

World leaders review Afghans' progress

AFP, Bonn

International leaders gather here Monday under tight security to discuss progress in Afghanistan in the year since the fall of the hardline Taliban regime and assure the country's urgent concerns are not forgotten as the world's attention turns to Iraq.

One year after a UN-sponsored conference outside the former German capital Bonn capped the end of more than two decades of civil war, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer has invited top Afghan, European, UN and regional officials to the same venue for a one-day meeting.

Monday's gathering is aimed at returning the spotlight to the war-ravaged country as President Hamid Karzai, who arrived in Bonn Sunday ahead of the meeting, struggles to assert his authority in the country and implement the rule of law amid repeated attacks and assassination attempts.

After the Taliban toppled late last year in a US-led military operation, the conference here a year ago

created a power-sharing accord that established an interim government, an international security force in Kabul and a road map toward elections in 2004.

Germany, which firmly opposes strikes against Baghdad, is concerned that Afghan security and its importance for the "war on terrorism" will suffer if international resources are diverted to Iraq, Fischer said on a visit to Kabul last week.

He said the international community must work so that Afghanistan can never again become the "breeding ground for terrorism" that allowed it to harbour the al-Qaida network.

Karzai, who is facing high expectations to show results from his year in power, met Fischer for talks late Sunday to put the finishing touches on the meeting's agenda.

Berlin will take a seat on the UN Security Council for two years from January and is to assume the command with the Netherlands of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul commissioned at the conference one year ago from February.

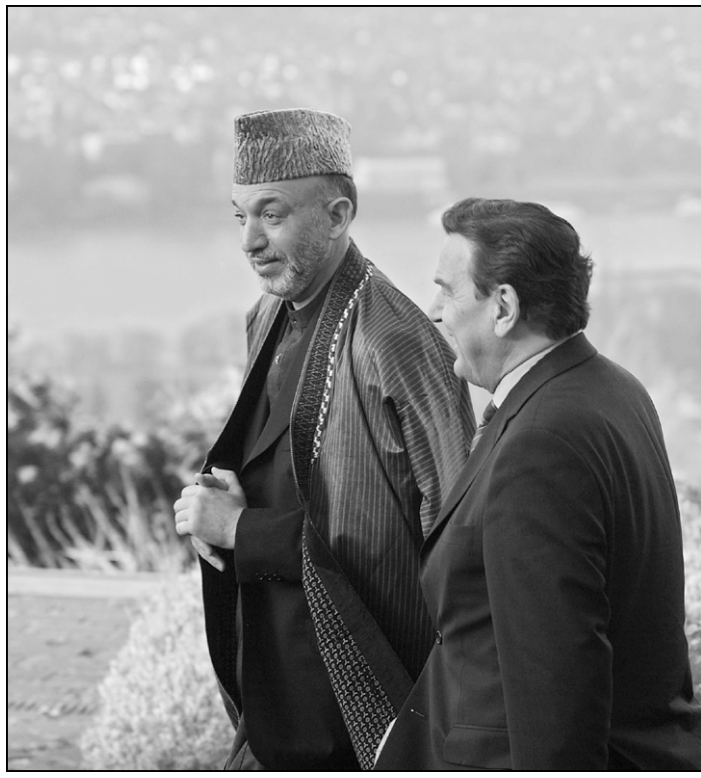


PHOTO: AFP

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (R) and Afghan President Hamid Karzai walk together near Petersberg Guesthouse in Bonn on the way to make a group picture, at the "Rebuilding Afghanistan: Peace and Stability" conference. One year after the meeting that sealed the end of two decades of Afghan civil war, international leaders opened a conference to take stock of Afghanistan's progress and its still pressing problems.

UN aims at Iraq's missiles

Inspectors catch Iraqi airfield unaware

AFP, Baghdad

UN disarmament inspectors on Monday entered a Baghdad research centre, which has been involved in the development of guidance systems for now-banned long-range al-Hussein missiles.

The team from the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) were granted immediate access to installations for the Al-Karama project in the capital's central al-Waziriya district.

The facilities where scientists had worked on missile guidance systems were put under permanent camera monitoring by the previous inspections regime UNSCOM before the quit Iraq in December 1998.

Iraq's al-Husseins had a range of 650 kilometres (400 miles) and have been banned by the United Nations since the end of the 1991 Gulf War when Baghdad was allowed to possess only short-range missiles.

