

UN team likely in Iraq within few days: Annan

Iraqi elections to be held next year: FM

AFP, Brussels

A UN team should be able to travel to Baghdad "within a few days" to study if fair elections can be held in Iraq before the return of sovereignty to Iraqis in June, UN chief Kofi Annan said yesterday.

He indicated that the US-led coalition in charge in Iraq had promised to guarantee security for the UN staff to work in the country, from which the United Nations withdrew three months ago.

"I believe that within a few days the team should be able to travel and start the work," Annan told reporters in Brussels.

The UN pulled its non-Iraqi staff out of Iraq in October because of the deteriorating security situation, after an attack on August 19 on its Baghdad headquarters which killed top envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello and 21 others.

Annan announced in Paris on Tuesday that the UN was to return to Baghdad, after a three-month absence, to conduct the review on holding elections before July.

But he insisted that security remains a concern, and said a decision on sending the team would depend on guarantees by the US-led coalition in Iraq on safety measures for UN staff.

Asked Friday if security conditions were not good enough, Annan said: "I believe we are in the process of making progress," adding: "The coalition has promised me that it would do its utmost to protect the team."

An advance UN team arrived in Iraq last week to discuss security with the authorities there. On Thursday the UN special envoy to Iraq, Ross Mountain, said in Amman that he expected the team to report soon on whether it is safe.

The UN election study team has been asked for by the US, whose plan to install a government in July appointed by an unelected transitional assembly is facing growing opposition from the majority Shiite Muslim community in Iraq.

Annan underlined earlier this week that the UN mission to study the feasibility of elections did not amount to a full return of the United Nations to Iraq.

The mission will be "a team that is going in... to give advice and then coming out. It's not a return of the United Nations," he said in Brussels on Wednesday.

And he warned: "If no agreement can be reached on that mechanism and a formula for a provisional government then I'm very much worried that there will be a

continuance of division and conflict."

The June deadline for the transfer of sovereignty is part of a calendar agreed with the US-appointed interim leadership in November that also sets out a timetable for a constitutional convention and general elections during 2005.

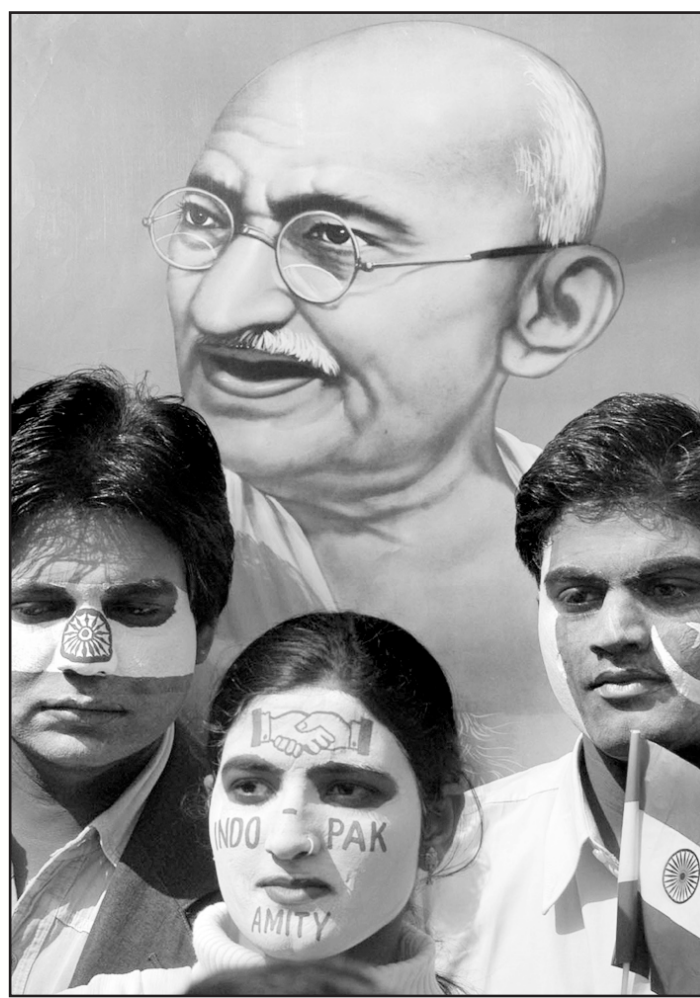
Meanwhile, interim Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari said Thursday elections would be held in his country next year in March as well as at the end of 2005.

