

7 die in caste-related violence in India

AP, Patna

Seven men from Hindu upper castes were killed at a roadside restaurant in India's crime-prone Bihar state, the latest caste-related violence in the region, police said yesterday.

The killings occurred Saturday night in Bihar's Newada district, about 60 miles southeast of the state capital, Patna, Director-General of Police D.P. Ojha told The Associated Press.

The attack was carried out as the men sat at a restaurant near the busy state highway connecting Patna to the city of Ranchi. Six men were killed on the site. One died in the hospital early Sunday, Ojha said.

Those dead included the father-in-law of Akhilesh Singh, who leads a gang of upper caste militia in the state, Ojha said.

The police chief said the upper-caste men were apparently killed to avenge the killings Thursday of seven lower-caste Dalits, often called the "untouchables" in India's social hierarchy.

Caste clashes are common in Bihar, one of India's poorest and most crime-wracked states. Landowning upper castes are fighting a battle for supremacy with lower caste farmers, and both sides are frequently attacked by caste militias.

NATO aims to resolve Iraq rift in fresh talks with members

Arabs to support efforts to disarm Iraq peacefully

AFP, Brussels

NATO launched fresh talks yesterday to try to resolve a damaging rift over Iraq, holding a meeting of a key committee which does not include France, one of three countries which has blocked accord, sources said.

NATO chief George Robertson convened the Defence Planning Committee (DPC), on which France does not sit, in a new bid to end the crisis centred on US proposals to help Turkey in the case of war on Iraq.

The committee session could be followed later Sunday by a meeting of the full ruling North Atlantic Council (NAC), which also includes France, sources said.

The NAC met five times in four days last week without making a breakthrough, and put its attempts on hold pending Friday's crucial session of the UN Security Council.

But few are predicting the outcome of the talks, amid continuing rancour notably between the United States and France, which has opposed an accord along with

Belgium and Germany.

One diplomat from the 16 countries backing the US proposals said he would not support a face-saving formula which does not deal with the substantial issue of providing military support to Turkey.

Meanwhile France confirmed yesterday that a solution is possible to a damaging NATO rift over Iraq, which would involve France staying out of military measures to support Turkey but reaffirming its political solidarity with Ankara, a French spokesman said.

He was speaking shortly after the start of a meeting of NATO's Defence Planning Committee (DPC), on which France does not sit, and ahead of an expected session of the ruling North Atlantic Council (NAC).

"The two meetings today should allow a solution to be found which, concerning France,, underlines that it does not participate in military measures which are part of (NATO's) integrated military structure," said the spokesman.

"However concerning the continuation of political consultations ..

requested by Turkey, we have called for a meeting of the NAC in which we will participate.

"This meeting should be able to reaffirm the fact that the allies are ready of course to fulfil their obligations to Turkey in the context and conditions of the treaty," he said, referring to NATO 1949 founding Washington Treaty.

AFP from Cairo reports Arab foreign ministers and a top European envoy held a meeting here yesterday to mull ways to support international efforts to disarm Iraq peacefully in order to prevent a US-led war.

Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreu, whose country is the current European Union president, joined the talks held in the Arab League headquarters by 20 Arab foreign ministers and diplomats representing Oman and Mauritania.

Papandreu's attendance marked the first non-Arab presence at an Arab League foreign ministers' meeting.

"It reflects the keenness of Arabs to consult with the EU in supporting international efforts to bring about a

peaceful settlement to the Iraq crisis and avoid war," an Arab League official told AFP.

"We hope the Arab meetings will deter those who want to harm Arab rights and dignity," said Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri.

The meeting, chaired by Lebanon, will prepare for an emergency Arab summit to be held on February 27 in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, according to the state-run Cairo daily Al-Ahram.

US Middle East envoy William Burns was expected to visit Cairo Sunday but his trip was postponed, according to the US embassy which did not give any reason.

Arab leaders have expressed fear that a US-led war on Iraq could destabilise the whole Middle East. Besides the emergency summit, they will also convene in an annual meeting in March, but its venue has been switched from Bahrain to Egypt.

A senior Arab diplomat confirmed that the emergency summit will be held on February 27, and could be followed on March 1st by the annual

session.

Qatar's Emir Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani confirmed Sunday in a telephone call to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak that he will attend the emergency summit to be held upon the invitation of the Egyptian leader, the official MENA news agency said.

The foreign ministers' meeting started Saturday with preliminary discussions.

Mussa told reporters early Sunday that "there is a consensus among Arab states in rejecting any military action against Iraq" and in holding the emergency summit.

"Arab states have agreed that they will not accept, cooperate with, deal with, rally to or facilitate a strike on Iraq," he said, speaking after the preliminary discussions.

