



A woman lays a carnation at the site of the collapsed apartment block in remembrance to the victims of the disaster in the Northern Russian town of Arkhangelsk, yesterday. An explosion apparently caused by a gas leak sheared off a part of a nine-story apartment bloc in this northern Russian city, killing at least 41 people, including five children.

Death toll rises in Russia blast

AFP, Moscow

The death toll from a gas leak blast that sheared off an apartment bloc's side reached 44 people yesterday as rescuers prepared to give up their search for survivors who could still be buried under the rubble.

"Unfortunately, it is unlikely that survivors will be found but there is always hope," Yury Vorobyov of the emergency ministry said in televised comments.

Meanwhile police continued their hunt for two homeless men who apparently caused the Monday morning explosion by allegedly removing bronze fittings from the gas pipe in order to peddle them off as scrap metal.

"We have not yet arrested anyone linked to this particular crime. We have only rounded up people who appear to fit the description and some of them have been let go after questioning," local interior ministry chief Valery Lobanov told NTV television.

Rescuers on the scene said 42 bodies have been pulled from rubble and two people have died in hospital. At least a dozen people were believed to be still stranded under the slabs of concrete but no one knew the exact figure.

They said a search would have to be called off later in the day because of a growing threat that the remainder of the shattered nine-story building in this White Sea port may soon come crashing down.

The dawn hour explosion saw survivors run out into the freezing cold in their nightgowns. They have been given temporary residence in shelter homes but many have complained that they fear authorities will not provide them with adequate new housing.

The incident is the latest in a recent series of disasters to affect buildings across Russia, including a massive fire of a historic building next door to the Kremlin that killed two firefighters on election day Sunday and the collapse of a Moscow water park in February that caused 28 fatalities.

US, Iraqi forces launch massive hunt

AP, Baghdad

US and Iraqi military forces backed by helicopters and armored vehicles launched a big operation in Baghdad yesterday, raiding suspected rebel hideouts in an effort to weed out insurgents and capture illegal weapons.

The campaign comes a day after gunmen killed two Europeans working on a water project. On Monday, assailants shot to death four American missionaries also working on a water project, suggesting the insurgents are going after civilians as a means of undermining reconstruction efforts in Iraq.

The new operation is called "Iron Promise" and is expected to involve thousands of US troops from the Fort Hood, Texas-based 1st Cavalry Division, which has recently arrived in Iraq, and the outgoing Germany-based 1st Armored Division. Scores of Iraqi Civil Defense Corps soldiers are

also involved.

In the first raid yesterday, about 250 troops from the armored division's 1st Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment as well as 250 Iraqi soldiers fanned out across the sprawling 20th Street Market, in the city's Al-Bayaa district, which sells everything from vegetables to used car parts.

Some of the stores are suspected of supplying weapons to the rebels, said the raid's commander, Lt. Col. Chuck Williams, 40, from Sterling, Va. He said the market assault was just the start of a city-wide crackdown on the guerrillas.

"There is a lot of pressure everywhere. It is all over town. The big things we are looking for is people moving weapons, IED (improvised explosive device) materials and explosives and ammunition. Our soldiers are looking to deter or discover this activity. We want to shut it off," he said.

With helicopters hovering overhead, forces in Bradley fight-

ing vehicles and Humvees circled the market to prevent rebels from fleeing the area. Troops then went store to store searching for weapons and guerrilla suspects.

US officials say they have identified 14 rebel cells across Baghdad and while raids on them in the past few months have disrupted their operations, they are still active.

A German and a Dutch national were killed in a drive-by shooting near the town of Mussayab, 45 miles south of Baghdad on Tuesday, officials said. Their Iraqi driver and a police officer also were killed, and two police were wounded.

Five Americans missionaries were shot in the northern city of Mosul a day earlier, leaving four dead and one wounded. On Tuesday in Mosul, assailants in a car fired on a police vehicle, killing three officers and wounding a fourth, and separately gunmen killed an Iraqi woman working as a translator for the US military.

5 Palestinians killed in missile strikes

REUTERS, Gaza

Israel killed three Palestinians in two missile strikes into a Gaza refugee camp yesterday, pursuing what it called a relentless offensive against militants after two suicide bombers struck a strategic Israeli port.

Israeli military action against militants and their leaders unfolded late on Tuesday when three helicopter missiles crashed into the house of an Islamic Jihad commander Gaza City, killing two Palestinians. The commander escaped with minor injuries.

Israeli officials said the campaign was aimed at smashing Gaza militant factions to prevent them claiming victory should Prime Minister Ariel Sharon go ahead with a planned evacuation of Jewish settlements from the sea-side territory.

