

Iraq to unleash suicide attacks in case of war

Blix says no evidence to justify US strike

AFP, Baghdad

A defiant Iraq threatened to unleash suicide attacks against US nationals in the Middle East and to wipe out any invading force should the Washington wage a new war against it.

The warnings by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Vice-President Taha Yassin Ramadan were made public Saturday -- the day after US President George W. Bush met his close ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and declared that a likely conflict was "weeks, not months" away.

"Martyrs, perpetrators of suicide attacks, are our new weapons and they will not only take action in Iraq," Ramadan told Monday's edition of the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel.

"The whole region will be set ablaze. This part of the world will become a sea of resistance and danger for Americans."

"It will be much worse for them than anything that has happened so far, especially in places where US soldiers are stationed, meaning in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait," Ramadan said.

Official newspapers in Baghdad on Saturday quoted Saddam telling senior military aides that if war happens, "the enemy will not enter Baghdad's suburbs because he will die. Even if they send a million soldiers, our boys will kill them."

The Iraqi warnings followed a meeting between Blair and Bush in Washington Friday after which the British prime minister said "time is running out" for Saddam.

Both the United States and Britain hope to persuade other members of the UN Security Council to adopt a new resolution backing military action against Iraq.

But Bush said that while he would welcome a new UN mandate, "any attempt to drag the process on for months will be resisted by the United States".

He insisted that a resolution on disarmament adopted November 8 last year "gives us the authority to move without any second resolution."

The United States, Britain and Australia have deployed a massive land, sea and air force to the Gulf region that will count more than 150,000 service personnel, several aircraft carriers and hundreds of warplanes by mid-February.

More than 100 US and British special forces also flew in from Jordan on a six-day covert mission in western Iraq to identify key targets in the event of a war, Britain's Daily Telegraph reported Saturday, quoting defence sources.

Meanwhile, chief UN arms inspector Hans Blix has challenged US charges that Iraq is flouting international demands to disarm, saying in an interview released Friday that the UN teams had found nothing to justify a war.

Blix took issue with much of the case being pushed by the US administration, which is moving toward a likely conflict with Iraq and its leader Saddam Hussein, the New York Times reported.

He acknowledged that "diplomacy needs to be backed by force sometimes and inspections need to be backed by pressure" but spoke out against war.

"I think it would be terrible if this comes to an end by armed force and I wish for this process of disarmament through the peaceful avenue of inspections," Blix said.



Iraqi students protest during the presence of UN disarmament experts on their campus at Saddam University in Baghdad on Saturday. US and British leaders' hopes for a new UN resolution authorising military action on Iraq within the coming weeks have triggered a final round of diplomacy to sway reluctant allies and opponents.



US soldiers from Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 504th PIR approach a cave in the mountains close to Spin Buldak in southern Afghanistan on January 28. US soldiers on Friday found stashes of cooking oil, food, boots and rockets in caves high in a southeastern Afghan mountain. Evidences are there that a hostile group may have been using the complex as a supply hub, a US military spokesman said.

India raps US over Iraq, Pakistan policy

REUTERS, Bangkok

India urged the United States on Saturday not to attack Iraq, even if it has evidence Baghdad is hiding weapons of mass destruction, saying a war must be avoided at all costs.

Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, on a swing through Southeast Asia after visiting Europe and the Middle East, said there was growing opposition around the world to any unilateral US action.

"Iraq must give up its weapons of mass destruction, but even if it fails to do so the action that should be taken should be decided by the United Nations, not by any country unilaterally," Advani told a news conference in Bangkok.

"A war should be avoided," he said. "When I visited Paris, I found that France and Germany had similar views."

Advani's appeal came after President Bush rejected on Friday any bid to delay disarming Iraq, saying a new Security Council resolution authorizing war would be welcome but not necessary.

US seeks permission to bomb Pak areas

IANAS, Islamabad

The US has sought "permission" of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to bomb the tribal areas of Waziristan and Northern Areas, where 10,000 al-Qaeda terrorists are reported to have taken sanctuary, well informed sources here said.

US officials, who sounded Musharraf, were reported to have specifically identified the Mahsoud and Khattak tribes as those providing sanctuary to the al-Qaeda men who had fled Afghanistan to escape the manhunt by US troops.

The sources said the Pakistani military establishment was concerned about the US move, because it felt the move could lead to a revolt by some 100,000 Mahsoud and Khattak soldiers in the army.

Lt. General (Retd.) Ali Quli Khan Khattak, who was overlooked for the army chief's post by former prime

minister Nawaz Sharif in favour of Musharraf, had conveyed the concerns of the Khattak and Mehsoud tribes to Gen. Mohammed Aziz, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, the sources said.

