

International

World reaction to Baghdad-UN deal: Relief and cautious optimism

TOKYO, Feb 23: Governments around the world reacted with a mixture of cautious optimism and relief on Monday that the United Nations and Baghdad had reached an agreement that could avert a US-led attack against Iraq, reports AP.

the Security Council, including the United States. But the Clinton administration said it still has "serious questions" about the accord and that it will continue to do nothing to begin to reduce the military forces it and other nations have amassed in the Gulf.

Asia, where it was early Monday morning when the agreement was reached. While many countries were optimistic that a US-led military strike on Iraq could be averted, some also said they won't accept an agreement that stops short of opening Iraq completely to UN arms inspectors.

to hit Iraq with its military might if Annan failed to persuade Saddam to open all sites without conditions. The US military has deployed 25,000 troops in the Persian Gulf region.

Armed men take over police hqs, free 35 detainees in Albania

TIRANA, Feb 23: A dozen armed men attacked and took over the police headquarters in the northern Albanian town of Shkoder on Sunday, freeing 35 detainees held there, the interior ministry here said, reports AP.

The assailants entered the building after an hour-long shootout in which three policemen were wounded, according to local hospital sources. They escaped with weapons after holding the station for several hours.

Interior minister Neritan Ceka appeared on television to denounce the "terrorist act" which he said was carried out by "foreign intelligence services trying to destabilise Albania."

Ceka said the assailants had freed 35 "most wanted criminals" and torched the police station.

Special police left Tirana for Shkoder, ministry official Ilir Cani said.



UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (left) and Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz signing an agreement between the UN and Iraq yesterday regarding the current standoff. It is hoped that the agreement will end the impasse over weapons inspections and prevent a US military strike against Iraq. —AP/UNB photo

70 killed in fighting Tigers launch suicide attack on Lankan navy, destroy 2 ships

COLOMBO, Feb 23: Tamil rebel gunboats attacked a 12-ship convoy carrying soldiers to northern Sri Lanka, sinking two ships. Up to 70 people were killed in the sea battle, military officials said Monday, reports AP.

also destroyed. The rebels, who maintain information offices in Europe, released no immediate statement on the fighting.

Separatist rebels in about 25 boats clashed with navy warships escorting the convoy a few miles (kilometres) off the northern coast and about 320 kms (200 miles) north of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital military officials said.

In previous sea battles, rebels have sunk navy ships by carrying out suicide attacks, smashing their explosive-laden smaller boats into the larger craft.

The Tamil rebels are fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in northern Sri Lanka. More than 51,000 people have been killed since fighting erupted in 1983.

The ships were attempting to reinforce troops on the Jaffna Peninsula, a region controlled by the government but isolated from the rest of the country.

Two ships carrying 110 soldiers and crew were sunk in the hour-long battle Sunday night. Seventy survivors were picked up by other ships. The rest of the 12-ship convoy made it safely to a nearby military port.

The peninsula is accessible only by sea and air because the rebels control the only link through the mainland.

Navy ships destroyed at least six of the attacking boats, which normally carry five fighters each, officials said, estimating 30 rebel casualties.

Since May, government forces have recaptured about two-thirds of the 77-kms (50-mile) highway. The military says more than 1,000 soldiers and 3,200 rebels have been killed in the battle to capture the road.

Two battle tanks being transported on the ships were also destroyed.

AFP adds, the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) used eight boats filled with explosives to ram two craft transporting just over 100 soldiers and sailors to the country's war-torn north, officials said.

The two boats, the Pabbatha and Vaalampuri, were bound for the northern peninsula of Jaffna when they came under attack, officials said adding that 58 security personnel have so far been rescued.

Naval officers estimated that each of the eight rebel boats would have carried at least two suicide cadres and therefore at least 16 guerrillas from the elite Black Sea Tiger Unit may have perished in the attack.

A fleet of Dvora-class gun boats was sent to the area to rescue survivors and navy divers were also sent, a navy officer said.

He said the two boats attacked were part of a convoy taking troops to the Jaffna peninsula which security forces wrested from rebel control in December 1995.

Sonia joined politics to uphold Indian traditions

AHMEDABAD, Feb 23: Congress star campaigner Sonia Gandhi yesterday said she never had any interest in politics but has now joined it to uphold the 5,000 year old tradition of India, reports PTI.

Your happiness was their happiness and both considered your pains as theirs," she said.

Rajiv, she said, introduced one-third reservation of seats in panchayats and municipal corporations to give more responsibility to women but today women were being subjected to harassment.

Unemployment was growing, industries were affected and prices were rising, Sonia said.

The Congress had the experience of leading the country on the right path, she said and appealed to the people to vote overwhelmingly for the party to return it to power with a "thumping majority".

"My family tradition has influenced me to care for the 5,000-year old tradition of this country," she said.

