



A South Korean woman holds a placard during an anti-US demonstration near the US embassy in Seoul on Tuesday. Simmering anti-Americanism was on the agenda here Tuesday as US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage began the second leg of an Asian tour to drum up support for a possible American-led attack on Iraq.

Protesters greet US envoy in S Korea

REUTERS, Seoul

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage flew into South Korea Tuesday for talks with top officials as angry protesters rallied to oppose his visit and American pressure on Iraq.

The South Korean leg of Armitage's four-country Asian tour to canvass support for US policy on Iraq is expected to be the most delicate, coinciding with rising anger over an accident in which two girls were crushed by a US army vehicle in June.

The grisly accident -- and the US court martial acquittal last month of two soldiers that operated the tank-like mine-clearing vehicle -- has unleashed the largest wave of anti-US sentiment in South Korea in recent years.

With a December 19 presidential vote just over a week away, the presence and legal status of the 37,000 US troops in South Korea have become an emotive election issue -- overshadowing problems such as North Korea's nuclear arms program.

US withholds judgement on Iraqi arms declaration

Washington upsets UNSC by seizing dossier

AFP, Souda Bay

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Tuesday it would take days or weeks to judge whether Iraq's voluminous arms declaration amounts to an additional material breach of UN Security Council resolutions.

"How would one know? It just arrived," Rumsfeld told reporters when asked whether the 12,000-page declaration constitutes a further "material breach" of UN Security Council resolutions.

Baghdad said the declaration reflects what it has been saying all along -- that it no longer has weapons of mass destruction. Rumsfeld has said the United States knows Iraq possesses weapons of mass destruction.

"There's no way in the world to know what's in that declaration in five minutes," Rumsfeld said. "I think the thing to do is not to prejudge it, but to be patient," he said. "I expect it's going to take days, or weeks to go over it, and come to some judgements about it."

Rumsfeld spoke as he flew to the Horn of Africa to deepen US ties with Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti, which have emerged as important allies in the war against terrorism. He stopped briefly in Crete before heading to Asmara, the Eritrean capital.

His visit to the Horn underscored that even as the United States prepares for a possible war with Iraq, it is still waging a war on terrorism that appears to be heating up.

Coordinated attacks in Mombasa, Kenya that left 13 dead on November

28 were followed by State Department warnings of possible terrorist attacks in Djibouti, Yemen and elsewhere in east Africa.

Warships and military supplies, oil and trade that flow through the Bab el Mandeb linking the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea make the poor and lawless region of particular importance to the west.

The vulnerability of the sea lanes was demonstrated October 6 when al-Qaeda attacked a French tanker off Yemen. In 2000, 17 US sailors were killed in a similar suicide attack on the USS Cole in Aden.

Meanwhile, the United States upset members of the UN Security Council Monday, as 25 more UN inspectors arrived in Baghdad to search for prohibited missiles and nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

Members of the council raised eyebrows after US officials removed the only complete copy of Iraq's arms declaration from UN headquarters soon after it arrived. Copies of the declaration later were released in Washington to other permanent council members.

Diplomats here said not all 15 council members were consulted before a US official took the declaration -- containing almost 12,000 printed pages and several computer disks -- from the office of chief UN arms inspector Hans Blix shortly after it arrived late Sunday.

"There were no face-to-face consultations, and many members are upset," one diplomat said.

The only one prepared to say so publicly, Syrian Ambassador Mikhail Wehbe, said the act was "in contradiction with every kind of logic in the Security Council and against the unity of the council."

Lanka seeks Indo-Pak fence mending to revive SAARC summit

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Tuesday expressed the hope that South Asia's arch rivals India and Pakistan will resolve their differences to allow a regional summit to be held next month.

Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando said he hoped relations between India and Pakistan, key members of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) would improve to allow the summit.

"We hope India and Pakistan be friends once more so that SAARC can get going again," Fernando said at a ceremony here to mark the SAARC "Charter Day."

Pakistan on Monday announced a delay in the 12th SAARC summit

due to be held in Islamabad next month and gave no new dates.

"Ever since the decision to hold the 12th SAARC summit in January 2003 in Islamabad, India has been looking for excuses to sabotage the event," Pakistan foreign office spokesman Kamran Niaz told reporters.

"In view of the little time left to make formal preparations, and in the face of the continued Indian refusal to confirm its participation, the government of Pakistan is regrettably left with no alternative but to postpone the 12th SAARC summit."

India had offered mixed signals on whether it would attend the summit.

China will go with UN on Iraq, even if it means war: Analysts

AFP, Beijing

On Iraq, China will go with any decision emerging from the United Nations, even if it means approving the bombing of Baghdad, analysts said Tuesday.

"If Iraq doesn't obey UN Security Council resolutions, and if as a result the United States moves militarily, I don't think China will oppose it too much," said Zhu Feng, an international relations scholar at Peking University.

Since Iraq and its reported arsenal of weapons of mass destruction moved to the forefront of the global diplomatic agenda, China has called for a peaceful solution to the issue.

