

Bush led like a 'blind man,' says ex-aide

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush was so disengaged that he led cabinet meetings "like a blind man," former Treasury secretary Paul O'Neill told CBS television in portions of an interview released Friday.

O'Neill, whom Bush fired in December 2002, explained that there was a lack of dialogue between the president and his top aides, either as a group or in face-to-face meetings. CBS reported on its Internet site.

The former insider, known for often blunt talk that sometimes rattled markets, told the network in an interview to be broadcast January 11 that the president asked no questions during their first one-on-one meeting.

"I went in with a long list of things to talk about and, I thought, to engage (him) on... I was surprised it turned out me talking and the president just listening... It was mostly a monologue," O'Neill said.

During cabinet meetings, Bush "was like a blind man in a roomful of deaf people," he told CBS.

The interview came after O'Neill served as the main source for an upcoming book, "The Price of Loyalty," which paints an insider's view of the Bush administration, the network said.



PHOTO: AFP
Stanford University scholar John Lewis responds to the press on arrival at Beijing's airport after returning from an unofficial visit to North Korea yesterday. Members of the US delegation said North Korean officials had allowed them to visit the secretive Yongbyon nuclear facility and had "honoured" all their requests.

US forces net more suspected insurgents

AFP, Baghdad

Guerrillas fired a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) at US troops in western Iraq, leaving one US soldier injured, as an insurgent was killed in a firefight with coalition troops, the US military said yesterday.

Dozens of people were also arrested in operations across Iraq, which led to the uncovering of several substantial weapons caches, military statements received Saturday said.

In Anbar, in western Al-Anbar province on Thursday, US troops from the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment came under RPG fire, leaving one soldier with a broken leg and shrapnel wounds.

Also in the Al-Anbar area, paratroopers from the US 82nd Airborne Division opened fire on two men seen planting an improvised bomb. One of the men was killed and another injured, the military said.

Paratroopers from the 82nd also captured six men in an operation to break a cell of insurgents loyal to the regime of ousted president Saddam Hussein.

US troops open fire on Iraqi cops: 2 dead

AFP, Tikrit

The US military yesterday confirmed that its soldiers mistakenly killed two Iraqi policemen overnight in the tense northern oil city of Kirkuk as relatives of the dead men demanded compensation.

Major Josslyn Aberle, a spokeswoman for the 4th Infantry Division in Tikrit, said the policemen were shot after failing to identify themselves when they were being pursued by troops of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade after a shooting incident.

"Two Iraqi police officers were killed yesterday after they failed to identify themselves to a coalition patrol," she said.

Aberle said the men were witnessed firing their weapons at a building and fled when US soldiers arrived at the scene. The soldiers gave chase, firing warning shots and calling for the policemen to halt.

"The men refused to comply. The soldiers took a defensive position and fired on the men, killing one, wounding another and capturing a third. The wounded man was treated immediately but died en route to hospital," Aberle said.

Police in Kirkuk, which has been rocked by recent ethnic unrest, said the US military apologised after the shooting at 8:30 pm (1730 GMT).

Aberle said she was not aware of any apology.

Soran Mohammed, a policeman at the scene, said the two policemen had been in their clearly marked car when the US patrol arrived and had repeatedly shouted "we are police".

The two men, Kurd Ardi Ali and Ibrahim Hadi, a Turkmen, were buried Saturday, while Ali's father

demanded compensation for the deaths.

"The Americans are now the enemy of the Iraqis because they have committed this horrible crime," said Ali Hussein Ahmed Shawali.

On Thursday US military leaders in the area met with the heads of Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen and Assyrian parties in Kirkuk that reflect the city's four main ethnic groups.

The Iraqis were asked to limit the number of armed security guards outside their offices to four or five, and not to stage any demonstrations without US military approval.

Kirkuk, which Kurds want to incorporate into an autonomous Kurdish region, following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, has been hit since the end of last year by deadly unrest among Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen.

Meanwhile, prayers at a Shiite Muslim mosque northeast of the Iraqi capital were brought to a bloody halt Friday when a powerful bomb exploded outside, killing five Iraqis and injuring 38, police and medics said.

Bodies littered the floor outside the Haj Sadek Banin mosque in Baquba, 60 kilometres (40 miles) from Baghdad, and vehicles were left blazing by the bomb which police said was timed to strike as worshippers left the mosque.

Paramedic Hussein Sadek said five people were killed and 38 wounded in the blast.

"The explosion took place as worshippers were leaving the mosque," doctor Ziad Tarek said, adding that several of the casualties were passers-by.

Indo-Pak talks may not start next month

Both nations set to lift travel ban on diplomats

ANI, New Delhi

Composite dialogue talks between India and Pakistan might not start as expected in February 2004, as the Union government is rapidly moving into general election mode.

Indian government sources have reportedly told the Daily Times here that a structured dialogue would only start after the Lok Sabha elections, and that officials from both countries would meet in March to decide on the agenda for the talks.

