

US envoy holds talks with Palestinian delegation

AFP, Jericho

US Middle East envoy William Burns on Thursday held talks with a senior Palestinian delegation on a US-backed peace plan, but with the glaring absence of Yasser Arafat, whom Washington wants to see replaced as Palestinian leader.

Burns earlier held talks with Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer in Tel Aviv before hurrying to Jericho, one of only two main towns in the West Bank not reoccupied by Israeli forces.

He met there with senior officials from Arafat's outgoing cabinet, which resigned on September 11 rather than face a parliamentary no-confidence vote and has not yet been officially reformed.

Arrest warrant for Washington sniper issued

REUTERS, Washington

Police hunted Thursday for an "armed and dangerous" man identified as John Allen Muhammad after apparently making a breakthrough in their three-week search for a sniper who has killed 10 people and wounded three in and around the U.S. capital.

"A federal arrest warrant has been issued for John Allen Muhammad, also known as John Allen Williams, a black male, 42 years of age," Montgomery County, Maryland, Police Chief Charles Moose, heading the multi-agency task force hunting the sniper, told reporters late on Wednesday.

He said Muhammad was charged with violations of federal firearms laws not related to the sniper killings that started on Oct. 2 and have cast a pall of fear over the Washington metropolitan area.

Attack on Internet backbone fails

AFP, Washington

A major attack this week on "a crucial piece of the Internet infrastructure" failed to cripple the Web, but could be a precursor to a more aggressive effort, security experts said Wednesday.

Analysts said the denial of service attack Monday targeted the 13 root servers that direct traffic on the Internet, bombarding the computers with requests that eventually shut them down.

"It was definitely a major attack," said French Caldwell, an Internet security specialist for the consulting firm Gartner Inc., who has worked with the Defense Department to protect against a crippling "digital Pearl Harbor" attack.

Bush, Kim, Koizumi to lock horns over Korea

AFP, Los Cabos

The United States, South Korea and Japan will Saturday strive to close ranks on North Korea policy, after the Stalinist state's bombshell confession that it has a clandestine nuclear program.

President George W. Bush, who made Pyongyang a charter member of his "axis of evil" is looking for firm backing in a three-way meeting at the Asia Pacific Cooperation forum (APEC) for his demand for an immediate halt to North Korea's newly exposed enriched uranium project.

But not for the first time, clear differences of approach are visible between his administration and South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, who won the Nobel peace prize for his "sunshine policy" of engaging Pyongyang.

A tribute to mountaineers

AFP, Auckland

As he reached the summit of Mount Everest nearly 50 years ago accompanied by Sherpa Tensing Norgay, Edmund Hillary had no idea how excited the world would be about his feat and how much a celebrity he would remain for the rest of his life.

Among the wealth of personal items, equipment, photographs and models on display at the Auckland Museum's exhibition celebrating his feat and titled "Sir Edmund Hillary: Everest and Beyond", is a letter penned to his mother two days after he reached the world's highest peak.

His innocence and humility are revealed in the letter -- on display for the first time -- which reads: "Dear Mother, well I may not have produced much joy or happiness in the world, but at least I've helped make the Hillary name a bit famous."

US braces for failure to win UNSC nod

Revised resolution is 'humiliation' for UN: Iraqi FM

REUTERS, Washington/Baghdad

The United States acknowledged on Wednesday it might fail to win Security Council backing for action to disarm Iraq, but Baghdad said the effort was a waste of time because Washington was determined to find any pretext for war.

The United States introduced its draft resolution on Iraqi disarmament to the full 15-member UN Security Council in a push to move to a vote, possibly next week.

Russia immediately opposed the US text, France raised strong reservations but Britain said it would co-sponsor the draft, aimed at ridding Iraq of weapons of mass destruction.

A Security Council resolution needs nine votes in favour and no veto from its five permanent members -- the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China.

The revised American text drops explicit authorisation for military action if Iraq does not comply with UN arms inspections but leaves the door open for

war by declaring Iraq in "material breach" of UN resolutions and threatening "serious consequences."

The council discusses the resolution again on Friday and hears from chief UN weapons inspectors Hans Blix on Monday.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said the outcome would be "either an agreement or a failure to reach agreement, and it could be either one right now."

Meanwhile, Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri on Thursday described a revised US draft resolution for disarming Iraq as a "humiliation" for the United Nations, and a declaration of war against the world body and Baghdad.

"The revised US draft, which is worse (than the initial one), is a humiliation for the United Nations and the international community," Sabri told Qatar's Al-Jazeera television channel.

"The draft is a declaration of war against the United Nations, and not only against Iraq. Its goal consists not only of attacking Iraq but also harming the prestige of the United Nations," Sabri said.



Family members light candles during the national memorial service at Parliament House in Canberra on Thursday for the 94 Australians killed in the Bali bombings on October 12. The families of the victims were joined by Prime Minister John Howard, state premiers, religious leaders, military brass and diplomats.



PHOTO: AFP

A hostage's relative (R) tries to get some information from a Russian policeman on Wednesday night as gunmen inside the theatre in Moscow hold between 600-700 people hostage. A spokesman for the Moscow police said between 40 and 50 gunmen were inside and have demanded that Russian troops leave the breakaway republic of Chechnya.

