

HR groups slam immigration plan of Bush

AFP, Washington

Hispanic rights groups and some illegal aliens Wednesday blasted President George W. Bush's immigration overhaul plan to legalise undocumented workers, calling it an election year ploy to win the Latino vote but sorely lacking in substance.

Bush proposed a temporary guest worker program enabling undocumented aliens holding a job unwanted by US citizens, as well as prospective workers abroad with a job lined up, to work in the United States for three years. An estimated eight to 12 million illegal immigrants believed to be living in the United States.

"Hispanic Americans are deeply disappointed with the president's announcement today on immigration policy," said Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza (the Hispanic people) - NCLR - the largest Latino rights group in the United States.

Bush's proposal, he said, "appears to offer the business community full access to the immigrant workers it needs while providing very little to the workers themselves."

NCLR's Michelle Waslin was suspicious of Bush's political motives.

"After two years of silence, the president has finally come out and said something about immigrants during the election year," she said.

"He's clearly trying to court the



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi child stands behind a barrier of razor wire outside Abu Gharib prison, 35km west of Baghdad yesterday as a crowd of several hundred wait for an announced prisoner release by the US-led interim government following the announcement on Wednesday by Paul Bremer, the top official in Iraq. Bremer said that the US-led coalition would release 100 Iraqi prisoners, with hundreds more to be freed in coming weeks, on condition they renounce violence.

Reenlistment bonus fails to excite US troops in Iraq

AFP, Tikrit

They're staying on because they love army life or are getting out because they're sick of it, and the 10,000-dollar bonus offered to reenlist is not a factor, said US soldiers in Iraq.

"Not even a million dollars" would make Corporal Will Tate stay on after his four-year stint is over in July, he said as he burned waste material on a cliff overlooking the Tigris River near his base in Saddam Hussein's hometown Tikrit.

"I haven't seen my family in one and a half years," added the soldier from the 4th Infantry Division (4ID), saying his future career in law enforcement back home in Arkansas would let him "progress a lot faster and further" than in the army.

First Lieutenant Colin Crow, from Louisiana, said the extra cash might be an incentive for some troops, but for most soldiers "it's not the money, it's the guys you're serving with and the job you're doing."

The US Army has decided to offer bonuses of up to 10,000 dollars to troops who agree to extend their tours in Iraq, Kuwait or Afghanistan.

The size of the bonus runs according to specialty, rank and length of extension.

The offer comes as the army is embarking on a massive and com-

plex rotation of its forces in Iraq, with some 125,000 US troops due to be deployed out of the region in the coming months and replaced by others.

Soldiers from the 4ID in Tikrit are among those to be rotated out over the coming months.

Private First Class David Quintero, from Texas, said he believed the bonus might encourage "soldiers who are sitting on the fence over to reenlist."

"But if I had something better lined up in the private sector I probably wouldn't," he said as he sat in his Humvee vehicle on the army base here in the palace compound of the ousted Iraqi leader.

At Kirkush military training centre, near Iraq's eastern border with Iran, where a handful of 4ID troops are posted to help train the New Iraqi Army, Major Richard Caya said he would not be tempted away from his young family.

"For me it's personal, I need to spend time with my wife and watch my kids grow," he said.

The army announced on Monday that it would extend the tours of thousands of soldiers in Iraq who were due to end their service or retire before their units' return home. Some 7,000 soldiers in Iraq fall into that category.

A similar offer is already in effect for members of army reserve units and for active duty soldiers scheduled to deploy to Iraq or Afghanistan, an army spokesman

said.

Some soldiers in Tikrit said they just might be tempted by the offer of up to 10,000 dollars to stay on in a country where hundreds of their colleagues have been killed by anti-coalition fighters.

Specialist Mai Truong, taking some time out to pump some iron at the improvised gym in 1-22 battalions' headquarters, was one.

"That would catch my eye," said the 24-year-old Texan. "But I'd have to talk to my wife."

Meanwhile, attacks by "terrorists" and crime levels have fallen by a dramatic 70 percent in Baghdad, a senior official in Iraq's interim interior ministry said in a statement yesterday.

"Terrorist attacks against coalition forces and crimes and offences have dropped 70 percent in Baghdad," General Ahmad Kazem Ibrahim, interim vice interior minister and head of the Iraqi police, said in the Sabah newspaper, published by coalition authorities.

Ibrahim did not give figures for the number of attacks or criminal acts or specify the period to which he was referring.