In an obvious reference to BJP, Sonia said "for the sake of power some political party had entered into unprincipled alliance with others. It had raised the issue of stability."

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The people of Gujarat gave this party two-third majority but it could not rule the state for more than one and a half year.

"I am worried over the future of the next generation and to fulfil the dream of my husband and great leaders I have decided to join politics," she said in her brief speech.

In the 45 years of Congress rule the country had only five prime ministers but in the five years rule by non-Congress parties the country has had seven prime ministers, she said.

"I am worried over the future of the next generation and to fulfil the dream of my husband and great leaders I have decided to join politics," she said in her brief speech.

Sonia said she had seen how Rajiv and Indira worked tirelessly without seeking any personal comfort for the uplift of the poor and downtrodden.

Sonia, who was accompanied by son Rahul, later left for Mumbai.



Sonia Gandhi is joined by her son Rahul Gandhi (C), and Sitaran Kesri (L), president of the Congress Party, as they wave to the crowd in Bombay Sunday. More than 100,000 people attended the election campaign rally. —AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

New ROK PM named: South Korean president-elect Kim Dae-Jung yesterday said he had decided to name his ally Kim Jong-Pil as the new prime minister despite objections from the majority opposition, his aide said. AFP reports from Seoul.

8 Uzbek soldiers killed: An Uzbekistan army private shot dead eight fellow servicemen with an assault rifle in a dispute over food in the Central Asian nation, a news report said Monday, AP reports from Moscow.

Mass grave discovered in Vietnam: A mass grave of Vietnamese soldiers who fought against the US-backed government in the former Saigon has been recovered in the central highland province of Kon Tum, officials said Monday, AP reports from Hanoi.

Death toll in 2nd phase of polls now 29

Sacking of UP govt: BJP challenges ruling in court

UK, Irish govts resume talks on N-Ireland

Father, son reunited 16 yrs after hijacking episode

Botha pleads not guilty

Asians oppose proposed NY law banning nose piercing

Regional disarmament meet opens in Kathmandu

6 killed in Philippines road mishap: Six people were killed when a bus collided with a truck carrying cattle in the southern Philippine province of Davao del Sur, the national police said yesterday, AFP reports from Manila.

China to launch 24-hr AIDS hotline: China plans to launch its first 24-hour AIDS hotline, offering recorded information on the disease, AP reports from Beijing.

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Sacking of UP govt: BJP challenges ruling in court

NEW DELHI, Feb 23: India's top prime ministerial candidate Atal Behari Vajpayee continued a hunger strike for the second day today to protest against the dismissal of a Hindu nationalist state administration, officials said, reports AP.

An aide said Vajpayee, 71, had been without food since late Saturday and had no plans to give up the fast.

He is under medical examination, the aide said.

Vajpayee, whose rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) hopes to win ongoing national election, began the protest after a BJP government in northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh was sacked after losing its majority.

An alternative government was then sworn in by Uttar Pradesh governor Romesh Bhandari.

Vajpayee branded the government sacking "unconstitutional and undemocratic" and said the state administration should have been given the chance to prove its majority in the house.

The BJP, which has made a legal challenge to the ruling, has called on the Indian president to sack the governor and reinstall the state government.

Political rivals have branded the hunger strike a "political gimmick."

UK, Irish govts resume talks on N-Ireland

BELFAST, Northern Ireland, Feb 23: Northern Ireland's peace talks are resuming with the IRA-allied Sinn Fein party serving a two-week suspension because of killings blamed on the Irish Republican Army, reports AP.

The British and Irish governments originally barred Sinn Fein when the talks involving nine other parties began in June 1996, then admitted the party last September after the IRA stopped bombing and shooting.

The governments ruled last week that the IRA was responsible for killing two Belfast men earlier this month, an unacknowledged violation of the 7-month-old ceasefire that is required for Sinn Fein to participate.

Father, son reunited 16 yrs after hijacking episode

COLOMBO, Feb 23: A Sri Lankan man who hijacked an Italian plane in a bid to get a visa to join his Italian wife and only son has been reunited with the boy 16 years later, press reports here said Monday, reports AP.

Sepala Ekanayake took 261 passengers of an Alitalia jet hostage and threatened to blow up the aircraft in June 1982 at the Bangkok airport unless Italian authorities granted him a visa and paid 300,000 dollars.

The boy, Free, now 19, arrived at Colombo International Airport Saturday for an emotional reunion with his father with both breaking into tears, newspapers here said.

They both took a minute to recognise each other after 16 years apart, the Sinhalese-language Divaina daily said. They looked at each other for a moment and then went rushing to embrace, the Divaina said.

Free is due to spend a three-month holiday with his father, the paper said.

Ekanayake who was persuaded to end the hostage drama was returned to the Sri Lankan capital where he was immediately arrested and the ransom money of 300,000 dollars taken away from him.

