



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi boy Hussein Ali Mohammed lies in Baghdad's Ali Yarmuk hospital late on Friday after allegedly having been injured in a US-British airstrike on what Washington and London said were air defence systems outside Baghdad.

Strike against Iraq effective, Pentagon says

AP, Washington

The joint US-British air strike against Iraq, described by President George W Bush as routine, was the biggest blow against Saddam Hussein's military in more than two years and involved two dozen attack planes armed with precision-guided missiles, Pentagon officials say.

"A routine mission was conducted to enforce the 'no-fly' zone" over southern Iraq, Bush said Friday. "It was a mission about which I was informed and I authorized. But I repeat, it's a routine mission."

It was the first military action ordered by the new president, who inherited and Iraq policy that has evolved from the 1991 Persian Gulf War that his father carried out to evict the Iraqi army from Kuwait. A key part of that policy is enforcement of no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq, a mission that has taxed the US military while also taking a heavy toll on Iraq's extensive air defenses.

Iraq does not accept the legitimacy of the no-fly zones. Iraqi television said one person was killed and 11 injured in Friday's attack.

Bush was in Mexico meeting with President Vicente Fox at the time the missiles were launched at about 1730 GMT. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Bush gave the go-ahead on Thursday.

At the Pentagon, Marine Lt Gen. Gregory Newbold, director of operations

for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called the strike a "self-defense measure" initiated by the commander of US forces in the Persian Gulf. The number of US and British attack planes involved 24 was much larger than in previous missions over northern and southern Iraq in recent years.

Dozens of support aircraft also were involved, including electronic jamming and radar control planes.

Bush's approval was required, Newbold said, because the mission was not the usual small-scale attack that American and British pilots have carried out almost routinely inside the no-fly zones. It was the first strike at targets outside the southern flight-restriction zone since December 1998, officials said.

The Pentagon said five targets were struck, including long-range surveillance radars and associated facilities that Iraq has used more frequently over the past six weeks to coordinate its defenses against American and British patrols. The radars allow Iraq to make better use of its surface-to-air missiles.

The US Central Command said Iraq recently increased its use of anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles, with more than 60 incidents since Jan 1. It gave no figures for previous periods.

In London, Defence Secretary Geoffrey Hoon said the attacks were a "proportionate response" to an increase threat to patrolling aircraft.

Taliban capture Bamiyan

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's ruling Taliban claimed yesterday to have retaken the strategic city of Bamiyan in the central highlands after fierce fighting.

The opposition forces conceded a loss of some ground, but vowed the city was still under its control.

"We have taken the city centre this morning and our forces are continuing their advance," senior Taliban spokesman Abdul Hai Mutmaen said.

Earlier Taliban's Bakhtar news agency chief Abdul Hanan Hemat told AFP: "We launched our attack after sunrise and captured the town and its surrounding areas after three hours."

"Fierce fighting is still going on as our forces continue their advance," he said.

UN warns of impending fall of Palestinian Authority

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan appealed to Israelis and Palestinians on Friday to resume peace talks, while a top UN official warned that the Palestinian Authority was close to collapse.

In a statement, Annan said Israel's economic blockade of the West Bank and Gaza "deprive the Palestinian Authority (PA) of necessary financial resources and aggravate the serious economic and social crisis in the occupied territories."

The statement said Annan had told Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon that he was "very concerned about the capacity of the Palestinian Authority to continue to function".

Earlier, the UN's special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, Terje Roed-Larsen, said "the fiscal crisis is acute" and "Palestinian institutions may crumble in the very near future."

The crisis flowed from Israel's decision to withhold transfers to the

PA of value added tax (VAT) collected by Israeli customs officials, he told a news conference.

Roed-Larsen said 50 million dollars a month was needed "to keep the PA afloat," and that the money held back by Israel already totalled 54 million dollars.

The PA was relying on a bank overdraft to pay the salaries of its doctors, teachers and civil servants for February and "within a few weeks it will be unable to pay salaries at all," he said.

"The fiscal crisis could lead to an institutional collapse, which will lead to further violence," he went on.

He added: "We already have a situation in parts of the West Bank and Gaza where we do not feel the PA is completely in control."

Two Palestinians and an Israeli soldier were killed Friday, taking to 415 the number of people who have died since the start of the Palestinian uprising on September 28.

In his statement, issued by his spokesman Fred Eckhard, Annan

expressed "grave concern at the growing cycle of violence and counter-violence."

Warning that further violence could have "very serious consequences for the entire region," he called on both sides to "exercise maximum restraint and caution, and to resume their dialogue in order to achieve a just, lasting and comprehensive peace."

Annan said he had instructed Roed-Larsen to undertake urgent consultations to prevent the destabilisation of the Palestinian territories.

Roed-Larsen said he would visit Washington on Tuesday and Wednesday for talks with senior US State Department and White House officials.

He said he had "discussed transfers of 60 million euros in budget support from the European Union" with EU officials in Brussels last week but so far only 10 million dollars had been made available, by Norway.

Nagaland outlaws recruiting teens

AFP, Guwahati

An outlawed tribal separatist guerrilla group has been recruiting teenagers in India's troubled north-eastern state of Nagaland, officials said yesterday.

Nagaland Chief Minister S C Jamir said militants from the banned National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-IM) were "holding captive" a number of teenagers in remote jungle areas as part of special recruitment drive.

"Reports of young boys being forcibly recruited by the NSCN (IM) group has come to light after security forces rescued 22 youngsters from one of the rebel hideouts", the chief minister told AFP from the state capital Kohima.

"We have been getting reports of youths being forcibly inducted by the militants".

