

Queen appeals to set aside row over Iraq

AFP, Paris

Queen Elizabeth II on Monday urged France and Britain to put aside their differences, in an apparent reference to the US-British war on Iraq, at the start of a state visit to France to mark the centenary of the Entente Cordial.

"We cannot allow current political tensions, whatever the feelings they create on one side or the other, divide us over the long term," she said in a speech -- delivered in French -- at a banquet hosted by President Jacques Chirac in her honour.

"We know that neither our two great nations, nor Europe, nor the Atlantic alliance, can allow themselves to be shaken apart or to have disputes in the face of the threats which confront all of us and our safety and our prosperity," she said.

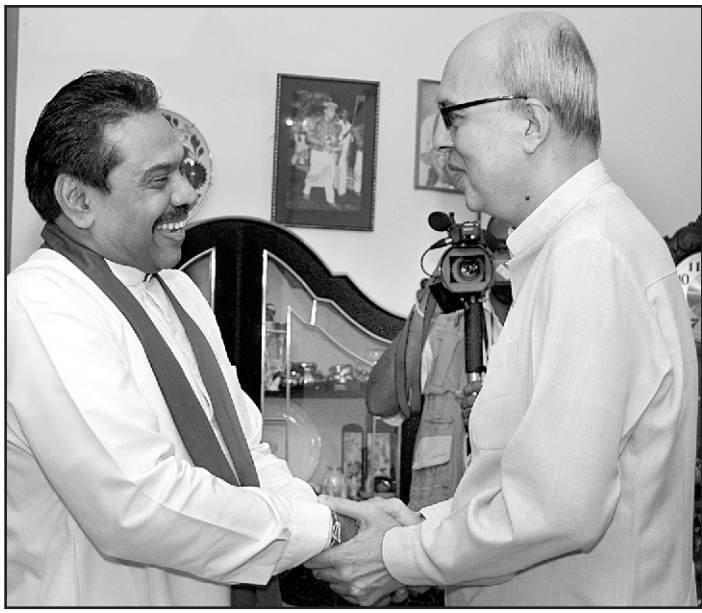


PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lanka's new Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse (L) receives India's High Commissioner Nirupam Sen in Colombo yesterday. Rajapakse, sworn in following elections held April 2, that returned a hung parliament, has vowed to push ahead with peace efforts of his predecessor, Ranil Wickremesinghe, with the greater involvement of neighbouring India.

Bush is losing support on Iraq: Poll

AP, Washington

Public approval of President Bush's handling of Iraq has slipped to a new low alongside his overall job rating after last week's grisly deaths of four contractors in Fallujah, a poll says.

Still, a majority supports his decision to use military force in Iraq, says the poll released Monday. Four in 10, or 40 percent, approve of the way Bush is handling Iraq, while 53 percent disapprove. That's down from six in 10 who approved in mid-January, according to the poll by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press.

Bush's overall job approval is at 43 percent, a low point for his presidency, down from 56 percent in mid-January. In the new poll, 47 percent disapproved of Bush's job performance. Bush's job approval soared to 90 percent after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and remained in the 70s for almost a year after that.

US mulls sending more troops to Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

The US military has begun considering possible reinforcements in Iraq, as the US-led coalition announced that radical Shia leader Moqtada Sadr, blamed for inciting violence last weekend, is wanted for murder.

More than 50 people have been killed in fighting with Sadr supporters known as the Mehdi Army militia, mainly in southern Iraq.

In central Iraq, US Marines on Monday launched a long-awaited offensive against the Sunni Muslim insurgency in the town of Fallujah, a hotbed of support of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

One Marine was killed as his comrades kicked off Operation Vigilant Resolve to hunt down the insurgents that slaughtered four US contractors in Fallujah last week.

Marines slapped an 11-hour night curfew on the city as patrols blared messages telling people not to leave their homes.

And yet another threat -- Jordanian Mussab al-Zarqawi, the alleged leader of a network linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda and believed responsible for several terror attacks in Iraq -- threatened US-led forces in a recording broadcast Monday on a radical Islamist website.

In the message said to have originated from inside Iraq, Zarqawi claimed that his "heroic Mujahedin have killed more than 200 soldiers from the coalition of the crusaders."

But the Marine operation and Zarqawi's alleged threats were overshadowed by the running battle with Sadr's radical Shia followers.

Iraq's majority Shias initially welcomed US-led coalition forces after decades of vicious rule by Saddam's Sunni-dominated regime.

The wave of Shia radical violence has now raised serious alarm for coalition troops, already burdened by a Sunni insurgency. A full revolt among the country's 15 million-plus

Shias would spell disaster.