The sources further went on to say that the Indian Government is quite serious about dissolving the Lok Sabha to hold early elections.

They said the joint statement issued in Islamabad last Tuesday only spoke of starting the process of the composite dialogue in February and not the composite dialogue itself.

"The two countries will now

move step by step and the political-level dialogue will only start after the two countries had drawn a blueprint for talks," they added.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has agreed to India's proposal to ease restrictions on the travel of diplomats from both sides. According to the Daily Times, a formal consent will be conveyed to the Indian government soon.

The restrictions were imposed by India in January 2002 following the terrorist attack on Parliament.

"The Indian government forwarded four confidence-building measures shortly before the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) summit which have been examined by the government of Pakistan," sources were quoted as saying.

Sources said Pakistan might give its consent to another Indian proposal to increase the number of staff at their respec-

tive diplomatic missions to 75 from the existing 55.

The strength at the high commissions of India and Pakistan was 110 in December 2001, but New Delhi's decision to reduce Pakistan's personnel and a reciprocal response by Pakistan left the strength at 47.

On November 13, 2003, the two countries simultaneously issued visas to eight additional officials for each other's high commissions, increasing the strength to 55 at their high commissions in Islamabad and New Delhi.

Sources said it was Pakistan that proposed to increase the strength of the diplomatic staff to 110 on May 6, October 29 and November 23, 2003 respectively.

"Restoration of the full staff strength at the high commissions will facilitate speedy processing and grant of visas to the Pakistanis and Indians who intend to travel by air, road and train," the sources said.

Terror threat level still 'high' at 8 US airports

AFP, Washington

The United States is keeping eight airports and other unspecified facilities on high alert for terrorist attack after lowering the general threat level to "elevated" from "high".

Announcing the lowering of the threat level Friday, after 19 days of intense nationwide security precautions, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said that the United States would however "maintain particular vigilance around some critical resources and locales."

Without giving details he said most of the increased security would involve "the private sector" and this included airlines, US media reported Saturday.

Sources told The Washington Post those facilities included eight airports, including those in Washington, New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

A government official told USA Today privately that "certain airports as well as the cities of New York, Washington and Los Angeles will continue to have increased security."

A few of the many hundreds of dams, bridges and chemical plants that received heightened protection during the higher alert will

continue to be treated with extra vigilance, USA Today quoted the official as saying.

The move signals a major departure in US strategy on internal security, in which officials "communicate quietly with local officials who need to ramp up security in specific areas" rather than issue costly blanket alerts encompassing the entire country, the Post noted.

The change reflects narrower, more "sophisticated" risk assessments concerning specific facilities, locations and types of infrastructure, homeland security sources said.

In stepping up the alert before the end-of-year holidays, Ridge had warned that Al-Qaeda could be planning an attack even more spectacular than the September 11 strikes on New York and Washington two years ago that killed about 3,000 people.

During the alert, which lasted nearly three weeks, numerous flights to the United States were cancelled, many others were delayed and some were even escorted to US airports by fighter jets.

"We are still concerned about continued threats, but the threat conditions that we've been following have diminished," Ridge told a press conference Friday.



PHOTO: AFP
The mother and brother of Iraqi Kurdish policeman Ardi Ali, 23, mourn during Ali's funeral in the northern city of Kirkuk, 255km north of Baghdad yesterday. Ali and Ibrahim Hadi, both policemen, were killed by US gunfire in Kirkuk on Friday in a case of mistaken identity, said the police chief of the northern oil city. "US forces have admitted killing two Iraqi policemen by mistake and said that they have opened an investigation," said General Turhan Youssef.

UN still reluctant to send officials back to Iraq

REUTERS, United Nations

In an effort to get UN staff back into Iraq, the United States Friday reviewed security for the world body, still reluctant to send officials into the field after last summer's disastrous bombing of its Baghdad offices.

US and British ambassadors sounded out UN Secretary General Kofi Annan before a crucial Jan. 19 meeting on the future role of the United Nations in Iraq. But many UN officials are wary of seeing the United Nations back in Baghdad while the US occupation is in force.

"Security is of course one of the principle concerns of the United Nations," said U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte after talks with

Annan and British Ambassador Emyr Jones Parry.

One proposal, participants said, was to have the multinational force in Iraq break off a contingent to protect UN staff. But no decisions were made at the session that included senior UN security officials.

"The situation on the ground remains insecure. So the scope for a UN role is very much limited by the security factor. That's a fact of life," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said.

Annan withdrew international staff in October after two bombing attacks on its Iraq headquarters, the one on Aug. 19 costing the lives of 22 staff and visitors.

Since then Annan has emphasized he would not send them back

unless security improved -- and unless the UN's political role was well-defined in contributing to the country's future.

The United States has devised a schedule that would transfer governing power to an Iraqi provisional authority by June 30, a procedure known as "phase 1."

