

Iraq to resume dialogue with UN on Mar 7

AP, United Nations

Iraq's foreign minister has agreed to meet with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan next month in a resumption of their dialogue, the United Nations said.

Annan expects a discussion on the return of weapons inspectors to Iraq. Stephane Dujarric, a UN spokesman, said Monday.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri and Annan will meet March 7. If more meetings are needed, they will be held after April 5 following an Arab League summit, Dujarric said.

"The secretary-general expects to have a focused discussion on the implementation of relevant Security Council resolutions, including the return of UN weapons inspectors to Iraq," he said.

The return of inspectors after three years is a key demand of the United States, which has accused Iraq of trying to rebuild its banned weapons programmes and of supporting terrorism.

Iraq has been under UN sanctions since it invaded neighbouring Kuwait in 1990. The sanctions cannot be lifted until UN inspectors verify that Baghdad has dismantled its weapons of mass destruction.

US drops AIDS vaccine test, Thai test on

REUTERS, Washington

The US National Institutes of Health said on Monday it was abandoning a scheduled trial that would combine two experimental AIDS vaccines in a double punch against the virus, but said a similar trial would go ahead in Thailand.

The US test had been planned to include 11,000 gay men, drug users and others considered at high risk of HIV infection and was meant to see if the two vaccines, one made by France's Aventis Pasteur and one by VaxGen, would work to control the AIDS virus.

Aventis and the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) said the US trial was being abandoned for technical reasons. It had been designed to see if there were ways to test someone who had been vaccinated to see if he or she was immune to HIV to any degree.

But the NIAID said another trial of the two vaccines, scheduled to start in Thailand, would go ahead.

"It will be the world's largest phase III HIV vaccine trial, with 16,000 participants," Beth Waters, a spokeswoman for Aventis, said in a telephone interview. A phase III trial is the last stage of testing before a drug or vaccine goes to the US Food and Drug Administration for approval.

Jim Tartaglia, vice president for research at Aventis, said the Thailand trial would probably start in September. There, researchers will watch to determine if people become infected with HIV after being vaccinated.

Genetic clue to multiple miscarriages

AP, Washington

Scientists studying how people inherit muscular dystrophy have stumbled onto a genetic quirk that helps explain a different medical mystery: why so many women suffer recurrent miscarriages.

Some otherwise healthy women have an X chromosome defect that can prove lethal to male fetuses. In a way it's good news if the fetus is female, the pregnancy should be fine.

Miscarriages are common, occurring in about 20 per cent of pregnancies. Most of those women later have a baby, but 1 to 2 per cent of couples suffer repeated miscarriages. Doctors discover a cause, such as uterine abnormalities, for only half, leaving the rest with no explanation and no treatment.

Enter Eric Hoffman, an expert on the genetics of Duchenne muscular dystrophy, one of the most deadly inherited diseases. It usually hits boys, but Hoffman diagnosed it in a girl. Her mother got 53 relatives to consent to genetic testing to better understand why her daughter got sick.

The X and Y chromosomes are the sex chromosomes. Boys have an X and Y, and girls two Xs, one inherited from each parent. Cells need only one active X chromosome, so every cell of a girl's body turns off one of those Xs. Typically, half the cells use mom's X and the others use dad's.

But Hoffman's patient was using only her father's X chromosome, and half the women in her huge extended family had the same abnormality. More intriguing, the large family had only half the boys expected from normal reproduction patterns -- and lots of miscarriages.

"We said, 'Uh-oh, what's going on?'" recalls Hoffman, genetics research chief at Washington's Children's National Medical Centre. Could this "skewed X inactivation," which otherwise didn't harm the women, be a significant cause of recurrent miscarriages?

Zimbabwe opposition leader charged with treason

AP, Harare

Zimbabwe's opposition leader has been charged with treason less than two weeks before the presidential elections that threaten to end President Robert Mugabe's almost 22-year rule.

Monday's charges against Morgan Tsvangirai, who heads the opposition Movement for Democratic Change and two other party leaders, marks the latest twist in an election campaign fraught with violence mainly blamed on Mugabe supporters.

Tsvangirai, who represents the biggest threat to Mugabe's grip on power, was released after two hours of questioning by police on alleged plans to assassinate the president ahead of the March 9-10 polls. Treason is punishable by death.