Mussa said "not one single Arab state has voiced reservations" on these issues, even Gulf states like Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain which host the US-led military buildup in preparation for any war on Iraq.

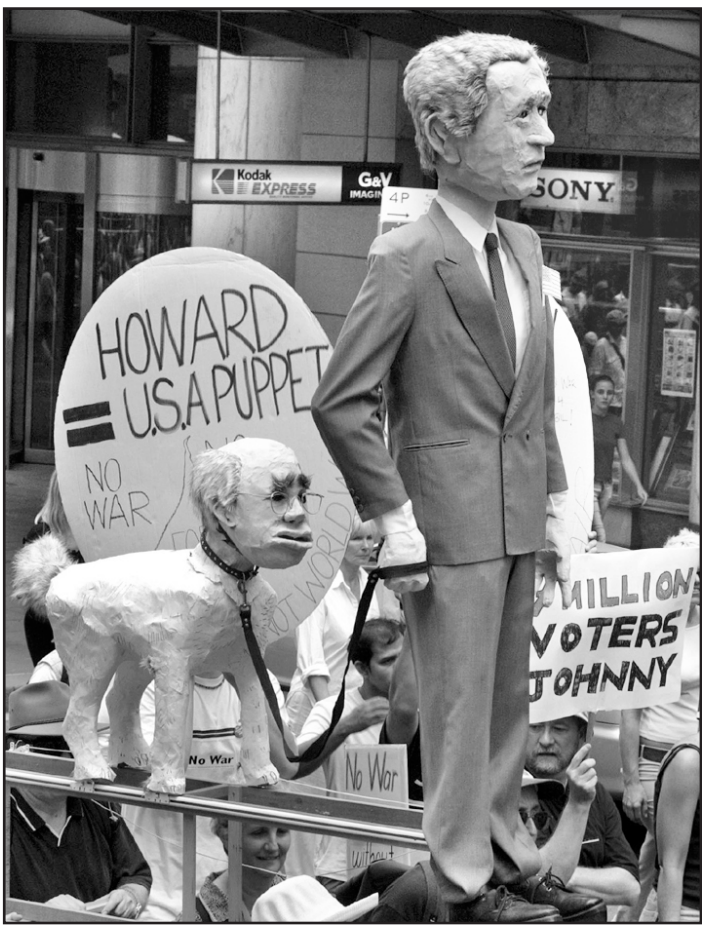


PHOTO: AFP

Effigies of US President George W. Bush (R) and Australian Prime Minister John Howard (L) that allude to their relationship are paraded through the streets in protest against a US-led war on Iraq in Sydney, yesterday. The 100,000-strong rally comes as Australian Prime Minister John Howard returned home on Saturday from an eight-day world tour which focused on the Iraq crisis, including a stop in Washington.

Howard firm on war support in face of protests

AFP, Sydney

Prime Minister John Howard showed no sign of wavering in his support for an US-led war in Iraq, despite some of the biggest anti-war protests ever seen in Australia.

More than 400,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide on Sunday in a nationwide protest to coincide with a co-ordinated weekend of global action involving millions of people.

Jubilant organisers belonging to an alliance of left-wing groups, trade unions, churches and pacifists claimed a quarter of a million demonstrators attended the Sydney rally, filling a park, several main streets and jamming the centre of Australia's largest city.

Even police estimated the attendance at more than 200,000, one of the biggest protests here since the Vietnam moratorium marches of the early 1970s.

Thousands of Muslims marched with local celebrities, people of all ages, race and political persuasion, many carrying banners and placards protesting against all war, whether UN sanctioned or not.

Organisers claimed another 100,000 protesters turned out in Brisbane, with similar numbers in Adelaide and 2,000 in Darwin after rallies in other state capitals on Friday and Saturday.

Up to 150,000 people brought Melbourne's city centre to a halt on Friday in one of the biggest rallies ever seen in the south-eastern city.

Howard, one of the staunchest supporters of US President George W. Bush's campaign to disarm Iraq, arrived home on Sunday after

visiting the United States, Britain and Indonesia for talks on the Iraq crisis.

He held talks with Bush in Washington, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in New York, British Prime Minister Tony Blair in London and Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri in Jakarta.

Australia and Britain are the only two countries so far to deploy military personnel to the Gulf in support of the US military build-up, but Howard said he had not given up hope of a peaceful settlement.

Howard said he was not convinced the large crowd at anti-war rallies was evidence that public opinion was firming against war.

"What I'm doing here is what I think is right for Australia," he told Channel Seven.

"This is not something where you read each opinion poll or you measure the number of people at demonstrations."

With 2,000 Australian military personnel positioned in the Gulf preparing for war, he said he had still to make a final decision on whether they would participate in any conflict.

