

Iraqi envoy denies Saddam ready for exile

AFP, Moscow

The Iraqi ambassador to Moscow firmly denied Friday that Saddam Hussein was prepared to go into exile to avert a US-led strike against his regime in Baghdad.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld suggested late Wednesday that a decision by Saddam to leave the country would help avoid US military action against Iraq.

But responding to "Western media reports" rather than Rumsfeld directly, Iraq's ambassador to Russia, Abbas Khalaf, flatly rejects the suggestion that Saddam was prepared to abdicate.

"This is another crude and stupid media invention that appeared in the course of the propaganda war launched by the United States against the Iraqi leadership," Khalaf told Interfax news agency.

Saddam appeals to UN to stop US attack

UN arms inspectors to return next month

REUTERS, United Nations

As UN weapons inspectors disclosed plans to go to Iraq next month, President Saddam Hussein appealed to the United Nations to stop the Bush administration from attacking his country.

In a letter read by his foreign minister to the 190-member UN General Assembly on Thursday, Saddam attempted to counter US war plans and denied he had any banned weapons.

"I hereby declare before you that Iraq is clear of all nuclear, chemical and biological weapons," he said in the message read by Najib Sabri only days after Baghdad agreed to readmit the arms inspectors without conditions.

He accused the United States of wanting to destroy Iraq in order to control the oil-based economy of the Middle East and hinted at limits to where the inspectors could go, saying Iraq's rights, sovereignty and security had to be respected.

"We have accepted the return of inspection teams to Iraq, taking into consideration the arrangements that should safeguard these principles," he said.

The statement immediately raised questions about a 1998 agreement on Saddam's palace compounds that included diplomats accompanying the inspectors.

The pact was endorsed by the UN Security Council but may be changed. The Bush administration is seeking Security Council support for a resolution authorising military action against Baghdad if it blocks any access for the UN arms experts.

Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix acknowledged that the agreement on the palaces was still valid unless the council decided otherwise.

But he told reporters after briefing the council that interpretations of Saddam's statement differed.

Delhi asks Karnataka to honour CRA's decision

PTI, New Delhi

The Centre on Friday asked Karnataka to honour the decision of the Cauvery River Authority (CRA) that directed release of 0.8 TMC feet of water to Tamil Nadu.

After a meeting with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Water Resources Minister Arjun Charan Sethi urged Karnataka "to honour the decision of the CRA as agreed to by them (Karnataka and Tamil Nadu)".

Sethi said he was asked by the Prime Minister to contact Karnataka government for ensuring release of water.

He has also sent a communication to Karnataka Government asking it to honour the CRA decision taken on September eight under which Karnataka should release 9,000 cusecs of water at Mettur amounting to 0.8 tmc ft of water accounted on weekly average basis for September and October.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) hold placards on Friday during a demonstration near Parliament in New Delhi. The protesters were calling for the intervention of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in providing relief to drought victims across the country.

Train derails in West Bengal

AFP, Kolkata

Six carriages of a passenger train derailed around midnight near Kolkata, local police said early Friday.

The Teesta Torsa train derailed at 11:55 pm (1825 GMT) near Mahipal town 230 km north of Kolkata in West Bengal state, they said.

There were no immediate reports of injuries, they said, adding that the cause of the derailment was not known.

The train had been heading to Calcutta from the north of West Bengal state when it derailed. It had been due to arrive in the city at 6:35 am.

Some 120 people were killed earlier this month when a train derailed as it headed to New Delhi from Calcutta.

The luxury Rajdhani Express veered off the tracks September 9 near Rafiganj in Bihar state as it was travelling around 130 kilometres (80 miles) an hour. Part of the train fell into the swollen Dhabi river.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli army tanks and bulldozers are seen inside Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's West Bank headquarters in Ramallah on Friday. At least three Israeli army bulldozers backed by excavators were demolishing buildings inside Arafat's Muqataa compound, leaving two-thirds of the vast complex in ruins, according to an AFP reporter on the scene.

Palestinians call for int'l action to lift Arafat siege

Israel wants to torpedo all peace initiatives: Shaath

AFP, Gaza City

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat called Friday on the international community to act immediately to end "Israeli aggression", in particular the latest siege around Yasser Arafat's headquarters.

