

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 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

Belgium and Germany.

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

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 Papandreou, 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.

Papandreou'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

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.

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.

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.

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 to February 22.

The sources ruled out any meeting between Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Zafarullah Khan Jamali. The Prime Minister, however, will 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 bipolar 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 have 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 world.

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