



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis dance on a wrecked car attacked yesterday in the flashpoint town of Fallujah, west of Baghdad. At least seven, including five American soldiers were killed when gunmen opened fire on two four-wheel-drive vehicles in Fallujah, police said. A crowd then set the vehicles ablaze and hurled stones into the burning wreckage.

Israeli soldiers remove West Bank outpost

Ahmed Qorei issues toughest rejection of suicide bombings

REUTERS, Hebron

Israeli soldiers dismantled a Jewish outpost near the West Bank city of Hebron yesterday, the first of a handful slated for removal ahead of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's visit to Washington.

The removal of unauthorized outposts -- some uninhabited -- is one of Israel's commitments under a U.S.-backed "road map" for peace with the Palestinians that has been stalled by violence and the failure of both sides to take promised steps.

The Hazon David outpost was dismantled after the Supreme Court lifted an injunction to prevent its removal.

"In accordance with the decision by the political level, Israeli military forces this morning completed the

dismantling of the uninhabited outpost of Hazon David," the army said in a statement.

Soldiers arrived overnight to avoid clashes with settlers from the nearby Kiryat Arba settlement, who scuffled with them on Tuesday.

Sharon is due to visit Washington in mid-April, seeking approval for unilateral Israeli steps that would mean a pull out from the Gaza Strip. Palestinians would welcome any withdrawal but fear that Israel wants to strengthen its hold on parts of the West Bank where they also want a state.

Meanwhile AFP from Ramallah reported that Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei yesterday blamed Wednesday the lack of progress in his government's program since he took office on wors-

ening security and economic conditions.

"The situation has remained the same since the government was formed. The (Israeli) siege, the aggression continue. The economic situation is deteriorating, the internal security situation is ... getting worse," he told the Palestinian parliament in a speech defending his government's performance.

Qorei also slammed the international community and especially the United States for its "blatant bias" towards Israel.

"All this is happening with the international community's complicity and the United States' blatant bias," he said.

Man blows himself up in Bolivia Congress

AP, La Paz

An angry miner with dynamite strapped to his chest blew himself up in Bolivia's congress Tuesday, killing two police officers and wounding 10 others, authorities said.

La Paz Police Chief Guido Arandia said the suicide bomber whose demand for early retirement benefits underscored the grievances of many low-paid miners in Bolivia stormed into congress around midday and went to a part of the building away from the congressional chambers.

The miner detonated his vest laced with at least five sticks of dynamite as congressional security police tried to negotiate. Arandia said he killed himself and fatally wounded Col. Marbel Flores, head of the congressional security police, and an officer.

"The problem for us is too huge to be able to face or challenge alone," he told hundreds of ministers and officials from more than 60 countries. "We require the international community to help us enforce the plan that we have."

White House U-turn on 9/11 probe

US national security advisor Condoleezza Rice to testify

AFP, Washington

The White House reversed course under mounting pressure and allowed Condoleezza Rice, President George W. Bush's national security advisor, to give sworn public testimony to the commission looking into the September 11 attacks.

Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney have also agreed to appear in a private meeting before all 10 members of the commission, instead of just the chairman and vice chairman.

"This commission has been charged with a crucial task. To prevent future attacks, we must understand the methods of our enemies. The terrorist threat being examined by the commission is still present, still urgent, and still demands our full attention," Bush

said.

Because of the "exceptional nature" of the inquiry, "we have given commission members access to relevant presidential daily briefings, to my communications with foreign leaders, and to internal White House communications.

Bush added: "I've ordered this level of cooperation because I consider it necessary to gain a complete picture of the months and years that preceded the murder of our fellow citizens on September 11, 2001."

The September 11 panel welcomed the surprise White House turnaround.

"We look forward to the commission's meeting with the president and the vice president and the public testimony of Dr Rice," said Commission chairman Thomas Kean, a Republican former governor of New Jersey.

Kean said the commission earlier got "some very good testimony" from Rice in a private session that he described as "candid," "factual" and "to the point."

"My hope is that she will replicate that testimony in public as well," Kean said, but also explore the differences "between the witnesses" -- a reference to testimony by former White House anti-terror czar Richard Clarke, who told the panel last week that Bush had not paid enough attention to the al-Qaeda threat.

