

British, French ministers hold immigration talks

AFP, Calais

French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and British counterpart David Blunkett on Thursday reviewed security measures around the Channel port of Calais, where efforts have been intensified in recent months to stem the flow of illegal migrants across to England.

The two were expected to discuss a precise date for the closure of the controversial Sangatte refugee centre — home now to about 2,000 mainly Iraqi Kurd and Afghan asylum-seekers — which has become a staging-post for cross-Channel people traffickers.

In July, France undertook to shut down the centre — a long-standing British demand — by April 2003 in return for British measures reducing the so-called "pull factors" that draw migrants across the Channel.

Sarkozy travelled to Calais in the company of Afghan Refugees Minister Enayatullah Nazari, who is negotiating a deal over the return of Afghan migrants based in France.

Bush sees Saddam laughing at UN

US now links al-Qaida with Iraq

BBC ONLINE, AP, Washington

US President George W Bush has said the United Nations "must have backbone" to hold Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to account over his weapons programme.

"He has defied the United Nations for 11 years," Bush said. He must be laughing when he hears about the United Nations and its resolutions, and that's not good for the health of the world."

Bush's National Security Adviser, Condoleezza Rice said the US had information that "Iraq provided some training to al-Qaida in chemical weapons development".

Correspondents say this is the first time Washington has tried to substantiate its allegations of a direct link between Iraq and al-Qaida - the group believed to have masterminded the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US.

Rice said the information came from al-Qaida detainees. Bush - speaking at a Republican party function - said that Saddam Hussein "must destroy his weapons of mass destruction and stop his lying", adding that "the choice is his to make".

But he also said the UN was also facing a choice between upholding its own resolutions on Iraq or risking becoming an ineffective League of Nations.

"The choice is theirs [the UN's]. But if they choose not to, for the sake of our future, for the sake of our freedom, we will not let the world's worst leader threaten us, blackmail us, or hurt us with the world's worst weapons," Bush said.

At the United Nations in New York, diplomats are still waiting to see a proposed draft resolution on Iraq.

AP adds: President Bush's national security adviser said al-Qaida operatives have found refuge in Baghdad, and accused Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime of helping Osama bin Laden's followers develop chemical weapons.

Condoleezza Rice's statements, aired Wednesday on PBS' "The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer" program, are the strongest yet alleging contacts between al-Qaida and the Iraqi government. Previously, evidence of the two working together was tenuous, or came from unreliable sources.

She made her accusations as the Bush administration continued to make its case to a sceptical world that Saddam should be removed from power, by force if necessary. They followed accusations from Democratic Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle that Bush was playing politics with the debate over war in Iraq.



American children trapped by fighting between soldiers and mutineers in the central Ivory Coast city of Bouake drive out of the city for Yamoussoukro after being freed by French troops on Wednesday. The children, including Cabnadians and Dutch, had been trapped at the International Christian Academy, a Baptist boarding school, for a week, even coming under fire Tuesday.

Tropical storm makes landfall on US coast

AFP, Miami

Tropical Storm Isidore made landfall on the coast of Louisiana and Mississippi early Thursday, as local residents batted down the hatches and struggled to save what they could from floods triggered by torrential downpours.

Bands of rain moving onto New Orleans in the morning dusk lashed city streets that have been emptied by an overnight curfew imposed by local authorities.

Many schools were shut down, coastal areas evacuated and the National Guard was put on the alert in the two states, even though the storm had lost much of its punch since it slammed Mexico's Yucatan peninsula with full hurricane force last week, killing four people and leaving seven fishermen unaccounted for.



A local braves a nearly empty and flooded Bourbon Street in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana, as tropical storm Isidore approaches on Wednesday. Residents in the US states of Louisiana and Mississippi braced for torrential rains, strong surf and potentially deadly floods as Isidore appeared set to slam onto land after churning across the Gulf of Mexico.

US-British jets raid Basra airport: Radar destroyed

AFP, Baghdad

US and British warplanes attacked Basra airport in southern Iraq overnight, destroying its radar system, Iraqi state satellite television reported Thursday, quoting an official spokesman.

"US and British aircraft carried out another aggression at 00:45 a.m. (2045 GMT Wednesday), targeting Basra international airport," the television quoted the spokesman as saying.

