

French families, Libya ink UTA compensation deal

REUTERS, Paris

Families of 170 people killed in the 1989 bombing of a French UTA airliner blamed on six Libyans signed a \$170 million compensation deal with Tripoli in a ceremony in Paris yesterday.

The accord was signed with representatives of a private Libyan fund run by the son of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. France and Libya are expected later Friday to issue a statement committing themselves to boosting bilateral ties.

"This accord shows that Libya is changing, has changed," said Guillaume Denoix de Saint-Marc, who lost his father in the attack and who helped lead negotiations resulting in the deal.

"It is very important for us now that Libya can go ahead and start rebuilding its future."

The deal, clinched late

Thursday by negotiators for the relatives and Libya, falls well short of the \$2.7 billion pay-out agreed by Libya last year for 270 victims of the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland.

However, Denoix de Saint-Marc defended the French deal, saying the difference between it and the Lockerbie pay-out was not as large as it seemed.

He estimated at least 50 percent of the Lockerbie compensation would disappear in legal fees and a further 10 percent in federal taxes. He estimated that the Lockerbie families would end up with at most \$2 million each.

France convicted six Libyans in absentia for the attack over the west African state of Niger. But Tripoli has always denied responsibility for the bombing and insisted it would not match the amount of the Lockerbie pay-out.

The \$170 million is expected to be shared among families of victims of 17 nationalities, including Africans, Americans, Britons and Italians who were on board the UTA plane when it was bombed over the west African state of Niger.

It comes on top of an original \$34 million settlement which France deemed insufficient in the light of the Lockerbie deal.

"It will be a roadmap relaunching relations between France and Libya," said an aide to Christian Poncelet, the president of France's upper house of parliament who on Thursday met visiting Libyan Foreign Minister Mohamed Abderhmane Chalham.

Since the Lockerbie deal, Libya has moved to improve ties with the West by pledging last month to scrap its banned arms programs. But France insisted the UTA settlement must be part of any full reconciliation.

In a New Year's speech to French diplomats, President Jacques Chirac said on Thursday a settlement of the UTA dispute would "allow Libya to reintegrate itself fully in cooperation initiatives between the two shores of the Mediterranean."

Paris threatened last year to veto the lifting of UN sanctions on Libya after Tripoli agreed to pay \$2.7 billion compensation for the bombing over Lockerbie, a deal that dwarfed the initial \$34 million UTA settlement.

But it relented after Libya said it would increase compensation for the French airliner bombing, for which six Libyans were convicted in absentia by a French court.

Subsequent negotiations with a private fund run by Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's son have proved stickier than expected, with Libyan officials unveiling conditions for the payout.



PHOTO: AFP

People stand by the remains of the French airliner UTA on September 22, 1989, which was bombed over the Niger desert killing the 170 people aboard. Libya signed a compensation deal in Paris with the families of the victims of the bombing yesterday.

Hamas says no to truce with Israel

AFP, Dubai

Hamas spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmad Yassin said in remarks published yesterday that his movement would not agree to a new truce that is not be respected by Israel and that it would not cease attacks on Israeli civilians as long as the Jewish state targets Palestinian civilians.

"Hamas will not commit the same mistake in agreeing on a new truce with Israel which will not be respected by the latter," Yassin told Saudi magazine Al-Majallah, published in London.

Yassin said, however, that his group was prepared for a new truce "on the condition that the countries that want this truce give guarantees" to Hamas.

These guarantees include "respect for the truce by Israel, and an end to the occupation and aggression against the Palestinian people."

Last June, Hamas and Islamic Jihad announced a three-month suspension of anti-Israeli attacks that was brokered by Egypt, but the Palestinian militant groups attached conditions and Israel said it placed no value on the ceasefire.



PHOTO: AFP

Jean Pierre Harrison, the husband of late Indian-born astronaut Kalpana Chawla - who was killed along with six other astronauts in the Columbia shuttle disaster - receives the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award for his late wife from Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee during the inauguration of the "Pravasi Bharatiya Divas" (Overseas Indian Origin Conference) in New Delhi yesterday. Vajpayee during his speech hailed "positive winds" in relations with Pakistan after the rivals agreed to resume dialogue that was stalled for two and a half years.

'Thousands of Iraqi prisoners could be released in months'

AFP, London

Thousands of Iraqis imprisoned during and after the US-led war in Iraq could be freed by the coalition in the coming months, the current head of Iraq's Governing Council said yesterday.

Adnan Pachachi was speaking in an interview with BBC radio, a day after some 60 Iraqi prisoners were released from the Abu Gharib prison near Baghdad following a pledge by US overseer Paul Bremer to start freeing hundreds of detainees.

"The majority of those released are very happy to be back to their homes and there has been a great deal of satisfaction and joy in Iraq because we expect that several hundreds more and perhaps even few thousands to be released in the next few months," Pachachi said.

"The policy that has been agreed on that there should be released several hundreds perhaps thousands in the next few months," he said, adding that freeing further detainees is "something which would ease the

situation" in Iraq and help promote reconciliation.

According to coalition figures, some 9,300 detainees are being held in the US-run prisons. That does not include 3,800 detained members of the Iranian armed opposition People's Mujahedeen, which enjoyed Saddam's patronage.

Bremer meanwhile has announced a scheme to free 506 inmates.

Pachachi said screening of prisoners was necessary "to be absolutely sure that those released have not been implicated in acts of violence against the Iraqis as well as against coalition troops".

"There is a continuous consultation going on between the governing council and the coalition administration" regarding prisoners' release, he said, adding that consultation would continue until US-led occupation of Iraq ends.

The coalition has set an end-June deadline for returning sovereignty to Iraq.