His Italian wife and son returned to Sri Lanka while Ekanayake was kept in remand custody. He won a court order preventing his wife taking Free back to Italy but by the time the order was issued, Free had already been taken off the island.

Botha pleads not guilty

GEORGE, South Africa, Feb 23: Former president FW Botha today pleaded not guilty in the magistrate's court here to ignoring a subpoena to appear before the truth and reconciliation commission, reports AP.

The 82-year-old Botha failed to appear before a TRC hearing on December 19 into his leadership of the now-defunct state security council which brutally enforced apartheid.

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Asians oppose proposed NY law banning nose piercing

NEW YORK, Feb 23: A new law proposed by a New York state legislator to ban nose piercing for those under 18 has raised opposition from South Asians, who say it is a centuries-old tradition in the subcontinent, reports India Abroad News Service.

Citing health concerns, a state senator, Frank Padavan, has introduced a law that would make nose piercing illegal in New York for those under 18. The move could also mar the present fast amongst the young to get various parts of their bodies - ranging from navel, eyebrows, lips to tongues - pierced. The law, which was introduced in January, would fine merchants for piercing any part of the body, except the ears, of a minor. Merchants who pierce a minor would face a 500 US dollar fine or three months in jail. The law would also make it a misdemeanour to pierce or apply a tattoo to anyone who is intoxicated.

Padavan said in announcing the legislation: "Since the majority of tattooists and body piercers are not trained as health care practitioners, the risk of bacterial infection, hepatitis B and AIDS has been recognised by the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) AIDS/HIV division." Many South Asians said that nose piercing is an important tradition among them that should remain legal for those under 18.

"I personally don't like it," Sunita Kanwar, manager of Krishna Jewellers, told IANS. "There's no way they would pass it. That would be kind of silly."

"In India, nose piercing has been done since the beginning of time and I don't think it has anything to do with health concerns," she said. Kanwar said her store performs nose piercing but that it requires minors who want piercing to have their parents present. "When we tell them we need their parents' consent, they don't come back," she said.

Shelly Khan, 18, and a student at Borough of Manhattan Community College, said law to restrict nose piercing for those under 18 is not a good idea.

"That's a cultural thing for Indians. There should be a law against that," she said.

A spokesperson for the CDC told IANS that there is no known case of HIV being transmitted through body piercing, but it recommends tattooists and those offering body piercing follow the same guidelines as health professionals. Padavan said that public health concerns outweigh the cultural significance nose piercing may have for some. "While culture is important, we are talking about health and welfare of children here," he told IANS. In the New York law, there is no provision for parental consent for body piercing, something which exists in laws in other states. Padavan said he "would consider" agreeing to a parental consent clause in the New York law should that be proposed in late negotiations on the bill.

Bills to limit access to minors to body piercing have been sprouting up in legislatures across the country recently, as the popularity of body piercing has grown among teenagers. On January 1, a law went into effect in California that forbade those under 18 to get pierced (except the ears) or tattooed without parental approval. A similar bill was signed in Delaware recently.

But in New Jersey, Governor Christie Todd Whitman vetoed a bill last month that would have severely restricted access of minors to body piercing and tattoos. Padavan would not say whether he expected the New York bill to pass.

Another sponsor of the New York bill, Assemblyman Anthony Semerino, a Democrat from Queens, said that cultural traditions in South Asia should not determine law in New York State. "In South Asia that's fine, but you're in America," he said. Young girls, he said, should wait until they are older before getting their nose pierced. "They should at least understand that they are in a new country and they should try to conform to customs here," he said.

Regional disarmament meet opens in Kathmandu

KATHMANDU, Feb 23: A regional disarmament meeting organised by the United Nations Regional Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Asia and the Pacific opened here Sunday, reports Xinhua.

The meeting falls on the 10th anniversary of the establishment of the regional centre, often referred to as "The Kathmandu Process."

Attending the three-day meeting are 48 diplomats, government officials, scholars and experts from 22 countries and five non-governmental organisations in the region.

In his opening statement, Javantha Dhanapala, UN Under Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, noted that the annual gathering in Kathmandu has become an increasingly important means to assist in identifying and addressing disarmament and security issues.

He said that through its ten-year existence, the regional centre has tried to meet new challenges and to play a distinctive role by responding to the significant changes in the international situation.

First of all, he said, the centre has tried to develop a region-oriented approach for disarmament taking into account the specific conditions prevailing in the Asia-Pacific region.

The centre, a non-governmental security dialogue mechanism, intends to further encourage states within the region to elaborate and employ measures for increasing transparency in military matters, he added.

Secondly, it provided the Asia-Pacific states with an additional forum for them to narrow down differences and search for a common position in disarmament negotiations and deliberations, the senior UN official said.

Thirdly, it has helped introduce principles or guidelines for the region. And fourthly, in addition to disarmament, dealing with region-specific issues is another characteristic of the Kathmandu process, he noted.