



PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese protesters light candles to mark the 20th anniversary of the Sabra and Shatila massacre in Beirut on Monday. Lebanese Christian militia began September 16, 1982 a bloody massacre in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in West Beirut. Hundreds were killed in the slaughter, which was carried out in revenge of the assassination four days before of Bashir Gemayel, the President-elect of Lebanon. The Israeli army was blamed for not preventing the massacre.

'Ozone hole is shrinking'

AFP, Sydney

The hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica that protects life on earth from the sun's ultra-violet rays is shrinking and will be closed by 2050, an Australian scientific team forecast Tuesday.

The team has discovered the level of ozone-eating chlorine from chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in the atmosphere has begun to fall some 30 years after the hole was first detected.

At its peak, the hole was three times the size of Australia.

But Paul Fraser, chief atmospheric researcher with Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), said a ban imposed on CFCs in the 1990s under the Montreal Protocol had begun paying off.

"This is big news, we have been waiting for this," he said.

Research by a monitoring station run jointly by the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology at Cape Grim in Tasmania found that the chlorine levelled off in 2000 and had started to fall for the first time.

World hails Iraq decision

AP, Tokyo

Though quickly dismissed by Washington, Iraq's decision to allow the unconditional return of United Nations weapons inspectors was welcomed by many around the world on Tuesday.

Russia, a member of the UN Security Council with veto power over any resolution, said Baghdad's about-face was a victory for concerted international efforts.

"Now our main task is to ensure that the inspectors can get to Iraq as soon as possible and start their work," Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said at the United Nations in New York.

Other leaders were more guarded. Australian Prime Minister John Howard called Iraq's move "a cautious first step" but said Saddam Hussein should not be trusted.

"Given Iraq's history of misrepresentation, of pretending to do one thing and doing another, I believe the world should welcome this development with a great deal of caution and a great deal of reserve and even a touch of scepticism," he told Parliament.

Iraq said Monday it would allow the unconditional return of inspectors to assess whether the country has weapons of mass destruction. The decision followed warnings from President Bush that Iraq could face military strikes if it did not comply with several UN resolutions.

However, just hours after its announcement, Iraq questioned whether allowing the inspectors to return would end the crisis.

Iraqi officials have speculated in the past that the United States would attack even if UN inspectors resumed their work.

"The issue does not end with Iraq's acceptance of the return of the inspectors," Prime Minister Tariq Aziz said Tuesday in Baghdad, adding, "The aim of the American policies is the oil in the Gulf."

In Asia, Iraq's announcement gave a boost to financial markets that have been weighed down for weeks by fears of war, traders said.

DPRK apologises for Japanese abductions

REUTERS, Pyongyang

In a rare act of contrition, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il apologised to Japan Tuesday for Pyongyang's kidnapping of Japanese citizens and promised not to repeat such misdeeds, a Japanese official said.

The apology, offered at a historic summit between Kim and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in the North Korean capital, could clear the way for fresh talks on establishing diplomatic ties between Tokyo and its former colony.

"It is regretful and I want to frankly apologise," a Japanese government official quoted Kim as saying. Kim added that he had punished those involved.

Japan has made progress on the issue of the abductees -- whom Pyongyang had denied kidnapping -- a condition for reopening normalisation talks, stalled for nearly two years by a raft of other issues including Pyongyang's demand for reparations for damages suffered during Tokyo's harsh 1910-1945 rule.

A Japanese official told reporters that four out of 11 Japanese citizens Tokyo said were kidnapped were alive.

Analysts have said the trip could make or break the career of Koizumi, who needs a diplomatic coup to cement his domestic support, but the implications go far beyond bilateral ties and domestic politics.

The talks between the two leaders were being watched around the world for clues as to whether the reclusive communist state, branded by President Bush part of an "axis of evil," was emerging from its Cold War cocoon.

The Japanese official said the two sides would issue a joint statement later, but gave no details about its contents.

Kim is thought to be keen to convince the United States that North Korea does not deserve to be linked with Iraq in an "axis of evil" at a time when Washington is seeking international support for a military attack to oust Saddam Hussein.



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (L) shakes hands with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il (R) after signing a joint statement at the end of their historic one-day summit at the Paekhwon guesthouse in Pyongyang on Tuesday.