2003 a deadly year for journalists

AFP, Paris

The Iraq war helped make 2003 a dangerous year for journalists, with 91 killed, most of them covering conflict or corruption, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) said here yesterday.

The number of fatalities was 23 percent higher than the previous year and took place in more than 25 countries, the federation said in a statement from its Australian-based president, Christopher Warren.

Citing an IFJ report entitled Media Casualties in the Field of Journalism and Newsgathering, Warren said many of the deaths were due to war, although assassinations and simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time were to blame in some cases.

"The impact of war and conflict on the work of news media cast a long shadow over journalism in 2003," said Warren, who is also the federal secretary of Australia's Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance.

"War in Iraq, conflict in Columbia, violence in the Philippines left journalists dead in a year marked by growing anger within media circles over the targeting of journalists," Warren said.

Bush now plans to send Americans to moon, Mars

REUTERS, Washington

Buoyed by a successful landing on Mars by a robot explorer, President Bush plans a major announcement on space policy next week that envisions sending Americans back to the moon and ultimately to Mars, officials and congressional aides said Thursday.

Nearly a year after the shuttle Columbia exploded on re-entering the atmosphere, sending NASA into a deep spell of melancholy, Bush is expected to outline a sweeping vision of US space leadership.

He is expected to propose a new lunar initiative leading to a permanent American presence on the moon and a mission to Mars in the long term, said the sources, who asked to remain unidentified.

Speaking to reporters with Bush in Florida, White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan said that after the Columbia tragedy Bush made clear his desire for US space exploration to continue.

"The president directed his administration to do a comprehensive review of our space policy, including our priorities and the future direction of the program,

and the president will have more to say on it next week," McClellan said, declining to reveal any details in advance.

Bush is scheduled to be in Mexico on Monday and Tuesday so any announcement is not expected before Wednesday.

Congressional sources said the administration was also considering setting up a more streamlined hierarchy for guiding the government's wide-ranging space programs and coordinating its research and development.

Under this scenario, there could be more exchanges of technology between NASA and the Defence Department.

Some members of Congress are worried about ensuring the United States remains the global leader in space exploration.

"If we don't do it, somebody else will," said Tennessee Rep. Bart Gordon, a ranking Democrat on the House Science Committee. "The Chinese, the Europeans and the Japanese all have the goal of going to the moon. Certainly we don't want to wake up and see that they have a base there before we do."

Failure to hunt Iraqi WMD to haunt Bush in polls

REUTERS, Washington

The failure to find Iraqi weapons of mass destruction looks set to dog the Bush administration in an election year amid persistent accusations it exaggerated evidence in making a case for war.

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a liberal-leaning US think tank, issued a report Thursday that compared public and declassified intelligence information with statements made by administration officials.

It concluded that the administration made the threat from Iraq sound more dire than the underlying information.

"We have found and have gone to some length to define and lay out

serious misrepresentation of the facts over and above what was in the intelligence findings," Jessica Mathews, president of the think tank and one of the authors, said.

In one example, she said UN weapons inspectors said the amount of biological growth medium that Iraq had could produce three times as much anthrax as it had declared if it used all that growth medium to produce anthrax.

President Bush in an Oct. 7, 2002, speech in Ohio, said: "The inspectors, however, concluded that Iraq had likely produced two to four times that amount. This is a massive stockpile of biological weapons that has never been accounted for and is capable of killing millions."

US military overstretched, morale at risk: Experts

REUTERS, Washington

The US military is overstretched by deployments in Iraq and elsewhere, forcing the Pentagon to keep thousands of soldiers and reservists in uniform long beyond their release dates with potentially dangerous effects on morale, experts say.

"There is no question that the force is stretched too thin," said David Segal, director of the Centre for Research on Military Organisation at the University of Maryland.

"We have stopped treating the reserves as a force in reserve. Our volunteer army is closer to being broken today than ever before in its 30-year history," Segal said.

Defence Secretary Donald

Rumsfeld and US commanders concede that the 1.4 million-member active duty armed forces, which have been cut by about a third since the end of the Cold War, are stretched by deployments in South Korea and Europe as well as post-2001 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

But Rumsfeld says he has seen no evidence so far in a major ongoing Pentagon study to support calls from analysts and some Army officials to boost the service's strength by perhaps 20,000 troops to 500,000.

Signs of strain are appearing, however. Segal said the National Guard finished last year around 10,000 below its recruitment target and he predicted more severe recruitment and retention problems next year.



PHOTO: AFP

US soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 22nd Regiments of the 4th Infantry Division blindfold Iraqi detainees during a raid in former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, 180km north of Iraqi capital Baghdad yesterday. Hundreds of US soldiers with air support raided scores of houses in Tikrit and detained 13 anti-coalition fighters.

Iraqi council okays federalism, Kurdish autonomy

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's interim Governing Council has agreed to a federal structure for the country and to enshrining Kurdish self-rule in three northern provinces in the fundamental law that will precede national elections in late 2005, council member Judge Dara Nuraddin said yesterday.

The fate of three more provinces over which the Kurds have claims would be decided later, he added.

Kurdish leaders Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani, meanwhile, met four Arab Governing Council members on Iraq's future shape late Thursday and early Friday in

the Kurdish resort of Salahuddin.

Nuraddin, a Kurdish independent helping draft the country's basic law, said the lawmakers had already decided on basic principles for Kurdish self-rule.

"In the fundamental law, Kurdistan will have the same legal status as it has now," he told AFP, referring to the region that has enjoyed virtual autonomy since the end of the 1991 Gulf War.

He said the council has decided that the basic law, to be adopted by March 1, will formally recognise the principle of federal Iraq, preserving the Kurds' legal right to autonomy over the long term.