



PHOTO: AFP
New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg (C), former POW in Iraq and retired US Army Spc. Shoshana Johnson (R) and singer Cyndi Lauper (L) help ring in the New Year yesterday in New York's Times Square. Security was tight as 700,000 people celebrated the New Year Eve in the area.

World welcomes 2004 amid grim backdrop

AP, London

Deadly bombings in Iraq and Indonesia, as well as fears of terrorism in the United States, Britain and Israel, cast shadows over exuberant New Year's celebrations around the world.

From Asia to Europe, the world ushered in 2004 with fireworks displays, massive parties and simple prayers for peace.

In New York, nearly 1 million revelers rang in 2004 with the dropping of the traditional New Year's Eve ball in Times Square a joyous, confetti-filled bash that took place under some of the tightest security ever seen. Snipers were posted on rooftops and helicopters patrolled overhead.

"It was brilliant," said Tanya Starkin, a 23-year-old waitress from Ireland, as fireworks lit the sky. "Everyone was so worried about everything, and now everything is good."

Australians also celebrated in

style with Sydney's famous harbor alight with colorful fireworks. In New Zealand, thousands crammed into a public square, dancing and waving glow sticks. Still, a tactical response team scoured the streets of Sydney, looking out for any possible security threat.

Pope John Paul II, during a vespers service at St. Peter's Basilica, gave thanks for 2003 and prayed for peace in 2004 "in Rome, in Italy, in Europe and the entire world." His New Year's Mass on Thursday will mark the Roman Catholic Church's World Day of Peace.

In Baghdad, a car bomb ripped through a restaurant during a New Year's Eve party, killing five Iraqis and injuring 35, including at least two Americans and one Briton.

In Indonesia's restive Aceh province, a bomb at a crowded New Year's Eve party killed nine people and injured 46. Police blamed Aceh separatist rebels for the blast, but the insurgents denied the accusation.

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Celebrations also turned deadly in the Philippine city of Lucena when fireworks started a fire in an old public market, killing at least 18 people.

Israel mounted greater security efforts than usual because of the threat of terrorism. Police reinforcements patrolled night spots in Tel Aviv, days after Israeli security officials warned of the possibility of a major New Year's terror attack at a public building or holy site.

In Paris, about 4,500 police officers and soldiers patrolled the city streets. The police presence was strong around the Champs-Élysées, the famous tree-lined boulevard in western Paris where the crowds gathered.

The green, pink and red glow of Roman candles lit up the Champs Élysées as roars of delight broke out just at midnight.

Young North Africans holding up the Algerian flag danced atop concrete barriers, a group of Italians

posed for pictures, and a young Danish couple bargained with a vendor for two cans of beer.

"It's great so far," said Ben Jacobs, a college student from Northville, Mich., who was visiting the city with friends.

London's Metropolitan Police said there was a "high state of alert" but there were no specific terrorist threats for New Year's Eve, and for many in Britain, the weather appeared the more immediate threat to the festivities.

Forecasts of sleet, rain and gale force winds forced the west coast city of Liverpool to reschedule its fireworks display to Friday. In London, the weather held off and thousands enjoyed a brief but spectacular fireworks show at the London Eye.

The huge sightseeing wheel at the edge of the River Thames became a necklace of light against the black sky and then exploded with rockets and multicolored fireworks as the crowd cheered.

Bush determined to build on past successes in '04

AFP, Crawford

US President George W. Bush on Wednesday expressed his determination to build in the New Year on successes achieved in 2003 and urged Americans to show compassion to those less fortunate.

In a New Year's Day message to the American people, Bush described the past year as "a time of accomplishment and progress."

"Working together, our citizens have made America a safer, more prosperous, and better country," he said. "In the New Year, we will build on these successes, embracing the challenges and opportunities ahead."

He said Americans were praying for the safety for US troops deployed overseas and were grateful for their service. "We have seen our brave men and women in uniform defend America and liberate the oppressed," Bush said.

The president said Americans from every walk of life were fostering a culture of compassion by devoting their time and talents to helping others.

"In the New Year, I ask all Americans to answer the call to bring hope to those who are less fortunate," Bush said.