The inspectors had set off as usual at 8:30 am (0530 GMT) Monday from their headquarters for a fifth day of inspections.

A convoy of white vehicles bearing the UN symbol rolled out of the Canal Hotel.

The inspection teams were accompanied by counterparts from Iraq's National Monitoring Directorate and pursued by journalists.

UNMOVIC and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have not reported anything untoward from their previous site checks on Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

The two bodies returned to Iraq on November 25 and launched inspections on November 27 under UN Security Council Resolution 1441.

The November 8 resolution gives the inspectors unprecedented powers to search for forbidden arms after the previous monitoring

regime, UNSCOM, left Iraq in December 1998 before US and British bombers pounded Iraq for four days for failing to cooperate.

Baghdad has strongly denied having any weapons of mass destruction and says the inspectors will find nothing incriminating.

AP adds: Caught by surprise, the director of an airfield north of Baghdad was not even at the base when UN weapons inspectors arrived.

Montadhar Radeef Mohammed was further surprised Sunday when he was kept outside until the inspectors gave him permission to enter the base they were searching for devices that can spray deadly microbes from the air.

"We are not giving any notice whatsoever and we insist to exercise our full rights," the top nuclear inspector, Mohamed ElBaradei, told the British Broadcasting Corp.

"And we intend to have it all the way in that fashion," ElBaradei added on CNN's "Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer."

Early Monday, a UN inspection team went to a Baghdad factory that made guidance and control systems for Iraq's "stretch Scuds," Soviet-made missiles that the Iraqis modified to longer range and used in the Gulf War. Such long-range missiles 400 miles are now prohibited for Iraq, and the inspectors presumably want to ensure that work has not resumed.

Iraqi Information Ministry officials said a second team of inspectors visited an alcohol plant on Baghdad's outskirts. The purpose of the inspection could not be immediately determined. Alcohol is a component of many chemical weapons.

During the inspection Sunday, the UN experts showed up at the field 20 miles north of Baghdad on the fourth day of the renewed search for weapons of mass destruction under a tough UN mandate that Saddam Hussein divest himself of illicit weaponry or face "serious consequences."

Israel orders demolition of 15 Palestinian houses

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel ordered Monday the demolition of 15 Palestinian houses between the settlement of Kiryat Arba and the flashpoint Jewish enclave in the southern West Bank city of Hebron, military sources said.

"We have issued a demolition order for 15 empty Palestinian houses between Kiryat Arba and the Tomb of the Patriarchs," a site holy to both Jews and Muslims, said Talia Somkha, a spokeswoman for the civil administration.

One such house was used two weeks ago by Palestinian snipers who opened fire on a patrol using the road that links Kiryat Arba to the holy site inside Hebron, killing 12 people, including nine soldiers.

'World faces risk of Pak nukes falling into terrors' hands'

AFP, Shimla

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee warned Monday that the world would face a "disastrous threat" if arch-rival Pakistan's nuclear weapons fell into the hands of extremists.

"If Pakistani nuclear bombs go into the hands of terrorists, it could pose a disastrous threat to the entire world community," Vajpayee told reporters in the northern Indian hill resort of Shimla.

"Atomic bombs reaching the hands of extremists and terrorists could prove highly destructive to the entire world community and should

be taken as a challenge by all."

Vajpayee was responding to comments made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who arrives in India Tuesday, that Pakistan's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) "could fall into the hands of bandits and terrorists."

"This matter raised by President Putin must be taken seriously by the entire world," Vajpayee said.

Putin, who will spend three days in India, told The Hindu newspaper Sunday that despite Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's assurances that his country's military potential was under tight control, Russia's "anxiety still persists."

"Our position is such that we believe that practical action should be taken to prevent the dissemination of WMD," Putin said.

"We also have concerns that they (terrorists) could obtain information concerning production techniques of even simple means that could be equal to weapons of mass destruction in their destructive potential."

Vajpayee said Pakistan would figure prominently in his talks with Putin. India had a close relationship with the former Soviet Union during the Cold War, when Pakistan was allied with the United States.

Key senators warn of missile dangers

AP, Washington

The terror attacks in Kenya brought a new dread into the war on terror with the threat of surface-to-air missiles against commercial aviation, leaders of the Senate Intelligence Committee say.

"Let's be honest about it: There are thousands of these surface-to-air missiles around the world," said the committee's vice chairman, Sen. Richard Shelby, R-La. "You can buy them, and you can transport them. A lot of them are not as accurate as others. But eventually, that's going to be one of the methods for the terrorists to hit."

