

43 more killed in Punjab

CHANDIGARH, Mar 18: Twenty six militants, including seven members of a family, were among 43 persons killed in Punjab since last night, reports PTI.

Police said seven members of a family were killed in inter-gang rivalry at Shamsinghwa village of Ferozpur district today.

The deceased were identified as Kulwant Singh, his wife Malkiat Kaur, their sons Jinda, Sohan Singh and his wife, and Swaran Singh and his wife.

An unidentified militant was killed in an encounter with security forces in village Aklian Kalan in Bhatinda district, police said.

Bullet-ridden bodies of two persons, Mukhtiar Singh and his son Balwinder Singh, were recovered from near village Kot Dharam Chand in Tarn Taran police district.

Militants gunned down one Sukhpal Singh and seriously injured his father in Gomti Kalan village of Sangrur district.

One Mahant Sital Dass was shot dead in Tholiwal village of Sangrur district. Two suspected Pakistani intruders were killed in the Khem Karan sector of Indo-Pak border, police said.

400 killed in loyalists' tank attacks in Karbala

Saddam goes in 8 months : Baker

WASHINGTON, Mar 18: U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, just back from a tour of the Middle East, said Sunday that many foreign leaders think Iraqi President Saddam Hussein would not be in power in eight months, reports Reuters.

Baker said in an interview on ABC television that US Gulf war ceasefire restrictions might have the side effect of helping rebels trying to topple Saddam.

But he said the United States was not arming the rebels and was not trying to remove Saddam though it hopes he will step down or be ousted.

Baker said the United States Sunday rejected at a meeting in Saudi Arabia Saddam's request that his military planes be allowed to fly inside Iraq.

Baker was asked if such restrictions would aid the rebels. "That may be a collateral effect of the suspension of operations agreement that we entered into with Iraq," he replied.

But he said the reason Iraq's request to fly its planes was rejected was that "that's a dangerous situation. We have our aircraft moving around there and we don't want to see

Iraqi aircraft."

Baker, who returned Sunday from the trip to the Middle East and the Soviet Union, was asked later if Saddam would still be Iraq's President in eight months.

"I don't know," he answered. "I would tell you that there's a judgment among many of the foreign officials that I visited with that he will not be."

Baker said the United States was not arming the rebels and did not want to see a power vacuum that would jeopardise Iraq's stability — but would like to see Saddam replaced.

Baker also said in the interview that he would continue to press for direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians towards agreeing on a Middle East peace.

But he said the Palestine Liberation Organisation will have to do more than ever after its support of Iraq in the Gulf war to show that it is a fit partner for peace talks.

He said the United States said when it broke off meetings with the PLO last year that "enough's enough, this is not a fit partner for a peace talk. There are certain things at a minimum you have to do now. They'll have to do even more."

As for Israel, Baker restated in strong terms the Bush administration's opposition to settlement of Soviet Jewish immigrants in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

"That's de facto annexation, he said. That is changing the facts and circumstances on the ground in the absence of negotiation to solve this Arab-Israeli conflict in a peaceful way."

AFP from London adds: An Iraqi rebel radio Sunday warned that President Saddam Hussein had declared a war against himself and would soon be getting a "just bullet."

The "Voice of Free Iraq" radio monitored by the BBC reacted angrily to a speech by the Iraqi leader Saturday in which he declared that the rebellion in mainly Shi'ite southern Iraq had been

crushed.

The radio said President Hussein had invited a "merciless war" against himself with his speech Saturday and warned: "A just bullet will be coming to you soon, catching you unawares."

His refusal to step down meant he would have to be removed by force, the radio said.

The radio blamed him for the thousands killed during the six-week-long Gulf war and the continued misery of the Iraqi people.

A report from Beirut says: A Tehran-based Iraqi opposition coalition said that 400 people were killed when Republican Guard tanks stormed the

Dawa Party said both cities, sacred to Shi'ite Muslims, were still in rebel hands.

Sciri accused Iraqi troops of using mustard gas in the cities of Najaf, Amara and Basra and quoted reports from Karbala as saying "suffocating gas" was used there against the rebels.

"Use of napalm spread over Basra, Amara, Qurna and Haniya" said Sciri. It said rebels had taken Nashawa and 2,000 soldiers surrendered there.

Holy shrines in Karbala include those of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson Hussein and his brother Abbas. Sciri said videotapes from inside Iraq showed both were hit by shells fired by Iraqi troops.

to the Najaf population, according to the Iraqi news agency INA.

Fierce fighting has been reported in the Muslim Shi'ite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala in revolt-torn southern Iraq and rebels have accused government forces of shelling both centres indiscriminately.

