

Laden is in Afghanistan, says report

AFP, Washington

Wanted Al-Qaeda terror network chief Osama bin Laden and his top aide, Ayman Al-Zawahri, have moved out of Pakistan and are believed to have crossed the mountainous border back into Afghanistan, ABC News reported.

Citing unnamed US officials, the network on Tuesday said they believed the two Al-Qaeda leaders have slipped across the mountainous border and re-entered Afghanistan, the network said in a statement.

Al-Zawahri reportedly resurfaced on Tuesday in two taped messages on Arabic television stations.

According to a Taliban statement released the previous day, Zawahiri is in Afghanistan where he is planning anti-American operations.

The network said bin Laden and Al-Zawahri had fled to Afghanistan after Pakistan's army increased pressure on regional tribal leaders to reveal the whereabouts of the two fugitives, who are also sought by Washington.



PHOTO: AFP
A man looks for his possessions in the rubble of his house, in Ait Belaziz, south of Al Hoceima, where 34 inhabitants died when the quake struck at 2:27 am (0227 GMT). At least 560 people were killed in the earthquake that struck northeastern Morocco early Tuesday local officials in the region told AFP.

Aid rushed to quake victims in Morocco

AFP, Paris

Countries and aid agencies around the world rushed yesterday to help Morocco recover from a devastating earthquake that left at least 560 people dead and hundreds more injured, despatching rescue workers and emergency equipment.

The Spanish Red Cross rushed five rescue teams to the quake-hit northeastern Al Hoceima region on Morocco's mediterranean coast, along with 20 firefighters from southern Spain.

Elsewhere, a French civil protection plane with 15 rescue workers on board along with sniffer dogs and clearance equipment left Marseille in southern France early Wednesday.

"France... intends to show with this aid its full solidarity with Morocco and to stand at its side at this sad time," a French foreign

ministry statement said.

A Belgian Hercules C-130, full of emergency aid, was also to set off for Morocco Wednesday.

The quake, which struck Al Hoceima before dawn on Tuesday, was measured at 6.3 on the Richter scale by French seismologists.

At least 564 people were killed and some 300 injured in the quake, leaving hospitals struggling to cope with the flood of casualties amid a desperate search through devastated villages for survivors.

Other European countries have also offered aid along with the United Nations and the Red Cross.

A first Spanish plane transporting rescue workers, medicine and blankets was due to arrive in Morocco early Wednesday in response to a request from the Moroccan authorities.

A second Hercules plane, packed with rescue equipment was

also ready to take off for Rabat.

A Portuguese military cargo plane will take 22 rescue workers and six sniffer dogs along with emergency aid to quake-stricken northern Morocco on Wednesday, officials in Lisbon said.

Blankets, tents and electrical generators are among the emergency aid being sent in the C-130 transport plane which was scheduled to leave a military airport just outside Lisbon at 10:00 am (1000 GMT).

Italy sent one Hercules plane with around 30 rescue workers, with a second plane due to leave later in the morning. An Italian reconnaissance team landed in Morocco overnight.

The regional government of Flanders, in northern Belgium, said it would release 100,000 euros to help provide drinking water and tents to the quake victims.

Conservative s in Iran take parliament majority

AFP, Tehran

Conservatives have won nearly all of the Iranian capital's parliamentary seats and therefore a comfortable majority in the assembly after the first round of voting, according to the final poll results released by the interior ministry yesterday.

Conservatives took 27 out of the 30 seats up for grabs in Tehran, bringing the number of new right-wing deputies in the 290-seat Majlis to 156.

Reformists hold just 39 seats, 31 went to independent candidates, five are reserved for religious minorities while the constituency of Bam -- the city devastated in December by a massive earthquake -- did not take part in the polls.

The remaining 58 seats, three of which are in Tehran, are going to a second round after candidates there failed to win the support of 25 per cent of eligible voters.

Russia uncertain about new leaders

AFP, Moscow

Russia was left guessing yesterday about its new leaders after President Vladimir Putin announced a shock decision to dismiss his government in what most here agree looks like a pre-election move that few can comprehend.

"A sacrifice on the eve of elections," the Moskovsky Komsomolets daily declared on its front page beneath a picture of the ousted prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov -- a man linked to Putin's predecessor Boris Yeltsin and the businessmen who lurked in his Kremlin court.

