

Syria urges UN to help rid ME of nukes

REUTERS, United Nations

Syria pushed for a ban on nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in the Middle East Monday, using its final days on the UN Security Council to shine a spotlight on Israel's suspected nuclear arms.

Syrian Ambassador Fayssal Mekdad, whose two-year term on the 15-nation council expires at midnight on Wednesday, asked the UN body to take up a resolution -- drafted by Damascus in April -- that is intended to rid the volatile Middle East region of all nuclear, biological and chemical arms.

But in a closed-door meeting, diplomats said, a number of the council's member nations -- including the United States, Britain and Pakistan -- expressed concerns with the Syrian text and Mekdad

said he would not push for a quick vote.

The Syrian draft was "wrong in substance, wrong in timing," Deputy US Ambassador James Cunningham said.

"We don't expect the resolution to make much progress," British Ambassador Emyr Jones Parry told reporters.

The draft calls for "freeing the Middle East region of all weapons of mass destruction" and asks Secretary General Kofi Annan to verify whether the measure, once passed, is implemented.

Syria asked for Monday's meeting after the council last week issued a statement welcoming Libya's announcement that it was voluntarily abandoning its programs for developing weapons of mass

destruction.

But Arab envoys said the draft was aimed at embarrassing Israel, widely believed to be the only country in the Middle East to have nuclear weapons though it has never officially acknowledged possessing them.

The draft resolution "is applicable to everybody, but in fact Israel is the real address in this regard, whether we like it or not, because Israel has all these kinds of weapons" and has not ratified most nonproliferation treaties, Mekdad said.

But Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Washington-based Arms Control Association, said the move could backfire on Syria as well as Iran, two nations believed by US intelligence to have chemical weapons stockpiles.

"The Syrians must realise that by offering a resolution on weapons of mass destruction, and not just nuclear weapons, they are potentially attracting attention to their own activities, which are suspected to include chemical weapons programs, as well as other states in the region including Iran," Kimball told Reuters in a telephone interview.

A CIA report to Congress earlier this year concluded that Damascus likely already held a stockpile of the nerve agent Sarin and appeared to be trying to develop "more toxic and persistent nerve agents," while Tehran likely already had supplies of "blister, blood, choking, and probably nerve agents and the bombs and artillery shells to deliver them." Both countries have denied the weapons charges.

