

Iran's judiciary defiant over academic's death term

AFP, Tehran

Facing mounting protests over a death sentence against a prominent reformist academic, Iran's judiciary on Wednesday hit back at its critics and insisted it stood by the controversial verdict.

"How can one defend someone who claims to be a Muslim but casts doubt on the principles of the religion... and qualifies as monkeys those who follow religious dignitaries," the judiciary's public relations office said in a statement a week after Hashem Aghajari was convicted of blasphemy.

"Do these comments, repeated by the accused a number of times during his trial, not justify such a verdict by a believing and Muslim judge?" the toughly-worded statement asked.

Aghajari, a disabled Iran-Iraq war veteran and close ally of embattled reformist President Mohammad Khatami, was put on trial after calling in a speech for a reform of Iran's state Shiite religion.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iranian woman, seen through the closed gate of Tehran University, takes part in a protest on campus along with students supporting the Islamic republic's embattled reform movement on Tuesday despite a threat from supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to intervene with "popular force" to end a mounting political crisis. At least 3,000 students gathered at the university chanting "death to despotism", on the fourth day of protests sparked by the sentencing to death for blasphemy of a popular academic and ally of President Mohammad Khatami.

World waits for Saddam to disarm or face war

AFP, Baghdad

The world waited Wednesday for President Saddam Hussein to declare if he agrees to the terms of a UN resolution to disarm Iraq or is prepared to face another war led by the United States.

With the Friday deadline looming, US President George W. Bush dismissed the Iraqi parliament's rejection of a UN resolution on disarmament saying he awaited direct word from Saddam.

A fresh signal emerged that Iraq may accept as official media in Baghdad broadly ignored parliament's rejection of Resolution 1441 and trumpeted the blank cheque MPs gave their president to decide.

Following the line adopted by state television and radio stations in the hours that followed Tuesday's unanimous vote, Arabic dailies in Baghdad splashed news only that assembly backed Saddam "to do what he deems fit" on the Security Council document.

They passed over the other clause of a two-part recommendation endorsed by parliament rejecting the resolution.

"National Assembly Mandates Combatant Leader Saddam Hussein to do what he deems appropriate on Resolution 1441," headlined the ruling Baath Party's Ath-Thawra, which was echoed by Al-Jumhuriya, Al-Qadisiya and Al-Iraq newspapers.

With the all-powerful Revolution Command Council (RCC) yet to meet under Saddam's chairmanship to take a final decision, the official media coverage of the parliamentary vote appeared consistent with other hints that the Iraqi strongman might agree to "deal with" the US-drafted resolution in

order to deny Washington a chance to attack.

"The Iraqi parliament is nothing but a rubber stamp for Saddam Hussein. There's no democracy. This guy is a dictator, so we'll have to see what he says," Bush said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, talking after a meeting with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, agreed.

"This isn't a real parliament. The only power that exists is in the hands of Saddam Hussein and we'll wait and see what he says."

Iraq cannot negotiate the terms of the resolution, which gave Saddam seven days to say whether he will comply with the measure or face "serious consequences," meaning military action.

"If Saddam Hussein does not comply to the detail of the resolution, we will lead a coalition to disarm him," Bush said. "There's a zero-tolerance policy now."

Adding an eerie note to the drama, a voice believed to be that of Osama bin Laden was broadcast on Al-Jazeera television hailing the latest spate of terror attacks and threatening US allies, as preparations go on to attack Iraq.

The speaker lashed out at Bush, "the pharaoh of the century... murdering our children in Iraq." "As you assassinate, so will you be (assassinated), and as you bomb so will you likewise be," said the tape, reported to be authenticated by Al-Jazeera and several experts.

The Qatar-based satellite station did not provide any details of how it obtained the tape but said it showed that bin Laden was still alive at least until the October 28 killing of a US diplomat in Amman.

Pak national to be executed today in US

AFP, Washington

If his last appeals fall on deaf ears, Pakistani national Mir Aimal Kasi is to be executed by lethal injection Thursday for the 1993 murder of two CIA employees, amid US authorities' fears of reprisals.

Kasi has appealed to the US Supreme Court, which has not yet decided if it will even hear the appeal, to review his case and has also applied for clemency from Virginia Governor Mark Warner.

"If the Supreme Court chooses to hear the case they would probably stay execution pending a review of the (case), should they not grant the writ the last line is in the hands of Governor Warner," said Tim Murtaugh, a spokesman for the Virginia Attorney General's office.

Pro-Musharraf parties reopen coalition talks

AFP, Islamabad

Islamists and pro-regime parties reopened talks Wednesday to thrash out an agreement on forming Pakistan's first civilian government in three years, party officials said.

The military government's response to a draft agreement between the two groups over controversial constitutional amendments was expected to be considered, the officials said.

The amendments are embodied in a Legal Framework Order which hands power to President Pervez Musharraf to sack parliament and also gives the military a firm role in politics.

"We expect to receive a government response on our proposed changes to the LFO (during the meeting)," Hafiz Hussain Ahmed, deputy secretary-general of the

Islamic Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) told AFP.

