



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi soldier stands guard in front of the UN headquarters in Baghdad Tuesday. UN weapons inspectors yesterday began first checks in suspect sites in nearly four years as the UN Security Council extended the oil-for-food programme by nine days.

Arms inspectors back at work after four years

Disarmament mission off to "a fairly good start", Annan says

AFP, Baghdad

UN arms experts resumed inspections in Iraq yesterday after a nearly four-year break, as the United Nations insisted Baghdad could still avoid war if President Saddam Hussein cooperated.

A team from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) picked a "military industrialisation" site in a Baghdad suburb known as "Just Defiance" for a first field mission since inspectors left Iraq in December 1998.

The buildings, also previously used as a women's prison, were singled out by the IAEA team, led by Frenchman Jacques Baute, because they house facilities belonging to Iraq's state body for military industrialisation.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said the first disarmament mission had got off to "a fairly good start", and stressed the need for Iraqi authorities to "sustain cooperation".

"The inspections have got off to a fairly good start," Annan told Europe 1 radio in France. "The Iraqis must fully cooperate, but this must be sustained cooperation to avoid a military conflict."

"I do not believe that war is inevitable if Iraq cooperates openly,"

Annan added.

Carrying highly sophisticated equipment, the inspectors left their Baghdad headquarters at Canal Hotel in two convoys of white four-wheel drive vehicles bearing the letters UN in black.

"The inspectors are driving the UN cars themselves. They know where they are going. They have maps and some of them are familiar with the roads in Iraq," UN inspectors' spokesman Hiro Ueki told AFP.

IAEA spokesperson Melissa Fleming told CNN television the inspectors faced a "daunting task".

Six experts from the IAEA and 11 others from the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) were followed by counterparts from Iraq's National Monitoring Directorate, as well as dozens of journalists and TV crews.

The inspectors, hailing from Australia, Britain, Egypt, Finland, France, Greece, Russia and the United States, said they would "freeze" sites they choose to inspect in Iraq to prevent their disarmament missions being disturbed.

Under UN Security Council Resolution 1441 adopted November 8, the teams have unprecedented powers to search Iraqi sites and question local sci-

tists about President Saddam Hussein's arms programmes.

Iraq has categorically denied that it now possesses or is developing any weapons of mass destruction and insists the inspectors will find nothing incriminating.

If it does not cooperate with the inspections, it could face "severe consequences," including possible military strikes led by the United States, which has pushed the UN Security Council to act against Saddam Hussein.

"Should Saddam Hussein defy the inspectors and the UN, then the (Security) Council will assume its responsibilities," Annan warned in an interview with Le Monde newspaper on Tuesday.

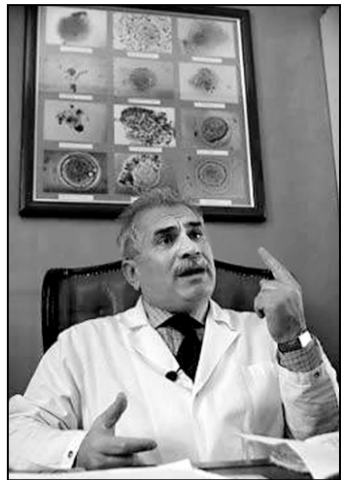
He urged the United States not to be overly hasty in its determination to go to war, warning this could split a now-united Security Council.

But US conservatives moved to put the pressure on a top official in the arms inspections, UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix, urging him not to take a soft line on Iraq.

Commentators on the American right said the former Swedish foreign minister let Iraq get away with too much in the past when he ran the IAEA from 1981 to 1997.

Washington-based Wisconsin

Cloned baby due in Feb, says Italian fertility doc



REUTERS, Rome

Controversial Italian fertility doctor Severino Antinori said on Tuesday a woman pregnant with a cloned embryo was due to give birth in January, but declined to give any details about her.

"It's going well. There are no problems," Antinori told a news conference, adding he had made a "scientific and cultural contribution" to the project but was not personally in charge.

The doctor, who made world headlines in 1994 when he helped a 62-year-old woman have a child, supports the cloning of human beings as a way for infertile couples to have children.

Many in the scientific community have challenged Antinori's statements in the past that women have been pregnant with cloned babies. He produced no evidence at the news conference.

