

US gets ready for Iraq war despite concern from allies

Baghdad trying to cash in on British war scepticism; Attack may destroy war on terror: Schroeder

AFP, Washington

US preparations for war against Iraq showed no sign of slackening Tuesday, despite mounting concern among US allies in Europe and the Middle East. Army General Tommy Franks, the commander of US forces in the Gulf, briefed President George W. Bush at the White House Monday on a new plan for a significantly slimmed down invasion force, the Wall Street Journal reported Tuesday. The plan appeared to be the latest instalment in a series of military options explored by the Pentagon for ousting Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, a declared goal of the Bush administration. The outline presented by Franks was in line with a proposal for an invasion force 50,000 to 80,000-strong backed by heavy air power that has gained support among Bush administration officials, the Journal said. Franks in the past has advised the president that 250,000 US troops would be needed for an Iraq invasion. But analysts have raised concerns that a long buildup would mean

losing the element of surprise and expose US forces to the threat of a preemptive Iraqi attack, possibly with chemical weapons. The United States currently has about 50,000 troops in the Gulf region, including about 10,000 in Kuwait. Meanwhile, Iraq is seeking to capitalise on growing scepticism in Britain towards an anticipated US military campaign to oust Saddam Hussein, a British newspaper reported Wednesday. The Guardian quoted Mudhafar Amin, Baghdad's representative in London, as saying that Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri was ready to visit Britain "to talk with any British official." Iraq regards Britain as the only country with the power to stave off a US offensive, said Amin, according to the left-leaning daily. Reuters adds: German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder was quoted on Wednesday as saying a military strike on Iraq could destroy international support for the U.S.-led war on terror. "This war (on terror) is not yet won, so I warn against an attack on Iraq," Schroeder was quoted as saying in the mass-circulation Bild newspaper.

Candidacy of Sharif's brother uncertain

AFP, Islamabad

The brother of deposed Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif may face money laundering and loan defaulting charges if he returns from exile to lead a major opposition party in October elections, a chief corruption prosecutor said. Pakistan's National Accountability Bureau (NAB) said the charges were pending against Sharif's billionaire industrialist family, who were banished to Saudi Arabia in December 2000, local media reported Wednesday. The charges could rule Shahbaz Sharif, who replaced his brother as Pakistan Muslim League leader on Saturday, out of polls under new electoral laws which include a ban on any candidate with a history of loan defaulting or with criminal convictions.

Saudis hit back in anger over 'enemy tag' by US

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi officials and newspapers responded in kind Wednesday over a briefing to a Pentagon advisory board that portrayed the kingdom as an enemy of the United States active at every level of terrorism. Although the Washington administration was quick to distance itself from the briefing, the press blasted a "growing current" in the United States aimed at damaging the 60-year-old US-Saudi relationship. "A current has been growing recently in Washington to undermine the historical relations between the kingdom and the United States, at the instigation of certain quarters who are enemies to Saudi Arabia," Okaz said.

Manipur rebels attack homes of CM, minister

AFP, Guwahati

Suspected separatist rebels opened fire on the private residences of the leader of India's northeastern state of Manipur and one of his ministers, officials said Wednesday. Three assailants late Tuesday entered the ancestral home of Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh in the village of Thoubal Athokpam, 40 kilometres (25 miles) west of Manipur's capital Imphal. "Some unidentified gunmen entered the chief minister's private residence and enquired if there were any male members in the house. On being told no one was there, the gunmen destroyed household goods including a television set," Manipur police chief Bimal Chandra told AFP by telephone.

Attack on Afghan army base: 12 killed

AP, Kabul

Unidentified attackers struck an Afghan army base south of Kabul early Wednesday, and a resulting firefight killed 11 guerrillas and one soldier, a local police commander said. The hour-long clash was the most serious battle near the Afghan capital in months.

The attack began at about 7 a.m. when the guerrillas, armed with automatic rifles, rushed the army's Kabul garrison in the Bagram-i district, about six miles south of the centre of the capital, said police Col. Haji Rashid.

