

US begins psychological operation in Iraq

Annan sees no reason now for attacking Baghdad

AFP, Washington

The United States has begun a psychological operation in Iraq, dropping mountains of leaflets and broadcasting messages to foment dissent among Iraqi soldiers and undermine support for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"Soldiers of Iraq. Since the beginning of time, there has been no profession more honourable than that of a soldier..." a voice booms.

"Saddam has tarnished this legacy. Saddam uses the soldiers of Iraq ... as his own personal bodyguards," the message continues.

"Do not let Saddam tarnish the reputation of soldiers any longer. Saddam uses the military to persecute those who don't agree with his unjust agenda. Make the decision."

The message in Arabic is broadcast from C-130 aircraft or transmitted from neighbouring countries such as Kuwait, the US Central Command said.

The US propaganda effort is in line with the Bush administration's policy of encouraging the Iraqi soldiers to topple Saddam themselves or at least lay down their arms when the US war machine starts rolling in.

"The messages are broadcast daily," Pete Mitchell, a Centcom spokesman told AFP. Iraqi soldiers are referred to the radio frequencies by leaflets.

"The intent of the broadcast is to inform the Iraqi people of what the US is doing. The US intent is to try to counter the propaganda that the Iraqis give to their own people," he said.

The US has also pursued its psychological warfare through intense leaflet dropping campaigns over Southern Iraq.

The last leaflet drop - the 10th in the last three months - occurred early Tuesday around Ad Diwaniyah, approximately 120 km south of Baghdad. Ar Rumaytha, approximately 320 km southeast of Baghdad and Qawam Al Hamzah, approximately 240 miles southeast of Baghdad.

AP adds: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said on Tuesday that he did not yet see any justification for a military strike against Iraq now since Baghdad had not hampered UN weapons inspectors operating in the country.

In an interview with Israel's Army Radio, Annan said the United States should wait for a report from the weapons inspectors before launching any offensive.

S Korea warns of confrontation with North

Expelled UN inspectors leave Pyongyang

AFP, Seoul

South Korean Defence Minister Lee Jun on Tuesday called on the nation's military to maintain readiness for a possible confrontation with North Korea amid mounting tension over the Stalinist state's nuclear ambitions.

"We must keep in mind that we are at a transitional stage where South and North Korea are still at military confrontation amid brisk exchanges for reconciliation and cooperation," Lee said in a New Year message to the South Korean people.

"Whatever changes take place in inter-Korean relations, there will be no changes to the mission (the armed forces) have to perform," he added.

In testimony to parliament on Monday, Lee said Seoul was concerned about possible North Korean military provocation amid the escalating nuclear standoff with the United States.

He also addressed anti-American sentiment in South Korea and widespread calls for the pullout of US troops from the Korean peninsula.

The defence minister said he

was aware that anti-US protests had found an echo among some officials and pundits in the United States who had urged Washington to withdraw US forces from South Korea if they were no longer welcome there.

"It is true that some US officials and citizens have suggested US troops should pull out of South Korea if that is what South Koreans want," Lee said.

Reuters adds: UN nuclear inspectors left North Korea Tuesday on the orders of the communist state as the United States tried to orchestrate a concerted diplomatic push to persuade it to halt its nuclear programs.

The inspectors, expelled by the North after it started reviving a mothballed complex capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons, stopped in China on their way to International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) headquarters in Vienna.

The departure of the inspectors, who had been monitoring the complex under a deal that ended a 1994 nuclear crisis, ends all hope of independent monitoring of the North's nuclear programs.



PHOTO: AFP
South Korean shoppers walk past a wreath announcing Tuesday the upcoming year in one of Seoul's shopping district. South Korea is ending 2002 in uncertain terms as worries over North Korea's revived nuclear programme and anti-US feelings running strong following the acquittal of two US soldiers implicated in the deaths of two Korean schoolgirls last summer.

Palestinians fear Israel will use US strikes on Iraq to send Arafat into exile

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian officials are increasingly worried that Israel will use the opportunity of a US war on Iraq to launch widescale operations against the Palestinian Authority, sweeping it and its leader Yasser Arafat into exile.

"We fear Israel will force president Arafat and the members of the Palestinian administration into exile and displace the population in an internal transfer operation," said Mamduh Nawfal, an adviser to the Palestinian leader.

He added that "these operations depend on the American administration's approval."

"These operations will not be easy and will create an atmosphere of anarchy which will further complicate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," Nawfal told AFP.

