



PHOTO: AFP

A protester dressed as Uncle Sam holds a cardboard gun to the head of a fellow demonstrator with a globe on her head as they take part in a peaceful protest against the possible US invasion of Iraq in New York. The demonstration took place while chief weapons inspector Hans Blix was briefing the UN Security Council on Monday. At least ten activists were arrested outside the United Nations building as they protested against a possible US-led war on Iraq.

Asia calls for patience, peace

UN inspectors should be given more time

AFP, Singapore

The release of the UN inspectors' report on Iraq was met with calls for peace in Asia Tuesday, with nations urging patience and restraint in dealing with Baghdad.

Australia, one of the US's closest allies, was out of key with the rest of the Asian-Pacific region, with Prime Minister John Howard saying the report was "extremely damning" evidence Iraq was in material breach of UN disarmament resolutions.

In joining calls for Baghdad to comply fully with disarmament demands, Asian nations Tuesday pushed for UN weapons inspectors to be granted more time to carry out their investigations.

China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council wielding veto powers over any resolution offered by the world body, insisted inspectors be given time and

resources to do their job.

"We maintain that no conclusions should be jumped to at this stage and we should give continuous support to the continued work of the weapons inspections," said foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue.

"We think that the question should be solved politically within the UN framework. We have stressed this over and over again."

Support for the UN as the mechanism for dealing with the Iraq crisis was echoed around the region.

"It's certain the Indonesian government will not give support to an American attack on Iraq and will oppose US efforts to carry one out," chief defense official Major General Sudrajat was quoted as saying by the Detikcom online news service.

Pakistan said UN weapons inspectors in Iraq should be permitted to continue their work in the

interests of peace, as Islamists in the country said the United States had lost the moral grounds to attack Iraq after the UN team's report.

"A peaceful resolution and preventing the further suffering of the Iraqi people must constitute the main objective," the Pakistani foreign ministry said in a statement.

Malaysia said the weapons inspectors' report proved there was no justification for war against Iraq, and suggested that an invasion could lead to increased Islamic terrorism.

"The new UN team has not come up with any certainty that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction," Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar told a news conference.

"How could one justify (saying) that Iraq has failed to cooperate with the UN team? We cannot support any decision now to say war should be declared on Iraq."

The minister warned: "If there is war, there will be a lot of anger against the Americans, against the British and against the Australians."

"Where will this lead us to? Our war against international terrorism is not over."

From India, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, a top Asian ally of the United States in its campaign against terror, said war would not be the solution to the crisis but only cause oil prices to spiral.

Vajpayee urged the United States to "practice restraint in dealing with Iraq."

Meanwhile, losses led gains in regional markets in the wake of the report by chief weapons inspector Hans Blix, who criticized Baghdad for not having come to a genuine acceptance of disarmament though he said inspectors had found no banned weapons since they began work November 27.

66 die in Chinese New Year road carnage

AFP, Beijing

Sixty-six people died and 71 were injured in a slew of traffic accidents over the past few days in the rush to get home for the Lunar New Year holidays, state press reported on Tuesday.

Eighteen people were killed and 32 hurt when a bus hit a truck in northeast China on Tuesday, the Xinhua news agency said.

Tuesday's accident in Liaoning province happened in the early hours of the morning near Maojadian on the Shenyang to Siping highway.

On Sunday, another 18 died when a 12-seat minibus crammed with 34 people overturned and plunged down a gully in the Guangxi region bordering Vietnam.

Sixteen people remain in a critical condition in hospital, the China Daily said.

There was similar carnage on Saturday in eastern Anhui province where two accidents left 19 dead and 11 injured, Xinhua said.

In the first crash, two buses collided head-on in Anqiy city leaving five dead and nine in hospital.

Clonaid shows lab shots, expert says that proves nothing

AFP, Washington

Clonaid, the firm funded by the Raelian sect, for the first time has put video clips of its purported clandestine lab on its website, but the images prove nothing, a US expert said.

In the four and one half minute clip that can be seen on the Clonaid site, the company's president, French chemist Brigitte Boisselier, handles equipment and comments on what she describes as steps in the human cloning procedure. The location of the lab is not specified.

