



PHOTO: AFP
A Canadian soldier rides a small vehicle before US marines on the tarmac of the International Airport in Port-au-Prince Sunday. US Marines landed in Haiti late Sunday as a vanguard of an international security force following the departure of President Jean Bertrand Aristide.

UN approves US-led forces for Haiti

US Marines start mission as Aristide lands in Central African Republic

REUTERS, AFP, UNITED NATIONS/ PORT-AU-PRINCE

The UN Security Council approved a US-led multinational force to restore order in Haiti Sunday, hours after President Jean-Bertrand Aristide resigned in the face of an armed rebellion.

A resolution adopted unanimously by the 15-nation council called on all sides in Haiti's bloody uprising to cease all violence and authorised the force to help "contribute to a secure and stable environment" for up to three months, after which a follow-up UN stabilisation force would take over.

The United States and France have already ordered troops to the Caribbean nation as part of the international force, and other governments including Canada and Brazil are expected to soon detail their troop contributions,

UN diplomats said.

Aristide arrived in the Central African Republic en route to exile in South Africa. Two government ministers were waiting at the international airport in Bangui to receive him.

The president's departure sparked a rampage through the streets of Port-au-Prince by angry pro-Aristide gangs armed with guns and machetes. At least 12 deaths and many more injuries were reported.

Widespread looting targeted warehouses and banks. Some people ran through the streets carrying suitcases of banknotes. But a dusk-till-dawn curfew appeared to be holding with just sporadic firing into the night.

US Marines were arriving in Haiti early yesterday to launch an international force to restore order

after the Caribbean nation's president Jean Bertrand Aristide fled a mounting insurrection.

A Marine contingent took up combat positions at Port-au-Prince airport just before the UN Security Council authorised the deployment of a multinational force in Haiti for up to three months.

The council said it acted after receiving an appeal for "the urgent support of the international community to assist in restoring peace and security in Haiti" from Chief Justice Boniface Alexandre, sworn in on Sunday as Haiti's new leader following the resignation of Aristide.

While waiting for the troops to move in, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan counselled Haiti's people "to remain calm, to work with the new president, and to think of their country and their future, not indi-

vidual ambitions."

"I know some of them may think it (the council action) is a bit late, but it's better late than never and we will do whatever we can to support them," Annan told reporters.

The council had awaited Aristide's departure before acting, despite a plea from Caribbean nations to urgently send international troops last week.

Initially, US and French troops are to make up the bulk of the force in Haiti, which is several hundred miles from Florida and is the Western Hemisphere's poorest nation.

The first US soldiers began arriving as the council voted and French forces were due in the morning, diplomats said.

'US mulls deployment in foreign airports'

REUTERS, New York

The United States' Homeland Security Department is planning to station American inspectors in foreign airports to screen passengers, the Wall Street Journal reported yesterday.

Citing US Customs chief Robert Bonner, the story said the initiative, which is still being developed, would aim to identify and catch possible terrorists before they board a US-bound plane.

US customs is considering seven specific cities but has yet to seek support from host countries, the story quoted Bonner as saying. International hub airports such as London's Heathrow and Narita in Japan could come under the plan, the story said.

"It will be voluntary," said Bonner. "Nobody has to participate in these things unless they find it in their interests to provide better security," he told the newspaper.

Iraqis reach deal on text of constitution

Basic law plans polls by January 2005

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi politicians agreed early yesterday on an interim constitution with a wide ranging bill of rights and a single chief executive, bridging a gulf between members over the role of Islam in the future government.

The new constitution, a key aspect of the United States' plans to turn over power June 30, will be signed by top American administrator L. Paul Bremer tomorrow, after the Shiite Muslim religious holiday of Ashoura ends, a coalition official said on condition of anonymity.

The document "strikes a balance between the role of Islam and the bill of individual rights and democratic principles," the official said.

He also said the charter sets a goal, not a quota, to have at least 25 percent of the national assembly

made up of women, adding that council members unanimously approved the document.

The deal came two days after a deadline for finishing the document, a key part of the US plan for handing over power to the Iraqis on June 30. Saturday's deadline had been set by the Americans and agreed to by the Governing Council in November. When it passed with the council still deeply divided, Bremer helped organise marathon talks.

Besides a comprehensive bill of rights, including protections for free speech, religious expression, assembly and due process, it also spells out the executive branch.

Under the terms of the document, Iraq will have a president with two deputies, a prime minister and a cabinet.

Council member Mahmoud Othman, a Sunni Kurd, said leaders will go over the document's English

and Arabic text to "make sure every word is there" before it is signed.

"They believe this is a document that is historic, not only for Iraq, but for the entire region," the official said.

The basic law does not tackle the ongoing wrangling of how power will be transferred from the US-led occupiers to an Iraqi government by July. That measure will be handled in a forthcoming annex, the official said.

Iraq's temporary constitution states that direct elections for a new government will be held if possible by the end of the year and no later than the end of January 2005, a coalition source said yesterday.