Large numbers of doctors and scientists reject human cloning as irresponsible, saying the risk of creating deformed or sick babies is too great and that it poses unanswerable ethical dilemmas.

Antinori would not reveal the location or nationality of the woman, but said ultra-sound scans showed the foetus currently weighed 2.5 to 2.7 kg (5.5 to 5.9 pounds) and was "absolutely healthy".

He said in May three women were pregnant with clones, one in her 10th week, one in her seventh and one in her sixth. He declined at the time to say where any of the trio were, disclosing only that one lived in an Islamic nation.

Antinori did not specify on Tuesday if the woman he said was due to give birth in January was one of the three he had spoken of earlier.

Bali suspect admits links to al-Qaida

REUTERS, Jakarta

Indonesia yesterday appeared to have pulled the noose tighter in its investigation of last month's Bali bombings, linking a suspect to the Islamic militant Jemaah Islamiyah group.

Police said the suspected ground commander of the attacks on Indonesia's most famous holiday resort had admitted he knew Hambali, a Muslim preacher who has been identified by Malaysia and Singapore as a ringleader of Jemaah Islamiyah and one of the group's main contacts with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida.

The bombs killed 185 people, mostly foreigners. National Police chief General Da'i Bachtiar said Imam Samudra, whom authorities identify as a top planner of the October 12 attacks, had at first denied any links to Hambali, alleged operational leader of Jemaah Islamiyah.

"But after we backed it with evidence and other findings he then confessed 'yes, I know Hambali'," Bachtiar told reporters, declining to elaborate on details of the connection.

Samudra, 35, was arrested last week near Jakarta as he was about to board a ferry for the island of Sumatra.

Police say Samudra has confessed to participating in the Bali attacks. They also say he has admitted involvement in church blasts in several Indonesian cities on Christmas Eve 2000.

Hambali is also wanted for involvement in the church attacks.

Asked whether Samudra had described his links to another Christmas bombing suspect, Abu Bakar Bashir, who several Southeast Asian nations say is Jemaah Islamiyah's spiritual leader, the police general said: "He hasn't told us."

Bashir, who is being detained in a police hospital, has denied any wrongdoing or knowledge of Jemaah Islamiyah.

Indonesian police say they have arrested 15 people in connection with the blasts on Indonesia's paradise island, but it is unclear how many are directly implicated.

Samudra is currently being held in police headquarters in Jakarta and it is unclear when police will take him to Bali, where the first arrested suspect, Amrozi, is detained.

Police have based much of their investigation on confessions they say Amrozi has made. Police say most of his statements match Samudra's confession, but a few discrepancies have appeared.

Samudra asserted that the blast in Paddy's Pub, one of the two bombed nightclubs in Bali's Kuta district, was a suicide attack.

The suggestion of a suicide bomber has added a new dimension to the threat posed by Islamic militants in the region, Australian police have said.

Malaysia said on Tuesday that police had arrested four suspected members of Jemaah Islamiyah, including members of a suicide squad who were part of a plot to bomb U.S. interests in Singapore last year.

Palestinian suicide bomber dies in blast

AFP, Gaza City

A would-be Palestinian suicide bomber was killed Wednesday morning when his taxi exploded in the northern Gaza Strip, Palestinian security sources said.

Israeli soldiers manning a military post near the Erez crossing point into Israel opened fire on the taxi when it refused to slow down, the sources said.

Palestinian security officers also tried to stop the car, but it exploded and set fire to an empty building which used to be the Palestinian liaison office, the sources added.

It was not immediately clear if the Palestinian blew himself up or if the charge he was allegedly carry-

ing was set off by the Israeli fire, the sources said, adding that he was alone in the car.

The sources said a Palestinian ambulance and firetruck could not access the area owing to heavy Israeli fire in the area.

There were no immediate reports of any other casualties.

The man's death raises the death toll for the 26-month-old intifada to 2,720 people, including 1,998 Palestinians and 672 Israelis.

Earlier Wednesday, in the southern Gaza Strip, two Israeli helicopter gunships fired five missiles that badly damaged a school and a house, Palestinian security sources and witnesses said.

Six former hostages still in Moscow hospitals

AFP, Moscow

Six people held hostage in a Moscow theatre last month remain hospitalized, Interfax said Wednesday, one month after special forces ended the dramatic three-day siege.

