

UN ready to send Iraq polls assessment team

Coalition welcomes decision

REUTERS, AFP, Paris

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said yesterday he was ready to send a mission to Iraq to assess whether elections can be held by mid-year, provided he receives adequate security guarantees.

Iraq's most powerful Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has demanded direct elections, challenging a US plan for transferring power to Iraqis by June 30.

Sistani's allies have indicated the cleric would abide by a UN decision, a key reason why the Bush administration, which had previously scorned the world body, now wants Annan to give the process legitimacy.

UN officials have been as dubious as the United States about direct elections, not just because of the short time left to organize them, but because of the violent atmosphere, which they say tends to favor extremists.

The United Nations withdrew

its international staff from Iraq in October after an attack on its headquarters in Baghdad killed 22 people in August.

"Once I'm satisfied that the CPA (US-led authority in Iraq) will provide adequate security arrangements, I will send a mission to Iraq in response to the requests that I received," Annan said in a statement released during a visit to Paris.

"The mission will ascertain the views of a broad spectrum of Iraqi society in the search for alternatives that might be developed to move forward to the formation of a provisional government."

Elections would favour Shiites, who make up an estimated 60 percent of Iraq's 25 million people.

The US plan envisages a complicated system of caucuses in 18 Iraqi provinces.

A phased transition to self-rule would allow for time to build institutions, form political parties and create alliances that cut across

religious groupings.

AFP adds: The US-led coalition welcomed yesterday a UN decision to send a team of experts to Iraq to study whether elections can be held before a planned transfer of power and agreed to provide adequate security measures.

The coalition "welcomes the UN Secretary General's statement of intent to send a mission to Iraq to evaluate the feasibility of elections before June 30," spokesman Charles Healy told AFP.

Earlier Tuesday, Kofi Annan agreed to a US and Iraqi request to send a team of experts to Iraq amid demands from the country's majority Shiite Muslim population for elections before the planned introduction of self-rule in June.

"As soon as I have been persuaded that the coalition's provisional authority will take adequate measures to assure security, I will send a mission to Iraq as I have been requested," Annan said in a statement released in Paris.

Key players get early copies of Hutton's report on Kelly

Blair on a knife-edge over tuition fees

AFP, London

Key players in the David Kelly affair were getting advance copies yesterday of a judicial inquiry's report on the suicide of the respected weapons expert at the centre of allegations that Downing Street "sexed up" intelligence on Iraq in the run-up to war. Lord Brian Hutton will release his findings on Wednesday on the circumstances that led Kelly to take his life last July, hurling Prime Minister Tony Blair into the worst political crisis of his career.

Blair and other key parties involved -- including the BBC, Kelly's family and the government -- were being given advance copies at midday Tuesday, allowing them 24 hours to digest and interpret its conclusions.

Hutton, a former Northern Ireland chief justice, has gone out of his way to avert leaks, obliging the recipients of advance copies to sign statements promising not to divulge the contents.

Security was reportedly tight around the print works in south

London where the report was produced, with employees being searched on their way out. The Sun newspaper said the document would run to 600 pages.

Attention will focus Wednesday on what Hutton has to say about Blair's role in the decision to expose Kelly as the source of a BBC radio report in May which alleged that a September 2002 dossier on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction had been "sexed up" by top Downing Street aides.

Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was threatened with a devastating political defeat in a vote on university tuition fees yesterday, just a day before a potentially damning report from a judicial inquiry into the suicide of weapons expert David Kelly.

Faced with a rebellion by backbench Labour MPs, Blair's inner circle warned that a parliamentary vote against a tripling of tuition fees in England and Wales would threaten the future of his government into doubt.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani poultry workers inject an anti-influenza vaccine into a chicken inside a poultry farm on the outskirts of Karachi yesterday. Since November 2003 some 3.5 million chickens have died on 3,000 farms around Karachi due to a vain influenza H7 and H9 according to Pakistan's Poultry Association.

US judge strikes down part of Patriot Act

REUTERS, Los Angeles

A federal judge in Los Angeles has struck down as too vague part of the Patriot Act that bars providing "expert advice and assistance" to foreign terrorist groups -- marking the first time a court has declared part of the law unconstitutional.

The written ruling by US District Judge Audrey B. Collins, came in a 2003 challenge to the Patriot Act by five organizations and two individuals who sought to support Kurds in Turkey and Tamils in Sri Lanka.

"The ruling is significant in that it strikes the statute down as being in violation of the Fifth and First Amendments," David Cole, a Georgetown University law professor who argued the case for the Humanitarian Law Project.

