

Senate approves rise in US military spending

AFP, Washington

The US Senate approved a 355.1 billion dollar military budget for 2003 on Wednesday...

The measure, approved on a 93 to one vote, represents a 12 percent, or 37.5 billion dollar, increase over the previous year's military budget.

The amount represents the biggest hike in military spending since the early 1980s when Ronald Reagan was president and the Cold War was ending.

The measure, approved by the House of Representatives last week, now goes to President George W. Bush's desk for final approval.

Sudanese truce comes into force

AFP, Nairobi

A truce agreement between Sudan's government and the country's main rebel group came into force Thursday...

The ceasefire came into force at exactly midday (0900 GMT), said the source, who asked not to be named.

The truce, agreed upon on Tuesday between Khartoum and the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), ought to be observed for the duration of peace talks aimed at ending almost two decades of civil war.

"Our troops had been told that guns must fall silent by midday. The other side (Khartoum) has told us they had done the same," the source added.

US to accept 70,000 refugees for year 2003

AFP, Washington

The United States will accept 70,000 humanitarian refugees during fiscal year 2003, which began October 1, the White House announced Wednesday.

In a statement addressed to Secretary of State Colin Powell, Bush stated that the admission "of up to 70,000 refugees ... is justified by humanitarian concerns or is otherwise in the national interest."

Those to be admitted "shall be allocated among refugees of special humanitarian concern to the United States" based on regional quotas.

Of the total figure, 20,000 slots been allocated to Africa; 2,500 to Eastern Europe; 14,000 to nations of the former Soviet Union; 2,500 to Latin America and the Caribbean; and 7,500 to the Middle East and South Asia.

Sniper holds Washington area hostage

AFP, Washington

As a serial sniper holds the Washington area hostage and picks off victims at random, US lawmakers duck the sensitive issue of gun control for fear of losing voters in upcoming congressional elections.

Democrats are still smarting from losing the White House and control of the US Congress in the 2000 elections, partly because they alienated gun owners in key states, according to analysts and poll data.

"A lot of the Democrats running for office are courting gun owners to show they are not anti-gun," said Harry Merchant, manager of Blue Ridge Arsenal, a shooting range and retailer in Virginia.

Violence mars national election in Jamaica

AFP, Kingston

The ruling People's National Party shot to an early lead Wednesday in Jamaica's national elections as officials admitted the vote counting was taking longer than usual, amid heavy rains and early violence in which at least seven people were killed.

Prime Minister P.J. Patterson's party had secured 21 seats in parliament to 18 for the opposition Jamaica Labor Party in results issued at 9:15 pm (0115 GMT Thursday) by Jamaica's Election Center. Twenty-one seats remained undecided.

Among the winners for the opposition was former prime minister Edward Seaga.

UN members pressure US to soften resolution on Iraq

EU, Russia agree on diplomatic solution

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council opened debate on Wednesday on Iraq with member states urging the United States and Britain to give arms inspections a chance before threatening to attack.

Most speakers on the first day of an open council session said the inspectors should have a chance to resume their work now that Iraq had agreed to let them in. Most, however, also insisted Iraq fulfill UN demands it dismantle all weapons of mass destruction.

The meeting was called at the request of South Africa's ambassador, Dumisani Kumalo, spokesman for the non-aligned nations movement, in order to allow countries without seats on the council to express their views.

Those calling for restraint included Iran and Kuwait, both of which have been invaded by Iraq.

Denmark, current president of the European Union, said the Iraqi government should have no doubt that "noncompliance will have serious consequences," a view echoed by Australia and New Zealand.

But none of the three explicitly endorsed the US and British call for a single council resolution warning Iraq it faced military action, a position repeated in Washington by US President George W. Bush.

"Either the Iraqi regime will give up its weapons of mass destruction or, for

the sake of peace, the United States will lead a global coalition to disarm that regime," Bush said.

Iraqi UN ambassador Mohamed Al-Douri accused the United States of trying to impose impossible conditions on the return of inspectors in order to have a pretext to attack and colonise Iraq.

"The United States wants the United Nations to give it a blank cheque to occupy Iraq, and not only Iraq but the entire Arab Middle East," Al-Douri said.

