

Britain, France plan joint military force

AFP, London

Britain and France are to create joint rapid deployment military units to be used in jungle, desert and mountain operations, the Financial Times reported yesterday.

The Anglo-French plan is part of a strategy by Paris and London to beef up Europe's defence and for the European Union to take on more responsibility in promoting world stability, the British business daily said.

Myanmar yet to set date for constitution drafting

THE NATION/ ANN, Phuket

Myanmar has not yet set a clear time frame for the convening of constitution drafting body, a remarkable step in the seven-point roadmap towards democracy and national reconciliation but said yesterday it gets ready to brief the second international forum on the new achievement of the plan.

Myanmar Foreign Minister Win Aung said yesterday that he would come to the forum, now dubbed as "Bangkok Process" to brief "like minded" participants what he called "progress" in the roadmap.

Al-Qaeda plotting to provoke civil war in Iraq: US

New tape calls for more attacks

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad/ Berlin

The United States said an al-Qaeda operative was plotting to provoke a civil war in Iraq as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan expressed concern over divisions among Iraqis on a plan to assume power.

US officials in Baghdad said US forces had seized a computer disc that contained a letter outlining the plan written by Abu Musab Zarqawi, who Washington suspects of links to Ansar al-Islam -- a Muslim militant group operating in Iraq.

"There is clearly a plan on the part of outsiders to come into this country and spark civil war, breed sectarian violence and try to expose fissures in the society," Brigadier-General Mark Kimmitt, the top US military spokesman in Iraq, said. "We believe the document is credible and we take the threat seriously."

Dan Senor, chief spokesman for Iraq's US governor Paul Bremer, said the 17-page letter proposed attacks on the shrines and leadership of Iraq's Shiite Muslim majority,

whom Arab Sunnis and Kurds fear could dominate a future government.

"The document... talks about a strategy of provoking violence targeted at the Shia, the Shia leaders in the hope that it would provoke reprisals against other ethnic groups in the country," he said.

In Washington, Secretary of State Colin Powell said the letter al-Qaeda was under pressure, but had not given up.

"With respect to the letter itself, it's very revealing. They describe the weaknesses they have in their efforts to undercut the coalition's effort," Powell said.

"But at the same time, it shows they haven't given up. They're trying to get more terrorists into Iraq... But they will not succeed."

Iraq's US occupiers have long said they suspect al-Qaeda has played a role in the insurgency against US troops and particularly in attacks on civilian targets in Iraq.

In October, Washington offered a reward of up to \$5 million for information leading to the arrest or

conviction of Zarqawi.

AFP adds: The German authorities are holding an audio tape apparently recorded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian suspected of being a senior member of al-Qaeda, in which he calls for the destruction of the United States, according to yesterday's edition of German daily Tagesspiegel.

"Oh Allah, destroy the kingdom of (US President George W) Bush, just as you destroyed the kingdom of Caesar," the voice on the 65-minute cassette says.

It accuses certain Arab governments of abandoning the Muslim faith and says: "Oh Allah, kill them one after the other. Spare no one," Tagesspiegel quoted police as saying.

Israel is also criticised on the tape, which the German authorities believed to be authentic, the daily said. It said the German federal police had confirmed they were examining the tape, which appeared to have been recorded during the second half of 2003.

Kerry looks for wins in Virginia, Tennessee

AP, Washington

Sparring with President Bush over the economy, Sen. John Kerry is looking ahead to the general election campaign at the same time he works to strengthen his hold on the Democratic nomination in a pair of Southern primaries yesterday.

"This president has the worst jobs record of the last 11 presidents combined," the Massachusetts senator said Monday, campaigning in advance of elections in Virginia and Tennessee. "He has lost over 3 million jobs."

After being battered by Democrats for months, Bush gave as good as he got. Democrats who oppose his call for making tax cuts permanent really want higher taxes and bigger government, he said, without mentioning Kerry by name.

"They're going to say, 'Oh, we've got to raise it so we can pay down the deficit.' No. They're going to raise the taxes and increase the size of the federal government, which would be bad for the United States economy."

Kerry's focus on Bush is a luxury he can afford.

The far-away front-runner in the Democratic race, he has won 10 of 12 primaries and caucuses to date, and hoped for additional success Tuesday in the Southern battlegrounds of Virginia and Tennessee.

