



Iraqi policemen stand guard during a demonstration yesterday in central Baghdad. Police closed off Baghdad's main commercial thoroughfare for hundreds of Iraqis demonstrating against terrorism amid persistent fears of attack by anti-US insurgents.

US considers elections for provisional Iraq govt

AFP, Washington

The United States is considering holding elections for a provisional Iraqi government rather than have its members selected by regional caucuses, The Washington Post newspaper said yesterday.

The possible change in the US plan for a transition to Iraqi sovereignty comes after the leader of Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, on Thursday rejected the current US-led coalition's blueprint for transition and demanded elections at all levels of the Iraqi administration.

"Elections are now a possibility," a senior US official close to Iraq's political transition process told the daily. "We're scrambling to find a solution."

The new thinking in US plans for post-war Iraq also coincides with US President George W. Bush's surprise

visit Thursday to Iraq.

Besides meeting US soldiers on the US Thanksgiving holiday, Bush met with some leaders of the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council.

On November 15, the US-led coalition announced it would hand over power to a provisional Iraqi government selected by notables to be convened in each of Iraq's 18 provinces, abandoning its previous insistence on prior elections under a constitution approved by referendum.

After Sistani's rejection, however, US officials told the daily that the Bush administration may be forced to organize elections to satisfy Sistani.

"We were surprised that Sistani did not bless the plan," a senior administration official said.

US officials said they were now waiting for a clear statement from

Sistani about what he wants -- Sistani's reaction to the coalition plan was conveyed to reporters by the current head of Governing Council, Jalal Talabani, after he met with the top Shiite cleric in the central holy city of Najaf.

"We're waiting to see what he says. If he says no to the caucuses, then we have to figure out a way to get elections done," the senior US official said.

Brushing aside the coalition's insistence that elections of any sort were impossible before 2005, Sistani insisted that the ration-card system in force here for more than a decade gave ample basis for an electoral register.

Another option US officials said they were considering was to hold elections in Shiite and Kurdish areas, but only caucuses in Sunni areas, where the worst anti-coalition violence is taking place.

Palestinians angry at Sharon's ultimatum

AP, Tel Aviv

Palestinians reacted with anger at Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's warning that Israel might seize land if peace negotiations fail, though Sharon also said Israel must give up territory for peace.

"You do not have unlimited time," Sharon told a news conference on Thursday, addressing the Palestinians, adding that if he feels the Palestinians are not serious about negotiating a peace deal, he may take unilateral steps. "Maybe (the Palestinians) can get things now that they won't be able to get then," he said.

The Palestinians, who claim all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip for a state, responded to Sharon's warning of impatience and annexation with a sharp rebuke.

"This is an unprecedented, arrogant statement. It is rude and it lacks any vision," Palestinian Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath said. "He should declare that he is committed to the 'road map' and implement all the Israeli commitments that are in this map," referring to a US-backed peace plan.

Sharon would not define "unilateral steps," saying only that they would make

Israeli life easier. The term is understood to mean he might order people to withdraw from some isolated Jewish settlements.

Netzarim, a heavily guarded enclave in Gaza, would be at the top of most lists for evacuation, and Sharon indicated a shift about the settlement.

Up to now, Sharon has said it is essential for Israel's security because it overlooks Gaza's port. But at the news conference, he refused to give any guarantees.

"I won't give any promise to any person about any place," Sharon said. "It is clear that in the future we will not be in all the places we are now," conceding that in a peace deal, Israel would have to give up territory in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Sharon's talk about possible concessions was aimed at an increasingly impatient gallery of critics, ranging from US officials to bickering coalition partners to ordinary Israelis despondent over worsening security and living standards.

Sharon said Thursday he remained committed to the road map, which both sides accepted in principle in June, although Israel attached 14

reservations. The plan calls for a Palestinian state by 2005.

But Sharon made clear that he will not fully abide by a road map requirement that Israel dismantle the scores of West Bank settlement outposts, many of them no more than a few trailer homes, which were established in recent years. He said some outposts have "supreme security value" and that "what is necessary will remain" a statement Palestinians called a blatant violation of the plan.

Sharon has also ignored the road map's call for a freeze on construction in the 150 veteran Jewish settlements where about 220,000 settlers live.

The Palestinians, for their part, have ignored the requirement that they dismantle the militant groups that have killed hundreds of Israelis in suicide bombings and shootings in three years of violence.

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia's goal appears to be ending the violence and then putting pressure on Sharon to come up with a concrete proposal. The road map does not spell out details such as the exact borders of a Palestinian state.



