

Iraq mulls inspectors' return

Baghdad denies nuke plans

REUTERS, AFP, Johannesburg

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said on Monday the return of UN weapons inspectors to Baghdad was under consideration.

"It's still under consideration," he told Reuters when asked if Iraq was prepared to let the inspectors, who left Baghdad in 1998, back into the country.

Aziz is in South Africa to represent Iraq at the Earth Summit, which is seeking ways to lift poor nations out of poverty without spoiling the environment.

Asked if he would have talks on the inspectors issue with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in Johannesburg, he replied: "I'm not sure. I may just be saying 'Hi' to an old friend."

Aziz told CNN on Sunday that allowing weapons inspectors back into Iraq under the direction of chief UN arms inspector Hans Blix was not an option.

UN arms experts left Iraq in December 1998 ahead of a U.S.-British bombing campaign to punish Baghdad for its alleged failure to cooperate with inspectors.

Washington says Iraq is part of an "axis of evil" and has used Iraq's alleged possession of chemical, biological and possibly nuclear weapons to underpin President Bush's campaign for a "regime change" in Baghdad -- a euphemism for ousting Saddam.

Iraq says such weapons have already been destroyed, and it refuses to allow the return of arms inspectors until the UN sanctions are lifted.

Wider rifts appeared in U.S. public opinion at the weekend over any possible U.S. attack on Iraq, with Secretary of State Colin Powell suggesting the return of the inspectors was a critical step, in contrast with Vice President Dick Cheney. Several commentators were quick to point out the contradictions.

Iraq has intensified diplomatic efforts against pre-emptive U.S. strikes. Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri flew into Moscow on Monday to press permanent UN Security Council member Russia to back his country's cam-

paigned to stiffen international resistance to U.S. threats to attack Baghdad. Sabri held similar talks in China last week.

Moscow has strongly backed Washington's "war on terrorism" launched after last September's hijacked airliner attacks on the United States. But it opposes U.S. strikes against Iraq, saying a solution must be found through the United Nations.

AFP adds: Iraq said Sunday it was sending envoys to European capitals to rally support against US plans to overthrow President Saddam Hussein, as a top Iraqi official denied his country was working to obtain nuclear weapons.

Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said in an interview broadcast worldwide on Cable News Network that Iraq was not working to obtain nuclear weapons.

"We are not working on this," said Aziz, interviewed from Johannesburg. "The United States have provided no evidence to support the allegations," he added, alluding to statements by US Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

On Thursday, Cheney told a gathering of Korean War veterans in Texas that Iraq continued to "pursue an aggressive nuclear weapons program," and that many in Washington "are convinced that Saddam will acquire such weapons fairly soon."

The Europeans, many of whom were alarmed by Cheney's war talk, have sought to cool tempers and urged diplomacy rather than belligerency in dealing with Iraq.

However, EU foreign ministers, meeting in Denmark, pressed Baghdad on Saturday to readmit UN weapons inspectors immediately.

Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan announced Sunday plans to dispatch envoys to European Union member states after warmly praising the 15-nation bloc for refusing to toe Washington's hard line.

The envoys will "explain the scale of American threats against the Iraqi people and the dangers they pose to world peace and security," Ramadan told the official Iraq News Agency (INA).



South Korean army soldiers clear dirt from a flood-ravaged town near the eastern port city of Gangneung on Monday. Tens of thousands of soldiers were mobilised after Typhoon Rusa, South Korea's worst storm in four decades, left more than 200 people dead or missing.



Chinese Liao Mingyu, 11, answers a question during a press conference on Monday at Sandton convention centre in Johannesburg. Leaders from around the world were gathering at the World Summit on Sustainable Development here for a three-day debate on the future of the planet.

Children urge world leaders to get to work

AFP, Johannesburg

Children on Monday urged the world's leaders gathered at the Earth Summit in Johannesburg to "take action" to ensure sustainable development of the planet and give future generations a chance of happiness.

The message was delivered by Analiz Vergara, 14, from Ecuador, Canada's Justin Friesen and Liao Mingyu from China, both 11, who were given the stage shortly before the leaders launched a three-day debate on poverty and the environment.

"Most world leaders do not listen. We are disappointed because too many adults are more interested in money than in the environment," they said, reporting back from an international conference on children and the environment in Canada three months ago.

The three children said that though they were "still only babies" in 1992 when the first Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro, they knew that in the past 10 years children had continued to suffer as a result of the damage to the environment.

Jaya appeals to parties to snub Sonia

PTI, Chennai

Launching a fresh attack on Congress President Sonia Gandhi, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J Jayalalitha said on Monday all political parties should come together in evolving a consensus to prevent a person of foreign origin from becoming Prime Minister of the country.

A week after she raked up the foreign origin issue of Sonia Gandhi, Jayalalitha repeatedly referred to Gandhi as Mrs Antonio Maino from Italy and said the country cannot tolerate her becoming the Prime Minister.

"India has to be saved from the clutches of Sonia Gandhi and her rapacious relatives" who had been using the position in India for their personal benefit, she said.

"I appeal to the leaders of opposition to get together and discuss this issue. I appeal to the political parties in the country to think seriously about it", Jayalalitha said.