Anxious waiting outside Moscow theatre

AFP, Moscow

Hundreds of relatives and friends of the hostages held in a Moscow theatre by Chechen rebels stood in the cold and rain overnight Wednesday in the hope of learning news of their loved ones.

Some were worrying for their wives, others for their mothers or their grandsons. All of those standing in front of the theatre under an icy drizzle appeared resigned and fatalistic.

Two men drinking cognac to fight off the cold, Mikhail and Sergei, said their wives had gone to see "Nord-Ost" a popular musical that has been playing to packed houses for the past year, and were still trapped in the theatre.

"Our wives went to see the show without us because we were working at the time," one of the said. "Let's drink and hope it works out well."

But another man standing near them was far more pessimistic.

"I don't trust these people (the hostage takers), this can't end well," he said.

A visibly distressed young woman, Yulya, waited with her boyfriend for the release of her mother.

"My mother is inside. She was able to call us on the telephone to say she was all right, but I feel so hopeless," she said.

An old woman in tears said her grandson, a theatre employee, was among the captives.

"I went to church to pray and then I came here. I don't know what to do, it is so terrible," she said.

Russian authorities have set up a support centre in a nearby sports complex for hostages' relatives and friends where they can receive the assistance of doctors and psychiatrists and drink hot coffee.

On several occasions during the

night, groups of obviously drunk young men tried to force security cordons around the theatre, asking to take the place of hostages.

As the sun began to rise, ever larger groups of onlookers gathered around the theatre to hear the latest news.

Relatives of the hundreds of hostages still held captive in the theatre begged Russian President Vladimir Putin in a petition not to storm the building.

"We ask you not to order an assault," they said in a text quoted by NTV television.

Hundreds of security forces, supported by armoured vehicles, have been deployed around the theatre, located in a cultural centre in southeastern Moscow, and sharpshooters have taken up position on the roofs of surrounding buildings, NTV reported.

Australia spells out fresh steps against terrorism

AFP, Canberra

Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced on Thursday a series of new counter-terrorism measures to deal with heightened threats to Australians at home and abroad following the deadly bombing in Bali.

The moves included creation of a National Counter-Terrorism Committee to oversee the "war on terrorism" and legislation making it easier to prosecute perpetrators of atrocities against Australians abroad.

Howard, calling it "a very sad day for the country," said the enhanced counter-terrorism drive reflected growing dangers for Australians from international terrorists.

"The terrorist attacks on the United States last year revealed that we are now operating in a new security environment. The Bali bombings tragically brought that directly and personally home to Australians," he said.

Army rejects revolt call in Venezuela

REUTERS, Caracas

Dissident Venezuelan military officers attracted several thousand sympathisers in Caracas on Wednesday as they tried to muster support for a popular revolt against leftist President Hugo Chavez, but the armed forces said they firmly opposed a rebellion.

One day after 14 rebel officers appealed for military and civilian disobedience against former paratrooper Chavez, the nation's garrisons showed no signs of heeding the call.

For a second night on Wednesday, several thousand Chavez foes packed the Caracas' Altamira Square, waving flags and honking car horns, in support of the rebel officers as they pursued their campaign for popular resistance against Chavez.

Genetic engineering can double the lifespan

AFP, San Francisco

Genetic engineering could increase lifespan without side effect American researchers have doubled the lifespan of a small worm by modifying its genetic composition while avoiding the usual side effect of disappearing reproductive capacity, according to a study published Thursday in Science magazine.

The technique consists in modifying the genes that control hormonal activity and that are common to many species including man.

This research could be a breakthrough in increasing human longevity, according to researchers of the University of California in San Francisco (UCSF) in charge of the study.

The technique, tested on a millimetre-long worm (Caenorhabditis elegans), deactivates clusters of genes at different stages of the worm's growth to study their effects on longevity.

The researchers studied Daf-2 and Daf-16 genes. In previous work, they had shown that partial deactivation of the Daf-2 gene made it possible to double the worm's lifespan. The gene encoded an insulin receiver as well as a hormonal growth promoter.

Other studies showed the influence of this hormonal production factor on the lifespan of the mouse and the fruit fly, which could make it equally important for man.

The Daf-2 gene also affects

reproductive capacity but new research shows that the gene acts in various ways at various stages of life to control reproduction or longevity.

This made it possible for scientists to separate these two functions, explained Cynthia Kenyon, a professor at UCSF and principal author of the study.

"A lot of evolutionary biologists predicted that you couldn't lengthen life span with out inhibiting reproduction," Kenyon said. "But that's not true. These worms live much longer than normal and they reproduce perfectly normally. They look great, they're vigorous. These animals are having their cake and eating it too."

"As we uncover more about how these and related genes function we hope to learn how youthfulness and longevity can be extended in humans without any side effects as well" the researcher continued.

Her team discovered that if the Daf-2 gene is deactivated right after birth, the worms live twice as long but reproduce poorly. On the other hand, if this gene is deactivated at the beginning of adulthood the worms will live longer and reproduce normally.

Professor Kenyon and her team first discovered the effect of the Daf-2 gene in 1993, when they succeeded for the first time in increasing the life span of a living organism by genetic engineering.

The lifespan of this small worm is normally 15 days.



PHOTO: AFP

A group of clowns perform on Wednesday as they parade in Mexico City. Some 500 clowns from Mexico and Central America are attending the VII International Clowns Convention in Mexico City.