



PHOTO: AFP
This photo released on Tuesday shows Queen Elizabeth II standing in the 18th Century Room at Buckingham Palace in front of a 1771 portrait by Johann Zoffany of George III, who was king for 59 years (1760-1820). This photograph is one of a Golden Jubilee portfolio of photographs being unveiled on Wednesday to mark the 50th anniversary of the Queen's accession.

Queen marks 50 yrs in throne

AFP, London

Queen Elizabeth on Wednesday marks 50 years since her accession to the British throne, a date tinged with sadness because it is the anniversary of the death of her father, King George VI.

The queen usually spends February 6 quietly at the royal residence of Sandringham, eastern England, where her father, who had been suffering from lung cancer, died peacefully in his sleep.

But this year, her golden jubilee, she has decided to carry out a public engagement and will open a cancer care unit.

Her visit to the Macmillan Centre in King's Lynn, eastern England, will be a poignant reminder of her father's death half a century ago, when the world was a very different place.

In 1952, Britons were still languishing under austerity measures as the nation struggled to rebuild after the privations of the Second World War.

Those years, battling Nazi tyranny and the threat of invasion, had been a strain for the royal family and ordinary Britons alike.

In peace and victory, the nervous and somewhat reluctant king, thrust on to the throne in 1936 after the abdication of his love-struck brother Edward VIII, increasingly retired to Sandringham, where he enjoyed the life of a country squire.

Years of heavy smoking had taken their toll, and suffering poor blood circulation, George's health was in decline.

In May 1951, a shadow had been detected on the king's lung and in September a malignant growth was discovered.

He was not informed of the full extent of his illness but underwent surgery in London to have the cancerous lung removed.

Doctors said they were satisfied with the king's progress and, on January 31, 1952, the 56-year-old George waved goodbye to his daughter Elizabeth, who embarked at London airport on an official Commonwealth visit.

The king returned to Sandringham. On February 5, after a day out shooting during which he bagged nine hares, he retired to his room at about 10:30 pm.

He was found dead by his valet at 7:30 am on Wednesday, February 6. The cause of death was given as coronary thrombosis, a blood clot that interrupted the supply of blood to his heart.

News of her father's death, and of her immediate accession to the throne, was sent to the 25-year-old Elizabeth in Kenya.

She was crowned queen at London's Westminster Abbey on June 2, 1953.

Afterwards she resumed the tour of the Commonwealth cut short by her father's death, the beginning of half a century dominated by royal duties.

The climax of her golden jubilee celebrations this year will be a four-day public holiday from June 1 to June 4 with spectacular fireworks, bell-ringing across the country and a carnival pageant in London.

The queen will make a personal address to both Houses of Parliament in London's historic Westminster Hall, and will hold a private dinner for European kings and queens at Windsor Castle, west of the capital.

Meanwhile, royal officials hope a star-studded pop concert in the grounds of Buckingham Palace in early June will prove a popular hit.

Though the British public's traditional respect for the monarchy has declined sharply since the queen's accession to the throne, support for Elizabeth personally remains strong.

Sixty-five percent think she is doing a good or excellent job, a recent poll found, and another 24 percent that she is performing fairly well.

No Iraqi terrorism against US since '93

AFP, Washington

They also come on the heels of a statement last week by President George W. Bush's -- the former president's son -- accusing Iraq, Iran and North Korea of forming an "axis of evil," in which he said Baghdad "continues... to support terror."

The unidentified intelligence officials also confirmed to the Times that there was a meeting in Prague between an Iraqi intelligence official and Mohammed Atta, the leader of the 19 people who hijacked four airplanes in the September 11 attacks on the United States.

However, the officials said they did not believe the meeting provides enough evidence to tie Iraq to the attacks.

Other experts maintain that even if Baghdad were somehow involved in the September 11 attacks, Saddam Hussein would never have entrusted such a sensitive matter to a mid-level intelligence officer like Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani, who is reported to have met Atta.

US indicts 'American Taliban' on 10-count

AFP, Washington

The United States threw the book at "American Taliban" John Walker Lindh, charging him with conspiring with the Afghan Islamic militia to kill his own countrymen, but denied it was planning to attack Iran, Iraq or North Korea.

A 12-member federal grand jury found the 21-year-old Walker Lindh, who was captured fighting on the side of the Taliban in Afghanistan, to be "an al-Qaeda-trained terrorist who conspired to kill his fellow citizens," said US Attorney General John Ashcroft.

