

US congressmen sue Bush for withdrawal from ABM

AFP, Washington

Thirty-one members of Congress filed suit against US President George W. Bush in federal court here Tuesday in an effort to prevent the White House from pulling out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty with Russia.

"We have asked the court to declare that the president cannot withdraw from the ABM treaty, or any other treaty, without the concurrence of Congress," said lead plaintiff Dennis Kucinich, a Democratic representative from Ohio.

The United States is scheduled Thursday to officially pull out of the 1972 treaty widely regarded as the cornerstone of arms control for nearly three decades.

the unilateral withdrawal over Russian objections to allow for development of a missile defense system, banned under the treaty.

The lawsuit filed in US District Court here argues only Congress can abrogate international treaties, accusing Bush of violating the US Constitution.

"The Constitution empowers Congress to establish laws, and charges the president with carrying out these laws. Nowhere does it give the president power to repeal laws. Only Congress has the authority to undo its work," Kucinich said in a statement.

Critics of Bush's decision to withdraw from the treaty have failed in both houses of Congress to bring a resolution opposing the move to a vote.

US proposes special forces to monitor Kashmir frontline

Sensory devices should be set up

AFP, New Delhi

The United States has proposed sending special forces to Indian-administered Kashmir to monitor the flow of Islamic rebels across the disputed border, an Indian newspaper reported Wednesday.

The Times of India, quoting unnamed sources, said officials in both India and Pakistan were "seriously evaluating" the proposal, which was likely to be discussed in meetings US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was holding in the two countries starting Wednesday.

A senior US defense official travelling with Rumsfeld strongly denied the report.

The Times of India said a "fairly modest" US military contingent would be deployed to monitor the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border in Kashmir between India and Pakistan, amid New Delhi's demands that Islamabad put a permanent end to rebel infiltration into its zone of the Himalayan province.

The newspaper said Washington was also considering sending "air-

borne monitors" to the Pakistani side to observe movement on the LoC.

New Delhi has always rejected any third-party role in Kashmir, the scene of a 13-year-old Islamic insurgency against Indian rule.

The Times of India said the United States would frame the deployment as part of its worldwide campaign against the al-Qaida terrorist network to "provide a politically safe rationale" for Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government.

Meanwhile, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has offered Washington's help in establishing a system of sensory devices to monitor incursions by militants into Indian Kashmir, a senior US defence official said Wednesday.

The idea, which the official said was a suggestion rather than a concrete proposal, was floated during Rumsfeld's talks here over breakfast with Indian National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra.



In this hand out from the Saudi Press Agency, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) is greeted by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz upon his arrival at the Red Sea port city of Jeddah on Tuesday. The Pakistani leader, who was earlier in the United Arab Emirates called on India to take more "substantive steps" to defuse the tension between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

PHOTO: AFP

McCartney marries the model

AFP, Glaslough

Sir Paul McCartney's new bride Heather Mills "wept tears of joy" as she exchanged vows with the former Beatle in a picturesque Irish castle setting in front of 300 guests on Tuesday.

"The ceremony was joyful and moving," McCartney's spokesman said following the service, which was strictly off limits to members of the world's media.

"Heather captured the hearts of the congregation when, overcome by the emotion of the occasion, she briefly faltered and wept tears of joy whilst making her vows," he added.

Bells rang out for 20 minutes at the chapel where moments earlier the couple tied the knot in a Protestant ceremony on the grounds of 17th-century Castle Leslie near the village of Glaslough in Ireland's rural north.

The village was in County Monaghan, birthplace of McCartney's mother.

After McCartney promised that the wedding would be a "private family" affair, photographers and TV crews aboard two airborne helicopters relayed images of events



PHOTO: AFP

Former Beatle Sir Paul McCartney and his bride Heather Mills pose for photographers outside Castle Leslie in Glaslough, County Monaghan, Ireland on Monday ahead of their marriage on Tuesday. Around 300 guests were entertained within the grounds of the castle following the service at St. Salvador's church in the grounds of the estate.

below, capturing some of the guests mingling around the castle grounds.

Mills was by tradition a few minutes late for the ceremony, said McCartney's spokesman.

She entered St Salvador's chapel to the strains of a bridal march, set to the song "Heather" which McCartney penned for his recent album "Driving Rain".

'Bush favours temporary' Palestinian state for now'

Israel tightens screws on WB towns

AFP, Beirut

US President George W. Bush favours the creation of a "temporary state" for the Palestinians ahead of a full-fledged state, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said in an interview published Wednesday.

