

'US has Iraq occupation plan'

Baghdad ready to respond within hour

AFP, Washington

The White House has a plan for the occupation of Iraq that calls for an American-led military government and war-crime trials for Iraqi leaders, the New York Times said Friday.

The plan, which is under discussion by the administration, includes a transition to an elected civilian government in Iraq that could take months or years, unnamed senior administration officials told the daily.

It is the first blueprint the White House has suggested for a post-invasion Iraq.

It coincides with a vote by Congress to authorise President George W. Bush to use military force to eliminate Iraq's weapons of mass destruction if its president Saddam Hussein ignores United Nations demands to do so.

The occupation plan would scale back the initial role for Iraqi opposition forces in a post-Hussein government, senior officials said, adding that they want to avoid the chaos and in-fighting that have plagued Afghanistan since the Taliban was overthrown.

The contingency plan would put an American military commander in charge of Iraq – perhaps General Tommy Franks, commander of the US forces in the Gulf – for a year or more while the United States and its allies searched for and destroyed Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

"For as long as the coalition partners administered Iraq," the daily said, "they would essentially control the second largest proven reserves of oil in the world, nearly 11 percent of the total."

A senior US official told the UN Iraq's oil-for-food program would be

expanded to help finance stabilisation and reconstruction.

The officials said they were moving away from the Afghanistan model of establishing a provisional government right away that would be run by Iraqis.

"We're just not sure what influence groups on the outside would have on the inside," an administration official said. "There would also be differences among Iraqis, and we don't want chaos and anarchy in the early process."

Instead, the paper said the administration was studying the postwar military occupations of Japan and Germany.

Meanwhile another report from Beirut says Iraq is ready to respond to any US attack "within the hour," Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said Friday, in the first official Iraqi reaction to a congressional green light for US President George W. Bush to use force against Baghdad.

"I am not surprised by this vote, and we will confront these plans of aggression," Aziz said of the joint resolution, adopted Thursday night and early Friday in Washington by US House of Representatives and Senate.

It authorises Bush to use force "in a manner necessary and appropriate to defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq and enforce all relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions regarding Iraq."

Asked when an attack might come, Aziz told journalists in the Lebanese capital that, "We are not the ones who decide that, but we are ready to respond to it within the hour."



Supporters of Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) flash victory sign as they dance with their party flags to celebrate the victory of their candidates in Karachi on Friday while Commonwealth election observers' head Tan Sri Musa Hitam (C) leaves after press conference in Islamabad. Commonwealth declared Pakistan's polls "for the most part transparent," but said there were doubts over whether there was a "truly level" playing field.

Kashmir coalition talks begin amid new hope

REUTERS, New Delhi/Srinagar

Indian political parties were trying on Friday to set up a new administration to run turbulent Kashmir after a state election that has raised hopes of peace and reconciliation in the region.

The country's main opposition Congress party started talks with Kashmir's People's Democratic Party on a possible coalition after voters threw out the Abdullah family dynasty that has dominated disputed Kashmir for decades.

The unexpected defeat of the Abdullah family's pro-India National Conference party could be a new start for the state after 13 years of separatist violence, Indian newspapers said.

"I have tendered my resignation. I want to take a rest," said Farooq

Abdullah, the state's chief minister whose six-year rule was widely seen to have fed disillusionment with New Delhi.

The United States, which has been trying to reduce tension between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan over Kashmir, welcomed the poll.

"The United States welcomes the successful conclusion of elections in Jammu and Kashmir...we hope this will be the first step in a broader process that will bring peace to the region," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

India has been hoping to use the election to start talks with the people of Kashmir on greater autonomy and defuse the insurgency in the Muslim-majority territory.

It has also seen a successful

election as strengthening its hand in talks with Pakistan, which wants Kashmiris to decide their future, with or without India, in a referendum.

But while New Delhi could now start considering talks with Islamabad, elections in Pakistan have produced strong gains for a hardline Islamic coalition that could stay President Pervez Musharraf's hand.

