

Demonstrators burn US flags as Bush visits South Africa

AFP, Pretoria

Around 2,000 demonstrators waved placards and burnt US flags to protest the visit by President George W. Bush to South Africa Wednesday, saying he was aiming to make South Africa Washington's "policeman on the continent."

The protesters, marching under the banner of the Anti-War Coalition, a broad-based group of non-governmental organisations which opposed the US-led war in Iraq, toyi-toyed (a war-like shuffle) and carried placards saying "Go away, we have enough Bushes in Africa," an AFP photographer reported.

"A village in Texas is missing an idiot," another placard read.

The protesters handed over a memorandum to US embassy officials.

The memo charged Bush with coming to Africa to make "South Africa the US's policeman" on the continent, the SAPA news agency reported.

It also accused the US leader of visiting South Africa with "big juicy carrots to get American hands" on the continent's oil.



PHOTO: AFP

A Zimbabwean opposition MDC party supporter living in exile holds up a placard during a demonstration outside the US embassy in Pretoria July 9, as US President George W. Bush arrived in the South African capital on the second leg of his African tour. Protestors called on the US government to lend support to the Zimbabwean opposition movement.

Iranian student leaders arrested after blasting regime

AFP, Tehran

Three leading Iranian student activists were arrested Wednesday just minutes after holding a press conference to blast the regime for banning events to mark the fourth anniversary of bloody student clashes with security forces.

The arrests were made after activists from the Office to Consolidate Unity (OCU) -- a pro-reform student umbrella group -- said President Mohammad Khatami had failed in his drive for reforms and alleged the hardline-controlled judiciary was trying to prevent freedom of thought.

"Since we believe that Khatami's reforms have come to an end, we wanted to stage a sit-in opposite the UN," the OCU's Reza Ameri-Nassab said moments before he was arrested, adding the gathering was postponed on the advice of supportive MPs.

Awake after nearly two decades in coma

PTI, Mountain View, USA

A man regained consciousness after spending 19 years in a coma, greeting his mother who was waiting at his bedside.

"He started out with 'Mom' and surprised her and then it was 'Pepsi' and then it was 'milk,'" Alesha Badgley, Stone County Nursing and Rehabilitation Center social director, said on Tuesday. "And now it's anything he wants to say."

Terry Wallis, 39, had been at the centre since a car crash in July 1984.

Wallis' wife, Sandi, said he was riding with a friend when their car plunged into a creek. They were found the next day underneath a bridge. The friend was dead and Wallis was comatose.

He emerged from the coma about two weeks ago.

'Congress ready to form post-poll coalition'

PTI, Shimla

Indian opposition Congress President Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday said her party would be prepared to enter into "appropriate coalition or alignment" with secular parties in the next general elections.

"Taking into account the present political scenario, Congress would be prepared to enter into appropriate coalition or alignment with secular parties on the basis of mutual understanding but without compromising with its basic ideologies....," Gandhi said in her valedictory address to the party's brainstorming session here.

Winding up the three-day meet, attended by over 250 senior party leaders, she said on the issue of coalition the party had formulated a view at its Pachmarhi session in 1998 and Bangalore Plenary two years ago.

Gandhi asked all secular forces to "intensify" efforts to evolve a



PHOTO: AFP

Congress(I) President Sonia Gandhi.

strategy for fighting fundamentalists and ensure defeat of BJP and its allies in the elections.

On the Ayodhya issue, she said the party was "clear and consistent" that the dispute must be resolved through courts and all

parties must abide by the verdict.

She, however, said that her party was not against a negotiated settlement. "We firmly believe that such a settlement once reached must have a complete legal sanction and sanctity".

Gandhi said Congress was firmly committed to the Protection of Places of Worship Act, 1992, enacted by the party government, which freezes the status of all places of worship other than Ayodhya as on August 15th, 1947.

Asking party workers to get back to work in their respective constituencies after attending the brainstorming session here, Gandhi told them to implement the Shimla Declaration.

With a clear direction and firm resolve "we have to go to the masses so that in the coming times our policies, ideologies and programmes are able to garner support from all sections of society," she said.

Remember Daniel Pearl? Parents ask Musharraf

IANS, New York

Slain US reporter Daniel Pearl's parents have expressed deep displeasure over Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's silence on their son's murder during his visit to America.

In a letter titled Musharraf ignores an Open Wound, published in Pearl's paper the Wall Street Journal, Judea and Ruth Pearl described Pakistan's democracy as "grossly dysfunctional".

Referring to Musharraf's June 29 speech before the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles, they said, "We are deeply disappointed that, speaking in Daniel's hometown, President Musharraf did not explain the current standstill in the investigation, prosecution and apprehension of those responsi-

ble for Daniel's murder."

Noting that Musharraf had described Pakistan as a "functioning democracy", they said that it "appears grossly dysfunctional if it can permit repeated and unending postponements of court meetings in the case of Omar Sheikh, the man convicted on July 15, 2002, for masterminding Daniel's murder."

Pearl was kidnapped and murdered in Pakistan in early 2002 while working on a story on Islamic extremists.

