

China willing to send arms experts to Iraq

AFP, Beijing

China said Thursday that it has told the United Nations it is willing to send experts to Iraq for weapons inspection duties, and that arrangements are being worked out.

"As for whether China will send representatives to participate in weapons inspection missions, as a requirement of the United Nations, the Chinese side has indicated its willingness to send experts to Iraq for the weapons inspections," foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said.

"Now the two sides are negotiating on the specific arrangements."

Liu also told reporters at the news briefing that China was pleased to see UN weapons inspectors successfully complete their first day of work at suspect sites in Iraq Wednesday.

'Disturbed' man hijacks plane bound for France

AFP, Rome

A mentally disturbed Italian former policeman was arrested on Wednesday after hijacking a plane flying to France from Italy with more than 60 people on board, officials said.

Stefano Savorani, a 29-year-old with a criminal record as a hijacker, approached the pilot with an electronic remote-control device which he said was connected to a bomb and demanded to speak to journalists, officials said.

The afternoon flight from the northern Italian city of Bologna to Paris was diverted to France's second largest city of Lyon, where Savorani was overwhelmed by police as he left the plane and taken into custody.

"He claimed to be a member of al-Qaeda, but he did not have all his faculties," police spokesman Gerard Laurent said.

MILF kidnaps 9 in S Philippines

AFP, Cagayan de Oro

Muslim separatist guerrillas killed one and kidnapped nine people during a raid in a remote southern Philippine community last week, police and military sources said Thursday.

Sources said members of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) attacked a village near the town of Magsaysay in Lanao del Norte town on November 16.

They burned a house owned by a convert to Islam, and gunned him down when he tried to stop them. Nine other members of the man's household were taken as hostages, the sources said.

The captives were believed taken to a rebel stronghold in a nearby province and the MILF members demanded some 50,000 pesos (about 1,000 dollars) in ransom.

Ivory Coast mounts air attack: Many killed

REUTERS, Abidjan

Ivory Coast army helicopters struck into rebel-held territory Wednesday and the rebels said dozens of people had been killed in the worst attacks since a truce was called nearly six weeks ago.

The renewed violence in the West African nation, the world's top cocoa producer, raised doubts over peace talks in Togo, despite hopeful comments from regional mediators that the two sides were close to a deal after more than four weeks of off-and-on talks that have borne little fruit.

The Ivorian army earlier accused the rebels of breaking the truce and said it was preparing to take action.

KSA dismisses US ultimatum over terror funding

AFP, Dubai

Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz Thursday dismissed reports of a possible US ultimatum over terror funding by the kingdom's businessmen, saying Washington had passed on no evidence of wrongdoing by Saudi nationals.

A 90-day deadline for action being considered by a US National Security Council task force is not "official US policy and has not been communicated to us through official channels," Prince Nayef told the London-based Arabic daily Al-Hayat.

Burden of proof on Iraq as experts keep up checks

Inspectors may use Western intelligence: Blix

AFP, Baghdad

UN weapons inspectors combed two more of 700 suspect sites in Iraq on Thursday as chief arms monitor Hans Blix said the burden of proof remained with Baghdad to show it does not have nuclear, chemical or biological weapons.

Teams from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), accompanied by counterparts from Iraq's National Monitoring Directorate, entered without incident a factory and laboratory close to Baghdad.

The IAEA team inspected the industry-ministry-owned Al-Nasser mechanical equipment factory, located within the huge Al-Taji compound 25 kilometres (15 miles) north of the capital.

UNMOVIC inspectors visited a former vaccines laboratory in Al-Dura, some 30 kilometres (20 miles) south of Baghdad.

The number of inspectors will begin to increase rapidly in the coming days to reach about 100 by the end of the year to accelerate the disarmament process, according to the United Nations.

Under UN Security Council Resolution 1441 adopted November 8, the teams have unprecedented powers to search suspect sites and question Iraqi scientists about President Saddam Hussein's arms programmes.

Iraq has strongly denied having any weapons of mass destruction and says 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.

Blix urged Iraq Wednesday to make the full accounting that is required of it by December 8, saying it had a last chance to come clean on any programmes not declared to previous inspection teams.

Meanwhile, Chief UN arms inspector Hans Blix said his teams could use US intelligence reports to verify a full accounting of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons programs that Iraq is bound to complete by December 8.

However, Blix said in an interview Wednesday with CNN that inspection teams, which earlier launched the first weapons inspections in Iraq in four years, would not allow their missions to be dictated by foreign governments.

A previous UN team in Iraq was accused of spying for the United States, hampering its inspection regime.

Blix said he would use information by US officials contradicting Iraqi claims in the December declaration, "if it is plausible."

"They have to give us some suggestion that is based upon something -- that they are not just pulling us by our noses," he warned.

"We maintain the burden of proof is on Iraq," Blix told CNN television.



PHOTO: AFP

A UN arms expert inspects a former vaccines production laboratory in Al-Dora, an agricultural area some 30 km southwest of Baghdad on Thursday. UN inspectors visited the laboratory and a factory which produces mechanical equipment -- located within the huge Al-Taji compound suspected by Washington of being used to produce weapons of mass destruction -- on the second day of inspections in Iraq in nearly four years, after describing cooperation on the first day of checks as good.

Sharon set for Likud landslide

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and hardline rival Benjamin Netanyahu do battle on Thursday for the right to lead Israel's Likud party into a general election and become the clear favourite to lead the country.

Opinion polls put Sharon far ahead of his even more right-wing rival on the eve of a ballot of Likud's 305,000 members, and he is expected to soar to victory over his foreign minister in the battle of the hawks.

Victory would be the first step for Sharon on the path to retaining the prime minister's post which he has held for almost two years, despite failing to quell a Palestinian uprising for independence or halt Israel's slide into economic crisis.

