

US, British troops enter into Iraq?

TEHRAN, Dec 19: British and US troops entered Iraqi territory last night across the Saudi border, the official Iranian news agency IRNA reported today, says AFP.

Citing informed sources in Khorramshahr, a town bordering Iraq in southwestern Iran, IRNA said the troops had advanced five kilometres into Iraqi territory.

The sources which were not further identified, were unable to say whether or not the troops had remained in Iraq.

An Iraqi Information Ministry official said Friday that Saudi armoured units had advanced to the Iraqi border the previous day on an apparent reconnaissance mission before pulling back.

In Riyadh, an official denied that armour had been moved to the border.

Air raids on Iraq dying away

BAGHDAD, Dec 19: US and British forces blasted Iraq for a third night, the raids dying away today as Iraq's Muslims started to observe Islam's holiest month of Ramadan with prayers for victory, reports Reuters.

Witnesses said the pan-Arab headquarters of Iraq's ruling Baath Party was hit by missiles in Baghdad in the pre-dawn assault, the fiercest in three days of bombardment.

As US security advisers prepared to brief President Bill Clinton on the impact of the attacks, a Gulf television station reported that more than 50 people had been killed in the Iraqi capital since the US led missile and bombing blitz began.

Qatar's Al-Jazeera satellite channel said its correspondent in Baghdad also reported more than 200 people wounded. There

was no official confirmation of the figures and there has been no word on casualties in attacks outside the capital.

The night sky over Baghdad was iridescent with anti-aircraft fire and the thunderous impact of Cruise missiles. Reporters could hear ambulance sirens, but access to the scene of the strikes was restricted by Iraqi officials.

The US and British strikes could end soon, US officials said on Friday. "As early as Friday," one official told Reuters in Washington when asked about a new report that the raids could be halted soon.

The officials, who asked not to be identified, said a final decision was likely after an assessment of the damage to Iraq's military capabilities during the past three nights of strikes.

Iraq's press stepped up its

condemnation of the United States, bellowing defiance and appealing to Arab solidarity.

"Yes, you the people of a great civilisation — we will fight and resist the aggression," the government newspaper Al-Jumhuriya declared.

British media asked which president would fall first.

"Doomed but who will be finished off first?" asked the tabloid Sun, Britain's best-selling newspaper in a splash headline framed by pictures of Clinton and Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

The Guardian newspaper agreed under its headline: "Two presidents in peril — but which one will be toppled first?"

The latest round of attacks coincided with the end of a day-long debate by the US House of Representatives on impeaching Clinton. US officials insisted Clinton's problems at home

over his affair with Monica Lewinsky would not deter the US military from punishing Iraq for its alleged refusal to cooperate with UN arms inspectors.

More Cruise missiles had been fired in the 72-hour-long campaign than nearly 300 during the 1991 Gulf War, US officials said. Intelligence reports showed that the first two days of raids had damaged bases of elite Republican Guard units in Baghdad and Tikrit, Saddam's home town.

The US B-1 bomber, widely derided as a huge waste of the US taxpayer's money, was also in action for the first time.

The attacks have carried a diplomatic price, with Russia and China, US defence experts accused Washington and London of using military action as part of a broader plot to achieve

world domination.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov told US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright by telephone that Moscow-Washington relations could be seriously damaged if the raids continued.

Thousands of stone-throwing demonstrators attacked the US Embassy in Damascus today and US guards fired tear gas at the angry crowd.

In the West Bank, three Palestinian protesters were injured when Israeli troops fired plastic-coated bullets at stone throwers. In Bethlehem, birthplace of Jesus, demonstrators scrubbed flagstones to erase all traces of Clinton, who was given an ecstatic reception to the town just 72 hours earlier.

Malaysian youths protested outside the US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur.