Meanwhile, with the war on terrorism still its top priority, the United States in 2004 will strive to expand peace, freedom and prosperity across the world, US Secretary of State Colin Powell wrote yesterday in The New York Times.

Powell said Washington in 2004 would continue working to restore sovereignty in Afghanistan and Iraq, relying on the international community and the United Nations "to help Iraqis establish a new citadel of free minds and free markets in the Middle East."

The United States, Powell said, "will open an embassy in Baghdad" when the Coalition Provisional Authority comes to an end on June 30, according to the November 15 transition plan.

The Middle East Partnership Initiative will be expanded, he added, "to encourage political, economic and educational reform throughout the region."

Along with the United Nations, the European Union and Russia, Powell said, "we will help Israelis and Palestinians achieve peace, so that a free Palestine will exist alongside a secure and democratic Jewish state in Israel."

"With China, Japan, Russia and South Korea we will continue to tackle the problem of North Korea's dangerous nuclear weapons program," Powell said, while cautioning that "we will not reward threats from Pyongyang or provide incentive for blackmail."

The secretary of state said Libya's renunciation of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction was the result of "bold British and American diplomacy," adding that Iran had also felt "our sustained pressure ... to come clean on its nuclear weapons program, and has begun to do so."

11 more found alive in Iran's quake debris

AFP, Bam

Eleven more survivors were pulled from the devastation caused by the earthquake in southeastern Iran on Wednesday, state radio said Thursday, in a report apparently aimed at providing at least a glimmer of good news amid the devastation and death.

They included Yadollah Saadat, 26, who was rescued thanks to the persistence of his wife Fatemeh Asgari, relief workers said here.

Saadat had been protected by furniture which toppled over him as his house collapsed, forming a cavity.

His wife, who was knocked out, recovered consciousness in hospital and insisted on returning to their home to search for her husband. He was found, also unconscious and with a fractured pelvis, but had recovered enough to speak as he was being flown out Thursday to hospital in Tehran.

Rescue workers in the affected region, centred on the city of Bam, had however expressed pessimism at the chances of finding any more people alive five days after the quake killed an estimated 40,000 people.

Some estimates have put the number of dead as high as 50,000.

State radio gave no details of the 11 people it said had been saved on Wednesday. On the previous day it had said that five people had been found alive in the rubble.

In all, some 2,000 people were found alive amid the devastation, most of them in the first days after the quake, which occurred on Friday.

Around 30,000 bodies have so far been removed from the devastation and buried in makeshift graves.

US eases sanctions on Iran for quake aid

REUTERS, Crawford

President Bush on Wednesday ordered an easing of some sanctions on Iran to speed the flow of humanitarian relief for victims of the massive Bam earthquake.

Under a special 90-day measure, US citizens and non-profit groups can donate money directly to non-governmental organisations working in Iran on reconstruction and relief efforts after the quake that killed up to 50,000 people.

The administration also moved to make it easier for relief groups to bring donated equipment such as satellite telephones and computers into the country.

"The president has directed Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of the Treasury John Snow to take significant steps to expedite disaster relief and humanitarian aid operations in response to the devastating earthquake in Bam, Iran," the White House said in a statement issued from Crawford, Texas, where Bush

is vacationing.

"The Iranian people deserve and need the assistance of the international community to help them recover from the catastrophic results of last week's earthquake," the White House said.

In the aftermath of the quake in the ancient city of Bam, tens of thousands of survivors were spending cold nights in tents while others were in hospitals.

The United States broke ties with Tehran following the 1979 Islamic revolution and last year the Bush administration branded it a member of an "axis of evil," along with Iraq and North Korea. But after the earthquake Bush said the United States wanted to join other nations in sending aid to Iran.

The move to ease the sanctions came at the initiation of Powell after he consulted with members of Congress and determined the action was warranted because of the "extraordinary" needs created by the disaster.

The action will speed relief by

allowing humanitarian groups to forgo a lengthy licensing procedure they would have otherwise had to follow to make transfers of funds into Iran.

Certain supplies such as food, clothing, tents and some medicines do not require a license. But now, aid groups can put cash donations to use for such purposes as rebuilding homes, schools and hospitals.

"Basically, they're getting rid of any blockages to letting the aid spigot go forward," said one Bush administration official.