Referring to Musharraf's comment on June 17 in Islamabad that he considered the Daniel Pearl case as his "history", they said that they disagreed.

"To us, to the international journalism community, and to the

many Americans who were shocked and betrayed by this brutal murder, the case would remain an open wound until two conditions are satisfied," they said.

The first of the two conditions was that all those involved in the planning and execution of the murder are brought to justice.

The second condition was that a monument to Daniel Pearl is erected in Karachi, reaffirming the ideals for which he stood: truth, humanity and dialogue, and denouncing the ideologies that took his life.

"Monuments unveil the hearts and minds of people. Is Pakistan's heart behind its president's vision?" the Pearls asked in conclusion.

Mass repatriation of Iraqi refugees ruled out: UN

AFP, New York

The UN refugee agency on Wednesday said that it was ruling out the mass repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees this year because of growing insecurity in the country.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will put the priority on small scale returns this year aimed mainly at relieving the refugee burden in neighbouring countries, UNHCR Iraq envoy Dennis McNamara said after his second mission to Iraq in a month.

He will urge Britain, France, Germany and other European countries, which want to start the repatriation of tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers they host, to be patient at a meeting in Geneva next Monday.

"I don't think refugee returns to Iraq are going to be a massive, large scale exercise this year, it is I hope a process where we'll lay the ground work in 2003 for larger scale returns in 2004," McNamara said.

Israeli soldiers shoot dead Palestinian in West Bank

Abbas quits Fatah committee, cancels meeting with Sharon

REUTERS, Jenin

Israeli soldiers shot dead a Palestinian in the West Bank on Wednesday during an operation to arrest his brother, a wanted militant, Palestinian security sources and witnesses said.

Israeli military sources said soldiers opened fire after being shot at. The incident followed a claim of responsibility from Islamic militants in Jenin for a suicide bombing that killed an Israeli woman on Monday, violating a 10-day-old truce.

Palestinian security sources said Israeli forces entered the village of Burqin close to Jenin early on Wednesday, burst into a Palestinian home and arrested a 22-year-old militant. The sources said that moments later soldiers fired at the neighboring home of the militant's 27-year-old brother, who they said was shot and killed while looking out a window. They said the man's wife was shot in the head and seriously wounded.

Meanwhile The Guardian reported that the Palestinian prime

minister, Mahmoud Abbas, resigned from the central committee of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement and called off a meeting with Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister, amid a rebellion within the Palestinian leadership over his handling of negotiations with the Israelis.

But Mr Arafat initially refused to accept the resignation and the committee - the political backbone of the Palestinian Authority - went into a crisis meeting that could resolve the power struggle over the fate of the US-led road map to peace, which brought Mr Abbas to power.

The crisis, which flared at a Fatah central committee meeting on Monday evening, has been brought to a head by Mr Abbas's failure to secure the release of the bulk of 6,000 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli hands. They include more than 1,000 detained without trial, among them children.

At the weekend, Mr Sharon's cabinet reluctantly voted to free fewer than 400 people but then set conditions, ruled out the release of

members of Hamas or Islamic Jihad, and said the process would not begin for weeks.

Palestinian anger was compounded by one of Mr Sharon's ministers, Avigdor Lieberman, who opposed the releases by saying he would be happy to drown the prisoners in the Dead Sea.

Palestinian sources said Mr Abbas faced a barrage of criticism at the Fatah central committee meeting.

Members accused him of giving too much ground to the Israelis in return for very little and of bowing to every American demand, including White House pressure not to make a public furor over Mr Sharon's failure to keep to his commitment to dismantle illegal Jewish outposts in the West Bank. More than one member demanded that Mr Abbas resign.

Yesterday, officials close to Mr Abbas said he postponed a meeting with Mr Sharon scheduled for today in protest at the failure to release more detainees.

A senior Palestinian official,

who declined to be named, accused the Israeli government of deliberately jeopardising the US-led road map to peace.

"The Israelis surely understand the importance of the prisoner issue to our public, so we can only think they are playing games with us," he said. "From the beginning we have said this process will only work when the Palestinian people have something to show for it. Abu Mazen has said the intifada is over, he has brought Hamas and Islamic Jihad into a ceasefire, he is doing everything the Americans want."

The crisis over the prisoner release has compounded a slide in Palestinian public support for Mr Abbas which began to slump at last month's summit with President George Bush and Mr Sharon when Mr Abbas renounced the intifada.

"Abu Mazen's position is very rocky," said a senior Palestinian official. "He's appointed, not elected. Public support is falling and that matters because what they think of Abu Mazen is what they think of the road map."

El Baradei to step up pressure on Iran

AFP, Tehran

The head of the UN's nuclear watchdog arrived in Tehran Wednesday for a day of talks he hopes will convince the Islamic republic to open up its suspect nuclear programme to more rigorous inspections.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director general Mohamed ElBaradei wants Iran to immediately and unconditionally sign, ratify and implement an additional protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

That would grant his inspection teams the power to make surprise visits to suspect facilities. At present, Iran is only obliged to accept pre-arranged visits to sites it chooses to declare.