Tamils, Muslims iron out differences at Thai talks

AFP, Sattahip

Sri Lanka's minority Muslims, who could make or break peace talks underway here, have clinched an agreement with Tamil Tiger rebels on resolving their differences, official sources said Tuesday.

The only Muslim delegate in the four-member Sri Lankan government team, Rauf Hakeem, has been invited by the rebels for a separate meeting with top guerrilla leaders to hammer out outstanding issues, the sources said.

Tamils who constitute about 12.6 percent of the country's population are the main minority, but the second largest minority -- Muslims -- have considerable political leverage over the co-habitation government.

Clashes between Muslims and the Tiger rebels in Sri Lanka's multi-

ethnic eastern province threatened a Norwegian-arranged truce, but Oslo's diplomacy managed to prevent a complete collapse of the process in April.

"Muslims must be on board for the talks to succeed and give it credibility," Hakeem said before he sat down as a member of the government delegation to talk peace with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Hakeem's participation at the talks which began Monday was in doubt earlier this month, but Norway mediated and ensured he was taken on board, initially as a government representative and later as the leader of a separate Muslim delegation.

Hakeem, who is also the minister of ports in the Colombo cabinet, said he hoped to play a "pivotal role" in

the peace process.

The sources close to the talks said that the LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham on Monday invited Hakeem to visit the island's rebel-held Kilinochchi area once he returns to Sri Lanka to resolve outstanding issues.

Diplomatic sources said the agreement was a positive development in the talks and would help ease tensions in Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic regions where Muslims have complained of harassment at the hands of the Tigers.

Balasingham acknowledged recognition of the Muslims as a key factor and noted that the island's north-east was also the "traditional homeland" of the community.

Delhi pleased with first round of Kashmir polls

Separatists cry foul

AFP, Srinagar

India said Tuesday it was satisfied with the "free and fair" first phase of controversial elections in Indian Kashmir, while separatists claimed the poll was rife with coercion and intimidation.

Monday's election passed off relatively peacefully despite threats by militants that they would disrupt the polls and kill anyone taking part, although six people were injured in explosions at or near polling stations.

Indian officials said the preliminary turnout figure was 44 percent of the 1.49 million eligible voters in

the five districts voting, which the Chief Electoral Officer in Kashmir, Pramod Jain, termed "satisfactory". Officials said the turnout could rise slightly once figures were finally tallied.

Turnout in the previous election in 1996 in those districts was 61 percent while for the whole state it was 54 percent. Average turnout in India's other state polls is usually around 67 percent.

Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani said the polling was "a befitting reply" to Pakistan, which has questioned the legitimacy of the Indian-organised elections -- in the past marred by allegations of vote-

rigging. "Conducting successful polling is in itself a befitting reply. I think the international community would regard these as successful elections," he said.

Tensions between India and Pakistan since December, when the Indian parliament was attacked by gunmen New Delhi claims were sponsored by Islamabad, have focused international attention on Kashmir.

India refused to allow foreign observers but some 28 foreign diplomats watched the voting unofficially.

Robot peers through pyramid 'door'

AFP, Cairo

A tiny robot's electronic eye peered through a stone slab in a narrow tunnel deep inside Egypt's largest pyramid Tuesday, only to find a small space and another obstacle beyond, disappointing but intriguing watching archaeologists.

Braced for the possibility that they might find nothing at all behind the slab, scientists had hoped to find statues or scrolls that could contain clues as to how the 4,500-year-old pyramid of Cheops was built.

The tank-like robot, with treads on top and bottom, crawled along a narrow, soaring shaft emanating from a chamber in the pyramid and inserted a fiber-optic camera through a hole it had drilled in a "stone door" at the end. But on the other side was only a small empty space blocked by stone.

"I'm really happy that we did this. We found another space. We have found another sealed chamber," Zahi Hawas, secretary general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, told a National Geographic television journalist as they stood deep inside the pyramid.

Egyptian and foreign journalists, who could only watch the event on a screen set up in a luxury hotel overlooking the floodlit pyramids on the desert plateau outside Cairo, let out a collective groan of disappointment.

An Egyptian antiquities official, asking not to be identified, said the hole in the "stone door," which had copper handles, had been drilled on Saturday. He added the stone found beyond it was "cracked," but may conceal nothing more.

US gets 5 al-Qaida suspects

AP, Karachi

An alleged organiser of the Sept. 11 attacks was handed over to U.S. authorities Monday along with four other al-Qaida suspects who were arrested here last week in a major blow to the terrorist network.