"She has the two essential basics: a micromanipulator attached to a binocular dissecting microscope, and a square wave pulse generator (embryonic cell fusion machine)," said William Muir, professor of genetics at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

"It shows they have the basic equipment, but it's like showing a picture of a race car and starting it up; it does not mean they know how to drive it," Muir said, adding: "It is inconclusive."

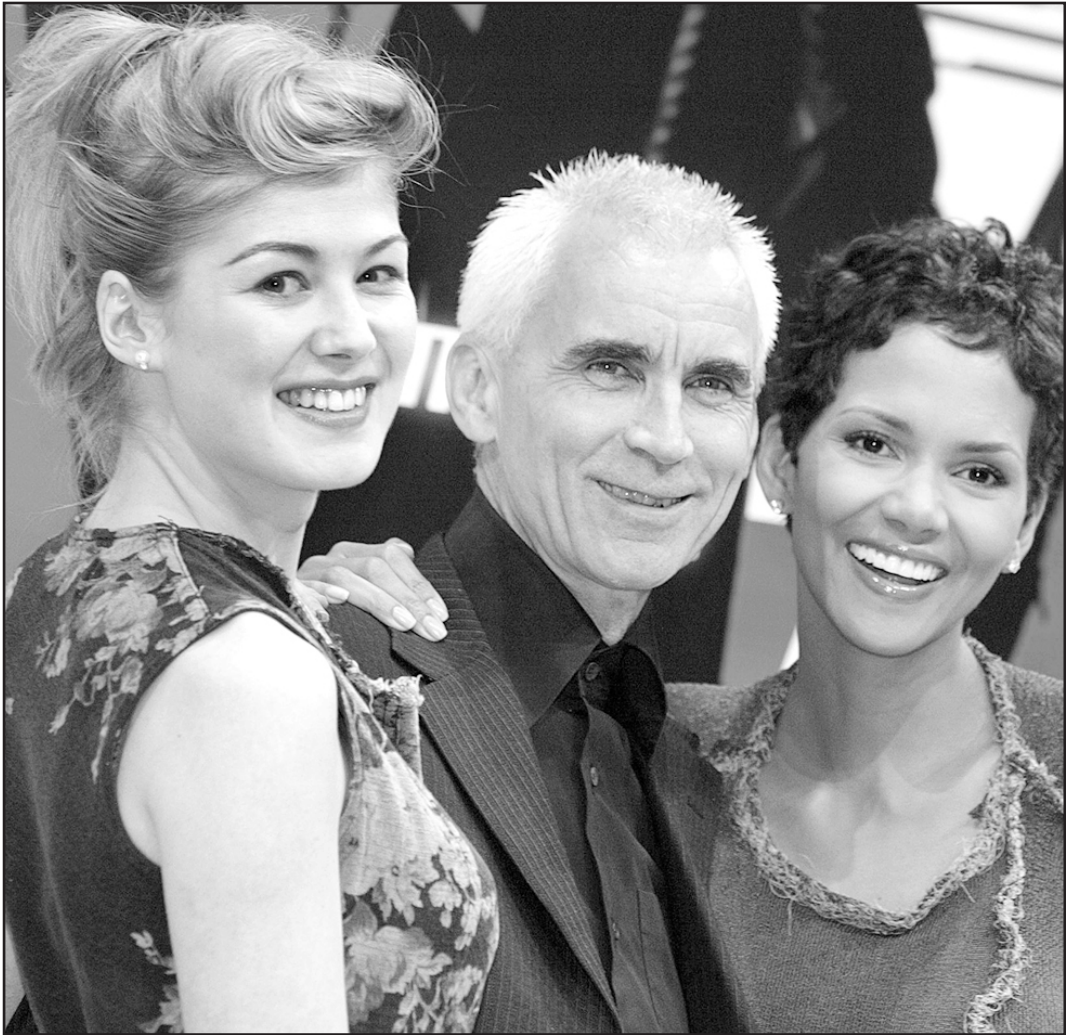


PHOTO: AFP

From R-L: Best actress Oscar winner Halle Berry, film director Lee Tamahori, and actress Rosamund Pike pose during a photo session at a news conference to promote its new James Bond spy thriller "Die Another Day" at a hotel in Tokyo on Tuesday. Berry plays a character called Jinx in the 20th Bond movie starring Pierce Brosnan as the super agent with a license to kill, which was shot in Spain, Britain, Hawaii, Hong Kong and Iceland.

