



PHOTO: AFP

Soldiers and civilians stand amid destruction after Wednesday's bomb explosion in the El Cartucho area of Bogotá as hardline independent Alvaro Uribe was sworn in as Colombia's president. At least 15 people were killed and 24 injured after a series of explosions rocked the area near Colombia's parliament and presidential palace as Uribe was being sworn in.

15 die as blasts mark Uribe's swearing-in

Police attribute attack to FARC

AFP, Bogotá

At least 15 people were killed Wednesday and 24 injured when a bomb exploded near Colombia's presidential palace as hardline independent Alvaro Uribe was sworn in as the country's president.

The homemade mortar detonated three blocks from the presidential palace in downtown Bogotá just as Uribe was being sworn in for the next four years.

Four policemen were injured a few minutes earlier when three smaller devices exploded even closer to the palace. One of the devices detonated within the palace grounds, a spokesman for Uribe said.

Police attributed the attacks to Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Bogotá Mayor Antanas Mockus said the FARC attacks were carried out with the help of international terrorists.

The attacks "clearly show Colombian terrorists are not acting alone" they are resorting to very destructive formulas used by experts in other countries," said the mayor.

They came about despite elaborate security measures in place for Uribe's inauguration. Some 20,000 troops were on the streets, air force jets patrolled the skies and the city's international airport was closed for the afternoon.

Bomb disposal experts, soldiers and emergency services rushed to the scene and helicopters buzzed overhead as Uribe made his acceptance speech in front of 600 invitees.

Guests included the presidents of Argentina, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela; the vice presidents of Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala; and Spain's Crown Prince Felipe.

Colombia's new president - branded a ruthless right-winger with links to paramilitary groups by his critics and a dedicated hard worker with an iron hand by his supporters - vowed to continue to combat the country's rebel groups.

Uribe expressed his support for the Colombian armed forces, and reaffirmed his controversial intention to recruit up to a million civilians to be the military's eyes and ears in their counterinsurgency operations.

The Colombian armed forces have been repeatedly accused of human rights abuses and of collaboration with illegal paramilitary groups responsible for the majority of atrocities against civilians.

In his first act as president, Uribe also held out an olive branch to Colombia's rebel groups, presenting Congress with proposals for legislation that would offer seats in the chamber to those who agreed to peace with the government.

Uribe, 50, won a landslide victory in May elections with his zero tolerance stance towards the 17,000-strong FARC.

He has repeatedly dismissed claims that he had links with the extreme-right paramilitary Self-defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), which the United States considers to be a terrorist organisation.

Saddam warns of bloody failure, if US strikes

Bush to consult friends, allies before military action

AFP, Baghdad

President Saddam Hussein issued a haunting warning to the United States yesterday that any new war was doomed to bloody failure, as fears mount that Washington will unleash military strikes on Iraq.

"All empires and evil coffin-bearers have been buried with their sick dreams when they have sought to harm Arab and Muslim nations," the Iraqi strongman said, conjuring up images of bodybags the US administration will not want to contemplate.

He called on the United Nations, which has demanded that Baghdad re-admit disarmament inspectors, to honour its commitments to Iraq

and to answer its questions, notably on sanctions.

In three rounds of negotiations this year between Iraq and the United Nations, focused on the resumption of disarmament inspections, Baghdad has submitted a series of questions, notably on the lifting of the sanctions regime imposed after the 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Saddam only mentioned the United States by name once in reference to the 1991 Gulf War, but there was no doubt who he was talking about amid constant war-mongering in Washington.

US President George W. Bush promised Wednesday to consult friends and allies of the US as he

explores all options on how to overthrow Saddam.

Bush and top advisers appeared to take a step back amid an international storm over Iraq, whipped by reports of intensive US planning for an invasion early next year.

"I promise you that I will be patient and deliberate, that we will continue to consult with Congress and of course we will consult with our friends and allies," Bush said.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri said Wednesday Baghdad would not cave in to pressure from the United States and Britain to unconditionally readmit arms inspectors.

Sabri said Iraq would only readmit United Nations weapons inspectors if sanctions were lifted.

US allies in Europe and the Gulf have watched with real unease as a flurry of US newspapers have carried leaks of invasion options suggesting Bush has all but decided to use military force pre-emptively against Iraq.

The Washington Times quoted administration officials as saying the Joint Chiefs of Staff were now fully behind an invasion, yielding to pressure from more hawkish civilian leaders after months of resistance.

Meanwhile, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld alleged that members of the al-Qaeda terrorist group are in Iraq but would not say whether their presence was sanctioned by the government.

Su Kyi wants all political prisoners free before talks

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has insisted on the release of all political prisoners in her country before she sits down for what could be landmark political talks with the ruling military junta.

In a video message released late Wednesday in Bangkok, Myanmar's most prominent democracy advocate warned the current political stalemate that has gripped her nation would continue "until all our political prisoners are free."

