

US sees end of UN talks, moves bombers to Gulf

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council has edged closer to a new tough weapons control regime for Iraq, as the United States announced the deployment of stealth bombers within striking range of the Gulf region.

Amid mounting pressure on Iraq, a US Air Force commander said Washington will deploy B-2 Stealth bombers closer to the Gulf region to increase the US firepower there. The Air Force B-2 Bomber Wing has begun practising for the deployment to the British Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia and an air base at Fairford in England, said Colonel Doug Raaberg, commander of the 509 Bomb Wing.

US President George W. Bush insists his country will act unilaterally against Iraq if the United Nations does not take firm action to disarm Baghdad and President Saddam Hussein.

Iraqi Kurd leader Jalal Talabani said Thursday he was "certain" of a US strike to topple Saddam, "but it will only take place after Ramadan."

the Muslim fasting month which runs from around November 6 to December 5.

"We are against an invasion of Iraq by the American forces," Talabani, who heads the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, told journalists in Tehran.

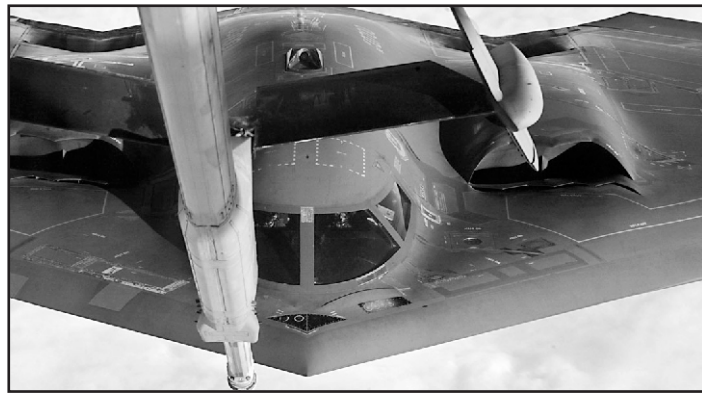


PHOTO: AFP

A B-2 Stealth Bomber flies somewhere over the state of Missouri towards a fuel hose for in-flight refuelling with an KC10 tanker on Wednesday as part of the Global Power Launch training mission out of Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri. The base is the home of the 509th Bomb Wing and all US B-2 Stealth Bombers.

"But the opposition forces are incapable of overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime without outside help. Foreign countries, the United States and why not Arab or European countries, could help us in getting rid of Saddam Hussein, including with military support," he added.

In Baghdad, Iraq's number two Ezzat Ibrahim stressed that the Iraqi people were ready to fight back against any US attack.

"We do not want war, we want peace. But if the fight is imposed on us by the US administration of evil, we will fight thanks to the force of our faith and determination," Ibrahim said in a statement carried by the press.

Ath-Thawra newspaper, mouthpiece of the ruling Baath party, said that "Bush denigrates and insults the UN and the Security Council."

The US president has been "acting like a new Hitler by adopting the propaganda methods of the Third Reich," it charged.

Meanwhile, on the international scene, US plans to use military force if necessary to disarm Iraq and bring about "regime change" in Baghdad continued to draw popular protests.

In Britain, peace activists promised to give Prime Minister Tony Blair and his ally Bush a Halloween fright on Thursday by staging anti-war events around the country.

Mondale enters US Senate race for Democrats

AFP, Minneapolis

Former vice president Walter Mondale agreed Wednesday to come out of political retirement to help the Democrats in their bid to hold on to a key Senate seat in elections next week.

The 74-year-old Mondale announced he would accept the party nomination for the Minnesota senate seat after the death of incumbent senator Paul Wellstone in a plane crash last Friday.

"It is with a heavy heart but with great hope for the future that I will pick up the campaign where Paul Wellstone left off," Mondale said in a letter to the chairman of Minnesota's state Democratic party.

"Paul cannot be replaced. No one can. But his passion for Minnesotans and their needs can inspire us to continue the work he began."

His appointment was to be confirmed by a state Democratic central committee meeting late Wednesday.

The Democrats controlled the US Senate by just one vote before Wellstone died and Minnesota will be one of a handful of tight races which could tip the balance of power.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian woman walks on the rubble of one of four Palestinian houses destroyed by the Israeli Army in the West Bank town of Jenin on Thursday. The army had flattened the homes of two suicide bombers and two wanted militants who were from the hardline Islamic Jihad group and Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

Australia warns of more al-Qaida attacks

AFP, Sydney

Australia's top intelligence officer said Thursday that more terrorist attacks by al-Qaida linked groups were inevitable, as Australian leaders held a "homeland security" conference to find ways to counter the threat.