18 killed in firefight on Pak-Afghan border

US-led coalition forces clash with ex-Taliban fighters

AFP, Bagram Air Base

At least 18 people have been killed in more than 24 hours of heavy fighting between US-led coalition forces and some 80 armed assailants in south-east Afghanistan near the border with Pakistan, the US military said Tuesday.

"At least 18 enemy personnel have been killed. No coalition casualties have been reported," the US military said in a statement issued from Bagram air base, north of Kabul, where its operations are headquartered.

The fighting broke out Monday near mountains north of Spin Boldak, a border town 450 kilometers (280 miles) south-west of the capital Kabul, and 100 kilometers (62 miles) south-east of the main southern city of Kandahar, the former stronghold of the hardline Taliban militia.

Spin Boldak administration official Saeed Jan said earlier that coalition and local Afghan forces were battling ex-Taliban fighters and put the death toll at five.

"There is a group of around 70 Taliban fighters and we have asked for further reinforcements," Jan said.

"US and Afghan forces are fighting the battle. Five Taliban fighters have been killed and three have been captured."

Fighting erupted when US Special Forces and Afghan troops were attacked with small arms at about 11:00am (0630 GMT) while they were clearing a compound north of Spin Boldak.

South Korean envoy meets North's official

AP, Seoul

A South Korean presidential envoy trying to defuse tensions over North Korea's nuclear program met on Tuesday with the second-highest leader of the isolated nation - a likely prelude to a meeting with communist leader Kim Jong Il, officials said.

Lim Dong-won, an envoy of South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, conferred with Kim Yong Nam, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, the North's parliament. In that post, Kim serves as the North's ceremonial head of state, or No. 2.

The 25-minute meeting at the Masudae Assembly Hall in the North's capital, Pyongyang, was seen as a necessary protocol for the South Korean envoy before meeting Kim Jong Il. Also present was An Kyong Ho, the director of a Northern agency overseeing Korean affairs.

A statement by the South Korean government said the talks were about "pending inter-Korean issues" without providing details.

Authorities in Seoul said chances for a meeting with Kim Jong Il were high.

Red alert in blast-rocked Mumbai ahead of PM's visit

AFP, Mumbai

Security in India's commercial hub of Bombay was tightened Tuesday ahead of a visit by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee after two bombs exploded injuring 27 people, police said.

Vajpayee was expected to arrive later Tuesday and spend about four hours in the city to inaugurate a fair before returning to the capital, a government spokesman said in New Delhi.

Ahead of the visit, Bombay's joint commissioner of police, Javed Ahmed, told AFP that a special team of investigators from the elite National Security Guard (NSG) was expected in the city to examine the scene of the explosions.

"This is standard procedure that the NSG team is called in as a post-blast investigative team," he said.

The metropolis was hit by two blasts Monday evening, the motives for which were still unclear. Twenty-seven people were injured, including eight in critical condition, police said.

Tripura rebels call for polls boycott

AFP, Guwahati

A leading tribal separatist group warned voters on Tuesday to stay away from next month's assembly polls in India's restive northeastern state of Tripura.

"Anyone violating the poll boycott would face dire consequences," the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTf) said in a statement.

Provincial elections are due February 26 in Tripura and three other Indian states.

The boycott call came after a string of violent attacks by tribal separatists against Tripura's incumbent Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M).

On Sunday night 12 people, most of them CPI-M supporters, were killed in an attack allegedly carried out by another banned movement in the state, the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT).

However, CPI-M spokesman Gautam Das alleged that the tribal separatists have been working with opposition parties to unseat the government. The opposition Congress party denied the charge.

Polling begins in Israel

Sharon eyes victory

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israelis began voting in a general election Tuesday which Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud party looked set to win bolstered by support for his tough policies against a Palestinian revolt.