He also warned about the possibility of a revolt by the tribespersons in the army should the government accede to the US request.

While senior military officials would not comment on the exact number of al-Qaeda activists in Pakistan, they maintained that the figure quoted by US officials was on the "higher side."

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the six-party alliance of Islamic radicals, held nation-wide protests in early January against Musharraf's decision to go along with the US in Afghanistan, the joint military operations in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and US plans to attack Iraq.

The protest by the MMA, which

emerged as a major force in the country's political scene after the October elections and rules the volatile NWFP, followed exchange of fire between Pakistani and US troops close to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border on December 29 and January 3.

Addressing a protest rally in Islamabad, Maulana Samiul Haq, a factional leader of the Jama'iat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), warned that there would be an "open war here" if the US attacked Iraq and that "no American will be safe."

In Karachi JUI chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman called for withdrawal of support to the US if it attacked Iraq while Jamaat-e-Islami chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed, addressing a rally in Peshawar, urged a change in Pakistan's foreign policy "which is in favour of the US and against Muslims and does not reflect the aspirations of the nation."

34 killed in Zimbabwe train accident

AFP, Harare

Thirty-four people were killed Saturday and many more injured when their passenger train collided with a goods train carrying inflammable substances near Dete, in western Zimbabwe, state radio said.

Some of the bodies retrieved from the wreckage were burnt beyond recognition, the radio said. The injured were taken to a hospital in the nearby town of Hwange.

Rescue operations were continuing, reports said.

The accident occurred early in the morning along the railway line that links the southern city of Bulawayo to the western resort town of Victoria Falls, the radio said.

Transport Minister Witness Mangwende expressed his condolences to the victims of the accident and was reported to be travelling to the scene of the accident.

Saturday's accident is the latest in a string of crashes involving trains in the southern African country. Last month five people were killed and 107 injured when a goods train ploughed into a bus in Harare.

Intense talks underway with Maoists in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Intensive discussions are under way between Nepal's government and Maoist rebels, including behind prison walls, ahead of the imminent start of formal peace talks, key mediators in the process told AFP.

The informal meetings, in which the Maoists are seeking to secure the release from prison of some 3,500 to 4,000 of their cadres, are aimed at smoothing the way for the official talks, they said in an interview late Friday.

Home ministry sources said the releases could begin next week, but that official talks would likely only start later in February.

The two mediators, medical doctor Birendra Jhapali and traditional doctor Dhani Ram Lamichhane, said they had over the last two days accompanied government chief negotiator Narayan Singh Pun to various jails in and around the capital to meet Maoist leaders.

"Both sides agreed they had to

forget their differences and work together to take a new direction ... and create a new and beautiful and developed Nepal," said Lamichhane.

Aside from a rebel demand for freeing Maoists detained under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act, he said, talks had also broached an all-party round-table conference the government has agreed to call to map out the political future of the Himalayan kingdom.

Among prisoners met by Pun, who is public works and transport minister, were two central committee members of the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist), Ram Karki, alias Partha Chhetri, and Bam Dev Chhetri.

Jhapali said informal talks had begun between the government and Maoists in October, soon after King Gyanendra dismissed elected premier Sher Bahadur Deuba as "incompetent" in dealing with the seven-year insurgency.

Frequent discussions had in the past few months taken place in

Kathmandu between Pun and a representative of the Maoists' politburo who goes under the pseudonym Sagar Chhetri.

The mediators, who describe themselves as "leftists but not Maoists", declined to identify the Maoist leader at the forefront of the negotiations.

Maoist sources, meanwhile, said senior rebel leaders, including a number of central committee members, had begun meeting Friday at Panga, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, to discuss strategies for the upcoming peace talks. The meeting was expected to last through the weekend.

Lamichhane scoffed at press reports which had claimed the king himself had met Maoist leaders in his palace on Monday, two days before the government and rebels announced a mutual ceasefire.

While the king had given his nod and perhaps even initiated the peace process, he had not intervened directly, Lamichhane said.

Russia asks Pakistan to stop Kashmir incursion

PTI, Moscow

Ahead of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's visit to Russia next week, Moscow has told Islamabad to honour its commitments to stop infiltration along the Line of Control and disband terrorist infrastructure to create a conducive atmosphere for the resumption of dialogue with India.

"Normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan would be in the interests of both the nations, as well as strengthening of stability and security in the region," Russian foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko said.

"We in Russia are confident that fulfilment of obligations taken by Islamabad to check the infiltration of militants into the state of Jammu and Kashmir across the Line of Control and the liquidation of terrorist infrastructure could create necessary prerequisites for the resumption of dialogue between the two countries," Yakovenko was quoted as saying by ITAR-TASS news agency.