Committee chairman Bob Graham, D-Fla., said the Bush administration must work swiftly to protect American air travellers.

Asia raps Australia over pre-emptive strike row

AFP, Manila

Asian nations Monday slammed "arrogant" Australia after Prime Minister John Howard threatened pre-emptive strikes against foreign-based terrorists to prevent an attack on his country.

The Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand all condemned Howard's weekend comments, saying Australia must respect other nations' sovereignty.

Philippine National Security Adviser Rollo Golez said the statement was "bordering on shocking".

"I can't believe that it would come from a supposed friendly country in

the neighbourhood. You are talking about a region with very strong government, the ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) region," Golez told Australia's ABC radio.

"This is the 21st century, not the 19th century," Golez later told reporters he would recommend Manila re-evaluate a proposed anti-terrorism agreement with Canberra.

"You know this (Howard's statement) to me is quite arrogant and because of this I have recommended that we review and go slow on the proposed anti-terror

pact with Australia because they might use this for their pre-emptive strike agenda," he said.

Indonesia, where at least 82 Australians were among more than 190 people killed in the Bali bombing on October 12, said Howard's comments were "unacceptable".

"Howard should not issue statements that would make another country uncomfortable," Vice President Hamzah Haz said.

"If a nation says that there are terrorists in another country, it is better to convey this to the head of state not by making statements like that," he told reporters.

Delhi wants Mizoram CM to talk to all rebels

PTI, Aizawl

Centre has asked Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga, who is brokering the Naga peace deal, to take the initiative to bring other North-Eastern insurgent groups to the negotiating table.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani had asked me to initiate peace talks with other groups of the region, when we met recently, Zoramthanga, who is currently in New Delhi, told PTI over phone.

"I told the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister that I would be happy to be instrumental in ending bloodshed and bring peace anywhere," Zoramthanga, a former rebel, said.

The Chief Minister said he and Advani were planning the arrangements for the political level talks with the NSCN (IM) in the New Delhi in December.

Foreign aid holds key to Lankan peace

AFP, Oslo

Sri Lanka's warring parties have virtually pledged not to return to war, but Norwegian peace brokers believe the durability of the fragile peace could largely depend on foreign aid and how it is spent.

International donors pledged 60 to 70 million dollars in immediate humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka at a meeting here last week although the antagonists are yet to agree on managing the money.

Norway's deputy minister for international development, Olav Kjørven, said they expected the two sides to finalise an aid delivering mechanism when they open their third round of formal face-to-face talks here on Monday.

The four-day negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and its official foe, the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE), are aimed at agreeing a system to receive and spend foreign aid.

"Aid is related to the peace process," Kjørven said adding that not only the island's embattled north-eastern regions, but the entire country must receive a "peace dividend" for the Norwegian effort to succeed.

Sri Lanka has a dismal record in handling aid over the years and diplomats fear that inefficiencies in disbursing immediately needed foreign cash could undermine the peace bid.

"The truth of the matter is that even though we have pledges of up to 70 million dollars, we will not be able to absorb it," a Sri Lankan official said, adding that an internal review was underway to improve aid delivery.

So far the country has been able to absorb only about 14 percent of

the total aid it receives from other countries as well as multilateral agencies.

"It is one thing for the negotiators to stay in good hotels and conduct talks, but if people are unable to have cement to rebuild their homes they will not support the peace process," a Norwegian diplomat here said.

Tamil Tigers have been reluctant to allow the Sri Lankan government to hold the purse strings while some donors have difficulty in contributing to any panel where the Tigers have a direct role.

This is because several countries have outlawed the Tigers as a terrorist organisation.

At the same time, the two sides are under international pressure to agree on a mechanism to deliver aid and at the same time ensure transparency, accountability and meet the demands of donors.

China, Russia urge DPRK to drop nuclear programme

REUTERS, Beijing

Russia and China urged North Korea on Monday to drop its nuclear weapons program in the strongest language used by the Cold War communist giants for detente on the Korean peninsula.

The appeal by the two nations, North Korea's closest allies, was the highlight of a summit between visiting Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

A joint declaration issued after the meeting strongly backed better relations between Washington and Pyongyang and also urged reconciliation between North and South Korea, but made it clear the nuclear issue needed to be tackled.

"The sides consider it important for the destiny of the world and security in Northeast Asia to preserve the non-nuclear status of the Korean peninsula and the regime of non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction," said the joint declaration.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) shakes hands with his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin (R) during a signing ceremony in Beijing's Great Hall of the People on Monday. Vladimir Putin is on his two-day state visit to China.

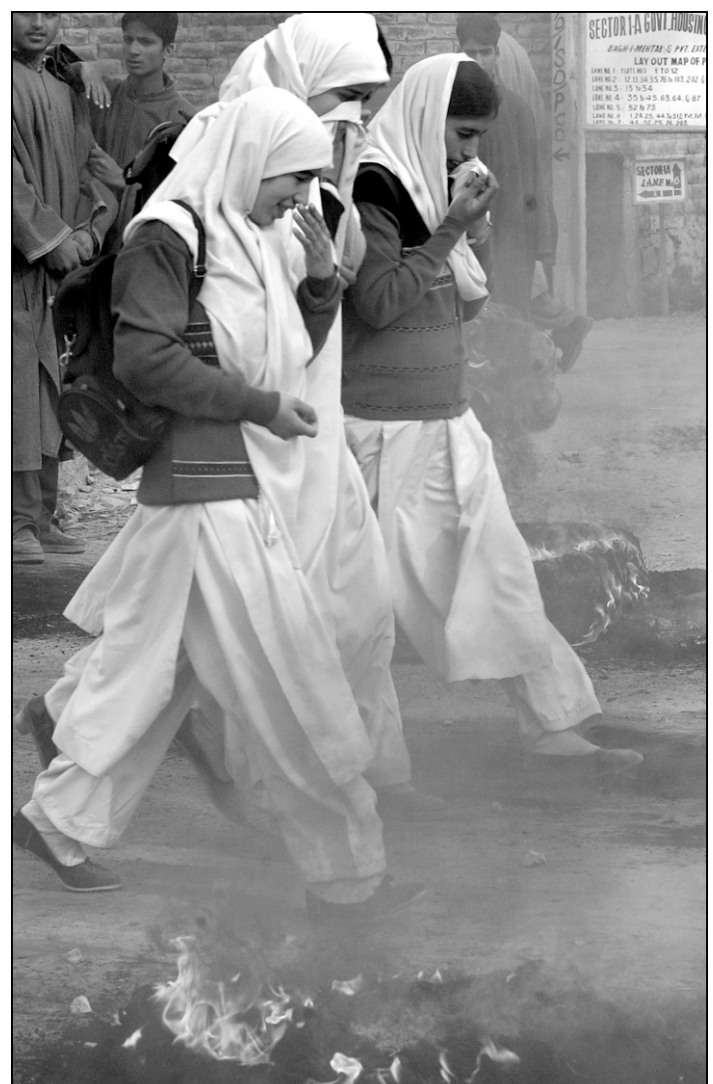


PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri schoolgirls walk past burning tyres set alight to protest against the death of Abdul Hamid on Monday. Hamid, a Kashmiri youth, was allegedly killed in custody after his arrest by Jammu and Kashmir Police.

Clashes in Afghanistan after air raid

REUTERS, Herat

Fierce clashes between rival commanders close to a key air base in western Afghanistan resumed Monday, the leader of one faction said, a day after a U.S. B-52 bombed one of the sides.

As rival forces battled in the west, three people were killed and five wounded in a gun battle between police and fighters of a military commander in the southern city of Kandahar.

The violence came as President Hamid Karzai travelled to Germany for a major international conference to assess Afghanistan's progress a year after the ouster of the hardline Taliban. A lack of security is one of the country's major problems after more than two decades of conflict.

In the west, faction commander Amanullah Khan told the Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) agency that rival Ismail Khan, the powerful governor of Herat province just north of the battle zone, had initiated the latest wave of fighting.

Both sides blamed each other for triggering Sunday's battle, which was ended when a U.S. B-52 bomber attacked one of the factions that had opened fire on a patrol of U.S. special forces.

A commander for Amanullah told Reuters that 13 people had been killed and dozens wounded in Sunday's fighting. It was believed to be the first time a heavy B-52 bomber had been engaged in Afghan combat for several months.

Amanullah told the AIP that fighting had died down overnight

but Ismail Khan's forces launched a powerful attack between 0445 GMT and 0515 GMT Monday using tanks, artillery and infantry.

"We have repulsed the attack and at least one dead body of Ismail Khan's soldier is lying on the battlefield," he said.