"Crime has started to ebb in Baghdad because of an improvement in living conditions in the capital and the arrest of some of those responsible for criminal acts and offences, thanks to information on criminal groups provided by citizens," he said.

Experts seek 'dirty bombs' in US cities

AP, Washington

Government nuclear experts are working undercover in major US cities, using high-tech equipment hidden in briefcases and golf bags to hunt for radiological "dirty" bombs and other weapons terrorists might use.

The Energy Department's Nuclear Incident Response Teams were in Las Vegas, Los Angeles, New York and Washington last month, according to three government officials who spoke on condition of anonymity. Later, more teams went to other cities, which the officials declined to identify.

The Homeland Security Department also has sent detection equipment for police to use in Chicago, Detroit, Houston, San Diego, San Francisco and Seattle.

Agency spokesman Brian Roehrke said there is no specific intelligence pointing to a dirty bomb which uses conventional explosives to disperse a plume of radioactive dust over several city blocks or plots involving chemical, biological or nuclear devices.

The federal action came as the nation's terror alert status was upgraded just before Christmas to orange, or high risk. Security officials were particularly concerned that holiday gatherings with large crowds could serve as targets for terrorists.

The teams took readings ahead of New Year's celebrations at New York's Times Square and the Las Vegas strip, and for the Rose Bowl Parade on New Year's Day in the Los Angeles suburb of Pasadena, Calif.

The only detection of radiation so far was on Dec. 29 at a rented storage locker near downtown Las Vegas, one government official said.

'Terrors had attack plan on Christmas'

AFP, London

Intelligence agencies in the United States believe terrorists were planning a Christmas attack more devastating than the September 11 atrocities in 2001, US Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said Wednesday.

Ridge told BBC's Newsnight programme that the US administration had stepped up security after "a stream of intelligence" pointed to an air attack on cities in the United States.

"It talks about attacks equal to or greater than those that occurred on September 11, talked about these attacks occurring in a time frame that covered our traditional holiday period, and it also included reference to aviation," Ridge said.

Ridge told the BBC that the intelligence pointed to specific flights which the British, French

and Mexican governments "are very much aware of, as are the travelling public in those countries."

"Some of (the intelligence) is a direct result of analysis from multiple sources and some of it is from very specific sources that have given us some specific information the nature of which we viewed as credible and we've been able in some measure to corroborate," Ridge said.

Ridge, speaking after talks with British government officials in Washington over improving airline security, said both countries wanted to draw up guidelines on how to respond to terror threats.

The talks came as British Airways flight 223 from Heathrow to Washington was delayed Wednesday for the fifth successive day after US authorities demanded more information on the passengers making the trip.

US asks France to hunt airline terror suspect

REUTERS, Paris

France said it was hunting Wednesday for a suspect sought by the United States over a security scare that forced a spate of airline cancellations and delays to US-bound flights in December.

A judicial source said France's DST state security office was looking for an Afghan listed in the United States as a terrorist and suspected of preparing an attack against a canceled December 24 flight from Paris to Los Angeles.

"I confirm that we are looking for someone. I cannot tell you anything more," French Justice Minister Dominique Perben told RMC radio.

Despite the fresh jitters, European airline stocks surged as strong traffic and earnings figures from British Airways offered signs that passenger safety worries were easing.

The US television channel ABC reported on Tuesday the man, a passenger who failed to show up for the flight, was suspected of links to the militant al-Qaeda network and might have a small bomb to attack planes.

The French interior ministry said intelligence services were unable to confirm the report and a US law enforcement official said idea the suspect was Afghan was "definitely not right."

Man pulled alive from Iranian quake rubble

AP, Bam

A 57-year-old man was pulled from the rubble of Iran's earthquake, barely conscious but still alive because he had a source of water during the 13 days he was buried, a doctor and a hospital official said yesterday.

Dr. Mahdi Shadnough, the chief physician at a Ukrainian field hospital providing aid to quake victims, said was unconscious but receiving medical treatment after his rescue Wednesday night.

"It's a miracle," Shadnough said. "He had no access to food but only water."

The source of the water was not known, but Shadnough said the ruins of the home where the man, whose name was given only as Jalil, were wet.

A magnitude 6.6 earthquake struck Bam in southeast Iran on Dec. 26, killing more than 30,000 people and leveling much of the ancient city.

People rarely survive being buried under rubble for more than three days. On Saturday, a rescue team found a 97-year old woman alive, buried in her Bam home.

