



PHOTO: AFP
An Iraqi Shiite Muslim boy holds up a poster of late Shiite leader Mohsen al-Hakim (C), killed under the regime of Saddam Hussein in 1982, and his two sons Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim (L), killed in a suicide bombing last August, and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim (R), member of the interim Iraqi Governing Council, during a protest in Samawa, 270km south of Baghdad, 21 January 2004. Some 500 people turned out in support of leading Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's demands for the US-led coalition to abandon power-transfer plans immediately in favor of full elections.

Libya cooperating with US, UK arms teams

REUTERS, Washington

Libya is cooperating fully with a team of visiting US and British officials who are studying how to dismantle and destroy its weapons of mass destruction programs, a senior US official said on Wednesday.

The official raised the possibility that Washington could within months begin easing US economic sanctions on Tripoli if it continues to cooperate on the weapons and addresses US allegations of support for "terrorism" and meddling in Africa.

In a sign of warming ties, six US members of Congress led by Rep. Curt Weldon, a Pennsylvania Republican, plan to visit Libya this weekend in the first congressional visit since President Muammar Gaddafi seized power in the Arab state 35 years ago.

The US official said a team of about 12 to 15 US and British weapons experts arrived in Libya on Sunday and were getting what they needed from Libyan officials, saying they could soon be ready to remove weapons-related equip-

ment.

"As of now, the Libyans have been very cooperative ... it's a day-by-day thing," said the US official who asked not to be named. "Nobody has any complaints at this point."

After nine months of secret diplomacy with the United States and Britain, Libya announced a surprise decision on December 19 to abandon efforts to acquire nuclear, chemical or biological weapons in an effort to end its pariah status.

The official said the US-British team was studying issues like how to dismantle and physically remove the bulk of the Libyan nuclear arms program from the country and how to deal with mustard gas stocks, which would be destroyed locally.

He said Libya denied having an offensive biological weapons programme but added, "that is a subject for further discussion."

The group follows initial visits by intelligence teams in October and December that surveyed Libyan arms programs and encountered some resistance that eventually disappeared.

"The first visits... didn't proceed completely free of difficulty and things got better as time went on," said the US official. "That is why this remains a performance-based question. If we get access to everything we ask for and we get cooperation then we proceed and if we don't, then we don't."

Libya's August admission of responsibility for the 1988 Lockerbie bombing and its promise to abandon weapons of mass destruction has set the stage for a possible end to US economic sanctions and even the reopening of a US embassy.

Lifting sanctions would allow US oil companies, including the Oasis Group that includes Marathon Oil Co., Amerada Hess and ConocoPhillips to resume work in Libya they abandoned when sanctions forced them out in 1986.

Asked how long it might take to remove the US sanctions if Libya provides perfect cooperation, the official said, "I think months is the best characterisation."

Sharon defiant over bribery case

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said yesterday he had no intention of resigning after prosecutors announced they were considering whether to indict him in connection with a corruption case.

"I am not about to resign. I stress -- I am not about to resign," Sharon was quoted as telling Yedioth Aharonoth daily after a Tel Aviv court charged a businessman friend of trying to bribe him when he held lower government posts in the 1990s. Wednesday's indictment of David Appel, a stalwart of the ruling right-wing Likud party, was the latest funding scandal to hit Israel's top office and drew renewed opposition calls for Sharon to quit.

The 75-year-old prime minister has denied any wrongdoing and vowed to cooperate with investigators. "If the question is whether recent developments are liable to bring about my resignation, the answer is no," he told Yedioth. "I do not intend to resign and am certain of my ability to complete the current term in office."

But Justice Ministry sources say prosecutors will decide within months whether Sharon should himself be indicted for bribery. Channel Two television quoted Attorney-General Edna Arbel as saying he could face charges as soon as next month. An ex-army general, Sharon enjoys broad support for his tough handling of a three-year-old Palestinian uprising. But this popularity has already been corroded by the corruption scandals, especially given Israel's ongoing economic slump. A poll in the mass-circulation daily Maariv Thursday found that 53 percent of Israelis believe Sharon was involved in misconduct, and 63 percent would want him to step down if this is proven.

While Sharon has not been charged, Justice Ministry officials say they are considering whether to indict the Israeli leader. The officials say the decision is expected in the coming weeks or months.

Sharon's spokesman Asaf Shariv would not comment on the case except to say: "I can guarantee there will not be an indictment."

David Appel was indicted in the Tel Aviv Magistrates Court for allegedly giving Sharon hundreds of thousands of dollars to promote a tourism project in Greece and also to help rezone urban land near Tel Aviv before and during Sharon's term as prime minister.

Appel's lawyer, Moshe Israel, denied the charges. "There is no doubt he is innocent," he said.

Search for WMD to take 'considerable' time: US

AP, Washington

Vice President Dick Cheney said that the US administration has not given up on the so far fruitless search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The "jury is still out," he said.

"It's going to take some additional, considerable period of time in order to look in all the cubby holes and the ammo dumps and all the places in Iraq where you might expect to find something like that," Cheney said in an interview on Wednesday with National Public Radio. "It doesn't take a large storage space to store deadly toxins, or even just the capacity to produce it."

Cheney also said that he's confident that there was a relationship between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. The US administration, however, has said in the past that there is no evidence that Saddam was behind the September 11 terrorist attacks. "I continue to believe I think there's overwhelming evidence that there was a connection between al-Qaeda and the Iraqi government," Cheney said. "I'm very confident that there was an established relationship there."

Cheney spoke the day before he leaves on a five-day trip to Europe, where he will seek help in the war on terrorism, speak out against the spread of weapons and attempt to smooth ruffled relations with allies.

In just his second foreign trip since taking office with President George W Bush around three years ago, Cheney on Thursday leaves for Davos, Switzerland, to address the World Economic Forum. After that, he will visit Rome.

The US administration's relations with some European allies and the United Nations soured after the US-led invasion of Iraq. Now, the United States wants UN experts to help resolve a dispute between the United States and a top Shiite cleric over the best way to transfer power to the Iraqis.

Final arguments begin in HR abuse case against Unocal

AFP, Los Angeles

A US judge has heard closing arguments in a landmark trial in which US oil giant Unocal stands accused of human rights abuses during the building of a disputed gas pipeline in Myanmar.

The case, brought by 15 Myanmar villagers, marks the first time that an American firm has been tried in the United States for alleged rights abuses and is being closely watched by legal pundits.

If the complex suit is ultimately successful, damages of up to one billion dollars could be awarded in the case.

The villagers claim in their seven-year-old lawsuit that Unocal turned a blind eye as junta troops murdered, raped and enslaved villagers and forced them to work on the 1.2-billion-dollar pipeline in the 1990s.

At issue in this first phase of the complex two-part trial, the phase that drew to an end Wednesday, is whether Unocal can be held liable for the conduct of its subsidiaries which invested in the pipeline.

A lawyer for the villagers claimed Wednesday that the California-based oil titan set up "corporate shells" to avoid liability for the enslavement of villagers by Myanmar's military junta when the pipeline was built.

"Unocal made all the decisions," lawyer Terry Collingsworth said. "It was a business choice. It's not illegal to have done that, but the tradeoff is if you go the corporate-shell route, you don't get limited liability."

BBC programme prompts call for Iraq war probe

BBC ONLINE

The government is facing renewed calls for a full judicial inquiry into its decision to go to war with Iraq.

It follows Wednesday night's Panorama programme, on BBC One, which contained a previously unseen interview with late weapons expert Dr David Kelly.

Dr Kelly said Iraq could deploy weapons of mass destruction within days or weeks, rather than the 45 minutes mentioned in a government dossier.

The Conservatives said the interview reinforced the case for a full inquiry.

Tory defence spokesman Michael Ancram said Dr Kelly's comments in the interview "do place his views at odds with those presented in the government's September dossier".

It was a "great shame" that the remarks had not been presented publicly as evidence to the Hutton inquiry into the arms expert's death, he said.

Dr Kelly apparently committed suicide after being named as the suspected source for a BBC story on claims Downing Street "sexed up" the government's Iraq weapons dossier.

The interview showed that he had been concerned over a passage amended by Downing Street chief of staff Jonathan Powell to suggest that Saddam Hussein would use weapons of mass destruction in circumstances other than self-defence, Ancram said.

"This interview reinforces the case for the full independent judicial inquiry into the run-up to the Iraq war which we have been calling for."

Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesman Sir Menzies Campbell said: "These comments clearly underline Dr Kelly's scepticism about the government's claim of an immediate threat."

"Nearly a year after going to war the Government has not been able to justify its cause for doing so."

Downing Street refused to comment on the broadcast, in line with its policy of staying silent until Lord Hutton has reported, next week.

US expert doubts N Korea bombs

REUTERS, Washington

A prominent US scientist who visited North Korea's nuclear facilities said on Wednesday he was not convinced the communist state could turn its nuclear technology into a weapon or mount it on a missile.

But Siegfried Hecker, former head of Los Alamos National Laboratory, one of America's top nuclear research facilities, said Pyongyang's program, which Washington is trying to halt, was still of great concern.

Hecker told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that North Korea probably could make plutonium metal, a key weapon ingredient, and that 8,000 spent fuel rods that could be used to produce fuel for nuclear bombs were missing from a storage area at the country's nuclear complex at Yongbyon.

He also said that a plant for reprocessing nuclear bomb-grade fuel was in good repair, that North Korean scientists had the technical expertise needed for reprocessing plutonium, and that a five megawatt nuclear reactor was "operating smoothly" and adding to the North's plutonium cache by 6 kilograms a year.

The United States has long asserted the North has enough plutonium for at least one or two nuclear weapons. If the 8,000 spent fuel rods were reprocessed between January and June 2003 as Pyongyang says, that would fuel at least half dozen more bombs, experts say.

Hecker was speaking in public for the first time since he and other members of an unofficial US delegation, including former US envoy to North Korea Charles "Jack" Pritchard, paid an unprecedented visit to Yongbyon at Pyongyang's invitation two weeks ago.

Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware, the panel's ranking Democrat who attended a closed-door briefing with Hecker on Tuesday, said the North "appears to be well along the path toward becoming a full-fledged nuclear weapon state."

In the public session, Hecker said the North Koreans hoped the visit would prove their nuclear capability and strengthen their hand in negotiations with the United States, which is working with four other regional states to negotiate an end to the programs.

But despite unique access to Yongbyon and detailed talks with nuclear engineers, Hecker said he still had "uncertainties" about Pyongyang's program.

The North showed it "most likely had the capability to make plutonium metal," a prerequisite for nuclear weapons, he said.

"However, I saw nothing and spoke to no one who could convince me that they could build a nuclear device with that metal and that they could weaponize such a device into a delivery vehicle," such as a missile, he said.

The North Koreans took the "extraordinary step" of displaying two glass jars housed in a wooden box inside a metal case that they claimed contained plutonium reprocessed last year from the 8,000 spent fuel rods, he said.

One glass jar reportedly contained 150 grams of plutonium oxalate powder and the other, 200 grams of plutonium metal.

Hecker held one jar in his hands, gloved for safety, to get a feel for density and heat content and said "it certainly was consistent with the way plutonium (metal) looks."



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian women workers wait to enter Israel at the Erez crossing in northern Gaza Strip, 21 January 2004. Thousands of Palestinian workers have been allowed to enter Israel but still face long delays after the army lifted a closure that it clamped on the coastal area following a suicide bombing last week that killed four people at the main crossing point into Israel.