"The president did not give up his objective but he knew that to reach his goal a temporary Palestinian state as an interim phase and maybe other measures would be necessary," Powell told the Arabic-language Saudi daily Al-Hayat.

Such a formula, according to Powell, would "allow the

Palestinians to achieve their hopes and dreams, and secure the confidence of the international community".

But Powell cautioned that a temporary state needed to rely on "a democratic power, transparency without corruption and effective security agencies".

"This will help to develop the necessary confidence between the two parties (Palestinians and Israel) in order to push forward," Powell told Al-Hayat, which is published in Beirut and other Arab capitals.

Bush "did not abandon his objective to set up a Palestinian state,

called Palestine," that would live side by side with Israel in security, Powell stressed.

Moreover, Israel kept the screws on Ramallah and other West Bank towns Wednesday as US officials said President George W. Bush would soon announce his next steps in the search for Middle East peace.

The Israeli occupation of Ramallah, the base town of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, went into its third day with troops searching for militants a day after a suicide bombing killed a teenager in northern Israel.

Investigators now know who recruited Sept 11 terrorists

AFP, Washington

Investigators have identified the al-Qaida operative who recruited Mohammed Atta and other Hamburg-based hijackers who took part in the September 11 terrorist attacks, The Washington Post said Wednesday.

Mohammed Haydar Zammar, 41, a German citizen of Syrian origin, disappeared after leaving

Hamburg for Morocco in October, but a US counterterrorism official suggested that he is in US custody or is being held in another country.

"Zammar is not walking the streets," said the official who requested anonymity.

According to German and US officials, Zammar also played a key role in linking Atta with al-Qaida leadership in Afghanistan.

The suspect, the officials said,

was a charismatic advocate at a Hamburg mosque of waging holy war against the west. Atta and others in the Hamburg-based group fell under his influence around 1997.

One or two years later, the US counterterrorism official said, Atta and company decided to "offer themselves" to al-Qaeda, adding that Zammar "played a very significant role," in the recruitment.

Floods hit millions in China

AFP, Beijing

At least 205 people were confirmed dead and hundreds missing in flooding this month in China, with the majority of the casualties coming in northern China's Shaanxi province, officials said Wednesday.

In Shaanxi, the hardest hit region, 152 people were confirmed dead, 266 reported missing and over 110,000 needing emergency aid as of Wednesday afternoon, Zhang Xiaoming, an official at the Civil Affairs Ministry, told AFP.

Some 489 millimeters (19.5 inches) of rain which fell on mountainous regions in the southern parts of the province between June 8 and June 10 has wreaked

havoc on farmland while triggering mud and landslides that have covered roads and railways.

"Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji and civil affairs officials have directed rescue operations and pledged eight million yuan (one million dollars) in rescue funds to the province," Zhang said.

More than 300 towns and villages were affected in Shaanxi and 83,000 homes were damaged by the flooding, caused by the heavy rain which fell along the Hanjiang river.

Land and mud slides were hampering rescue operations under cloudy skies Wednesday as some 526 kilometers (315 miles) of provincial roadways were blocked and 13 bridges damaged.

Karzai set to sail through

AFP, Kabul

Interim leader Hamid Karzai was expected to face only a token challenge Wednesday in a vote for head of state at Afghanistan's Loya Jirga grand assembly which convened here for the second day.

His election was seen as a formality after his speech on the opening day of the traditional gathering to choose a new government appeared to have defused a row over pressure piled on former king Mohammed Zahir Shah not to stand for the post.

Karzai assured delegates that the ex-monarch would not be merely shuffled aside, saying he would move back into his old royal palace and play a central role in all state ceremonies.

For his part, Zahir Shah said in his inaugural speech: "I would like to

declare that I support him (Karzai) and he is our candidate as head of the state for the transitional period."

But although Karzai's role seems assured, there is likely to be a battle for the cabinet posts between the former king's supporters and the Northern Alliance, which ousted the Taliban last year with the help of US air strikes.

"We are preparing for a lengthy and heated discussion today on the make-up of the cabinet, the legislative body and the judiciary," delegate Fahim Dashti told AFP as he entered the giant marquee where the meeting is being held.

"If the Northern Alliance ministers are going to trim their ministries then the king's camp should do the same," said Dashti, who is in the Northern Alliance camp.

One leading Northern Alliance figure, powerful interior minister

Yunus Qanooni, Tuesday tendered his resignation in the interests of "national unity".

