

No let-up in firing over N Iraq: US Air Force

AFP, Incirlik Air Base, Turkey

British and US pilots flying over northern Iraq come under fire on nearly every mission, US Air Force officers responsible for Operation Northern Watch said this week.

There has been no let-up since September 16, when Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invited the UN Security Council to resume inspections of suspect weapons sites, they said.

"You know you're being shot at when you see the airbursts," said Dave, a first lieutenant flying his first combat missions in an F-16 fighter-bomber out of Incirlik, a NATO air base in south-central Turkey, an hour by jet from the Iraqi border.

Asia's 'Big 2' on brink of AIDS nightmare: UN

AFP, Paris

The United Nations on Tuesday warned China, India and other Asian countries that they had to race to prevent AIDS from leaping out of localised pools of infection and becoming an uncontrollable threat.

"The window of opportunity for bringing the HIV/AIDS epidemic under control is narrowing rapidly in Asia," it said, predicting that without urgent steps the number of infected Asians would more than double within five years.

"In several countries, low national prevalence rates conceal serious, localised epidemics. There is a vital need to expand activities that focus on people at most risk of infection, as well as a need for more extensive HIV/AIDS programmes that reach the general population."

Man wanted for rioting, murder is BJP nominee

THE STATESMAN, ANN, Gandhinagar

He was imprisoned for 108 days after the Gujarat riots for fanning communal passions and leading mobs to burn down houses during the violence.

He has four cases, including murder and rioting, against him. But this didn't prevent the BJP from nominating Jitu Vaghela as the party candidate to contest the Shaherkotla Assembly seat against the sitting Congress MLA, Sailesh Parmar.

Out on bail, Vaghela (31) seems unfazed and states that his top priority will be the salamati (safety) of the voters in his constituency.

He said nine persons were killed in Ahmedabad's Gompipur area and numerous shops and houses were burnt. The number of injured was so high that "we lost count". He was arrested "while returning from a hospital after taking an injured person there".

Turkmenistan president escapes assassination

AFP, Ashkhabad

Turkmen dictator Saparmurat Niyazov said on Monday night he had survived an assassination attempt, in what could prove the most serious challenge yet to his 17-year-long rule in this energy-rich Central Asian state.

"This morning when I was going to work three vehicles ... came out from some blocks of flats. There were armed people in them. My motorcade sped past and when I came to work I was told that a gun-fight had ensued," Niyazov said.

The official Neutralny Turkmenistan newspaper reported that the incident happened when the presidential motorcade was travelling along the city's Turkmenbashi street, which is named after the president.

Violence rages in Kashmir: 10 killed

AFP, Srinagar

Three Muslim rebels, including one accused in a weekend surge of violence, were shot dead in Kashmir, where six civilians and a policeman were also killed, officials said Tuesday.

The three militants, who police said were all Pakistanis, were killed by Indian troops who were backed by counter-insurgency police in a gunbattle overnight, a police spokesman said.

A police constable was also killed in the clash, which lasted several hours in the village of Kundan in the southern district of Doda, the spokesman said.

Blix asks Iraq to provide 'convincing' evidence

British parliament backs UN resolution

Reuters, AFP, United Nations/ London

As the first contingent of UN arms experts landed in Baghdad, the chief inspector said he warned Iraq it had to provide "convincing" evidence to prove it no longer had weapons of mass destruction.

Hans Blix, whose assignment could determine whether the United States launches war against Iraq, told the UN Security Council on Monday the advance team of 19 inspectors would begin work on Wednesday after being out of the country for four years.

Blix, who just returned from a trip to Baghdad with Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, also said Iraqi officials told him they had no banned weapons. But they raised many questions about a crucial declaration of chemical, biological and nuclear arms due on Dec. 8 under a tough new Security Council resolution.

"I had the feeling they were going to try to put up a very substantial report," although they wondered if they had to include every detail of their chemical industry down to "the production of plastic slippers," Blix said.

But on the critical issue of access to President Saddam Hussein's palace compounds, he said Iraqi officials told him "that the entry into a presidential site or a ministry was not exactly the same thing as entry into a factory."

Resolution 1441, adopted by the council on Nov. 8, gives inspectors unfettered access to any suspected location, including the palaces, and threatens Iraq with "serious consequences" if it does not disarm and disclose its weapons.

"If the Iraqi side were to state as it still did at our meeting -- that there were no such programs, it would need to provide convincing documentary or

other evidence," Blix said.

"The production of mustard gas is not exactly the same as the production of marmalade," he told reporters, referring to early reports that did not give a full account.

Despite a show of unity on inspections, the United States forced the 15-member Security Council to extend for only nine days the Iraq humanitarian oil-for-food plan after failing to get the plan renewed for three months rather than the usual six.

Council members agreed to renew the program, which expired at midnight on Monday, until Dec. 4 so negotiations between Washington and the other 14 nations could continue.

The program allows Iraq to sell oil to purchase food, medicine and a host of civilian supplies to ease the impact of UN sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

AFP adds: The House of Commons voted against an opposition motion proposing that a military offensive should not be taken against Iraq unless there was a fresh mandate from the UN Security Council.

The defeated opposition amendment had demanded that the Security Council should decide as a whole whether Baghdad had breached UN Resolution 1441.

It had also called for prior approval by parliament before the deployment of British troops against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime.

After more than five hours of intense debate, the amendment put forward by the opposition Liberal Democrats -- and supported by 32 rebel members of Prime Minister Tony Blair's ruling Labour Party -- was defeated by 452 votes to 85.