"Unfortunately there will be further terrorist attacks, of that we can be certain," Dennis Richardson, director of the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), told the meeting in Canberra.

Richardson said he was convinced al-Qaida was involved in the October 12 bombing on the Indonesian resort island of Bali which killed more than 180 people,

85 of them believed to be Australian.

He said statements attributed to al-Qaida founder Osama bin Laden on October 6 and to his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri two days later warning of new terrorist attacks had to be heeded.

"We may never know if those statements foreshadowed Bali on the 12 October, but we can be confident that the hand of al-Qaida is somewhere in that atrocity," he said.

Richardson, whose agency takes the lead in counter-terrorist operations and has carried out a series of controversial raids against Muslim families this week in search of al-Qaida agents, said the Australian public should prepare for a years' long battle against terrorism.

Police identify Bali bomb suspect

AFP, Jakarta

Investigators have identified one of three suspects wanted for the October 12 Bali bombing, Indonesia's police chief said Thursday.

"Out of the three men whose faces we have sketched, one has been identified," General Da'i Bachtiar told reporters after meeting with Vice President Hamzah Haz.

Bachtiar would not release the man's name, who has not been arrested so far.

Central African capital calm after govt troops rout uprising

AFP, Bangui

The Central African Republic capital Bangui was calm Thursday morning, a day after government troops launched an offensive to recapture areas held since last week by rebels.

Troops loyal to President Ange Felix Patasse, backed by Libyan soldiers and, according to some witnesses, rebels from the Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC), on Wednesday forced the rebels -- backers of former army chief Francois Bozize -- to give up their positions and flee northward.

The Libyan troops have been in CAR to protect Patasse since May 2001, when an earlier attempt to oust him was quashed.

Rumsfeld predicts early ouster of Iranian govt

AFP, Washington

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has predicted an early overthrow of the Iranian government by its own people, or its collapse amid mounting problems and internal strife.

But the forecast, made Wednesday during a radio call-in show, came in response to a question on whether the administration of President George W. Bush planned to move on to Iran after achieving its goal of "regime change" in Iraq.

Therefore, it appeared to signal that the administration saw no need to resort to overt or covert military

measures to topple the regime in Tehran, because it expected it to tumble under its own weight.

"I suspect that during my lifetime we're going to see a change in that situation over there and that the young people and the women and the people who believe in freedom will overthrow that cleric government and it will fall in some way of its own weight," Rumsfeld said on "The Mike Gallagher Show."

The defence secretary, who turned 70 in July, called Iran "an interesting place" controlled by "a very small clique of clerics."

Koreas push ahead with rapprochement

AFP, Seoul

South Korean Red Cross officials left for North Korea Thursday to discuss building permanent reunion centres for families separated for five decades since the Korean War.

The three-day Red Cross meeting would be held at the North's Mount Kumgang resort. The two Koreas have agreed to set up two family reunion centres but details of their construction have not been discussed.

The inter-Korean meeting will also cover a contentious issue on the fate of hundreds of South Koreans kidnapped by North Korea,

officials here said.

"We will have in-depth talks on how to establish reunion centres and the issue of those missing," South Korea's chief delegate Lee Byong-Woong told reporters.

The two Koreas have allowed hundreds of separated families to meet relatives under a reconciliation accord signed by their leaders two years ago.

Meanwhile, North Korea's rigid stance during recent normalisation talks with Japan raised doubts about the sincerity it showed at a landmark summit just a month ago, Japanese media said Thursday.

Russia comes clean over gas use

AFP, Moscow

Russia broke four days of silence on Wednesday and revealed that the gas used to subdue Chechen rebels and end the Moscow hostage crisis was fentanyl, a potent agent responsible for nearly all of the 119 deaths among the captives.

Moscow also demanded the extradition of a top aide to the Chechen rebel leadership after he was arrested in Denmark on suspicion of being behind the siege.

Health Minister Yury Shevchenko denied that the gas used in Saturday's special forces operation to free the hostage was banned under chemical weapons conventions and said that the active substance in the gas was fentanyl, a powerful narcotic used as an anaesthetic.

"A fentanyl derivative was used to neutralise the terrorists," the minister said, referring to the Chechen rebels who had threatened to execute the hostages unless Russia agreed to end the war

in their homeland.