Dr. Assad Yavari, vice chairman of the Los Angeles-based nonprofit, Iranian Muslim Association of North America, said his group has raised \$750,000 through telethons and other efforts. The group had been waiting to hear about the status of the sanctions before making plans to put the money to use.

"It's excellent news," Yavari said. "It's going to help us tremendously because now we can use the money more efficiently."

Pope calls for new int'l order to keep peace

REUTERS, Vatican City

The world needs a "new international order" to solve its conflicts and ensure peace, Pope John Paul said in his New Year's Day address yesterday.

"More than ever we need a new international order which draws on the experience and results of the United Nations," the 83-year-old pontiff said at a mass in St. Peter's Basilica.

"An order which is capable of finding adequate solutions to today's problems, based on the dignity of human beings, on integrating all society, on solidarity between rich and poor countries, on the sharing of resources and the extraordinary results of scientific and technological progress," he added.

This year, John Paul directed his thoughts to continuing conflicts

around the globe. But he stressed that to bring about peace, there needs to be a new respect for international law and the creation of a "new international order" based on the goals of the United Nations.

He called for "an order that is able to give adequate solutions to today's problems based on the dignity of the human being, on an integral development of society, on solidarity among nations rich and poor, on the sharing of resources and the extraordinary results of scientific and technical progress."

The pope lamented continuing violence between Israel and the Palestinians, and also offered his prayers for his ambassador to Brunei, Archbishop Michael Courtney, who was gunned down by assailants this week as he returned from a funeral.

thoughts to continuing conflicts

Stargazers predict better days

AFP, Beijing

After a tumultuous 2003, the world this year will free itself of major wars and the global economy will accelerate as a new cycle of good fortune is ushered in, astrologers across Asia predict.

Stargazers agree that the coming 12 months cannot fare much worse than the seasaw ride that the world went through in 2003, dogged by war in Iraq, fluctuating financial markets and mysterious diseases.

"On the whole, 2004 will be better than 2003," said Hong Kong-based Feng Shui Master Ma Li-wah, when asked about what the Year of the Monkey will bring.

"2004 will herald in a new fortune cycle. The global economy will continue to improve for the better with small enterprises expected to benefit most."

The political front is also expected to be a lot calmer, said the master.

"Although conflicts around the world will continue, like in Iraq, there will be no new major wars emerging. So the political situation is likely to see some stabilisation in the year to come."

While astrological predictions are often dismissed as superstitious nonsense, millions of people swear by what mystics say and Yue Hua, an astrologer from Nanyang province, spoke in China's Hunan province, spoke in the same tongue as Ma.

"I think there will be no major wars next year," said Yue, but warned: "Corrupt people better watch out as many will be caught."

One of the major drivers of the world economy last year was emerging China and astrologers see the developing nation continuing its juggernaut drive.



PHOTO: AFP
Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (2nd L) follows a Shinto priest (2nd R) to make a surprise visit to the controversial Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo on the New Year's Day, while plainclothes security policemen guard him.

Koizumi visits war shrine

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi made a surprise New Year visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine commemorating the country's war dead in Tokyo yesterday.

The move, likely to provoke an outcry from China and other nations who suffered from Japan's war-time aggression, came as Tokyo is preparing to send military personnel to Iraq despite fierce opposition at home.

Dressed formally in hakama pleated skirt and traditional "kimono" bearing his family crest, Koizumi walked into the shrine, which was surrounded by a few hundreds of well-wishers to mark the New Year's Day.

He bowed deeply at the main chamber before being escorted inside by a Shinto priest and spent a few minutes paying his respects out of sight from the media.

Honouring 2.5 million Japanese war dead, Yasukuni is widely seen as a symbol of Japan's former militarism, particularly since 1978 when it enshrined 14 Class-A war criminals including wartime prime minister General Hideki Tojo. Koizumi is only the third prime minister to visit the shrine since 1978.

It was Koizumi's first visit to the shrine on a New Year's Day, the nation's most important national holiday, since he took office in 2001.

The nationalist premier has pledged to make a pilgrimage once a year to "dedicate on peace" but has avoided visiting there on sensitive days such as August 15, the anniversary of the end of World War II.

Koizumi made his third trip on January 14 last year, drawing harsh criticism from China, South and North Korea, and other Asian nations.