Meanwhile, amid an intense Franco-US diplomatic battle over a new UN Security Council resolution on Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell met here Wednesday with French Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie in a bid to overcome their deep divisions.

Moreover, the European Union and Russia agree the Iraqi crisis can only be solved through diplomacy and call for the return of weapons inspectors to Iraq, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said Thursday after talks with senior EU officials.

"Both Russia and the European Union are for the fastest possible return of inspectors to Iraq. The settlement must be reached only through diplomatic means," said Ivanov.

He added that both Russia and the European Union "believe that a military solution could have a serious impact on the region as a whole."



PHOTO: AFP Iraq's Ambassador to the United Nations Mohammed Aldouri (R) talks to a member of his delegation on Wednesday before addressing a public UN Security Council debate on Iraq. The debate is expected to centre on the Bush administration's drive to back up a UN resolution on disarming Iraq with military force.



PHOTO: AFP An elderly Palestinian man walks down the stairs of Abraham's Mosque as an Israeli soldier stands guard at the heavily guarded Tomb of the Patriarchs, a place of worship to both Jews and Muslims in the West Bank town of Hebron on Wednesday. Palestinians hardly dared hope for an Israeli army withdrawal from their reoccupied areas of this flashpoint city, but as Israel insisted a pullback has already started there is scant evidence of it on the streets.

US Senate gives nod to electoral reforms

AFP, Washington

The US Senate on Wednesday approved a sweeping reform of the US electoral system, aimed in part at avoiding the chaos in Florida during the 2000 presidential election.

The measure sets national election standards, and grants states some 3.8 billion dollars over the next three years to modernise or replace ageing voting machines and improve voter registration methods.

The House of Representatives approved a similar measure on October 10. The measure, approved in the Senate on a 92-2 vote, now goes to the White House for the president's signature.

Despite a 32 million dollar overhaul of Florida's electoral system since the presidential vote, 14 of the Florida's 65 counties reported irregularities in an early September Democratic Party primary.

5 killed in Philippine bomb attacks

AFP, Zamboanga

Two bombs ripped through adjacent shopping centres in the southern Philippine city of Zamboanga Thursday, killing at least five and wounding around 70 others, police and military officials said.

A bomb disposal unit recovered and defused seven other explosive devices planted around the commercial area, the military said, labelling the attack a "terrorist act."

The first bomb exploded on the ground floor of the three-storey Shop-O-Rama department store critically wounding several people and sending panicked shoppers and staff rushing into the streets, police reports said.

Minutes later a second blast at the adjacent Shoppers' Central instantly killing at least one person. Four others died on arrival at hospital or while being treated, hospital staff said.

Wounded victims lay on the sidewalk among mangled bodies,

body parts and shattered glass, witnesses said. The force of the explosions destroyed metal shutters and windows of nearby establishments.

The entire block of shops was immediately evacuated. Schools were called off as a precautionary measure.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks, the latest in the troubled southern Philippines this month. Security officials had already been on heightened alert in the wake of the Bali car bombing in Indonesia, which killed more than 180 people.

Witnesses said a suspect was seen leaving a package inside the Shop-O-Rama store prior to the first explosion.

"We will get into the bottom of this. We condemn this terrorist act," armed forces southern command chief Lieutenant General Narciso Abaya said as he led a truckload of army troops, armed with assault rifles, to secure the area.

"Terrorists can strike at the most unexpected time and for as long as they can inflict the maximum casualty to helpless victims in order to sow fear," he said.

The attack came just hours after Abaya assumed his post as the top commander in the south and vowed to crush Muslim Abu Sayyaf guerrillas operating in nearby Basilan and Jolo islands.

In other attacks in the southern Philippines this month, a US serviceman and three Filipinos were killed in an October 2 bomb attack near an army arms depot here blamed on the Abu Sayyaf.

Six other people were killed and more than 20 others wounded in a similar attack eight days later in southern Kidapawan city.

The military has blamed renegade members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) for the Kidapawan attack. The MILF is the main Muslim separatist group waging a rebellion in the south since 1976.

