

US offers Iraq power transfer concessions

Prisoner abuse probe opens

AFP, Baghdad

US overseer in Iraq Paul Bremer says Washington is open to compromise on its power transfer plans for the country after a leading Shiite cleric threatened strikes and protests unless the US-led coalition holds direct elections.

Meanwhile, the US military said Friday it had opened an investigation into reports of abuse of Iraqi detainees by US troops at a coalition detention facility.

Bremer's offer of modifications to a November 15 deal with the interim Iraqi Governing Council came after influential Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani threatened a wave of unrest unless his call for elections is heeded.

"We're willing to consider refinements and that's something that we will be willing to discuss at

the appropriate time," said Bremer, who holds talks on Monday with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Iraqi council members.

The once apolitical Sistani's bombshell came after thousands of Iraqi Shiites demonstrated support for the religious hierarchy's rejection of coalition plans for provincial caucuses to choose a provisional government.

Sistani will not hesitate to call strikes and a campaign of civil disobedience if the coalition goes ahead with plans to hand sovereignty to an unelected body in June, his representatives warned.

Backed by the "wrath of God", the cleric was willing to "continue this battle to the end", representative Sheikh Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai said, adding that while Sistani was still ready to talk, an

action plan was in place.

"(Sistani's) actions will be progressive: we will begin perhaps first with mass protests, then move on to a civil disobedience campaign, and then finally a general strike," Karbalai said.

Iraq's Shiite religious parties have found new voice following the capture of their longtime tormentor Saddam Hussein, piling pressure on the coalition to adopt a transition plan that reflects the community's demographic weight.

Both Bremer and the United Nations have warned Iraq lacks the basics for holding nationwide elections, with no electoral law in place and no population census on which to base an electoral register.

Washington hopes the forthcoming talks involving Bremer and the UN chief will persuade the

world body to dispatch a team to Iraq to convince Sistani to back down, diplomats say.

The move would mark a bold step for the UN, which pulled staff out of Iraq after a series of deadly attacks against aid agencies including a truck bombing that killed its top envoy and 21 others in August.

Annan has indicated he is unwilling to send his personnel back into Iraq unless he is satisfied the security situation is improved and that the UN will be given a substantive role to play.

Security remains a major problem for the coalition despite claims by top generals that progress is being made. In the latest attack Friday, a teenage boy was killed when a bomb exploded in Baghdad as troops tried to defuse it.



Pakistani women dance during a march calling for "Peace in South Asia" at the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai. Tens of thousands of activists pushing nearly as many causes were taking part in lectures, workshops, protests and entertainment at the fourth WSF.

Vajpayee hopes Pakistan will keep commitments

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee yesterday said he hoped the commitments given him by Pakistani leaders during his recent meetings with them would be implemented "sincerely."

"India and Pakistan have taken some confidence-building measures recently," Vajpayee told a two meeting of provincial police chiefs in the Indian capital New Delhi, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency reported.

"They have led to an understanding between us about the way forward towards relations of peace, in which security and stability can be enhanced."

"We hope that the commitments undertaken will be implemented sincerely and that we can move forward ... rather than be caught in suspicion and hostility."

In breakthrough talks earlier this month, India and Pakistan announced the resumption of their stalled dialogue.

The two sides also issued a joint statement in which the Pakistani president assured the Indian prime minister that his country would not be used for any "terrorist" activity directed against India or any other country.

New Delhi has repeatedly accused Pakistan of aiding the infiltration of Islamic militants into Kashmir to foment an Islamic militancy there, a charge Islamabad has consistently denied.

More than 40,000 people have been killed since the outbreak of the Islamic rebellion in the scenic Himalayan region in 1989 according to Indian figures, though separatists put the toll at twice as high.

Kashmir, the spark for two of the three wars between the two South Asian nuclear rivals since their independence from British rule in 1947, is claimed by both in full.



PHOTO: AFP

Nobel Peace laureate of 2003 Shirin Ebadi (R) talks with Indian actress and former MP Shabana Azmi at the opening ceremony of the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai Friday. Tens of thousands of anti-globalisation activists began the movement's first convention in Asia, the six-day meeting blasting off with a peace performance and speeches from leading world social critics. More than 78,000 people registered to take part in the hundreds of panels and protests at the WSF, billed as an annual strategy session of civil society.

US reminds Israel to weigh consequences of targeted killing

AFP, Washington

The United States Friday issued its boilerplate warning for Israel to consider the consequences of its actions amid signs the Jewish state has targeted the spiritual leader of the radical Islamic Hamas movement for assassination.

"While Israel does the right to defend itself, we've also made clear that Israel needs to consider the consequences of any actions that it might be contemplating," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

He added that the US position on so-called "targeted killings" had not changed, but did not repeat the key element that Washington is opposed to such acts.

Boucher also called on the Palestinian Authority to do more to rein in militant groups like Hamas, which claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing on Wednesday that killed four Israelis at the Erez crossing in the Gaza Strip.