Palestinian gunmen took up positions and swore to fight to the finish, anticipating a widescale Israeli incursion into Gaza, where 7,500 Israelis live amidst 1.3 million Palestinians.

"We prepared ourselves and said farewell to our families. If they come in it will be a battle to the death," one gunman said.

In the volatile Rafah camp of southern Gaza, an Israeli helicopter fired two missiles overnight into a group of Palestinians, killing a gunman and a bystander, witnesses said.

Military sources said troops fired two missiles at two separate groups of armed Palestinians laying explosive charges intended to counter Israeli forces who frequently raid the camp, a bastion of militant factions.

Another Israeli missile launched into the camp around 3 a.m. EST killed a 17-year-old civilian, witnesses and medics said. Israeli military sources said the missile targeted a group of gunmen digging in close to its troops.

Palestinian security sources said six Israeli tanks, backed by helicopters, also pushed several hundred meters (yards) into the Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza, with Israeli soldiers firing machinegun rounds from positions nearby.

Saddam not giving much information

REUTERS, Washington

Former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein is not giving up much useful information under interrogation but he is talking to his captors, a senior US official said on Tuesday.

Asked whether the United States was getting any "worthwhile intelligence" from Saddam, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said in an interview on a Philadelphia radio station:

"I occasionally see the debriefs and he's a pretty wily guy, and he's not giving much information I've seen, but he seems to be enjoying the debate."

US authorities are interrogating Saddam at an undisclosed location in Iraq, with the CIA taking a lead role.

Saddam, 66, has been in US custody since he was captured in mid-December in a hole in the ground near his hometown of Tikrit in central Iraq.

The United States formally declared Saddam a prisoner of war in January, ending him to a host of rights under the Geneva convention.

US pledges extra 1 billion to Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

The US will give Afghanistan another one billion dollars this year, bringing pledges for 2004 up to a total of 2.2 billion dollars, US Secretary of State Colin Powell announced here yesterday.

On a one-day visit to the Afghan capital, Powell told reporters the new pledge would be made at an international donors' conference in Berlin late March.

"The United States will make another significant contribution at that conference, another billion dollars on top of the 1.2 billion dollars we have already committed," he said.

"So this year it will be 2.2 billion dollars."

The extra billion was already approved by Congress in November as part of a wider budget appropriation bill, but Powell is the first to announce that it would be pledged during the March 31-April 1 Berlin conference.

Afghanistan's top donors

Britain, Germany, Japan and the US are expected to pledge some nine billion dollars over the next four years at the conference, according to German newspaper reports.

Afghan Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani however complained in Tokyo last week that his country would need 27.5 billion dollars to rebuild over the next seven years and that previous pledges "vastly underestimated" its needs.

The 4.5 billion dollars in pledges Afghanistan received at the Tokyo donors' conference in January 2002 had failed to lift it out of poverty after the ouster of the extremist Islamic Taliban militia by US-led forces, he said.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell flew into the Afghan capital yesterday for talks with President Hamid Karzai, as US forces step up the hunt for Osama bin Laden in southeast Afghanistan and officials try to register voters in time for June polls.



An Iraqi woman shows reporters yesterday the destruction caused by a rocket attack on a house in the southwest outskirts of Baghdad late last night. Three Iraqi children and an adult were killed and five other individuals were injured in three rocket attacks by insurgents on three different areas of Baghdad last night, a US army officer told AFP. No further details were available.

Nations shun new Haiti leader

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Venezuela and Jamaica have refused to recognise the new Haitian government formed after former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was deposed.

Haiti's new PM unveiled a new cabinet excluding all established politicians and anyone linked to Mr Aristide.

But the omission of any member of the former ruling Lavalas party in Gerard Latortue's new government sparked an angry response from his predecessor.

Venezuela has offered refuge to Mr Aristide, who is currently in

Jamaica.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez said: "We don't recognise Haiti's new government." The president of Haiti is named Jean-Bertrand Aristide and he was elected by his people.

Haiti's Caribbean neighbour, Jamaica, also said it would not recognise Mr Latortue's authority, at least until after a regional summit of the Caribbean Community (Caricom) scheduled for next week.

The moves have threatened to create new rifts between the countries and the US, which criticised Jamaica's sheltering of Mr Aristide.

None of the 13 cabinet members appointed by Mr Latortue has direct affiliations with any political party.

The list includes a retired head of the Haitian army, an economist who once worked for the United Nations, and former civil servants.

Haiti's new government has been designed, said Mr Latortue, to establish the foundations of democracy.

But his predecessor, Yvon Neptune, lambasted the absence of members of the former administration, saying it risked further polarising the country.

Mr Latortue defended his position in an interview with Reuters news agency.