"It underscores what so many have said all along about the Patriot Act -- that Congress, in acting so hastily after 9-11, swept far too broadly and didn't pay significant attention to constitutional rights and liberties," he said.

Canadian soldier killed in Afghan suicide attack

REUTERS, Kabul

A Canadian soldier with the Nato-led peacekeeping force in Afghanistan was killed and three countrymen wounded when a suicide bomber threw himself in front of their car in Kabul yesterday.

Police said at least nine Afghan civilians were also wounded in the attack near the Canadian base on the southern outskirts of Kabul. They said the bomber died in the blast.

The casualties were the first among the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) since two Canadian soldiers were killed in October when their car hit a mine on the outskirts of Kabul.

"One Canadian soldier has been killed and three others wounded," said ISAF spokesman Colonel Joerg Langer. "There has been at least one civilian death. It appears that may have been the suicider himself."



PHOTO: AFP

From left, French President Jacques Chirac, Chinese President Hu Jintao, Chinese First Lady Liu Yongging and French First Lady Bernadette Chirac pose before a state dinner hosted by Chirac at the Elysee Palace Monday in Paris. Hu is on a four-day state visit to France.

US-led invasion of Iraq unjustified: HR Watch

AP, London

The war in Iraq ended a brutal regime but there were no current human rights violations on a scale, which could justify the US-led invasion, Human Rights Watch said yesterday in its annual report.

Although Saddam Hussein had an atrocious human rights record, his worst actions occurred long before the war and there was no ongoing or imminent mass killing in Iraq when the conflict began, the advocacy group said.

US President George W Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair cited the threat from Saddam's alleged weapons of mass destruction as their main reason for attacking Iraq. But as coalition forces have failed to

find evidence of such weapons, both leaders have also highlighted the brutality of the regime when justifying military intervention.

Human Rights Watch, however, said such claims were invalid.

"The Bush administration cannot justify the war in Iraq as a humanitarian intervention, and neither can Tony Blair," executive director Kenneth Roth said.

Atrocities such as Saddam's 1988 mass killing of Kurds would have justified humanitarian intervention, Roth said.

"But such interventions should be reserved for stopping an imminent or ongoing slaughter," he added, adding, "They shouldn't be used belatedly to address atrocities that were ignored in the past."

Asian nations urged to use Sars tactics against bird flu

AFP, Bangkok

Asian nations battered by bird flu will hold crisis talks here today amid calls for them to unite against the outbreak in the same way they co-operated to fight last year's Sars epidemic.

Nine Asian countries have now confirmed they have been hit by bird flu, killing at least eight people and leading to the slaughter or death of more than 20 million chickens.

"The Sars outbreak produced a spirit of transparency and co-operation among nations," said World Health Organisation (WHO) spokesman Peter Cordingley. "That's what we need for the bird flu conference."

"We need countries to open up and share information in the way they did against Sars," he said of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (Sars) outbreak that erupted in southern China and went on to kill some 800 people in 32 countries.

With the disease now spreading apparently uncontrolled as far north as Pakistan and as far east as Japan, the Thai hosts said they hoped the half-day talks would restore confidence in the region's shattered poultry industry.

Ministers and senior officials from agriculture and health ministries from the affected nations of Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Taiwan, Pakistan and Vietnam have been invited to attend.

US plans to add bases in E Europe: Powell

AFP, Moscow

The United States plans to set up some military bases in former Warsaw Pact countries in eastern Europe but this is not aimed against Russia, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Tuesday on a visit to Moscow.

"We are trying to rearrange our presence in Europe to rationalise it in the best way. As part of that effort, we may want to put some temporary facilities in some of the countries that used to be part of the Warsaw Pact," Powell told the Moscow Echo radio.

"But these would not be big bases of the kind that we had in Germany during the days of the Cold War. These might be small places where we could go and train for a brief period of time or use air bases as access to get to dangerous crisis places in Central Asia, the Persian Gulf and the Middle East.

"But is not essentially moving our army closer to the Russian Federation and people should not see it in that way. The number of troops overall will be going

down, therefore we are not trying to surround anyone," he added.

The United States has been considering relocating bases from Germany and shifting resources to new NATO members in the east.

However, European military sources in eastern Europe have said that Washington sees that the main threat to stability has moved from the borders of Russia to the south east, and would rather move its bases to countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, closer to potential hot spots.

