

Vajpayee calls for AIDS-like campaign to combat TB

AFP, New Delhi

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said yesterday that India, which has the most tuberculosis cases in the world, needed a TB awareness drive like the one in place against AIDS.

"It seems to me that mass awareness campaigns about tuberculosis are not commensurate with the threat it poses," Vajpayee told a New Delhi conference on tuberculosis.

"In recent years people's awareness about HIV/AIDS has increased significantly and we need a similar approach in the case of TB," he said.

"Even today not all TB patients know it is completely curable."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has estimated that 4.5 million Indians have tuberculosis. It has more TB cases than any country in the world, the WHO's Global Tuberculosis Report has said.

India accounts for 30 percent of the world's tuberculosis patients, according to a report by a private anti-TB alliance released Tuesday.

US overseer sets goals for Iraq power transfer

Rocket hits Baghdad hotel, new clashes in Fallujah

AFP, Baghdad

US civil administrator Paul Bremer delivered Wednesday a televised address to the Iraqi people laying out the goals of his US-led coalition less than 100 days before a hand-over of sovereignty.

"Much remains to be done in the next 100 days but today we should take heart for what has already been accomplished," Bremer said. "What a difference a year can make in the lives of Iraqi people."

Bremer said he planned to set up a defence ministry at cabinet level later this week and pledged to address the security concerns of many Iraqis as well as fight corruption.

In his speech, in front of Iraqi officials, Bremer listed the economic, political and social achieve-

ments since May and praised the recently-signed interim constitution, which will see Iraq through elections and into next year.

He referred repeatedly to the contrast in Iraq compared to when former president Saddam Hussein was in power.

Meanwhile, a rocket slammed into a major Baghdad hotel yesterday in a new targeted attack calculated to add chaos to the already complex process of returning sovereignty to the Iraqis at the end of June.

In the restive town of Fallujah, at least three Iraqis were killed and several people injured, among them two US soldiers, in a series of incidents overnight and into Wednesday morning.

The violence comes as the US civilian administrator, Paul Bremer, was due to deliver a major

address to Iraqi officials to mark the start of the last 100 days until sovereignty is returned to the Iraqi people.

The rocket in Baghdad caused no injuries when it hit the sixth floor of the heavily-fortified Sheraton hotel at just after 4:00 am (0100 GMT), but it shook awake guests and sent panic through the area.

Normally darkened like the neighbouring Palestine Hotel at that hour, most lights were on at the Sheraton, which is popular with Western contractors and the media, and lifts could be seen busily shutting up and down.

In Fallujah, three Iraqis were killed and five people wounded, including two soldiers, overnight when the soldiers came under attack, civilian and military officials said.

US missions in UAE shut on 'specific threat'

AFP, Dubai

The US embassy in the Emirati capital and its consulate in Dubai closed yesterday after a "specific threat" to the embassy, following Israel's killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the mission announced.

"The embassy in Abu Dhabi and consulate in Dubai have temporarily suspended operations for Wednesday March 24 in light of a specific threat to the embassy in Abu Dhabi," it said in an official statement.

"The embassy and consulate will be assessing their security posture on the Thursday-Friday weekend with regard to the re-opening Saturday."

"We have no specific threat information against the American community in the United Arab Emirates however the Department of State has issued a new worldwide caution and a new Middle and North Africa public announcement in light of the killing of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin."



PHOTO: AFP

Relatives of the victims of the 11 March bomb attacks in Madrid sit as they wait for the start of the memorial mass at Madrid's Almudena cathedral yesterday.