"We ask all the international community, notably the United States, United Nations, European Union, Russia and Arab countries, to act immediately to bring an end to Israeli aggression, especially against president Arafat," Erekat told AFP.

Erekat charged that the siege was "part of the plan of (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon, who is aiming to strike Arafat and to completely destroy the peace process."

Israeli tanks entered Arafat's compound in the West Bank town of Ramallah late Thursday and surrounded his office building after a suicide bomb blast on a crowded bus in Tel Aviv killed six people including the bomber and left some 60 others wounded.

Earlier, Israel's cabinet had decided unanimously to "isolate" Arafat and to demand the surrender of some 20 wanted senior Palestinians in the compound, among them West Bank intelligence Chief Tawfiq Tirawi, public radio said.

The Israeli army besieged Arafat's base for more than a month after a March invasion of the West Bank also triggered by a major suicide bombing. That siege was only lifted after US and British mediators negotiated the imprisonment, under international guard, of six Palestinians wanted by Israel who had been held up inside Arafat's compound.

Meanwhile, Israel's military escalation aims "to torpedo all peace initiatives", Palestinian international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath said here Friday.

Israel Prime Minister Ariel "Sharon's policy consists of escalating the situation in order to torpedo all peace initiatives, the Arab initiative, the European initiative and the US initiative," Shaath told the Egyptian official MENA news agency.

He said the situation in the Palestinian territories was "dangerous" after Israeli tanks besieged Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's compound in the West Bank town of Ramallah late Thursday.

Israel has demanded the surrender of wanted Palestinians after a suicide bomber killed five people on a crowded bus in Tel Aviv. Shaath said Israel killed 85 Palestinian civilians last month, including 34 children.

The Palestinian official arrived in Cairo after attending the UN General Assembly in New York. He is due to travel later in the day to the Palestinian territories, according to MENA.

US blasts Hitler-Bush comparison

AFP, Washington

The United States expressed outrage Thursday at a German minister's comments comparing US President George W. Bush to Nazi leader Adolf Hitler amid accusations Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder is exploiting anti-Americanism to win reelection.

As Schroeder and his party members step up anti-US rhetoric over Iraq, Washington took exception to some of the language coming across the Atlantic ahead of Sunday's scheduled vote.

In particular, the White House blasted Schroeder's Justice Minister Herta and Pauling-Gmelin's likening of Bush's political methods to those used by Hitler.

"This statement by the justice minister is outrageous and is inexplicable," Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

"The president was very angered by these comments and (national security adviser Condoleezza) Rice took this very personally as well," a senior US official, who declined to

Bomb attack on Musharraf thwarted: Armitage

REUTERS, Washington

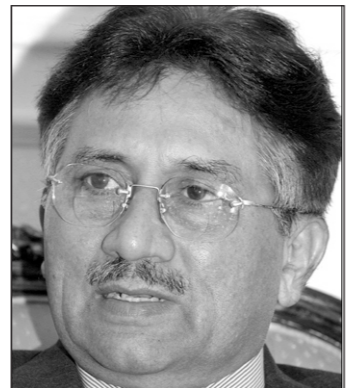
A top US official said Pakistan's intelligence services had thwarted a plot to blow up President Pervez Musharraf, although Pakistani officials earlier denied any such attack had been planned.

Testifying Thursday at a joint hearing of the Senate and House intelligence committees into last year's Sept. 11 attacks, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said: "President Musharraf's intelligence service thwarted a bombing attempt on him yesterday."

His statement followed a report in Thursday's Washington Post that Pakistani police and intelligence officials had arrested an Islamic militant who was plotting to assassinate Musharraf.

Earlier Thursday Pakistani Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider had denied local media reports that militants arrested Wednesday had planned to attack Musharraf while he was at a defence exhibition in the

southern city of Karachi. Musharraf attended the exhibition Monday night and on Tuesday. Haider said the militants had been involved in an earlier foiled plot to assassinate Musharraf in late



April, as well as in a car bomb attack on the US consulate in Karachi in June that killed 12 people.

"They are involved in the US consulate bombing for sure and they earlier had attempted -- not this time -- on the president's life," Haider told reporters.