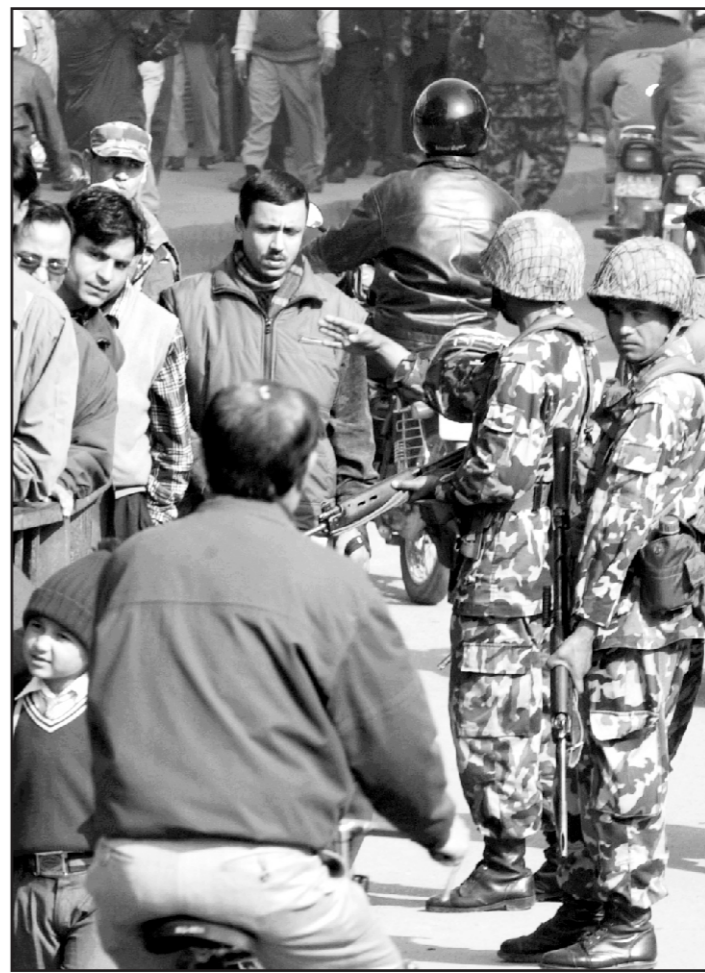


PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese soldiers ask onlookers to move while standing guard across the entrance of a supermarket after a bomb went off inside causing material damage, two days before a general strike called by Maoists, in Kathmandu yesterday. No casualties were reported in the blast, the second blast in two days hitting the Nepalese capital as King Gyanendra called for an end to the eight-year Maoist insurgency. Security has been tightened in Kathmandu ahead of the February 13 anniversary of the launch of the Maoist "people's war," which aims to overthrow the monarchy.

Pakistan vows crackdown on 'curse' of honour killing

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan president Pervez Musharraf yesterday resolved to deal harshly with "the curse" of killing women in the name of family honour.

"We must deal with any culprits of honour killing most harshly with all the force available to the government," Musharraf said in his address to inaugural session of a three-day international conference on promoting rights of rural women.

"Whenever I come to know of any case (of honour killing) I take immediate action but unfortunately it is not a one man's job."

Musharraf said Pakistani man needed to change their attitudes towards woman and urged the men of Pakistan to show chivalry while dealing with cases of honour killing.

"This curse of honour killing. It is totally illegal and we have to educate ourselves that we are a civilized society," Musharraf said.

Musharraf said people in positions of authority had to change their mindsets on the issue.

"I would like to urge...all those who are in positions of authority to try (honour killing) cases...to show civilised behaviour, to show that we are a tolerant, educated, progressive society and we do not tolerate honour killings."



PHOTO: AFP

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo shakes hands with residents in Cavinti town, Laguna province south of Manila yesterday during the first day of campaign for the May presidential elections. The campaign is a face off between economist Arroyo and movie star Fernando Poe.

42 killed in Haitian uprising

AP, St. Marc

In the strongest challenge yet to embattled President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, rebels in nearly a dozen towns went on a rampage that has left at least 42 killed and prompted fears of a coup d'etat.

After sporadic gunbattles Monday, police regained control of the important port city of St. Marc, 45 miles west of Port-au-Prince. At least two men were shot and another was allegedly shot and killed by Aristide supporters. His body was left on a roadside.

"The national police force alone cannot re-establish order," Prime Minister Yvon Neptune told The Associated Press in St. Marc on the first visit to any of the affected towns by a senior government official.

