

Germans 'no' to Iraq war equals support for Saddam: Pentagon

AFP, Berlin

Top Pentagon advisor Richard Perle said in an interview Tuesday that a German "no" to strikes against Baghdad on the UN Security Council would be akin to backing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Following months of simmering tensions over German opposition to military action against Baghdad, Perle told Germany's daily Die Welt that if Berlin were to use its non-permanent seat on the Security Council from January to vote against a war, it would be "catastrophic" for transatlantic relations.

"If a chancellor refuses to support even a UN-led action, one can only see that as de facto support for Saddam Hussein," Perle said in comments printed in German. "It would be catastrophic for the German-American relationship."

Fuel truck explodes in Israeli oil refinery

AP, Jerusalem

A fuel truck exploded Tuesday in an oil refinery in the northern Israeli city of Haifa, causing a large fire, TV and radio reports said.

It was not immediately clear if there were casualties.

"There was an explosion, that is the first report we got. Forces that arrived there said there is a big fire in the area," said Gershon Zalderman, a chief firefighter in the area. "The fire is in a petrochemical plant adjacent to the oil refinery."

Firefighters and rescue workers are working now to prevent the fire from spreading, a scenario that Zalderman said could be extremely dangerous. It was unclear if the explosion occurred in a fuel tanker or in one of the plant's buildings, he added.

Lawyers have no right to go on strike: SC

PTI, New Delhi

A five-judge constitution bench headed by Chief Justice G B Pattanaik held that all lawyers must boldly refuse to abide by any strike call given by any bar association.

No threat or coercive action of any kind could be held against any advocate by any bar association for his non-participation in the strike.

The lawyers can hold peaceful dharnas and protest march holding banners and placards outside and away from the courts to find remedies to any of their grievances.

Only in rarest of rare cases where the advocate feels that the dignity, independence and integrity of the bar or the bench has been lowered, they can hold token strike which should not exceed one day.

Congo peace accord signed in Pretoria

AFP, Pretoria

Delegates to talks on the future of Democratic Republic of Congo signed an agreement early Tuesday to end four years of brutal warfare and set up a government of national unity, an AFP correspondent witnessed.

The agreement will see President Joseph Kabila remain as head of state of the huge central African country during a two-year run-up to the first elections since those on independence from Belgium in 1960.

He will be seconded by four vice presidents -- not named in the agreement -- representing the government, each of the two main rebel movements and the unarmed opposition.

Gore says 'no' to battle with Bush

AFP, Washington

Al Gore said Monday he was "at peace" with the idea that he will never become president as the race for the Democratic party nomination intensified after his decision not to seek a battle with George W. Bush in 2004.

Half a dozen leading Democrats are now expected to start jockeying for position, led by senators John Edwards, Joe Lieberman and John Kerry, following Gore's stunning announcement that he would not stand again.

Gore reaffirmed Monday that he did not want to enter a race that would concentrate on his 2000 battle with Bush that became the closest presidential election in history, in which he won the popular vote but did not get the presidency.

Arms declaration was last chance for Iraq: US

Verdict on dossier this week, US activates 9,000 reservists

REUTERS, Washington/Baghdad

The United States will deliver its final verdict later this week on Iraq's weapons declaration after warning there were problems with the dossier and that Baghdad would not get a second chance.

The United States and its ally Britain have signaled they are ready for war if Iraq breaches a tough UN Security Council resolution aimed at ensuring it has no weapons of mass destruction.

Iraq handed documents to the United Nations on Dec. 7 and US experts have been trawling through them to find possible discrepancies between the Iraqi version and information Washington has collated from its own intelligence sources.

"We said at the very beginning that we approached it with skepticism and the information I have received so far is that that skepticism is well founded," Secretary of State Colin Powell told a news conference Monday. "There are problems with the declaration."

Powell did not elaborate on Washington's problems with Iraq's declaration on its alleged chemical, biological and nuclear weapons program. It was not clear what steps Washington would take after delivering its verdict.

British officials were quoted as saying they were "very disappointed" by Baghdad's 12,000-page dossier.

UN officials have also said Iraq's declaration fails to account for all of its chemical and biological agents. A UN resolution in November warned Iraq of "serious consequences" if it failed to comply with UN disarmament

demands. "We'll withhold making a final judgment or final statement until we have completed our analysis, completed our discussions with UNMOVIC (the UN arms inspectorate) and IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) and our colleagues on the permanent membership of the Security Council," Powell said.

"Then statements will be forthcoming, I expect, toward the end of the week after (UNMOVIC's Hans) Blix makes his presentation to the Security Council Thursday."

AFP adds: The Pentagon announced Monday it was activating some 9,000 Army National Guard soldiers to boost security at Air Force installations in the United States.

"We are leveraging all of our active and reserve assets," Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs Thomas Hall said.

"Our intent is to reduce the burden on the Air Force security forces personnel, in particular of those ... who are serving into a second year of mobilization."

The reservists are being called upon to increase security at 163 Air Force installations.