"Had there been an organisation that sponsored a Lavalas member, I would have been happy. But there weren't any," he said.

Moroccan group behind Madrid attacks: Report

REUTERS, Madrid

Spanish investigators suspect a militant Moroccan group linked to al Qaeda was behind the Madrid train bombings that killed 201 people, El Pais newspaper reported yesterday.

Other reports said the attacks on four commuter trains were meticulously planned over up to 20 days and that police were hunting for 20 Moroccans, who may also be linked to the Casablanca bombings of last year.

El Pais said police believed those who carried out the attack were linked to the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, which it

said is financed by al Qaeda.

The United States added the militant Islamist organization last April to its list of "terrorist groups." It said it emerged in the late 1990s and had members trained in Afghanistan.

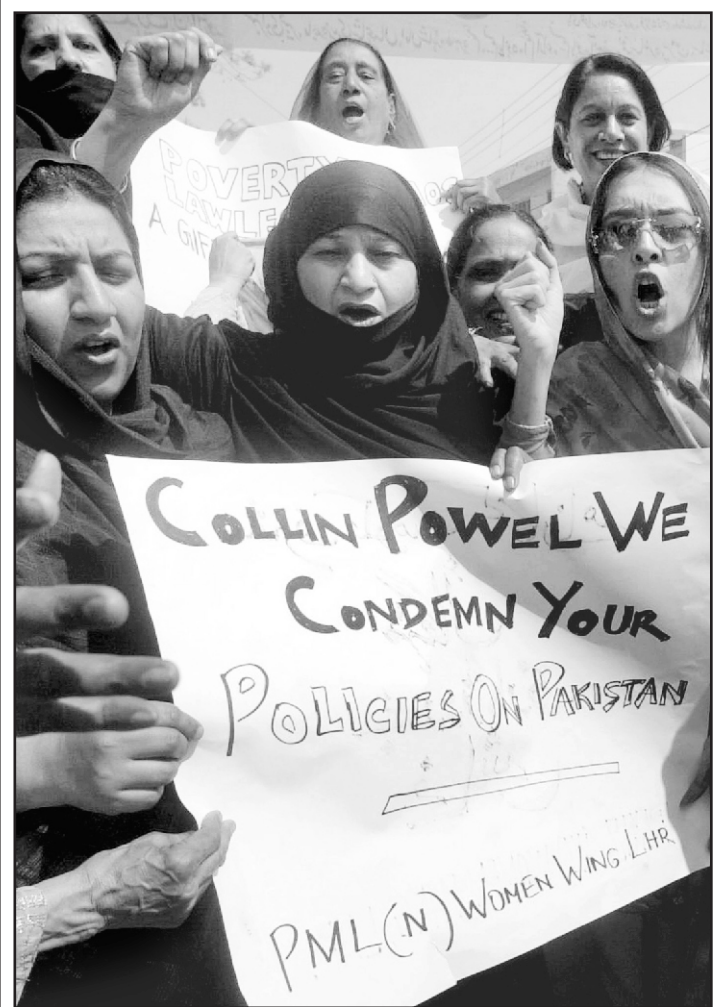
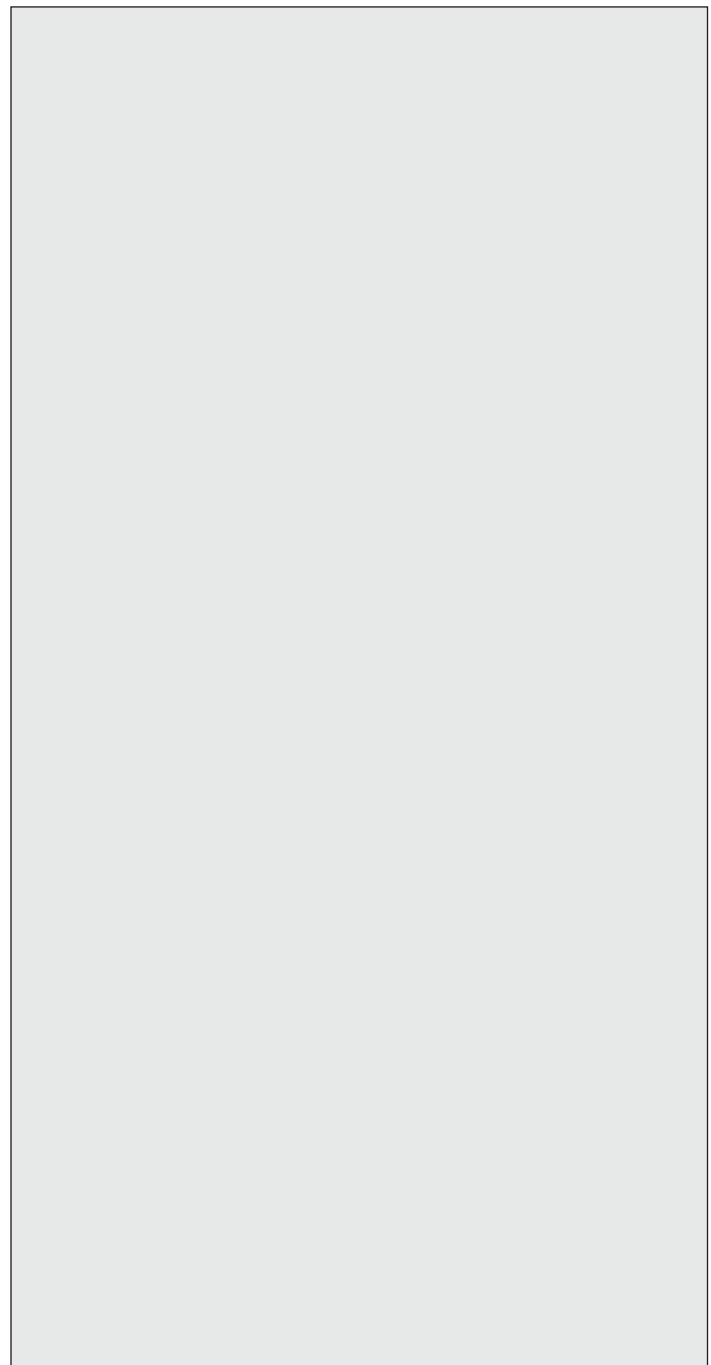
El Mundo newspaper, quoting police sources, said police were hunting for 20 Moroccan citizens in connection with the Madrid attacks. It said the same people were also suspected by Morocco of having participated in bombings in Casablanca last May which killed 45 people, including 12 suicide bombers.