A coalition spokesman revealed Monday an arrest warrant against Sadr for the murder of a rival cleric, Abdel Majid al-Khoei, last April, days after the fall of Saddam.

Sadr is currently barricaded in a mosque in the Shia shrine city of Kufa, and his aides vowed that he would never be captured.

The coalition's deputy director of operations, Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, promised Sadr would be treated with respect if he surrendered, despite the deaths of one Salvadoran and eight US soldiers in clashes with his illegal Mehdi Army militia Sunday.

Arafat wants Hamas' entry into PA

AFP, Berlin

Veteran Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat wants the militant group Hamas to be integrated into the political structure of the Palestinian Authority, he said in an interview published in Germany Monday.

"They (Hamas) were there from the beginning, even if they did later break away," Arafat said in a German translation of remarks to the weekly news magazine Focus.

"My policy has always been dialogue ... and I wanted to send three people to the Arab League summit as representatives for the Palestinians, including a Hamas representative," he said.

On March 29, Tunisia took the unprecedented decision to call off the summit it was to have hosted after Arab foreign ministers failed to agree on proposals it deemed

essential for political reform in the Middle East.

Arafat also said pointed out that there is "a big difference" between the late spiritual leader of Hamas, Shiekh Ahmad Yassin, who he described as a moderate who wanted peace, and his successor Abdelaziz al-Rantissi.

Yassin, the founder of the radical Palestinian group, was killed by an Israeli air strike on March 22 as he was leaving a mosque in Gaza City.

"Anyway, what counts today is that contact is made with Hamas leaders," Arafat said, underlining that Rantissi is "only in charge in the Gaza Strip."

Rantissi, who was named as Yassin's successor on March 24, has described US President George W. Bush as an enemy of Muslims but has sought to allay fears that US targets could be attacked.

Terror attack thwarted in Frankfurt

AFP, Berlin

An extremist attack on Germany's financial capital Frankfurt was thwarted recently when police arrested an armed man as he was about to enter a discotheque in the city, according to a German television programme broadcast Monday.

The program FAKT, broadcast on the public channel ARD, said the man was carrying a gun and two metallic tubes containing explosives, pieces of metal and nails when he was stopped.

According to the programme the 35-year-old suspect was known to be violent and was considered by those who knew him to be an Islamic militant fanatic.

A photo of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and a letter announcing his conversion to Islam were found at his apartment.

Advani eyes deal on temple-mosque row

AFP, Ayodhya

India's deputy prime minister said yesterday agreement was in sight on resolving one of India's most explosive religious disputes over construction of a Hindu temple on the ruins of a razed mosque.

Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani, on a cross-country campaign trek for national elections due this month, said in the northern temple-studded town of Ayodhya where the destroyed 16th-century mosque is located "some quiet progress" had already been made in settling the row.

He said he was confident agreement could be reached soon between Hindu and Muslim leaders to decide the future of the site where Hindu zealots destroyed in 1992 the Babri Mosque, triggering nationwide riots in which at least 2,000 people, mainly Muslims, died.

Many Hindus believe the mosque was built atop the birthplace, long before recorded time, of the god-king Ram and want a new temple built in its place to honour him. They say a temple originally stood on the mosque site.

The dispute has become a major flashpoint between India's majority Hindu and minority Muslim communities.

"A negotiated settlement will be the most desirable to resolve the Ayodhya issue," said Advani, 76, who was present on the day when a frenzied Hindu mob demolished the mosque and was only recently cleared of conspiracy charges.

"We've already made some quiet progress and we will be able to reach an agreement involving Hindu and Muslim representatives shortly after a new government is in place," he told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP
India's Prime Minister and leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Atal Bihari Vajpayee (R) waves to crowd as he stands alongside Lok Sabha BJP candidate, Dr. Bhupen Hazarika at an election rally in Guwahati yesterday. Vajpayee's consensus-building talents are seen as the key factor that will propel his Hindu nationalist-led alliance back into power in India's forthcoming national elections which will be held in five stages from April 20.

US lacked info to prevent Sept 11, says Bush

AP, Washington

President Bush said Monday he will tell the commission investigating the Sept. 11 attacks that his administration lacked the information needed to prevent the terrorists from striking.

The federal panel reviewing the attacks plans to meet soon with Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney in a joint private session to determine whether anything could have been done to stop the attacks.

A date for the meeting has been set but neither the commission nor the White House has disclosed it. Bush said he looks forward to "sharing information with them."

"Let me just be very clear about this," he said. "Had we had the information that was necessary to

stop an attack, I'd have stopped the attack. ... If we'd have known that the enemy was going to fly airplanes into our buildings, we would have done everything in our power to stop it."