Some 4,500 reservists are currently serving their second year of active duty following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said this month the Iraqi declaration on its banned weapons programs would not itself trigger a US decision to go to war.



A billboard judged to be pornographic is removed from a cinema hall in compliance with the directives issued by Chief Minister Akram Khan Durrani, a leader in the MMA coalition of religious parties, in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar on Monday. Two dozen video-shop and cinema owners were detained in a crackdown on "vulgar" media ordered by the new Islamist government.



Indian actress and former Miss World, Aishwarya Rai (C), poses for photographers with volunteers of the Missionaries of Charity in front of a portrait of Mother Teresa at Sishu Bhavan, a home for destitute babies, in Kolkata on Tuesday. Rai was visiting Sishu Bhavan to pay her respects to Mother Teresa and distribute sweets among the children.

BJP dy mayor, 3 others shot dead in Varanasi

AFP, Lucknow

A local leader of the ruling Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and three others were shot dead Tuesday in Varanasi in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, police said.

The politician, Anil Rai, his bodyguard and two others were killed when unidentified assailants on a motorbike sprayed their vehicle with bullets.

Another two people in the car were also shot but survived the attack, which occurred in a busy city street, police said.

"The assailants have absconded and police are trying to trace them," said Daljit Singh Choudhury, Varanasi's senior police superintendent.

The group was on its way home from the city railway station, where they had picked up Rai on his return from a trip to New Delhi, when the attack took place late morning.

Police said the attack could be related to a long-standing family feud linked to an incident in which Rai's brother was murdered several years ago.

They did not believe there was any political motive behind the killing.

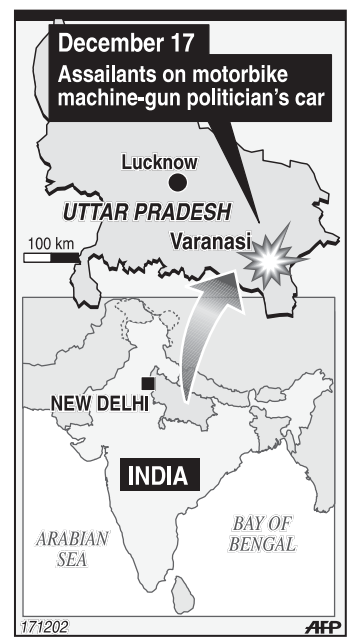
The assailants were armed with automatic weapons, Choudhury said.

Meanwhile, two Indian soldiers died in a shootout with Islamic militants while a policeman and a

civilian were killed in a bomb blast in Indian-administered Kashmir overnight, police said Tuesday.

The soldiers, one a junior officer, died late Monday during a fierce seven-hour-long gunbattle near the town of Anantnag, 50 km south of Srinagar, the summer capital.

Police said the fighting erupted after personnel from the Indian army's counter-insurgency wing, National Rifles, ringed a residential house on a tip-off that Islamic militants were hiding there.



US pushes both India, Pakistan for talks

PTI, Islamabad

Despite India ruling out resumption of talks with Pakistan till it completely stopped cross border terrorism, the US on Monday asserted it would remain engaged in bringing the two countries together for dialogue.

US Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca, who held wide-ranging talks with senior Pakistani officials, including Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmud Kasuri, also said that Washington was focused on building a long-term and broad-based relationship with Islamabad.

Arriving a day after Pakistan arrested three people for allegedly trying to assassinate two American diplomats, Rocca held comprehensive talks on bilateral issues and the Indo-Pak standoff with Kasuri and Foreign Secretary Riaz Kokhar.

Rocca's talks with Kasuri and Kokhar covered a wide range of issues, regional and security issues, including the status of India-Pakistan relations, Foreign office spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan told reporters.

A press release issued by Pakistan Foreign office said during the talks Rocca "underlined the US commitment to remain engaged in bringing about a Pakistan-India dialogue."

Both sides agreed that the resumption of the bilateral dialogue

process was essential to meaningfully address all outstanding issues, the release said.

According to the release, Rocca said that the US was focused on building a long-term and broad-based relationship with Pakistan and appreciated Islamabad's cooperation in the global war against terrorism.

"The situation in the region with particular focus on Pakistan-India relations, SAARC and Afghanistan, were also discussed," it said.

Rocca would meet President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali tomorrow and hand over new equipment to beef up security at the airports to Pakistan at a special ceremony, he said.

Replying to questions on Indo-Pak relations, Khan declined to comment on BJP's sweeping victory in Gujarat saying it was an internal matter. "These are internal provincial polls. I am not going to comment on it," he said.

To a question whether India has shown any interest in resuming talks with Pakistan, Khan said "we are waiting for a change of Indian attitude".

Asked to elaborate on yesterday's comments by Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Jamali that a certain lobby in India blocked the talks between the two countries, Khan said the Prime Minister did not mean any specific person.

"We can not pinpoint XYZ are and against and so and so are in favour.

There has been predominantly in the past few months a negative attitude towards Pakistan. All our positive proposals and efforts for reduction of tensions and improvement of relations to start dialogue, have not had positive response from India," he claimed.