The inaugural session of the assembly, charged with selecting a new government that will organise democratic election in 2004, was mostly ceremonial and none of the more than 1,500 delegates took the stage.

But on Wednesday the representatives, who represent every ethnic and special interest group in the diverse nation, seized their chance to be heard after decades of civil war, Soviet occupation and Taliban domination.

Nominations for candidates to be appointed president of the Loya Jirga turned into a major gripe session as delegates complained about everything from corruption and security to excessive applause during speeches.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Afghan security guards stop delegates to regulate the flow of people in to the Loya Jirga's opening session in Kabul on Tuesday. More than 1500 delegates from through out the country met on Tuesday at the Loya Jirga, or "Grand Council" to select new leadership for Afghanistan after 23 years of war.

Bush vows to hunt down 'dirty bomb' plotters

Legal challenge against detention of suspect

AFP, Washington

Nine months after the September 11 attacks, US President George W. Bush vowed Tuesday to hunt down any "would-be killers" tied to a plot to set off a radiation-laced "dirty bomb" in the United States.

"There's just a full-scale manhunt on," Bush pledged a day after his administration announced it had arrested US citizen Abdullah al-Muhajir in connection with such a plan. "We will run down every lead, every hint."

The president's comments came as an attorney for suspect al-Muhajir -- born Jose Padilla -- filed a petition for his release, saying his ongoing detention without formal charges was unconstitutional.

"This guy, Padilla, is a bad guy. And he is where he needs to be -- detained," Bush said as he met with key

lawmakers to seek support for his plan to create a Cabinet-level agency to marshal domestic anti-terrorism efforts.

US Attorney General John Ashcroft Monday announced al-Muhajir's arrest, alleging that he had ties to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, blamed here for suicide attacks that killed more than 3,000.

Meanwhile, a lawyer for a US national who converted to Islam and now stands accused of plotting to set off a radiation-laced "dirty bomb" in his home country petitioned Tuesday for his release, saying his continued detention was unconstitutional.

However, President George W. Bush and other top US officials insisted that the suspect was a "bad guy" who would remain in military custody as long as necessary.

Canada to toughen immigration policy

AFP, Ottawa

Canadian Immigration and Citizenship Minister Denis Coderre announced Tuesday tougher controls on immigrants and refugees suspected of having criminal or terrorist links.

"We must keep out terrorists and criminals," he said, noting that it was exactly nine months since the September 11 terror attacks on the United States.

One of the prime clampdowns, Coderre told a press conference, would be on undocumented arrivals who land in Canada without any identity papers and claim refugee status.

At the same time, Canada was

having detailed talks with the United States on how best to tighten immigration controls in both countries to stop criminals and would-be terrorists from moving between the two North American neighbours.

Immigration officials would now have the power, said Coderre, to detain undocumented persons or anyone arriving under suspicion of having criminal or terrorist links.

There have been many cases of refugee claimants arriving by air in Canada without identity documents -- although boarding without such papers is not allowed. Human smugglers often direct illegal immigrant to destroy all identity papers prior to landing in Canada, according to published reports.

El Nino is back to punish Latin America

Asia faces threat of floods, drought

AFP, Miami

Five years after lashing out at about half the planet, El Nino is back, striking Latin America with killer rains and menacing a large part of the world with threats of drought, floods and devastation.

Rising surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean -- one degree centigrade above average by late May -- punishing rains in Central America, Colombia and Chile, as well as drought in Indonesia, clearly signal the return of El Nino, says the US National Oceanographic and Atmosphere Administration (NOAA).

"The overall trend ... are characteristics of El Nino," notes NOAA

weather forecaster Vernon Kousky, predicting the phenomenon would continue until year's end.

Meteorologists in Chile also blame El Nino for the violent rainstorms that drenched the South American country earlier this month. The storms were the worst experienced by Chile in eight decades, leaving 13 people dead, damaging 10,000 buildings and forcing 65,000 to flee their homes.

Similar weather killed 16 people in Colombia, with 13 more reported missing.

In Honduras, torrential rains in recent days killed at least nine people, while in Nicaragua, thousands of people fled their homes.



PHOTO: AFP

Fire and smoke loom rise behind the Twin Creek Ranch just north of Highway 24 in Florissant, Colorado on Tuesday. The raging wildfire threatening the US city of Denver was burning out of control on Tuesday forcing up to 40,000 residents on the outskirts of the city to prepare for possible evacuation, officials said. More than 400 firefighters were battling the inferno.