Meanwhile, South African observers railed against the police for not protecting opposition supporters from attacks by ruling party activists.

In two recent incidents, election monitors were themselves the targets of violence by Mugabe loyalists.

Tsvangirai said police told him he would be summoned to appear in court at an unspecified later date.

Police spokesman Wayne Bvudzijena confirmed treason charges had been made, but would give no further details.

Tsvangirai said he was freed with no restrictions on his movements and would continue with his election campaign.

He said he was formally charged with a plot to kill Mugabe along with two senior party colleagues, Secretary-General Welshman Ncube and shadow Agriculture Minister Renson Gasela.

"Of course, I denied it completely. The timing is obvious. This was all

along part of the ZANU-PF (ruling party) strategy to eliminate me from the race," Tsvangirai said.

Ncube and Gasela have not yet been questioned by the police. Tsvangirai's attorney, Innocent Chagonda, said it was "highly improbable" the state could continue with the case before the election.

Tsvangirai described the allegations as "political drama of the highest order" by Mugabe and the state media.

Mugabe said last week that he would not have Tsvangirai arrested before the elections despite allegations of the assassination plot.

The government claims Tsvangirai met with members a Montreal-based political consulting firm last year to arrange for the "elimination" of Mugabe.

Ten days ago, the firm released a secretly recorded video tape of a Dec 4 meeting in Montreal which they said incriminated Tsvangirai.

Zimbabwe's state media has given wide coverage to the allegations first made by Ari Ben-Menashe who heads the Canadian consulting firm Dickens and Madsen.

Tsvangirai said he met four times with the firm and hired them to lobby abroad for his party. He said his recorded remarks were taken out of context.

On the tape, Ben-Menashe, in the presence of Tsvangirai, says: "The MDC, represented by the top man who's sitting here right now, commits to ... the coup d'etat or the elimination of the president."

Later in the tape, Tsvangirai says: "We have moved so far, we can now definitely say that Mugabe is going to be eliminated. But what is the transitional arrangement?"

A local media monitoring group said the recording had been heavily edited and rearranged.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghanistan's interim leader Hamid Karzai (L) shakes hands with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami after signing a political accord outlining the basis of future ties with Iran, in Tehran yesterday.

Karzai ends Iran visit with call for strong ties

AP, Tehran

Afghanistan's interim leader ended a high profile three-day visit here yesterday, saying that US rhetoric would not influence his government's resolve to improve ties with Iran, state-run Tehran radio reported.

Hamid Karzai, who was officially seen off by President Mohammad Khatami at Saadabad Palace in northern Tehran, said Iran's contribution to rebuilding Afghanistan was needed.

"We do not consider cooperation with Iran as interference. We want strong, brotherly and friendly relations with the government and people of Iran," the radio quoted Karzai as saying.

The Afghan leader said despite US criticism of Iran, his government welcomed its western neighbor's contribution in reconstructing Afghanistan.

Before the farewell ceremony, Karzai and Khatami signed a memorandum of understanding on fighting terrorism and drug trafficking and promoting trade and economic relations, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported.

According to the agreement, Iran will help Afghanistan reorganize its police and army and build roads, IRNA said.

US envoy to Nepal compares Maoists to al-Qaida

AFP, Kathmandu

The US ambassador here has labelled Maoist rebels in Nepal "terrorists" who took up arms after failing to mobilise popular support, the Nepalese state RSS news agency said yesterday.

"The Maoists, under the guise of Maoism and their so-called people's war, are fundamentally the same as the globally recognised terrorists," Michael Malinowski told a seminar Monday, according to RSS.

Malinowski compared the Maoists to the Abu Sayyaf group in the Philippines and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

"They are radicals who seek to impose their narrow views and beliefs on others, despite the popular will of those they seek to

influence or convert," Malinowski told the launch of the five-day seminar on South Asia Peace Operations in Kathmandu.

The Maoist insurgency in Nepal, launched in 1996 to bring about a communist republic, has claimed more than 2,600 lives.

Some 39 security personnel from 20 countries are participating in the seminar organised by the Royal Nepalese Army and co-sponsored by the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

"There is no peace in Nepal presently but there are lessons to learn from the present scenario for those within and outside Nepal," Malinowski said, adding that the country's democratic systems had been undermined

by the insurgency.