"That's not a strong foundation from which to be engaging in a difficult set of discussions with Kashmir," said one Western observer of South Asia.

Mostly Hindu but secular India says Muslim Pakistan backs the rebels in Kashmir. Pakistan denies this, says it offers only moral support to the Kashmiri "freedom struggle."

Blair tries to sway Putin

AFP, Zavidovo

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was engaged in intensive talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin Friday hoping to persuade him to back a tough UN resolution threatening force against Iraq.

The key meeting took place as US President George Bush obtained authorisation from Congress to attack Iraq, citing a "continuing threat" posed by Baghdad's alleged weapons buildup.

Blair arrived in Moscow late on Thursday and headed immediately for Putin's country dacha at Zavidovo, 120 kilometres north of the Russian capital, for talks focusing on the diplomatic manoeuvring around a potential US military campaign against Iraq.

After holding talks throughout the evening, the two men met again in the morning, flanked by aides, Putin's top foreign policy aide Sergei Prikhodko told ITAR-TASS.

PPP smells rat in vote counting

C'wealth observers term Pak polls mostly transparent

AFP, Islamabad

Ex-premier Benazir Bhutto called for new elections in Pakistan Friday and alleged fraud in the counting of votes, as a slow count showed a massive swing to Islamic parties, a huge lead by a pro-government party, and fewer seats for her party than anticipated.

"I'm sorry to say vote counting was not done in a transparent manner. The regime engineered changes in the night," Bhutto told AFP in a telephone interview from London.

"The votes being announced are contrary to all the exit polls and on the ground realities."

Benazir charged that electoral officials disappeared with ballot boxes for "two to three hours" after polling closed Thursday in Pakistan's first general elections since the 1999 military coup.

"The votes disappeared, the boxes disappeared, the presiding officers disappeared all across Pakistan except North West Frontier Province in the first two or three hours when there should've been counting."

By 1100 GMT the pro-government Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) had won 48 of some 150 national seats announced.

Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had secured 30 seats and the other chief opposition party Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) had won 12.

In a shock result an alliance of six radical Islamic parties won huge gains in conservative western border areas, securing 32 of the national assembly's 272 general seats.

Meanwhile, Commonwealth election observers on Friday declared Pakistan's polls "for the most part transparent," but said

there were doubts over whether there was a "truly level" playing field.

"While our observers encountered a number of irregularities and disturbances, we received no major complaints from polling agents and on the whole what we observed was orderly and peaceful," the head of the team, Tan Sri Dato Musa bin Hitam declared in a preliminary statement.

"As for the conduct of elections on polling day, I consider that they have been well organised and for the most part transparent."

Pakistanis voted Thursday in the first legislative elections since a military coup three years ago.

But Musa bin Hitam, Malaysia's former deputy premier, cited allegations by opposition parties and human rights groups of pre-election engineering.

"Our particular concerns have been allegations of widespread use of government influence and resources to favour certain parties and candidates and conversely to disadvantage others," his statement said.

"This has raised doubts as to whether it can be said that the playing field was truly level."

However, Musa bin Hitam, who led 22 observers from 18 Commonwealth countries, said it was significant that more than 72 parties contested the polls for a national assembly and four provincial assemblies.

"It is significant that political parties have chosen to fully participate in elections, despite allegations of pre-poll rigging and the fact that major political leaders have been excluded."

The Commonwealth report will largely determine next month's review of Pakistan's three-year suspension from the 54-member body, the delegation chief said last week.

Keep \$ 30 m but return the talking parrot

AFP, Singapore

A Singaporean woman who won 30 million US dollars from her American ex-husband has been ordered to return a talking parrot and a few other items in a bitter divorce case that has captivated Singapore.

The Straits Times said Bettina Chew, 42, was also told to return to business consultant David Selby his computer-controlled telescope, three sapphire gemstones and documents related to his art collection.

But the judge handling the case, Lee Seiuh Kin, said Selby will not get some other cherished possessions he was claiming: a 1952 Gibson guitar worth 4,000 dollars and some Khmer and Han Dynasty art works.