China -- one of the UN Security Council's five permanent veto-

wielding members -- has also insisted that any action against Iraq should be approved by the council.

So far, that has not posed much of a dilemma, since the United Nations has advocated an approach to the problem that is -- initially at least -- peaceful.

So it has been no surprise that China has greeted the dispatch of UN arms inspectors to Iraq, saying it would contribute to a political solution to the crisis.

China is expected to repeat its stance when US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage arrives in Beijing Wednesday for two days of talks aimed at laying out US plans on Iraq.

But if down the road the UN Security Council is asked to pass a much tougher resolution, China

may feel obliged to side with the hawks, observers said.

This is especially the case if China were to find itself alone in opposition of a belligerent resolution on the Security Council.

"China's stance depends on other governments, and Russia has softened up, while France is also gradually changing its attitude," said Wu Guoguang, a political scientist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

"China doesn't want to be alone in opposing a tough resolution," he said.

For the time being, however, China is still giving diplomacy a chance, and has been quick to welcome Iraq's release of its arms declaration.

Muslims determined to oust hardliners in Gujarat polls

AFP, Ahmedabad

Muslims in India's riot-torn western state of Gujarat will be turning out for assembly elections on Thursday with one goal in mind -- to oust the hardline Hindus whom they claim have for months violently persecuted and terrorised them.

Since late February, India's wealthiest state has been hit by raging communal violence that according to official figures has killed at least 1,000 people, mostly Muslims. Human rights groups put the death toll at around 2,000.

The rioting was sparked by the torching of a train coach carrying Hindu activists in the town of Godhra by a mob -- believed to be Muslims -- in which 58 Hindus died.

Many Muslims, a minority in the industrial state, were forced to flee their homes in revenge attacks and take shelter in special camps set up for their protection.

Now it is time to cast ballots and the 400,000 or so Muslim voters are determined to make their presence felt -- against the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party

(BJP), which they claim turned a blind eye during the attacks.

"This is our chance to show the BJP that Muslim votes also count," said Mukhtar Mohammad, a Muslim leader from the Panchmahals district, 150 km south of here.

(Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and (Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna) Advani have been repeatedly saying that they don't need our votes. We will give them a reply on December 12."

He said leaders of the minority communities, especially Muslims, across the state are mobilising forces to ensure that there is 100 percent opposition turnout -- in favour of the Congress party, arch-rival of the BJP.

"This time there will be 100 percent voting by Muslims and all of us will vote for Congress. We have even asked all our brothers who left the city immediately after the riots to return and cast their votes to defeat BJP," said Zubeir Gopalani, another Muslim leader from Vadodara, a city about 120 km south of here.

Muslides kill 34 in Brazil

REUTERS, Angra Dos Reis

Hopes of finding survivors of mudslides which killed at least 34 people in a Brazilian seaside town near Rio de Janeiro were dwindling on Monday night as the rain continued, authorities said.

"The search continues," Hilton Prates, undersecretary of the economic development of Angra dos Reis, told Reuters. "Everybody is on duty."

He and the town morgue confirmed 34 dead, but some local media said the number had risen to 39 as hopes faded of finding survivors in the mud, which rumbled down the hills around the town, destroying buildings and blocking roads.

"The search is now for bodies," a spokesman for the local fire brigade said.

Fernando Jordao, the town mayor, told Reuters earlier that some 40 people were missing and about 1,500 were left homeless and were seeking refuge in schools. He estimated the cost of the damage at 40 million reais (\$11 million).

The National Meteorological Institute forecast more rain for Rio de Janeiro state until Thursday. It said five inches of rain had fallen in 24 hours, almost half the usual 10 inches (300 mm) registered in the month of December.

Nepali parties to keep up fight for democracy

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's main political parties said Tuesday they had decided to continue their struggle to restore democracy after the king sacked the prime minister.

Party officials met Tuesday to discuss the political situation following the sacking of former prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba by King Gyanendra on October 4.

Gyanendra took power for almost a week before installing an interim government headed by staunch royalist Lokendra Bahadur Chand and postponing elections which were due to take place in November.

Political parties have denounced the king's actions as "undemocratic and unconstitutional."

A joint statement after the meeting said the parties would continue their separate struggles to peacefully agitate for democracy, but with "mutual understanding and cooperation."

"The movement will continue but will be intensified but in a peaceful manner to restore the gains of the 1990 popular movement and implement the constitutions in letter and spirit," the statement said.

Multi-party democracy and a

constitutional monarchy were introduced in 1990 after mass protests.

The country is facing "a highly complicated and vicious political situation which has derailed the constitutional values and the principle that people alone are the source of state power and that sovereignty is inherent in the people themselves," the statement added.

The meeting was attended by top leaders of the Nepali Congress, the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leinist (NCP-UML), the National Democratic Party (NDP), the People's Front-Nepal, and the Nepal Peasants' and Workers' Party.

The statement also urged Maoist rebels not to resume their attacks.

Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, alias Prachanda, said last week the rebels would stop attacking infrastructure and opposition party activists.