The Madrid bombers spent 15 to 20 days studying train timetables

and the stations where to get on and off the trains, La Vanguardia reported. It said two groups of three bombers each placed the explosives that ripped apart four trains.

Spanish media had previously reported that police were still looking for five Moroccan men, part of a group of eight main suspects in Spain's worst attack. Three Moroccan suspects have already been detained.

As a traumatized Spain hunted its attackers and buried its dead, the United States urged friends and allies not to waver in the face of fears they too may be targets for more brutal attacks.



Female activists of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) shout anti-US slogans during a demonstration in Lahore, yesterday, a day ahead of US Secretary of State Colin Powell's visit to Pakistan. Powell praised Pakistan for its latest raid against Al-Qaeda and Taliban fugitives hiding along its rugged northwest border with Afghanistan, which have resulted in the loss of 15 troops and the killing of some 24 foreign and local militants.

WAR ON TERROR Asian allies step up security measures

AFP, Sydney

Asian allies in the US-led war on terror sounded the alarm yesterday as fears of a follow-up to last week's bombings in Spain prompted several governments to raise alerts against possible Al-Qaeda attack.

Australia, Japan and South Korea, who like Spain all have troops stationed in Iraq, pledged increases in security in the wake of the Madrid blasts, which left 201 people dead and have been blamed on Islamic extremists.

However, none of the three countries suggested withdrawing from Iraq despite a plan by Spain's newly-elected socialists to pull out 1,300 troops after Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar suffered an election defeat linked to the attacks.

Australia announced a funding boost for frontline intelligence bodies to the tune of 300 million dollars in addition to launching a major counter-terror exercise to test defences against chemical and biological strike.

Prime Minister John Howard said the increased funding, to be included in the May budget, would take total expenditure on national security to almost three billion dollars since the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001.

Some 88 Australian citizens were among the 202 killed in the October 2002 bomb attacks on the

Indonesian resort island of Bali, blamed on the Al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah regional terror group.

In South Korea, acting President Goh Kun put the country on high alert, identifying the nation as a potential target for terrorists because it plans to deploy a further 3,000 troops for rehabilitation work in Iraq next month.

"Those countries which have their troops stationed in Iraq have become main targets for terrorist attacks," spokesman Kim Duck-Bong quoted Goh as saying.

"South Korea, in some respects, is a country that should be on a high state of alert against terrorism."

Goh called for thorough preparations to ensure the safety of the troops and additional measures to prevent attacks on public facilities in South Korea, such as a new high-speed railway that will go into service in April.

Meanwhile, Japanese police said they would double the number of officers deployed at major railway stations in Tokyo as part of measures to boost security following the Madrid bombings.

Fears of terrorist attacks are looming large in Japan, in the process of deploying 600 troops to Iraq, after a statement attributed to Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the Madrid bombings which named Japan as a potential target.