The hostage toll stands at 129 people dead, most killed by the powerful opiate gas that troops pumped into the theatre to subdue the hostage-takers. All 41 Chechen hostage-takers were also killed in the October 26 raid.

Another hostage was discharged from hospital on Wednesday, Interfax quoted Moscow health authorities as saying, putting the total number discharged at 64.

Canada PM aide quits after calling Bush 'moron'

REUTERS, Ottawa

The top aide to Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien who called President Bush a "moron" resigned on Tuesday, saying the controversy generated by the comment had made her position untenable.

Francoise Ducros, Chretien's communications director, had been under intense pressure from opposition politicians and the media since making the remark last Wednesday during a conversation with journalists during a NATO summit in Prague.

She first offered her resignation last Friday but Chretien refused to accept it, saying the remarks had been private. But on Tuesday she sent Chretien a letter saying she

was quitting.

"It is very apparent to me that the controversy will make it impossible for me to do my job. I would therefore like to leave my position as director of communications immediately," wrote Ducros, who had been in the post since mid-1999.

Ducros, a 40-year-old lawyer known for her combative and often abrasive manner, showed undying loyalty to Chretien and was considered one of the most influential players in Ottawa.

"I'm very sorry. She was very good, a very competent person and served me and served the government extremely well, and I wish her good luck," Chretien told reporters.

7 dead in mine explosion in China

AFP, Beijing

Seven miners have died following an explosion at a privately-run coal mine in northeastern China, a local official said yesterday.

The blast happened on Tuesday in Jilin province's Baishan municipality, a spokeswoman for the Baishan mines administration bureau told AFP, adding that she did not know whether there were any more people trapped or missing.

An earlier death toll of 11 people, given by the website of the official People's Daily newspaper, was mistaken, she said.

Women make up half of AIDS patients: UN

REUTERS, London

It started as a mysterious infection among gay white men but over two decades HIV/AIDS has exploded into the worst epidemic humanity has ever faced and is now afflicting as many women as men.

Ominously, the disease is also starting to take its toll on agricultural output and is worsening the food crisis in some of the world's poorest areas, according to the UN.

AIDS will have killed 3.1 million people by the end of this year, five million more have been infected with the deadly virus and 42 million people, half of them women, are living with HIV/AIDS, according to the latest figures from UNAIDS.

"For me what is most striking is that for the first time women comprise 50 per cent of the global epidemic," Peter Piot, the head of UNAIDS, told Reuters Tuesday.

"In Africa 58 per cent of all people living with HIV are women. The face of AIDS is becoming the face of

young women," he added in an interview ahead of World AIDS Day on December 1.

The changing dynamics of

HIV/AIDS means more babies could become infected through their mothers and that women, who have traditionally been the carers, are



PHOTO: AFP

A file photo shows 25-year-old South African Lawrence Jet (in bed), who is HIV-positive, next to Ida, his 84-year-old grandmother, and sole provider. Both are living off a government grant at their home in Mtulwa, some 150 kilometres south of Durban.

being struck down with the illness that has afflicted their husbands, fathers and brothers.

AIDS is now contributing to other disasters, particularly in southern Africa which is most affected by the epidemic.

"It has exacerbated the food crisis. That is new. I think we are starting to see the true impact of AIDS in countries that are heavily affected," Piot said.

Drought and famines are not new to Africa but in countries where a quarter or a third of the population are ill, AIDS has intensified the problems they bring.

"Now it is much worse because agricultural production has gone down already because of AIDS, and nutritional requirements for whole communities have increased because people are sick and need more food," Piot added.

December 2002 shows Africa, with 29.4 million people living with HIV/AIDS, is the worst affected region, Eastern Europe and Central

Asia with 1.2 million cases has the fastest growing epidemic but Asia, particularly China and India is the real time bomb.

An estimated one million people in China are infected with HIV and unless effective responses take hold, the number could reach 10 million people - equivalent to the entire population of Belgium - by the end of this decade, the report says.

"It is truly an epidemic that is still on the rise," said Dr Alan Whiteside of the University of Natal in South Africa.

"It is not just a health crisis. It is a development crisis as well," he added at a news conference to launch the report.

In North America and Western Europe, the introduction of anti-AIDS drugs in 1995/96 caused a dramatic fall in AIDS deaths but the trend has begun to level off.

Researchers are also reporting an increase in unsafe sex and in heterosexual transmission of the virus.