Stating that Pakistan has desired good relations with India, Pakistan Foreign Minister said "We have been forthcoming about starting a dialogue. The trouble is that the reluctance throughout is always on the part of India. They are giving one excuse or the other.

"They are the ones who are shy of coming forward for a dialogue, knowing that is the only way to resolve all outstanding issues between the two countries. We hope good sense will prevail one day and they will realise the futility of the kind of policies they have been pursuing against Pakistan. The Prime Minister perhaps was alluding to this situation", Khan said.

On reports about Mumbai gangster Anees Ibrahim extradition from Dubai to Pakistan, Khan said the question should be directed to Interior Ministry officials as he had no information about it.

About Iran-India Gas pipeline to be laid through Pakistan, he said he reiterates Pakistan's willingness to give guarantees to get the project started. Pakistan was also agreeable to hold trilateral talks with India and Iran on the issue if Iran worked out such a meeting.

Fresh violence in Gujarat

AFP, New Delhi

Violence erupted overnight in the troubled Indian state of Gujarat after the Hindu nationalist BJP party's crushing victory in state elections, reports said Tuesday.

Police were forced to send in reinforcements to the districts of Nagarwada and Fatehpura in the town of Baroda after shops were attacked amid outbreaks of arson, according to the United News of India.

"Preliminary reports said police had opened fire and lobbed teargas shells to disperse the clashing mobs which ransacked and looted several shops," the report said.

"No one is reported to be injured in the police firing so far. Police Commissioner D D Tuteja and other senior officers have rushed to the

spot." The violence broke out at around 10:00pm on Monday (1630 GMT), prompting shops and markets to close in Baroda. Two houses were set ablaze in Nagarwada district.

Results of the state election, announced Sunday, gave the BJP a surprise two-thirds majority with 126 seats in the 182-member assembly.

The BJP had campaigned openly on the plank of Hindutva, which means the Hindu way of life but is used to define rightwing Hindu fundamentalism.

Led by the state's Chief Minister Narendra Modi, the party unashamedly capitalised on the rioting sparked by the burning to death of 58 Hindu pilgrims and activists on a train on February 27 in the town of Godhra, allegedly by a mob of Muslims.

Pak jets withdrawn from Indian border areas

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan has withdrawn most of its fighter aircraft from forward bases as part of the de-escalation of tension with India, the head of the country's air force said on Tuesday.

The announcement by Air Marshal Mushaf Ali Mir came a day after Pakistan's president held a top-level meeting at the army's General Headquarters to review the progress of troop withdrawals along the 2,900-kilometre border.

Mir would not say how many aircraft were involved in the pullback or exactly when it began.

Mir said, however, that the stand-down would not effect Pakistan's efforts to produce or acquire high-tech aircraft to meet any future threat.

"If the Indians get more high-tech aircraft, Pakistan will also be needing advanced aircraft," Mir said.

He said Pakistan is manufacturing a number of K-8 trainer aircraft with China's help.

Mir also said Pakistan is manufacturing a new aircraft model, called the "Super Seven," also with China's collaboration. He said the first would be ready for a test flight in June.

Asia-Pacific nations start talks on terror financing

AFP, Bali

Senior officials from 33 Asia-Pacific countries began talks Tuesday in bomb-battered Bali on ways to starve terrorists of the money they need to commit atrocities.

A relatively small sum -- 30,000 dollars in the case of the Bali bombing two months ago -- can be used "to destroy a huge amount of business assets and opportunities," said Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda in his opening speech.

"Hence if we can find a way by which terrorists could be denied access to the funds that are being pumped into their operations, undoubtedly we would be able to strangle it altogether," he said.

Apart from national officials and private-sector executives, representatives of 14 international organisations including the United Nations and the World Bank are taking part in the two-day conference.

The venue in Bali was decided before the October blast which killed more than 190 people and severely

damaged the island's tourism industry. But keeping the location unchanged was an act of defiance, Indonesian officials have said.

The conference is being co-hosted by Australia, which lost 88 people in the blast.

Australia's Justice Minister Chris Ellison praised Indonesian police for "first-rate" work which has seen the arrest of three key Bali suspects in addition to 12 others.

Regional terror group Jemaah Islamiyah is widely accused of staging the bombing.

Ellison described money-laundering as a "great problem" in the region.

"It allows criminals to legitimise the profits of their illegal actions and it also provides terrorists with the money they need to carry out terrible atrocities," he said in his speech.

Money-laundering worldwide is estimated to be worth between 800 billion and two trillion dollars a year, or 2.5 percent of the world's gross domestic product, he said.

Wirayuda said terrorism "is not a vocation for paupers."



Former White House intern Monica Lewinsky (L) is flanked by Italian TV anchorman Bruno Vespa in the RAI studios in Rome on Sunday to record a scheduled appearance in the "Porta-a-Porta" programme by Bruno Vespa. Lewinsky was banned from appearing on the show after its top executive said her presence would be unsuitable for family viewing.