Howard said he had not given up hope for a new UN Security Council resolution on Iraq, but it was now a matter for the Council to decide if its will was to be flouted or obeyed.

"Peace is a possible outcome if the world community speaks with one voice," he said.

Howard said in his discussions with Megawati he had discussed the charge that Australia was taking a stance against the Muslim world, but she had accepted his position on Iraq was not anti-Islam.



PHOTO: AFP

An Afghan movie vendor waits for customers displaying the latest Bollywood movie "Escape from Taliban" at a market in Kabul. India's formulaic Bollywood film industry has departed from its usual romantic musicals to shoot the true story of a woman's struggle to escape the horrors of Afghanistan's former Taliban regime. The film is based on the true story of an Indian woman who lived under the hardline militia after marrying an Afghan.

Greek Cypriots vote for new president

AP, Nicosia

Shortly after he enters office, the new president of Greek Cyprus will face a crucial, difficult decision that will help determine the divided island's fate.

Whoever wins elections held yesterday must choose between accepting or rejecting a hotly debated United Nations plan to reunify Cyprus. The issue has become the central issue in Sunday's election.

The election comes 10 days before UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan is to visit Cyprus in a last ditch bid to break a prolonged deadlock and win acceptance of his plan by Feb. 28.

Cyprus has been divided into a Greek Cypriot controlled south and a Turkish-occupied north since Turkey invaded in 1974 in the wake of an abortive coup by supporters of union with Greece. A breakaway Turkish Cypriot statelet in the north is only recognised by Turkey, which maintains 40,000 troops there.

Alvaro de Soto, Annan's special envoy for Cyprus, returned to the island late Friday after talks in New York with the UN leader, warning that if the plan is not accepted by the deadline "the opportunity (for a settlement) disappears until something happens, and that is totally uncertain."

If the deadline is not met, only the

Greek-backed portion of Cyprus will be able to sign its EU accession agreement by April 16.

The Annan plan envisages reunification as a single state consisting of two separate Greek and Turkish Cypriot "component states" linked through a weak central government.

Ten candidates are running in the election, but the duel is between Glafcos Clerides, the 83-year-old right-wing incumbent, and Tassos Papadopoulos, 69, a centrist backed by other opposition leftist parties.

Clerides decided to run for a third term, but limited to 16 months instead of a full five-years, saying he is best qualified to continue the delicate reunification negotiations. The opposition accuses him of being too old and willing to yield on basic issues of principle.

Greek Cypriots are deeply split over the plan.

Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash, who is backed by Ankara, opposes the Annan plan because it rejects his demand for recognition of his statelet as a prelude to reunification as a two-state confederation.

Polls give Papadopoulos between 45 and 48 percent, compared to between 34 and 38 percent for Clerides.

N Korea marks Kim Jong Il's birthday

AP, Seoul

North Korea marked leader Kim Jong Il's birthday yesterday by urging the military to be on alert and imploring its people to "burn with hatred" against the United States.

The anti-US diatribe in the state-run newspaper Rodong Sinmun appeared at the height of government-orchestrated celebrations for Kim's 61st birthday, which included festivals, speeches and calls for patriotism.

The reclusive leader's birthday is a national holiday in North Korea, and laudatory fervour has been rising for weeks ahead of the day. On Saturday, communist party and military officials pledged their loyalty to Kim.

Rodong Sinmun, monitored by the South Korean news agency Yonhap, said the United States was pushing its nuclear dispute with North Korea "to the brink of war." Washington and its allies are pressuring Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons development.

"All servicemen of the Korea People's Army should always be on the alert," the Rodong Sinmun editorial said. "All party members and workers must burn with hatred and hostility in their hearts toward US imperialists." mothers.

US, Britain reworking Iraq resolution

AP, United Nations

Rattled by an outpouring of anti-war sentiment, the United States and Britain began reworking a draft resolution Saturday to authorise force against Saddam Hussein.

Diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the final product may be a softer text that does not explicitly call for war.

Before Friday's dramatic Security Council meeting, where weapons inspectors gave a relatively favourable accounting of Iraq's recent cooperation, US and British diplomats said they had been preparing a toughly worded resolution that would give them UN backing for military action.

British diplomats had said then that any resolution would have to include an authorisation of force. They described working versions of the draft as short, simply worded texts that found Iraq in "material breach" of its obligations and reiterated that Saddam now faces "serious consequences" as a result.

In diplomatic terms, coupling the

consequences with material breach would be tantamount to an authorisation.

But the measured reports by inspectors, in addition to massive global opposition to war - expressed both in the council and in the streets - came as a blow to their plans.

The two English-speaking allies had hoped to push through a new resolution quickly, and there had even been talk of a Saturday council meeting to introduce it. But their plans were put on hold Friday after staunch opposition - led by France, Russia and China - drew rare applause inside the council chamber.