Indian Muslims shout slogans and burn effigies of US President Bill Clinton, right, and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, outside the Jama Masjid during a demonstration in New Delhi Friday. — AP/UNB photo

India, Pakistan among '99's "top 10 hot spots"

WASHINGTON, Dec 19: Iraq, Central Africa and Colombia are expected to be among the 10 most serious areas of conflict and political instability the world will face in 1999, a humanitarian organisation said Friday, reports AP.

World Vision also cited Angola, Sudan, North Korea, Indonesia, the Balkans, Ethiopia/Eritrea and India/Pakistan in its listing of 10 "global hot spot." None of the nations or regions was ranked.

"Regrettably, we tend to view the future as projections of the past," said Dayton Maxwell, a senior policy advisor for World Vision, a relief and development organisation.

Maxwell also noted that more "interstate conflicts" are emerging. In Central Africa, for example, internal stability in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is compounded by the involvement of surrounding nations, such as Angola, Rwanda and Uganda.

World Vision also noted:

— In Colombia, there is civil strife that resembles civil war, the economy is faltering and nearly 800,000 people are unemployed.

— The conflicts between India and Pakistan and between Eritrea and Ethiopia continue. In Angola, the civil war between the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola and the government has started again. In Sudan, the current ceasefire between the government and Christian and animist rebels is scheduled to end Jan 15.

— North Korea's relations with the international community are strained because of fears about possible resumption of its nuclear programme and missile deployment. In Indonesia political divisions are increasing and in the Balkans, fears remain that worse fighting in Kosovo may break out in spring.

Missiles not aimed at real targets

WASHINGTON, Dec 19: When the dust settles in Iraq, the US government says Saddam Hussein will have lost some of his machinery for making nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. But, by design, any existing weapons of mass destruction will survive, reports AP.

President Bill Clinton says the main purpose of the airstrikes is to diminish Iraq's capacity for producing the lethal weaponry that the United States and Britain contend is a threat to the world.

Why, then, are the hundreds of missiles and bombs in the attack not aimed at likely hiding places for weapons that Clinton claims Saddam would not hesitate to use?

"That's a good question, and I don't know the answer," said Brent Scowcroft, who was President George Bush's national security adviser when the issue of Iraq's illicit weaponry first arose in the 1991 Gulf War. If these weapons are the worry, why not bomb

them, he wonders. Tariq Aziz, the Iraqi deputy prime minister, said Friday he knows why.

"The matter is not weapons of mass destruction," he told a Baghdad news conference. "They know that all weapons of mass destruction have been totally destroyed." He asserts that the bombing campaign is intended only to "show that the United States is the sole superpower in the world."

Clinton administration officials say the reasons for not targeting weapons of mass destruction are twofold: They can't be pinpointed with certainty and bombing them might release dangerous poisons and cause additional casualties of innocent civilians.

Instead, US missiles and bombs are aimed at the facilities that support Iraq's weapons programme — a military research and development centre, for example, and a barracks for the Republican Guard military units that are responsible for weapons security. Also, a mis-

sile repair facility.

Defence Secretary William Cohen says the Iraqis can't be believed when they claim they have no weapons of mass destruction.

Saddam Hussein has claimed for eight years that he has no chemical weapons. Cohen said. "Only when confronted with the facts has he retreated and admitted he had been lying."

"So we don't take him at his word that he has none," Cohen added.

David Albright, a former UN nuclear weapons inspector and now president of the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington, said US officials strongly suspect Saddam is still manufacturing nuclear weapons components and probably has some chemical and biological materials.

"But who knows where they might be stored," Albright said. Even if Iraq has such weapons stashed away, the US and British bombing — if suc-

cessful — would make it harder to use them or to manufacture more.

In the longer run, Saddam's ability to threaten the world with illicit weapons may depend on whether he puts out the welcome mat for the United Nations' beleaguered corps of inspectors and lets them work unhindered. If he does not, the United States will have to rely on two tools that Russia and some other countries oppose: indefinite economic sanctions and, perhaps, further military action.