"Until all our political prisoners are free, none of us can say that Burma (Myanmar) is now truly on the road towards democratic change," said the 1991 Nobel peace laureate who was released May 6 from 19 months of house arrest.

Taiwan tones down referendum rhetoric

China protests to US over Taipei official visit

AFP, Beijing

The United States was dragged into a row between China and Taiwan yesterday while the island itself back-pedalled from comments by its president on a possible independence referendum.

Beijing said it had made "serious representations" to the United States over a visit to the United States by Tsai Ing-wen, chairwoman of Taipei's Mainland Affairs Council, and the island's Premier Yu Shyi-kun.

Tsai was expected to meet with US officials, Congress members and academics in Washington as early as Thursday to explain the weekend remarks by Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian.

China has reacted furiously ever since Chen said Saturday that Taiwan and China were different countries and that a referendum would be the only way to decide the island's future.

"We ask the American side to adhere to the promise it made to China and stop the official exchange of visits and not to send the wrong message to Taiwanese independence forces," a foreign ministry spokesman in Beijing said.

China routinely objects to any visits to the United States by Taiwanese officials.

But Tsai's meetings come as Taiwanese officials step up their attempt to tone down the impact of Chen's remarks.

Premier Yu told Taiwanese

journalists in New York that his government would not hold any referendum on independence unless it was forced into such a move by China.

But the attempts at clarification appeared to have no effect on Beijing, which continued its propaganda barrage against Taipei.

"Taiwan 'referendum' is a declaration of war," belittled the front-page headline of the Global Times, a bi-weekly paper run by the People's Daily, the Communist Party's official mouthpiece.

A state-run opinion poll found 91 per cent of Chinese respondents believe President Chen is "a sinner for a thousand years" and "public enemy number one" after his comments.

"Gaza First" talks fail

Palestinians blame Israel for new condition

AFP, Ramallah

Talks between Israeli and Palestinian officials on an Israeli security plan to tackle the 22-month conflict "failed, as Israel imposed new conditions," Nabil Abu Rudeina, a close aide to Yasser Arafat, told AFP early yesterday.

"Israel went back on its position of Monday under which the security plan would also be applied to Bethlehem after Gaza, saying it would only be applied to Gaza, and adding many new conditions," the aide to the Palestinian leader said after Wednesday's meeting. He gave no further details.

The Palestinian cabinet had earlier given a tentative green light to an Israeli plan titled "Gaza First" during an emergency session.

The plan presented on Monday by Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer to newly appointed Palestinian interior minister Abdelrazak al-Yahya at a meeting in Jerusalem broadly set out an Israeli withdrawal from re-occupied land in return for a crackdown on militants.

The plan, to be first applied in Gaza, would then have been applied in Bethlehem in the West Bank where police had been told after Monday's meeting to prepare to resume their

functions. Hours later in Gaza City, a Palestinian was killed yesterday as Israeli forces stepped up their policy of raids.

The 21-year-old Palestinian was fatally wounded as the Israeli army staged a new incursion into the town of Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip, Palestinian security sources and witnesses said.

Four others were also wounded as around 25 tanks and armoured troop carriers moved into the town, with four accompanying bulldozers razing farmland in the area, the sources said.

A member of the Palestinian Authority Ziyad Abu Ziyad on yesterday called for an end to Palestinian attacks in Israel in an interview on Israeli public radio.

"The attacks on civilians in Israel must stop immediately. We must keep this goal in sight so as to be able to resume negotiations," he said speaking in Hebrew.

The Islamic hardline movement Hamas stressed Wednesday that it rejected the plan which it said tried to "sow the seeds of chaos, internal divisions and civil war" among Palestinians.

Meanwhile in Washington, a team of senior Palestinian ministers was to enter talks with top US officials yesterday, warning of "chaos" if the Bush

administration hopes of seeing Yasser Arafat replaced come to fruition.

Against a backdrop of suicide bombings by Palestinian militants and operations on the West Bank and Gaza by Israeli troops, the ministers were to meet Secretary of State Colin Powell and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice.

Their deliberations will represent the most significant contacts in Washington between Palestinians and US officials since President George W. Bush declared in June that Arafat must be replaced with leaders "not compromised by terror" if a Palestinian state is to become reality.

But Saeb Erakat, a veteran negotiator heading the Palestinian team, on Wednesday warned there could be no question of Arafat being marginalised.

Evidence of the battle for the soul of US Middle East policy burst into the open yesterday, when the Palestinian mission was jolted by harsh words by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Rumsfeld said there was "no question that the Palestinian Authority has been involved with terrorist activities. So that makes it a difficult interlocutor."

