

## US is 'dinosaur with a sparrow's brain', says Rafsanjani

AFP, Tehran

Powerful former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani labelled the United States Tuesday as a "dinosaur with a sparrow's brain" and ridiculed what he said were Washington's failures in Iran and Iraq.

"The failure of the recent unrest in Iran was a disgrace for the United States," Rafsanjani said, referring to the June 10-20 wave of anti-regime protests and unrest that officials here have blamed on Washington.

"The United States has heavily invested itself in creating trouble in Iran," the official news agency IRNA quoted him as saying. "But their cavalry consists of hooligans, good-for-nothings and thieves."

## Any support to terrors in Kashmir illegal: US

PTI, Washington

The United States has said that any kind of support to terrorist organisations operating in Jammu and Kashmir is illegal under US law.

"There are multiple regulations that prevent US citizens from contributing to armed conflict, from contributing to terrorism, from supporting terrorists," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said while replying to a question about the arrest of US and Pakistani citizens "for training rebels and terrorists in Kashmir".

## Thugs for hire!

THE STAR/ ANN, Kuala Lumpur

Hired hands have started advertising their services by circulating business cards offering to "fix" someone for a fee, said MCA Public Services and Complaints Department head Michael Chong.

"This is the first time I've come across such a thing. They have become more daring. It was done secretly previously but now they are doing it in open," he told reporters Monday in Wisma MCA.

Among the services and charges listed were RM300 (for bullying), to "fix" someone (RM400), to teach someone a lesson (RM1,000) and causing grievous injuries (RM2,000). A cellular telephone number was also provided.

On Monday, in front of reporters, Chong called the person offering the services and had a three-minute conversation with him.

When asked why he was resorting to such actions, the person said that it was difficult to earn a living and claimed that he had good relations with the police.

"He also said that he could pretend to be an Ah Long (loan shark) and carry out the deed. Then he said that it was not convenient to talk over the phone and asked to meet somewhere.

## BBC under scrutiny as political heat rises

REUTERS, London

The BBC is no stranger to political spats but rarely has the publicly funded broadcaster's independence been put to the test as now.

The British Broadcasting Corporation is under fierce political fire for the very reporting that made its name across the globe just as it prepares for a debate over its future.

Blasted in the past as a leftist elite and threatened with having its funding withdrawn, the BBC is at the center of a vicious row over a report that claimed Prime Minister Tony Blair's office "sexed up" a dossier on Iraqi weapons.

## British govt defeated in fox hunting vote

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair suffered a large defeat in parliament late Monday as lawmakers voted overwhelmingly to ban fox hunting with dogs in England and Wales.

Blair's Labour government had intended for lawmakers to vote on proposals to ban stag hunting and hare coursing while allowing fox hunting under licence.

However following a stormy five-hour debate in the lower House of Commons, the government withdrew its proposals at the eleventh hour, allowing lawmakers the opportunity to vote on an outright ban to fox hunting -- an issue that has pitted animal rights activists against countryside dwellers who see their way of life under threat.

# Abbas eyes Israeli pullout from WB within 6 weeks

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas said Tuesday he believed the Israeli army would withdraw from all positions occupied in the West Bank since the start of the Palestinian uprising within six weeks.

"I expect Israel will complete the withdrawal (from all reoccupied Palestinian areas) within a month or a month and a half," he told a meeting of the Palestinian Legislative Council in Ramallah.

Abbas said he would meet later Tuesday with his Israeli counterpart, Ariel Sharon, to discuss the necessary steps for that withdrawal.

"Now we are looking to see how Israel will return to the borders of September 28, 2000 because it is an important step that is in the roadmap," Abbas said, referring to the date when the Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, broke out.

"Today we will discuss with Sharon about the schedule" for the withdrawal, he said.

He said the timeframe was important because the Palestinian security apparatus did not currently have the ability to cope with an immediate takeover of security responsibility for the entire West Bank.

"(At the moment) we do not have the ability and we need to create the ability very fast. We need it to carry out this programme," he said.

Abbas said earlier the meeting with Sharon in Jerusalem would cover an array of roadmap-related issues, including the possible revival of the joint committees that existed before the start of the uprising.

The two men are to hold a joint press conference at Sharon's office in Jerusalem at 5:40 pm (1440 GMT) ahead of the evening meeting, Israeli officials said Monday.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army is

to withdraw from the southern West Bank town of Bethlehem and its environs Wednesday, just three days after pulling out of part of the Gaza Strip, Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said.

"We will hand over security control for Bethlehem to the Palestinians on Wednesday," Mofaz told public radio Tuesday, confirming information revealed by a Palestinian source a day earlier.

"This withdrawal will be a test to see whether the security of Israelis, including those in Judea and Samaria, is assured," he said, using the Biblical name for the West Bank.

