

Schroeder takes off for talks with Bush

AFP, Berlin

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder took off early yesterday for Chicago at the start of a brief visit to the United States during which he will hold talks with US President George W. Bush, his office said.

As well as discussing Iraqi debt relief, Schroeder is expected to relay to Bush European fears about the crippling effect of the weak dollar.

The chancellor will start his trip by visiting electronics giant Motorola and giving a speech on economic policy.

Later Thursday he was to fly to Washington before meeting with senators at the Capitol Building early Friday and then talks and lunch with Bush.

It is Schroeder's first invitation to the White House in more than two years after the two leaders fell out over Germany's opposition to the US-led war on Iraq.

Russia-EU ties no worse for EU expansion, says Ivanov

AFP, Moscow

Russia's ties with the European Union are not overly strained by the EU's imminent expansion into the former Soviet bloc, acting foreign minister Igor Ivanov said in an interview published yesterday.

"There is no crisis in relations between Russia and the EU. Moreover, there is no basis for such an argument," Ivanov told the Izvestia daily.

Ivanov's comments came as the EU warned Russia of a "serious impact" on relations if Moscow fails to sign a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) before the EU takes in 10 new mainly eastern European states on May 1.

However, Ivanov played down the new ultimatum, saying that "Russia and the EU mean too much to each other, and increasing cooperation between us is inexorable and without political alternative."



PHOTO: AFP

A Haitian policeman wearing civilian clothes (R) holds a hand gun as militia members, popularly known as "chimeres" – mythical fire-breathing monsters – approach him on a street in Port-Au-Prince. The policeman handed the gun to the men who were manning a road block on a street leading to Port-Au-Prince's International Airport. The armed gangs that have played a key role in many of Haiti's brutal regime changes took to the streets of Port-au-Prince again, this time in allegiance to embattled President Jean Bertrand Aristide.

UK spied on Annan in run-up to Iraq war

REUTERS, London

Britain spied on UN chief Kofi Annan in the run-up to the Iraq war, former minister Clare Short said yesterday, threatening a fresh crisis for Prime Minister Tony Blair as he tries to put the conflict behind him.

The UN declared any such operation would be illegal.

"This is something which is not entirely surprising because we always have suspected that," Andreas Nicklisch, deputy director of the UN's office in Brussels, told Reuters.

"It's illegal of course, but it's also unnecessary because we work in complete transparency and openness."

Short's claim comes a day after Blair's government dropped charges against a translator who admitted leaking a top-secret US document seeking London's help in bugging United Nations members in

the run-up to the war.

Asked whether British spies had been told to carry out operations within the UN, Short replied: "Yes, absolutely."

The ex-aid minister, who resigned after the war but was in government during the period when London and Washington sought UN authorisation for military action, said Secretary General Annan's office had been specifically targeted.

"In the case of Kofi's office, it was being done for some time," she told BBC Radio. "I read some of the transcripts of the accounts of his conversations."

"In fact, I have had conversations with Kofi in the run-up to the war thinking 'oh dear, there will be a transcript of this and people will see what he and I are saying.'"

A Blair spokesman refused to comment on the allegation beyond saying that the UK's security ser-

VICES "act in accordance with national and international law at all times."

But the prime minister himself will be pressed on the issue at his monthly press conference later in the day.

Iraq has become a political nightmare for Blair. Ten months after Saddam Hussein was toppled, none of the banned weapons he claimed Iraq had primed for use has been found.

The premier's public trust ratings have slumped and many in his Labour Party feel let down to the point of mutiny.

"Until the boil of the truth about Iraq is lanced, the prime minister can never put this behind him," Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn told Reuters.

Pressure mounts on Aristide to resign

Foreigners flee Haiti amid looting

AP, Port-au-Prince

Pressure mounted for President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to step down as his supporters built barricades in the streets of Haiti's capital before an anticipated rebel advance and diplomats sought ways to stop the violence.

Foreigners fled the island nation amid isolated looting Wednesday, while the UN Security Council was set to hold a meeting on Haiti yesterday.

President Bush said the United States is encouraging the international community to provide a strong "security presence," and France said a peace force should be established immediately for deployment once a political agreement is reached.

A leader of the group of rebels

that has overrun half the country urged Haitians to stay indoors if fighting nears the capital.

"We're going straight for the National Palace where we're going to arrest Aristide," Guy Philippe said in a call to Radio Vision 2000 from the rebel-held city of Cap-Haitien in the north. "It will be over very soon."

The message was contrary to one he gave hours earlier, when he told a reporter he wanted to see if Aristide resigns and to "give a chance to peace."