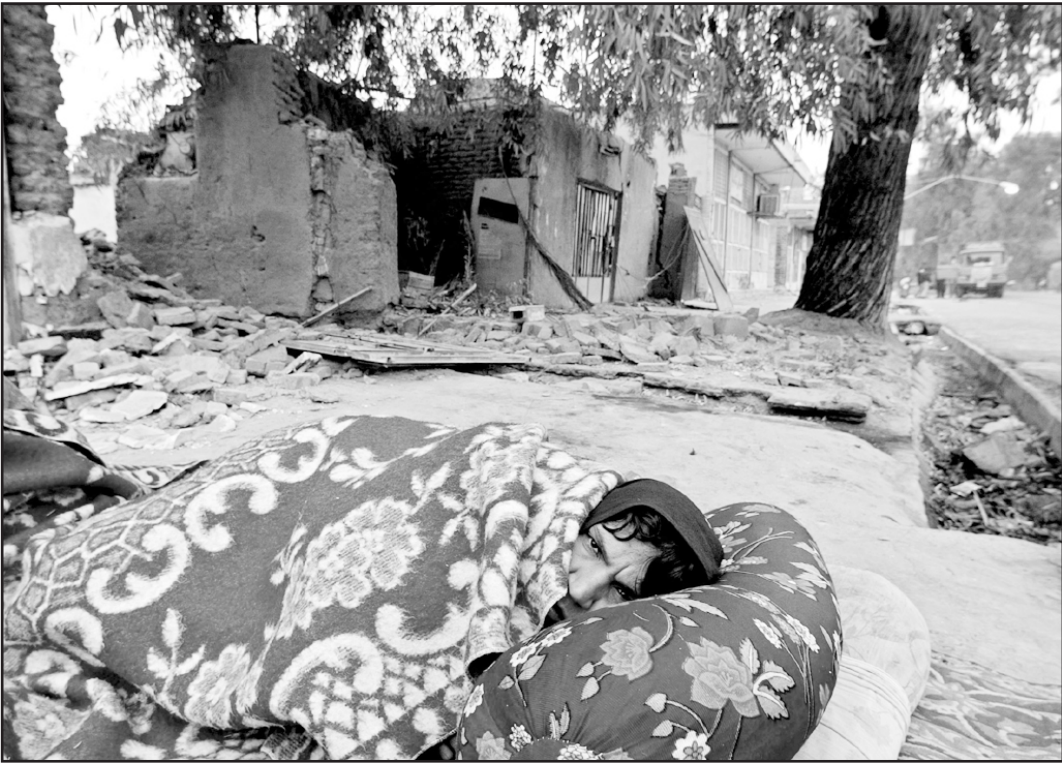


PHOTO: AFP

An Iranian woman sleeps on the pavement outside her destroyed house yesterday in the devastated city of Bam. The death toll from the massive earthquake that flattened the southeastern Iranian city is expected to rise even further, a UN spokesman said as a local official predicted it could top 50,000.

Chirping birds save 2 Iranian children

REUTERS, Bam

The chirping of two pet canaries from beneath the rubble of a destroyed house in Bam saved two children after the birds attracted the attention of rescue workers, Iran's official news agency reported yesterday.

"The two children were stuck in the debris next to their broken bird case," the IRNA news agency said. "After hearing the birds singing, rescue workers went to the location and were removing the debris when they found the children."

Pet birds such as canaries and nightingales are popular in rural villages in Iran.

It was not immediately clear when the two children, who were badly injured, were found in the old town of earthquake-hit Bam. IRNA said they were being treated in hospital.

The canaries were also rescued from the ruins and set free, the agency said.

Indian foreign secretary in Pakistan for Saarc summit

AFP, Wagah

Indian Foreign Secretary Shashank crossed to Pakistan yesterday ahead of a regional summit, calling for better ties between the rival neighbours' businesses and people but ruling out any bilateral talks.

Shashank, who uses only one name, will meet with his South Asian counterparts to finalise agreements, including a possible free trade pact, ahead of the January 4-6 summit.

He again rejected one-on-one talks with Pakistan, which has called the summit an ideal time to resume bilateral dialogue.

"This can take place only after there is a proper understanding and the peace process undertaken recently starts bearing fruits," Shashank told reporters before crossing the Wagah border post.

'60 terrorist groups at work around world'

AP, Washington

Roughly 60 terrorist groups, many of which are expanding their access to home-made weapons of mass destruction, are operating worldwide, the National Defence Council Foundation reported.

The foundation, made up of former military special operations forces members, found that terrorists are getting better at sustaining themselves through the drug trade and other illegal activities, giving them the economic base for terrorist activities.

The foundation usually puts out an annual count of world conflicts this time of year, but the prevalence of terrorist activities made the true tally of conflicts impossible to calculate, F Andy Messing Jr, executive director of

the Alexandria, Virginia, think tank, said on Monday.

The proliferation of nuclear weapons and the ease with which terrorist groups can make weapons of mass destruction are big concerns, the panel said.

The expansion of US intelligence has helped considerably in pinpointing these groups, but the foundation was uncertain about whether intelligence groups have caught up to the rise of terrorism.

The United States must reconfigure its forces to meet the threat of terrorism, using greater special operations capabilities over conventional military resources, said Messing.

State-to-state conflicts would also continue, mostly disputes over water, timber, oil, religion, drugs and border issues, the panel said.

Advani wants early polls

AFP, Mumbai

Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani said yesterday he wanted national elections before the October 2004 deadline as he was confident his Hindu nationalist party would be re-elected.

Advani said the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was upbeat after December 1 regional polls, in which it swept the main opposition Congress out of power in three states, and amid indications of strong economic growth.

"Looking at the economic feel-good factor and the impact of recent assembly elections, we feel that elections should be held early," Advani told reporters in Bombay.

He was speaking after talks with Bal Thackeray, chief of the far-right Shiv Sena which is one of around 20 parties in the federal coalition, known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Aid workers shift focus to wounded in Iran

AP, Bam

Aid workers sifting through the ruins of Iran's devastating earthquake said yesterday their operation had shifted from searching for survivors to treating the injured and homeless and burying the corpses still being pulled from the rubble.

The death toll from Friday's 6.6-magnitude quake that shook the ancient city of Bam rose to 28,000, according to Ted Peran, coordinator of UN relief operations. At least 10,000 people were believed injured.