New Palestinian cabinet to be announced soon

Palestinians disappointed with Sharon-Bush meet

AFP, Ramallah

The new Palestinian cabinet currently under discussion is not expected to be revealed before Sunday, an aide to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Nabil Abu Rudeina, said Thursday.

"The discussions on the composition of the new Palestinian cabinet are still under way and an announcement is not expected before Sunday, Abu Rudeina told AFP.

On Wednesday a member of the central committee of Arafat's Fatah movement said the cabinet list was virtually finalised and should be disclosed on Thursday.

"We are almost finished -- there

are still some positions that need to be discussed but at least we have decided on 13 to 14 ministerial positions," Sakher Habash said.

He confirmed speculation that interior minister Abdel Razaq al-Yehya, who was only named at the last abortive reshuffle in July, would be replaced by senior Fatah member Hani al-Hassan.

Arafat trimmed back his ministries in July under heavy international and Israeli pressure to reform a corrupt and unwieldy administration, slashing their number by a third.

He also launched efforts to revamp his sprawling security apparatus, accused of failing to rein in militants whose attacks have

triggered Israel's massive reoccupation of the West Bank.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians expressed disappointment Thursday at a meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and President George W. Bush, saying the US leader did not press Israel to withdraw from re-occupied territories.

"We were expecting President Bush to ask Sharon to implement UN Security Council resolution 1435 calling for an Israeli withdrawal from re-occupied Palestinian territories," said Nabil Abu Rudeina, top aide to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

CIA issued Bali warning

AFP, London

The CIA issued a warning about a potential terror threat to Bali but no action was taken, a US intelligence source told a British newspaper Thursday after the nightclub bombing which killed more than 180 people. The CIA warning is at the centre of a growing row, not only in Washington but also in London and Canberra, The Guardian daily said, over whether more could have been done to prevent the Bali attack.

According to a US intelligence source, quoted in the left-wing paper, the Central Intelligence Agency sent a warning to its stations across south-east Asia in the first half of September, alerting them to an imminent attack.

"It mentioned five or six potential targets, including -- specifically -- Bali," the source told the paper.

Black-hole hunter races into space

AFP, Toulouse

The world's most powerful gamma-ray telescope soared into space on Thursday on a mission to track down black holes, exploding stars and mysterious bursts of radiation emanating from the fringes of the Universe.

The 330-million-euro (-dollar) observatory, Integral, was placed flawlessly into orbit by a Russian Proton rocket, one of the workhorses of space, launched from the Baikonur space station in Kazakhstan, the European Space Agency (ESA) said.

The telescope, built by ESA with contributions from the Czech Republic, Poland, Russia and the United States, is the most sensitive detector ever made of gamma-ray radiation.

This is high-intensity energy typically emitted by massive stars in their death throes, when they explode to become supernovae. Their death eventually gives birth to life, helping to create other stars and planets many millions of years later.

"When they explode, these giant stars spew out a series of heavy elements which enrich the interstellar environment and become the stuff of which we are made," Gilbert Vedrenne, a leading scientist at the Centre for Space Radiation Research (CESR) said.

"With Integral, we hope to gain a better understanding of how this stardust is ejected into the Universe."

Supernovae can also collapse in upon themselves to create neutron stars -- stars of incredibly dense, compacted matter, that can then develop into black holes.

These are the mightiest and most mysterious phenomena in the known cosmos, with the ability to suck in stars that venture too close to their gravitational maw.

"Only gamma rays enable us to sidle up and get a really close look at black holes," said Jacques Paul of France's Atomic Energy Commission. "That way, we may be able to get a first-hand evidence of a flaw in the laws of physics."

Integral's other task will be to scout for gamma bursts -- unexplained explosions at the outer reaches of the detected Universe that were only spotted a few years ago.

Integral, weighing more than four tonnes and five metres (18 feet) long, stands for International Gamma-Ray Astrophysics Laboratory.

The 92-minute flight ended with the separation of the payload from the rocket's fourth stage and the telescope began a slow journey to take up its orbital position, mission officials said.



PHOTO: AFP Monica Lewinsky (L) arrives with Mark Birnbaum (R) at the GQ Men of the Year awards in New York on Wednesday.