Sadr said: "They came from here and there in an attempt to devastate the town, loot and plunder, and set fire to government buildings and cars. These acts run counter to Islamic law and heavenly values" according to an agency dispatch monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation.

"Those saboteurs and thugs are trying to hide behind Islam and its heavenly teachings, but Islam has nothing to do with their disgraceful deeds, which contradict Islamic teachings."

He said that the Iraqi news media should expose foreign media lies and false claims by disclosing "criminal acts and chaos" brought about by the mobs in Iraqi cities.

"All these deeds are denounced and run counter to the Islamic law" he said.

Shi'ite neighbouring Iran is reported to have warned Baghdad about the shrines in the two cities torn by violence in a two-week-old uprising against President Saddam Hussein in the Shi'ite south.

An émigré opposition leader says a Najaf-based cleric issued a religious decree declaring jihad (holy war) against Saddam.

Jalal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan said in Damascus the order came from grand Ayatollah Abolqassem al-Khoei, the world's highest-ranking Shi'ite scholar.

Saddam, in a weekend speech to the nation, said his forces had crushed rebellion in the Shi'ite south and were turning to defeat a Kurdish revolt in the north.

James Baker and ultimately President George Bush would decide on how swiftly the withdrawal went ahead and whether there would be a permanent US military presence in the Gulf, Stone said.

"That is being negotiated... I have no view as to whether there will be a permanent presence here but it is an option that could be discussed," he said.

"The soldiers have done their part in this action and we want to get them home as quickly as possible... but there are political elements involved which are not my responsibility," he said.

Stone said, the number of US army troops in the Gulf had dropped to around 295,000 from a peak of 305,000 during the war.

He said there would be an acceleration in the numbers of US forces leaving the Gulf over the next three months but the numbers of specialists.

Baker's visit to Turkey protested, one killed

ANKARA Mar 18: A leftist guerrilla was killed when bombs exploded in four Turkish cities in protest against US Secretary of State James Baker's visit to Turkey Saturday, reports Reuters.

The unidentified guerrilla died in a premature explosion which wounded a colleague when they planted a bomb outside a US office in the western city of Izmir, the semi-official Anatolian News Agency said.

The agency said both victims were members of the Dev-Sol (Revolutionary Left) group which claimed responsibility for the blasts as Baker flew in from Moscow for post-Gulf war talks with Turkish officials.

Gen Aslam Beg firm to retire in August

ISLAMABAD, Mar 18: Pakistan's Army Chief of Staff General Aslam Beg today tried to end rumours of his political ambitions by reaffirming his intention to step down in August, reports AFP.

"No one should doubt my intention to retire on the due date, the General was quoted as saying today by several newspapers.

Reacting to reports that the United States is worried about his plans, the Army chief said the United States always opposes "those who understand its true intentions."

Justifying his anti-U.S. stance during the Gulf war against Iraq Gen. Beg said, "I was warning and against a con-

Off the Record

Let Shabana be MP, VP, Jyoti told

NEW DELHI: Writers, cultural activists and academics on Sunday asked the Janata Dal leader, Mr. V. P. Singh, and

the West Bengal Chief Minister, Mr Jyoti Basu, to persuade cine star, Ms Shabana Azmi, to contest the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections from South Delhi constituency, reports PTI.

Members of the Forum for Democracy and Secularism, Mr Pankaj Dixit, Mr Abdul Bismillah, Mr Gurucharan, Mr Wajahat, Mr Ashok Chakradhar and Mr Naqvi Husain Jafri made this request in separate talks with Mr Singh and Mr Basu.



Mountain gorillas for tourists

KAMPALA: Uganda is planning to promote its mountain gorillas as tourist attractions to lure visitors back to the country after decades of wars and instability, reports Reuters.

"We are moving forward with gorilla tourism," Ben Otot, a senior Ministry of Tourism official, said on Sunday.

About 420 of the animals live in the Bwindi forests of western Uganda, bordering Zaire and Rwanda.

Tourists stopped taking safaris in Uganda with the rise of Idi Amin's government in the 1970s. Stability has returned but wildlife in the once-famous Murchison Falls and Queen Elizabeth National Parks has been largely wiped out by poachers.

Uganda's tiny neighbour Rwanda earned 15 million dollars last year from tourism based on its gorillas, made famous by the film "Gorillas in the mist," Otot said. But the business has collapsed since rebels invaded the country in October.

Conservationists say the war threatens 350 gorillas in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, where thousands of rebels are holed up.