After the attacks, "this country immediately went on war footing and we went to war against al-Qaeda. And we're going to keep after them until they are brought to justice and America is secure," Bush told reporters while on a trip to North Carolina.

Bush also said National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice "knows exactly what took place and will lay out the facts" when she testifies Thursday before the 10-member bipartisan panel. "I'm looking forward to people hearing her," he said.

Rice's testimony was assured

only after Bush changed course last week under pressure and decided to allow her to appear publicly and under oath. She met privately with the commission in February.

The Bush administration had been uneasy that allowing a top aide to testify could set a precedent of summoning top aides before a congressional panel to provide sworn testimony. Such a move would inhibit the willingness of aides to provide the president with candid advice.

Commission spokesman Al Felzenberg said Monday the decision to let Rice testify might have been influenced by a 1945 photo the panel sent to the White House showing a top presidential aide appearing before a congressional panel to discuss policy advice.

Lithuanian president impeached

REUTERS, Vilnius

Lithuania's parliament voted President Rolandas Paksas out of office yesterday for his links with Russian business and intelligence, making him the first European leader to be removed through impeachment.

The Baltic News Service, a local agency, said two-thirds of the assembly found the former Soviet stunt pilot guilty on all three counts -- granting citizenship to a Russian businessman in return for campaign funding, breaching official secrets and influencing the outcome of a privatization.

The scandal has embarrassed the country of 3.6 million people, which won independence from the crumbling Soviet Union in 1991, as it returns to the European main-

stream. It joined Nato last week and enters the European Union in May with a booming economy.

Lithuania's security chief and parliamentary panels accused Paksas' advisers of links to Russian mobsters, raising fears the latter would use Lithuania to gain access to the enlarged EU.

Those charges were dropped to avoid jeopardizing security agents and the case centered on businessman Yuri Borisov, who financed Paksas' election campaign and hired him a public relations company alleged to have links to Russian intelligence.

In return Paksas granted him Lithuanian citizenship, warned him he was under surveillance by Lithuanian police for alleged blackmail, and finally tried last month to appoint Borisov his adviser -- although Borisov does not speak Lithuanian.

Indian parties demand ban on opinion poll

AFP, New Delhi

Indian parties joined ranks yesterday to demand a blanket ban on opinion surveys and exit polls ahead of national elections as they had the potential to sway the vote, officials said.

The request was made as political leaders from six national and 45 regional parties met with India's autonomous Election Commission for talks on election practices for the national polls that begin April 20 and end May 10.

"There was a unanimous demand by all political parties (for a) ban on opinion polls from the first day of (election) notification," said Kapil

Sibal, spokesman for the main opposition Congress party.

"These are not opinion polls but opinion-making polls," Sibal said. "There was total consensus on this issue."

Political parties believe exit polls in constituencies that have already voted could influence balloting in regions where the electoral process is yet to begin.

Both exit and opinion polls have proved to be wildly inaccurate in three parliamentary elections conducted in India since 1996.

Commission officials said the poll watchdog was "strongly" in favor of a ban.

At least nine opinion polls con-

ducted by television stations and newspapers since March 27 have put India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ahead of the Congress.

Tuesday's meeting also focused on whether the BJP's use of advertisements attacking the Italian origins of Congress president Sonia Gandhi was in breach of new election laws banning campaigns deemed "slandorous".

The BJP said it was also upset over a commercial that accused Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, 79, of collaborating with the British during colonial rule.