"By end of '04, beginning of '05," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity, just hours after the text had been finalised following three days and nights of political wrangling by Iraqi leaders.

China slams HR situation in US

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday published a scathing attack on the human rights situation in the United States, retaliating for a similar report issued by Washington last week that accused Beijing of backsliding on its rights record.

Only days after slamming the US report as "interference in its internal affairs," the State Council, China's cabinet, countered with its own criticism.

Allegations of US atrocities in the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan led the way.

"In recent years, the United States has practiced unilateralism on the international stage, wantonly engaged in military adventures, violently invaded the sovereignty of other nations and left the mark of rights violations everywhere," the 2003 US Rights Violation Record said.

"Since the United States initiated the war on Iraq, 16,000 Iraqis have been killed including 10,000 citizens," the report said.

With a 400 billion dollar defense budget, US defense spending is bigger than military expenditures of the rest of the world combined, while the United States is the world's biggest seller of arms.

It was responsible for more than 48 percent of all conventional weapons sales to the developing world in 2002, the report said.

Rights violations were not only restricted to the 364,000 soldiers Washington has based in more than 130 countries, the report said, but also occurred at home where the United States remains one of the world's most violent places to live.

"The United States leads the world in gun ownership, guns are everywhere and crimes involving guns are on the rise," it said.

Of the 15,980 murders committed in the United States in 2001, 63 percent involved guns, while 56 percent, or 16,586 people, who committed suicide in the US in 2000 used guns, it said.



PHOTO: AFP
Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal (L) listens to his Sudanese counterpart Mustafa Osman Ismail prior to the start of the foreign ministers' meeting at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo Sunday. The meeting was held to examine the application of the resolutions of the previous Arab summit held in Sharm el-Sheikh concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the situation in Iraq following the visit of an Arab League delegation to the country in December.

Lankan monks attack JVP ahead of polls

Tamil candidate shot dead

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Buddhist clergy yesterday accused President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Marxist allies of launching a "smear campaign" against them in the run up to parliamentary elections.

The Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, which partnered with Kumaratunga's Freedom Alliance for the snap April 2 polls, had begun clandestinely distributing pamphlets protesting the entry of clergy into the political race, the monks told reporters at a Buddhist shrine here.

"The alliance has got a Buddhist monk to say that those who vote for us will end up in hell," said monk candidate Ellawela Medananda. "But it is those who distort the teachings of the Buddha who will go to hell first."

He said Kumaratunga's alliance

was worried monks would split its vote but the clergy was confident of getting more widespread support, even from members of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP).

Meanwhile, an electoral candidate was shot dead in eastern Sri Lanka yesterday in the first political killing in the run up to parliamentary polls in April, police said.

Two gunmen stormed a hospital in the town of Batticaloa and fired at Sinnathambay Sunderapillai who was receiving treatment for gunshot injuries suffered in an attack on Saturday, police said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the killing which came two days after the London-based human rights watchdog Amnesty International asked Tamil Tiger rebels not to kill opponents during the electoral campaign.

Pakistan denies deal with US on Laden hunt

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan flatly denied yesterday a report that it had struck a deal to allow US troops to hunt for al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden on its territory.

"This report has no truth in it and there is no such deal," military spokesman Major-General Shaukat Sultan said.

The latest issue of the New Yorker weekly said thousands of US troops would be deployed in a tribal area bordering Afghanistan in return for Washington's support for Islamabad's pardon last month of Abdul Qadeer Khan, a scientist who admitted leaking nuclear secrets to Iran, Libya and North Korea.

The article quoted a former senior intelligence official as saying it was "a quid pro quo" deal with Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf. "We're going to get our troops inside Pakistan in return for not forcing Musharraf to deal with Khan."

'Taliban preparing attack against US troops'

PTI, New York

US military officials believe that the Taliban fighters are preparing to launch an offensive against the US and its Afghan allies this spring, a media report said yesterday.

Quoting a senior US military official, Time magazine says that at the same time US forces will mount a spring offensive of their own, in tribal areas along the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan, to flush out Osama bin Laden.

"As the weather gets better and as people are better able to travel in the rougher terrain, we expect an increase in violence," General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said.

The US is not expected to

openly announce the true intent of the offensive, which will focus on an area stretching from Jalalabad, near Afghanistan's eastern border, to Kandahar, a former Taliban stronghold in the south.

While the US pushes east along a broad front, Pakistani forces will push west, flooding the tribal areas in what Lt General David Barno, commander of US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, calls a "hammer and anvil" strategy.

A small contingent of special-operations troops taken out of Afghanistan for the war in Iraq, including members of the Elite Joint Task Force 121, which helped track down Saddam Hussein, will be reinserted for the offensive, Time said quoting the official.

Putin names ex-tax chief Fradkov as new PM

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin named a relative unknown, former tax chief Mikhail Fradkov, as prime minister yesterday just two weeks before the presidential election.