The five suspects including Ramzi Binalshibh, a Yemeni who allegedly wired money to the hijackers in the United States and provided them logistical support were flown out of Pakistan, several senior Pakistani officials said.

The handover took place after a Pakistani official said police were investigating whether some of those arrested with Binalshibh were involved in the murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, who was abducted in Karachi in January.

If a link were established, it would be the first evidence that al-Qaida

may have been involved in Pearl's abduction and killing.

President Bush said Binalshibh's arrest showed the war on terrorism had not flagged.

"I had the feeling that after September the 11th, that some around the world would grow weary and tired of this effort," Bush said in Iowa. "But that's not how America feels. That's not how that fellow who's been picked up in Pakistan feels, too."

German prosecutors believe the 30-year-old Binalshibh was meant to be the fourth suicide pilot in the attacks on the United States. After he was refused a U.S. visa, he instead arranged payments to American flight schools and made frequent organisational trips.

After his exclusion as the fourth pilot, Binalshibh became the most significant contact person inside the

network," chief German prosecutor Kay Nehm told reporters in August.

Although U.S. officials say Binalshibh was a key figure in the German-based cell that helped carry out the Sept. 11 attacks, they say he was not an overall leader in Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

The FBI believes he is a key aide to Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who is thought to have been a top planner of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon and to have plotted several al-Qaida attacks since.

The arrests of Binalshibh and the other militants marked one of the biggest successes in the U.S.-led war against terrorism since Abu Zubaydah, the third-ranking official in the al-Qaida network, was captured in March in Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Fireworks blast kills 15 in Tamil Nadu

AFP, Madras

At least 15 people were killed and more than 40 injured when a van fitted with gas cylinders blew up while being loaded with firecrackers at Attur in southern India, police said Tuesday.

The fireworks appeared to have been high-intensity crackers prepared for the Hindu celebrations of Diwali next month.

Director General of Police in Tamil Nadu state B.P. Nailwal told AFP the explosion flattened 15 houses in the lane where the van was being loaded.

So far, he added, 15 bodies had been pulled from the debris. More than 40 injured people had been admitted to a government hospital at Attur, some 360 km northwest of the state capital Madras.

Preliminary investigation, Nailwal said, showed that a dealer in home-made fireworks was loading the van with his illegal merchandise

when the blast occurred late Monday night.

"The van had two gas cylinders fitted in the boot (trunk) as alternative fuel," he said. "It is possible that some spark could have triggered the explosion and the huge amount of incendiary stuff added to the intensity."

"All the houses in the lane were razed to the ground," Nailwal said.

Police and rescue workers were Tuesday morning pulling out bodies from under the heavy debris of crashed concrete walls, witnesses said.

One witness, G. Krishnan, told AFP by telephone that at least 22 bodies had already been recovered but police could not confirm the figure.

According to Krishnan, the fireworks manufacturer, Ravi Arunachalam, 26, had stocked the crackers in his house and had been planning to sell them at surrounding villages.

Rockets hit UN office in Afghanistan

AFP, Islamabad

An Afghan security guard was injured when two rockets hit a United Nations office in eastern Afghanistan early Tuesday, an Afghan news agency said.

The rockets hit the office of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in the eastern district of Jalalabad city, the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press said. The attack shattered windows and also damaged nearby buildings, it said.

It was not clear whether the UN office was the target of the attack. Army installations and the airport are also located in the east of the city.

There have also been numerous rocket attacks on US bases in eastern Afghanistan in recent days, but no casualties have been reported.

Ten rockets were fired at two US bases in the city of Khost on Sunday night, the Afghan Islamic Press reported earlier.