"There would be two elections," Zebari told a Bulgarian conference held by a non-governmental organisation, the Atlantic Club.

"First for members of the constitutional convention, direct elections for a constitutional convention to write a constitution, in March 2005.

"The second elections would take place at the end of 2005, under the new constitution to elect a government. We are committed to that plan."

UN Security Council nations have given a cautious welcome to Tuesday's decision by Secretary General Kofi Annan to send a team of election experts to assess the possibility of elections in Iraq.



Members of the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Council with their faces painted with the national colours stand in front of a portrait of the, Mahatma Gandhi, during a rally staged to mark his 56th death anniversary in Bhopal yesterday. Mahatma Gandhi, aged 78, was on his way to a prayer meeting, when he was shot three times in the chest and died on January 30, 1948.

Indian army kills 11 militants in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The Indian army said yesterday it shot dead 11 suspected militants in Kashmir, including two commanders of a hardline group, in a bloody start to a long weekend that will culminate in Eid festivities Monday.

The violence in the Muslim majority state was the heaviest since separatists and India held historic talks last week which they sealed with a joint call for an end to bloodletting.

Six of the militants were killed Friday in the village of Kumhar Mohalla, in the northern Indian Kashmir district of Kupwara, an army spokesman said.

"Two of the slain militants have been identified as divisional commanders of Lashkar-e-Taiba," the spokesman said, referring to a hardline Islamic rebel group responsible for most of the suicide attacks in Indian Kashmir.

One of the other slain rebels was a Lashkar operative and the other three belonged to another hardline group, Harkat-ul-Jehadi Islami, the spokesman said.

The six were killed in an encounter during a "cordon and search" operation by the Indian army's Kilo Force -- a counter-insurgency wing operating in northern Kashmir, he said.

Three Indian soldiers were injured in the clash. One house

was damaged.

Another Lashkar member was captured alive during the operation, the spokesman said, adding that the Indian army recovered seven AK rifles, grenades and other ammunition from the site of encounter.

Also on Friday Indian troops shot dead three militants in the Rafiabad area of northern Baramulla district, the spokesman said.

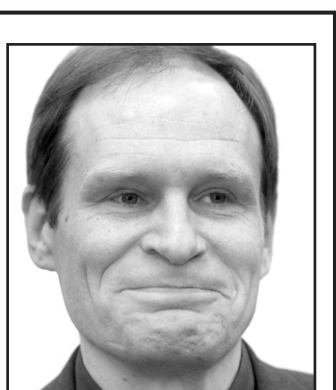
"The three were killed during a search-out operation conducted on a tip off," the spokesman said.

In overnight encounters another two rebels were killed by the army in two separate encounters in Baramulla district and in Poonch in southern Kashmir, the spokesman said.

Indian troops have intensified their operations against Muslim militants since Indian and Pakistani leaders agreed early this month to resume talks on all the issues, including Kashmir in February.

On January 16 Indian army killed the chief commander operations of region's dominant rebel group Hizbul Mujahedin, Gazi Naseer-ud-din along with Hizbul's publicity and financial chief.

More than 40,000 people have died in Indian Kashmir since the eruption of anti-Indian insurgency in 1989. Separatists put the toll twice as high.



German cannibal gets 8 and a half years jail

AFP, Kassel

A German self-confessed cannibal was sentenced to eight and a half years in prison for manslaughter Friday for killing and eating a man he claims was a willing victim.

The court in the central city of Kassel rejected state prosecutors' call for a conviction on murder charges and a 15-year sentence for defendant Armin Meiwes.

Meiwes, who sat impassively as the verdict was read out, had admitted slaying, carving up and eating a man he met over the Internet after sex and hours of sado-masochism, but insisted it was all consensual.

BBC says sorry to Blair

AFP, London

The BBC was Thursday grappling with the worst crisis in its history as its head Greg Dyke resigned and the proudly independent world broadcaster was forced to apologise to the British government over a faulty report on Iraqi arms.

Humbled and humiliated as never before, the BBC bowed to pressure from Prime Minister Tony Blair and unconditionally apologised for alleging in a May radio broadcast that Downing Street had "sexed up" intelligence on the threat from Iraq.