The guerrillas have been fighting for a communist republic in Nepal since 1996 and the insurgency has so far claimed more than 7,300 lives, according to official figures.



Soldiers from the 19th Support Centre fill sand bags during a training exercise in a desert support and resupply "pit stop" in the northern Kuwaiti desert, 13 km from the Iraqi border on Tuesday. Some 12,000 US troops are taking part in manoeuvres in the Gulf emirate in preparation for a possible war with neighbouring Iraq.

Top Kashmir HR activist sets himself on fire

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's leading human rights activist set himself on fire Tuesday in protest at alleged human rights violations by Indian troops, but escaped with minor injuries as police put out the flames in time, police and witnesses said.

Ahsan Untoo, chairman of Kashmir's Human Rights Forum, doused himself in kerosene and set fire to himself Tuesday morning in a busy area of Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir.

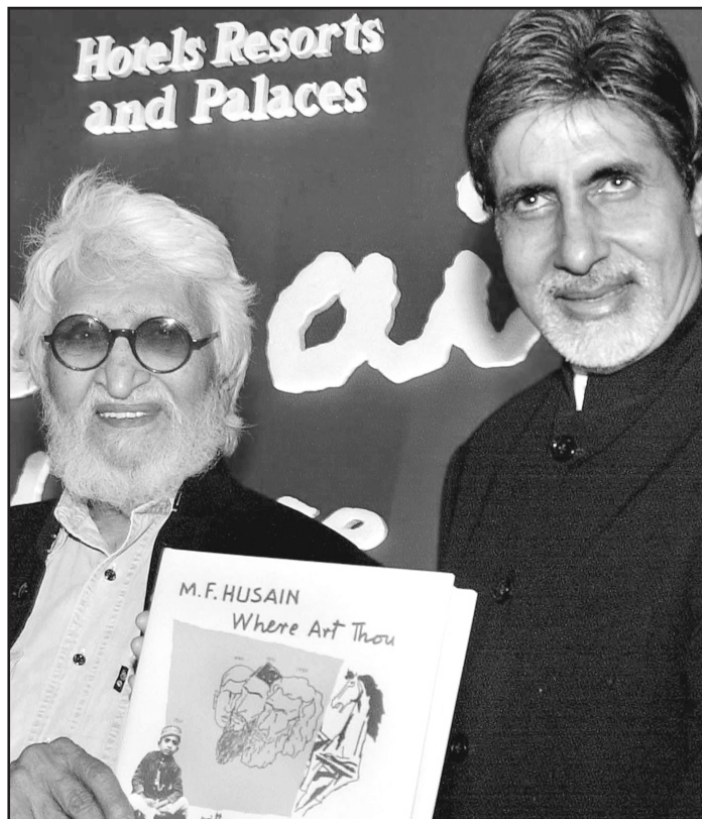
Police swiftly put out the flames and whisked Untoo to a nearby police station.

"Untoo suffered minor burns on his left arm and shoulder," a police officer told AFP, adding medical treatment was being given at the police station.

"There is no need to take him to hospital," he said.

Untoo's protest came on international Human Rights Day.

Minutes before he set himself on fire Untoo told AFP his action was to register a protest against "growing human rights abuses by Indian troops" in Kashmir -- a scenic Himalayan region ravaged by a 13-year anti-Indian rebellion.



Famous Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan (R) poses for the release of the autobiography of Indian artist Maqbool Fida Hussain (L) in Mumbai on Monday. Besides being one of the most popular Indian painter, Maqbool Fida Hussain has made international award winning films and created beautiful designs in tapestry, jewellery and toys.

Howard's pre-emptive strike threat a warning to Asia, says US

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister John Howard has won new support for his stand on pre-emptive strikes from Japan and the United States, which said it was a wake-up call to Asian nations to rid themselves of terrorism.

On the eve of a visit to the Asia-Pacific region, US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage told the Australian Financial Review Howard's real message was that Asian nations have to try their utmost to police themselves better.

"I very much appreciate and support the Prime Minister's statement," Washington's second-ranked diplomat said before leaving for South Korea, Japan, China and Australia for talks on the US campaign to disarm Iraq.

"It was also a wake-up call to some neighbours that they need to better police themselves and rid themselves of the scourge of terrorism."

"The real message is that they have to make the utmost efforts to police themselves, because then there is no need for anyone to pre-

empt any threats."

Japan became the first Asian nation to endorse Howard's declaration last week that he would order pre-emptive strikes against suspected terrorists in neighbouring countries as a last resort.

Its counter-terrorism ambassador, Hiroshi Shigeta, told The Age of Melbourne he was "comfortable" with Australia's position, which he said had originally been misrepresented by journalists.

Speaking in Tokyo, Shigeta said when he read a full transcript of Howard's remarks, he considered Australia was "in favour of respecting international law."

Armitage did not name the countries he was referring to, although the strongest criticism of Howard's comments came from Malaysia, Indonesia, The Philippines and, to a lesser extent Thailand.

But he complimented Indonesia's investigation of the Bali bombings which has so far netted most of those suspected of plotting the attack in which around 190 people died, almost half of them Australian.