Israeli security officials were meeting with their Palestinian counterparts at a military base in the area to finalise the details of the withdrawal, public radio said.

But Avi Dichter, head of Israel's internal security service Shin Beth, warned that Israel would not be able to continue

transferring further security responsibility to the Palestinians in the West Bank if the Palestinian Authority did not start disarming and disbanding militant groups in the Gaza Strip, the radio said.

Israel had stressed as much several weeks ago, the radio quoted him as saying.

Four Palestinian militant groups, including the radical Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements, announced a three-month ceasefire on Sunday, which was quickly followed by a partial Israeli withdrawal from the northern Gaza Strip.

But Israeli Foreign Minister Sylvan Shalom said Monday Israel was not a party to the ceasefire, which was an agreement between the Palestinian Authority and militant groups.

Like the United States, the Israeli government is not satisfied with a ceasefire alone and is demanding militant groups be disarmed.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli bulldozers destroy the foundations of a mosque near the church of the Virgin Mary (background) in Nazareth on Tuesday which marks the site where, according to Christian belief, the Archangel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary that she would give birth to Jesus Christ. The operation was launched following a court decision ordering the Waqf, the body charged with managing Muslim assets, to destroy the foundations, saying they had been illegally constructed.

## Floods displace 300,000 in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Another five people have died due to heavy rains in India's northeast, pushing the death toll to six with more than 300,000 displaced in mudslides and flash floods, police and government said Tuesday.

A police spokesman said two people drowned late Monday when their boat capsized in the middle of the Brahmaputra River near Alamgang in the western Dhubri district of Assam state.

"The two were among several others who were rowing their boats to reach safer areas to escape the floods when it capsized," the spokesman said.

"Their bodies have not yet been recovered."

The spokesman said a mother and an infant died in Shillong, capital of Meghalaya state neighbouring Assam, in a landslide triggered by incessant rains since Friday.

Late Monday, a boy drowned when the boat he was in capsized in south Tripura state, while a baby girl died Sunday after she slipped off her mother's lap into raging waters while the family was trying to cross a flooded area in a row-boat.



PHOTO: AFP

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (R) has a laugh with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf during a joint press conference in Berlin on Monday. Musharraf touched down in Berlin on the latest leg of a four-nation tour after a high-profile visit to the United States.

## Pakistan vows to end row with India

AFP, Berlin

President Pervez Musharraf affirmed Monday Pakistan's commitment to peacefully resolving its disputes with India but said the conflict over Kashmir must be addressed with sincerity.

Musharraf reiterated "Pakistan's desire and resolve towards the resolution of all disputes... and our desire to address in a composite manner all issues concerned, but addressing the whole issue of Kashmir with sincerity."

His remarks, made in Berlin after talks with his German counterpart Johannes Rau, came after a Pakistani ambassador had arrived in India in the most visible sign yet of a normalisation in their ties after a long military standoff.

Diplomatic ties between the nuclear-armed rivals, along with train, air and bus links, were severed after an attack on India's parliament in December 2001 by gunmen whom New Delhi claims

were sponsored by Islamabad.

The two neighbours have recently adopted a number of confidence-building measures including a planned exchange of diplomats and resumption of transport links to ease the way to dialogue.

Last week, Musharraf suggested a Middle East-style peace roadmap on Kashmir that would include outside mediation, but India has rejected the proposal.

India, whose prime minister visited Germany a month ago, accuses Pakistan of fomenting a 13-year insurgency against its rule in the Kashmir region in which more than 38,000 people have died according to Indian figures.

After the talks with Rau, the first by Musharraf during his two-day visit, the Pakistani president also called for the political and military strategy in Afghanistan to be reviewed so that foreign troops could be withdrawn.

## Iraq no quagmire, says Rumsfeld

REUTERS, Washington

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on Monday remnants of toppled President Saddam Hussein's government have coalesced into a "terrorist network" in Iraq, but rejected the notion that U.S. and British forces are facing a guerrilla war or are stuck in a quagmire.

During a Pentagon briefing, Rumsfeld compared the postwar situation in Iraq to the difficult path taken by the United States after declaring its independence from Britain and before establishing a new Constitution and electing a president.

Rumsfeld also accused some members of the news media, who he did not identify, of hoping Iraq becomes another Vietnam.

When a reporter identified the Vietnam War during the briefing as "your classic quagmire," Rumsfeld cut her off and said: "There are so many cartoons where people, press people, are saying, 'Is it Vietnam yet?' hoping it is and wondering if it is. And it isn't. It's a different time. It's a different era. It's a different place."

The US military has launched numerous raids in recent days aimed at halting escalating attacks against the American and British troops occupying Iraq.

## Bhutanese deadline for ULFA rebels ends, but they are still there

AFP, Guwahati

An Indian separatist group is continuing to hold on to its bases inside Bhutan despite the passing of a deadline for them to leave the Himalayan kingdom, police said Tuesday.