The couple divorced last year, splitting more than 60 million dollars in assets.



Nepali activists shout slogans during a protest march against Nepal's King Gyanendra, near parliament in New Delhi on Friday. The activists protested against Gyanendra's decision to sack caretaker Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba along with the entire Cabinet on October 4.

Sept 11 probe focuses on 5th plane targeting White House

AFP, Washington

The probe into the September 11 terror attacks on the United States is focusing on the possibility there were plans for a fifth plane to strike the White House, the New York Times said Friday.

Based on fresh information on al-Qaeda's original plan and interviews with al-Qaida detainees, the plan called for a plane to have been piloted by suspect Ramzi Muhammad Abdulla bin al-Shibh -- also known as Ramzi Bin al-Shibh and Ramzi bin al-Shaiba.

He was arrested last month in Pakistan.

Investigators also have new insight on bin al-Shibh's movements around Europe in the months before

India unlikely to resume talks with Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

Despite a boost from successful elections in Kashmir, the Indian government will be unlikely to bow to international pressure to resume dialogue with Pakistan, analysts and government sources said Friday.

Instead, New Delhi is likely to focus on securing an internal settlement in the state, where Islamic militants are engaged in a violent rebellion against Indian rule and separatists want independence.

"I think the most wonderful thing these elections could trigger would be the internal settlement of the anger and disaffection of the people of Jammu and Kashmir," said former foreign secretary and former Indian envoy to Pakistan S.K. Singh.

"This internal settlement will be addressed first. If the United States thinks we should abandon this internal settlement and go for an external settlement process and talk to Pakistan first, this will not happen," the veteran foreign policy expert said.

After a four-phase violent election in Kashmir, the long-ruling National Conference (NC) led by father and son duo Farooq Abdullah and Omar Abdullah, was routed, according to results announced Thursday.

All signs Friday were that a popular coalition government of the opposition Congress and a regional party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), would be forged in the next few days.

The government in New Delhi

Blast kills 16 policemen in Chechnya

AFP, Moscow

Sixteen pro-Russian Chechen policemen were killed when an explosion ripped through a police station in Grozny, the capital of the breakaway Russian republic of Chechnya, a Chechen prosecutor said Friday.

Nine other people were wounded in the blast, ITAR-TASS news agency quoted prosecutor Nikolai Kostyuchenko as saying.

Earlier reports had said that 13 policemen were killed in the explosion, which occurred on the second floor of the four-storey building at 1300 GMT Thursday.

Israeli army stages incursion in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli tanks entered Palestinian territory in the northern Gaza Strip Friday, where the armed wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) claimed it wounded a Jewish settler.

The tanks fired five shells and opened up with heavy machine guns as they moved a few metres (yards) into the Beit Hanoun area, Palestinian security sources said.

Some houses were damaged but no casualties reported.

The National Resistance Brigades said it had attacked two cars carrying settlers between the nearby Jewish settlements of Alei Sinai and Nitzanit.

"Our military group ambushed two settler taxis near Nitzanit, opened fire and threw hand grenades, injuring one settler," a statement said, adding that an Israeli helicopter evacuated the wounded.

The army could not immediately confirm the incident.

The group said the attack was in retaliation for the "Khan Yunis massacre", in reference to the army raid Monday in which 17 Palestinians, mainly civilians, were killed.

The army has stepped up its military sweep of Gaza lately, sparking Palestinian fears of a complete reoccupation of the narrow and crowded strip.

Demand for US student and tourist visas dips

AFP, Washington

Demand for nonimmigrant visas to visit the United States, including those for tourists and students, has plummeted in the past year due to the September 11 attacks, the State Department said Thursday.

"Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, nonimmigrant visa demand has dropped approximately 20 percent and the trend continues downward," said Lynn Cassell, a department spokeswoman.

In fiscal 2002, which began October 1, 2001, and ended September 30, only 7.8 million foreigners applied for nonimmigrant US visas, a second department official said.

That figure represents a 22-percent decline from fiscal 2001 when there were 10 million applications for student, tourist, business and temporary worker visas, the official said.

