



Spectators gather around the MetLife Blimp at the United States Air Force Museum on Friday in Dayton, Ohio. The blimps were part of a blimp meet though the blimps were not able to fly due to high winds. The city of Dayton is celebrating the 100th anniversary of powered flight, which was invented in Dayton by the Wright brothers.

Bush comes under Democrats' fire

Iraqi council prepares for its first meet

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's first representative body since Saddam Hussein fell from power prepared Saturday to hold its inaugural meeting as attacks on US troops continued more than three months since the end of the war.

In Washington, as the CIA took the rap for US President George W. Bush's erroneous claim that Saddam sought nuclear arms, opposition Democrats called for heads to roll and Bush's popularity ratings plummeted to their lowest level since January 2003.

Sunday's landmark meeting of the new transitory governing council in Baghdad has been declared a major step by coalition forces desperate to restore order and placate Iraqi citizens seething at the slow pace of US-led efforts to restore basic services and security and introduce a democratic government.

The council, with 25 members reflecting the make-up of Iraqi society, is charged with mapping Iraq's path towards elections -- and is meeting almost 35 years to the day since Saddam's Baath party came to power.

But Iraq's first tentative steps

towards democracy came amid ongoing violence, with more attacks on US forces in the flashpoint town of Fallujah, west of the capital.

Two people were arrested after a separate blast rocked the Abu Ghraib prison, west of Baghdad, leaving one US soldier slightly wounded.

A US army patrol also came under fire on the outskirts of Fallujah late Friday, but suffered no casualties.

US military vehicles patrolled Baghdad neighbourhoods Saturday appealing by loudspeaker for Iraqis to help them restore law and order to the capital terrorised by looters and armed robbers since the regime fell.

The credibility of the unelected governing council is considered crucial to coalition efforts to rebuild Iraq and get its oil-based export economy up and running to fund the massive costs of reconstruction.

Its success will also be vital if Bush is to reverse plummeting US public support as the majority find the number of US casualties in Iraq "unacceptable", according to a new poll Saturday.

Fifty-two percent of respondents to a Washington Post-ABC poll said

the number of casualties was unacceptable, while 44 percent found them acceptable and three percent had no opinion.

At least 31 US soldiers have been killed in guerrilla attacks in Iraq since May 1, when the United States declared an end to major combat operations.

Fully 50 percent of polled Americans said they thought the Bush administration "intentionally exaggerated its evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction."

Democrats turned up the heat on the Bush administration Friday, calling for an independent investigation into whether the White House misled the public over the Iraqi threat before the war, and insisting that heads should roll over the growing scandal.

In a surprise statement, Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet took responsibility for a key error that Bush had included in his January 28 State of the Union Address to Congress, that Iraq was trying to procure nuclear material from Africa.

Tenet admitted that the statement: "the British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa," should "never have been included in the text written for the president."

Former Vermont Governor Howard Dean called for a full-scale investigation into whether the US government ignored the CIA's faulty intelligence on Iraq's weapons programs.

"We need to find out what the president knew and when he knew it," Dean added, resurrecting language used during the investigation into the Watergate political scandal, which led to the resignation of disgraced President Richard Nixon in August 1974.

Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, another Democratic presidential hopeful, also demanded a full-scale inquiry, saying in a statement that the controversy "breaks the basic bond of trust we must have with our leaders in times of war and terrorism."

The White House has been on the defensive for several days over reports that the CIA gave the Bush administration advance warning last year that documents alleging Iraq had tried to buy enriched uranium from Niger were false.

Kashmir's former ruling party deserts Vajpayee

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's former ruling party on Saturday pulled out of the Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's coalition in New Delhi, 10 months after it was swept from power in provincial polls.

Omar Abdullah, the leader of the National Conference, told reporters he would send a fax to Vajpayee's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) severing support to the coalition.

"It's the right decision and should have been taken earlier. It's part of a reorienting of the National Conference, and I couldn't do it by remaining in the NDA," Abdullah said.