Jalil was conscious enough to mouth out his name to searchers who dug him out of the rubble, but he slipped into unconsciousness after just a few minutes, said Mohammad Reza Tahmasebi, who is in charge of the Ukrainian hospital.

"We hope to keep him alive, but we cannot guarantee it," Shadnough said.

Jalil is from the town of Narmanshir, about 37 miles outside Bam and came to the city a day before the earthquake and stayed at his sister's home.

Tahmasebi said Jalil was a member of the Baluch ethnic group, known for tolerating harsh conditions.

UN envoy urges Israel to talk with Syria

AFP, Beirut

The UN coordinator for the Middle East peace process, Terje Roed-Larsen, urged Israel to accept Syria's offer to reopen peace talks, saying it was in the country's best interests, in an interview published yesterday.

"It is in the interest of the Israeli government to return directly to the negotiating table," Roed-Larsen told the London-based Arab newspaper Al-Hayat monitored here.

He added that he "highly welcomed" Syria's offer, in the remarks translated from Arabic.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad called on the United States last month to support renewed negotiations with the Jewish state in order to normalize the two neighbours' relations and defuse the volatile situation on Israel's northern border.

The offer has divided Israel's political circles.

Previous negotiations between then Israeli premier Ehud Barak and Assad's father, Hafez, collapsed in early 2000.

Israel had agreed to withdraw from most of the strategic Golan Heights, occupied by Israel in 1967 and annexed 14 years later, retaining control only on the rim of the Sea of Galilee.

However, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is apparently demanding that any new talks start from scratch.

Meanwhile, hardline Israeli Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged his government yesterday to resume peace negotiations with Syria, arguing that the Jewish state was in a strong position to obtain concessions.

"Bearing in mind Syria's very precarious position, it's in our interest to exploit recent overtures for contacts" with Syria, the influential former premier told public

radio.

He explained that US pressure on Damascus in the aftermath of the war in Iraq provided an unprecedented opportunity to reach an agreement "without withdrawing from the Golan" Heights, occupied by Israel in 1967 and annexed 14 years later.

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Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and the head of military intelligence have also spoken out in favour of resuming talks, while Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz has voiced his opposition.

Shalom again said Thursday that Damascus' overtures should be examined seriously.

"There is a need to examine Syria's intentions seriously, but this is a long way from saying in advance that we are ready for this or that withdrawal," he told army radio.

"We have to go (to the negotiations) without preconditions. I believe that in this way we can achieve peace."

Sharon is reportedly in no mood to do Syria a favour by welcoming it to the negotiating table and happy to keep it painted in a diplomatic corner.

In response to Assad's request that any negotiations should resume where they left off four years ago, Sharon responded that they should start from scratch.

The recent announcement that Israel was launching a largescale settlement project for Jews in the occupied Golan was also seen as a slap in Assad's face.

Australia looks at face scan check on foreign visitors

AFP, Sydney

Australia yesterday said it was trialling a hi-tech face recognition system to screen airline passengers for potential terrorists trying to enter the country.

A spokesman for Customs Minister Chris Ellison said trials of the Australian-designed Smartgate system had so far proved successful, without causing the lengthy delays that accompanied the introduction of so-called "biometric" screens in US airports this week.

"It has cut processing time from 45 seconds to 17 seconds, with a 98 percent success rate" he told AFP. "We're ahead of the rest of the world as far as biometric systems go and this is a superior system that enhances traffic flow."



PHOTO: AFP

Ettie Siono-Asemaga (L) speaks of her lucky escape from her damaged home at Vailele, on the island of Niue, which bore the brunt of Cyclone Heta yesterday. Cyclone Heta ripped through on January 6 night, killing one woman, and seriously injuring her baby. Cyclone Heta, with winds of up to 300km an hour, slammed into the tiny South Pacific island causing severe damage.

Britons to require visa to visit US

AFP, London

British travellers to the United States will soon need a visa even for short visits under new security measures imposed by the US Congress, a British newspaper said yesterday.

Under the new rules, after October 26 this year all passports must contain "biometric indicators" -- computer chips carrying a digitally encoded record of the bearer's face and possibly fingerprints, The Daily Telegraph said.

British officials have reportedly said that these cannot be produced until the middle of 2005 at the latest, requiring all new British passports issued in the interim to be accompanied by a visa obtained from offices in either London or Belfast.

The ruling will affect all British passports issued after October 26 and passports issued before then will still entitle people to enter the US without a visa, The Daily Telegraph said.