Indian army soldiers rescued the 22 youths, aged between 16 and 20, earlier this week from the Phek district in eastern Nagaland as they were being taken by the militants to a secret "combat training hideout".

There has been no immediate reaction from the NSCN (IM) about the incident.

During interrogation, the boys

said they were forcibly held hostage by the militants and that they were now afraid to go back to their villages because of possible retaliation by their captors.

"We shall first seek the consent of the boys' families and the village councils and would like them to be rehabilitated," said Brigadier A S Lamba, an army commander in Nagaland.

The boys are now lodged at an army base camp.

The NSCN (IM), fighting for an independent tribal homeland, entered into a ceasefire agreement in August 1997 and has held several rounds of peace talks with the Indian government aimed at ending five-decades of violent insurrection in the region.

More than 25,000 people have lost their lives in the conflict in Nagaland in the past 52 years.

The Nagaland local government says the latest incident was a clear violation of the ceasefire by the NSCN (IM).

"In the name of ceasefire, the NSCN (IM) has been doing all kinds of illegal things from extortion to kidnapping and looting," the chief minister said.



PHOTO: AFP

A model wears an elaborately detailed hat with an outfit at the Bob Mackie show during Fall 2001 Fashion Week in New York on Friday.

13 troops, 6 Islamists killed in Algeria

AFP, Algiers

Thirteen soldiers and six armed Islamists were killed during a clash near Sidi Bel Abbes, 440 kilometers southwest of Algiers, press reports said yesterday.

The clash, the second in two days in the area, occurred late on Thursday. Twelve Islamic militants and two soldiers died on Tuesday near Sidi Bel Abbes in a confrontation between an armed Islamic group and security forces.

"US- Mexico summit successful"

AFP, Mexico City

Mexican President Vicente Fox gave an upbeat assessment of his meeting with US President George W. Bush, telling a news conference late Friday that the day-long summit went "extraordinarily well."

In an interview with the Televisa television network here, Fox said he and Bush had discussed bilateral relations and regional affairs at length.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters run for cover after burning tires in downtown Srinagar on Friday. One civilian was killed and dozen others including six police officers were injured during clashes between police and Kashmiri protesters demonstrating against the recent killing of protesters by Indian troops.

UN pleads for more aid for Afghan refugees

AFP, Peshawar

United Nations Under Secretary General Kenzo Oshima yesterday appealed to international donors to do more to help hundreds of thousands of Afghans displaced by drought and war.

"Fighting in Afghanistan must stop and the international community can and should do more to help suffering people," Oshima said, while visiting a refugee camp near here.

About 130,000 Afghans are living at the Jalozai camp, located 25 kilometres from here in miserable conditions.

They include some 80,000 out of an estimated 170,000 new refugees who arrived in Pakistan since

September, fleeing the drought and civil war between the ruling Taliban and its opponents.

"I have come here representing the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to see plight of refugees and raise awareness about their situation," Oshima said.

"These people are really in very bad, unbelievable misery. It is really heart-breaking to see these people," he said.

Oshima has already visited Afghanistan to inspect the displacement camps set up there in western Herat region after the worst drought in living memory and the unending civil war drove more than 600,000 people from their homes since mid-2000.

Protests mark appointment of judge in Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Several hundred opposition supporters demonstrated in the Malaysian capital yesterday to protest the appointment of former attorney-general Mokhtar Abdullah as a judge in the country's highest court.

The youth chiefs of the National Justice Party (Keadilan) and the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) lodged a complaint at a police station nearby the court buildings

over Mokhtar's alleged misconduct.

A crowd of 500 supporters and onlookers gathered near the police station, shouting "Reformasi" or reform, but most fled and regrouped at a nearby department store after riot police warned them to disperse.

Police said three people were detained during a one-hour standoff between the supporters and some three dozen riot police armed with rattan canes and shields and backed by a water cannon.

The crowd later marched down

to the Merdeka Square across the court buildings before dispersing peacefully. Police stood guard but did not take any action.

PAS youth chief Mahfuz Omar told reporters they had urged police to investigate Mokhtar's conduct while he was attorney-general.

"He has made selective prosecution and abused his powers as attorney-general," Mahfuz said. "He is not qualified to be a judge in any courts."

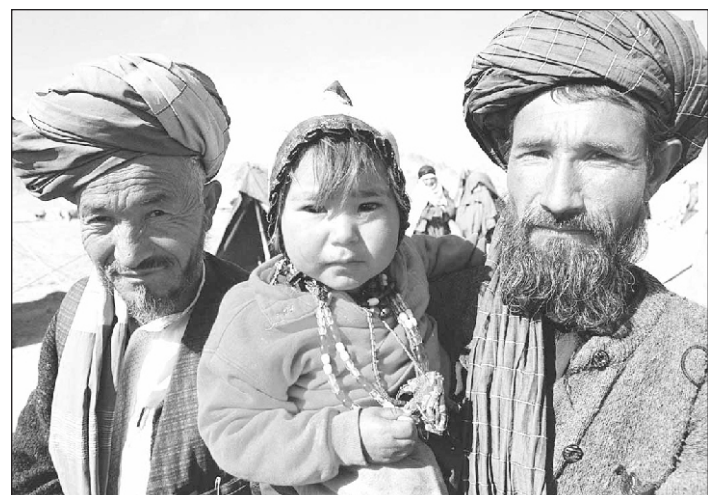


PHOTO: AFP

Two elders of displaced Afghan families and a child wait for medical assistance in Afghanistan's western city of Herat on Thursday. Some 80,000 people have sought shelter at poorly equipped displacement camps around this western city since mid-2000 due to drought and war.