Asked what was the alternative to Sonia Gandhi, she said that would be discussed by the opposition leaders and could not be discussed in a press conference.



Asked why she was making this outburst against Gandhi, Jayalalitha said she was not making any outburst but only making a "precise, calm and valid statement" about the Congress President.

Pressed further, she said she was making this comment because the general elections were not far away and there was a projection by the media that she was going to be the next Prime Minister of the country as there was no alternative to Mrs Antonio Maino. She has conveyed the impression through her demeanour attitude that she was already the Prime Minister of the country. "This cannot be tolerated and we have to arrive at a consensus on it", she added.

Pakistan trims lists of candidates for polls

Imran loses one wicket

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan on Monday began wrapping up a preliminary scrutiny process of candidates for October polls, which has seen ex-premier Benazir Bhutto eliminated, ex-premier Nawaz Sharif pull out, and cricket hero-turned-politician Imran Khan rejected in the first of three seats for which he was nominated.

A record 4,020 candidates filed nominations to contest 342 national parliamentary seats, while 9,648 candidates applied to run for 728 seats in the four provincial assemblies, the Election Commission said.

The week-long scrutiny process was set to conclude Monday after election officials rejected self-exiled two-time former premier Benazir Bhutto and her estranged sister-in-law Ghinwa, and announced a rejection of Imran Khan's bid to run in one of three seats.

A spokesman for Khan's

Tehreek-i-Insaf party, Saifullah Nyazee, said his papers were rejected in the seat of Bahawalpur Sunday because a copy of his degree from Oxford University was not certified.

However Nyazee told AFP he was optimistic that nominations in two other seats would be approved later Monday.

Under tough new electoral laws brought in by President Pervez Musharraf, all candidates must have at least a Bachelors degree from recognised universities or religious schools.

Sharif, whose nomination papers were initially accepted, announced a shock withdrawal of his nomination late Saturday, citing solidarity with traditional arch-rival Benazir.

Benazir was rejected on the grounds of two absconding convictions against her, awarded by an accountability court when she failed to return from overseas for graft

trials in May and July.

The acceptance of the nomination of exiled Sharif, who was convicted of hijacking, terrorism and tax evasion several months after he was deposed in a bloodless coup by Musharraf in October 1999, had sparked angry accusations of bias by Benazir's supporters.

Benazir's rejection in three seats, two in the seats of Larkana and Ratto Dero in southern Sindh province and a third for one of the seats reserved for women, sparked waves of protest across Pakistan at the weekend, leading to hundreds of arrests on Saturday but none on Sunday.

Her lawyer Farooq Naik said he would appeal against the rejections this week.

"If she is disqualified the voters will stand disenfranchised and they will not be allowed to choose their own candidate," he told reporters in Larkana, Benazir's home town, on Sunday.

Pakistan urges US to push for Vajpayee-Musharraf talks

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan has urged the United States to take initiative for a one-to-one meeting between Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in New York during the upcoming United Nations General Assembly session this month.

Chairman of Pakistan's Kashmir Committee Abdul Qayyum Khan said Saturday Pakistan intends to raise the Kashmir issue in a big way at the General Assembly session.

Talking to reporters after meeting

with Lisa Curtis, senior Adviser to the US assistant secretary of State Christina Rocca, Khan said he has requested Curtis to step up US efforts to bring about a Vajpayee-Musharraf meeting without which things could go out of control.

Musharraf is scheduled to address the General Assembly on September 12 while Vajpayee is expected to address the world body on Sept 13.

Terming the assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir as a "futile exercise", he said the permanent solution to the problem was needed.

Earlier, talking to PTI, Khan said he was planning to approach the Indian High Commission here to give a visa to Ajmal Khatak, a prominent politician of the country's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the member of Pakistan's Kashmir Committee, to visit India for holding talks with India's Kashmir Committee headed by Ram Jethmalani.

Ahead of his meeting with Curtis, Qayyum Khan met Musharraf on Friday to review the fast moving political scenario in Jammu and Kashmir.

Syria lets 200 al-Qaida men flee to Lebanon

AP, Jerusalem

Nearly 200 al-Qaida operatives, including several senior commanders, have settled in Lebanon with Syria's permission, taking refuge in a large Palestinian refugee camp there, an Israeli newspaper reported Monday.

A source in Jerusalem, who spoke on condition of anonymity, confirmed the report, saying the information comes from Israeli and Western intelligence agencies.

A Lebanese security source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, denied al-Qaida members were in the refugee camp, saying 10 to 15 Islamic militants are hiding from

authorities in the camp. The militants were involved in clashes in which nine Lebanese soldiers were killed.

Zeev Schiff, a prominent Israeli journalist who covers the military, reported in Haaretz daily that Damascus has allowed between 150 and 200 al-Qaida operatives to settle in the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el-Hilweh, near the Lebanese coastal town of Sidon.

The group includes senior commanders who arrived from Afghanistan through Damascus and Iran, the newspaper reported Monday, attributing its information to "various intelligence services."