The 10-count indictment formalised six charges already levelled by the federal government and added four new ones: conspiracy to contribute services to al-Qaeda, contributing services to the network, conspiracy to supply services to the Taliban, and using and carrying firearms and destructive devices during crimes of violence.

"If convicted of these charges Walker Lindh could receive multiple life sentences, six additional 10-year sentences, plus 30 years," Ashcroft said Tuesday.

Meanwhile US Secretary of State Colin Powell said that President George W. Bush's characterisation of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an "axis of evil" was "deserving," but that the United States was not about to invade any of the countries.

"It does not mean that we are ready to invade anyone or that we are not willing to engage in dialogue -- quite the contrary," Powell told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In an apparent response to US claims that Iran was helping al-Qaeda members escape from Afghanistan, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi said Iran would deport to their home countries any al-Qaeda or Taliban fighters found within its borders.

Pak police close in on Pearl kidnappers

AFP, Karachi

been able to arrest anyone from there or not, but the raid was conducted," he said.

Earlier police in the southern port city of Karachi, where Pearl was last seen 14 days ago, made a series of arrests in what they said could lead to a "breakthrough" in the search.

Three people were arrested during a raid on a house in Karachi where police had traced the source of the e-mails containing photos of Pearl, which were sent to media organisations.

"This was the place where the e-mails were sent from. We are expecting a breakthrough from these people, we are interrogating them," a senior investigator told AFP on condition of anonymity.

But the three were not Muslim militants Mohammad Hashim Qadeer, Mohammad Bashir and Imtiaz Siddiqui, identified earlier Tuesday as "prime suspects."

"I don't know whether they have

US to continue to work with Arafat 'ME tensions threaten world stability'

AFP, Cairo

The United States will continue to work with the Palestinian Authority and its elected leader, Yasser Arafat, US Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East William Burns said here Wednesday.

"Our position is very clear, and that is that President Arafat is the elected leader of the Palestinian people, that we continue to work with the Palestinian Authority," Burns told reporters after meeting Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

In the wake of Palestinian suicide bombings last month, US President George W. Bush accused Arafat of "enhancing terror" and has threatened to sever all links with the Palestinian Authority if he fails to crack down on terrorism.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Monday that Arafat must "choose once and for all the option of

peace over violence" and that he "cannot engage with us and others in the pursuit of peace and at the same time permit or tolerate continued violence and terror."

Burns said he discussed with Mubarak "how we can work together to take advantage of what may be a renewed opportunity to move ahead," citing "many ideas that are out there contained in the Mitchell report, in the Tenet security workplan."

The Tenet understanding, named after US CIA director George Tenet, sets out a mechanism for implementing a ceasefire, after which the Mitchell plan, a blueprint for moving the peace process back on track, can be put into effect.

Resuming negotiations "requires some very difficult positions and some real actions on the part of the Palestinian Authority, and we've been frustrated by the failure to

make kind of the maximum effort that was called upon before," Burns said.

"We also recognise there are obligations that the Israeli government has as well," said the US official, who is also scheduled to meet Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher during his Cairo visit.

Meanwhile, failure to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians threatens stability around the world, and the international community must act to help end the conflict, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat told Wednesday's Mirror daily. Interviewed in Ramallah on the West Bank, Arafat told the British tabloid that he was "committed" to peace and that the Palestinians were ready to live as "an equal neighbour" alongside Israel.

"We are ready to end the conflict," he added.

Asked to respond to his com-

ments, Britain's Foreign Office said it was undertaking intensive diplomacy in a bid to help bring violence to an end, but said Arafat must make "100 percent effort" to break up paramilitary groups operating from his territory.

A cycle of Palestinian suicide bombings and Israeli retaliation raids has seen almost 1,200 people killed in the Middle East over the past 18 months.

Arafat told the Mirror: "Britain and other countries must act now to stop the situation. I'm asking all our friends to work very hard and very quickly to help end the conflict."

"The whole international community will be directly affected by what happens here. Our peace is the platform for the whole peace."

Asked by a Mirror journalist if peace in the Middle East was likely in his lifetime, Arafat said: "There is no doubt. No doubt."

Lanka inches towards peace

Scandinavians to monitor truce

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels are poised to clinch a formal bilateral truce to be monitored by Nordic countries and clear the way for direct peace talks, official sources said Wednesday.

Peace broker Norway is sending deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen here Thursday to wrap up a bilateral ceasefire agreement ahead of negotiations aimed at ending decades of ethnic bloodshed.

Sources close to the peace process said considerable progress had been made in finalising the ceasefire deal, and both the Tamil Tigers and the Colombo government appeared to be more flexible than earlier.