Israeli Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who leads the hardliners in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud party had said in November that a US strike on Iraq would provide an ideal opportunity to oust Arafat.

Such an operation would "enable

us to get rid of Saddam Hussein and provide a good opportunity to get rid of Arafat," said the hawkish former prime minister.

Nawfal fears "the Palestinians will once again pay the price of the war in Iraq as was the case during the Gulf war."

Many commentators argue that the negative impact of Arafat's public support for Saddam Hussein during the 1991 Gulf war on international opinion forced the Palestinians into making bigger concessions in the peace process which started the same year in Madrid.

Sakher Habash, a central committee member of Arafat's ruling Fatah party, predicted that "no scenario should be ruled out and that Sharon will do everything he can to fight the Intifada."

Following a spate of deadly Palestinian suicide bombings in June, the Israeli army reoccupied most of the West Bank and both Sharon and US President George W. Bush called for Arafat to be dumped.

Baby 'Eve' heads home

REUTERS, Miami

The head of a company that says it has produced the first human clone said on Monday that the mother and baby were home following the child's birth last week and genetic proof demanded by scientists and other sceptics should be available in a week.

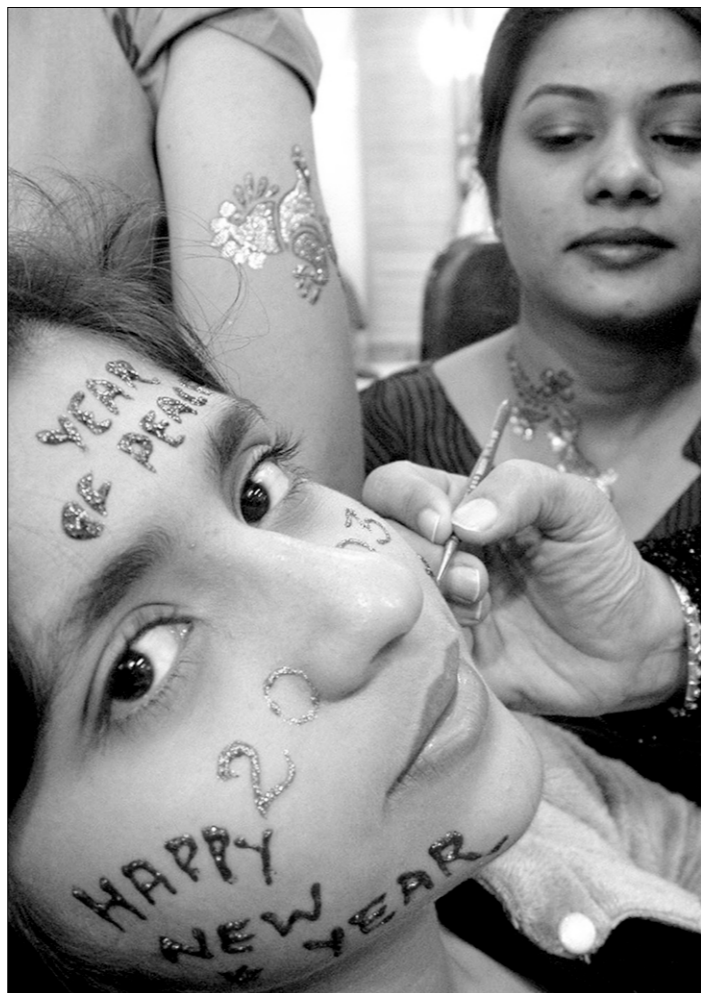


PHOTO: AFP
An Indian teenager has her face decorated with New Year make up at a beauty parlour in Bhopal on Tuesday before ushering in 2003. Though the 1st of January is not a public holiday in India, many businesses close shop for the day.

Iraq war may cost \$50-60 b

REUTERS, Washington

White House Budget Director Mitchell Daniels estimated the cost of a war with Iraq could range from \$50 billion to \$60 billion, well below earlier estimates from other administration officials, The New York Times reported on Tuesday.

A spokesperson for Daniels disputed the report, saying the budget director was referring to the cost of the 1991 Gulf War rather than projecting the cost of a potential war with Iraq.

Daniels, in a telephone interview with the newspaper, would not provide specific costs for either a long or a short military campaign to oust Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. But he said that the administration was budgeting for both, the article said.

Daniels cautioned that his budget projections did not mean a war with Iraq was imminent. He said that it was impossible to know what any military campaign against Iraq would ultimately cost, the Times reported.