Soldiers fought back mainly with rocket-propelled grenades, he said, and afterward bodies were strewn about the ground in front of the base.

PA mulls security plan while Israel kills militant chief

Sharon talks emergency plan in case of 'massive attacks'

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat held an emergency meeting with his cabinet Wednesday to discuss Israel's proposed plan to tackle 22 months of violence, even as the Israeli army pressed its campaign against Palestinian militants. As the cabinet sat down to discuss the security cooperation plan, Israeli forces killed a local head of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of Arafat's Fatah faction, and one of his lieutenants in a raid in the northern West Bank town of Tukarem.

The plan presented in talks Monday between Israeli Defence

Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer and Palestinian interior minister Abdel Razaq al-Yahya has been met with scepticism by observers on both sides. Under the "Gaza First" proposal, the Palestinian Authority would crack down on hardline militant factions in return for a phased Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian land in the Gaza Strip that it has re-occupied since the start of the Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, in September 2000.

Palestinian international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath, who visited the scene of an Israeli overnight incursion in northern Gaza,

held out little hope for the plan. "I am not sure the Israelis will really commit themselves to any withdrawal from Gaza, Bethlehem or anywhere else," Shaath told AFP. Moreover, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was expected Wednesday to examine with security officials various scenarios of possible large-scale Palestinian attacks, public radio reported. The discussions, which are to include Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Finance Minister Sylvan Shalom, will look into measures needed in the event of "massive attacks" and review the possible forms of retaliation, the radio said.



Palestinian boys taunt Israeli armoured personnel carrier and other military vehicles stationed on a main road between Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip and Khan Yunis on Tuesday. Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer met late Monday with newly-appointed Palestinian interior minister Abdel Razaq al-Yahya, offering an Israeli troop pullback in the Gaza Strip in return for a Palestinian crackdown on militant groups.

Pak school raid suspects 'commit suicide'

Attackers left warning note of more raids

BBC, AFP, Islamabad

Three men suspected of attacking a Christian missionary school for foreigners in Pakistan on Monday have committed suicide, police say. Officers said the suspects were challenged by police after a hand grenade was recovered from one of them; they rushed towards a nearby river and killed themselves with other explosives. The three blew themselves up in a village in Pakistani-administered Kashmir, some 40 kilometres (25 miles) from the school at Murree, north-east of Islamabad.

"These are the same attackers," a Kashmir police officer, Hajee Syed Haseeb Hussain, told the Associated Press news agency.

He said the men were dressed in clothes similar to those worn by the Murree attackers, and that their

grenades matched those recovered at the school. At least six people were killed when up to four gunmen fought their way into the Murree Christian School complex in the hills near Islamabad on Monday. The gunmen - who the government says were Islamic militants - opened fire indiscriminately, but were chased off after a gun battle with security guards. Pakistan has condemned the attack as a "cowardly act of terrorism". AFP adds: Gunmen who tried to kill scores of foreign pupils at a Christian school in a hill town northeast of here left behind a note warning of more attacks, a Christian rights activist said Wednesday. Staff at the Murree Christian School, where six Pakistanis were shot dead by masked attackers on Monday, found the letter at the front gate and handed it to police, said Shahbaz Bhatti, who heads the All Pakistan Minorities' Alliance.

Iraq must accept UN terms: Annan

AP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has told Iraq in a no-nonsense letter that it must accept the Security Council's terms for the return of weapons inspectors.

Annan was responding to Iraq's invitation last week for chief inspector Hans Blix to visit Baghdad for technical talks. Those talks would centre on the return of inspectors who have been barred from the country for nearly four years.

In his reply on Tuesday, the secretary-general insisted that Iraq must follow the roadmap laid out by the Security Council and rejected its proposal to deal with outstanding issues about its alleged weapons of mass destruction.

The return of inspectors is a key demand of the Security Council and especially of the United States, which has accused Iraq of trying to rebuild its banned weapons programs and of supporting terrorism. President Bush, who has called for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to be replaced, has threatened unspecified consequences if inspectors are not allowed to return. Under council resolutions, sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait cannot be lifted until UN inspectors certify that its biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons have been destroyed along with the long-range missiles to deliver them. With members of the U.S.

