

Blix suspects US bugged him before Iraq war

AFP, London

Former UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix said yesterday he suspected both his United Nations office and his New York home were bugged by the United States in the run-up to the Iraq war.

Blix told the *Guardian* newspaper he expected to be spied on by the Iraqis, but to be bugged by the US he described as "disgusting".

Blix said his worst spy fears were realised when he was shown a set of photographs by a senior member of the Bush administration which could only have been obtained through underhand means.

"It feels like an intrusion into your integrity in a situation when you are actually on the same side," he told the *Guardian*, speaking from his home in Stockholm.



PHOTO: AFP
Haitians walk past a burning barricade on a street near the Petionville district of Port-au-Prince Friday. Rebel forces virtually isolated President Jean Bertrand Aristide in the Haitian capital where looting and killings were reported as international pressure mounted on the beleaguered leader to quit.

US, Pakistan deny Bin Laden was Captured

AP, Tehran

Pentagon and Pakistani officials on Saturday denied an Iranian state radio report that Osama bin Laden was captured in Pakistan's border region with Afghanistan "a long time ago."

The claim came as Pakistan's army hunted terror suspects in a remote tribal region along the border, believed to be a possible hiding place for the al-Qaida's leader.

The director of Iran radio's Pashtun language service, Ashed Hosseini, said the report was based on two sources -- one of whom later told The Associated Press he was misquoted.

The report said bin Laden had been in custody for a period of time, but that President Bush was withholding any announcement until closer to November elections.

"Osama bin Laden has been arrested a long time ago, but Bush is intending to use it for propaganda maneuvering in the presidential election," the radio report

said. Pakistani officials have denied knowing bin Laden's exact whereabouts, although there have been reports that military forces believe they know his general location and had him encircled.

The state radio report, quoting an unidentified source, said US Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's visit to the region this week was in connection with bin Laden's arrest.

Larry Di Rita, the chief Pentagon spokesman who traveled with Rumsfeld this week to Afghanistan, denied the report. "I don't have any reason to think it's true," he said Saturday.

Lt. Col. Bryan Hilferty, a spokesman for the US military in Afghanistan, also said he had no information to suggest bin Laden had been caught.

"Things are going well, and we believe we will eventually catch all the leaders of al-Qaida, but I know nothing of that report," he said.

Amnesty urges Tigers not to kill rivals in polls campaign

AFP, Colombo

Amnesty International yesterday urged Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels not to kill opponents ahead of parliamentary elections in April and said widespread human rights abuses during the campaign was a major concern.

The London-based human rights watchdog said it was worried that candidates who do not have the backing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) could become targets for assassination.

The LTTE is not contesting the elections called by President Chandrika Kumaratunga on April 2, nearly four years ahead of schedule, but announced that it would back a moderate group, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which is largely seen as a Tigers proxy.

Diplomats and analysts say the TNA, which had 15 seats in the earlier parliament, could bag a sizeable number out of the 31 seats in the Tamil-dominated northeast.

5 Kashmiri rebels killed in gunfight

PTI, Jammu

Five Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) terrorists, including a platoon commander, were killed and a huge cache of arms seized in a fierce gun battle with security personnel in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district yesterday, official sources said.

Acting on an intelligence input about the presence of a terrorist training camp in Dara Sangla forest belt in the district, the security forces cordoned off the area on Saturday morning, the sources said.

When the terrorists hiding there lobbed grenades and opened fire, the security forces retaliated. In the ensuing gun battle five terrorists, including Abu Fakri, a self-styled platoon commander of LeT, were killed.

The operation was still on and two more terrorists are hiding in the area, they said.

Identities of other slain terrorists are being ascertained, they said adding five AK rifles, two pistols, 17

'10,000 minors abused by US priests over 50 years'

AFP, Washington

More than 10,000 children and teenagers were sexually abused by US Roman Catholic priests over the past 50 years in an epidemic of child abuse which bishops often sought to cover up, according to two studies released Friday.

The alleged perpetrators worked in close contact with the community, as priests, teachers, molesting mostly young boys in the priest's residence or the church, according to figures compiled by researchers.

More than half of the 4,400 alleged offenders had a single victim, but a core group of predators were said to have preyed on thousands of young people, according to a study by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York.

11 killed in Pak shooting near Afghan border

AP, Wana

Pakistani forces killed 11 people in an exchange of fire after a minibus failed to stop at a roadblock in a tribal region where anti-terrorism operations have been ongoing, Pakistan's army spokesman told The Associated Press.

The shooting occurred early yesterday, the morning after armed men and soldiers exchanged fire at a military compound in the region. Pakistani forces have been carrying out a sweep for terrorist suspects, and tension is high in the area.

The minibus failed to stop at a roadblock in Zeri Noor, a village just outside of Wana, the main town in tribal South Waziristan, army spokesman Gen. Shaukat Sultan told AP. He said soldiers only shot at the bus after someone inside opened fire on them.

"It was a terrorist act," he said. Allah Dad, a local resident, told AP that the bus was filled mostly with Afghan refugees on their way to the border. A taxi driving near the minibus was also hit, and the driver killed, Dad said.

He said as many as 12 people were killed, and seven more injured in the incident.

"They opened fire when the bus didn't stop," Dad said. "There is a lot of tension in the area and a lot of troops. The roads to Afghanistan have been sealed."

Two local officials who spoke to the AP earlier on condition of anonymity did not mention an exchange of fire, saying it was not clear exactly what prompted the shooting.