US for delaying release of ME peace plan

Palestinians ready for truce talks with Israel

AFP, Washington

The United States is seeking a further delay in the publication of a Middle East peace plan that provides for a Palestinian state in order to give Israel time to form a new government, US officials said Friday.

The officials declined to confirm a report that Washington was looking for a six-week delay, but said the reality of the situation following Israeli elections earlier this week would make progress on the so-called "roadmap" difficult in the immediate future.

The publication of the roadmap, which had been expected in December, was first delayed at the request of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Sharon, who opposes elements of the plan, did not want it to become an issue in the campaign for Monday's election in which he won re-election.

Despite the delays, State

Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the United States remained committed to the roadmap and to President George W. Bush's vision of two states -- Israel and Palestine -- living side-by-side.

"We recognize the reality of elections, the formation of a government would maybe slow things down and not provide the atmosphere for high-level decisions," he told reporters.

"Obviously, if you are looking for governmental decisions, there has to be a government to make those decisions," Boucher said.

He said Washington believed the roadmap remained "the best means to implement the vision of two states living side-by-side."

"We want to keep moving as we can," he said, adding that Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered the same message to Israel on Wednesday in a telephone call to Sharon.

The Washington Post reported

earlier Friday that the United States wanted to delay the release of the roadmap -- created by the international diplomatic "quartet" on the Middle East -- by six weeks.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian leadership is ready to discuss a general ceasefire with the Israelis and immediately restart peace talks under the guidance of the so-called Quartet, it said in a statement Saturday.

"The Palestinian leadership said it was ready to conclude a general ceasefire agreement in all the regions and restart negotiations as soon as possible under the aegis of the quartet," the leadership said after its meeting late Friday in the West Bank town of Ramallah, cited by the official Wafa news agency.

The quartet on Middle East peace -- the United States, European Union, Russia, and the United Nations -- is due to propose a peace plan expected to call for a Palestinian state by 2005 and guarantees of Israeli security.

India, Thailand to cooperate on trade, terrorism

THE NATION/ANN, Bangkok

Thailand and India on Friday agreed to begin intensive negotiations towards a free-trade agreement and cooperation on security issues including narcotics and terrorism, said India's visiting deputy premier LK Advani.

The feasibility study on a bilateral free-trade agreement has been finished, and the pact is expected to be signed by September, he told a press conference.

The pact aims to increase the more than US\$1 billion (Bt42.6 billion) in annual two-way trade between the two countries, he said.

Advani arrived in Thailand on Thursday to boost cooperation on economic and security matters with Thailand. He flies back to India on Saturday.

Advani discussed both schemes with Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Thai counterpart Wisanu Krea-ngam. The two countries began discussions on security matters in November 2001 when Prime Minister Thaksin visited India.



A car covered with snow at Pajares village in northern Spain on Friday as the freezing weather hit roads, railways and airports. Motorists found themselves trapped in their cars on treacherous motorways due to the heavy snow fallen in most areas of north Spain.

7 million people living illegally in US: INS

AFP, Washington

Some seven million illegal immigrants were residing in the United States as of January 2000, according to a report released Friday by the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

The agency said that the figure represented a 1.2 million increase from October 1996, the last time the INS released similar data.

The report suggests that the pace of illegal immigration has been far faster than anticipated.

Earlier INS estimates placed the growth of the undocumented population at about 275,000 per year -- a figure it now has revised upward sharply to 350,000 per year. In

1999 alone, INS statistics show the undocumented population swelled by more than half a million.

The increase in illegal immigration during the 1990s came despite an infusion of billions of dollars in border enforcement manpower and resources.

Nearly three-fourths of the undocumented population is concentrated in seven states: California, Texas, New York, Illinois, Florida, Arizona and Georgia.

California and Texas account for some one million or more illegal immigrants.

Mexicans make up 69 percent of the total US undocumented population, growing from 2 million to 4.8 million.



New Delhi resident Nikita Anand (C) smiles after she was crowned 'Miss India Universe' flanked by first runner-up Ami Vashi (R) and second runner-up Sweata Vijay at the Femina Miss India contest in Mumbai on Friday. Twenty-six young women from all over India took part in the contest.

Small planes, helicopters guarding US capital

AFP, Washington

Two Black Hawk UH-60A helicopters and two small Cessna Citation airplanes belonging to the US Customs Service began patrolling the skies over the US capital this week, a customs spokesman said Friday.

The new low-altitude contingent is designed to complement the high-flying F-15 and F-16 fighters stationed at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, which stand ready to take off at any moment in the event of an emergency, spokesman Kevin Bell said.

The unarmed aircraft are charged with intercepting all unauthorized aircraft that venture within the 25 kilometers (16 miles) of restricted airspace over Washington.

"The mission is to get to fly day and night patrols," Bell said.