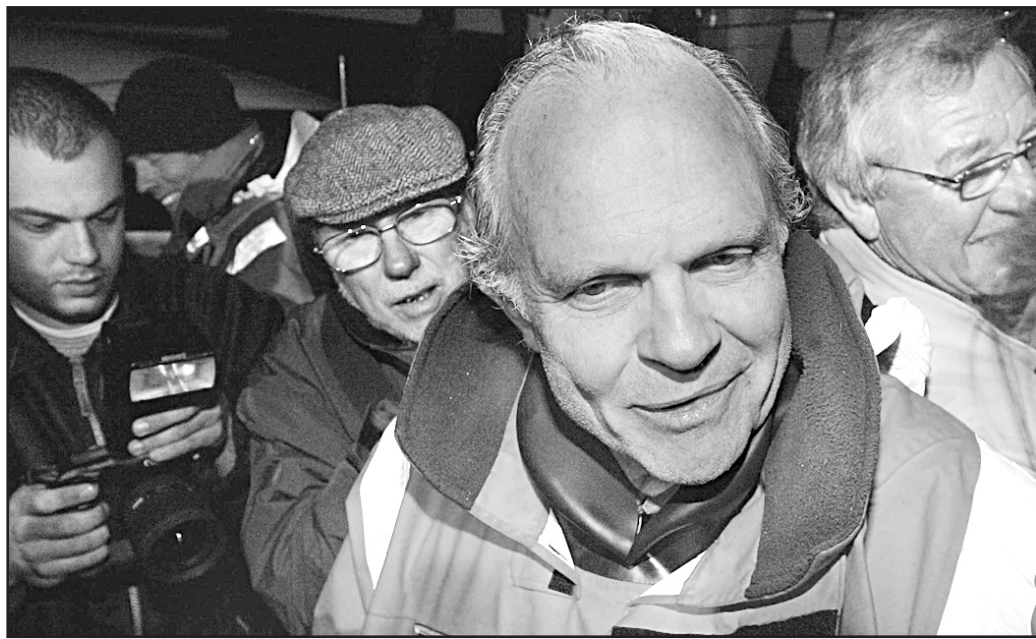


PHOTO: AFP
American Adventurer Steve Fossett (R) answers questions from the media after arriving in Plymouth Monday where he and his 12 person crew became the first sailors ever to circumnavigate the globe in under 60 days, beating the previous record by almost six days.

Round-the-world in just 58 days!

AFP, London

American adventurer Steve Fossett and his crew of 12 became the first sailors ever to circumnavigate the globe in under 60 days on Monday, beating the previous record by almost six days.

Fossett's 125-foot (38-metre) maxi-catamaran Cheyenne crossed the finishing line off Brittany, France, in 58 days, nine hours, 32 minutes and 45 seconds, said John Bee, a spokesman for his Fossett Challenge team.

Fossett's time was five days, 23 hours, four minutes and 39 seconds faster than the Frenchman Bruno Peyron took in his boat Orange in 2002.

The 59-year-old former businessman's time remained subject to

official ratification.

Cheyenne left Plymouth, on the southwest coast of England, on February 7 and reached the Isle of Ouessant to cross an imaginary finish line on Monday at 1443 GMT.

Fossett said the atmosphere on board was euphoric.

"Everyone is just so happy - we are all emotionally drained," he told his team headquarters by satellite phone.

"It's quite a celebration. Everybody on this crew is absolutely delighted, this is a satisfying moment for all of us."

"When we started out I thought the chance was 50-50 that we would get around. Then I wondered that the boat might not be fast enough."

Peyron immediately sent his congratulations to Fossett.

BRITISH NEWSPAPERS WARN

Iraq slipping into chaos

AFP, London

Iraq is in danger of sliding into chaos as US-led forces face increasingly bloody battles against both the Sunni community and the country's previously less hostile Shia Muslims, British newspapers warned yesterday.

"On the brink of anarchy," was the identical front page headlines chosen by the left-leaning Guardian and Independent newspapers, both of which opposed Britain's support for the military intervention in Iraq. Even papers which backed the

conflict carried dire warnings about what might happen following deadly clashes between US troops and supporters of firebrand Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr, who is wanted by coalition forces for murder.

"The spectre of chaos looms large over Iraq," the right-wing Daily Telegraph said in a signed editorial by one of its opinion writers.

"None of these actions even pretends to be concerned with winning hearts or minds," the Guardian said of the US military offensives in an editorial column. Even the business-based

Financial Times, which has taken a far more neutral stance towards the war, stressed that troops and helicopters were not enough alone.

"A purely military response will not get the US out of its hole," it said in its editorial.

The Independent recommended that the June 30 deadline be reconsidered.

"Even without US actions to try and clear the decks in preparation, the deadline was bound to set off a jostling for position among the various factions," it argued.

Iran to cooperate with UN nuclear watchdog

AFP, Tehran

A top Iranian official pledged yesterday the Islamic republic would accelerate its cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog and provide quick answers to quell suspicions Tehran was seeking to develop nuclear weapons.

"Iran and the IAEA want the dossier of Iran to be closed as soon as possible," the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, Gholam Reza Aghazadeh, told reporters after talks with the visiting head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mohamed ElBaradei.

"We have decided to accelerate

the work and to respond to the problems and questions that the agency has," he said.

ElBaradei said Iran appeared to have "agreed on the need to accelerate the progress of our work in resolving all outstanding issues."

"Mr Aghazadeh committed that Iran will do everything possible to accelerate the process in resolving the outstanding issues," he said, adding he had "made it very clear that the agency and the international community is very keen that we resolve all the remaining outstanding issues as early as possible".