In "phase 2" the Iraqis would write a constitution and hold general elections by the end of 2005.

Negroponte acknowledged that the United Nations still had a problem fielding staff quickly before June by saying that "I think that on phase 2 there isn't any doubt that the United Nations is prepared to play a robust role if it is asked to do so by the Iraqis."

Powell sees chances of talks with Iran

REUTERS, Washington

Secretary of State Colin Powell said Friday the Bam earthquake had opened up some opportunities for dialogue between the United States and Iran even though there was no reason to expect a quick political rapprochement.

In his comments to Arab television network Abu Dhabi TV, Powell went further than other US officials over the last few days in raising the possibility of a dialogue between the long-time adversaries.

"It showed that in a crisis like that we could cooperate, and maybe that will lead to other areas of cooperation. But we should not think that just because of this humanitarian rapprochement it immediately leads to a political rapprochement," Powell said according to a transcript of the interview released by the State Department.

Michael Jackson to lease out his Neverland ranch

AFP, Los Angeles

Singer Michael Jackson intends to lease out his Neverland ranch, the lavish spread that police searched two days before arrested him on child molestation charges, media reports said Friday.

"The 37,000 square foot (3,400 sq meter) estate is a rental," said People magazine, adding, "Jackson is said to be serious about staying away from Neverland for good."

The ranch is located in the community of Santa Maria in western California. It boasts a ferris wheel, amusement rides and a small zoo.

"He can now be closer to his family," said Jackson family lawyer Bryan Oxman.

ETOnline reported Jackson was for the moment roughing it in a 2.25-acre Beverly Hills mansion which he rents for 70,000 dollars a month.

Pakistan jails French journalists

BBC NEWS ONLINE

A court in Pakistan has sentenced two French journalists to six months in prison for violating visa regulations.

The two men, reporter Marc Epstein and photographer Jean Paul Guilloteau, from L'Express magazine were arrested by the Pakistani authorities last month.

The trial judge ruled they had visited the south-western city of Quetta, near the Afghan border, without permission, also fining them US\$1,750 each.

The prison term has been suspended for a week so lawyers can file for appeal.

Police said the Frenchmen's visas only allowed travel to Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi.

A Pakistani journalist who was working with the two reporters as a fixer, Khawar Mehdi Rizvi, was

detained with them.

The BBC's Zaffar Abbas in Islamabad says such harsh sentences against foreign journalists are rare in Pakistan.

He says security officials there are alleging the two French journalists were trying to portray some local armed tribesmen as Taliban during their stay in Quetta in December, but the allegation was not raised in court.

Soon after their arrest last month, President Pervez Musharraf criticised the two men and their Pakistani fixer for trying to defame the country by falsely presenting the country as a hub of Taliban activities.

A petition by the lawyer acting for the two Frenchmen argued for the suspension of the jail term on the basis that they were "highly respectable journalists and not criminals".

BBC suspends TV show over host's anti-Arab comments

AFP, London

The BBC said Friday it was suspending a popular daytime television show after its veteran presenter sparked outrage by branding Arabs as "suicide bombers, limb amputators, women repressors".

Britain's public broadcaster said it "strongly disassociates itself" with comments made by presenter Robert Kilroy-Silk, a former MP for the ruling Labour Party, in a newspaper last Sunday, and has launched an investigation.

"We stress that these comments do not reflect the views of the BBC," the broadcaster said in a statement.

"The BBC is taking the Kilroy programme off air immediately while we investigate this matter fully."



PHOTO: AFP
Ashes rises above as lava flows down the slopes of the De Fuego volcano, 60km from Guatemala City. The volcano erupted early Friday forcing the evacuation of many villages around the 3763 mts high volcano.

BJP hints at Lok Sabha polls by end of March

PTI, Hyderabad

Set to sound the electoral bugle at its 'historic' national executive meeting in Hyderabad, BJP yesterday hinted at the possibility of holding Lok Sabha polls by March end and said the Election Commission was duty-bound to facilitate a popular government 'at the earliest'.

"We prefer elections to be held within 45 days of dissolution of Lok Sabha. If dissolution comes by end of January or first week of February, elections can be announced by February 15 and the process can be completed by March end," BJP general secretary Pramod Mahajan told reporters.

As hectic preparations were on for the two-day national executive meeting beginning on Sunday where the party will formalise its early poll plans, Mahajan said the

month of September, the original schedule for LS polls, is the 'worst month' to conduct elections in view of rainy season in many parts of the country.

"Ideally, we think February is the best month for elections. Since it is not possible now to conduct polls in February, we want elections at the earliest possible time," he said while participating in a 'Meet the Press' programme organised by Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUWJ).

While asserting that his party would not force a schedule on EC, Mahajan, however, said "The twin duty of Election Commission is to ensure free and fair polls and to give a popular government to people at the earliest. These two duties are not exclusive of each other".