

2 'would-be bombers' caught in Bethlehem

AFP, Bethlehem

Palestinian authorities arrested two militants in the West Bank town of Bethlehem who were planning to carry out suicide attacks against Israel, a Palestinian security source said yesterday.

The pair were arrested "in the last few days", the source said without revealing their names.

One was a member of Islamic Jihad while the other belonged to the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed faction linked to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

The Israeli authorities handed over security control in Bethlehem to the Palestinians in July.

'Iraqis, Americans secretly tried to avert Iraq war'

AFP, Washington

Iraqis and Americans secretly tried last February to avoid war in Iraq through negotiations mediated by a Lebanese businessman, US media reported Wednesday.

ABC News reported the secret meeting involved a Lebanese-American businessman and Iraqi intelligence officials and came just days after Secretary of State Colin Powell laid out the US case for war at the United Nations in February.

Imad Hage, the president of the American Underwriters Group insurance company and known in the region as having contacts at the Pentagon, told the US television network that he was first approached by an Iraqi intelligence official who arrived unannounced at his office in Beirut.

A week later, according to Hage, he and an associate were asked to come to Baghdad, when Hage says he met with Saddam Hussein's chief of intelligence, General Tahir Habbush, who is still of the US military's most wanted list.

"Based on my meeting with his man," said Hage, "I think an effort was there to avert war. They were prepared to meet with high-ranking US officials."

Hage said Habbush repeated public denials by the regime that Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction and offered to allow several thousand US agents or scientists to carry out inspections, according to ABC News.

UN panel targets US drive for cloning ban

REUTERS, United Nations

A UN committee was poised on Thursday to derail for two years a US-led drive for a broad global ban on all forms of human cloning, including medical research on stem cells, diplomats said.

A motion to defer drafting of the treaty until 2005, to be put forward by Iran on behalf of the 57-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference, appeared to be gathering steam in the UN General Assembly's legal committee, diplomats on both sides of the battlesaid.

A defeat would be a setback for Washington, US anti-abortion groups and many heavily Catholic nations, and a victory for countries active in the medical and pharmaceutical fields and scientists who see promise in stem cell research.

"There's a good chance this motion will be adopted, although it is not a sure thing," said one envoy, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Sharon paves way for prisoner swap deal with Hezbollah

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was paving the way yesterday for a Hezbollah prisoner swap deal likely to see hundreds of Palestinians freed as fresh talks took place to tackle a dispute delaying the formation of a new Palestinian government.

Sharon faces a major battle to persuade fellow ministers to back the prisoner exchange, but the premier believes that failure to push through a deal could lead to the death of an Israeli held by the Lebanese militia.

"It's a matter of life and death," Sharon was quoted as saying by the top-selling Yedioth Aharonot daily on Thursday.

"The ministers must decide on the fate of a fellow Israeli. For my part, I am for saving him."

Sharon's office announced Wednesday that the exchange deal would be put before ministers at the weekly cabinet on Sunday, but reports say that a majority oppose the proposal.

It follows lengthy German-led mediation efforts between the two sides which are likely to lead to the release of Israeli businessman Elhanan Tannenbaum and the bodies of three Israeli soldiers in exchange for the freedom of a number of Hezbollah figures and hundreds of Palestinians.

Israeli media reports said that 400 Palestinians would be set free along with 19 members of the Shiite Muslim militia.

Tannenbaum, who was abducted in October 2000, has been accused by Hezbollah of being an Israeli spy. There have been widespread reports that Tannenbaum was involved in dubious business deals at the time of his abduction.

The prospect of a deal has provoked fierce debate in Israel with many commentators warning it will encourage further kidnappings.

Others mocked Sharon's government for its apparent readiness to agree a deal with the headline Hezbollah, after it undermined the position of moderate former Palestinian premier Mahmud Abbas, by refusing to free more than a fraction of the estimated 6,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails.