The White House had previously said that Rice, 49, would not appear publicly before the independent bipartisan commission, citing separation of the executive and legislative branches of government.

Statue of Liberty to reopen

REUTERS, New York

The Statue of Liberty, America's "icon of freedom," is expected to reopen to visitors this summer for the first time since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks following extensive security and safety improvements, officials said on Tuesday.

More than \$30 million will have been spent on improvements by the end of the year, according to a joint announcement by the U.S. Interior Department, the National Park Service and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton said it would take about four months to complete the work and allow visitors inside the statue's pedestal, which houses a museum and observation deck, for the first time in nearly three years.

"After Sept. 11, we were compelled to take a hard, overall look at the security of the nation's icon of freedom," said Norton. "We had to reassess what it means to provide an appropriate level of safety and emergency services for our visitors, especially at a location that is an attractive terrorist target."



PHOTO: AFP

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Afghan President Hamid Karzai pose for pictures yesterday in Berlin, where representatives from more than 60 countries attend the opening of the international conference aimed at stepping up the pace of reconstruction in war-ravaged Afghanistan.

UK police probe 'bomb plot'

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Anti-terrorism officers are continuing to question eight men as they investigate an alleged bomb plot. The arrests in south-east England came as detectives seized half a ton of fertiliser, of a type used as explosive in the Bali and Istanbul bombings.

The suspects are thought to be at Paddington Green's high-security police station in London, and could be held up to a fortnight under anti-terror laws.

Aged from 17 to 32, the men are thought to be UK citizens of Pakistani descent.

About 700 officers from five forces carried out searches at 24 addresses early on Tuesday morning, following weeks of surveillance.

Ammonium nitrate, the fertiliser seized from the lock-up in Boston Road, Hanwell, west London, can be mixed with other chemicals to create a powerful explosive.

BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner said the raids followed the infiltration of alleged extremist Islamist groups.

He said sources had told him the alleged targets of any bombing were not military or government-related but members of the public.

Our correspondent said police believed they had traced the source of the ammonium nitrate but had not

revealed the details.

He described a mood of "restrained jubilation" among security services who believed they had stopped a plot at an early stage.

Head of Scotland Yard's terrorist branch Peter Clarke said warrants were issued under the Terrorism Act 2000.

The men are being questioned on suspicion of being involved in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism.

Surrey Police said the 18-year-old man arrested in Horley had been found at a Holiday Inn hotel near Gatwick Airport.

There were also raids at houses and businesses in Colindale, north London, Luton and Reading.

Mr Clarke, who is national coordinator of terrorist investigations, said premises were still being searched by forensics teams.

He assured the Muslim community the police knew the "overwhelming majority are law abiding and completely reject all forms of violence".

"We have a responsibility to all communities to investigate suspected terrorist activity," he said.

He said the operation was not linked to the bombs in Madrid and there had been no danger to the public.

UNSC ready to approve oil, food probe in Iraq

REUTERS, United Nations

Security Council members, except Russia, were ready to welcome a United Nations investigation into allegations of corruption in the now defunct Iraq oil-for-food program, diplomats said.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan notified council members last week he was setting up an independent panel to probe any wrongdoing by UN officials running the program, but needed backing from member states to investigate companies around the world.

Most council members wanted to welcome the probe but diplomats said Russia, whose companies among those of other nations that had dealings with Iraq, only wanted to "note" Annan's intention to pursue a full-scale investigation.

In contrast France went out of its way last week to embrace the

investigation and offer its cooperation. France's UN ambassador, Jean-Marc de la Sabliere, issued a statement saying it was important to get "right to the bottom of possible wrongdoing or illicit activities from UN staff as well as contracting entities."

Annan is investigating the UN-run program that began in late 1996 and ended last year. Some \$65 billion passed through the program, which monitored Iraqi oil sales and purchases of civilian goods. It was aimed at easing the impact on ordinary Iraqis of harsh economic sanctions imposed after the 1991 Gulf War.

The US General Accounting Office, an interagency body headed by the Treasury Department, says Iraqi elites raised \$4.4 billion by imposing illegal surcharges.