The raid "destroyed (the airport's) civilian radar system in addition to causing damage to its main building," said the spokesman for the ministry of transport and communications, describing the raid as a "terrorist act that

contradicts the spirit and objectives of the International Air Transport Association."

"The civilian radar system destroyed by the American enemy" was operating in line with international rules, the spokesman said.

He called on relevant international bodies to "assume their responsibilities in condemning this act which contravenes international law."

Daily skirmishes are reported in "no-fly" zones enforced by US and British warplanes over northern and southern Iraq since the end of the 1991 Gulf War.

Baghdad does not recognise the air exclusion zones, which are not sanctioned by any UN resolution.

US detects al-Qaida camp in Iran

REUTERS, Washington

US intelligence has detected what appears to be an al-Qaida training camp in a remote region of eastern Iran along the border with Afghanistan, NBC News reported on Wednesday, citing unidentified sources.

The network said it was told by its sources that overhead imagery of the site shows a suspected terrorist camp that includes a driving course and rifle range very much like al-Qaida camps in Afghanistan that were used to train for assassinations, NBC reported.

NBC quoted the sources as saying that Iran's civilian government may not know the camp exists but that Iranian military and intelligence certainly would.

Asked about the report, a U.S. official said "there are some pockets of al-Qaida in Iran near the border" but would not comment further. A Pentagon spokeswoman declined to comment, referring calls to the intelligence community.

The Washington Post reported last month that two top al-Qaida deputies were harboured in Iran along with dozens of al-Qaida fighters.

Iran has denied that al-Qaida members have sought refuge within its borders.

"It has become a bad habit of some American circles to issue repetitious and baseless charges against Iran. Those al-Qaida members are not in Iran," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told Reuters in response to the earlier report.

Washington has named Iran part of an "axis of evil" accusing it of seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction and sponsoring terrorism, a charge Iran denies.

Chechens down Russian chopper as battle rages

REUTERS, Moscow

A major battle raged in southern Russia Thursday after Chechen guerrillas downed a Russian military helicopter, killing its two-man crew, Russian news agencies said.

Fierce fighting erupted between a large group of Chechen rebels and security forces around a village in Russia's Ingushetia region — just across the border from Chechnya — after a rebel missile brought down the Mi-24 helicopter gunship.

The new clash came against a background of angry charges by Russian President Vladimir Putin that its former Soviet ally Georgia is allowing its territory to be used as a launch-pad for rebel cross-border operations into Chechnya.

US, allies put pressure on Saddam to go into exile

AFP, Washington

The United States and some of its Arab allies have begun a quiet effort to defuse the Iraq crisis by persuading Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to go into exile, USA Today reported Thursday.

The report, which cites three unnamed Arab diplomats, said an initial overture came in August, when Qatar's foreign minister suggested to Saddam that he consider stepping down to avoid a devastating war with the United States.

Saddam angrily told the Qatari diplomat to leave, USA Today said. The feeler was part of a strategy to see whether Saddam, faced with defeat and possible death in a US invasion, would follow other dictators, who have gone into exile, according to the report.

The daily said US officials made clear this week that they could accept such an outcome as an alternative to war, but the administration of President George W. Bush does not want to appear to be the originator of the idea for fear that it would kill any chance of success.

A senior State Department official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that although continued freedom for Saddam was

contrary to official US policy, "it's a scenario we have to come to terms with," USA Today reported.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld suggested last week that a decision by Saddam to go into exile would help avoid US military action.

"Now, if Saddam Hussein and his family decided that the game was up and we'll go live in some foreign country like other leaders have done," Rumsfeld said in an interview with PBS's "The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" program when asked what, if anything, could satisfy the Bush administration short of military action against Baghdad.

He did not finish the sentence. "There have been any number of leaders who have departed recognising that the game was up, that it was over, that they had run their term. So that could happen," the defence secretary said, citing the examples of former shah of Iran Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Ugandan president Idi Amin and Haitian dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier.

The Bush administration has declared regime change in Baghdad the key goal of its Iraq policy.