Musharraf, speaking in Islamabad Thursday after opening a two-day conference on peace and security in South Asia, also denied there had been any such plan.

"There is no threat to my life. God is great. He saves all," he told reporters.

The Washington Post report said Sharif Ahmad, 30, was arrested in Karachi late Tuesday with five other men at a house less than a mile from the defence exhibition site.

"In their sole aim to kill President Musharraf these militants had collected 70 hand grenades, 40 rocket-propelled grenades and rockets and... bomb-making chemicals at their hide-out in Karachi," the Post quoted a Karachi police official as saying.

Space fossil of big Bang detected

AFP, Washington

After 20 years of searching, US astrophysicists said Thursday they have detected for the first time a polarisation of the cosmic microwave background noise, a finding that supports the cosmic inflation theory, which says that following the big bang the universe expanded rapidly.

The discovery was accomplished with the help of the Degree Angular Scale Interferometer at the Amundsen-Scott base in Antarctica.

Scientists studied 32 spots in the sky for 200 days to detect faint polarisation in the background noise.

"Polarisation is predicted. It's been detected and it's in line with theoretical predictions," said John Carlstrom, an astrophysicist at the University of Chicago.

Cosmic microwave background noise is the oldest radio waves observed in the universe. Dating back some 14.7 billion years, they represent the equivalent of a space fossil of the big bang.



PHOTO: AFP

A woman cries over the body of Ivorian musician Marcelin Yace (C), killed during an attempted mutiny by soldiers facing demobilisation on Thursday. Yace was returning home from a concert when armed men fired at his car.

Pak anti-graft court charges Zardari

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani anti-corruption court has formally charged Asif Ali Zardari, the jailed husband of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, over a kickbacks case, party officials said Friday.

It was the second legal blow this month for Zardari, who last week was convicted in a separate graft case and jailed for seven years.

Accountability court judge Mansur Ali Khan late Thursday indicted Zardari for receiving commissions worth millions of dollars in a contract involving Swiss firm SGS during Benazir's second tenure.

JKLF leader detained

AFP, Srinagar

Police in Indian-administered Kashmir Friday detained a senior separatist leader who was due to make a speech urging people not to take part in ongoing elections, his party said Friday.

Javed Mir, acting chairman of the pro-independence Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), was picked up by police from his home in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, JKLF spokesman Ashraf Ahmed said.

Blair faces Labour revolt over Iraq

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair faces an embarrassing revolt by members of his own party during a forthcoming protest vote against the government's headline stance over Iraq, the Financial Times said Friday.

Thirty non-cabinet Labour MPs told an FT survey they would vote against the government when parliament is recalled Tuesday for a one-day debate over Iraq.

Another 30 said they would have to be powerfully persuaded by Blair of the threat posed by Iraq not to vote against the government.

Parliament's debate on Iraq is to be preceded by the release of a

dossier that Blair hopes will convince skeptical Britons on the need to take a hard line against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and his reputed pursuit of weapons of mass destruction.

Blair is the European leader who most strongly backs US President George W. Bush's position on Iraq, despite widespread public reluctance for Britain to join a conflict that lacks a clear UN endorsement.

One-fifth of 100 non-cabinet Labour MPs quizzed by the FT said they opposed any military action, while a slightly higher number said they were deeply sceptical of the need for war and were doubtful about

supporting a UN-backed strike. Just over half questioned the need for action and fiercely oppose a strike without UN backing.

Bush urged Congress Thursday to give him the green light to use any means, including force, to disarm and oust Saddam if the UN fails to confront the Iraqi leader following Tehran's pledge to readmit weapons inspectors without conditions.

Blair has made clear that parliament's debate will not end in a vote that binds the government.

The protest vote will highlight Labour's divisions over Iraq since the opposition Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have said they will abstain.

3000 arrested during Orissa bandh

PTI, Bhubaneswar

Nearly 3000 people were taken into preventive custody and normal life was disrupted in Orissa on Thursday by a 12-hour bandh against the Centre's move to privatise the profit-making National Aluminium Company Ltd (NALCO).

Trade and commerce came to a grinding halt, trains services were completely disrupted and government offices and banks barely functioned as the bandh received spontaneous response in most urban areas.