"We have gone out of the rescue phase and entered the humanitarian relief phase of the operation," Peran said. "There's always hope of pulling more survivors out ... but the window of opportunity is closing rapidly."

Some international rescuers headed home, saying they were frustrated at their inability to save lives. There were fears the number of dead could rise as high as 40,000 after Bam on Monday passed the critical mark of 72 hours after the quake, the longest period people are expected to survive in rubble.

Occasionally, people survive longer if they are trapped in a pocket with air to breathe, though Bam's traditional architecture sharply limited that possibility. The city's mud-brick houses, constructed without supporting metal or wooden beams, crumbled into small chunks and powder-like dust.

"We did not find anyone alive," said Steve Owens of the charity British International Search. His team spent 14 hours traveling less than 125 miles on a jammed road to

Bam and reached the devastated city too late to help.

"We were a day late getting to the site," Owens said, waiting Tuesday at the airport in the provincial capital of Kerman for a flight back to England. "When things like this happen, there should be ways to get teams in quicker. It's frustrating."

Russia's Emergency Situations' Ministry said that its 150 rescuers would return to Moscow on Tuesday and that a plane carrying humanitarian aid would be sent to Iran on Wednesday.

At the peak of rescue efforts, 1,700 international relief workers from 30 countries had converged in Bam, Peran said. By Tuesday, the number of rescuers dropped to about 1,500 after seven teams returned home.

US open to talks with Iran: Powell

REUTERS, Washington

The United States is open to restoring a dialogue with Iran after "encouraging" moves by the Islamic republic in recent months, Secretary of State Colin Powell said in an interview published on yesterday.

"There are things happening and therefore we should keep open the possibility of dialogue at an appropriate point in the future," Powell said in a interview with The Washington Post.

This month, in a European-brokered deal, Iran agreed to snap UN inspections of its nuclear facilities, which the United States says are a front for building an atom bomb. Tehran also welcomed international humanitarian aid for victims of Friday's devastating earthquake.

The first US military aircraft to land in Iran in more than 20 years arrived over the weekend carrying disaster response experts and tons of emergency supplies for survivors of the Bam earthquake, US officials said on Monday.

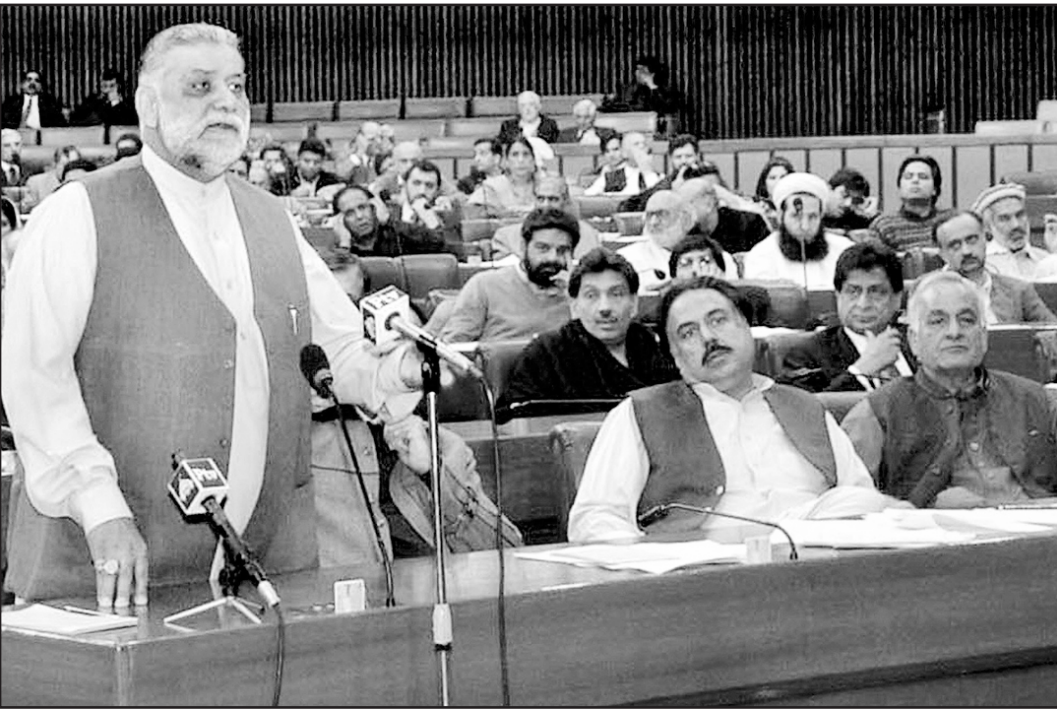


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali addresses the National Assembly after the lower house adopted a constitutional amendment bill in Islamabad Monday. The assembly has passed a constitutional amendment, weakening President Pervez Musharraf's powers to dismiss the government, after he agreed to water down his authority to end a paralysing political row.