Congress and senior U.S. officials talking openly about war with Iraq, Saddam Hussein's government is facing increasing pressure to let the inspectors back in but whether Iraq will agree to the Security Council's terms remains to be seen.

"I hope once they've read the letter, they will find their way to become more forthcoming," Annan said Tuesday before sending the reply.

The secretary-general discussed the invitation to Blix with the 15-member Security Council on Monday and spoke to the chief inspector, who is vacationing in Sweden, on Tuesday before sending the letter through Iraq's UN mission.

33 killed in Mexico bus crash

REUTERS, Zinapécuaro

Some 33 people -- including a dozen children -- were killed and at least 26 were injured on Tuesday when a bus taking them on a religious pilgrimage crashed on a highway in western Mexico, authorities said. The vehicle's brakes apparently failed in the predawn hours near the town of Zinapécuaro, about 120 miles northwest of Mexico City in Michoacan state. The bus plowed through a toll booth before slamming into a pillar supporting a bridge, officials in the state attorney general's office said. The victims were members of the Luz del Mundo evangelical church from Tixtla in the Pacific coast state of Guerrero and had travelled overnight on their way to the church's annual Congress in Guadaluajara. Among the dead were a dozen children, including a 10-month-old baby, many of whom were travelling in their parents' laps in the overcrowded bus, officials said.



Indian emergency personnel from the fire brigade look for survivors after heavy rains caused a landslide in Mumbai on Wednesday. Six people were killed and 11 injured in the landslide that occurred early in the morning in a residential area of the city.



Cherie suffers miscarriage

AFP, London

Cherie Blair, the 47-year-old wife of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, was recovering at home late Tuesday after suffering a miscarriage 18 years after giving birth to the couple's first child.

Cherie Blair was admitted to hospital late Monday and underwent an operation Tuesday morning, causing a delay to the couple's vacation in France, a Downing Street spokeswoman said.

"Following inquiries from the media in France and in London, we can confirm that the prime minister and Mrs Blair have delayed their departure on holiday."

Libya shedding pariah status: British minister

AFP, London

Libya and its leader Moamer Gaddafi are shaking off their reputation as a global pariah, in stark contrast to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, the first British government minister to visit Tripoli in nearly 20 years said Wednesday.

"Gaddafi was indeed involved in the past in terrorism but the evidence is that now that he has not been involved in terrorism for some years," said Mike O'Brien, minister for the Middle East.

China threatens war with Taiwan over referendum

Taipei cancels military drill to ease tensions

AFP, Beijing

China stepped up the pressure on Taipei Wednesday with a warning from its military that Taiwan risked attack if President Chen Shui-bian went ahead with a referendum on the island's future status. In the first direct reference to military action since Chen's call for a referendum Saturday sparked a crisis between the rivals, an unnamed "senior military source" told the China Daily that the comments were "provocative". Chen's remarks emphasised the growing possibility that "peace will have to be safeguarded and won through the use of force", the

source was quoted as saying. "If we want to strive for peace, we have to be fully prepared for military actions," they said. "We have enough confidence and determination to settle the question." Chen's remarks "especially underscore the need for the mainland to proceed with military preparations as a backup to encouraging a peaceful reunification," the military source added. The threat was echoed Wednesday in an editorial in the official Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily newspaper, which warned Chen's actions

made military conflict more likely. "It would be a futile attempt to change the current situation by separating Taiwan from China, and could push Taiwan towards war," said the editorial. Meanwhile, Taiwan Wednesday called off scheduled naval exercises in a goodwill gesture to ease tensions with China raised by President Chen Shui-bian's apparently pro-independence remarks, the navy said. The drill "has been cancelled to avoid speculation and misunderstanding, given current cross-strait situations," a naval spokesman told AFP.

Benazir to fly home to fight Musharraf's election 'rape'

AFP, Islamabad

Exiled former premier Benazir Bhutto will fly into Pakistan late this month or early September to contest October elections which President Pervez Musharraf "is trying to rape," she told AFP in an interview. "I still plan to contest the elections and to do so I have to file my nomination papers in person, so I will come back in time," she said by phone from her home in London late Tuesday.