"The first one has been removed," said the paper while predicting massive government overhauls on the eve of Putin's expected March 14 re-election.

Putin's announcement Tuesday on national television that he was dismissing a government that oversaw four years of economic growth was a surprise not only to the

nation but also to his ousted team.

The Kommersant business daily reported that most ministers and Kasyanov himself learned -- or overheard through corridor whispers -- of the decision on Tuesday morning. Many were informed of the news by Russian reporters.

Both independent newspapers and Western investors in Russia appeared uncertain about what sparked such a seemingly rash move from a president known for his calculating caution in politics.

Kasyanov, 46, has not appeared in public since his ouster. And only the back of his head was shown on state-controlled national television Tuesday when Putin asked him over to his Kremlin office to deliver the news.

Putin's decision is seen here as the Kremlin's formal break with the Yeltsin era and the business tycoons with which it was linked so closely and whom many believed Kasyanov was defending.

Israel to shorten 'wall'

Barrier is wrecking chances of ME peace: Arab League

AFP, Jerusalem, The Hague

Israel is to shorten the planned route of its West Bank separation barrier by some 80 kilometres (50 miles), military sources said yesterday as world court hearings on the legality of the vast project entered their third and final day.

"We have decided to shorten the length of the fence by 80 kilometres," the source said, pointing out the move will reduce the overall length to 640 kilometres (just under 400 miles).

It was the second move in four days to reduce the overall length of the West Bank barrier and was clearly timed to coincide with the ongoing arguments on the barrier's legality in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which are due to finish on Wednesday.

Earlier this week, Israeli troops began dismantling an eight-kilometre (five-mile) section that encloses the Palestinian town of

Baka al-Sharkiya inside an enclave just north of Tulkarem.

According to military sources, troops will also remove another kilometre-long section which lies to the east of Qalqilia to ease travelling conditions for Palestinians.

Another 20 kilometres, which was planned to run between the villages of al-Mutilla and Teysir in the north-eastern corner of the West Bank, is also to be canned, the source said.

Israel will also scrap plans to dig a series of trenches to the north-west of Jerusalem which would fence-off thousands of Palestinians into a complex network of enclaves.

It was not immediately clear where the remaining cuts would occur.

Meanwhile, at The Hague the Arab League and Organisation of the Islamic Conference were expected to make their case against the barrier.

The Israeli government has

boycotted the hearings, though it has made written submissions, saying the case is beyond the court's competence.

The UN General Assembly called on the ICJ in December to give an opinion on the legality of the barrier. No date has been set for the court to release its findings, although any verdict will be merely advisory.

As the hearings opened on Monday, Israel's hawkish Prime Minister Ariel Sharon vowed to push on with construction regardless of any verdict, and work began Tuesday on a new 42-kilometre section (25 miles) in Beit Surik village, just north-west of Jerusalem.

An intricate montage of barbed-wire fences, deep trenches and towering concrete walls, the controversial barrier often juts deep into Palestinian territory, cutting local residents off from schools, hospitals and places of work.



PHOTO: AFP
Negotiators from six countries shake hands before the start of talks on the North Korean nuclear crisis, in Beijing yesterday. From left are US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, South Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Soo-hyuck, North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye Gwan, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Japanese chief negotiator Mitoji Yabunaka and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov.

Haiti's opposition rejects peace plan

AP, Port-Au-Prince

Haiti's opposition coalition rejected a US-backed peace plan to avert all-out civil war, causing alarm in the international community as rebels threatened the capital. The opposition, like the rebels, say Aristide must step down.

Aristide, who has accepted the plan that would have him share power with his political rivals, appealed to the world for urgent help and warned of a rising death toll if rebels try to take the capital. So far, at least 70 people have been killed in the three-week uprising, about 40 of them police officers.

"Should those killers come to Port-au-Prince, you may have thousands of people who may be killed," Aristide said. "We need the presence of the international community as soon as possible."

France's UN Ambassador Jean-Marc de La Sabliere said diplomats were considering proposing "a police force, or a civilian force" for approval

by the UN Security Council.

The United States also may seek a UN Security Council resolution authorising dispatch of international peacekeepers to Haiti if a settlement between government and opposition forces is reached, a US official said Tuesday.