"If things keep going the way they are now, the numbers will be dropping even more in fiscal 2003, perhaps even another 20 percent," the second official said.

The official noted a 33-percent drop in visa applications between August 2001, before the September 11, 2001, attacks, and the same period this year.

The State Department announced Wednesday it would raise the fee for nonimmigrant visas by more than 50 percent to cover the cost of increased security checks instituted after September 11, but also to make up for a "critical revenue shortfall" cause by the drop in applications.



US actress Melanie Griffith (C) stands with Spanish actress Penelope Cruz (R) and Spanish supermodel Esther Canudas (L) at a press conference to launch the US branch of the Sabera Foundation on Thursday in Beverly Hills, California. The non-profit organisation supports street children and abandoned women in India.

UN warns Asian govts of urban slum problem

AFP, Manila

The United Nations warned Asian governments Friday to swiftly control the growth of urban slums as mega cities continue to mushroom in the region.

"Unless you do something about this situation, it will get worse," said Anna Tibajuka, the executive director of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat).

UN-Habitat was elevated into a fully fledged UN programme by the world body's general assembly to tackle the explosive problem of urban slums, particularly in developing countries.

Tibajuka said in an interview with AFP here that slum dwellers make up 30 to 40 percent of Asia's urban population, warning that the problem was getting worse with

the growth of mega cities in the region.

Mega cities are those housing more than 10 million people.

"Asia at present has the world largest number of megacities and the trend is, this seems to be on the increase, and when cities have such kinds of (population) numbers, their management becomes more difficult," Tibajuka explained.

In 2000, 12 of the world's 19 mega cities were in Asia, comprising Tokyo, Bombay, Calcutta, Shanghai, Dhaka, Karachi, Delhi, Jakarta, Osaka, Metro Manila, Beijing and Chao.

The UN-Habitat projects the region would have 15 of the 23 mega cities in 2015, with the inclusion of Bangkok, Hyderabad and Tianjin.

Curfew in Lankan district after 3 killed in violence

AFP, Colombo

At least three people were killed and another 30 wounded in a grenade attack in northeastern Sri Lanka Friday as authorities imposed curfews after a shooting at a police base, officials said.

The shrapnel-pocked bodies of the three men were at the main hospital in Trincomalee, 260 kilometres (160 miles) northeast of Colombo, hospital sources said.

The clashes erupted as minority Tamils in the area organised a work stoppage to protest the killing of seven people who tried to storm a police commando base in the eastern district of Ampara on Wednesday.

"The curfew is aimed at preventing potential trouble," a local official said, adding that the strike organised by Tamils had led to inter-communal tensions in the multi-ethnic region.

The curfew is to be in place until Saturday morning, officials said.

A senior military officer was sent to the area Friday by the government to ensure unrest did not spread to neighbouring areas.

Scandinavians monitoring a truce in Sri Lanka called for restraint following Wednesday's shooting.

Lawyers challenge legality of war against Iraq

AFP, United Nations

International law specialists, in a letter to the UN Security Council released Thursday, challenged the legality of the kind of preventive war which US President George W. Bush has urged against Iraq.

"There is no precedent in international law for use of force as a preventive measure in response to a potential threat of violence," the lawyers said in a letter to all 15 council members.

Dated Tuesday, the letter was

signed by Peter Weiss, president of the Lawyers' Committee on Nuclear Policy in New York, and by Jacqueline Cabasso, executive director of Western States Legal Foundation in Oakland, California, an affiliate of the Lawyers' Alliance Against Nuclear Arms.

It was released as the US House of Representatives voted 296-133 to give Bush power to use force to disarm Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. The US Senate is expected to do likewise by Friday.

Bush said the House had sent a

message to the United Nations that "the gathering threat of Iraq must be confronted, fully and finally."

He had previously made clear that he was willing to act preemptively and without UN approval if necessary.

But in their letter, Weiss and Cabasso said preventive war "appears contrary to the (UN) Charter, given the Charter's emphasis on the peaceful resolution of disputes and the non-use of force."