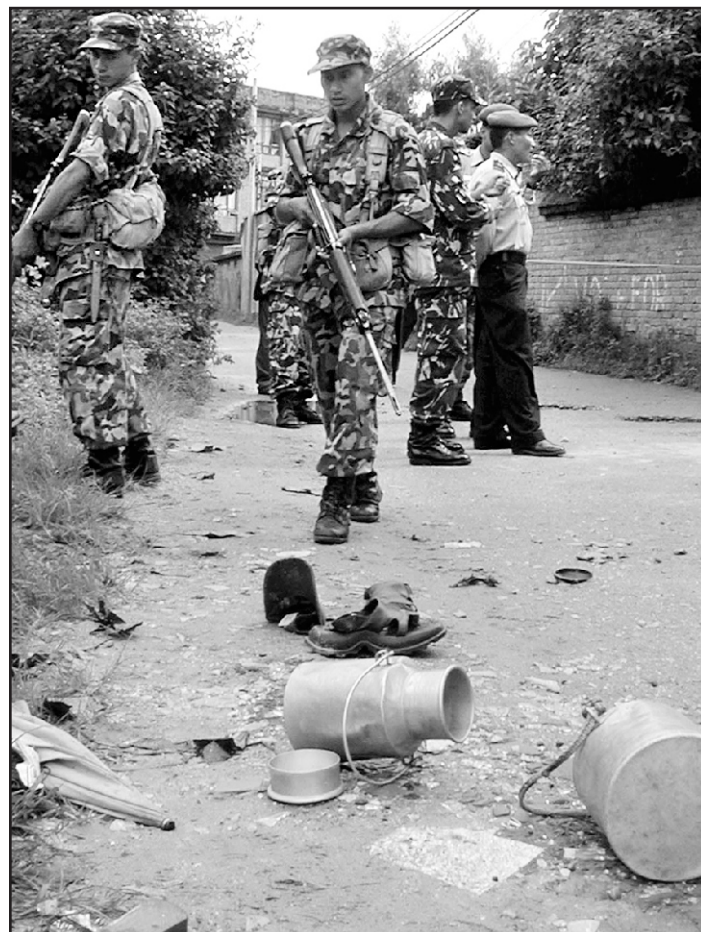


PHOTO: AFP

Two armed security officers look through debris following a bomb blast at a college in the heart of Kathmandu yesterday.

Maoist blast in Nepal leaves 6 hurt

AFP, Kathmandu

Up to six people were injured yesterday when a bomb planted by a Maoist student wing exploded at a business college in the heart of Nepal's capital Kathmandu, officials and witnesses said.

"The bomb, which went off at 07:25am Thursday morning damaged the shutter of a shop at the ground floor of the college building," said one man, who did not want to be named.

The building, which belonged to Mohan Bahadur Pandey, the chief press secretary of King Gyanendra, was rented to the Applied College of Business Management, the witness said.

Home ministry spokesman Gopendra Bahadur Pandey said five were injured in the blast, while witnesses put the injury toll at six. Two of the wounded were reported to be in a serious condition.

"The blast damaged the window panes and the shutter of a shop in the building," he said. "So far no one has been arrested."

The All Nepal National Free Students' Union (Revolutionary) (ANNFSU-R), which is seen as the student wing of the Maoists rebels, later claimed responsibility for the bombing.

Sati again sends shock wave across India

AFP, New Delhi

The burning to death of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre has shocked much of India, but unrepentant members of her village have proudly deified her and claim her sacrifice will help end a drought crippling their state.

Police in the central state of Madhya Pradesh are viewing Tuesday's event as murder and have arrested 15 people for allegedly forcing 65-year-old Kuttu Bai on to a blazing funeral pyre to enforce the grisly custom known as "sati".

They are also pressing charges of murder against Bai's two sons for participating in the event in order to take over their mother's property.

Eyewitness accounts vary on the train of events that led up to Bai's death-by-fire in Tamoli village,

in Madhya Pradesh's Panna district, early Tuesday afternoon.

According to some, members of her family, including her two sons, tried to talk her out of committing sati but "like a woman possessed", she simply dressed up and followed the funeral procession, then sat calmly on the pyre.

Others, however, claim the widow was forced on to the blazing pyre by family members.

As word spread of the impending act of sati, up to 5,000 people from the surrounding area rushed to Tamoli to witness the spectacle, according to one report.

Police say that when they were tipped off, they raced to the village in the rural heart of the state and tried to pull Bai from the fire.

The angry crowd, however, pelted them with stones, injuring them, and they retreated.

Witnesses also offer different versions as to how the fire came to be lit.

Some say it simply ignited on its own in an "act of god", while others say dozens of incense sticks stuck near the pyre set it alight.

Police, however, believe one of the sons set fire to the pyre in the presence of the other, hence the charges of murder.

A photograph published in the Hindustan Times newspaper yesterday shows a man stoking the huge blaze, with thousands of people watching from nearby embankments. The widow cannot be seen in the unclear photo.

Villagers, according to the newspaper, believe sati to be sacred and have deified Kuttu Bai, saying her sacrifice will rescue them from the drought crippling their state.