Official sources said ElBaradei was to spend much of the morning in talks on the thorny issue with Iran's atomic energy chief and Vice President Gholam-Reza Aghazadeh.

He is also due to meet Iran's

reformist President Mohammad Khatami and Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi.

Although natural resource-rich Iran has fiercely denied US allegations that its atomic energy programme is merely a cover for a top-secret bid to acquire nuclear weapons, officials are so far showing no sign of buckling to the international demands.

This comes despite mounting alarm in Washington over the nature of the programme and Iran's ballistic missile development, especially following the announcement here Monday that a missile capable of hitting Israel had been successfully tested and deployed in the armed forces.

And on Tuesday, US Senator Sam Brownback -- a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee -- warned that Iran may succeed in producing a nuclear weapon within little more than two years.

This followed fresh allegations from an exiled Iranian opposition

group that Iran has two secret nuclear sites that have not been declared to the IAEA.

But Iranian officials are expected to tell ElBaradei that they see demands for more inspections as being driven by old arch-enemy the United States, and that while they have nothing to hide, their signing of the protocol can only come after lengthy talks that would bring an end to what they see as unfair treatment.

According to the terms of the NPT, signatories are obliged to provide mutual assistance in peaceful nuclear technology. Only Russia is helping Iran's power project near the southern city of Bushehr.

In an exclusive interview with the headline Jomhuri Islami newspaper published Wednesday, powerful former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said Iran would show cooperation with the IAEA, but did not say whether that meant signing the additional protocol.

2 more wanted Iraqi leaders in US custody

REUTERS, Baghdad

US forces have captured former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's interior minister and another wanted top official surrendered, the US military said on Wednesday.

Both men were on a US list of most wanted officials linked to the ousted leader's government.

The military said in a statement Mahmoud Diyab al-Ahmed, former interior minister, was captured by coalition forces on Tuesday. It did not say where he was detained.

Ahmed was number 29 and seven of spades on the US "deck of cards" of 55 most wanted Iraqis given to US troops in Iraq.

Also on Tuesday, Mizban Khidr Hadi gave himself up to U.S. forces in Baghdad, the statement said. Hadi, a senior member of the Baath Party and the Revolutionary Command Council, was number 23 on the list and the nine of hearts.

The military said the incidents were not related.



PHOTO: AFP

Two Iranian women pray as they listen to a Muslim preacher reciting the Quran in Singapore, July 9. Iranians gathered for a private farewell to Ladan and Laleh Bijani, the twin sisters who died within minutes of achieving their 29-year-old separation.

Failed surgery fuels ethics debate

Iranians around the world mourn Ladan-Laleh

REUTERS, Singapore

Prayers were held on Wednesday for conjoined Iranian twins who died after a marathon separation operation as a debate erupted over whether the pioneering surgery should have even been attempted.

The 29-year-old sisters, Ladan and Laleh Bijani, had made it clear they were willing to risk death in high-risk surgery for a chance to pursue separate dreams and live out their lives in different cities.

"They gambled and have lost," was the verdict of Singapore's Straits Times newspaper, which nevertheless noted the unprecedented procedure was "history in the making".

Iranians in the city state were in a somber mood as they gathered to hold prayers for the two women at a private home.

"I think the doctors have an obligation to fulfill the wishes of their patients," said Ali Homayouni, 25, an Iranian law student who had visited the twins in the hospital.

"It was their duty to make sure they do the best job they could given the circumstances," he said.

But medical experts were more critical, concerned about the haste and motives behind the surgery.

"There are troubling aspects about this case," Dr Ian Kerridge, Associate Professor in bioethics at

Sydney University's Center for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine told Reuters.

"...and one of them was the statement by one of the surgeons that they found it was more difficult than they had expected. To me that sets off a little bit of an alarm bell."

Kerridge suggested doctors could have let the girls wait for a year, talk to people who have not had the surgery or to people who felt it was wrong.

The man who had adopted and brought up the sisters in Iran, Alireza Safaian, a doctor himself, wept as he spoke to Reuters at his home in southwestern Tehran of the decision by his daughters and the Singapore doctors to go ahead with an operation.

"When they took them to Singapore, I knew they would bring back their bodies. They took them there and killed them."

Twins joined at the head occur once in every two million live births. A separation operation had never been tried on adults.

Dr Keith Goh, who led the team of 28 specialists and 100 assistants in the 52-hour long operation, defended the decision.

"I think that for those of us who were here over these last three days, for those of us who flew in from all over the world...the time and commitment is a convincing indication of their belief that the decision is correct," Goh told a news conference.



PHOTO: AFP

US soldiers and Iraqi police work together in arresting alleged looters along Saadun Street in the centre of Baghdad, July 9. The US military police has been training former Iraqi policemen and new recruits in policing methods as they try to re-establish law and order in cities and towns around Iraq. Three troubled months after the fall of Saddam Hussein on April 9, United States is still confronting "complex security" problems in Iraq but the next few weeks should see dramatic changes, top US official said.