US favours Indo-Pak amity, says Powell

PTI, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell has said the US policy towards India and Pakistan and its attitude towards the Kashmir issue is one of "trying to turn our parallel improvement of relations with India and Pakistan into a triangle of conflict resolution."

But he made it clear that the US was not imposing itself as a mediator.

India and Pakistan, he said, still dispute who should control Kashmir. During 2002, a major war between them--perhaps involving nuclear weapons--seemed distinctly possible, he said.

"So, working with partners in Europe and Asia," he said, "we mobilised to help end the crisis".

"We have since been trying to turn our parallel improvement of relations with India and Pakistan into a triangle of conflict resolution. We do not impose ourselves as a mediator. But we do try to use the

trust we have established with both sides to urge them toward conciliation by peaceful means," he said in the latest issue of Foreign Affairs journal.

"Whereas Russia is still developing its democracy, India's democracy dates from its Independence in 1947. With recent economic reforms setting institutional roots, India is developing into a mature market economy," he said.

"As Indians themselves are the first to admit, however, their country still faces many challenges. Illiteracy, poverty, environmental degradation, and inadequate infrastructure all hamper progress," Powell said.

"We want to help India overcome these challenges, and we want to help ourselves through a closer association with one of the world's venerable cultures. We have, therefore, worked to deepen our relationship with India," he said.

Iraq tightens security fearing attacks

AFP, Baghdad

One Iraqi was killed and three were wounded last morning when a roadside bomb hit a US convoy in Baghdad, the military said, amid concern over renewed attacks timed for the New Year's holiday.

"One Iraqi was killed and (another) was hit in the neck ... He will probably die," said a US soldier at the scene of the 9:00 am (0600 GMT) attack in the capital's Karrada district.

Private Matthew Andersen said an Iraqi translator with the US soldiers was also hurt when the bomb hit the convoy of four vehicles.

A separate US military spokesman said a third Iraqi was hurt but there were no American casualties.

Roadside bombs against US convoys and patrols are common in and around Baghdad.

Iraqi police said Tuesday they had reinforced security in the capital in anticipation of more insurgent

attacks over the New Year.

"Police have taken strict security measures with the approach of the New Year and have put in place plans to confront possible terrorist attacks against Iraqis and foreigners," Baghdad police chief General Hassan Ali Ubeidi told AFP.

More than 11,000 officers have been deployed, he said.

"Police are going to step up patrols, set up checkpoints and intensify operations across the city," Ubeidi said.

On Christmas Day a roadside bomb blew off the hand of a policeman trying to defuse it, and wounded at least one civilian. Last Thursday's bombing occurred as rebel rockets and mortars pounded the city with attacks on a major hotel and three foreign embassies.

But there were no deaths and few injuries in what the US-led coalition that administers Iraq called a "weak and ineffective" action.

UN nuclear chief says Gaddafi confirms dropping mass destruction arms

AFP, Vienna

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi confirmed he has abandoned programmes of weapons of mass destruction, the head of the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) said here Monday after a meeting in Tripoli.

"He reiterated his commitment to the destruction of weapons of mass destruction and he said he will promote (nuclear) non-proliferation in the Middle East," said a spokesman for IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei.

ElBaradei visited the Libyan capital following Gaddafi's surprise announcement that his country was giving up the search for chemical, biological and nuclear arms.

Gaddafi had likewise indicated in a meeting with ElBaradei, head of the UN's Vienna-based nuclear watchdog, that he wished to "turn a page in his country's history and promote its social and economic development," the spokesman said.

The meeting took place in Tripoli, where the IAEA chief and his team arrived on Saturday.

ElBaradei said in Tripoli earlier Monday that Libya was prepared to allow UN inspectors access as if it had already signed the additional

protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

He added that during their inspections, his team had seen equipment capable of enriching uranium but it was not in operation.

The announcement and ElBaradei's visit are the fruit of nine months of secret negotiations between Libya and diplomats from Britain and the United States which ended with Tripoli's dramatic pledge on December 19.