Dyke, director general and editor in chief, became the second BBC official to fall on his sword, following Gavyn Davies who stepped down as chairman just hours after judge Lord Hutton

reported his findings about the events, triggered by the May broadcast, which led to the suicide in July of arms expert David Kelly.

The 11 remaining governors of the world's biggest and best known public broadcaster said the BBC was "unreservedly apologising" for the broadcast.

Dyke, however, later appeared surprised at the apology.

"I could not quite work out what they had apologised for," Dyke told reporters, adding: "I don't necessarily accept the findings of Lord Hutton."

Dyke did not elaborate but, amid accusations from some commentators that Hutton's report was a "whitewash" of the government, suggested he may shortly voice criticisms of the judge's conclusions.

Americans warned of Asian bird flu

AFP, Washington

The US government Thursday warned Americans over the rapid spread of bird flu in Asia, advising them to avoid live fowl and poultry markets.

The State Department said in a fact sheet that the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), in common with the World Health Organisation, was concerned about the disease mutating into a form which could be passed among humans.

The CDC advised Americans in affected areas to "avoid poultry farms, contact with animals in live food markets and any surfaces that appear to be contaminated with feces from poultry or other animals," the fact sheet said.

UK parliament to probe Iraq intelligence

AFP, London

The British parliament is to hold a new inquiry into intelligence supplied to the government before the Iraq war that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, a newspaper reported yesterday.

The Times said that Richard Dearlove, the head of MI6, Britain's foreign intelligence service, was to appear before parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC).

Dearlove would be asked why he believed that intelligence on Saddam's weapons was reliable and accurate, and would produce a

report on its findings in June, the paper said.

But the Foreign Office denied that Dearlove had been called to answer questions as part of a fresh inquiry, saying that the spy chief appeared regularly before the Intelligence and Security Committee.

A Foreign Office spokesman said: "There is no special inquiry at all. Richard Dearlove sees the ISC on a regular basis."

Saddam's failure to give up his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction was cited by Britain and the United States as a justification for launching war on Iraq last March.

Cull compensation key to beating bird flu in Asia

AFP, Hong Kong

Compensation for poultry farmers hit by bird flu will be vital in beating outbreaks sweeping Asia, but unless farmers feel they are getting a fair price any cull is likely to end in chaos.

Agreement on a price level will require unprecedented international cooperation among Asia's countries, especially Japan and China.

And unless the compensation is fair, United Nations health and agriculture experts believe it is unlikely farmers will actually slaughter their birds.

"Compensation will be one of the key factors that will determine whether or not we stamp out these outbreaks," said United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) regional animal health officer Hans Wagner in Bangkok.

"If the level of compensation is insufficient then the farmers will not carry out the culls. They may even resort to clandestinely selling the infected animals."

It may be no coincidence that richer nations such as Taiwan and South Korea, which appear to be making headway in containing their outbreaks, are also the countries that have paid their farmers

the most generous compensation.

A Taiwanese agricultural official said Taipei will make "reasonable" compensation for the 910,000 chickens and 10,000 ducks culled. One farmer in Chiayi, he used as an example, received 88 Taiwan dollars (2.60 US dollars) for each slaughtered chicken.

Similarly, South Korea has offered to pay 100 percent of the market price for almost two million birds slaughtered.

It will also offer tax breaks and other financial deals to affected farms and has said it will buy more than 10 million birds to prop up sagging market prices.

India set to free British gun runner

AFP, New Delhi

India agreed yesterday to free Briton Peter Bleach, jailed for life for air-dropping arms to a militant group, and signed a deal with Britain that will speed up repatriations of Indian illegal immigrants.

The pact was inked by British Home Minister David Blunkett and Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani after they held talks on fighting shared problems such as organised crime, terrorism and illegal immigration.

"The increased co-operation of the Indian authorities will help to reduce delays in returning those who have destroyed their travel documentation," said a statement issued after the signing.

Blunkett said ongoing exchanges between Indians and

Britons were "of great value to us", pointing to the fact that 1.3 million people of Indian origin lived in Britain and that 300,000 Britons visited India each year.

"The agreement we have signed with India demonstrates our commitment to improving co-operation between our two countries on illegal immigration," said Blunkett.