Shocked and battered by a wave of suicide bombings, Israelis have moved to the right since the uprising began just over two years ago.

This has strengthened Likud and forced the center-left Labour Party into an uphill struggle to make an impact in the January 28 general election. It also ensures Thursday's

winner will be the front-runner to be premier after the election.

"I believe that I will be elected on Thursday and then again in two months," Sharon, 74, said in an interview published by the Ma'ariv newspaper on Wednesday.

The latest poll, commissioned by Army Radio and reported on Thursday, put the incumbent's lead at 22 percentage points.

This, despite 53-year-old Netanyahu's attempts to portray Sharon's leadership as disastrous for national morale.

"Despair is eating away at every segment of society," Netanyahu, who was prime minister in 1996-99, told the mass circulation Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper.

Palestinians are unlikely to welcome either leader's victory because they regard both as hardliners who stand in the way of peace. They have also made clear they would prefer to have Labour Party leader Amram Mitzna as Israel's prime minister.

Sharon and Netanyahu have both blamed Palestinian President

Yasser Arafat for the violence of the last two years. Sharon has refused to meet Arafat for talks and Netanyahu says he wants the Palestinian leader exiled from the region.

Likud members can vote from 10 a.m. (3 a.m. EST) until 10 p.m. (3 p.m. EST). The result is expected around 12:30 a.m. on Friday.

Sharon is expected to win the vote easily, largely because the veteran former general is more trusted by Israelis than his rival to bring the security they crave.

He has sought to look tough against the Palestinians, but he also hopes to avoid an escalation in the conflict that could harm U.S. efforts to win Arab support for possible war on Iraq.

Commentators say Netanyahu miscalculated when he sought to outflank Sharon by opposing the eventual creation of a Palestinian state. Polls indicate that a majority of Likud voters accept eventual Palestinian statehood.

Scientists doubt imminent birth of cloned baby

REUTERS, London

Will 2003 be the year of the first human clone? An Italian fertility expert says a patient will give birth to a cloned baby early next year but experts, including one who helped create Dolly the sheep, are sceptical. Dr. Severino Antinori told a news conference in Rome on Tuesday that the cloned baby is due in January.

The maverick doctor gained fame nearly a decade ago when he helped a 62-year-old woman give birth following fertility treatment with a donated egg, but he has revealed few details about his latest project.

"It's going well. There are no problems," was all he would say about the pregnancy of the cloned embryo.

He gave no clues about the woman's identity, age, where and when the embryo was cloned and where she would give birth nor of two other women he said are carrying cloned embryos.

Australia, Canada, EU close missions in Philippines

AFP, Manila

Australia, Canada and the European Union closed their embassies in the Philippines Thursday in response to specific terrorist threats by Islamic extremists.

Western diplomatic missions across Southeast Asia have sporadically shut their doors since a wave of threats linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network and its regional allies around the September 11 anniversary.

Fears of new attacks have intensified since the October 12 Bali terrorist bombing, and a spate of bomb blasts in the southern Philippines and Manila last month which left 23 people dead.

Embassies in the city. No other foreign embassies were known to have closed -- the US mission is closed for the Thanksgiving holiday but a spokesman said it would reopen on Friday.

Armed police secured the Australian embassy and the EU office, both occupants of an office tower in the Makati financial district of Manila, as well as the Canadian embassy three blocks away.

Police SWAT teams armed with assault rifles patrolled the streets of Makati, as Manila police chief Reynaldo Velasco said he had ordered tighter security at all foreign



PHOTO: AFP

Italian firemen aboard a rubber dinghy search for people remained isolated in their homes due to the heavy floods in Pordenone on Wednesday.

Bush names Kissinger to head Sept 11 probe

AP, Washington

President Bush on Friday appointed former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to lead an investigation into why the government failed to foil the Sept. 11 attacks, telling the veteran diplomat to "follow all the facts wherever they lead."

Signing a bill he once opposed, Bush told survivors and victims' family members, "We must uncover every detail and learn every lesson" from the terrorist strikes. The bill creates a 10-member independent panel for an 18-month inquiry into the attacks on Washington and New York that killed more than 3,000.



Iraq's neighbours get ready for war refugee

AFP, Amman

Iraq's neighbours are quietly preparing contingency plans to deal with an influx of refugees in case of a US war on Baghdad, but most insist they will seal off their borders to people fleeing the combat.

For financial reasons and matters of domestic stability, Jordan, Turkey and Kuwait have flatly said they will refuse to allow Iraqi refugees to enter their territory but are willing to help them on the other side of the border.

Iran, which has been flooded by Afghan refugees during the Afghan-Soviet conflict, has set conditions to take in refugees.

"You cannot consider Iraqi refugees if they are living in camps inside their own country. This will be a big problem," an official from an international aid organisation told AFP in Amman.

A regional official of the UNHCR meanwhile told AFP in Cairo that the UN refugee agency stands by the principle of the right of people to

seek asylum, enshrined in the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights.

The UNHCR, however, "does not comment on behalf of governments" on whether their borders will be open to refugees, Karim Atassi said.

During the 1991 US-led Gulf war to drive Iraqi troops from Kuwait, more than half the 2.5 million people fled Iraq through Jordan and the kingdom, is not willing to host another influx of refugees.

King Abdullah II, who has refused to let Jordan become a launchpad for any US attack on Iraq, told AFP in October that his country had adopted "plans and measures to prevent Jordan from becoming a host country for refugees" from Iraq.

"We will remain firmly opposed to the establishment of refugee camps on Jordanian territory but we will spare no effort to facilitate the passage of refugees through Jordan, in case of a war against Iraq," he said.