The MMA and the Grand National Alliance (GNA), a group of pro-regime parties, finalised a draft on proposed changes that were given to Musharraf's government Tuesday.

Some differences, however, remained over some of the clauses between the MMA and GNA, Ahmed said.

"We have said we accept some of the constitutional amendments. We have some reservations on the president's power to dissolve parliament. But we reject the setting up of a National Security Council," Ahmed said.

The proposed council would have the power to sack parliament.

Musharraf introduced the LFO ahead of October 10 polls which led to a hung parliament. Nearly five weeks of frantic negotiations over

forming a coalition have failed to bear fruit.

The Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid, which spearheads the GNA, emerged as the leading party with 103 seats, but it still fell far short of the 172-seat simple majority required to form government.

The secular Pakistan People's Party of former premier Benazir Bhutto trailed with 81 seats, while the Islamist MMA grabbed a surprise 59 seats, winning it the crucial balance of power.

The MMA's Ahmed said Chaundhry Shujaat Hussain, the parliamentary leader of the PML-Q, had already discussed the draft with military rulers and sought legal opinions from the law ministry.

"The outcome of today's meeting will be presented to the MMA supreme council for approval late on Wednesday," he said.

Egypt TV news chief gets 18 years

AP, Cairo

In an unusually harsh punishment, a court has sentenced the news director of Egypt's state-owned television station to 18 years of hard labor in prison on bribery and drug charges.

Mohammed el-Wakil also was fined 113,000 Egyptian pounds, or about \$24,300, by the court on Tuesday.

Another defendant in the case, university lecturer Fakher Fuad, received a five-year sentence for bribing el-Wakil.

The only legal recourse available to el-Wakil, who broke into tears on hearing his verdict, is to appeal to the Court of Cassation, which would either uphold the verdict or order a retrial.

The case came as President Hosni Mubarak's government wages an anti-corruption campaign to address foreign investors' complaints that doing business in Egypt means dealing with corrupt officials.

China moves for a leadership change

AFP, Beijing

Preliminary election results for an elite Chinese Communist Party committee have confirmed President Jiang Zemin and many other top leaders are retiring, delegates told AFP Wednesday, marking the first step in an expected leadership changeover.

Jiang was among six of China's current seven top leaders not elected in a preliminary vote for the party's new Central Committee, to which all leaders must belong, two delegates to the 16th Party Congress told AFP separately.

"Those six people are not on the new Central Committee list. They were not on the candidates' list," said one delegate from an eastern province, who asked not to be named.

The seven top leaders, also including Premier Zhu Rongji and party number two Li Peng, form China's top ruling body, the party's

Politburo Standing Committee.

"The result of the preliminary vote is out. It is the overall result," a delegate from a northern province told AFP.

"The only one (of the top seven leaders) on the list is Hu Jintao," he said.

Hu has been widely expected to take over as party head at the end of the Congress on Thursday, and then as state president at the annual meeting of China's parliament next spring.

However the whole process is held in secret, and the first confirmation that a leadership change is taking place came only on Monday when a delegate said the six leaders were not on a candidates' list for the 300 or so-strong Central Committee.

The first formal stage in this changeover thus came Tuesday, when the 2,114 Congress delegates took the preliminary vote on the new Central Committee.

Attempt on top advisor of Gyanendra

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese police Wednesday shot dead a suspected Maoist who tried to assassinate a top advisor to King Gyanendra, as most of Kathmandu remained shut for the third and final day of a rebel-called strike.

The Maoists had called the three-day strike to protest the king's October 4 dismissal of the elected prime minister, whom he replaced a week later with a staunch royalist.

Meanwhile, the home ministry announced that 18 Maoists had been killed by Nepalese troops in clashes across the kingdom since Tuesday. The incidents in the isolated areas could not be confirmed independently.

Police said that early Wednesday a suspected Maoist tried to plant a bomb at the official residence of Keshav Jung Rayamajhi, chairman of the state council standing committee, a top advisory board to the king.

Israel takes control of Nablus

US envoy talks peace roadmap with Palestinians

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli tanks and troops backed by helicopter gunships took control of Nablus at dawn Wednesday, arresting some 30 people after rolling into the northern West Bank town overnight in the wake of a deadly attack on a kibbutz.

Soldiers took over the casbah, or old town, of Nablus and the nearby Askar and Balata refugee camps with backing from sappers and tanks, Israeli public radio said, quoting highly-placed military sources.

An AFP reporter in the town said thousands of soldiers had moved into the city overnight, taking up positions on almost every street. Around 150 tanks and armoured vehicles entered the city,

Palestinian sources said.

Helicopters buzzed overhead as the huge force moved in, initially firing machineguns to ensure none of the 100,000 residents of the city ventured outside.

There were no reports of injuries. The Israeli army also occupied another West Bank town, Bir Zeit, north of Ramallah.

The moves followed an attack late Sunday on Kibbutz Metzzer in northern Israel in which five people, including a mother and two children, were killed.

"The soldiers received a mandate to operate for as long as necessary to destroy the infrastructures of Palestinian terrorist organisations following very many alerts of attacks planned from these sectors," public radio said.

At least 30 Palestinian suspects were arrested during the night, it added.