British and American diplomats conceded they would need to go home, consider the views of others and soften the tone of the draft.

Adding to the pressure, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in an interview on Saturday with Abu Dhabi Television that another resolution, following up on Resolution 1441, which was passed in November, would be necessary if force was used against Saddam. "I think a second resolution, following through on the

conditions of 1441, is necessary," Annan said.

While Secretary of State Colin Powell said after Friday's meeting that there was no talk of compromise yet, some diplomats said privately that it was the responsibility of the five council powers - the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China - to negotiate a way out of the impasse over Iraq.

Unless that happens, President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair are unlikely to gain UN support for a war to disarm Iraq. While they may be prepared to act without it, UN backing would offer international legitimacy and a guarantee that reconstruction costs would be shared.

UN backing is particularly important for the British government, which faces strong public opposition to a war. More than 750,000 people attended an anti-war protest in London on Saturday, police said, and millions more joined in similar demonstrations across the globe.

India to raise terror issue at NAM Summit

PTI, New Delhi

India is expected to impress upon the 114-nation Non-Aligned Summit in Malaysia later this month to take a "clear position" on terrorism besides focusing on steps to rejuvenate the grouping to achieve the goals like nuclear disarmament, poverty alleviation and stoppage of environmental degradation.

With threat of US-led military action against Iraq, the two-day summit beginning February 24 is likely to take a firm stand on intervention and unilateral action, and non-observance of international law.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee will lead the Indian delegation at the 13th summit in Kuala Lumpur which will be attended by at least 52 heads of state or government. At the last summit in Durban in South Africa, 45 leaders were present.

Besides terrorism, Iraq and nuclear disarmament, NAM would also concentrate on proliferation of small arms and plastic explosives and democratisation of international institutions including reforms in the UN system and global financial bodies.

"India would like the Summit to

take a clear position on terrorism, which is posing a challenge to global peace and security," sources said on Sunday.

They said India would urge the NAM to also focus on emerging challenges of unilateralism, HIV/AIDS, the need for South-South cooperation and solidarity among member states.

The main summit would be preceded by a two-day meeting of senior officials from February 20 followed by a conference of foreign ministers on February 22.

The sources ruled out any meeting between Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Zafarullah Khan Jamali. The Prime Minister, would, however, hold bilateral meeting with leaders of leading NAM states on the sidelines of the summit.

At a 'brain-storming' session in Durban in December last, External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha and other key NAM members had identified four priority areas including threats to global security from terrorism as part of renewed efforts to make the body more relevant in a unipolar world.

The initiative, led by Sinha, to give NAM a "modern look" was

taken as the world environment now was "markedly different" from what it was when the body was founded, the sources said.

Inequities of the multilateral trading system under the WTO, human rights issues, development and capacity building, promotion of good governance, transparency and democratic practices and marginalisation of developing countries in other areas are expected to be discussed by NAM.

The sources said the Kuala Lumpur Summit would help NAM address global realities in "pragmatic, responsible and contemporary manner". The areas identified were likely to be incorporated in the summit agenda.

The summit assumes more importance as chairmanship of the international forum would be shifting from Africa to Asia after a gap of over seven years.

The sources said the situation in Afghanistan, continued military occupation of Palestine and developments in North Korea, which has reportedly revived its nuclear programme, would also figure in the deliberation among the leaders.

Osama bin Laden's eldest son living in Iran ?

PTI, London

Osama bin Laden's eldest son Saad, believed to be a key figure in the al-Qaeda terror network, has reportedly moved to Iran and is living there with other members of the outlawed group.

Saad, 23, who fled Afghanistan in December 2001 after the fall of the Taliban regime, had been spotted in Iran last month, a media report said on Sunday quoting American intelligence officials.

The officials said it was not clear what relationship - if any - Saad had

with the government in Tehran, a leading British daily reported on Sunday.

The reported sighting followed Congressional testimony by CIA chief George Tenet about the "disturbing signs of al-Qaeda's established presence in both Iran and Iraq", The Sunday Times said.

Al-Sharq al-Awsat, an Arabic newspaper, based in London had made the same claim last week.

US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, has named Saad as one of the several "key players" with enough knowledge of al-Qaeda to

take over the organisation from his father.

Iran, named along with Iraq and North Korea as part of President George W Bush's "axis of evil", rejected claims of any link with terrorism as "baseless".

US intelligence officials has claimed that several of bin Laden's older sons - he is said to have around two dozen - are playing an increasingly important role in al-Qaeda, helping to arrange financing and logistical support for terrorists in the field.

Earlier, Saad had lived with his father in Sudan from 1991 to 1996.