Otot said up to 800 chimpanzees in Ugandan forests near Kabale, 250 km (150 miles) west of Kampala, should also attract tourists.

Kuwait to slash foreign workers

ABU DHABI, Mar 18: The Kuwaiti government may scrap subsidies on services provided to foreigners living in the Emirate, Kuwait's Planning Minister was quoted as saying here Sunday, reports AFP.

"We are not under any obligation to educate, give medical care, transportation and other welfare subsidies to non-Kuwaitis, Sulaiman Al-Mutawa told the United Arab Emirates (UAE) daily 'Gulf News'.

Before the Iraq invasion of August 2, Kuwait — like other oil-rich Gulf states — offered health care, education and many other public services at subsidised rates to expatriate workers.

Mr. Mutawa said a new population policy would review the state's obligations to foreign workers and their dependents who formed the large majority of Kuwait's population before the invasion.

They live in Kuwait but the state picks up the tab for everything, he said in the interview from Kuwait City.

The Emirate says it expects to spend tens of billions of dollars to repair oil facilities and restore other installations destroyed during the seven-month Iraq occupation.

Mr. Mutawa said there would be a drive toward large-scale mechanisation and automation, as well as better induction of Kuwaitis in the labour force to reduce dependence on foreign workers.

He said his ministry had also recommended a tightening of Kuwait's nationality law.

It will be a selective process in which we will look at individual skills, caliber and type, and whether these are lacking among Kuwaitis. These people will be offered nationality, Mr. Mutawa said.

In the past, few non-Kuwaitis were granted Kuwaiti nationality, even if born in the Emirate or resident for decades.

Ishaq asks UN to solve Kashmir issue

ISLAMABAD, Mar 18: President Ghulam Ishaq Khan said Sunday that Kashmir is the main obstacle to improving Pakistan India relations and demanded that the United Nations resolve the dispute, reports AFP.

Khan expressed the hope that the international community would pay "greater attention to the solution of this problem," "in the interest of durable peace and friendship in this part of the world."

He was talking to Sri Frederic Bennet, former member of the British Parliament, who called on him at the presidency here, an official statement said.

Pakistan demands that the United Nations take steps to

hold a plebiscite in the divided Kashmir state in accordance with its 1949 resolution.

India and Pakistan have fought two wars over the disputed territory and the upsurge of militant separatist movement in Indian part of Kashmir has caused new strains in relations.

Khari said that he was encouraged by the recent success of international efforts to restore Kuwait independence under a mandate from the United Nations.

The world should implement UN resolutions on other regional disputes such as Kashmir, he said.

BRIEFLY

Iraq, US talk truce: Senior Iraqi officers met in Safwan Sunday with US and Saudi counter parts at the request of Baghdad for discussions on ceasefire arrangements US officials said, reports AFP.

Major William McCormick spokesman for the first US infantry division, said that Iraq had requested the meeting which took place at a US Command post here two days ago.

In Riyadh US Central Command released a statement saying that "coalition representatives headed by Major General Robert Johnston," Central Command Chief of staff met with approximately 10 Iraqi Military officers at 1:00 p.m. (1000 GMT) Monday.

Indian troops kill 4: At least four people were killed Sunday when Indian troops fired at a crowd herding cattle into neighbouring Bangladesh, officials said, reports Reuters.

They said violence erupted at Debnathpur village, 140 km (85 miles) north of Calcutta, when the crowd, believed to be Bangladeshis, attacked troops who stopped them near the border and accused them of stealing the cattle.

70 p.c. US bombs missed mark: Over 70 per cent the US conventional bombs had missed the mark during the coalition forces attack on Iraq and Kuwait, says the United States air force chief of staff, reports PTI.

General Merrill A. Meade disclosed that conventional bombs missed 70 per cent of the time and precision-guided bombs made up barely seven per cent of the US tonnage dropped on Iraqi targets.

He said the US dropped 88,500 tonnes of bombs on Iraq and occupied Kuwait. Out of this, 70 per cent missed the mark. Based on the figures given by General Meade, 23,363 bombs hit targets and 62,137 tonnes missed.

US 'blank cheque': The leaders of Albania's biggest opposition party said on Sunday Washington had promised them a "blank cheque" in economic and humanitarian aid if they win the country's March 31 elections the first multi-party vote since the communists seized power in 1944, says Reuters.

Sali Berisha and Gramoz Pashko said the United States has also offered to send food and medical aid to Albania immediately, using cargo planes from the recent Gulf war.

The leaders of the Albanian Democratic party were invited by the US State department to discuss Albania's worsening political and economic situation.

