

Delegates from Zambia (C), two Tibetan Buddhist monks (2-R and 4-R) and three Bangladeshi women pose for a souvenir picture at the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai yesterday. Anti-globalisation activists called for the world to unite against the United States as 100,000 people from 130 countries registered to the WSF. WSF is billed as a counterweight to the World Economic Forum of business and political leaders which opens its meeting on January 21 in Switzerland.

Plane with 10 crashes on US-Canada border

REUTERS, AP, Chicago

A small plane carrying as many as 10 people crashed in the icy waters of Lake Erie along the US-Canadian border on Saturday and no survivors have been found, a US Coast Guard official said.

Coast Guard officer Jeff Hall said the Georgian Airlines plane took off from Peele Island, Canada bound for Windsor, Ontario. It crashed about a half mile off the coast of Peele Island, which is just north of Sandusky, Ohio.

Weather conditions were cold and icy in the area.

The US Coast Guard was notified by Canadian officials of the missing plane at about 5:20 p.m. EST, he said. No other information about the people on board was available.

The pilot radioed a frantic call for help shortly after taking off about 5 p.m., but controllers then lost contact with the plane, said US Coast Guard Lt. j.g. Christopher Pasciuto. An island resident heard the plane laboring just before the crash, the Ontario Provincial Police said.

UN mulls next move as US pleads for help in Iraq

AFP, United Nations

In a high-stakes bid to keep its Iraq plans from being derailed by mounting Iraqi opposition, the United States comes to the United Nations today to ask for help from Secretary General Kofi Annan.

The US overseer in Baghdad, Paul Bremer, and a delegation from his hand-picked Iraqi Governing Council will meet with a wary Annan in an effort to get the United Nations back into Iraq after a three-month absence.

Annan requested the meeting in mid-December to get "clarity" on what the world body would be expected to do as the US-led coalition prepares to formally end its occupation and Iraqis begin governing themselves on July 1.

But the talks have taken on new urgency for Washington in the wake of opposition from the spiritual leader of Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has rejected plans for the handover.

Annan, a vocal opponent of the war, will be asked for help from the same administration of US

President George W. Bush that kept the United Nations at arm's length as it toppled Saddam Hussein and began to remake Iraq.

Sistani wants the democracy that the coalition promised after the war, and says direct elections must be held instead of the caucus system now being prepared to create a caretaker government in July.

He has already drawn tens of thousands of supporters onto the streets to protest putting an unelected government in power, and has threatened strikes and civil disobedience if the United States does not relent.

Bremer said Friday that Washington would consider some "refinements" to the plan, which was originally spelled out in a November 15 agreement between the Governing Council and the coalition.

That deal made no mention of the United Nations, which Annan ordered out of the country the previous month after two bombings at its Baghdad headquarters, one of which killed 22 people including the senior UN official in

Iraq.

But in Baghdad, a Western official said that Annan had already agreed to send a team to Iraq to study Sistani's demands and that the details be hammered out Monday.

A UN spokesman on Friday did not confirm that a team would go, but a senior UN official played down high expectations of the meeting, calling it "a stage along a road."

A spokesman for the main Shiite party, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, said SCIRI leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, a Governing Council member, would use the talks to press Sistani's request.

He said Sistani would back down only if a UN fact-finding team "officially concludes" that free and fair elections are impossible in the short-term, which Annan has indicated he believes.

"If this is the case, then His Holiness will present another option that is close to organising free elections," said the spokesman, Mohsen al-Hakim.

UN officials have not envi-

sioned a major UN role in Iraq before July 1, and Annan has repeatedly said he is unwilling to risk the lives of more staff if the world body only has a sideline role and security does not improve.

But even work on a modest scale carries risks for the United Nations and for Annan, who says the world body is at a "fork in the road" in the aftermath of the Iraq war, which has seen UN personnel become the targets of deadly attacks.

A scathing inquiry into security lapses around the August 19 bombing of the UN offices that killed his top envoy, Sergio Vieira de Mello, pointed blame at some of the highest levels of the world body and damaged its credibility.

As Annan mulls his next move in Monday's talks, he is also expected to attend a separate meeting later in the day, where the Governing Council and the US-led coalition will brief the UN Security Council.

Current president Heraldo Munoz of Chile said last week that the council, which was sharply divided over the war, would feel "free" to raise questions about the plans for Iraq's future.

Arundhati hopes Bush would share fate of captured Saddam

AFP, Mumbai

Indian writer Arundhati Roy, who wants an ongoing anti-globalisation conference to launch a campaign to shut down US companies, said yesterday she hoped President George W. Bush would share the fate of the captured Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

"If Saddam Hussein deserves to be humiliated and have his fillings counted and his hair checked for lice on primetime TV, then so does George Bush," Roy told about 100 people at a leftist convention on the sidelines of the World Social Forum.