Earlier this week, the embattled

Blair faces fresh 'dodgy dossier' claims

Reuters, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair faced fresh claims of misleading the public over Iraq on Saturday after a newspaper reported the government's first weapons dossier had lifted old information from the Internet.

The Independent newspaper said the dossier, published last September, contained at least six separate items on Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction that were lifted from reports up to 21 months old.

The report will probably cause further embarrassment for the government which has already acknowledged it made a mistake in failing to credit work by an American PhD student used in its discredited second dossier in February.

A spokesman for Blair declined to comment on the latest newspaper claims, insisting: "We have said all we have to say."

AFP adds: The British govern-

ment faced a fresh allegation Saturday that last September's dossier on Iraq used information lifted from the Internet to reinforce the case for war just as did the later, now discredited "dodgy" dossier, published in February.

The Independent newspaper reported that the document showed at least six separate items on Saddam's alleged weapons of mass destruction were lifted from reports up to 21 months old.

Downing Street has acknowledged that it made a mistake in failing to credit work by an American student used in its February dossier, but has stoutly defended the integrity of the September document.

But The Independent claimed that the earlier dossier drew heavily on sources already in the public domain.

Pakistan's bomb is not 'Islamic': Saudi prince

PTI, Washington

Stressing that nuclear proliferation must be seen in terms of "regional realities", a key Saudi military strategist has said Saudi Arabia does not accept the notion that "Pakistan's nuclear bomb is an Islamic bomb".

"(Nuclear) Proliferation must be seen in terms of regional realities -- the Israeli monopoly of nuclear weaponry, defiance of non-proliferation regimes by India and Pakistan and reported efforts by both Iran and Iraq to acquire nuclear weapons," Prince Naeef bin Ahmed Al-Saud, responsible for Saudi military planning, said in the Joint Forces Quarterly, published by the Institute for National Security Studies for the National Defence University.



Indian devotees gather at the cave-shrine of Amarnath on Friday some 115 km from the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar. Though this year's pilgrimage comes at a time of increased hopes for peace in Kashmir, Indian security forces have been deployed in strength to keep Kashmiri rebels at bay as they have attacked the procession in the past.

Hurriyat elects new leader

PTI, Srinagar

All-Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) -- an umbrella organisation of 25 Kashmiri separatist groups -- elected Moulvi Abbas Ansari, leader of the Ittehadul Muslimeen, as its new chairman on Saturday.

The election was "unanimous", and took place at an unscheduled meeting in Srinagar, outgoing chairman Abdul Ghani Bhat told reporters.

Ansari becomes the first Shia to head the conference. He had admitted to being in race for the post in a recent interview.

Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) chairman Yaseen Malik was also believed to have been in the race. He was conspicuous by his absence at the meet.

Arafat must be sidelined for progress in ME: Sharon

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on Saturday urged Europe to distance itself from Yasser Arafat, charging that the Palestinian leader is an obstacle to the peace process, as he prepared to make a trip to Europe beginning this weekend.

It appeared likely Sharon, who gave a similar interview to Friday's Italian daily Corriere della Sera, would use the trip to try to bring further pressure on Arafat.

"Arafat still controls the larger part of their armed forces, and part of the money, and he has got all those phone calls from leaders, mostly from Europe," Sharon told

The Daily Telegraph.

"Every act of this nature only postpones progress. Most European countries are doing that. They are undermining Abu Mazen," Sharon said.

Sharon will also be holding talks with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw on Monday, then meeting with the leaders of Britain's Jewish community on Tuesday before travelling to Norway on Wednesday.

The peace process along the international "roadmap" has continued to advance haltingly since Arafat ended his month-long stay in Europe.

Sharon is to travel to London on Sunday to meet British counterpart Tony Blair for talks aimed at advancing the Middle East peace process and mending strained ties between the two countries.

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Khatami offers to resign if Iranians want

AB, Tehran

President Mohammad Khatami said in a speech he would resign if people want him to, amid growing public dissatisfaction over his failure to meet promises of democratic reform, a newspaper reported Saturday.