Russia backs 'pre-emptive' strikes against terror: FM

AFP, Moscow

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said Monday, ahead of a meeting with his Iraqi counterpart Najib Sabri, that Moscow supported "pre-emptive measures" against global terrorism, but only under UN approval.

Ivanov's comments strongly hinted at a reluctant acceptance of US arguments to launch a military assault aimed at ousting Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad.

Russia has furiously opposed an attack in the past, viewing Iraq as a key trading partner that also owes it roughly eight billion dollars in Soviet-era debt.

Iraq has been identified as a member of an "axis of evil" by US President George W. Bush in an anti-terror campaign that has been supported by Moscow in Afghanistan.

Ivanov stressed that the fight against terrorists must be "supported by existing, and with the creation of new, multilateral mechanisms," Russian news agencies reported.

This, Ivanov said in a speech to Russian diplomats and students, was necessary to "resolve existing problems -- but it is even better to take pre-emptive measures."

He added however that the United Nations' role was "as important as ever today."

Russia, along with China, which Sabri visited last week, holds veto power in the UN Security Council.

Washington has argued that it does not need UN authorisation for such a strike because it would come under the guidelines of existing UN resolutions about Iraq's need to comply with weapons inspections teams.

Moscow meanwhile has pressed Baghdad to readmit the inspectors in return for a lifting of UN sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

Moments after Ivanov's comments, the official Russian foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko stressed that Russia preferred the Iraqi conflict to be solved "at a political-diplomatic level."

In his speech, Ivanov said Russia's global view had shifted following the September 11 terror attacks on the United States.

"The world 'has changed remarkably... and unfortunately these changes began with the tragedy in America," said Ivanov.

"The central role (in international stability) has become dominated by the fight against international terrorism," he said.

The Russian foreign ministry earlier said that Ivanov's talks with Sabri would be "a good opportunity to discuss our bilateral ties and the whole situation around Iraq."

Some senior Russian lawmakers close to President Vladimir Putin's administration earlier had suggested that Moscow's main interests in Iraq are commercial -- and that they have little interest in seeing Saddam remain in power, as long as existing contracts are honoured.

Washington had earlier been concerned by Iraqi claims that it had struck a new 40-billion-dollar trading agreement with Russia.

But in another sign of solidarity with Washington, Moscow quickly denied the Iraqi claim, saying it had only struck a framework trading agreement last year, which did not carry any specific price tag.

Pakistan cries foul over bloodshed in Kashmir

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan on Monday expressed deep concern over a recent surge in civilian casualties in Indian-controlled Kashmir and blamed Indian security agencies for the killings.

"Pakistan is convinced that Indian security agencies and renegade elements in their pay are behind these killings, the main target of which are Kashmiri Muslims," a foreign ministry statement said.

It said Indian authorities "invariably make the false claim that Kashmiri freedom fighters are responsible for these deaths."

The statement said the involvement of Indian security personnel in the bloodshed has been "acknowledged" by Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International.

"The objective of the Indian authorities in carrying out these killings and blaming them on Kashmiri freedom fighters is to portray internationally the struggle as terrorism," the statement said.

"(This strategy) is to alienate the Kashmiris from the freedom movement to secure a greater voter turn-out at the forthcoming

fraudulent assembly elections in Indian-occupied Kashmir."

The statement called upon the Indian government to end its "diabolical machinations" in Jammu and Kashmir as well as its "brutal suppression of the Kashmiri people," urging dialogue to resolve the Kashmiri dispute.

Kashmir, divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both, has been at the centre of two of three wars between the nuclear-armed South Asian neighbours since their independence from Britain in 1947.

Both countries have deployed an estimated one million troops along their common borders since tensions again flared after a bloody attack on the Indian parliament in December by Muslim militants.

India accuses Pakistan of arming, funding and training Islamic militants battling New Delhi's rule in Indian-controlled Kashmir, a charge Islamabad denies.

More than 36,500 people have died in the region since the beginning of the Muslim insurgency in 1989.



A Royal Air Force Seaking helicopter hovers over the "Norsea" ferry, which was hit by a fire in one of its engine rooms early Monday about eight miles east off the coast of Great Yarmouth. The ship was carrying 611 passengers from Hull to Zeebrugge when the blaze broke out.

Fire breaks out on ferry in North Sea

AFP, London

A ferry carrying 611 passengers drifted early Monday in the North Sea after a fire was extinguished in the vessel's engine room, coastguard and ferry sources said.

The blaze was extinguished by around 6:30 am (0530 GMT), according to the ferry's fire crew, and firefighters of the RAF and Suffolk Fire Brigade in eastern England who were airlifted to the ship during the emergency.

Earlier Monday hundreds of passengers donned lifejackets and were told to muster at emergency points on deck, as the ship drifted 13 km northeast of Great Yarmouth, east England.

Coastguards were alerted at 2:20 am after a fire broke out in the engine room of the Norsea, a P/O ferry, coastguard spokesman Mark Clark said.

Once the fire began, the P/O ferry's own fire system was automatically activated, before the engine room was shut down and carbon dioxide was pumped in to extinguish the flames.

The ferry's captain Jerry Walker said that there were no injuries on board due to the fire -- although there was concern for one passenger, a woman who suffers from angina.