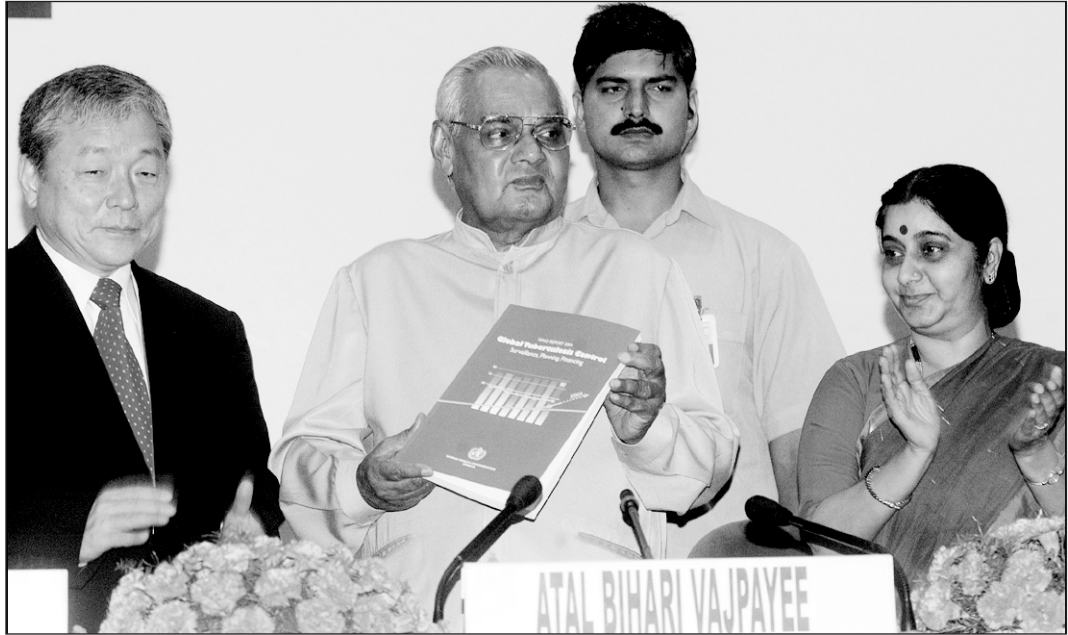


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (2-L) holds a copy of a report on Tuberculosis as Indian Health Minister Shushma Swaraj (R) and Director General of the World Health Organisation (WHO), Dr. J.W. Lee (L) look on during the inauguration of the second meeting of the Stop-TB Partners forum on World Tuberculosis Day in New Delhi yesterday.

UNSC on collision course over Hamas killing

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council was on a collision course Tuesday after the United States and the Palestinians vowed no compromise over Israel's assassination of a militant Islamist leader.

Capping two days of fractious talks, the council adjourned in deadlock as the United States insisted it would not accept condemning the killing of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin without reference to Hamas, the militant group he founded.

But the Palestinians, represented by lone Arab council member Algeria, said they would not agree to any resolution that mentioned Yassin's Hamas group, which has claimed scores of deadly attacks on Israel in the past three years.

"He preached hatred and glori-

fied suicide bombings," said the US ambassador to the United Nations, John Negroponte.

"Yassin was opposed to the existence of the state of Israel and actively sought to undermine a two-state solution" in the Middle East, Negropontesaid.

"This Security Council should not, and the United States will not, support initiatives which ignore this reality."

Israel killed Yassin, the wheelchair-bound cleric who founded the radical Islamist group, in a helicopter strike in the Gaza Strip on Monday, drawing condemnation from leaders around the globe.

Algeria forced an open debate at the council on Tuesday after Negroponte blocked a council statement that would have condemned the killing without reference to Hamas's history of attacks on Israel.

The Palestinian representative to the United Nations, Nasser al-Kidwa, denied that he was trying to paint the United States into a corner by forcing a veto on a council resolution about Yassin's assassination.

"A veto has never been our goal and it isn't our goal now," he told reporters after a four-hour session of the council ended in stalemate.

"Our goal is to have action taken by the Security Council now in the right way," he said. But he ruled out Negroponte's call to blame Hamas, saying: "We can't accept any mentioning of any Palestinian group by name."

Nine votes are needed on the 15-nation Security Council to pass a resolution although the five permanent members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- have veto power over all council resolutions.

India says no to US 'non-Nato ally offer'

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

There was no return to the Indo-US bonhomie of a week ago, and the government in effect said no Wednesday to the American offer to give India 'major non-Nato ally' (MNNA) status, saying the offer had not been considered.

Continuing to express displeasure against the US for keeping it in the dark about Pakistan's special MNNA status, the external affairs ministry spokesman said, "we have not given any consideration to that kind of relationship with the United States."

A call had been made by the US

Secretary of State, General Colin Powell, to the external affairs minister, Yashwant Sinha, over the weekend, to make amends, and during their conversation, the spokesman said, "Secretary Powell referred to the way in which

the US announcement about designating Pakistan as a major non-Nato Ally had emerged, and said that their intention had not been to spring a surprise on India."

Powell had been trying to call Sinha ever since the announcement was made in Pakistan, but could not reach the minister who was campaigning in his constituency.

'Early strikes wouldn't have prevented Sept 11'

REUTERS, Washington

Even if the United States had killed or captured al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, it would not have prevented the hijacked plane attacks on America, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on Tuesday.

He and other top officials of the Bush and Clinton administrations told the national commission investigating the Sept. 11 attacks that eliminating bin Laden, invading Afghanistan or bombing al-Qaeda training camps in the months leading up to the attacks would not have prevented them.