The deaths are sure to increase anger in the region. Tribal leaders deeply resent the presence of the army on their

lands. Pakistani forces have been slowly increasing their presence under pressure from Washington to crack down on al-Qaeda and Taliban suspects, who are believed sheltering in the region.

In the operation Tuesday in Wana, troops arrested 25 suspected terrorists, none of whom have been identified.

In Friday's raid, armed men tried to sneak into a military compound in Wana, sparking a shoot-out, Sultan said Saturday. There were no casualties and the spokesman said he had no details.

"I can only say that there was an exchange of fire but there were no casualties," Sultan told The Associated Press.

Wana is located about 190 miles west of the capital, Islamabad.



PHOTO: AFP
Taiwan's president Chen Shui-bian is mobbed by supporters as he leaves a rally in Miaoli, northern Taiwan. The rally was part of the huge "Hand-in-Hand" demonstration which saw an estimated 2.5 million people join a human chain running the length of the island to protest against the deployment of Chinese missiles against them.

Annan transcripts 'Blair could be unaware of circulation'

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair may not have been aware that transcripts were circulated to senior ministers of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's conversations in the run-up to the Iraq war, the woman who started the spying allegations said yesterday.

In an interview with The Independent newspaper Clare Short, Britain's former international development secretary, said that it was likely Blair would not have known that the transcripts were circulated around government.

"I'm afraid that there is no question that such transcripts were regularly circulated," Short said.

"He's not a man for detail but he is in a position to stop the practice."

Blair, who called Short's allegation "deeply irresponsible" and insisted that British intelligence agents always acted within the law, resisted calls Friday to come clean on the allegations.

Polls possible in Nepal around November: PM

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Prime minister Surya Bahadur Thapa said Friday his government was preparing to hold general elections around November following the successful staging this week of a student union ballot.

"The general elections will be held near and around mid-November this year and the government is making necessary arrangements for it," Thapa told a delegation from the Nepal Bar Association (NBA).

"The final date for the election, however, will be announced in due course."

Parliament has been suspended since King Gyanendra fired the elected prime minister and named a loyalist in his place in October 2002.

The five main opposition parties have since demanded the king call fresh elections or restore the elected legislature.

In the campus level elections, the pro-leftist student factions affiliated with the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) won 80 percent of the seats, including that of the state-run Tribhuvan University.

Iraq seeks to ease donors' concern over transition

AFP, Abu Dhabi

Council clashed over the role of Islamic clerics in family law.

It was unclear whether the members would meet the midnight deadline set in a November agreement to clear the way for Iraqi sovereignty at the end of June.

But Hafidh said there "was no going back" on the date of June 30 for the transfer of power from the US-led coalition to an interim Iraqi government.

"We are very much committed to this process, because we know this will enable you to be more encouraged to assist the country," he said.

The World Bank, which along with the United Nations is managing trust funds through which non-US donor money will be channeled to Iraq, said Wednesday that the uncertain political climate, the absence of a sovereign power and insecurity may slow the transfer of pledged money to the country.

Hafidh has come to Abu Dhabi

with a list of 700 projects that he said need urgent funding of four billion dollars over the next 12 months.

The World Bank said Wednesday he was probably going to secure 500 million dollars by June 30.

Meanwhile, Iraq issued an urgent appeal yesterday for donor countries to disburse four billion dollars for 700 priority projects this year, at the opening of a donor conference in the Emirati capital, Abu Dhabi.

"Our needs are enormous and urgent," said interim minister of planning and development cooperation, Mehdi al-Hafidh. "It is high time the promises made in Madrid were honoured," he told dozens of representatives of donor countries and international organisations who pledged 33 billion dollars in the Spanish capital last October.

"We've had differences in the past. But there's nothing wrong with friends having differences and we are both committed to put the differences behind us and move forward," Bush told reporters as he and

Bush, Schroeder united for a free Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

Schroeder sat side-by-side in the Oval Office.

Schroeder said he told Bush of German concerns about the weakness of the dollar versus the euro, which Germany feels is depressing German exports.

The two leaders pledged to push for a joint US-European partnership aimed at pushing for peace in the Middle East. They said specific proposals would be put before leaders attending a series of international summits in June.

Bush and Schroeder declared themselves "united in support of a free Iraq" and reaffirmed the July 1 deadline for a transfer of sovereignty from a US-run authority to a new Iraqi government.

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California's top court refuses to halt gay marriages

AFP, San Francisco

California's Supreme Court late Friday refused an appeal by the state's top legal official to immediately order a halt to the city of San Francisco's defiant gay marriage blitz.

The court's refusal came after two San Francisco judges last week denied requests by conservative groups seeking emergency orders halting the marriages until the issue over whether state laws banning same-sex marriage are unconstitutional is settled.

The Supreme Court instead ordered San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom and his administration to show by March 5 why the top court should not halt the same-sex marriage blitz and defend his actions.

The decision was a response to Attorney General Bill Lockyer's petition seeking an immediate halt to the marriages and the invalidation of the more than 3,000 gay unions sanctioned by the city since February 12.

Newsom two weeks ago ordered officials to begin issuing marriage licences to same-sex couples in an open challenge to state laws barring the politically-explosive practice.



PHOTO: AFP
Secondary and primary school students take part in a sand sculpture competition on the Shek O beach in Hong Kong yesterday. Students from 27 different schools participated in the event with the theme "Love, be concerned and serve."