"The violence is tied to a coup d'etat," he said the day before.

In Port-au-Prince, the capital, a coalition opposition political parties met to discuss whether they should join the rebels. By late Monday, they had distanced themselves from the uprising.

"We do not recognize ourselves in the armed insurrection but in the peaceful struggle of the people for democracy," said Mischa Gaillard, an opposition politician who met with others in the Democratic Platform late Monday. "We deplore violence."

The uprising, which began Thursday in Haiti's fourth-largest city of Gonaives, signals a dangerous turning point in Haiti's three-year political crisis. A similar revolt in 1985 also began in Gonaives and led to the ouster to following year of the 29-year Duvalier family dictatorship.

N Korea denies receiving N-tech from Pakistan

Islamabad must 'roll up' proliferation network: Powell

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday denied it had received nuclear technology from Pakistan and accused the United States of mounting a smear campaign to get the upper hand ahead of six-party talks.

The Stalinist state said that the charges were a "sheer lie" despite a confession by Pakistan's leading nuclear scientist, who admitted last week he had passed on nuclear secrets to North Korea, Iran and Libya.

North Korea's foreign ministry said the admission by Abdul Qadeer Khan was part of the US scheme to take the high ground ahead of talks on February 25 to resolve the 16-month-old nuclear crisis.

"The US trite smear campaign would only reveal its deplorable position and will convince no one," the ministry said in a statement.

Washington argues that the Beijing talks must focus on North Korea's covert uranium-based programme as well as on its well-documented plutonium-producing enterprise.

North Korea says the uranium programme exists only in the imagination of the United States.

"The United States is now hyping the story about the 'transfer of nuclear technology' to the DPRK (North Korea) by a Pakistani scientist in a bid to make the DPRK's 'enriched uranium programme' sound plausible," said the statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency.

"This is so sheer (a) lie that the

DPRK does not bat an eyelid even a bit."

Washington has long suspected North Korea of selling missile technology to Pakistan in return for parts and know-how on uranium enrichment.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said he has told Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf he must pull up the nuclear smuggling ring led by its disgraced nuclear hero "by its roots."

Powell spoke publicly for the first time since a telephone call with Musharraf late Friday about the scandal over nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, who admitted leaking nuclear secrets to US foes Iran, Libya and North Korea.

Blair raised 'false expectation' on Iraqi WMD: Expert

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government raised a "false expectation" about Iraq's pre-war weaponry, a move which undermined the global fight against proliferation, a former senior military intelligence official said yesterday.

"Personally I don't think they will find stockpiles in Iraq and (people) have been given a false expectation that they were there," the British expert, Brian Jones, told the Independent daily.

Saddam Hussein's refusal to give up his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was cited by Blair as the main reason to invade Iraq alongside the United States last March.

In a key part of its attempts to persuade a sceptical Britain of the

case for war, the government said in a September 2002 dossier that Saddam's regime could "deploy chemical or biological weapons within 45 minutes of an order to do so".

But Jones told the Independent that the intelligence assessment which included the controversial 45-minute claim had merely outlined "possible scenarios" rather than detailing any specific threat posed by Iraq.

"The fact was, it was so nebulous that there was nothing you could really hang your hat on," said Jones, who was in charge of the nuclear, chemical and biological branch of Britain's Defence Intelligence Staff until January 2003.

Asia has highest number of children out of school: Unesco

AFP, Paris

Asia accounts for the biggest number of children in the world not receiving a school education, despite steady increases in enrolment in the 1990s, according to a statistical report released by Unesco yesterday.

The report, based on official 2000 and 2001 education figures for 22 countries in South and East Asia, said that "an estimated 46 million primary school-age children are out of school, and more girls (28 million) than boys (18 million) are excluded from primary education."

With an estimated 104 million children out of school, Asia accounted for 45 percent of the worldwide total, just ahead of sub-Saharan Africa, where 42 percent of children are not

enrolled, the report said.

The South and East Asia region studied stretches from China to East Timor, and from Iran to the Philippines. The zone is home to 3.24 billion people, or more than half the world's total, including more than a billion each in China and India.

Although school enrolments rose "substantially" between 1990 and 2000, the statistics showed that several countries had a high number of primary school dropouts.

"In India, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar, only half the children who enter primary school will reach grade five, indicating a dropout rate of 53 percent, 47 percent and 45 percent respectively," with Nepal, Cambodia and Bangladesh close behind, the report said.