"I officially declare that chemical substances of the kind banned under international conventions on chemical weapons were not used," he said, as quoted by the Interfax news agency.

Russian officials had previously refused to specify the nature of the gas whose effects killed most of the 119 hostages who died and has left hundreds of others still in hospital, saying only that it was an anaesthetic-type gas of a kind used in surgery.

US Ambassador Alexander Vershbow said Tuesday that lives could have been saved if precise information had been given out immediately following the operation.

Shevchenko stressed that the substance, widely used in medical practice, "cannot in itself be called lethal," attributing the deaths of the hostages to their poor condition after three days of captivity, notably a lack of movement and oxygen.

Sharon starts talks for forming right-wing govt

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon started talks Thursday to form a right-wing government as he sought to avoid snap polls with the country mired in conflict with the Palestinians, the day after the Labour party bolted his cabinet.

Israel was almost certain to lurch rightward as Sharon courted ultra-nationalist and pro-settler parties to join his cabinet, in a bid to thwart the centre-left Labour party's attempt to trigger new elections by the spring.

"The prime minister will be busy today with a series of contacts to

form a stable new government and a majority in the parliament," Sharon's cabinet secretary Gideon Saar told public radio.

"The majority of parliament members do not want elections," he added.

Sharon, the burly former general, seemed determined to stay the course, after Labour leader and defence minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer quit the country's 20-month national unity government Wednesday over a budget row.

Ben Eliezer and his fellow Labour members resigned after

last-minute talks with Sharon failed to reach a compromise over Israel's 2003 austerity budget that had angered Labour with its high subsidies allotted for Jewish settlements in the occupied territories.

The row was largely viewed as a ploy by Ben Eliezer to earn his stripes with his party's dovish wing ahead of a November 19 primary for Labour's leadership mantle.

But Sharon clearly wished to fend off his rival's manoeuvre to call a national election before the end of his term in October 2003.

Ivory Coast govt, rebels open peace talks

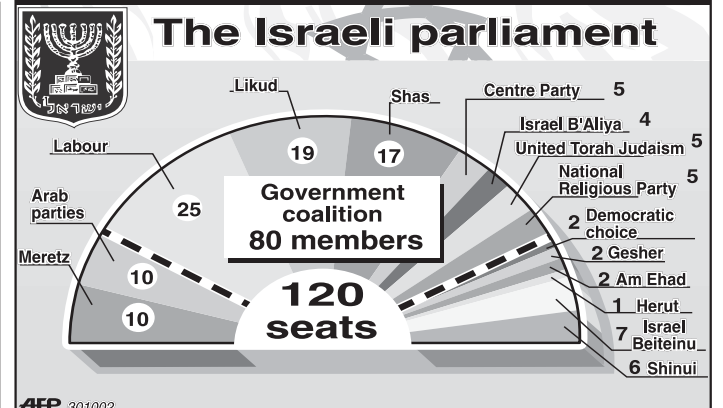
AFP, Lome

The government and rebels from Ivory Coast held their first face-to-face talks Wednesday in the Togolese capital Lome, in a bid to end more than five weeks of bloody unrest in one of west Africa's wealthiest countries.

"The real negotiations of substance will only begin tomorrow (Thursday)," said Mohamed Ibn Chambas, executive secretary of the 15-nation Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Togolese President Gnassingbe Eyadema, mediating the talks on behalf of ECOWAS, met separately with each side in the morning before they went into the direct talks.

The rebels "realise that they have no interest in continuing to fight. If everything goes well, we will finish the talks tomorrow (Thursday), unless they are manipulated by politicians," Eyadema told AFP during a break in the talks.



AFP 3/21/2002

India names Kargil officer as new army chief

AFP, New Delhi

India Thursday named a senior officer who played a key role during a short military conflict with Pakistan in Kargil in 1999 as its new army chief.

Lieutenant General Nirmal Chander Vij, a highly decorated officer and currently vice chief of the army, is to take over from General S. Padmanabhan when he retires at the end of the year, a defence ministry statement said.

During a career spanning 40 years, 59-year-old Vij has worked in a variety of command, staff and instructional posts, the statement said.

"He has the distinction of commanding two corps of the Indian army, one of them being a strike corps and another in insurgency operations. He was the director general military operations during the Kargil conflict," it said.

India's troops clashed with Pakistan-backed intruders in the icy heights of Kargil in Indian Kashmir in 1999 in which nearly 1,000 combatants from both sides died.

After Kargil, Vij was made commander of the army's southern command.