"Even if bin Laden had been captured or killed in the weeks before 9/11, no one I know believes it would have prevented 9/11," Rumsfeld told the commission at a hearing.

The plot had already been set in motion and the attacks on New York and Washington that killed about 3,000 people would have been seen as retaliation for any US strikes, the officials said.

Rumsfeld and his predecessor William Cohen as well as Secretary of State Colin Powell and his predecessor Madeleine Albright, were questioned about why they had not taken more aggressive action against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan before Sept. 11.



PHOTO: AFP

A British soldier secures an area near the burning oil export pipeline from the southern city of Basra, 500km from Baghdad, to the Faw peninsula on the Gulf yesterday in the Maamer zone 100km further south of Basra. A spokesman for the governorate of Basra said a technical problem caused the blaze. Basra is headquarters to some 8,800 British troops who have occupied the south of Iraq since last year's invasion, which toppled president Saddam Hussein.

Lebanese-Israeli border tense

AFP, Beirut

Israel's killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin has reignited tension along the Lebanese-Israeli frontier, with two operations by Hezbollah and a pro-Syrian Palestinian group against Israel in the past 48 hours.

UN officials in south Lebanon fear that the deteriorating situation there could escalate dangerously at a time when regional tensions over the cleric's assassination on Monday are already high.

Two members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), who were on an operation against Israel, were killed and a third wounded, according to the latest toll, in an attack by Israeli helicopter gunships.

In a statement on Wednesday, the front said: "One of our commandos on Tuesday night fired several salvos of rockets against northern Israel... and while the operation was under way, Israeli aircraft led an attack which killed two of our members." The group

said the rockets were launched "in response to the assassination of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin", and vowed to "pursue its resistance actions against Israel".

Israel killed Yassin in a helicopter raid as he left a mosque in Gaza City after dawn prayers.

Just hours later, in the first ripost to his death, the Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah bombarded Israeli positions in the disputed Shebaa Farms area, claimed by Lebanon with Syria's consent.

One of those opportunities came in February 1999 when intelligence reports pinpointed bin Laden near a hunting camp in the Helmand province of Afghanistan used by visitors from the United Arab Emirates.

Clinton, reminded the commission that when that administration bombed a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan in 1998 that it believed might help bin Laden acquire chemical weapons, it met a lot of public criticism that it was a mistake. He said he would do it again.

Cohen, who was defense secretary under President Clinton, said bin Laden had issued a "fatwa" or religious decree to have him killed. "I was put on a list, there was a price tag, there were several attempts, that I don't want to go into details about, going after me," he said.

Bin Laden has managed to elude US forces and those of its allies, who have been hunting him for years.

Rumsfeld said before the attacks he knew of no intelligence that al-Qaeda was planning to hijack planes and crash them into buildings in the United States.

Powell told the hearing: "Most of us still thought that the principal threat was outside the country."

Anything we might have done against al-Qaeda in this period or against Osama bin Laden may or may not have had any influence on these people who were already in this country, already had their instructions, were already burrowed in and were getting ready to commit the crimes that we saw on 9/11."

Albright said she and other officials would have been prepared to kill bin Laden from the time of the 1998 US Embassy bombings in Africa until the day Clinton left office.

The testimony followed a weekend bombshell by Richard Clarke, a former counterterrorism official under both Bush and Clinton, who said the Bush administration did not take the al-Qaeda threat seriously before the attacks and then focused immediately on trying to link the strikes to Iraq. No definitive proof of such an Iraqi link has ever emerged.

Clarke and CIA Director George Tenet will testify before the commission on Wednesday.

National security has become a prominent political issue leading up to the November presidential elections. Democrats accuse Bush of giving the terrorists threat too little weight and focusing too much on Iraq. Republicans say the Clinton administration did too little to combat al-Qaeda.

China throws out US plan to fingerprint its citizens

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday rejected plans by the United States to fingerprint its citizens applying for non-immigrant visas, calling it a discriminatory move that infringed on human rights.

"This measure has caused strong dissatisfaction among the Chinese people and in different social circles," the foreign ministry said on its website, a day after it called off its human rights dialogue with the US.

Beijing suspended the dialogue after Washington announced it would propose a resolution to condemn China for rights abuses at the ongoing annual meeting of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva.

The foreign ministry statement said China had made "solemn representations" to the United States through diplomatic channels on the fingerprinting issue.

"They pointed out that this measure is discrimination against Chinese citizens. It has harmed the Chinese citizen's dignity and right to privacy. It is a method that infringes on their human rights," it said.

The US embassy in Beijing began on Monday collecting fingerprints as biometric identifiers for non-immigrant visa applicants.