14 killed in Johannesburg: Fourteen people were killed in factional fighting Sunday as violence in Alexandria township spilled over to a migrants hostel near the centre of Johannesburg, police said, reports AFP.

Police spokesman Reg Crewe said six people were killed when fighting erupted in the afternoon at the George Goch Hostel. It was reported calm Sunday night.

Police earlier recovered eight bodies in Alexandria, which borders Johannesburg's plush white northern suburbs. That brought the death toll in the township to 10.

21 killed in Punjab: Twentyone people were killed in Punjab while security forces nabbed 12 militants since last night, reports PTI.

A report from Batala quoting police sources said three unidentified militants were killed in an encounter with security forces near village Bhattawal.

An AK 47 rifle, an AK 74 rifle, two IIE 36 hand grenades along with ammunition were recovered from the spot.

39 officials sacked in Syria: The Syrian government has sacked 39 civil servants on charges of corruption and bad conduct, the officials SANA news agency reported Sunday, says AFP.

The latest dismissals bring to nearly 1,000 the number of civil servants who have been sacked from their jobs over similar accusations since 1988.

Prime Ministers Mahmoud Al-Zohbi has repeatedly said his government would "continue to wage war against routine bureaucracy and corruption."

18 killed in Philippines: Eighteen people were killed and seven wounded in gun battles across the Philippines between government forces and communist guerrillas during the weekend, the armed forces said on Monday, reports Reuters.

The dead were 14 soldiers and policemen and four New People's Army (NPA) rebels.

Defence officials say communism in the Philippines is dying and recent rebel attacks are intended to create the impression that the NAP, fighting for 22 years to establish a Marxist State, is still a major threat to national security.

Chinese envoy in Iraq: China's Ambassador to Iraq has become the first Foreign Diplomat evacuated from Baghdad to return to the city since the Gulf war, diplomatic sources said, reports Reuters.

Ambassador Zhen Dayong, who left Iraq a week before the 42-day war broke out on January 17, arrived in Baghdad on Friday, the sources said.

No timetable for US pullout from Gulf Troops being replaced

DAHRAN, Mar 18: American troops will still be in the Gulf in July and more soldiers are arriving to replace some of those who have left, US Army Secretariat Michael Stone said on Sunday, reports Reuters.

Stone told reporters in Dahran that the withdrawal of up to half a million US soldiers, sailors and airmen and

women who helps a drive Iraq out of Kuwait would go ahead as quickly as possible but a definite timetable had yet to be worked out.

French Defence Minister Pierre Joxe said Saturday that turmoil in Iraq was preventing allied forces making the Gulf war ceasefire official and setting a date for a withdrawal.

"One can consider that the

page has not yet been turned," Joxe told French Television during a visit to French army engineers digging out mines on Kuwait City beaches.

He said uncertainty over the situation in Iraq, where President Saddam Hussein faces widespread rebellion, had prevented the signing of a full official ceasefire.

Stone refused to comment on the movement of US forces in southern Iraq, a large section of which is held by allied troops.

When asked whether US troops could all be home by July American Independence day, Stone replied, "I don't think."

"We're going to have everybody out by then. Think there will be a need to have US army forces here beyond July 4, Stone said. "There are still new units coming from the United States to replace units that are here that are going home or where there is a different requirement."

"We can continue the rotation if we see that there is a need for forces here beyond July 4 or whatever date you want to suggest," he added.

Stone said preparation of heavy equipment for transport back to the United States and the need to clear unexploded mines and bombs from the battlefield would slow down the withdrawal.

US Defence Secretary Dick Cheney, Secretary of State

Indian Ocean states for regional integration

ANTANANARIVO, Mar 18: Leaders from Indian Ocean countries ended a weekend summit in Madagascar capital of Antananarivo with plans to promote regional integration, reports Reuters.

"We are all fundamentally in agreement. Now we must proceed with studies for our ideas and our projects," said Didier Ratsiraka, President of Madagascar and acting head of the five-member Indian Ocean Commission (IOC).

IOC members — Madagascar, Mauritius, Seychelles, Comoros and Reunion — said there were regional plans for a petrol refinery, a cement factory, hospitals and a university.

Plans were also made to protect the Indian Ocean's environment, develop tourism and cooperate in foreign diplomacy.

But the leaders said the IOC

could not maintain closer links with South Africa until its racial policies were completely abolished.