Sharon was likely to face a more daunting challenge forging a lasting coalition among rival parties that have come to reflect not only hawks against doves but the growing secular-versus-religious divide in Israeli society.

The 74-year-old former general said he hoped to set up a government that would last its four-year term and end a period of political instability in which Israel has seen three elections since 1999.

"Citizens of Israel, go and vote," Sharon told reporters at a polling station in Jerusalem where he cast his ballot.

Final opinion polls indicated Sharon's right-wing Likud would increase its strength to 30 or 33 seats in the 120-seat parliament. Its main opponent, the center-left Labor Party led by Amram Mitzna, was forecast falling to 18 or 19.

Sharon has benefited from the Israeli electorate's lurch to the right after 28 months of a Palestinian uprising in which Palestinian suicide bombers have killed hundreds of Israelis.

Mitzna, 57, has failed to generate support for his more conciliatory approach advocating immediate peace talks and unilateral Israeli pullbacks from Palestinian areas if negotiations fail.

He voted early Tuesday in the mixed Arab-Jewish city of Haifa, in northern Israel, where he is mayor.

Voting began under heavy security at 7 a.m. (midnight EST) at 7,966 polling stations, and will end at 10 p.m. (3 p.m. EST) when the results of exit polls will be televised. Unofficial near-final results should be made public early Wednesday.

More than 30,000 police and soldiers were deployed across the country following intelligence warnings that Palestinian militants were

"Coalition forces returned fire, killing one, wounding one, and detaining a third," the statement said.

The detainee told the troops that 80 armed attackers were hiding several kilometers away around Adi Ghar mountain.

Apache AH-64 helicopter gunships called in by the US forces were fired on from the ground, prompting a return of fire and the launch of "the quick reaction force, drawn from the 82nd airborne division."

B-1 bombers, F-16s and an AC-130 gunship were called in for support.

The B-1s dropped nineteen 2,000-pound bombs and the F-16s dropped two 50-pound bombs while the Apaches and AC-130 fired repeatedly, the statement said.

"The enemy forces were engaged throughout the night and the action continues," the US military said.

Reuters adds: US and Afghan forces have been engaged in heavy fighting with armed rebels in the mountains of southern Afghanistan, close to the Pakistani border, a local government official said Tuesday.

Khalid Khan Achakzai, an official with the foreign ministry in the Afghan border town of Spin Boldak, said US warplanes had been called in to bomb the remote mountains in the Ataghar area, close to Spin Boldak itself.

Achakzai said at least one Afghan soldier had been killed and one wounded in the fighting and two rebels arrested. He said Afghan forces had returned to Spin Boldak Monday night after the fighting had died down.

planning attacks to coincide with the election.

The army imposed a blanket ban on Palestinian travel across the West Bank and Gaza Strip and into Israel in a measure that Palestinians condemned as collective punishment.

There was more bloodshed in the two territories Tuesday. A blast tore through the home of a Palestinian militant from the Islamic group Hamas, killing three people.

Palestinian officials blamed the explosion on an Israeli missile strike, a frequent method of killing militants. But Israeli security sources denied any link to the blast and radio stations said the militants were killed while preparing a bomb.

A 27-year-old Palestinian militant was killed and two other Palestinians wounded in an exchange of fire with Israeli troops in the West Bank city of Jenin, wit-

nesses and medics said.

A Palestinian photographer working for Agence France Presse was shot in the leg during the incident, AFP said.

No single Israeli party has ever won a parliamentary majority. This time, the fight for a stable, multi-party coalition was shaping up as a battle for the government's soul.

Shinui, a stridently secular party that has played to public resentment over benefits given to religious Jews, was poised to become the third largest faction, possibly gaining the kingmaker role historically held by ultra-Orthodox politicians.

Although Likud's triumph seemed such a foregone conclusion that media reports had Sharon already drafting his victory speech, the makeup of the next government could be decisive in determining the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon casts his vote at a school voting station in Jerusalem on Tuesday. Israelis went to the polls early in the morning with security tight for a general election, which Sharon's Likud party is tipped to win.