Scowcroft, for one, does not believe that Saddam's weapons programme can be contained without inspectors on the ground.

"I don't think it can be done through sanctions alone," Scowcroft said. "The sanctions keep him from building up his overall military forces, but he gets enough income to apply it toward weapons of mass destruction, especially chemical and biological."

Pak-US dispute over F-16 jets resolved: Sharif

ISLAMABAD, Dec 19: Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said on Saturday Pakistan's long-standing dispute with the United States over the purchase of 28 F-16 fighter planes has been resolved, reports AP.

Pakistan will get 467 million dollars from Washington, the outstanding amount of the money it paid for the fighter planes it never received. Earlier Pakistan had received 157 million dollars as partial repayment.

"The F-16s issue has been a long-standing and a persistent irritant in our bilateral relations with the United States," Sharif told a news conference. "For almost a decade now this issue has been hanging fire between the two countries because, in all these years, the US refused to give us the planes as well as our money."

But that's over now and the money will be returned, he said.

"I am delighted that this issue has been satisfactorily settled," he said.

Delivery of the fighter aircraft was stopped after 1990 when the United States stopped all military and humanitarian aid to Pakistan to protest its nuclear programme.

The repayment of the money to Pakistan will be divided into a 327 million cash payment before the end of December and a 140 million dollars payment in wheat and other commodities over the next two years, he said.

"As Pakistan must make annual purchases of wheat against cash, we deem this arrangement to be entirely satisfactory and as good as receiving cash payment," Sharif said.

Sharif, who met US President Bill Clinton in Washington earlier this month, said in a statesman-like manner, he (Clinton) has honoured his commitment.

BRIEFLY

CPI-ML leader Mishra dead:

Vinod Mishra, one of the vanguards of the Naxalite movement, died in Lucknow on Friday following a cardiac arrest, one of his top aides said, PTI reports from Lucknow.

Mishra, general secretary of CPI-ML (liberation group), was 52. He is survived by wife and a daughter.

Serb mayor killed in Kosovo:

Kosovo's secessionist Albanians rebels are denying responsibility for the killing of a Serb municipal leader, amid Serb threats to launch another security sweep, AP reports from Pristina.

The body of Zvonko Bojanic, district mayor of Kosovo Polje, 5 km west of Pristina, was found dumped along a roadside Friday, a wrapping up what has been the bloodiest week in the province since a US-brokered agreement in October. Bojanic had been badly beaten, with multiple fracture wounds, and was shot between the eyes.

MSP leader to contest Algerian polls:

The biggest Islamic fundamentalist political party in Algeria, the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), formerly Hamas, announced on Friday that its leader would be a candidate in presidential polls due in April, AFP reports from Algiers.

At a press conference, the chairman of the MSP consultative council the 'majlis al-Shura' Tayeb Aziz said the council had agreed "unanimously" to nominate MSP leader Sheikh Mahfoud Nahnah as its presidential candidate.

Rare manuscripts stolen in UK:

Centuries-old manuscripts and books, including works by William Shakespeare and Geoffrey Chaucer, are missing from a university library in northern England, AP reports from Durham.

The two manuscripts and five books, worth more than 250,000 pounds, were taken out of a glass-topped display case at Durham University's library, police said.



Members of the women brigade of Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI) tussle over a baton with police officers during a mass law violation in protest against price rise and other issues in Calcutta Friday. — AP/UNB photo

3 soldiers found dead in Karachi

KARACHI, Dec 19: The mutilated bodies of two Pakistani army soldiers and an air force technician were found in the violent southern port city of Karachi early Saturday, police said, reports AP.

The three men had been kidnapped earlier. Police said the bodies showed signs of "severe torture".

The bodies of the three men were found in an abandoned vehicle, they said.

Last month the government called in the army to aid police in quelling relentless violence between rival factions of the ethnic-based Muttahida Qami Movement (MQM).