An Indian Hindu wedding party dances upon the arrival of the bridegroom (Background-C) on horseback to his wedding celebration in New Delhi Thursday. Police slapped traffic restrictions in New Delhi as at least 12,000 wedding bells rang and as many marriage processions, led by grooms on stallions, clogged the city's streets. November 27 is considered the holiest spot in the monthly Hindu calendar for matrimonial unions prompting parents to marry off their daughters and arrange their wedding parties within the holy period, Hindu priests said.

Explosives found British police quiz terror suspect

REUTERS, London

British anti-terror police questioned a suspected suicide bomber on Friday after finding explosives in the house in south western England where the man was arrested in a coordinated raid.

"A relatively small quantity of explosives was found," said a police spokesman. "The man is being held at a central London police station."

Detectives in Gloucester where the man was arrested on Thursday morning were preparing to search a second address in the town.

Police, who can hold the 24-year-old Muslim man for up to seven days under sweeping anti-terror laws, declined to comment on the nature or target of any planned attack.

But that didn't stop newspapers speculating that the man may have been planning the country's first suicide attack on a soft target such as a sports stadium or the royal family.

'Bush visit to Iraq a pre-polls publicity stunt'

AFP, Paris

"Electoral raid on Baghdad". The caustic headline in the left-wing Paris daily Liberation summed up European newspaper editorial reaction Friday to President George W. Bush's Thanksgiving Day visit to US troops in Iraq.

The brief visit, arranged in top secrecy, occurred too late for most papers to give it full coverage, and almost all ran the same wire agency photo of Bush, clad in a grey army bomber jacket, carrying a large tray of roast turkey, potatoes and grapes through a crowd of smiling soldiers.

Those which did comment were mostly skeptical of Bush's motives, with the US presidential election now less than 12 months away.

"The turkey has landed," ran the front-page headline in the London daily Independent.

North Korea shows signs of abandoning nukes: ROK

REUTERS, Tokyo

North Korea, locked in a dispute with the United States over its nuclear weapons programme, is showing signs of abandoning its nuclear ambitions, a South Korean government spokesman said yesterday.

"It is very fortunate for the future of the Korean peninsula that North Korea shows signs of giving up its nuclear program and that the United States has indicated its intention to provide North Korea with security assurances," visiting South Korean government spokesman Cho Young-dong told reporters in Tokyo.

Taiwan bill spells 'hidden trouble', says China

REUTERS, Beijing/Taipei

China's official Xinhua news agency said on Friday Taiwan's referendum bill passed by parliament spelt "hidden trouble" hindering eventual reunification between the mainland and an island China considers a runaway province.

It was the closest thing to an official reaction from China, which has threatened invasion if Taiwan, ideologically split from Communist China since the end of the civil war in 1949, drags its feet on reunification.

Taiwan's parliament passed a watered-down referendum bill that fell short of allowing a vote on independence, backing away from an immediate showdown with China ahead of the island's March 2004 presidential elections.

"Some articles of the bill still leave room for the pro-independence forces in Taiwan to conduct separatist activities and will be the hidden trouble hindering the reunification of the Chinese nation," Xinhua said in a dispatch from Taipei.

Taiwanese opposition legislators threw out a radical version of the bill proposed by President Chen Shui-bian's independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

There was no comment from China's policy-making Taiwan Affairs Office or Foreign Ministry on Friday, apparently fearing further interference in Taiwan politics may backfire -- helping Chen and hurting his opposition rival who opposes independence -- ahead of elections.

But analysts said there was no immediate risk of war.

UN probes possible Iran-Pak nuke link

REUTERS, Vienna

The UN nuclear agency is probing a possible link between Iran and Pakistan after Tehran acknowledged using centrifuge designs that appear identical to ones used in Pakistan's quest for an atom bomb, diplomats say.

Diplomats said the agency was trying to determine whether the drawings had come from someone in Pakistan or elsewhere.

Tehran, accused by Washington of seeking to develop nuclear weapons, told the UN nuclear agency it got the blueprints from a "middleman" whose identity the agency had not determined, a Western diplomat told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

It was unclear where the "middle-

man" got the drawings. The UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has said in a report Iran told the IAEA it got centrifuge drawings "from a foreign intermediary around 1987."

Centrifuges are used to purify uranium for use as fuel or in weapons. Experts say the ability to produce such material is crucial for an arms program and the biggest hurdle any country with ambitions to build a bomb must overcome.

