

US seeks UN help to defuse row with Iraqi Shiites

Annan to make statement on possible Iraq mission shortly

AFP, Baghdad

The United States yesterday summoned a top advisor to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to Washington for help in defusing tensions with Iraq's majority Shiite Muslims over plans to set up a new administration in Baghdad without elections.

Hours later, Annan announced he would make a statement "shortly" on whether he would dispatch a fact-finding mission to Iraq on the US plans to restore Iraqi-self rule through an appointed body by July 1.

On the ground, more Japanese troops arrived in the region on a controversial humanitarian mission while millions of Shiites

headed for main weekly prayers after a week of demonstrations to demand the elections.

The country was still reeling from 24 hours of guerrilla activity ending Thursday, which claimed the lives of nine Iraqis in a series of devastating attacks that also killed two US soldiers.

In Washington, Lakhdar Brahimi, a widely respected diplomat newly appointed as Annan's special advisor, met with US Secretary of State Colin Powell, national security advisor Condoleezza Rice, and her top Middle East aide Robert Blackwell.

"They talked about the way forward on Iraq, particularly in the next six months, and ideas for the political transition," said one

senior administration official.

Credited with paving the way to the historic Afghanistan constitution agreed earlier this month, Brahimi is seen as having the respect and negotiating skill that could smooth the way to an agreement on the handover of power.

The US-backed plan to install an unelected government by June 30 has drawn opposition from the pre-eminent religious leader of the Shiites, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Sistani wants direct elections and has drawn tens of thousands of protesters onto the streets of Iraq in support, throwing a wrench into a plan agreed late last year with the US-appointed Iraqi Governing Council.

But Sistani has indicated he will agree to a compromise if the United Nations sends a team of experts to Iraq that concludes it would be impossible to organise free and fair elections before the handover deadline.

Annan said Monday he would consider sending the team after meeting in New York with a delegation from the Governing Council as well as the US overseer in Iraq, Paul Bremer, and the top British envoy here, Jeremy Greenstock.

"We are continuing our reflection and analysis and I'll be making a statement shortly," Annan told AFP after speaking Friday at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. He did not elaborate.

3 Pak militants to die for church attack

AP, Islamabad

A Pakistani court has sentenced three Islamic militants to death after finding them guilty of killing four women as they prayed at a church near the capital in 2003, a police official said yesterday.

The three men were captured shortly after the August 9, 2003, attack on the grounds of a Presbyterian hospital in Taxila, a small town about 40 km northwest of here.

The women were all nurses at a hospital adjacent to the church. They died as they were leaving the church when attackers hurled grenades at the congregation.

A police official in Taxila, Jan Mohammed, told AP by phone that the judge ordered three other defendants free for lack of evidence.

India's talks with Kashmiri separatists augur well

AFP, New Delhi

Talks between the Indian government and Kashmiri separatists have broken new ground but there is a long way to go before the deadly separatist revolt in Indian Kashmir is settled, analysts said yesterday.

Still, the landmark meeting Thursday represented a welcome change from when the two sides only traded accusations without being willing to listen to each other's views, analysts said.

"It's a very, very positive step -- the thing has to be solved," said Kashmir University Professor Bashir Dabla. "The point is not whether they got something or not but that there is a consensus

among the partners in the conflict that it should be resolved."

On Thursday, the moderate wing of Kashmir's main separatist group, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, and Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani called for an end to violence in the Muslim-majority territory.

They agreed to more talks to find a solution to the 14-year-old insurgency that has left at least 40,000 dead by the official toll and at least double that number by the separatists' tally.

The encounter was the first time the separatists and the government had held such high-level talks and came only two weeks after nuclear rivals India and Pakistan agreed to

resume discussions next month on a host of disputes, including Kashmir, trigger of two of three wars between the neighbours.

The separatists want independence for Kashmir or its incorporation into Pakistan. India and Pakistan hold Kashmir in part but claim it in full.

Nuradin Baba, head of the political science department at Kashmir University, said it was too much to hope the dispute could be resolved swiftly.

"They have to break the psychological barriers on all sides. But at least it generates a positive atmosphere to hope in the society and creates goodwill.

Rough weather hits Egypt: 6 killed

AFP, Cairo

Six people were killed and another 42 hurt Thursday in traffic accidents around Egypt, as the country was swept by heavy rains and sandstorms that also forced traffic to be diverted from Cairo airport, reports said.

Among the dead was a married couple and their two children, who were killed in Ismailiya, on the Suez Canal, when their car collided with a bus in heavy rains, state news agency MENA reported.

The weather, with sandstorms in places reducing visibility to zero, led authorities to close down roads in the Suez region to prevent accidents.

Fifteen flights were turned away from the main international airport in Cairo and forced to land at Hurgada, on the Red Sea, airport sources said.



PHOTO: AFP
Turkish people brave the snow as they hardly manage to walk under heavy snowfall in Taksim Square area in Istanbul, Turkey Thursday.

Special court acquits Jaya

PTI, Chennai

A special court acquitted Tamil Nadu CM Jayalitha in the SPIC disinvestment case.

Special Judge R Rajamanickam also acquitted former state Industries Secretary C Ramachandran and Industrialist A C Muthiah who were arraigned in the case along with Jayalitha, holding that the prosecution had failed to prove the case beyond all reasonable doubt.

They were charged by the CBI, the investigating agency, with conspiring to get the state-owned Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation (TIDCO) to renounce its rights in the joint sector Southern Petrochemical Industries Corporation (SPIC) in March 1992, when SPIC came out with a 'zero conversion' bonds issue.

Musharraf optimistic about Kashmir peace prospects

AFP, Davos

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf voiced Thursday optimism over the possibility of peace in the Kashmir region long-disputed with India.

Addressing business and political leaders at the World Economic Forum, Musharraf said: "My optimism is based on the fact that for the first time there is a realisation that we need to address all issues including the issue of Kashmir to bring peace and harmony to the region."

For progress to be made there needed to be the "initiation of a composite dialogue" on all

issues including Kashmir.

"I am very hopeful, that with sincerity and resolve on both sides we will address all issues," he added.

India and Pakistan both occupy Kashmir in parts and claim it in full, and have fought two of their three wars in an attempt to wrest full control of the picturesque Himalayan region.

The nuclear rivals are inching towards resuming talks on the future of the region after earlier this month reaching a breakthrough to reopen dialogue on all points of dispute between them.

Musharraf sought to reassure

that his country's nuclear arms would never slip into the wrong hands.

"Pakistan's nuclear assets are in extremely safe hands and they will never be allowed to fall into the hands of extremists," the president said.

He called on wealthy countries to help root out what he considered to be the sources of extremism: unresolved political disputes, poverty and illiteracy.

"I personally feel, that the West, the United Nations, the United States ought to move forward toward the resolution of political disputes and the social-economic emancipation of the Muslim world", he said.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani lawyers shout slogans as they display portraits of the so-called father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, Abdul Qadeer Khan, during a protest against the recent arrests of nuclear scientists, in Lahore yesterday. A Pakistani court hearing appeals against the detention of nuclear scientists suspected of selling technology to Iran and Libya barred the government from handing them over to foreign agencies.

Serious implications if Iran fails to cooperate with IAEA: ElBaradei

AFP, Davos

The chief UN nuclear watchdog warned Thursday of "serious implications" if the Iranian government failed to fulfil its promise of cooperation to dispel fears about its nuclear program.

Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, told reporters at the World Economic Forum here that Tehran had been working with the IAEA as it pledged to do late last year.

But he added: "It is very important for the agency to come to a conclusion. It will have serious implications if they do not cooperate fully with us in the investigations. I hope and I am confident that they will cooperate."

ElBaradei did not elaborate on what he meant by "serious implications" if the Iranians did not come clean on their nuclear program.

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami gave new assurances here Wednesday that his country

had no nuclear ambitions and opposed the production of nuclear arms. "Iran has never had weapons of mass destruction," he said.

Iran agreed last year to suspend uranium enrichment as a confidence-building measure, and ElBaradei said Thursday the IAEA had no indications Tehran was still trying to procure materials to make a bomb.

"They are working hard to verify the suspension of all procurement activities and I think we are making good progress and I hope we will continue to make progress," he said.

Asked about reports that nuclear materials were being smuggled into Iran, ElBaradei said, "We have individuals involved I do not want to jump to the conclusion that the government is involved."

"We are in the process of investigating this network first of all to stop it and then avoid a recurrence of that very dangerous phenomenon."

Blair will survive Kelly affair, but Iraq row to go on: Robin Cook

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair will not be toppled from office next week by the report of a judicial inquiry into the suicide of weapons expert David Kelly, former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook predicted yesterday.

But a row over the way Blair took a sceptical Britain into the Iraq war alongside the United States last March was likely to continue, Cook said in an article for the Independent newspaper.

"The death of David Kelly was a personal tragedy for him and his family, but the even larger political scandal was how Britain was manoeuvred into taking part in (US President George W.) Bush's war on Iraq on warnings of an imminent threat which have turned out to be bogus," he said.

Cook, who was Britain's Foreign Secretary from 1997 to 2001, resigned his post as the

government minister in charge of relations with parliament last March in protest at the Iraq war.

"If Tony Blair wants not only to survive next week but to restore his authority he desperately needs to reach closure on the controversy over the war," Cook added.

Lord Brian Hutton, the senior judge heading the independent inquiry into scientist Kelly's death, makes his report next Wednesday, and it could prove highly damaging for Blair.

Kelly took his own life in July last year, just days after he was exposed as the source of a BBC story which alleged that the British government had "sexed up" intelligence on Iraq and its reported weapons of mass destruction.

The suicide hurled Blair into his worst crisis since he moved into Downing Street in May 1997.

US soldiers faced 13 court martials in Iraq for crimes since May 1

AFP, Baghdad

Adultery, assault, drunkenness, kidnapping, stealing computers, abusing prisoners and attempting to flee to Syria are some of the offenses US soldiers have been charged with in court martial cases since the Americans landed in Iraq.

At least 13 soldiers have gone up for court martial hearings in Iraq since May 1, the official end of major combat in the strife-torn country, according to an official army list obtained by AFP.

Seven have been handed bad conduct discharges, while the others have been sentenced to jail terms, ranging anywhere from between two and six months.

"It's a microcosm of society," said army lawyer Captain Jennifer Santiago about the excesses of military life nine months into the US occupation of Iraq.

Many other cases are still under investigation and are not at the stage where the top US commander in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, would recommend court martial proceedings, said Santiago, who serves at the coalition's command in Baghdad.

Last week, the US military announced an investigation into cases of abuse at an Iraqi detention centre, widely believed to be

Baghdad's massive Abu Gharib prison.

That investigation is on top of a "handful" of inquiries into whether US soldiers have maltreated Iraqi detainees, Santiago said.

She would not specify how many, but said the overall number was small.

A senior US military spokesman also confirmed there were "some cases" of alleged abuse, but refused to comment further.

Santiago said most of the investigations and court martial proceedings were for soldier-on-soldier offences related to "alcohol, sex, disrespect, disobedience and assault."

Since May, the US military in Iraq has discharged at least four soldiers and one non-commissioned officer for assault, according to the list given to AFP.

Three of the soldiers were involved in attacks on an officer or fellow soldier. But the military said it was unable to specify if the other two assault cases involved attacks on Iraqis or fellow soldiers.

In one of those cases, where the victim's identity was not revealed, the soldier was found guilty of "theft, assault and kidnapping." He was sentenced to "179 days in confinement" and expulsion from the military.

Sharon to make strong case for barrier ahead of US trip, ICJ hearing

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who faces a bribery scandal at home, will most likely visit Washington next February ahead of an International Court of Justice hearing on the legality of the separation barrier Israel is building in the West Bank, an Israeli official said yesterday.

The official, who asked not to be named, said Sharon had been given "an open invitation" to visit the United States for talks with US President George W. Bush.

He said the invitation had been extended by Bush's national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, during a conversation with Sharon's chief of staff Dov Weisglass, who is in Washington to discuss the barrier.

Sharon's US trip is likely to occur before February 23 when a hearing will open at the court in The Hague on the legality of the barrier whose controversial route, which often juts deep into the Palestinian territories, has sparked anger on the Palestinian side and even prompted Bush to call it "a problem."

Palestinians see it as a land-grab and a bid to pre-empt the borders of a future Palestinian state while Israel insists the barrier, which is to stretch 730km, only aims to prevent infiltration by Palestinian attackers.

A December 8 Arab-backed UN

General Assembly resolution asked for the ICJ opinion which, although it will only be advisory and its ruling non-binding, could well embarrass Israel.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom telephoned US Secretary of State Colin Powell Thursday to once again defend the barrier and said Israel intends to question the competence of the world court to give an opinion on the substance of the case "as well as for procedural reasons."

And Sharon said last Sunday he may consider minor changes to the barrier's path where it has not yet been constructed as he acknowledged the works caused "damage to Palestinians' quality of life."

Israeli justice officials have already warned that they would have a hard time defending the barrier at The Hague because of its problematic route.

Sharon will also expose his "disengagement plan" to Bush during his upcoming trip, Israeli media reported Thursday.

The hawkish premier warned last December that if the Palestinians were not to implement their obligations under the peace roadmap, he would unilaterally disengage from them by withdrawing from a limited number of Jewish settlements, mostly in the Gaza Strip, and drawing his own security border.

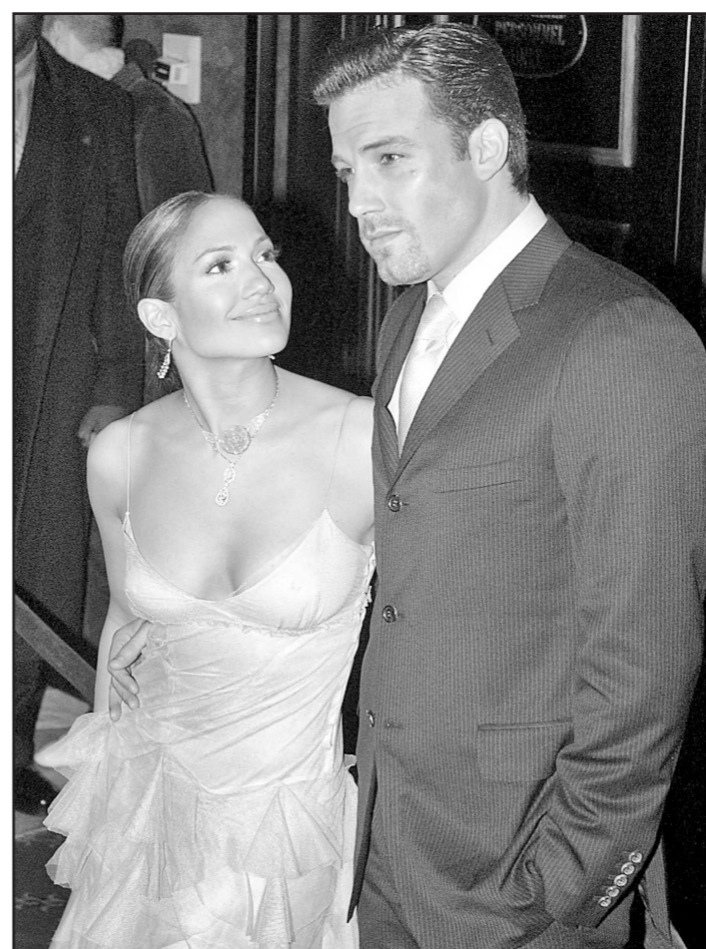


PHOTO: AFP
US actors Jennifer Lopez (L) and boyfriend Ben Affleck (R) arrive at the premiere of Lopez's new film "Maid in Manhattan" in New York December 8, 2002. Hollywood's hottest couple, Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez have split up, four months after calling off their wedding amid a media frenzy, J-Lo's spokesman said Thursday.