Democrats take a swipe at Bush for politicising war against terrorism

Daschle demands apology

AFP, Washington

The Bush administration, under fire from Democrats for allegedly politicising the war on terror, is trying to substantiate its claim that the regime of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has links with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said late Wednesday Washington had information that Iraq had helped train members of al-Qaida in chemical weapons development and had given refuge to some of the network's operatives.

In a US television interview, Rice said, "We clearly know that there were in the past and have been contacts between senior Iraqi officials and members of al-Qaida going back for actually quite a long time."

"We know too that several of the detainees (from the conflict in Afghanistan), in particular some high-ranking detainees, have said

that Iraq provided some training to al-Qaida in chemical weapons development."

Rice said the US government did not contend that Saddam was behind the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, when suspected al-Qaida hijackers rammed passenger planes into the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon building outside Washington.

But she said that the secret ties between Baghdad and bin Laden's network were "a story that is unfolding, and it is getting clear, and we're learning more."

Rice made the charges as the debate over Iraq policy and other national security issues degenerated into loud political squabbling, with congressional Democrats accusing President George W. Bush on Wednesday of trying to exploit the war on terror for political gain.

The Democratic lawmakers were incensed by Bush's remark that the

Democratic-controlled Senate "is not interested in the security of the American people."

"You tell those who fought in Vietnam and in World War II they're not interested in the security of the American people," fumed Democratic Senate Majority Leader Thomas Daschle. "That is outrageous! Outrageous!"

AP adds: Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle lashed out at President Bush for suggesting that Democrats were putting politics ahead of the nation's security, igniting a fierce response from Republicans and complicating efforts by Congress to find a unified position with the president on Iraq.

The president, Daschle said Wednesday on the Senate floor, should "apologise to every veteran who has fought in every war who is a Democrat in the Senate. He ought to apologise to the American people."

"We ought not politicise this war," Daschle, D-S.D., said.



Christopher Reeve (front row, C) is surrounded by comedian Robin Williams (front row, L), actor Daryl Mitchell (front row, R), actress Kim Cattrall (back row, L), Barbara Walters (back row, 2nd L), actress Catherine Zeta-Jones (back row, 2nd R) and her husband actor Michael Douglas (back row, R) at the 12th Annual "A Magical Birthday Bash" in New York on Wednesday. Reeve, Zeta-Jones, Douglas and Walters all celebrate their birthdays. The event was a benefit for the Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation. Reeve is celebrating his 50th birthday.

Milosevic trial enters key phase

REUTERS, The Hague

UN prosecutors Thursday opened their key Croatia and Bosnia cases against Slobodan Milosevic, accusing him of genocide in what they call Europe's worst human rights violations since World War II.

The former Yugoslav president faces 61 charges in this stage of the biggest international war crimes hearing in Europe since Hitler's henchmen were tried at Nuremberg. The siege of Sarajevo, the Srebrenica massacre, detention camps at Trnopolje and Omarska: the Bosnia and Croatia indictments catalogue atrocities that shocked the world during Milosevic's 1990-97 strongman reign as Serbian president.

Prosecutors closed their case two weeks ago on Kosovo, where Milosevic and former aides are accused of expelling around 800,000 Albanians from the southern Serbian province — almost one-third of the Kosovo Albanian population.

are among the multiple charges Milosevic faces in the indictments for ethnic cleansing in Croatia and Bosnia in the early 1990s.

Tribunal judges have entered not guilty pleas for 61-year-old Milosevic, the first head of state ever to be indicted for such crimes while in office. He refused to plead when he was sent to The Hague last year. Each side has three hours to make opening arguments, after which the prosecution will begin calling witnesses.

Prosecutors will call 177 witnesses, 106 on Bosnia and 71 for Croatia, its spokeswoman Florence Hartmann said on Wednesday. They had wanted to call 250, but judges — who are keen to hurry along the marathon trial — made them cut back.

On Kosovo, 124 witnesses appeared in open court. Croatian President Stjepan Mesic will testify on Croatia, Hartmann said, though she declined to say when. His office said recently that he would be the first witness on Croatia.

The United States is secretly developing chemical weapons such as disabling anaesthetics and psychoactive substances in breach of international law, an independent watchdog charged Thursday.

The "non-lethal" weapons being developed by a branch of the Department of Defence are designed for use against civilians or in military, anti-terrorism and counter-insurgency operations, the Sunshine Project said.