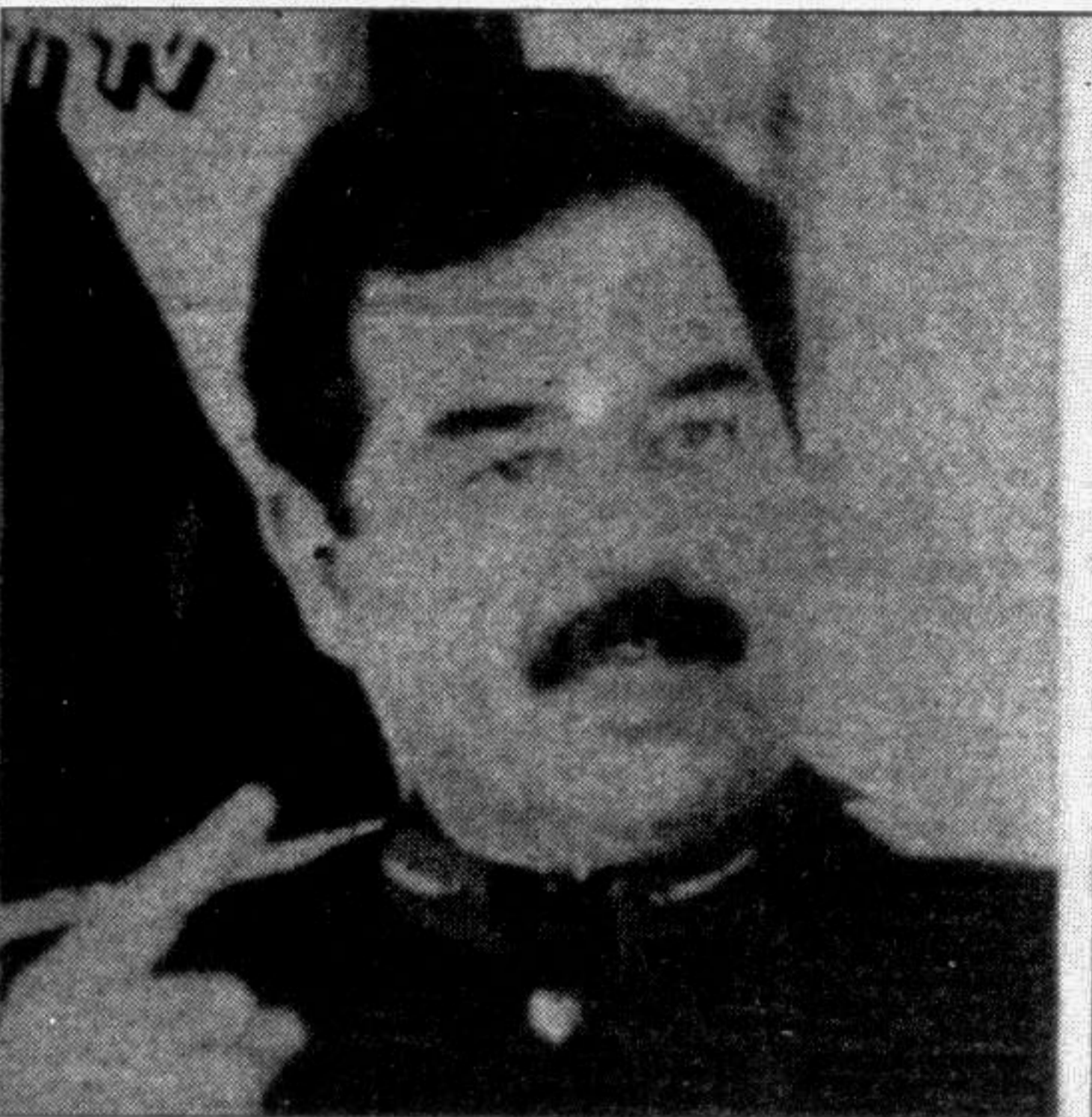
French Prime Minister Michel Rocard also attended the talks. France is an IOC member because of its sovereignty over Reunion.

He said France's military presence in the Indian Ocean still had a "positive" role to play in ensuring world peace.

He said talks should continue over Madagascar's territorial claims to the Bles, a string of French Indian Ocean islands.

Seychelles also wants control over Diego Garcia, the island military base run by Britain and the United States.

Rocard left on Sunday for Reunion, the French overseas territory where riots left 10 people dead last month.



Saddam: Days are numbered?



SAFWAN, Iraq: An Iraqi refugee is interrogated by two US soldiers on his arrival at the last American checkpoint in Iraq 8 km (5 miles) north of Safwan, March 17. Many people are still fleeing fighting between forces loyal to President Saddam Hussein and Shi'ite rebels in Southern Iraq.

— Photo AFP/ UNB.