Arctic winds leave eastern US colder than Iceland

REUTERS, New York

Bone-chilling arctic winds and record low temperatures swept the US Northeast Friday, closing schools in Boston, disrupting flights in New York and raising the chance of New England power blackouts.

Social workers and police took homeless people to shelters and utilities were stretched to the limit, asking customers to conserve energy, as temperatures in the region were well below those in Juneau, Alaska and Reykjavik, Iceland.

Pedestrians hustled on New York streets bundled up from head to toe as arctic winds of 18 mph made exposed skin feel painfully cold.

"We have never experienced anything like this," said Tamara Neema, a tourist from California visiting New York's Times Square.

Hanwha accused of giving huge illicit funds to 2 ROK parties before polls

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

The South Korean Hanwha Group handed over an estimated 5 billion won in alleged illicit funds to the two major parties prior to the 2002 presidential election, prosecution sources said yesterday.

The conglomerate is under suspicion of providing some 4 billion won and 1 billion won in certificates of deposit, respectively, to the opposition Grand National Party and the then-ruling Millennium Democratic Party, they said.

The prosecution will summon Hanwha Chairman Kim Seung-youn for questioning on details of his group's slush funds funneled into the parties as soon as he returns home, probably after the Lunar New Year's holiday next week, the court said.

Kim left the country for the United States earlier this month just one day after the prosecution moved to impose an exit ban on him.

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

South Korea will likely agree to a US proposal to pull all its troops out of Seoul with no residual units in the capital, Korean officials said.

Defence officials from the two countries opened the sixth round of the Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative talks in Hawaii on Thursday. The negotiations will address a previous agreement to realign US military units in South Korea and other pending issues.

At the heart of the relocation issue is whether to keep symbolic, residual units at the US Yongsan

Garrison in central Seoul, which currently hosts some 8,000 troops affiliated with the US Eighth Army and two key command posts.

Washington has already informed the Seoul government of its plan to move the Combined Forces Command and United Nations Command to locations south of Seoul. The two allies have so far failed to agree on how much land the US military would retain at Yongsan.

Under a bilateral agreement between the two governments, the prominent US military presence in the capital, which has been a source of anti-US sentiment here,

is set to pull back to areas south of Seoul by 2006.

"There seems to be no change in the US position for a complete withdrawal from the capital," Lt. Gen. Cha Young-koo, the Korean head delegate to the two-day Hawaii talks, told reporters Wednesday.

"The final agreement on the move will be made in favor of the US stance," the official said.

South Korean officials hope the United States will maintain a symbolic presence in Seoul as a show of its will to deter any threat from North Korea.



Pop star Michael Jackson reaches out to touch the hand of his mother Janet (L) as he is encircled by his immediate family including his sister Jermaine (2L) and brother Jermaine (R) and supporters. Nation of Islam Chief of Staff Leonard Farrakhan Muhammad (R) is also seen as Jackson leaves his arraignment for child molestation charges on Friday at the courthouse in Santa Maria, California. Jackson pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Nasa to stop servicing Hubble telescope

AFP, Washington

Nasa has decided to stop servicing the Hubble space telescope due to budget problems and safety concerns, bringing its mission to an early end, US space officials said Friday.

Hubble will remain in orbit as long as it can fulfill its duties, then be brought crashing back into Earth's atmosphere, with re-entry expected around 2011, said John Grunsfeld, chief scientist for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

"We will get as much life as we can out of the Hubble telescope, and we will continue to support research and analysis even after re-entry," he said.

The orbiting telescope has provided scientists with a wealth of invaluable data and images of the universe since it was launched in April 1990.

More people falling ill in Vietnam as bird flu claims new victim

AFP, Hanoi

The World Health Organization confirmed yesterday that a fourth person had died from bird flu in Vietnam and warned that a growing number of people were falling sick with respiratory illnesses.

The UN health agency said more people had been referred to two hospitals in Hanoi, raising fears that if they test positive for the virus it could wreak havoc on Vietnam's predominantly rural population.

The outbreak has sparked an Asia-wide health scare but Bob Dietz, the WHO's spokesman in Vietnam, cautioned that there was still no evidence of human-to-human transmission despite the deaths of several members of the same family.

"We believe we are seeing more cases of respiratory illness," he said. "It is too early to say whether or not this indicates an increase in H5N1 cases."

"It may be because more people with respiratory illnesses are being sent to these hospitals from the areas surrounding Hanoi because of concern surrounding H5N1 infections reported to the public."

Meanwhile, the state-run VN Express news portal reported that there had been bird flu outbreaks at a poultry research centre in Hanoi and on a farm in the northern province of Vinh Phuc in July last year.

This comes amid unconfirmed reports that the Vietnamese authorities had deliberately covered up the outbreaks.

Ten more experts from the UN health agency, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are due to arrive in the Southeast Asian nation this week to help contain the efforts.

Authorities have culled 39 tonnes of poultry since December 27 in Ho Chi Minh City alone, according to state media. A WHO expert is due to travel to the southern business capital over the weekend on a week-long mission.

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