to stay out of the Gulf war, reports AP.

Rafsanjani met with Iraqi envoy Saadoun Hammadi, a member of Baghdad's ruling Revolutionary Command Council and then summoned his Supreme National Security Council to a meeting, according to the Islamic Republic News Agency, monitored in Nicosia.

Iraq fails to get back planes from Iran

NICOSIA, Feb 3: A senior Iraqi official wound up a mission to Tehran on Saturday empty-handed, failing to secure the return of Iraqi combat aircraft which have flown to Iran since the outbreak of the Gulf war, reports Reuter.

As Deputy Prime Minister Saadoun Hammadi, headed home, President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani reiterated Iran's view that Iraq was ultimately responsible for the war he described as "the most saddest tragedy of today's humanity."

The Iranian news agency IRNA quoted Hammadi as saying his talks with Rafsanjani and Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati were "good and fruitful."

But Velayati told Tehran radio that during lengthy talks, Hammadi was told that Iran's neutrality dictated that the Iraqi planes--said by US-led Allies to number up to 100 military aircraft including some of Baghdad's most advanced fighters and bombers--should remain in Iran until the end of the war.

A senior Iranian official said last week that by sending its combat planes to Iran, Iraq probably wanted to preserve them from destruction until a ground offensive started.

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