Several diplomats familiar with the IAEA said the blueprints were of a machine by the Dutch enrichment unit of the British-Dutch-German consortium Urenco -- a leader in the field of centrifuges.

Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Ali Akbar Salehi, told Reuters he had no

knowledge a Urenco design had been used by Iran. "This is new information to me," he said.

In a statement to Reuters, Urenco said it had not supplied any centrifuge know-how or machinery to Iran.

"Urenco would like to strongly affirm that they have never supplied any technology or components to Iran at any time," it said.

Pakistan, which non-proliferation experts and diplomats say used the Urenco blueprint, and Iran have repeatedly denied any cooperation in the nuclear field.

Iran had long insisted its centrifuge program was purely indigenous and that it had received no outside help whatsoever -- not from Pakistan or anywhere else.

The father of Pakistan's atom bomb, Abdul Qadeer Khan, worked at the Urenco uranium enrichment facility in the Dutch city of Almelo in the 1970s.

After his return to Pakistan he was convicted in absentia of nuclear espionage by an Amsterdam court, but the verdict was overturned on appeal. He has acknowledged he did take advantage of his experience of many years of working on similar projects in Europe and his contacts with various manufacturing firms.

But David Albright, a former UN weapons inspector and head of the Institute for Science and International Security think-tank, said: "Khan is widely believed to have taken these drawings and developed them."

Lanka mulls Tigers' settle or secede call

Political turmoil had endangered peace:Prabhakaran

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka President's party yesterday said it was still studying a Tamil rebel warning of separation unless majority Sinhalese politicians ended their bitter power struggle and revived a Norwegian-backed peace bid.

President Chandrika Kumara-

tunga's People's Alliance said it was looking at the speech made Thursday by Tamil Tiger Supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran who said the political turmoil had endangered the peace initiative.

"We don't want to give a piecemeal reaction," party spokesman Sarath Amunugama said. "We are studying the

speech and we will come up with a detailed response next week."

The president's party had earlier been quick to criticise the Tamil Tigers as well as the Norwegian-backed peace bid, but diplomats said the party appeared to be taking a more measured approach amid international pressure not to scuttle the peace process.



Tamil Tiger leader Velupillai Prabhakaran (R) welcomes EU External Relations Commissioner Chris Patten (L) as the Tamil Tiger Political Wing Leader S. P. Thamilselvan (C) looks on in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi in North western Sri Lanka on November 26.

Prabhakaran in his speech denied allegations by Kumaratunga that the rebels were re-arming, recruiting and strengthening themselves taking advantage of an Oslo-brokered truce since February 23 last year.

The press here reported Prabhakaran's speech made at the culmination of their heroes' week celebrations to honour 17,708 war dead, but made no comments. There was also no immediate comment from Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's government.

Prabhakaran, who marked his 49th birthday Wednesday, said a power struggle between Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe had cast doubts over the peace process.

Kumaratunga sacked three ministers in Wickremesinghe's government and suspended parliament for two weeks on November 4, four days after the Tigers unveiled their first ever blueprint for peace.

In the ensuing political crisis, peace-broker Norway suspended its involvement in the process saying they needed "clarity" on who was really in charge in Colombo.

"Whatever the reasons she (Kumaratunga) attributes to her actions, it has now become a universal truth that she took this serious action as an immediate response to our draft proposals," Prabhakaran said. "As a consequence ... the peace process is severely endangered."

Mahathir appointed Petronas advisor

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad has been appointed advisor to national oil firm Petronas, a report said yesterday.

"(Mahathir) has agreed to be a Petronas advisor for quite some time," Petronas chairman Azizan Zainul Abidin was quoted as saying by the Malay-language Utusan Malaysia.

Mahathir's appointment as advisor was appropriate because he had contributed many ideas to improve Petronas' operations previously, Azizan said.

Mahathir, who retired as prime minister on October 31 after 22 years in power, was personally responsible for Petronas's expansion overseas, Azizan said.

EU-China open HR dialogue

AFP, Beijing

The European Union opened human rights talks with China Thursday, with torture, the death penalty and political prisoners on the agenda amid claims that the dialogue has become a propaganda tool for Beijing.

The bi-annual talks, in their 16th session, will push for more openness from Beijing, said a European diplomat familiar with the discussions.

The 15-country EU -- set to expand to 25 members next year -- has voiced "deep concern" in the past over China's rights record.

In a 20-page report last month, Amnesty International detailed hundreds of thousands of people detained in China, executions carried out after unfair trials and widespread torture and ill-treatment.