"We will continue to welcome Indians travelling legitimately to Britain as visitors, students or on business, but we will take action to remove those breaking immigration rules. This means co-operation on tough law enforcement."

Advani, meanwhile, informed the visiting British home minister that India was willing to agree to a British request to free Bleach.

Attacks imperil statehood: US

Israeli troops kill 3 more Palestinians

AFP, Washington

The United States condemned the "horrendous" suicide bombing Thursday near Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's official home and warned that such attacks imperil the hoped-for creation of a Palestinian state by 2005.

"We strongly condemn this terrorist attack. We condemn it in the strongest possible terms," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said, adding that US President George W. Bush's "thoughts and prayers" were with the victims.

The bomber, a member of the hardline Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, killed 10 other people and left about 48 injured when he blew

himself up aboard a rush-hour Jerusalem bus.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell denounced the "horrendous attack" and emphasized that those behind it "have struck a blow once more against the aspirations of the Palestinian people to have a homeland of their own."

Powell expressed support for the US-backed "road map" to peace but warned that extremist violence against Israelis might make it impossible to meet the blueprint's 2005 deadline for creating an independent Palestinian state.

"The longer time goes by without progress because we can't get it going, the parties can't get moving because of this terrorist activity, the more difficult it will be to

achieve the goals laid out in the road map with respect to a timetable," he told reporters.

Meanwhile, three Palestinian militants were shot dead by Israeli troops in the occupied territories early Friday, including two teenagers close to a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip, medical sources said.

Sources at Gaza City's Al-Shifa hospital had originally confirmed the death of only one Palestinian in the incident near the settlement of Dugit, close to Beit Lahya, but later said a second had died.

The two were later named by family sources as Mohammed Khalaf and Mohammed al-Ashqar, both members of the hardline Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.



Students and activists shout anti-monarchy slogans during the Martyrs' Day rally in Kathmandu yesterday. The students have been protesting for months against King Gyanendra's decision in October 2002 to dismiss the elected government.

HEALTHY WITH TWO HEARTS

A doctor uses an ultra sound device to examine the chest of Zaudin Yandiev, 55, from the village of Inarkh in Ingushetia on Thursday. The medical tests showed that Yandiev has two hearts, symmetrically positioned in his chest though working independently within his blood system.

7 US troops killed in Afghan blast

REUTERS, Kabul

An explosion at an arms dump that killed seven US soldiers in Afghanistan was an accident, authorities and militants fighting US forces said yesterday.

Thursday's blast near the town of Ghazni was one of the worst single blows to US forces hunting al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan since their intervention in late 2001.

The explosion occurred when the troops were destroying a cache of weapons dating back to the war against the Soviets in the 1980s, according to the secretary to the provincial governor.

"An American patrol was on a mission in Deh Aven, in the Jaghatu district," Ahmad Jawid said.

"Villagers stopped the convoy and said there was an ammunition depot. The Americans went to evacuate the ordnance, which was stored there from the time of the Jihad (holy war)."

"They began to destroy it. The incident happened when the person in charge of blowing it up made a mistake."

Ghazni is about 75 miles south of Kabul.

The US Central Command said in a statement the soldiers were killed when working near an ammunition dump Thursday afternoon. But it did not say whether it was an accident or an attack.

Islamic guerrillas led by a resur-

gent Taliban have stepped up attacks on foreign troops and the US-backed government since August. The militia claimed responsibility for two suicide bombings in Kabul this week that killed two foreign peacekeepers.

But when asked about Thursday's deaths, Taliban spokesman Abdul Latif Hakimi said the guerrillas were not responsible, although he added: "It is retribution from God. We are happy about whatever has happened in Ghazni."

US military officials in Afghanistan was not immediately available for comment.

In addition to the seven troops killed, US Central Command said another US soldier was missing and an interpreter was injured. Jawid said he knew of only one US soldier killed.

More than 100 US troops have died, most of them in accidents, since the launch of the US military's Afghan campaign, although some of the deaths occurred outside Afghanistan.

The US military leads a 12,000-strong foreign force in Afghanistan hunting remnants of the Taliban regime overthrown in 2001 and their al-Qaeda allies.

Guerrillas are most active in the south and east of Afghanistan, but two suicide attacks in Kabul this week killed one British and one Canadian soldier, both members of a multinational peacekeeping force in the capital.