"Saddam Hussein surely ought to be tried for crimes against humanity. But so should all his accomplices in the US and Europe," she said.

"To applaud the US army's capture of Saddam Hussein and therefore justify its invasion and occupation of Iraq is like deifying Jack the Ripper for disemboweling

the Boston Strangler," Roy said.

The winner of the 1997 Booker Prize for "The God of Small Things" was speaking at the Mumbai Resistance, an alternative convention in Bombay of around 2,000 leftists who view the World Social Forum as too moderate.

Roy is also taking part in the World Social Forum, which she co-inaugurated Friday with a call for the 100,000 anti-globalisation activists to pick two US companies engaged in the Iraq war and launch a campaign to shut them down.

She repeated her appeal to the Mumbai Resistance, recommending as a possible target Bechtel, the San Francisco-based engineering firm which has been awarded contracts worth 2.48 billion dollars to reconstruct Iraq from the US Agency for International Development.

Roy noted that George Shultz, a former US secretary of state who has advised President Bush, was on Bechtel's board of directors.

Laden, Mullah Omar in 'good health'

AFP, Dubai

Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, his right-hand man Ayman al-Zawahiri and fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Omar are all in good health, according to a statement purportedly from the Taliban published on a Islamist website.

"The emir of the faithful, Mullar Omar, and sheiks Osama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri are in good health," said the statement from a body calling itself the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

It was not possible to verify the authenticity of the statement, carried on the website groups.yahoo.com/group/globalis_lamicmedia/ message/291 and signed by "the vanguard of the Mujahideen victory in Afghanistan."

It said media reports about a hunt led by Pakistani and US forces against bin Laden, Mullah Omar and Zawahiri, were "just lies aimed at fooling people."

Israel mulls changing barrier route as World Court battle looms

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli leaders yesterday discussed possible changes to the snaking route of a huge barrier being built inside the occupied West Bank to make it easier to defend at the World Court, political sources said.

A top army officer began work at the head of a committee that will hone details of a unilateral partition plan that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has vowed to enact if there is no progress on talks with the Palestinians.

The International Court of Justice at the Hague -- also known as the World Court -- starts hearings next month in response to a UN General Assembly request to rule whether Israel must tear down the barrier.

Israel's High Court will also hold a hearing before then on the legality of the barrier, built of razor wire and concrete.

"It was the recommendation of the attorney-general that if there

are not changes to the route then it will be difficult to defend," said one senior political source. "This is what is being discussed, but there will not be major changes."

The Jewish state says completed sections of the barrier are already keeping out suicide bombers like those who killed hundreds during more than three years of conflict.

Palestinians call it an "Apartheid Wall" whose purpose is to grab land that Israel has occupied since 1967. Designed to loop around Jewish settlements, it cuts deep into land that Palestinians want for a state.

Even Israel's main ally, the United States, has criticised the route. The political sources said Sharon's cabinet chief would go to Washington this week to try to reach an understanding on some of the more controversial sections.

There have already been minor tweaks to the route. Israelis said they were to make life easier for Palestinians.

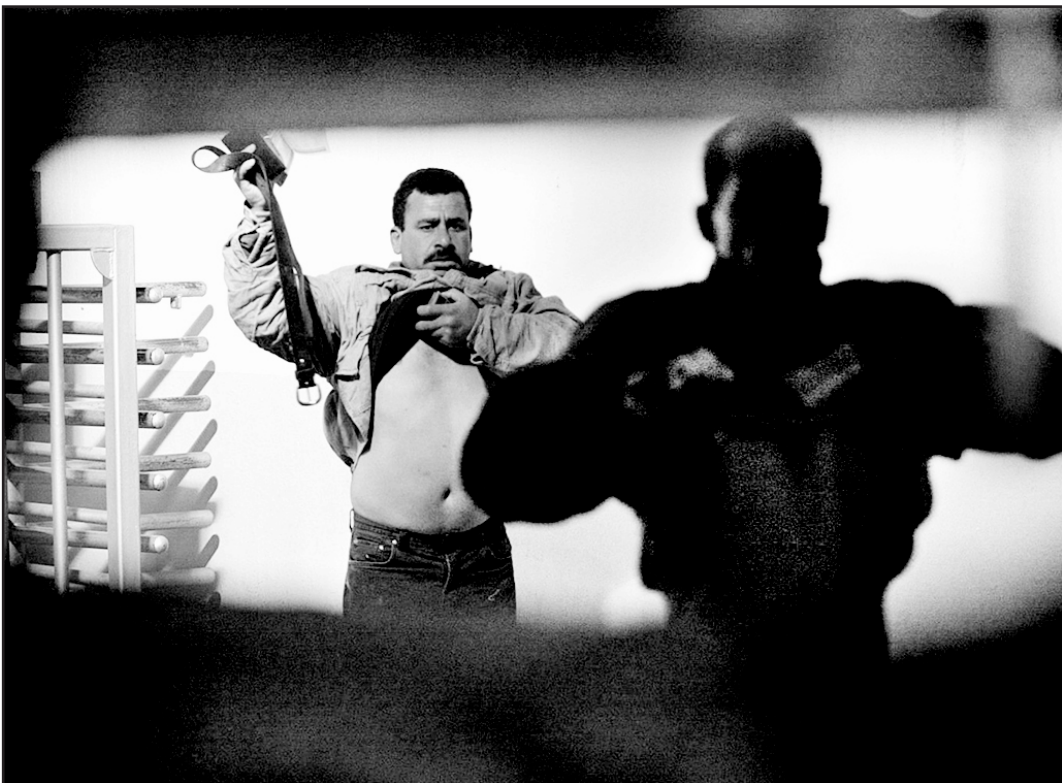


PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian workers follow orders from Israeli soldiers and lift their shirts to show their midriff and special passes as they cross the Erez Crossing into Israel for a working day yesterday. Israel lifted the closure of the Gaza strip that followed last week's suicide attack which left four Israelis dead and allowed thousands of workers to enter it's territory and the Erez Industrial area.



PHOTO: AFP

A Syrian Muslim woman holds up a placard as she takes part in a protest outside the French Cultural Center in Damascus Saturday against plans by the French government to ban the Islamic headscarf from schools in France.

Congress hunts for allies & a leader

AFP, New Delhi

India's fractured opposition has begun a hunt for a prime ministerial candidate to match the formidable image of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee ahead of parliamentary polls likely to be held in April.

The main opposition Congress party's leader -- Italian-born Sonia Gandhi -- has decided to keep herself away from the race, at least for the moment.

"We never impose our leadership on other parties," Sonia told reporters in Mumbai recently. "This question (of who will be prime minister) will be decided by the people of the country."

Sonia, 56, was until recently being projected by her party as its prime ministerial candidate, but with voices of dissent from prospective allies the issue has been now kept in limbo.

The Congress has started an intense exercise to forge new alliances with regional parties while also patching up relations with old foes.

On the ruling side there is a structured coalition led by

Vajpayee, 79, of about two dozen parties that have more or less remained together since 1999, the opposition has not been able to project a united front.

Until recently, the Congress was not even in favour of coalitions but this has now changed with the largest opposition party actively seeking allies to counter the ruling conglomerate.

The biggest problem, however, remains the question of who will be prime minister should the opposition win -- most prospective Congress allies are not willing to accept Sonia as their leader.

Their main opposition to her candidature is that she was not born in India and only assumed Indian citizenship after her marriage to assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in the early eighties.

The ruling Hindu nationalists have made Gandhi's foreign origin one of their main election issues. Sonia is also considered to be a far less experienced leader politically, having joined active politics only in 1996 at the urgings of her party, compared with Vajpayee's more than five decades of political life as an MP.

BJP won't tie-up with SP, BSP: Mahajan

PTI, Nagpur

As the countdown for early Lok Sabha poll begins, the BJP yesterday rejected any possibility of electoral alliances with Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party led by Mayawati.

"There is no possibility of an electoral alliance either with Mulayam Singh or Mayawati," Pramod Mahajan told a press conference in Nagpur.

"BJP is yet to recover from the trauma of pulling down of the government in Uttar Pradesh by Mayawati," he said.

On alliance with Om Prakash Chautala's INLD, Mahajan said "even if he does not align with us, he is not going to have an alliance with Congress in Haryana."

On Cong-NCP alliance, Mahajan said if NCP chief Sharad Pawar

strikes a pre-poll alliance with Congress with whom he broke on the issue of foreign origin of Congress President Sonia Gandhi, the anti-Sonia votes, which his party had secured during previous elections, would come back to BJP.

"We did not go to NCP, it was NCP which had approached BJP," he said adding "the proposed Cong-NCP tie-up will have no effect on our poll prospects in Maharashtra."

"If you see the history of elections in the past, the Congress has always suffered whenever Pawar had gone close to it," Mahajan said.

"Neither Congress nor Pawar has understood it," he quipped.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee is going strong and his age factor will in no way hamper the poll campaign of BJP-led NDA during the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections, BJP general secretary Pramod Mahajan said in Nagpur yesterday.