A US or NATO base in the Baltics, moreover, would likely enrage Moscow, which opposed the entry of the former Soviet republics into the Western military alliance.

The three Baltic states are a group of seven former Communist bloc nations which has received invitations to join the alliance, and are expected to formally join the bloc in May this year.

The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were admitted to the alliance in 1999.

Storms kill 38 in US

AP, Washington

From Minnesota to Maine and Kansas to South Carolina, residents hunkered down for more arctic pounding, as a pair of winter storms blamed for at least 38 traffic deaths kept up their onslaught.

The storms have been pummeling states in the eastern half of the nation with snow, sleet and freezing rain since Sunday. Michigan was expecting up to 21 inches of snow Tuesday; highways were glazed over as far south as Georgia.

The weather was blamed for at least 38 deaths, most of them traffic related, on Sunday and Monday.

Authorities in Michigan warned motorists to stay off roads Tuesday.

"Don't drive if you don't have to," said Mike Proud, a forecaster at the National Weather Service's office in Gaylord, Mich. "Be well prepared. It's going to be a lot of snow."

The heaviest snowfall Monday was 24.8 inches at Duluth, Minn., as moist air swept inland from Lake Superior. Drifting snow closed about 70 miles of Interstate 29 in North Dakota, between Fargo and Grand Forks.

Cairo building collapses killing 8

REUTERS, Cairo

Rescue teams have pulled eight bodies from the ruins of a high-rise building which collapsed in flames in Cairo and are searching for at least six more people under the rubble, a high-level security source said yesterday.

The 11-storey building collapsed Monday after catching fire. Most of the dead and missing were soldiers and rescue workers who had been evacuating the building when it collapsed. Officials said the building's residents had left before it fell.

"There's still hope. We are prepared to work for days until we are absolutely certain there's no one left in the building," said the security source, who declined to be named.

"You can pull survivors out of a building like this 48 hours after the incident. The bodies we are pulling out were probably hit by debris. People can survive in air pockets," he added.

A total of six more soldiers and rescue workers were still trapped under debris, the source said. But the authorities could not be totally sure more civilians were not trapped in the rubble in Cairo's commercial and residential area of Nasr City.

Pakistan plans charging nuclear heroes

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's probe into the sale of nuclear secrets to Iran and Libya has narrowed to seven scientists and military officers, as speculation mounted yesterday that "national heroes" could be charged.

President Pervez Musharraf, Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat and Information Minister Sheikh Rashid have all declared this week that those found guilty of selling nuclear technology and expertise to foreign countries will be "severely" punished.

Their pledges raise the awkward prospect of charging some of Pakistan's most revered men, elevated to national hero status for their contributions to making Pakistan a nuclear power and giving it near parity with nuclear-armed neighbour India.

"This is a very sensitive matter," Hayat was quoted as saying in the Dawn newspaper Tuesday.

"If some of those who were called national heroes have done this and are being exposed, the nation has the right to see true

faces of those who have compromised Pakistan's national interest and used its assets for personal gains."

Already the investigation, which has seen at least 14 top nuclear scientists and administrators interrogated, has infuriated their families and Islamist organisations. They have held almost daily protests against the treatment of those questioned in recent weeks.

Rashid said the probe was now focussing on three scientists and four military officials.

"There are seven people under investigation now, four of them are associated with security matters," he told a press conference late Monday.

Of them, "one or two" may be guilty, he said.

"There may be one or two who (indulged in proliferation) for personal commercial gains."

"Those found involved will be dealt with severely."

The widely-revered "father" of Pakistan's nuclear program Abdul Qadeer Khan, a metallurgist who

was charged with stealing the blueprints for uranium centrifuges while working in the Netherlands in the 1970s, is among those to have been questioned.

But as one of Pakistan's most respected national heroes, he was not taken into custody as the other 13 were.

The Asian Wall Street Journal reported Monday that Khan, 66, may be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act, according to an unnamed government official.

Rashid refused to comment on the report saying only that Khan had not been placed under any restrictions. He said he would meet Khan on Tuesday.

The probe would be finished before the Muslim festival of Eid-ul-Azha next week, Rashid said.

"It is believed that one or two scientists undergoing debriefing will be freed after their statements."

Musharraf, who told the BBC Monday that guilty proliferators would be harshly punished, repeated the promise to a high-level meeting later, Rashid said.