Sources also revealed the Indian Ocean atoll nation of the Maldives was being considered as a possible alternate venue for talks after New Delhi was lukewarm to rebel demands for a base in the Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is fighting for an independent homeland in the north and east of the island, has been banned in India since the group was blamed for the May 1991 assassination of

former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi.

After the Tigers and the government began observing unilateral ceasefires at Christmas, the LTTE asked that its London-based chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, be allowed to have a base in Tamil Nadu so he could travel the short distance to northern Sri Lanka to meet rebel leaders.

But after India's objections, hectic diplomatic efforts to find an alternative raised the possibility of the Maldives although the matter has not been decided yet, official sources said.

Meanwhile, Balasingham Wednesday accused President Chandrika Kumaratunga of trying to undermine Norway's peace drive and denied her claims that they were recruiting child soldiers.

He said Kumaratunga had raised the question of forced conscription of children in a bid to create "controversy and apprehensions" over the peace initiatives.

Kumaratunga Tuesday expressed "deep concern" that the guerrillas were conscripting children during the ongoing truce and urged the rebels to honour commitments on the issue given to the UN Children's Fund in 1998.

India, Russia in talks to finalise arms deal

AFP, New Delhi

firing cruise missiles.

The deputy prime minister also held talks with Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh.

Vladimir Ladanov, political analyst in the Russian embassy in New Delhi, said "a lot of good things" were expected from Klebanov's visit, which would include the signing of a military protocol on Thursday.

As well as the submarine leases, the protocol could also signal the joint production of Russian war jets in India as well as the sale of long-range Russian bombers to the Indian air force.

Experts say the whole agreement could be worth in excess of one billion dollars.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov (L) shakes hands with Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes before a meeting in New Delhi on Wednesday. Klebanov said on Tuesday that traditional allies India and Russia were on the threshold of a "quantum jump" in military partnership and called for greater defence cooperation between the two nations.

US prepared for casualties in extended war on terror

AFP, Zamboanga

The US military said Wednesday it is prepared to take casualties in its joint operations in the southern Philippines against local allies of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terror network.

American involvement in the operations against the Muslim Abu Sayyaf guerrillas would only be temporary, however, and there are no plans to set up permanent bases in the strife-torn south, said US Pacific Command special operations chief Brigadier General Donald Wurster.

Wurster acknowledged US soldiers joining patrols could be killed if the joint patrols came under attack by the Abu Sayyaf gunmen.

No question (about it), American

soldiers could be there where they could become injured or killed if the Philippine army is attacked," Wurster told reporters after calling on officials of this southern city, the staging ground for the joint operations.

The US government, however, is prepared to accept the risk "to achieve the more quality objective" of helping Manila crush the rebels.

He noted that the Philippine military has suffered heavy casualties while trying to rescue hostages Martin and Gracia Burnham of Kansas and Filipina nurse Deborah Yap.

US official in India to derail terror funding

AFP, New Delhi

Bush's message of restraint to India and Pakistan who have massed troops on their shared border.

The tense military face-off was triggered by a December attack on the Indian parliament which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based terrorist groups.

During his stay in Islamabad, Dam praised Pakistan's "essential leadership" in the financial war on terrorism, but warned more needed to be done.

"Pakistan's assistance has been very essential in what we're trying to do in leading this war," Dam said, describing Pakistan as "one of those countries that is putting their shoulder to the wheel."

At least 600 US soldiers will take

part in the six-month joint operations formally launched last week.

Americans will serve only as observers and advisers in the operations, which would include accompanying Filipino soldiers on patrol in southern Basilan island where the guerrillas are holding hostage two US Christian missionaries and a Filipina nurse. However, the American troops would be armed and authorised to fire back in self-defence.

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The US leader from 1981 to 1989,

who has withdrawn from public life since being struck down with Alzheimer's disease, will spend the day at his mansion in the exclusive Bel Air area of Los Angeles with his wife Nancy, they said.

"There is nothing public planned

for the president, it's very low-key at this time of his life and anyway Mrs. Reagan is not feeling well at the moment," his spokeswoman Joanne Drake told AFP.

Reagan beats longevity record of US leaders

AFP, Los Angeles

Former US president Ronald Reagan became on Wednesday the United States' longest-living leader when he celebrated his 91st birthday with a slice of chocolate cake and a patriotic teddy bear, aides said.

By turning 91, Reagan -- the 40th US president -- beats the longevity record for a US leader by surpassing that of the second president John Adams, who served from 1797 to 1801 and lived for 33,119 days -- almost 91 years.

The US leader from 1981 to 198