Abbas resigned exactly two months, plunging the Palestinian leadership into political turmoil from which it is still struggling to emerge.

His successor, Ahmed Qorei, has so far been unable to persuade veteran Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to accept his choice of interior minister, stalling the formation of a new government.

The central committee of the mainstream Fatah movement was due to meet on Thursday morning in the West Bank town of

Ramallah after two previous gatherings Wednesday failed to resolve the impasse.

Qorei had been appointed by Arafat as head of an "emergency" eight-man cabinet whose one-month term of office expired on Tuesday.

He was then appointed head of a "caretaker" government but Palestinian finance minister Salam Fayad said Thursday that the new arrangement had no legal basis.

"I consider that the mandate of the transition cabinet of which I was a part expired on November 4," Fayad told AFP. "I think that the law is very clear on this subject -- the mandate of a temporary government cannot be prolonged unless the necessary legal steps are followed, which has not happened here."

Meanwhile a Palestinian woman was shot dead Thursday when she was hit in the neck by a bullet during an early morning Israeli army raid in the northern West Bank city of Nablus, Palestinian medical and security sources said.

Intiaz Abu Ras, 38, was shot inside her home in Nablus's old city, the Casbah.

Israeli military sources said they were investigating the incident, adding that troops had returned fire after being shot at themselves from several different directions during the raid.

US Congress doubles troops' death benefit

AP, Washington

As the US death toll rises in Iraq, Congress has approved doubling the death benefit for the families of fallen troops and more tax breaks for military personnel involved in the war against terrorism.

Wednesday's 420-0 vote in the House sends the package of enhanced military benefits to President Bush just a few days ahead of Veterans Day.

"It's long overdue," said Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Texas. "It's been a long time since 9-11, and we are trying to take care of our military."

Under the bill, families of soldiers killed while on active duty would get a \$12,000 tax-free payment, up from the current \$6,000.

The increased death gratuity, meant to offset the cost of a funeral and other immediate expenses, combines with benefits already available to the survivors of soldiers killed in war. Families typically get payment from a \$250,000 life insurance policy.

Families do not pay federal income taxes for the year the service member died. Surviving spouses, while still unmarried, and surviving children get a monthly dependency compensation payment. They are also eligible for full Social Security death and survivors' benefits.

Pope tells Putin he's 'praying for Russia'

AFP, Vatican City

Pope John Paul II told Russian President Vladimir Putin that he was "praying for Russia" during a wide ranging 30-minute meeting at the Vatican on Wednesday evening, Vatican sources said. The 83-year-old pontiff and the president also tackled the thorny issue of relations between the Holy See and the Russian Orthodox Church, which has accused it of proselytising in territory traditionally associated with Orthodoxy.

"Both parties expressed the hope for a positive development between the Holy See and the Moscow Patriarchy," Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said, describing the talks as "very cordial".

John Paul II raised the situation of Catholics in Russia and their "ecclesiastic structures", following the Russian Patriarch's Alexis II's condemnation of the pope's creation last year of four new dioceses in Russia.

N Korea to block US from nuke sites

AP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday it will block US efforts to remove equipment and technical data from two nuclear power plants under construction in the communist state, a news agency reported.

The United States and its allies said this week they want to suspend construction of the \$4.6 billion power plants project.

"We will never allow the transferring of equipment, facilities and technical documents out of the Kumho district unless compensations for the stopping of construction of light-water reactors are made," the North Korean spokesman told Pyongyang's state-run news agency KCNA.