Aristide, 50-year-old former slum priest, once commanded widespread support as Haiti's first democratically elected leader and savior to the poor, but he has steadily lost support as poverty deepened after his party swept flawed legislative elections in 2000 and international

donors suspended aid.

An opposition coalition, which maintains it is not linked to the rebels, continued to call on the president to resign and formally announced its rejection of a US-backed proposal for Aristide to remain president and share power with his political rivals.

French Foreign Minister Dominique De Villepin also indicated France no longer supports Aristide.

"As for President Aristide, he bears heavy responsibility for the current situation," de Villepin said in a statement. "It is up to him to accept the consequences while respecting the rule of law. Everyone sees quite well that a new page must be opened in Haiti's history."

Colombia fires top brass after rebel attack

AFP, Bogota

President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia fired six high army and secret police (DAS) chiefs late on Wednesday after FARC rebel forces mounted an attack in which 12 soldiers died and three civilians were abducted in the south of the country.

The decision was announced by the president's office after an emergency security council meeting was held to review the attacks by the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, mounted on Wednesday morning in the Huila province towns of Santa Maria and Neiva, 350km south of the capital.

The guerrilla attacks were said to have been mounted as retaliation after a government offensive against the rebels at the weekend.

In the latest fighting, army troops from the 9th Brigade surrounded attacking rebel forces in Santa Maria. In the ensuing firefight 12 soldiers and four guerrillas were killed, and four soldiers were wounded.

Hopes fade for quake survivors

AFP, Al Hoceima

Thousands of survivors of a devastating earthquake in northern Morocco spent their second night in the open amid mounting anger over a lack of emergency aid and the shoddy construction work which many said exacerbated the toll of over 570 dead.

Search and rescue teams said late Wednesday they had all but given up hope of finding any more survivors as international aid poured into a region still trembling with aftershocks, one of which added at least one casualty to the toll of fatalities as the body of a father of seven was found buried under his collapsed home.

Rescuers finally made their way up to remote mountain hamlets, including the isolated Ait Kamar, in the Rif Mountains.

There Jaafar, a slightly-built teenager, spoke for thousands of dispossessed Moroccans as interior ministry sources revised the toll from Tuesday's powerful earthquake to 571 dead and 405 injured.



PHOTO: AFP

Teruel Paleontologic Foundation director, Luis Alcala, shows the dinosaur bone found in Barriohonda de Riviera next to Teruel in Spain Wednesday. The enormous dinosaur bone, the largest ever to be found in Europe at a length of nearly two meters (six feet), is from the Cretaceous period around 150 million years ago, the head of the local foundation said.

Iraqi cleric demands UN resolution on polls date

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's leading Shiite cleric accepted yesterday that elections could not be held before July but demanded that the UN Security Council pass a resolution ensuring they would take place by the end of the year.

In a statement released in the city of Najaf, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the head cleric among Iraq's Shiite community, said he wanted the Security Council to guarantee the elections would not be pushed back again.

"The Marjaiya (the religious Shiite authority) wants clear guarantees through a resolution by the UN Security Council on the organisation of elections by the end of 2004, as specified by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan," he said.

Sistani had wanted general elections held before the June 30 transfer of power from the US-led coalition, but a UN report published on February 23 said a "credible" vote could only be held at the end of the year at the earliest.

In his statement, Sistani said that a UN resolution would "assure the Iraqi people that this issue will not be delayed again".

Despite accepting the delay, he insisted that the body to which power will be transferred should focus its efforts on organising elections and avoid tackling other major issues in the transition period.

"The Marjaiya wants the body

that will receive power at the end of June to have extended powers in order to prepare transparent and free elections but also urges it to run the country without taking important decisions," he said.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's report, which had been requested by Sistani, doomed the November 15 agreement reached between the interim Governing Council and the coalition on the future of the political process, keeping only the date for a power handover.

The United Nations gave no indications as to how or to whom power should be transferred, saying only that such a move would have to come through "consensus".

Sistani voiced fears about the mechanism for transferring power and said "there is wide concern that the parties involved will not succeed in reaching an understanding supported of the Iraqi people."

The US-stalled Governing Council has yet to announce its verdict on the UN report but said Wednesday that it plans to do so next week.

"The council has received the report and decided to submit it for examination to a special committee and they will deliver a detailed opinion on the document and give an answer in writing to the United Nations Secretary General," a member of the executive body, Mohammad Bahr Ullum, told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

A family prepares to sleep in a tent on Mohamed V Square in central Al Hoceima Wednesday fearing possible aftershocks of the earthquake, which hit the region on Tuesday and killed over 560 people.