US may drop DPRK from axis of evil: Koizumi

REUTERS, Tokyo

In what could signal a major shift in Washington's policy on North Korea, President Bush was quoted as telling Japan's prime minister that he may drop the reclusive communist state from his "axis of evil" trio.

A possible softening of Bush's stance toward North Korea emerged at a time when the isolated communist state is trying to avoid becoming a target of the U.S.-led war on terror.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said Friday that he had proposed in a telephone call to Bush Thursday night that he stop branding North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" and resume stalled dialogue with Pyongyang.

Koizumi, recording an interview to be aired on Japanese television Sunday, said Bush had replied he would "seriously" consider his ground-breaking proposals.

Koizumi briefed Bush on his landmark summit Tuesday with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, at which Kim promised to extend a moratorium on missile tests and honor pledges concerning Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Bush has linked North Korea with Iraq and Iran in an "axis of evil" which he says threatens the world with weapons of mass destruction.

Fighting in Ivory Coast's 2nd city as troops foil coup

AFP, Abidjan

Government troops fought renege soldiers in Ivory Coast's second city Bouake on Friday as Prime Minister Pascal Affi N'Guessan said a coup attempt in the west African nation launched a day earlier had failed.

The economic capital of Abidjan, site of fierce fighting on Thursday when hundreds of soldiers attacked police barracks and the homes of two ministers, appeared calm and there were also reports of clashes in the northern town of Korhogo.

Interior Minister Emile Boga Doucou, former military ruler Robert Guei and at least 80 loyalist troops were killed and 150 wounded in the fighting, the worst outbreak of violence in the former French colony since a military coup in 1999.

"I can assure you that as I speak this attempt has failed," Affi N'Guessan announced on television late Thursday.

Defence Minister Moise Lida Kouassi on Thursday outlined plans to attack Bouake on Friday morning to wrest it from army mutineers.

"We will assemble our forces at Yamoussoukro (the political capital)... and start the offensive from Friday morning," he said.

Abidjan was eerily calm Friday after the sound of gunfire, which had shattered the city's peace since early Thursday when the coup erupted here and in two strategic

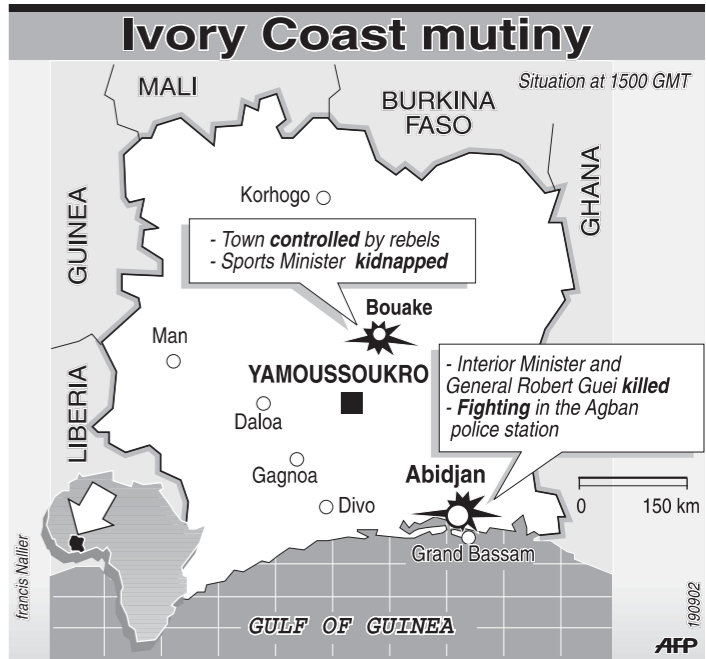
towns, petered out overnight. The city's streets were deserted due to a curfew in place until 8:00 a.m.

A resident from Bouake, about 400 kilometres (250 miles) north of Abidjan, said by telephone: "The night was calm but firing started this morning. It's less heavy than yesterday but nobody knows what is going on. People are all indoors."

Meanwhile, President Laurent

Gbagbo, currently on an official visit to Italy, said he would remain in Rome for the time being and called a news conference for 11:15 GMT.

Guei, the former military ruler who the government said was behind the army uprising, was killed in fighting with government troops, according to officials. His body was shown on national television.



AFP