Fradkov currently holds the post of Russia's representative to the European Union and on Monday was reported to be in Brussels.

"We faced a difficult task -- to present a new government," Putin said during a televised meeting with his supporters from the State Duma lower house of parliament.

"This had to be a person of very high qualification, one who is decent, who has solid experience in various government structures," Putin said.

"The man is Fradkov, Mikhail Yefimovich, a minister who represents Russia at the European Union," Putin said.

Indian politicians gear up polls campaign

AFP, New Delhi

With election dates announced, Indian politicians have begun fanning out into the vast rural landscape to reach the country's 675 million voters through rallies, roadshows and a variety of electronic gizmos.

The world's largest democracy will vote in four phases from April 20 to May 10 and spin doctors and managers of the principal political parties are bracing for a long and arduous campaign into the scorching Indian summer.

The ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party -- BJP) has made plans for an estimated 3,000 rallies for its national leaders, including putting the face of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, 79, on every street corner.

"Our campaign will be positive, offensive and combative," said

Amitabh Sinha, BJP's national convenor and media manager.

"We will pace the campaign as and when required. We will take the pitch high and then low and then high depending on the situation. Our campaign team is very experienced in managing elections in the most scientific manner."

Apart from traditional roadshows and rallies, the BJP has also chalked out an "e-campaign" to reach its target audience through mobile and fixed phones, SMS, e-mails, and television and FM radio spots.

The party is setting up a 24-hour call centre to run this electronic blitzkrieg. Details have been collected of a majority of the 72 million phone connections in the country -- 46 million fixed and 26 million mobile phones.

Belgian child killer's 'trial of century' starts

AFP, Arlon

The long-awaited trial of "Belgium's most hated man," alleged child killer Marc Dutroux, finally began nearly eight years after a spate of abuse of schoolgirls that convulsed his country and shocked the world.

The trial of the 47-year-old former electrician, who has been in custody ever since his arrest in August 1996, promises to be a long and emotional affair, lasting at least two months and hearing more than 450 witnesses.

But many Belgians doubt whether the trial will answer all of their questions. Many believe Dutroux lay at the sinister heart of a paedophile ring that encompassed politicians, judges and policemen.

Dutroux himself fuelled the conspiracy theories, even before the trial got underway, claiming that he was "used" by others.

"People want to believe that I am at the centre of everything. They are mistaken," he said, according to comments originally reported by Flemish-language television station VTM.



PHOTO: AFP
Opponents of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez try to set fire the Supreme Electoral Council's installations during a demonstration in Caracas Sunday. Venezuela's Election Commission has postponed its preliminary judgement on whether the opposition had collected enough valid signatures to demand a referendum on Chavez's continued tenure.

Australia launches new inquiry into pre-Iraq war intelligence

AFP, Sydney

Prime Minister John Howard agreed yesterday to launch a new inquiry into Australia's pre-war intelligence on Iraq's banned weapons after a parliamentary committee found its spy agencies may have exaggerated the evidence.

The bipartisan committee cleared the government of "sexing up" intelligence to justify war against Iraq but recommended a review of the intelligence agencies, particularly its Office of National Assessments (ONA), which advises the prime minister.

The ONA, it said, had made a sudden and as yet unexplained change in its assessments between September 12 and 13, 2002, when it appeared "more ready to extrapolate a threatening scenario from historical experience."

Government MP David Jull, who chaired the committee, said the changes meant the ONA "overstated" the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) compared to assessments

made by another spy agency, the Defence Intelligence Organisation. "The government's emphatic claim about the existence of Iraqi WMD reflected the views of the ONA after 13 September 2002," he said.

Jull told the national parliament Australia's intelligence agencies faced a difficult job in assessing Iraq's weapons capability, but it was now clear some of their judgments were wrong.

"Our conclusion was that the assessments of the Australian intelligence community were more moderate and cautious than those of the partner agencies in the US and the UK," he said.

"However, despite their caution, it's possible they overstated their case."

Howard, like US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, based his decision to join the invasion of Iraq on the claim that its president Saddam Hussein possessed and was prepared to use stockpiles of WMD.

Israel vows to finish barrier by year end

AFP, Jerusalem

The separation barrier being built by Israel around Jerusalem will be completed by the end of the year, Interior Minister Tzahi Hanegbi said, after a court order to suspend construction on a 42-km section.

"The security fence, whose purpose is to save lives, will be finished by the end of the year around Jerusalem," Hanegbi told public radio.

Israel's supreme court Sunday ordered the suspension of building work on a section of the barrier northwest of Jerusalem where two Palestinian protesters were killed last week.

The order, which will remain in force until next week, allows the court to examine appeals presented by residents of eight Palestinian villages in the West Bank against construction of the barrier on their land.

Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, who paid a visit to the site on Sunday, denounced the court's decision, saying that "any judicial delay will give a suicide bomber the chance to enter Israeli territory."