The US ambassador has recently visited the rebel-hit areas of Achham in far western Nepal and Salyan.

The Nepalese cabinet on Monday announced the creation of a 100 million rupee (1.3 million dollar) relief fund to compensate the families of security personnel, teachers, civil servants, political workers and other killed by the Maoists.

In view of the current state of emergency, the cabinet also announced that, as an austerity measure, government functions like receptions, luncheons and dinners would not be organised except for diplomatic purposes.

Senator joins lawsuit against Cheney

AFP, Washington

The second-ranking Democrat in the Senate said he would join a General Accounting Office lawsuit seeking to compel Vice President Richard Cheney to release information about his meetings with energy executives when he worked on the administration's energy policy.

Senate Assistant Majority Leader Harry Reid said he hoped to learn if the meetings influenced President George W. Bush's decision to abandon his campaign promise to base any decision on a national nuclear waste repository on "sound science."

"There is no question that Vice President Cheney met on several occasions with nuclear power executives," said Senator Reid. "Cheney needs to stop hiding the truth. He should tell the public which executives he met with, and when he met with them."

Earlier this month, Bush

approved a plan to store the nation's nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain, Nevada, despite protests by state officials, including Senator Reid.

The GAO on Friday filed its first-ever lawsuit against the government, seeking documents from a White House energy task force.

AP adds: Former Enron chief executive Jeffrey Skilling, whose testimony has been challenged by lawmakers, faces questioning before a skeptical Congress again Tuesday this time along with other Enron officials whose versions of events conflict with his.

Sherron Watkins, the vice president who warned former chairman Kenneth Lay in August of potentially serious accounting problems, is testifying at the same time as Skilling who has stated he knew few details of questionable transactions involving partnerships used to hide more than one billion dollar in debt.

Lawmakers want to bring together Skilling, Watkins and

Jeffrey McMahon, Enron's current president and chief operating officer to put the same questions to each of them and compare their answers at a hearing of the Senate Commerce Committee.

The three are sharing the same witness table but it was clear Monday that Skilling and Watkins view events through different prisms.

Bruce Hiler, Skilling's lawyer, said, "We specifically requested Skilling be on the same panel with Sherron Watkins. He is looking forward to what will be Skilling's first specific conversation with Ms. Watkins about these matters."

Retorted Watkins' attorney, Philip Hilder: "Mr. Skilling ought to know that this is a congressional hearing, not a conversation with Sherron Watkins, and he needs to answer the questions and have the conversation with the congressional committee."

ME bracing for another round of violence

AP, Jerusalem

Israel was threatening retaliation for Palestinian gunfire attacks, foreshadowing another round of deadly Mideast violence after several days of efforts to calm the region.

Striking two hours apart, Palestinian gunmen killed two Israelis Monday near a Jewish settlement in the West Bank and wounded eight at a bus stop in a Jewish neighborhood in a disputed part of Jerusalem claimed by both sides. A policewoman injured in the incident in the Jewish neighborhood died on Monday, a hospital official said.

Earlier, Israeli soldiers killed two Palestinians at West Bank roadblocks, one a 16-year-old girl who tried to stab soldiers, according to the military, and the other, a husband rushing his wife to a hospital to give birth.

After the violence, both sides threatened retaliation.

Claiming responsibility for the two attacks on Israelis, the Al Aqsa Brigades, linked to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, said they were retribution for Israeli operations.

Raanan Gissin, spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, said Israel would hit back for the Palestinian attacks.

Gissin said understandings aimed at calming the situation, worked out at a meeting of Israeli and Palestinian security commanders on Thursday, were off. After the meeting, Israel removed some roadblocks in Gaza and pulled out of positions it seized a week earlier.

However Gissin said, the Palestinians did not keep their pledge to stop attacks, and said Israel would hit back with what he called a "measured response."

In the week before the security meeting, Israel pounded Palestinian security buildings and checkpoints and killed almost 50 Palestinians, responding to bloody Palestinian attacks.

In a telephone talk with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Sharon noted that a group linked with Arafat had taken responsibility for the attacks and said Israel would "take the required steps to defend its people," according to a statement from Sharon's office.