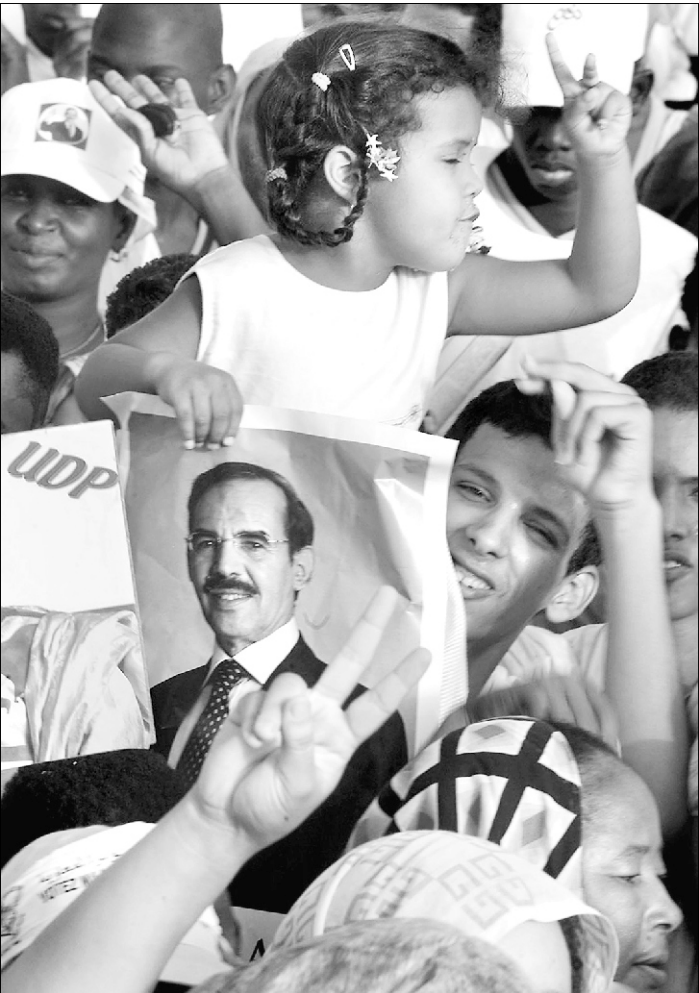


PHOTO: AFP

People attend an election rally for Mauritanian president Maouiya Ould Taya, candidate in the forthcoming presidential elections at the Nouakchott Olympic stadium on Wednesday. The election will take place today.

Bush bans late-term abortion procedure

Opponents mount court challenge

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush signed a law on Wednesday banning a late-term abortion procedure, the first government restriction on abortion rights in the United States in three decades.

Within an hour of Bush signing the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act, a federal judge in Nebraska partially blocked the law from being implemented, in one of a series of legal challenges around the country.

The US Congress, where Bush's Republican party enjoys a slim majority, approved the prohibition on what anti-abortion groups describe as "partial birth abortion" in late October.

Bush signed the legislation before a crowd of some 400 people gathered at a government building named for former president Ronald Reagan, arguably the Republicans' most popular living leader.

"For years, a terrible form of violence has been directed against children who

are inches from birth, while the law looked the other way," Bush told the audience before signing the act.

"Today, at last, the American people and our government have confronted the violence and come to the defense of the innocent child," he said.

The bill defines a "partial-birth abortion" as any termination of a pregnancy in which the fetus, or its head, is taken outside the mother's body before being killed.

The method is usually used in the fifth and sixth months of pregnancy. The bill would allow the technique if it were necessary to save a mother's life.

"By acting to prevent this practice, the elected branches of our government have affirmed a basic standard of humanity, the duty of the strong to protect the weak," Bush said.

In a reference to court challenges to the law, he said "the executive branch will vigorously defend this law against any who would try to overturn it in the

courts."

The US Supreme Court struck down a similar state law in Nebraska in 2000.

In addition to the latest Nebraska case, legal challenges were also underway in New York and California.

Bush's Republican party officially opposes all abortions, and the issue resonates with many of the religious conservatives the president hopes will turn out in droves to support his reelection in November 2004.

The US Congress has voted twice since 1995 to ban the procedure, but on both occasions then-president Bill Clinton vetoed the bills, and Congress failed to muster enough votes to override his vetoes.