About 1,000 people have died this year in the factional feud.

No one has taken responsibility for the killing, but police are blaming the ethnic group, a former ally of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government.

Muslim extremist leader killed in Philippines

ISABELA, Philippines, Dec 19: The leader of a Muslim extremist group who was the Philippines' most wanted man has been killed in a raid by police and soldiers on his mountain hideout in the southern part of the country, officials said on Saturday, reports AP.

Three police officers, including the leader of the raiding team, and another member of the Abu Sayyaf extremist group also died in the ensuing gunfight late Friday in a remote village on Basilan island.

The body of Abu Sayyaf leader Abdurajak Abubakar Janjalani was identified by his relatives and Basilan Gov Wahab Akbar.

"We are glad it is over," Akbar said. "I advised him to surrender before, but he never listened. Now my people can live in peace. It is the end of the road for Janjalani. It is over, thank Allah."

Police were informed of the whereabouts of Janjalani and about 20 armed followers by local agents on Friday and immediately organised special commando units for the raid on the village of Tumakit in Lamitan, about 880 km south of Manila.



With Iraqi flags and guns Palestinian boys raise hands as they shout anti-President Clinton, US and British slogans during a sit-in at the entrance to Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp in Sidon, south Lebanon, Friday protesting the air strikes on Iraq. — AP/UNB photo

N Ireland moves closer to peace

Armed groups under pressure to surrender weapons

BELFAST, Northern Ireland, Dec 19: The outlawed Irish Republican Army — and other armed groups — are coming under increased pressure to surrender their weapons after Northern Ireland moved closer to peace, reports AP.

Politicians agreed Friday on the shape of the new government, and the province watched hopefully as the first terrorist weapons were handed over and destroyed under the April peace accord.

"They have been given an example, let them and other paramilitaries follow it," said David Trimble, the Protestant politician elected to lead Northern Ireland's future government.

On Friday, the Loyalist Volunteer Force began the disarmament process by handing in nine submachine guns, rifles and pistols, 350 rounds of

ammo, six detonators and two pipe bombs.

That gesture followed a successful 18-hour negotiating session by Protestant and Catholic politicians that agreed the shape of the new coalition government's executive body, a subject that had bedeviled them over the past two months.

With those two steps, coming in a matter of hours of each other, the peace process seemed to get back on track.

"I never thought I'd see the day," said a teary-eyed Michael McGoldrick, father of the Protestant terrorist group's first murder victim, as he watched the symbolic televised sight of a gun barrel being sawed in two.

The Loyalist Volunteers spent two years killing Catholics at random in hopes of derailing peace negotiations, but called a ceasefire in May in recognition of widespread pub-

lic support for the accord.

Under the watchful eye of John de Chastelain, the Canadian army general who leads the independent disarmament commission, the group gave up a larger-than-expected chunk of its arsenal in hopes of shaming the IRA into matching the gesture.

But the IRA on the Catholic side, along with Ulster Defence Association and Ulster Volunteer Force on the Protestant side, bluntly dismissed Friday's start to disarmament as a cynical stunt that wouldn't move them. All three groups have repeatedly refused to disarm — a stance the IRA reaffirmed only last week.

Pressure, however, is mounting. And particularly on the IRA: whose allied Sinn Fein party wants to take its seats as soon as the new government administration is formed.

Off the Record

Greetings war

LUCKNOW: Politicians in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh are fighting a greetings war to mark the New Year, reports AP.

Lawmakers and members of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party, which is in power in Uttar Pradesh, are preparing to mail thousands of greeting cards with pictures of a mushroom cloud, representing India's successful nuclear tests this May.

The BJP said the tests were the biggest achievement so far this year. The party is also in power in India, with the help of 18 regional parties.

The Congress Party, the main opposition group in India's federal legislature and the party which ruled the country for most of its 51 years of independence, designed cards showing onions — whose sixfold price hike in recent weeks was among the reasons for the BJP's rout in three crucial state legislature elections recently.