"It should be the end of August or the first week of September." Benazir -- twice-dismissed as prime minister, twice convicted of abducting and facing at least five corruption cases -- remained defiant despite her party's strongest concession yet that her comeback bid after four years in self-exile may be in vain. The Pakistan People's Party



(PPP) on Monday formed a new wing to run for election without her, admitting they would be denied registration with Benazir at their helm, because of a host of new "Benazir-specific" election restrictions. The 49-year-old daughter of Pakistan's late prime minister

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, hanged in 1979 by the military dictator who overthrew him two years earlier, said she was still fighting. "Musharraf is putting one hurdle after another in my path," she said. "My contesting those elections is forcing him to show his true hand, which is to rape the elections, because he is making new laws to stop me." Benazir's next battleground is once again Pakistan's courts. Laws she wants overturned include a ban on absconders contesting elections and an "absentee" law requiring defendants to be present in trials. A ban on former premiers from a third term is also seen as Benazir-specific. She plans to launch a challenge in the Supreme Court against the absconders' ban, and appeals in other courts against her absconding convictions.

Conjoined twins separated

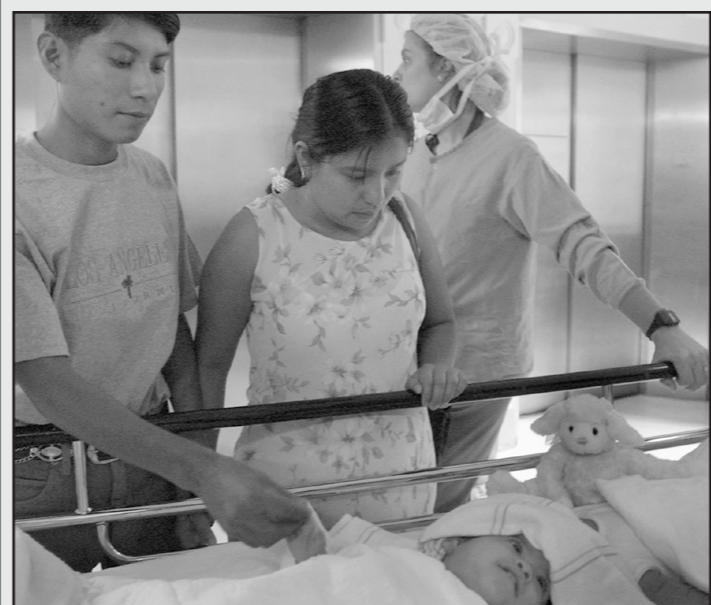
AP, Los Angeles

Guatemalan twin girls who spent the first year of their lives joined at the head were in critical but stable condition after they were separated and one underwent an additional operation.

Maria Teresa Quiej Alvarez and her sister, Maria de Jesus, remained sedated late Tuesday at the University of California at Los Angeles Medical Centre. They were expected to use breathing tubes for days.

Early Tuesday, after the separation was completed, Maria Teresa was returned to surgery because of a buildup of blood on her brain, said Dr. Jorge Lazareff, the lead neurosurgeon. Nearly five hours later she

was out of surgery again and back in the paediatric intensive care unit. The second operation was not expected to have any effect on Maria Teresa's long-term prognosis, Lazareff said. "I'm absolutely positive they will do OK. I'm absolutely positive if you go and visit them in five years they will be leading a normal life," Lazareff said. Dr. John Frazee, another neurosurgeon, said it remained to be seen whether the girls suffered any brain damage following 22 hours of surgery. "They're moving, which is a good sign," he said. "There's no way of knowing what the state of affairs is for another week."



Wenceslao Quiej (L) and his wife Alba-Leticia Alvarez-Quiej, hold hands and watch their daughters, conjoined twins Maria Teresa, left, and Maria de Jesus Quiej-Alvarez, prior to the surgery that separated the one-year-old girls on Tuesday in Los Angeles.