



PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi girls look out of their shattered window after an explosion went off as a US patrol drove past, near a hotel in Baghdad's upmarket Karrada district yesterday. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

US-led coalition stands firm on transition plans

8 US soldiers, 7 Iraqis killed in shootings, bombings

AFP, Baghdad

Battered by 24 hours of deadly attacks on US troops and Iraqi civilians, the US-led coalition stood firm against demands for immediate polls, insisting its plans to cede power to an unelected caretaker government were the best deal on offer.

In a day of violence, eight US soldiers and seven Iraqis were killed in drive-by shootings, bombings and air crashes across the war-shattered country.

Steadfast in the latest tests to their resolve, the coalition's leaders Saturday sought to strengthen the case for their vision of restoring sovereignty to Iraq as unease among the country's majority Shiite Muslims continued to simmer.

Three US soldiers were killed and six wounded when a car bomb exploded at a military checkpoint in the western town of Khaldiyyah

on Saturday, the US military and witnesses said. At least eight Iraqis were also wounded.

Just six hours earlier, two US soldiers perished when their convoy was attacked by a home-made bomb north of Fallujah.

And in the oil refinery town of Beiji, 200km north of Baghdad, a US soldier died of wounds sustained in a rocket-propelled grenade attack on his vehicle, a US military spokeswoman said.

The latest killings brought to 240 the number of US soldiers killed in action in Iraq since US President George W. Bush declared major combat over on May 1.

Two US pilots were also killed when their helicopter came down near the northern city of Kayyarah, but it was not known if the crash was caused by hostile fire.

Four Iraqi civilians were killed and more than 30 wounded when another device exploded outside a crowded courthouse in the town of

Samarra, 125km north of Baghdad, police and US officials said.

In Baghdad and the northern city of Mosul respectively, an Iraqi traffic policeman and a police officer were mown down in separate drive-by shootings, police said. Another policeman was killed by a bomb near the northern oil centre of Kirkuk.

An improvised bomb exploded in the capital's upmarket Karrada district early Sunday, in an apparent attempt to target a passing US military patrol. There were no casualties.

The latest violence marred the start of a UN security mission which arrived Friday, ending a three-month absence of UN international staff since a spate of deadly attacks last year.

The mission could pave the way for a UN team to assess the feasibility of holding elections in Iraq prior to a June 30 deadline for handing over sovereignty.

Iraq may have transferred some WMDs to Syria: David Kay

AFP, London

Part of Saddam Hussein's secret weapons programme was transferred from Iraq to neighbouring Syria, and their status has yet to be resolved, David Kay, the just-resigned head of the Iraq Survey Group, was quoted Sunday as telling a British newspaper.

In what it called an exclusive interview, the Sunday Telegraph said it was told by Kay that he had uncovered evidence that unspecified materials had been moved to Syria shortly before the start of the Iraq war in March last year.

"But we know from some of the interrogations of former Iraqi officials that a lot of material went to Syria before the war, including some components of Saddam's WMD (weapons of mass destruction) programmes," he said.

Israel gets ready for prisoner swap with Hezbollah

Turkey offers mediation with Syria

AFP, Jerusalem

Preparations were being laid in Israel yesterday for a long-awaited prisoner exchange deal with Lebanon's Hezbollah militia, as the Jewish state said it had accepted a Turkish offer of mediation with Syria.

Israel confirmed Saturday it had accepted a Turkish offer to mediate in possible talks with Syria, while stressing it did not mean the Jewish state had agreed to accept the recent peace overtures from Damascus.

Under the German-brokered prisoner exchange announced Saturday, Israel agreed to release over 400 Palestinian and Arab prisoners in exchange for the

return of an Israeli businessman kidnapped in October 2000, and three IDF soldiers, widely presumed dead.

The swap is likely to take place on Thursday in Germany.

In a secondary deal, Israel has committed to turn over Samir Kantar, a veteran Lebanese prisoner jailed for life in Israel over the murder of an Israeli family in 1979, in return for "concrete proof" about the fate of the missing airman Ron Arad.

Israel television said such proof would have to include "unequivocal evidence" of his fate, such as DNA samples showing he was still alive, or other pathological evidence if he had died or been killed.

Senior Israeli security officials

were meeting Sunday to iron out the technical details of the exchange, media reports said.

"The important thing from our point of view is that we brought our boys home," foreign ministry spokesman Jonathan Peled told AFP.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Israel had taken the right decision.

"The decision over the prisoner exchange deal was not an easy decision. I think we took the right, ethical and responsible decision," army radio quoted him as saying before a cabinet meeting.

"On this day, we all embrace the families of the prisoners of war, and Israel will do everything to ensure the rest of the prisoners and the

disappeared will be returned home soon."

Among the 36 Lebanese and Arab prisoners set for release were Sheikh Abdel Karim Obeid and Mustafa Dirani, who were captured by Israel in 1989 and 1994 and held in exchange for news of Arad, the German embassy said.

Another 400 Palestinian prisoners would also be released and Israel would return the corpses of 59 Lebanese nationals killed in action, it added.

Israel was expected to publish a list of the Palestinians on Monday, at least 48 hours ahead of the swap, in order to allow for last-minute appeals to the High Court, public radio said.

Second rover lands safely on Mars

AP, Pasadena

Nasa's Opportunity rover landed on Mars late Saturday, arriving at the Red Planet exactly three weeks after its identical twin set down, and prompting whoops and cheers of delight from mission scientists.

"We're on Mars everybody," Rob Manning, manager of the entry, descent and landing portion of the mission, shouted as fellow scientists at Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory burst into wild applause.

The unmanned, six-wheeled rover landed at 9:05 p.m. PST in Meridiani Planum, Nasa said. The smooth, flat plain lies 6,600 miles and halfway around the planet from where its twin, Spirit, set down on January 3.

Minutes after the landing, former Vice President Al Gore and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger strode through mission control, shaking hands with elated scientists.

tists.

Together, the twin rovers make up a single \$820 million mission to determine if Mars ever was a wetter world capable of sustaining life. Nasa launched Spirit on June 10. Opportunity followed on July 7.

Earlier this week, Spirit developed serious problems, cutting off what had been a steady flow of pictures and other scientific data. Scientists said earlier Saturday, however, that they believe they can fix the problem in the weeks ahead.

At a jubilant news conference nearly two hours after the landing, Nasa Administrator Sean O'Keefe broke open a bottle of champagne, as he did after Spirit's landing, and toasted the mission's leaders.

"As the old saying goes, it's far better to be lucky than good, but you know, the harder we work the luckier we seem to get," O'Keefe said, adding "no one dared hope" that both rover landings would be so successful.

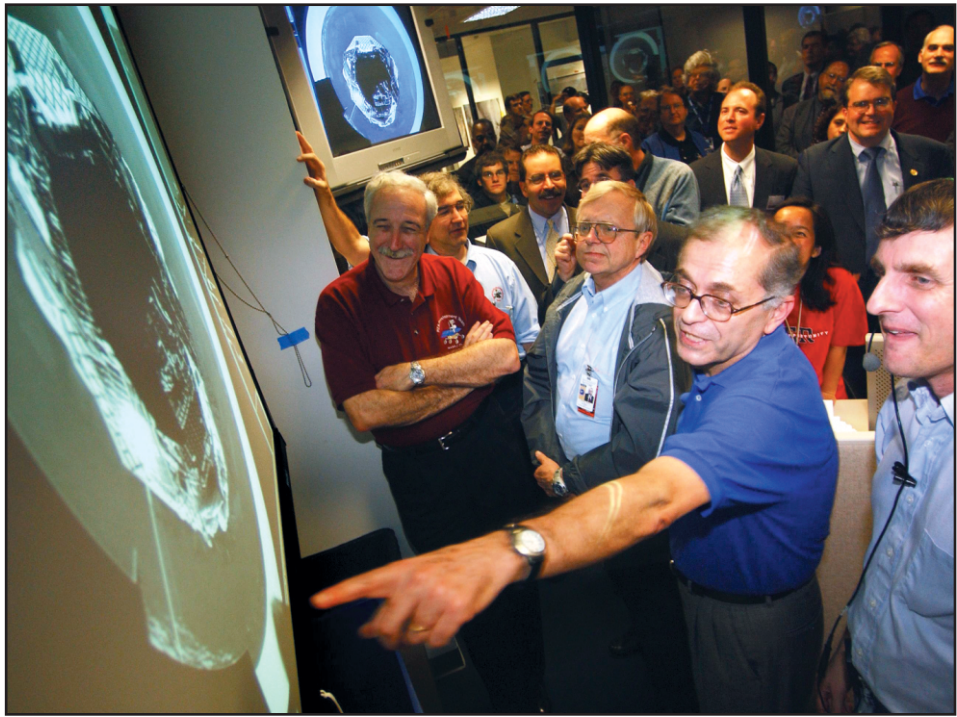


PHOTO: AFP
(L-R) Nasa Administrator Sean O'Keefe, Associate Administrator for Space Science, Dr Edward Weiler and JPL Director, Dr. Charles Elachi and Dr. Steve Squyres, Principle Investigator view the first images taken by the Nasa Mars Rover "Opportunity" after its successful landing on the Red Planet.

EU mulls lifting arms ban on China

AFP, Brussels

EU foreign ministers will launch discussions today on lifting the arms embargo on China imposed after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, despite US opposition to such a move, diplomats say.

No immediate decision is expected, but the bloc could agree to end the ban as early as March, said one source ahead of the talks. The discussions were initiated by France, which is hosting Chinese President Hu Jintao this week.

European officials say they are aware that the United States is against lifting the ban. Ministers will bear this in mind, but insist the bloc will take a decision based on a substantive argument among themselves.

"We are conscious of the US position, and we want to avoid serious high profile differences

with the US. But it's not the primary factor," said a senior diplomat with the Irish EU presidency.

France and Germany -- infamously dubbed "Old Europe" during the Iraq crisis -- are backed by "many" other EU states in believing that "it is high time for this anachronistic, obsolete embargo to be lifted," said one envoy from a country pushing for the ban to be ended.

"Some member states see it as anachronistic," confirmed the Irish diplomat, referring to the ban imposed in 1989 after China sent in tanks to break weeks-long pro-democracy protests, killing hundreds.

"Others put the accent on human rights," she added. Diplomats say the EU states most strongly opposed to lifting the embargo are Denmark and Sweden, with the Netherlands also

reluctant.

On Monday ministers are likely to have only initial talks, before asking diplomats to discuss the issue further and then returning to the matter themselves at their regular monthly meetings.

Britain, Washington's staunchest ally during the Iraq war, appears at least open to lifting the ban. "Our position is that we do accept the need for a review of the arms embargo. We think there probably is an issue about modernizing it," said a British source.

British Foreign Office minister Bill Rammell said in Beijing last month that the EU has other controls in place to ensure that China could not use newly bought European weapons to attack Taiwan or for domestic crack-downs.

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

An urgent international meeting on the bird flu epidemic will be held in Bangkok on Wednesday. Ministries from countries impacted by the epidemic and major chicken importing nations will attend to discuss ways to curtail its impact, government spokesman Jakrapob Penkair said yesterday.

Countries hit by bird flu that will attend the meeting are Vietnam, Japan, China, Cambodia and South Korea. Big importers of poultry meats and products - Singapore, the United States, Hong Kong and the European Union - will also participate, Jakrapob said.

Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai said that Hong Kong and Laos would also attend the meeting.

The meeting will also be attended by experts from the World

Health Organisation and the Food and Agriculture Organisation, he said.

Jakrapob said Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra wanted to boost confidence among poultry product importers that the epidemic is manageable.

Thailand effectively managed to communicate this message in the case of Sars, the deadly flu-like virus which spread across the globe early last year.

The government has been accused of covering up information on the spread of avian flu and responding slowly to tackle the virus. Two cases of human infection were confirmed by the government on Friday.

According to government figures, Thailand is the world's fourth largest chicken exporter. It exported 500,000 tonnes of chicken worth Bt52 billion in 2003.

Better bird flu vaccine not likely soon

AP, Bangkok

The bird flu virus spreading through Asia appears to have mutated and development of a more effective vaccine is not likely for more than six months, the World Health Organisation said yesterday.

Vietnam, which reported its sixth death due to the avian influenza virus on Saturday, and Thailand are the only countries this year where the avian influenza virus has been passed onto humans.

But the virus has hit millions of chickens in four other countries as well, raising concerns it might mutate, link with regular influenza and foster the next human flu pandemic.

The WHO, which said earlier it hoped a vaccine for the disease would be ready in four weeks, said on its Web site that it fears that its forecast that the virus would mutate had come true.

UN conference urges S Asia to protect refugees

AFP, Islamabad

Five South Asian governments, including India, were urged at a UN-sponsored conference on Saturday to adopt a uniform and comprehensive legal framework to guarantee the protection of refugees in the region.

Delegates from Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal made the call at the end of the two-day meeting of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) in order to settle disparities and uncertainty arising over the treatment of refugees in South Asia.

None of the five countries are signatory to a 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees, the basic international agreement on the protection of refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said in a statement.

The EPG, a body formed a decade ago at the recommendation of the UN Refugee Agency, proposed a model international law that is now incorporated in the new South Asia Declaration.

The UNHCR said that the conference recommendations would be presented to the ministers concerned for possible legislation.

India, Pakistan won't jail civilians straying in their territory

AFP, Amritsar

Indian and Pakistani frontier guards Saturday agreed that civilians accidentally crossing into each other's territory would not be jailed but handed over.

"It was unanimously decided that if any civilian mistakenly crosses into each other's territory he would be handed over to the respective country during flag meetings," Hemant Purohit, Deputy Inspector General of India's Border Security Force (BSF), told reporters in the northern Indian city of Amritsar.

The decision was taken at a day-long meeting of the BSF and Pakistani Rangers here. This was the second meeting in two months.

Other issues discussed included ways to minimise tensions between the two sides and increase the effectiveness of border patrols, another BSF official said.

The Pakistani delegation was led by Wing Commander Sher Jaman Khan, the official said.

India and Pakistan usually jail people straying accidentally into each other's territory. These people languish in prison for months,

sometimes years, before they are released and sent back.

Last year, a number of civilian prisoners were released by both countries since the thawing of India-Pakistan ties after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee offered a hand of friendship to Pakistan in April last year.

The BSF official said Indian and Pakistani border guards were jointly patrolling the border in three districts of the northern Punjab state - Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Ferozpur.

"Joint patrolling will prove helpful to prevent infiltration on both sides which is of utmost importance to maintain peaceful relations," he said.

The last meeting between the two sides was held on December 20, 2003, when a BSF delegation led by commandant Darbara Singh went to Pakistan.

Monthly meetings between the BSF and the Pakistani Rangers were routine until December 13, 2001, when an Islamic militant attack on India's parliament complex strained ties between the two neighbours and brought them to the brink of war the following year.



PHOTO: AFP
Policemen from the Indian Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) keeps vigil near the Bakshi stadium in Srinagar yesterday ahead of the Republic Day celebrations.

Red alert as India set to celebrate Republic Day

AFP, New Delhi

India has put its troops on alert across the country ahead of today's Republic Day celebrations amid fears of attacks by Kashmiri militants and a general strike call by rebels in its troubled northeast, officials said.

The holiday has become a major target for Islamic militants and separatist rebels who say the celebrations are part of Indian hegemony and muscle-flexing.

The national capital, where President Abdul Kalam will take the salute at the historic Rajpath in the presence of the country's top leadership and chief guest Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, has been placed under a multi-layered security blanket, police said.

Security has also been beefed up at Indira Gandhi International Airport, vital installations, prominent hotels, tourist spots and other public places, a spokesman said.

The lawns around Rajpath have been under 24-hour guard for weeks while all buildings flanking the eight kilometre (five mile) route of the Republic Day parade will be taken over by security personnel on Monday, the Press Trust of India news agency said.