Lanka faces tough talks, overtures gain support

AFP, Oslo

Norway has secured unexpected cash and international political support to boost Sri Lanka's fragile peace bid as the warring sides head for contentious political talks here next week, diplomats said Tuesday.

Peace broker Norway announced at the end of a one-day international conference here Monday that Sri Lanka received aid pledges of between 60 to 70 million dollars/euros and unprecedented political credit for the progress so far.

"In every aspect the outcome far exceeded our expectations," said

Sri Lanka's chief peace negotiator G. L. Peiris. "The huge international support now makes the peace process irreversible."

However, the government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are set to take up thorny political issues for the first time since the start of formal face-to-face talks in Thailand on September 16.

Diplomats said although the two sides have made spectacular gains in two rounds of talks in Thailand since September, the next session here in Oslo from December 2 to 5 could be crucial.

Flash floods kill 35 in Morocco

AFP, Rabat

Flash floods have claimed at least 35 lives in Morocco and caused extensive damage in large parts of the north African country, the Moroccan press agency MAP reported Monday.

Thirty-eight people were swept away by the flooded Benguenbi near Settat, south of Casablanca, MAP said. It said 30 of them are confirmed dead, and eight others are missing.

In Moulay Yacoub, near Fez, 200 kilometres east of Rabat, a 36-year-old man and four of his five children died when their house collapsed from the heavy rain late Sunday.

In Mohammadia, an industrial town north of Casablanca, a fuel tank and a number of cars were swept away by the rising waters of the El Maleh, where a dam was breached, flooding land in the provinces of Benslimane and Khouribga.

King Mohammed VI has offered his condolences to the families of the victims and ordered authorities to take "urgent measures" to help those affected.

Israel rules out peace 'roadmap' before polls

Fresh raid in Gaza, West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel rules out any decision by the quartet of Middle East diplomatic players on their so-called "roadmap" for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before the January 28 general election, an official said Tuesday.

"Any definitive quartet decision putting us in front of a fait accompli before January 28 and the setting up of a new Israeli government is out of the question," the high-ranking official from Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's office told AFP.

"This decision should take the line of the future cabinet into account and will depend on the outcome of the vote," the official said on condition of anonymity.

The document, which calls for an unequivocal commitment by Israel to the creation of an independent Palestinian state, is to be discussed by the "quartet" -- the United Nations, United States, European Union and Russia -- in Washington on November 20.

The official said Israel had obtained guarantees from Washington that while the draft would continue to be discussed, no irreversible decision will be made before the new government takes office.

"Washington told us it wanted to continue consultations on the plan but promised there would be no definitive version before the elec-

tions in Israel," he said.

Dovish Labour leader Amram Mitzna and the right-wing Likud party, which has yet to decide who of Sharon and Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will lead it to the legislative election, have widely different views on the creation of a Palestinian state.

Reuters adds: Israeli tanks backed by helicopter gunships swept into the Gaza Strip on Tuesday, battling Palestinian gunmen and troops arrested at least 25 suspected militants in West Bank raids.

The Gaza incursion was the latest in a drive against militants following a suicide bus bombing in Jerusalem last week that killed 11 Israelis in a new round of violence.

The army said 25 suspected militants were arrested in the West Bank, but Palestinian witnesses said many others were detained.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is juggling conflicting pressures to look tough before a general election, while avoiding an escalation in the conflict to help Washington win Arab support for possible military action against Iraq.

As part of the West Bank roundup, about 200 troops backed by heavy armour entered the Deheisheh refugee camp in the city of Bethlehem before dawn, rounding up some 30 Palestinians in house-to-house searches, Palestinian witnesses said.



PHOTO: AFP

The first batch of international UN arms inspectors arrive in Baghdad aboard a UN Hercules C-130 plane from Larnaca on Monday. The 11 experts from the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and six from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), are set to begin the first inspections of suspected Iraqi weapons sites in nearly four years.

Bush inks Homeland Security Act

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush set in motion on Monday the biggest government overhaul in half a century, creating a vast Department of Homeland Security to prevent terrorist attacks on the United States and tapping White House domestic security czar Tom Ridge to run it.

But before signing the legislation into law, Bush offered a warning to anxious Americans: "With a vast nation to defend, we can neither predict nor prevent every conceivable attack, and in a free and open society, no department of government can completely guarantee our safety."

A chief aim of the new department will be to avoid breakdowns in

communication between the FBI, the CIA and other agencies exposed by the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, which killed about 3,000 people. While neither the FBI nor the CIA will be part of the new department, it will include a division that would analyse intelligence in hopes of thwarting future attacks.

Bush nominated Ridge, currently the director of the White House Office of Homeland Security, to head the new department, which will consolidate all or parts of 22 federal agencies including the Coast Guard, Secret Service and Border Patrol.

Once confirmed by the US Senate as expected, the former

Pennsylvania governor and decorated Vietnam veteran will take on what many believe is an impossible job: screening out would-be attackers without slowing down some 500 million people, more than 11 million trucks, 51,000 foreign ships and 2.2 million rail cars that enter the country each year.

Bush acknowledged it would be an "immense task" just setting up the new agency, which is expected to have 170,000 employees and a consolidated budget of up to \$40 billion.

"Adjustments will be needed along the way. Yet this is pressing business and the hard work of building a new department begins today," Bush said.



PHOTO: AFP

A Kashmiri man passes by the destroyed shops during the Indian shelling in the Chakothi sector, some 60 km from Muzaffarabad, capital city of Pakistan's administered Kashmir on Monday. A woman was killed and at least eight other people were wounded in the Pakistani zone of Kashmir in heavy shelling across the Line of Control (LoC).