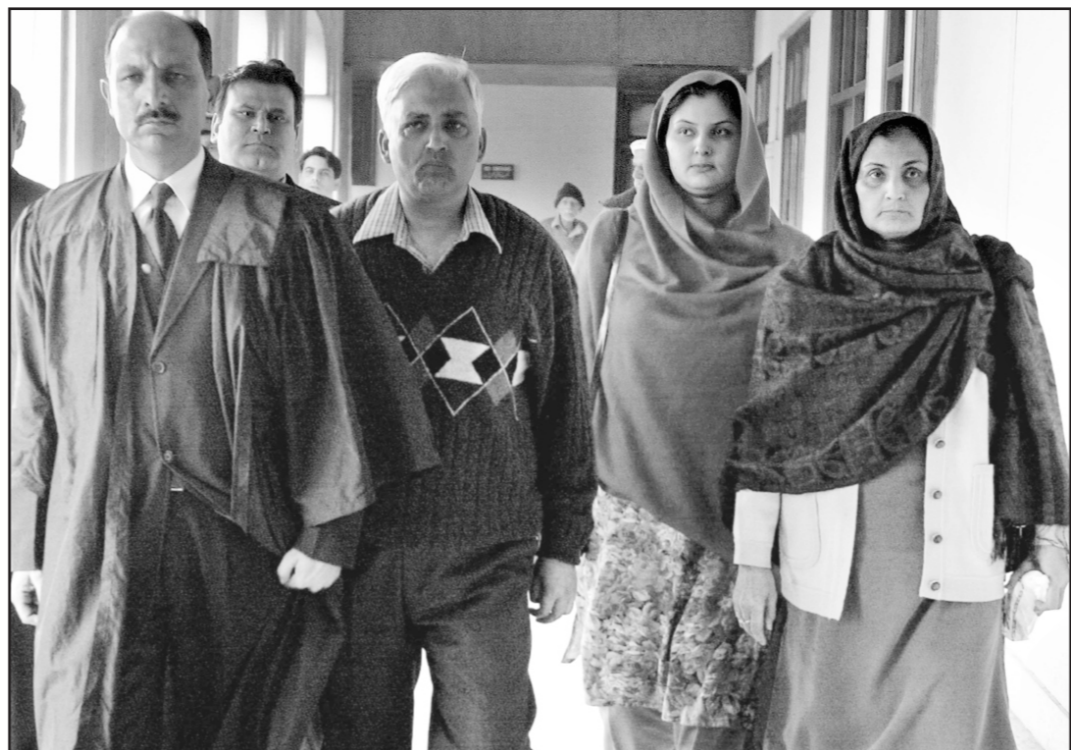


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Lawyer Shah Khawar (L) Tahira Nazir, wife of Pakistan nuclear scientist Doctor Nazir Ahmed, his daughter Saima Adil (2-R) and Shafi Sajawal (Background 2-L) son of Brigadier (retired) Sajawal Malik, director general of maintenance and general services A. Q. Khan Research Laboratories arrive at the High Court for the hearing of detained nuclear scientists in Rawalpindi yesterday. Pakistan's probe into the sale of nuclear secrets to Iran and Libya has narrowed to seven scientists and military officers, as speculation mounted that national heroes could be charged.

UN gets new legal tool to fight human trafficking

AFP, Vienna

Today the United Nations will get teeth to fight the international trade in human beings when in a new protocol on trafficking in its convention on organised crime, takes effect.

The text is the UN's first legal tool to fight human trafficking and urges cooperation between member states to "prevent, fight and punish" the practice that sees three to four million women and children sold into forced labour or prostitution every year.

It was adopted in the National Assembly in November 2000 and has been ratified by some 50 countries.

Trafficking has become almost as lucrative as the trade in drugs and arms. The US state department recently estimated that selling women and children as sex workers has become a business worth seven to 10 billion dollars.

And, as with weapons and drugs, the nature of dealing in human beings makes it difficult and expensive to curb.

Traders profit from loopholes and differences in laws from coun-

try to country and a lack of cooperation between national authorities.

According to a report by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) published in December, the 200,000 women and children from eastern Europe who are forced into prostitution in the West every year are becoming harder to identify and therefore more isolated and vulnerable.

As a result the European Union has decided to give temporary residence permits to those victims who agree to work with the police and justice officials to dismantle trafficking networks.

The Indian subcontinent is one of the regions where traffic is growing most rapidly, along with central Europe and Russia. Young girls kidnapped in Nepal and Bangladesh are sold to brothels in India for around 1,000 dollars.

The United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) says in central and east Africa there is another dimension to human trafficking with some 50,000 kidnapped every year and forced to fight in guerrilla armies.