The Jerusalem attack took place at the last stop on a bus line that serves Neve Yaakov, the northernmost Jewish neighborhood in the expanded Jerusalem boundaries that include the Arab section, captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war.

Witnesses said a lone gunman taking cover behind a car opened

fire on Israelis. Jerusalem police commander Mickey Levy said a police van was hit, and police jumped out and charged the attacker, shooting him. It was in this assault that the policewoman was wounded. Police said the gunman was critically wounded.

Two hours earlier, Palestinians opened fire on an Israeli car waiting at a roadblock near the Jewish settlement of Nokdim, south of Bethlehem, killing two men, the military said. A pregnant woman in the car was seriously wounded and delivered a healthy baby girl at a Jerusalem hospital by caesarean section an hour after the attack, hospital officials said.

In the second such incident in as many days in the city of Nablus, Israeli soldiers opened fire on a car carrying a pregnant woman to a hospital. On Monday, a Palestinian man was shot and killed while trying to circumvent a temporary roadblock, the military said. His wife, who was lightly injured, gave birth to a girl shortly after her husband died.

On Sunday, a pregnant woman was seriously wounded but gave birth to a healthy baby, doctors said.

'Thailand's wild elephants may be wiped out in 15 years'

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand is losing more than 150 wild elephants every year and the herd could be wiped out within 15 years if no action is taken, a report said yesterday.

The Forest Industry Organization's Chananat Laohawattana told The Nation newspaper that the wild elephant population has sunk from 3,500 to 2,257 in the past eight years.

The state-owned enterprise said it had plans to create a National Mahout Institute to handle comprehensive care for the beasts, and set up 10 elephant shelters around the country.

"We will present the proposal to the Agriculture Ministry on Friday," Chananat told the daily.

The shelters would provide training to elephants and their mahouts, targeting those who now wander the streets of Thailand's cities and tourists resorts begging for donations.

34 nations meet to find ways to combat human smuggling

AP, Bali (Indonesia)

Government ministers from 34 nations in Asia, Australia and the Pacific met yesterday on how to curb illegal immigration and the trafficking of asylum seekers.

The three-day conference, the first gathering of its kind in Southeast Asia, follows growing international concern about the plight of refugees who travel through the region and make perilous voyages on leaky boats to neighbouring Australia, which has recently tightened its maritime borders.

"One of the big issues for the region to address is the relationship between ... people smuggling activities, drug smuggling and other trans-boundary crimes," Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said as he arrived for the talks.

Australia's relations with Indonesia deteriorated sharply last year after a Norwegian ship rescued more than 430 asylum seekers from a sinking Indonesian boat. Canberra refused to accept the people, mainly from the Middle East and South Asia, and demanded they be returned to Indonesia.

Canberra's policy also damaged relations with other Asian nations and undermined its human rights reputation around the world.

Hoping to redress that diplomatic damage, Canberra and Jakarta agreed to co-host a meeting of ministers from nations ranging from the Middle East to the Pacific to try and find a regional solution to illegal immigration.

In recent years many developed countries, including Australia, have toughened their laws in response to increased arrivals, using more restrictive definitions of refugees, locking up asylum seekers and closing borders

to newcomers.

Meanwhile, countries like Iran and Pakistan, which together host the world's largest refugee population - some 3.8 million people mainly from Afghanistan - complain that rich countries are doing too little to ease the problem.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees says there are some 22 million refugees and displaced people worldwide.

The gathering was preceded by a meeting of the foreign ministers of Australia, Indonesia and East Timor, a UN-occupied territory due to achieve independence in May after 300 years of Portuguese rule and a quarter-century of Indonesian occupation.

It was the first such trilateral meeting since the withdrawal of Indonesian troops from East Timor in 1999, after a campaign of violence in which hundreds perished and much of the province's infrastructure and housing were destroyed.

"Our challenge now is how to manage this triangular relationship into a positive and mutually beneficial venture for the interests of each and every one of us," Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda said.

East Timor, which is currently under UN rule is due to become the world's newest nation on May 20. Tuesday's talks focused on how its independence would affect economic ties, tourism and security concerns in the region.

The three delegations also reviewed progress in setting up the Southwest Pacific Forum, which will group countries such as Indonesia, East Timor, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand.