

Turkey sends mixed signals on Iraq attack

AP, Ankara

Turkey's foreign minister said the United States could use its bases for an attack on Iraq, but officials later backed away from a firm commitment, reflecting the sensitivity of the issue in this key US ally.

Turkey's public is widely opposed to military action against Iraq, but its leaders feel they have little choice but to support a war if Washington pushes ahead with one. Turkey is NATO's only Muslim member and borders Iraq and use of its bases is key to any US effort.

Foreign Minister Yasar Yakis said Tuesday during a visit by US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz that Turkey would allow the bases' use but only if the United Nations approved military action.

UN experts visit Iraqi nuclear site

Iraq criticises UN inspectors over visit to presidential site

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

UN arms experts searched a nuclear power facility south of Baghdad yesterday as the United States pressed for more aggressive inspections in the hunt for any Iraqi banned weapons.

Starting a second week of inspections, a team of experts swooped on al-Tuweihi compound run by Iraq's nuclear power authority in Salman Bak, a few km (miles) south of the capital.

Another team headed toward an undisclosed location northwest of Baghdad.

In Washington, a US official told Reuters the United States had urged chief UN inspector Hans Blix to substitute his methodical approach for a more intensive multi-pronged operation that would "stress" the Iraqi system and make it harder for President Saddam Hussein to conceal his capabilities.

Using a "much bigger inspection force, going on multiple inspections day after day (would put) Iraq to the test around the country," the official said Tuesday.

Blix had resisted the US recommendations during a meeting at UN headquarters Monday with US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, the official said.

Blix was not immediately available for comment.

On a visit to Turkey, whose cooperation in any war on neighbouring Iraq would be vital to Washington, US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said Wednesday Washington was ready to invest up to hundreds of millions of dollars in air bases that might be used in a war against Baghdad.

He said Washington would start intensive talks on such investment with its NATO ally, whose Foreign Minister Yasar Yakis said Tuesday Turkey would open up its bases to the US for military operations authorised by the United Nations.

AFP adds: Iraq criticised UN arms experts for the first time since they began inspections last week, wondering if they had started "misbehaving" as their predecessors had done.

"The question is: Is it a start of misbehavior which would recreate the climate that marked relations between previous arms inspection teams and Iraq?" asked a foreign ministry spokesman in a reference to the inspectors' first visit to a presidential site on Tuesday.

In a statement quoted by the official INA news agency and broadcast on state television, the spokesman also wondered if the inspectors were starting to behave in the "bad" way which "the United States, Britain and the Zionist entity (Israel) are seeking to impose on the United Nations."

The spokesman was referring to Iraq's crisis-ridden relationship with inspectors of the former UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), who fled the country ahead of a December 1998 US-British bombing blitz.



PHOTO: AFP
An Iraqi soldier prevents journalists from entering the Muthanna installations upon the arrival of UN arms inspectors at the site in the Iraqi desert, some 250kms north of Baghdad on December 4, 2002. Experts from the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were also searching on the seventh day of inspections a facility associated with Iraq's nuclear program before the 1991 Gulf War at al-Tuwaita, south of Baghdad.

Putin pays tribute to Gandhi

AFP, New Delhi

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his wife Lyudmila yesterday paid tribute to Mahatma Gandhi, considered the father of the Indian nation, at his memorial on the banks of New Delhi's Yamuna river.

The presidential couple laid a huge wreath on the granite memorial at Rajghat and stood in silence before the eternal flame for some moments as a mark of respect to the revered leader, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

Putin was escorted to the site by Small Scale Industries Minister Vasundhara Raje and Gandhian social worker Nirmala Deshpande.

Putin, dressed in a black suit, also placed flower petals on the memorial, which he had also visited during his trip to India in October 2000.

Later, he wrote in the guest book in Russian.

"I pay my respects to the memory of Mahatma Gandhi, the great son of Indian people. The humanism of Mahatma Gandhi is the basis for the policy of the future," Putin wrote, according to a rough translation provided by Russian officials at the memorial site. Lyudmila Putin also signed the book.



PHOTO: AFP
Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) shakes hands with Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (R) during an official welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace in New Delhi, on December 4, 2002. Putin, in India for a brief three-day visit, began a hectic schedule of summit-level talks with key Indian leaders.

Court doesn't allow Imelda to return home

AFP, Manila

Former first lady Imelda Marcos was barred by the Supreme Court yesterday from retaking possession of a provincial home previously seized by the Philippine government.

The Supreme Court issued a writ barring the implementation of a lower court ruling returning the house to the widow of deposed Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos, court officials said.

The property was among Marcos family assets seized by the government in 1986 after a bloodless popular revolt brought Marcos' 20 years in power to an end.

A special anti-graft court had ruled earlier this year that the seizure of the house on the central island of Leyte was illegal because the government did not follow the proper procedure specified by law for seizing the property.

Government lawyers appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court.

"The court resolved, without giving due course to the (government) petition, to issue a temporary restraining order effective immediately and continuing until further orders from this court," the Supreme Court said in a statement.

The temporary ruling bars the lower court, Imelda Marcos, and their agents from enforcing the lower court ruling, it added.

Marcos died in exile in Hawaii in 1989.

Imelda Marcos and the rest of the heirs returned to the Philippines in the early 1990s as the successor government mounted a worldwide hunt and litigation to reclaim up to 10 billion dollars in assets that the family allegedly siphoned off from state coffers.

Death sentences commuted for 17 Ismailis in Saudi Arabia

AFP, Riyadh

Seventeen Ismailis sentenced to death for their role in unrest in the southern Saudi city of Najran have had their decapitation by the sword commuted to 10 years in jail, the interior ministry said yesterday.

King Fahd took the decision after the men had "repented and admitted their errors," said a statement published by the official Saudi Press Agency SPA.

It was the first time that Saudi Arabia announced that death sentences had been handed down to people involved in trouble in Najran in April 2000 when a Saudi security officer died and several others were injured.

According to the authorities three foreigners were also hurt during unrest which followed the arrest of a Yemeni "sorcerer" practicing black magic in Najran. An unspecified number of arrests were made.

Hinduja family 3rd richest in Switzerland

PTI, London

Leading NRI Hinduja family has been ranked as the third richest family in Switzerland by a financial magazine in the country, next only to Prince Hans Adam from Liechtenstein and the Latsis Family connected with banking.

According to the latest issue of the Magazine Bilan, a leading financial magazine in Switzerland, the Hinduja, chairman of the Hinduja Group and GP Hinduja, and third brother Prakash Hinduja figure third in the list of 300 richest people in the country.

In the Swiss German version of the magazine, "Bilanz", they are listed in the category of "Bankers" while in the French version, "Bilan", they are placed under the category of "Services and Commerce", with fortune worth 3 to 4 billion Swiss francs.

Curfew imposed after deadly riots in East Timor

AFP, Dili

East Timor imposed a curfew and sent troops onto the streets of the capital Dili after deadly rioting described by a cabinet minister as an attempt to topple the government.

Officials said shots were fired and at least one, possibly two, people died after a large crowd which was demanding the release of an arrested student went on the rampage.

A supermarket was set ablaze and other buildings and vehicles were damaged.

Some government officials said they suspected a radical group known as RDTL was behind the violence, the most serious since East Timor's independence from Indonesia on May 20.

"This is an orchestrated manoeuvre to topple the government," Rogerio Lobato, the minister

of internal affairs, told AFP.

He blamed people linked to RDTL, a hardline nationalist group which has been tied to previous unrest and was not part of the mainstream independence movement during Indonesian occupation.

Lobato said the government was declaring a state of emergency.

"The prime minister has met the president and the order is going to be issued immediately."

Lobato said a curfew would take effect at 7:00 pm (1000 GMT).

Smoke was seen rising over the west of the city yesterday afternoon as violence continued. An AFP reporter could not confirm what had happened there as security forces were blocking roads.

The reporter saw a small crowd in central Dili burn a government car outside the trendy City Cafe. The Hello Mister supermarket was earlier

guttled. The council of ministers which includes the cabinet and other high-level officials was to meet in special session to consider further moves, Guterres said.

President Xanana Gusmao met protesters to try to calm the situation and later broadcast an appeal to the nation.

Agio Pereira, chief of staff to Gusmao, said two people had been killed. Other senior officials said only one person died.

Six shots had been fired during the melee, an AFP reporter said, but the source of the gunfire was unclear.

"Some warning shots were fired by East Timor police and there are unconfirmed rumours of shooting from the crowd," said Brigadier General Justin Kelly, deputy head of the UN peacekeeping force.

Tension had been rising since

Tuesday afternoon when police went to a local high school to arrest a student. Two police motorcycles were burned and another vehicle was damaged at that time.

Seeking the student's release, the crowd arrived at Dili's waterfront government offices and then went to the parliament Wednesday.

The crowd began throwing stones towards parliament where a visiting delegation from Portugal was meeting officials.

Protesters broke windows in parliament, which had been elegantly renovated ahead of independence, and caused minor damage to UN and police vehicles.

The crowd moved around the corner and began to attack Hello Mister, one of the first foreign businesses to open in Dili after the 1999 violence surrounding the vote to separate from Indonesia.

Firefighters struggle as Sydney ringed by flames

REUTERS, Sydney

Thousands of firefighters struggled yesterday to control more than 60 bushfires that ringed Sydney, destroyed houses and disrupted power and transport across Australia's largest city.

Sydney was taken by surprise by the bushfires which ignited almost simultaneously within an hour during the afternoon as temperatures soared and strong winds fanned flames, sending a huge pall of smoke across the city to the ocean.

"We have over 60 fires burning around the metropolitan area and we are rescuing them as we can," Rural Fire Service Commissioner Phil Koperberg told Australian television.

Koperberg declared a bushfire emergency in six city areas.

Five firefighters and two residents suffered burns and were taken to hospital, local media reported.

A handful of buildings were destroyed and power supplies were disrupted across the city of four million, trapping people in lifts, cutting train services, and forcing the Sydney Opera House to cancel performances Wednesday night.

Several residential areas were

evacuated and surf lifesavers prepared boats to evacuate residents from coastal suburbs surrounded by bushland.

Koperberg said one fire in Sydney's northwest had a 2.4-mile front and was up to 12 miles in length. Another blaze forced Sydney's main army barracks to be evacuated of non-essential personnel and burned a swathe across the southwest of the city toward the coast.

"The fires have been travelling very, very quickly. We have had reports of spotting (where burning ash blown by wind sparks new fires) two to three km (miles) in front of fires. It makes it difficult to get in front of the fires," Koperberg said.

Australia is in the grip of one of the worst droughts in 100 years and fire fighters have battled hundreds of bushfires in five states in recent months in what is shaping up as one of Australia's worst bushfire seasons.

Last Christmas, some of the worst ever bushfires ringed Sydney, burning through 1.9 million acres and destroying 109 houses. The fire service says 20,000 homes were saved from the flames.

EU announces blacklist of ships after tanker disaster

REUTERS, Brussels

The European Commission on Tuesday published a blacklist of ships which have not complied with maritime safety rules, seeking to name and shame after a tanker spilled thousands of tons of oil on the Spanish coast.

The tanker Prestige started spewing a thick black slick of fuel oil onto more than 164 beaches along the northwest coast of Spain after cracking up and sinking. It has caused a re-examination of maritime safety after earlier disasters.

"Words are not enough: it is necessary to act and apply the maritime safety measures in full,"

said European Transport Commissioner Loyola de Palacio.

The Commission, responsible for overseeing European Union laws, said it had drawn up a list of 66 ships which had regularly failed to comply with maritime safety rules.

It also said it would propose a ban on the transport of heavy fuel oil in single-hull tankers, seen as the most dangerous and vulnerable.

"Safety is the responsibility of everyone and a strict application of all the measures is the only way of ensuring that substandard ships do not fall through the safety net," de Palacio added.

The Commission said in a

statement that the transport ministers of EU states would consider its proposals at a meeting on December 12 and 13. De Palacio said she would also urge member states to speed up the adoption of maritime safety rules.

Some EU states have already started to take measures to protect themselves from a Prestige-style disaster.

Spain, Portugal, France and Italy have adopted a policy of spot-checking single-hull heavy fuel transporters older than 15 years and of expelling dangerous ships from their exclusive economic zones, which stretch 200 miles out to sea.



PHOTO: AFP
A display of terracotta warriors unearthed from a site in Weishan, in Shandong Province, Northern China. Two villagers were planting trees in the area on 23 November when they found the ruins and reported it to local officials. It has been determined that the terracotta warriors date from the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), a later period than China's most famed terracotta warriors found in the ancient capital of Xian from the Qin Dynasty (221 BC - 207 BC).

Campaign for gender equality gains support in Iran

AFP, Tehran

A campaign to make a woman equal in value to a man in Iranian legal cases has won the support of leading clerics, a woman Member of Parliament was quoted as saying yesterday.

Fatemeh Koulai, one of the 13 female MPs who are leading the campaign, told a press conference Tuesday that a deputation had visited the holy city of Qom to drum up support.

"The grand ayatollahs Yussef Sanei, Mohammad Hadi Marefat and Mohammad Ebrahim Janati said they were in favour of the blood money of women being the same as that of men," she said, naming senior clerics close to the reformist movement.

She said she and her col-

leagues would be meeting other religious dignitaries, many of whom from the conservative factions are strongly opposed to the move.

Under Iran's Sharia law, for purposes such as compensation a woman is valued at half the price of man, who is currently deemed to be worth 150 million rials (around 18,750 dollars).

For example, if the relatives of a murder victim agree to pardon the killer to spare him from execution, the murderer must pay the family in return the blood price of the victim.

Conversely, the relatives of a woman murdered by a man must pay half his blood money to his family when he is executed, because his life is worth twice that of hers.