Palestinian sources said two of them were wanted members of the radical Islamic group Hamas who were arrested in the Askar refugee camp.

The Israeli forces, backed by helicopter gunships, entered the town at 4 a.m. (0200 GMT) from the east and west, moving towards the centre under covering fire without apparently meeting any resistance.

By around 5 a.m. the Israelis had complete control of the town and the casbah was surrounded by tanks.

Israeli radio and television had announced Monday night that troops were preparing to move into Nablus as part of tough reprisals for Sunday's attack.

Meanwhile, US State Department envoy David Satterfield met with senior Palestinian officials here Wednesday to discuss the new "roadmap" for peace in the Middle East.

Satterfield, on a week-long tour of the region, told reporters after his meeting with top Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat and international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath that the talks had been "very serious and thorough".

"We did not give Satterfield our official position yet, but we discussed every aspect of getting the peace process back on track. We will give our answer in a few days, after more consultations with Arab leaders and the Palestinian leadership," Erakat said.

4 new suspects named for Bali bombing

REUTERS, Bali

Indonesian police investigating last month's Bali bombings named four new suspects in the case yesterday, bringing the number of official suspects to seven.

Police last week named one man, Amrozi who has confessed to involvement in the blasts, as the chief suspect in the case.

"There are many other suspects ... Idris, Hudama, Umar also known as Imam Samudra, Umar and another Umar," Indonesian police chief Da'i Bachtiar told a news conference.

Tuesday, they named two of Amrozi's brothers, Ali Imron and Ali Fauzi, as suspects.

'US was unprepared for post-Sept 11 hate crimes'

AFP, New York

Anti-Muslim hate crimes in the United States rose 1,700 percent during 2001, due to a post-September 11 backlash that caught officials unprepared, Human Rights Watch said in a report released Thursday.

According to government figures, there were 481 reported cases of hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims last year, compared to just 28 in 2000.

Although no monthly breakdown was provided, the author of the Human Rights Watch report, Amardeep Singh, said local statistics made it clear that the vast majority of crimes occurred after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. In

Phoenix, Arizona there were 46 attacks on Muslims after September 11, compared to zero in the previous eight months of the year. In the state of Massachusetts, the number of incidents rose from five to 85 over the same period.

"Government officials didn't sit on their hands while Muslims and Arabs were attacked after September 11," said Singh. "But law enforcement and other government agencies should have been better prepared for this kind of onslaught."

The 41-page report, titled "We Are Not the Enemy," drew on research with police, prosecutors, community activists and victims of hate crimes in six major US cities. It also examined the scope and

extent of such incidents, which included murder, assault, arson and vandalism.

Much of the violence was directed at people solely because they shared, or were perceived as sharing the national background or religion of the hijackers and al-Qaida members deemed responsible for attacking the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.

While acknowledging the strenuous official condemnation of hate crimes in the wake of September 11, the report argued the government had contradicted its message by directing anti-terrorism efforts -- including secret immigration detention and FBI interviews of thousands of non-citizens -- at Arabs and Muslims.

Laden's shadow still haunts Kabul

REUTERS, Kabul

The first anniversary of the liberation of Kabul from the Taliban was overshadowed on Wednesday by an audio tape that Washington said was probably made by Saudi-born militant Osama bin Laden.

The inability of nearly 8,000 US troops in Afghanistan to find significant al-Qaida and Taliban remnants has prompted a debate in Washington over a possible shift to aid and reconstruction from a mainly military campaign.

The Afghan government has urged the international community to pour more money into the war-ravaged country of 23 million, amid growing frustration among ordinary people at the slow pace of reconstruction.

It was shaken this week by rare violent protests involving university students in Kabul who clashed with police during demonstrations over poor living conditions in their hostels.

Students say at least four people died, although the authorities insist only one student was killed when police opened fire on the protesters late Monday.

President Hamid Karzai called a brief crisis meeting on Tuesday with ministers before boarding a plane bound for the United States, where the Western-educated leader was due to receive an award from an aid agency.

In Kabul there was little to mark the anniversary of the fall of the Taliban. At a small function at the Interior Ministry a message from Karzai was read out praising



PHOTO: AFP

Photo dated June 5 shows Afghan workers repairing a road some 40 km from Kabul. A report in Kabul said that work got underway on a huge internationally-funded road linking Afghanistan's major cities of Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat in a project seen as the war-scarred country's best hope of achieving peace and stability.

Afghan resistance forces for toppling the hard-line Islamic militia.

"We achieved this freedom through the sacrifices made by our brave soldiers," Karzai's message said.

One year ago, people thronged the streets, men shaved their beards and women threw off burqa veils in a euphoric display of the

relief at the demise of the Taliban and its brutal implementation of Sharia law.

The defeat has ushered in an era of relative freedom, with women allowed to work, girls going back to school and music once again blaring from car radios.

Traffic clogs the streets of the capital, much of which is still in

ruins from 23 years of occupation and war, and business is booming in some areas as a sense of normality creeps back.

Many people are happy to be rid of the Taliban, but the Afghan people, swelled by the return of two million refugees, now want to see roads and houses built and jobs created.