It was unclear which of the factions the U.S. bomber had attacked. U.S. military spokesman in Afghanistan Colonel Roger King told reporters at Bagram air base north of Kabul that he was not sure which side the B-52 bomber was targeted against.

"One of those groups took the U.S. under fire, we just don't know who," he said. "We bombed somebody who was shooting at our forces and everybody who operates in Afghanistan understands that if you fire at coalition forces there will be fire returned."

Herat's security chief Sayed Nasir Alawi said the U.S. bomber attacked Amanullah's positions after they opened fire on the U.S. troops. Amanullah told AIP Ismail Khan's forces were hit.

Ethnic Pashtun Amanullah and ethnic Tajik leader Ismail Khan are old foes. Their forces have clashed several times this year, as have other rival factions in northern and eastern Afghanistan where central control remains weak.

The clashes near Herat Sunday coincided with Karzai's departure for an international conference in Germany to assess progress made by his government and the international community a year after the Taliban's ouster.

Kerry moves for 2004 US presidential race

REUTERS, Washington

Sen. John Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat, said on Sunday he had taken the first step toward a run for president in 2004, forming an exploratory committee ahead of a formal announcement next spring.

Kerry, a Vietnam veteran who won an unchallenged race this month for a fourth Senate term, told NBC television's "Meet the Press" program that he sensed a "deep anxiety" in Americans over the security of their jobs, income, retirement, health care and education as well as over the security of the nation.

Sangatte asylum centre to close by Dec 30

AFP, London

The Sangatte asylum centre in northern France, the source of three years of bilateral disagreement, will be shut down by December 30, French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and his British counterpart David Blunkett said Monday.

With the Red Cross refugee centre closed to new arrivals since early November and due to shut definitively by April, the two governments needed to reach a deal on where the applications of an estimated 5,000 asylum-seekers registered by the Red Cross should be processed.

Lankan Muslim party heads for split

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main Muslim party looked headed for a split Monday, throwing into question the stability of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government.

Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) on which the government depends for its parliamentary majority, suspended two senior party members after learning they were mounting a challenge to his leadership.

Hakeem, part of the government delegation negotiating with Tamil Tiger rebels in Norway, rushed back home to face the crisis.

On Monday, the dissidents, who did not recognise their suspension, announced that the SLMC leadership had in turn acted against Hakeem.

"The party high command which met Sunday night decided to suspend the membership of Rauf Hakeem and remove him from the position of the party leader," said SLMC secretary A.L.M. Hafraath, who was suspended by Hakeem.

Any split in the SLMC, which has 12 members of parliament, could affect the political survival of Wickremesinghe, whose coalition has only a two-seat majority in the 225-member parliament.

Wickremesinghe's government is to open a third round of negotiations Monday in Norway with the Tamil Tigers in talks aimed at ending three decades of blood-

shed that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

SLMC dissidents have accused Hakeem of not fighting aggressively enough for the rights of Muslims in a settlement of the Tamil separatist conflict.

"We do not want Muslim representation in Oslo as a mere show. In any event, the outcome of peace talks has to be presented in parliament," said SLMC president A.L.M. Athaullah, who was also suspended by Hakeem.

Muslims have long complained of harassment at the hands of the Tamil Tigers and some say it has grown worse since the rebels entered a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire with the government in February.

Wickremesinghe also faces criticism of his peace drive from President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who is of a rival party.

She has the power to dismiss the government after it completes a year in office -- which means anytime after midnight Thursday (1800 GMT).

Muslims make up seven percent of Sri Lanka's population and are regarded as a distinct ethnic minority. Sri Lankan Tamils are the biggest minority with about 12.5 percent of the 18.66 million population.

Sinhalese account for nearly 70 percent of the population.

Rain-making machine on the cards

AFP, London

A professor at Scotland's Edinburgh University has been awarded a government grant to develop the world's first rainmaking machine, the Times reported Monday.

Professor Stephen Salter will create a 200-foot (60-metre) high turbine to suck water out of the sea and turn it into water vapour through nozzles, spraying it out into the atmosphere, the daily paper said.

The rain maker, described as looking like a "giant egg-beater", would be based on catamarans and placed off the coast of desert land.

Diamonds worth millions stolen from Dutch museum

AFP, The Hague

Thieves have stolen diamonds and rare jewels worth millions of euros (dollars) on Sunday night from a museum in The Hague, the assistant director of the Museon told AFP Monday.

"There was a break-in last night and part of the material of our educational exhibition on diamonds was taken," said Bob Crezee of the museum.