The US Supreme Court legalized abortion in 1973 and the abortion rate is presently at its lowest in 30 years, with 21.3 abortions registered for each 1,000 women aged between 15 and 44. In 1981, that rate was as high as 29.3 abortions.

American truck painter admits to 48 murders

REUTERS, Seattle

A truck painter pleaded guilty on Wednesday to strangling 48 drug addicts and prostitutes to death -- in a killing spree known as the Green River murders -- and said in a confession, "I killed so many women I have a hard time keeping them straight."

Gary Leon Ridgway, 54, said in a confession read by a prosecutor in open court that he murdered the women because he hated prostitutes and knew that they would not be missed. As details of his grisly crimes unfolded, relatives of the victims wept in court and the owlish-looking Ridgway showed no emotion.

Ridgway, who some law enforcement officials believe may have killed more than 100 women, pleaded guilty in return for prosecutors' agreement to spare his life.

Ridgway's confession included details of how he gained his victims' confidence by showing them pictures of his son, had sex with them and then took pleasure in strangling them from behind, often in his house or truck.

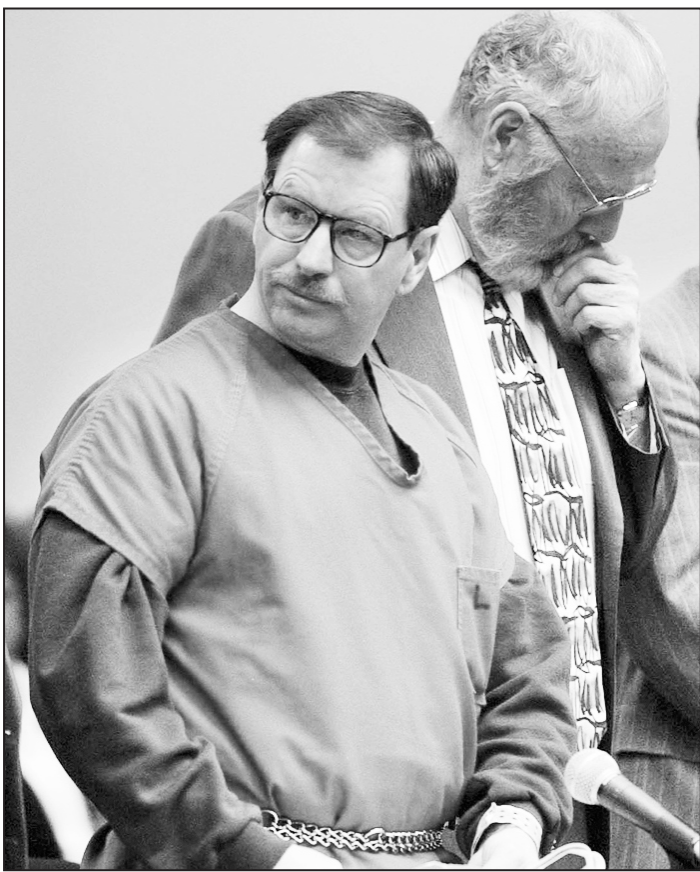


PHOTO: AFP

Gary Ridgway (front) listens as individual charges are read in the King County Courthouse in Seattle, Washington Wednesday. Ridgway, 54, pleaded guilty to murdering 48 prostitutes and runaways, making him the worst serial killer in US history.

58 nations failed to report on steps to fight terrorism: UN

AP, United Nations

A United Nations Security Council committee has named 58 countries that failed to meet an October 31 deadline to submit reports on measures they are taking to stop supporting, financing and providing sanctuary to terrorists.

Almost all are developing nations in Africa, Asia and the Pacific islands.

The committee is monitoring what all 191 UN member states are doing to implement a security council resolution adopted less than three weeks after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. The resolution required UN members to adopt legislation and take administrative measures and other steps to halt all support for terrorists.