The socialist Samajwadi Party, too, is designing a card showing the BJP's alleged anti-Muslim attitude and the reported connection of BJP lawmakers with criminals in Uttar Pradesh. The Independent Election Commission has said in the past that dozens of lawmakers in Uttar Pradesh have criminal records. The BJP has repeatedly been blamed for increasing Hindu-Muslim tension in India over the years.

The Bahujan Samaj Party, which represents low-caste Hindus, is also planning to print cards highlighting what it calls rampant corruption in the state administration.

Mighty mice!

BANGKOK: They've infiltrated, overrun and occupied the once impregnable corridors of Thailand's Ministry of Defence, reports AP.

Now Thailand's top brass has pledged to exterminate them. Are they the Myanmarese, Japanese, Chinese, Laotians or Vietnamese?

No. They're mice. Thousands of the furry pests have infested the ministry, said Gen Theeradet Meephian, Permanent Secretary of Defence, according to Saturday's Bangkok Post newspaper.

They've chewed through telephone lines and computer cables, bitten into official documents and virtually occupied many offices, he said.

As is the case with many of Thailand's oldest ministries, the defence ministry buildings were built more than a century ago.

While its 19th-century low-rise European style buildings, replete with columns and verandas, are pleasing to the eye, when it comes to rodents its defence capabilities are suspect.

In fact, Gen Theeradet said his ministry is at a loss of how to beat back the invaders and so is seeking help from an ally that is legendary for its ability to confound all those who attempt to penetrate its inner sanctums: the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, the capital's city hall.

Longest scroll painting

LUCKNOW: A retired Indian arts professor has made it to the Guinness Book of World Records for the world's longest scroll painting on silk.

"I received the certificate from the Guinness Book of Records on Wednesday," Lucknow-based Sanjay Kumar Chatterjee, 63, who retired as head of the Department of Fine Arts at the Himachal Pradesh University, Shimla in Himachal Pradesh, told India Abroad News Service. The award-winning painting measures 100 ft by 11 ft (about 30m by 3.3m) and weighs just 2.5 kg.

Prof Chatterjee already figures in India's Limca Book of Records for his three previous paintings.

"Synchronisation of nuclear physics and Indian mythology" is the common theme he has given to each of these. Chatterjee proposes to put up his entire work on giant size scrolls at an exhibition in New Delhi.

Anwar's wife calls for his release during Ramadan

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 19: Jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim's wife on Saturday appealed for his release on bail during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, reports AP.

Azzah Ismail, the sacked deputy prime minister's wife, made the request as she submitted an application to officially register a pro-reform group that will seek greater political freedom in the Southeast Asian nation.

"For the month of Ramadan, we appeal to the government to release Anwar on bail," she told reporters. Ramadan begins in predominantly Muslim Malaysia from Sunday.

Azzah announced the creation of the pro-reform group on Dec 10 but said it was not going to contest elections.

Police have threatened Azzah with jail if she took up the leadership of the nascent movement that her husband began. But she has openly defied

the authorities by giving interviews and making statements. On Saturday, she was accompanied by her eldest daughter, Nurul Izzah, when she went to the office of the Registrar of Societies in Kuala Lumpur.

Along with forms for registration, she submitted the logo of the group, named Adil, the Malay word for justice.

Meanwhile, the adopted brother of Anwar Ibrahim failed to win reprieve on Saturday from a six-month prison sentence when an appeals court dismissed his case.

Sukma Darmawan was imprisoned for allegedly engaging in sodomy with his brother.

Sukma petitioned judicial authorities by arguing he should have been tried by an Islamic Shariat Court, not under civil law. But an appellate court on Saturday upheld an earlier decision by Malaysia's High Court to reject his plea.

Iraqis prepare for Ramadan

BAGHDAD, Dec 19: Nervous Iraqis hurried home late Friday with baskets full of food and sugar-coated rolls to prepare for Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, awaiting another round of US and British bombardment, reports AP.