But earlier Monday, the United States refused to ease diplomatic pressure on Libya, despite the Tripoli government's latest concessions on its banned weapons programmes.

Washington noted Libya's decision to allow snap inspections of suspect sites, which came days after its surprise decision to come clean on its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs.

But it warned its long-time foe there was a long way to go before it could expect normal relations with the United States.

"We're looking to Libya to get out of the terrorism game and get out of the WMD game," said State Department deputy spokesman Adam Ereli.

"They have made some very

important and noteworthy statements regarding their intention to do so.

"It is a long process. We need to make sure that there is follow through on these commitments.

"As there is follow through, we are willing to discuss with them the issue of improved bilateral relations, but we're not there yet."

Libya still faces a range of US sanctions, and the latest move by the unpredictable Gaddafi was seen partly as a bid to get them removed.

The country was under international sanctions for years over the 1988 bombing of a US airliner over the Scottish town of Lockerbie that killed 270 people.

But the United Nations lifted its embargo in September after Tripoli agreed to pay 2.7 billion dollars (2.2 billion euros) in compensation and accept responsibility for the bombing but denied guilt.

AFP adds: The United States refused Monday to ease diplomatic pressure on Libya, despite the Tripoli government's latest concessions on its banned weapons programmes.

Saddam has his legal options for defence

AP, Washington

Even Saddam Hussein has legal options. The deposed Iraqi leader could harken back to the trials of Nazi leaders and Japanese commanders after World War II to fight expected charges of genocide and war crimes, claiming he never personally killed anyone or that he had no control over atrocities committed in his name, US defence lawyers and scholars say.

Saddam also might look to the present, and adopt the tactics of deposed Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic. On trial now before a UN War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, Netherlands, Milosevic has essentially thumbed his nose at the prosecutors and judges and uses the sessions to make windy speeches.

Any trial for Saddam may be a long time off, and it is not clear where or how he will be called to answer for alleged crimes dating back decades. But when the expected trial comes, Saddam can choose from a few basic legal strategies.

The first step for Saddam's defence team will be a challenge to the authority of whatever body puts him on trial, lawyers say. That attack will be easier to make if Americans are involved in organising or underwriting the trial, but a smart defence lawyer would use the same tactic to

challenge even a trial conducted wholly by Iraqis, lawyers say.

Former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark said last week that he would be willing to provide legal counsel to the ousted Iraqi leader if he requested assistance. Clark was attorney general under President Johnson and is a staunch anti-war advocate who has met with Saddam on several occasions in the past decade.

Another strategy would be for Saddam to plead insanity or infirmity to try to head off a trial altogether, although lawyers say that seems unlikely.

Assuming there is a trial, Saddam could claim he committed no crimes, or that his actions were justified to put down insurrection or defend his country.

Or, as in the trials arising from World War II, Saddam could try to shift the blame or turn the tables on his accusers.

Adm. Karl Doenitz, commander of the German U-boat campaign, received a relatively light sentence of 10 years at the Nuremberg war crimes trial after claiming that he used the same warfighting tactics as the Allies, including failing to pick up survivors after a submarine attack. Doenitz' lawyers produced an affidavit from US Adm. Chester Nimitz to back up this claim.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Army soldiers survey the scene of shopfronts, damaged in an explosion in Lawaypura some 10km north of Srinagar yesterday. At least 33 troops and a woman passer-by were injured in a bus blast, which sent the bus crashing into a tree and could be felt two kilometers away.

Vatican envoy to Burundi shot dead in 'rebel' ambush

AFP, Bujumbura

The Vatican's ambassador to Burundi died Monday after he was shot in an ambush the army blamed on rebels refusing to sign up to a peace deal to end a civil war.

Archbishop Michael Courtney, an Irishman, was hit in the head, shoulder and leg Monday when his car was attacked south of the capital, the military said.

The 58-year-old papal nuncio died in a Bujumbura hospital less than three hours later, an official there said. "We were trying everything we could to save him. We were trying to extract the bullets and he died while we were operating," he said.

Chief of army staff General Germain Niyoyankana pinned the blame for the attack on rebels from the National Liberation Forces (FNL), the only remaining active rebel group in a decade-long conflict that has claimed around 300,000 lives -- a war in which Courtney played an active mediating role.

"We are sure the FNL is responsible for this monstrosity," Niyoyankana said.