"Our reports say militants belonging to the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) are still in their camps inside Bhutan," Khagen Sharma, head of police intelligence in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, told AFP.

The ULFA is fighting for an independent homeland in Assam. Indian intelligence officials say there could be more than 3,000 ULFA rebels in Bhutan who carry out hit-and-run guerrilla strikes on soldiers in Assam.

In March Bhutan issued an ultimatum to ULFA to vacate its

camps by June 30, failing which it said the government would remove them by military might.

"If the militants refuse to leave our country through the process of peaceful dialogue, we will be left with no option but to use our military forces to remove them," Bhutan's King Jigme Singhye Wangchuk said last month while announcing the deadline.

Bhutan issued the ultimatum after New Delhi sent its National Security Adviser, Brajesh Mishra, to the capital Thimphu to air India's serious concern at the presence of the Assamese militants in Bhutanese territory.

Bhutan says ULFA has nine camps in the country, including the outfit's general headquarters and military training bases inside thick jungles in the southern Samdrup Jhonkar district.

## HK marks 6th anniversary of handover

AP, Hong Kong

Patriotic music and flag waving marked the sixth anniversary of Hong Kong's return to China Tuesday, but protesters charged that the territory's freedoms could be crushed by a planned anti-subversion law.

The demonstrators chanted that Beijing should "end the one-party dictatorship" in mainland China, and one set fire to the Communist Party's flag.

The activists took aim at one of the biggest controversies to emerge since Britain handed Hong Kong back to China - the anti-subversion bill that carries life prison terms for many crimes against the state.

## Gas cylinder blast kills 7 in Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

The death toll from a gas explosion which wrecked a house in Tel Aviv was finalised at seven Tuesday, hospital sources said.

The blast on Monday killed a couple from Nigeria, including a nine-months pregnant woman, a five-year-old girl from the Philippines and four Israelis.

Police blamed the explosion on a gas bottle of faulty manufacture.

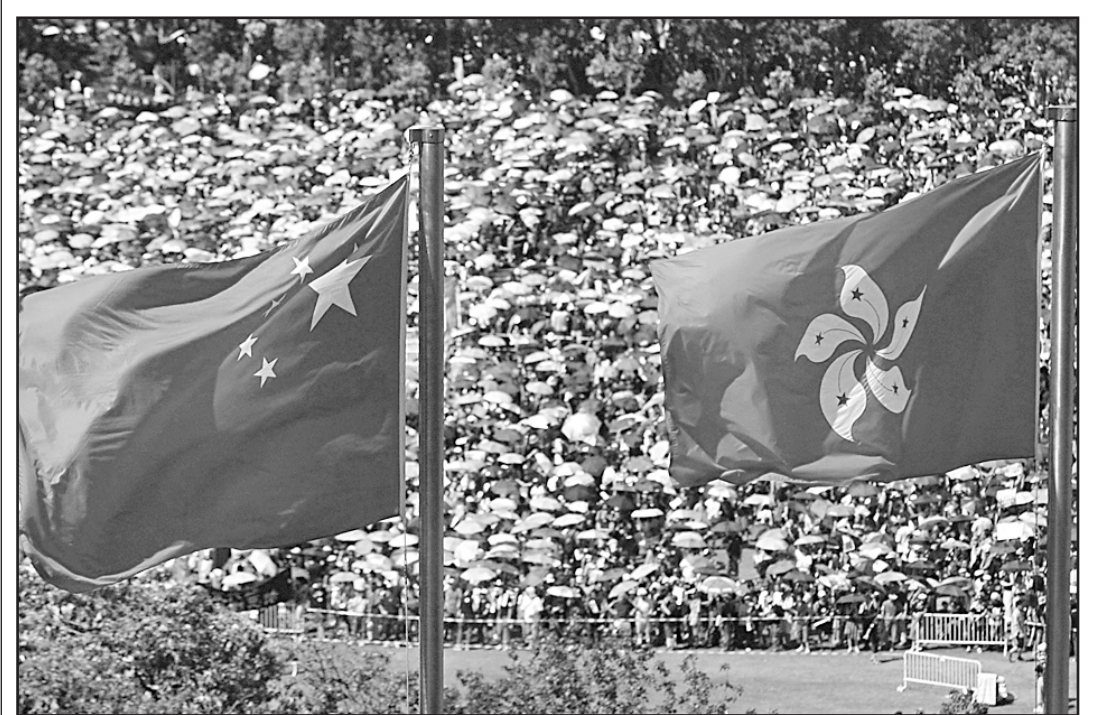


PHOTO: AFP

Chinese national and Hong Kong (R) flags fly over thousands of protesters at Victoria Park in Hong Kong on Tuesday. More than 200,000 people marched here to protest anti-subversion legislation which many in this former British colony fear could erode political freedom six years after its return to Chinese rule.