Mosques were lighted up with neon strips, and preachers congratulated the Muslims on the coming of the month of virtue, which marks Prophet Mohammed's (SM) receiving the Holy Quran from Allah about 1,400 years ago.

"May Allah help us enjoy peace and stability in Ramadan. May Allah bring humiliation and shame on our enemies," blared loudspeakers from atop a minaret near the Culture and Information Ministry where foreign journalists work.

The United States and Britain have vowed to continue their air and missile campaign to force President Saddam Hussein's government to accept unhindered UN searches for its

prohibited weapons of mass destruction.

After days of missile blasts, fear grips Baghdad's five million people once night falls. On Friday night, streets were empty of pedestrians and shops that usually stay until early in the morning had closed down. Cars were still on the streets, though, when anti-aircraft fire lit up Baghdad's night sky.

There was no spontaneous sentiment against Americans on the streets. When pressed to say who is to blame for their predicament, some Iraqis reply — with typical Islamic resignation — that all has been decided by Allah in advance.

Petrol is plentiful and residents say there have been no power cuts in the past three days. But air strikes have downgraded state-run television and radio. Saddam's picture and voice wavered when addressing the nation on Friday evening.

"It's fine without (state) television and radio. Kids go to bed early but they go crazy at the sound of bombs and anti-aircraft guns," said Ibrahim Farhan, a teacher.

The government has temporarily closed schools and universities since many students belong to militias guarding communication centres and the main streets in the capital.

While Saddam exhorted his people to resist, many in Baghdad hoped the beginning of Ramadan would usher in nights with no bombs and missiles. Some were doubtful this would happen.

It is not in the Islamic tradition not to wage war during Ramadan. Early Muslims fought all day without eating or drinking. And we Arabs launched a war against Israel in 1973 during Ramadan," said Hussein Hameed, a Baghdad resident.

Numan Abdulkarim, out shopping for Ramadan, said he would pray all night that his wife and three grown children will be able to have their Suhour — the light morning meal — to the sound of Quran recitations and not deafening bombs.

"We are by nature a peaceful people, but I do not know what has happened to us," he said.

But while ordinary people yearned for a peaceful Ramadan, their leaders gave no hint of a peaceful solution.

Both Saddam and Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz declared Friday that Iraq can withstand the bombing and defeat its enemies.

Saad Qassem Hammoudi, a senior official of the ruling Baath party, spurned the idea that Iraqis were afraid of war.

"The Iraqis believe in the just cause and fight for the lifting of sanctions. They will continue their steadfastness no matter the sacrifices," he told The Associated Press.

Jiang vows to continue one-party rule

BEIJING, Dec 19: China's move to crush a would-be opposition party has gathered force: President Jiang Zemin vowed one-party rule would not be shaken, key opposition organisers went on trial for subversion and a rights group said Saturday another organiser was sent to a labour camp, reports AP.

The developments were the latest in a campaign against the China Democracy Party that began three weeks ago. Activists around the country in June started to form what they hoped would be communist China's first opposition party.

Xu Wenli, a veteran dissident who was the opposition group's adviser and a leading organiser, faced trial Monday for subversion. Two other leaders, Qin Yongmin and Wang Youcai, were tried separately on Thursday, but no verdict was immediately announced.

Prison terms were virtually certain. The maximum term the three faced was life.

Authorities sent another organiser to a labour camp for three years without trial, the Hong Kong-based Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China reported on Saturday.

Xu Wangping, 36, was detained on October 14 and sent to the Xishanping labour camp outside Chongqing, in southwestern China's Sichuan province, earlier this month, the Information Centre said.

He was a former factory worker who served an eight-year prison sentence for trying to organize an independent labour union during the 1989 democracy protests. Since his release in 1997, he had been organising a branch of the China Democracy Party in Sichuan, the monitoring centre said.