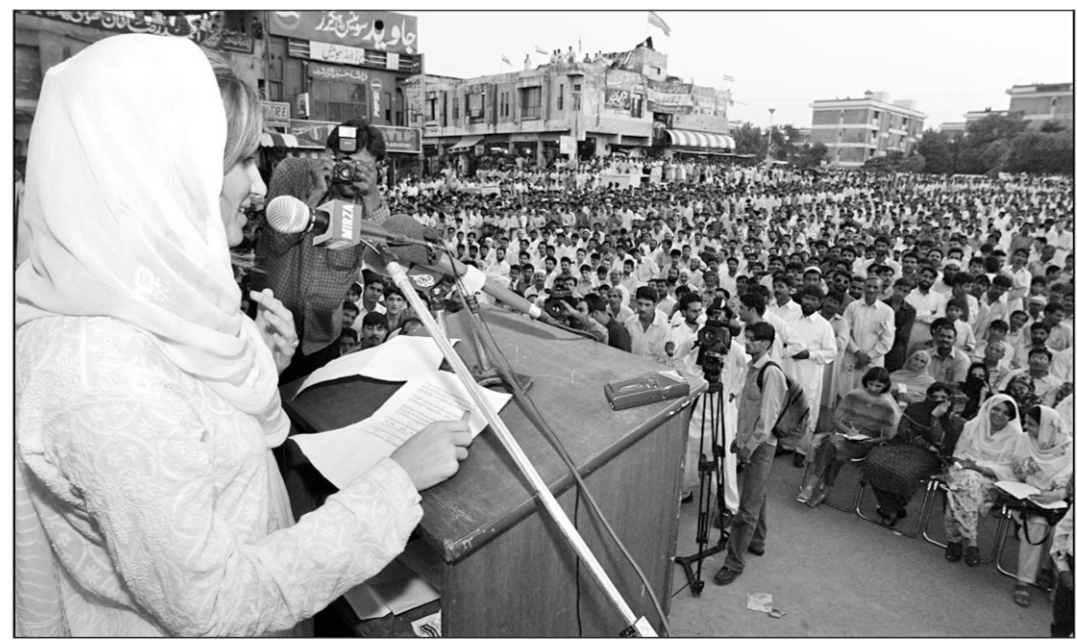


PHOTO: AFP

Jemima Khan, wife of Pakistan's cricket legend turned politician Imran Khan, speaks at a public rally to boost her husband's election campaign for the October 10 polls in front of Pakistan's national flag in Islamabad on Monday. Jemima, daughter of late British tycoon Sir James Goldsmith, made her first public appearance for the campaign and asked people to come out of their house on the election day and cast their vote. Imran heads Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (Justice movement).

US after ME oil: Baghdad

AP, Baghdad

In Iraq's first public comments since agreeing to allow the unconditional return of UN weapons inspectors, Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz questioned whether that retreat would end the crisis.

"The issue does not end with Iraq's acceptance of the return of the inspectors," Aziz said at the opening of a "solidarity conference" in Baghdad attended by lawmakers and other delegates from around the world.

Iraqi officials, citing comments from top members of President Bush's administration, had specu-

lated in the past that the United States would attack even if they allowed UN inspectors back to determine whether Iraq was stockpiling nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the missiles to deliver them.

The aim of the American policies is the oil in the Gulf," Aziz added in his brief remarks.

In a letter addressed Monday to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Iraq agreed to allow the unconditional return of UN inspectors, "to remove any doubts that Iraq still possesses weapons of mass destruction."

The White House dismissed the offer as a tactical move and continued to press for a new UN Security Council resolution that could open the way to military action against Iraq.

Under Security Council resolutions, sanctions imposed on Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait cannot be lifted until UN inspectors certify that its weapons of mass destruction have been destroyed. Inspectors left the country in December, 1998 ahead of U.S. and British airstrikes to punish Iraq for not cooperating with inspections.

REUTERS, Singapore

Arrests of suspected militants in Asia and hints of more to come might suggest the al-Qaida network and its sympathisers are on the ropes, but analysts and officials say it is too early to declare victory.

While the attacks on the United States a year ago marshalled Asian countries to Washington's war on terror, a formidable battle remains against a hydra of insurgency and the money funding it.

"It's still bubbling under the surface," said Clive Williams, director of terrorism studies at the

Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University.

"You don't need to go to America to attack Americans."

Malaysia and Singapore have detained dozens of people on suspicion of being part of terror plots by the Jemaah Islamiah (JI), a group they say has links to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida group, accused of carrying out the Sept. 11 attacks.

Singapore said Monday it "seriously disrupted the JI network" in the city state by arresting 21 suspects in August after detaining 13 others since December for planning

to blow up the U.S. embassy and other targets.

Pakistan, a conduit for U.S. funds to Muslim Mujahideen fighters during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and a key backer of the Taliban before siding with Washington, this week handed over five suspected al-Qaida members to the United States.

The Pakistan military government said the arrests of Ramzi bin al-Shaibah, accused of playing a key role in the planning of the Sept. 11 attacks, and the others "show that the backbone of the terrorist network seems to have broken."