It was the first time Khatami has publicly offered to resign. Iran's formerly popular president has come under increasing pressure in recent months to stand firm against unselected hard-line clerics and fulfill election promises of freedoms and democratic change in Iran.

"We are not masters of people but servants of this nation. If this nation says 'We don't want you, we will go,' Khatami was quoted as saying by the government-owned daily, Iran.

Koreas agree on peaceful fix to nuke flap

AB, Seoul

South Korea and North Korea agreed Saturday to seek a peaceful solution to the dispute over the communist nation's suspected nuclear weapons program, but negotiators offered no specific steps.

A joint statement issued after all-night talks fell short of South Korean hopes it could persuade its northern neighbor to participate in multilateral talks involving the United States, China, Japan and Russia.

North Korea maintained its position that it wants one-on-one talks with the United States.

The nuclear dispute flared in October when US officials said North Korea admitted it had a clandestine nuclear program in violation of a 1994 agreement with Washington.

The United States and its allies suspended fuel shipments promised under the 1994 deal, and Pyongyang retaliated by expelling UN monitors, restarting nuclear facilities and withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Saturday's statement in which the Koreas agreed to resolve their differences through an "appropriate method of dialogue" was a departure from the North's previous

ously hostile rhetoric.

"The South and North expressed concern over the recent situation on the Korean Peninsula and agreed that joint efforts are needed to sustain peace and safety on the peninsula," negotiators said in the statement.

South Korea said it believed the meetings in Seoul "created the atmosphere" for North Korea's participation in multilateral talks.

South Korea has warned that it might curtail reconciliation efforts with the North if the communist state does not take action to ease tensions over its nuclear development.



This photo released by Carnival Cruise Lines on Friday shows the new Carnival Glory being escorted by water-squirting tugs as the liner arrives in Cape Canaveral, Florida. Constructed in Monfalcone, Italy, at a cost of 500 million USD, the 952-foot (290-meter) liner is to be the largest ship sailing weekly Caribbean cruises from Central Florida. It can accommodate more than 3,000 guests and is the 19th ship in the fleet of Miami-based Carnival Cruise Lines. Former astronaut Sally Ride is scheduled to christen the ship on July 14.

VHP asks Muslims to give up 3 disputed sites

AFP, New Delhi

Hardline Hindu leader Ashok Singhal Saturday demanded Indian Muslims give up three disputed religious sites to Hindus for the sake of smooth relations between the two communities.

Singhal, international vice president of the militant Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council), accused the Muslim community of adopting a "rigid attitude."

"Having adopted such a rigid attitude, Muslims cannot live in the society," he said, as quoted by the Press Trust of India news agency.

"They should not challenge the self-respect of Hindus. They have to reach an understanding with Hindus and give up their claim on the three temples," he said.

Singhal said the status of three places in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh was "non-negotiable": Ayodhya, Kashi and Mathura.

The three Hindu pilgrimage sites all have shrine areas claimed by both Hindus and Muslims.

The most explosive dispute is over Ayodhya, where thousands of Hindu zealots in December 1992 razed a 16th-century mosque, believing it had been built over the ruins of a Hindu temple that

marked the birthplace of warrior god Ram.

In Kashi and Mathura, temples and mosques exist side by side.

The demolition of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya set off nationwide riots between Hindus and Muslims that left at least 2,000 people dead and hundreds of thousands homeless.

The fate of the site is in the hands of a court, which has ordered an archaeological dig to check the Hindus' claim of a former temple.

An attempt by a prominent Hindu pontiff, Acharya Jayendra Saraswati, to solve the Ayodhya dispute was rejected a week ago by India's main Muslim body the All India Muslim Personal Law Board.

Saraswati had proposed that Hindus build a temple in an area adjoining the disputed site while negotiations continued.

But India's main Muslim body rejected Saraswati's suggestions Sunday saying that it looked on them as "thinly veiled threats".

The VHP has close links with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP party, but the latter has played down its ties to the temple construction movement since coming to power in 1998.