Britain and Australia, meanwhile, urged their citizens to get out of Haiti, following similar warnings from the United States, France and Mexico. There are about 30,000 foreigners in the former French colony, 20,000 of them Americans.

Last-ditch efforts by US Secretary of State Colin Powell did not save the peace plan because the Democratic Platform coalition said Aristide must step down if Haiti is to have peace.

The plan would have kept Aristide as president, but with diminished powers and a shared government.

"We sent our position (paper) and a signed letter saying 'No' to the proposal," opposition leader Paul Denis told The Associated Press.

Sri Lanka poll campaign begins with violence

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's election campaign got off to a violent start with at least 40 activists wounded in clashes, police said here yesterday as Tiger rebels warned against preventing minority Tamils from voting.

Party supporters, including a Buddhist monk, were wounded in 27 incidents reported in southern and north-central regions of the island on Tuesday as nominations for the April 2 election closed, a police spokesman said.

"We have arrested 12 people in connection with these incidents and more arrests could follow," the spokesman said.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga called the April 2 election nearly four years ahead of schedule after a feud with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe over his handling of the peace process with Tiger rebels.

The guerrillas are not contesting, but have fielded proxy candidates through a moderate Tamil party.

Vajpayee asks Muslims to overcome 'fear psychosis'

PTI, New Delhi

In a bid to reach out to the Muslims, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee yesterday asked them to come out of the "fear psychosis", appealing to them to "think and decide," for themselves in the coming Lok Sabha elections.

"Get out of the fear that is dividing the nation and vote for a government that would not allow any community to live in fear," he said addressing a minorities conference organised by the party's minority cell.

"India is at a turning point and we want to improve the well-being of the people and therefore never allow a situation to be created at the time of elections that could cause harm to the prevailing situation," he said.

Highlighting the various steps taken by his government in infrastructure, foodgrains production and foreign exchange reserves, Vajpayee said there was a need to take the right information abroad and inform the people that "India is on the right path and growing strong".

"There is nothing that cannot be solved through dialogue" he said and referred to the conduct of elections in Jammu and Kashmir and the improvement of ties with Pakistan.

Hitting out at the Congress, he said while the NDA had been successful in running a coalition, the Congress was still unable to forge a coalition since the parties they were trying to have alliance have had bitter experience with it in the past.

Hurriyat ends talks with govt abruptly

PTI, Srinagar

Under attack from hardliners, Hurriyat Conference yesterday announced suspension of talks with centre accusing it of not being "sincere".

The Hurriyat said the process would resume only if the government ended "human rights violation" in Jammu and Kashmir.

"The dialogue process with the government is in suspension because there is no evidence of sincerity and seriousness on their part," Hurriyat chairman Maulana Mohammad Abbas Ansari told reporters at a hurriedly called press conference at the amalgam's headquarters here.

Ansari said the talks could resume only after Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani fulfilled his promise of putting an end to human rights violations in the state before the end of this month.

"There has to be a perceptible change in the ground situation by the end of this month. If there is not, we will not go for talks with the Centre," he added.

Sonia Gandhi commences 2-day roadshow in Haryana

PTI, Faridabad

After similar visits to Uttar Pradesh and Orissa in the run up to the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections in India, Congress president Sonia Gandhi yesterday commenced her two-day roadshow in Haryana from here.

Haryana Congress president Bhajan Lal also accompanied her along with a number of party workers.

During her tour of the state, the Congress chief is scheduled to visit a number of districts, including Faridabad, Gurgaon, Rewari, Bhiwani, Jhajjar, Rohtak, Hissar, Fatehabad, Jind and Sonapat.

In Faridabad, Congress chief made brief halts at Badkhal chowk and near the district Congress office in old Faridabad but did not talk to media or others.

The Congress president waved to the people standing along the highway in the district from her vehicle.

Sonia's convoy also passed through Palwal and Sohana in the adjoining Gurgaon district. She will also visit Nuh and Taoru areas of Gurgaon district and then move on to Dharuhera and Rewari.



PHOTO: AFP
India's Congress Party President and Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi (C) waves to supporters during her election campaign in Palwal, some 55 kms south of Delhi yesterday. India's politicians are preparing for the forthcoming general elections which will be held late April and first week of May 2004.