

Poland, Ukraine rule out taking part in offensive operations in Iraq

AFP, Warsaw

Poland and the Ukraine, both part of a Warsaw-led multinational stabilisation force in Iraq, ruled out yesterday taking part in offensive operations in the country.

Polish Defence Minister Jerzy Szmajdzinski told a news conference after meeting his Ukrainian counterpart Evhen Marchuk that the 9,000-strong force "is not an offensive force, but a stabilisation force."

"The multinational division has adopted as a principle not to carry out offensive operations, but to limit itself to reacting when its soldiers come under armed attack," he said.

At a joint news conference in Warsaw Marchuk concurred, saying the Ukrainian brigade serving under the Polish-led force "was not set up to engage in combat, but to protect channels of communication and public buildings."

"The sixth Ukrainian brigade in Iraq is carrying out a special mission approved by the supreme authorities in Ukraine," he said.

On Thursday the two countries had indicated that they would main-

tain their troops in Iraq at current levels.

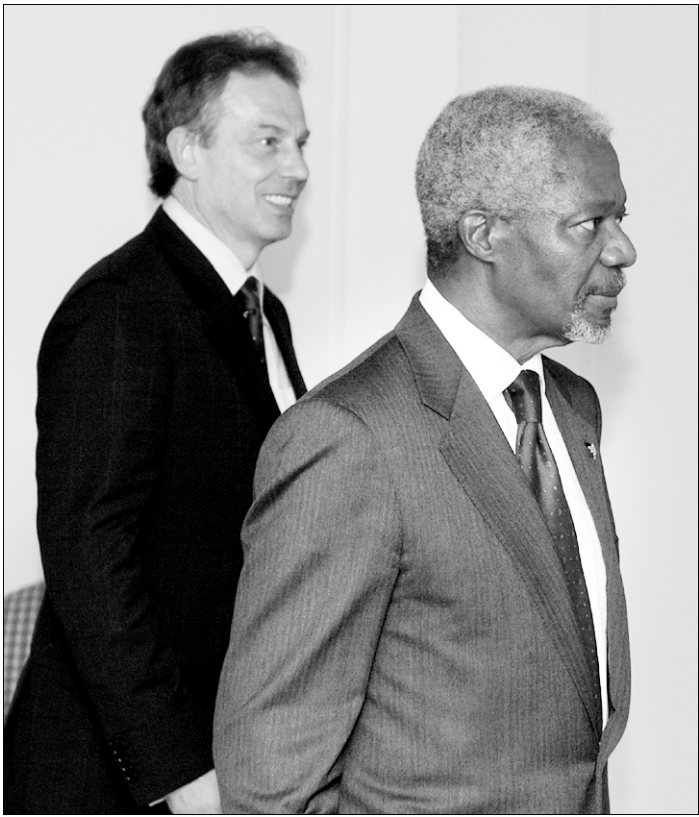
Ukraine has contributed some 1,650 soldiers to the multinational force which is patrolling a large swathe of southern Iraq. Poland has 2,500 of its own soldiers in the force.

Szmajdzinski also told the news conference that NATO defence ministers would hold an informal meeting with their Ukrainian counterpart "probably at the end of May".

"It will be a third informal conference of this kind, covering Ukraine's relations with the alliance, reforms carried out within the Ukrainian armed forces and the transformations being carried out in Ukraine," he added.

Marchuk said Kiev was planning "important changes in its structures and manpower of its army in the coming years."

At the end of March Ukraine, a former Soviet republic that one day hopes to join NATO as it inches away from neighboring Russia, hailed the expansion of the transatlantic alliance as a "key element" for European security.



British Prime Minister Tony Blair (L) and United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (R) leave a press conference where they talked about the situation in Iraq on Thursday after they met at a private residence in New York ahead of a Bush-Blair meet in Washington.

Blair seeks fresh UN resolution on Iraq

UK committed to Iraqi power handover in June: Straw

BBC ONLINE

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has said he is seeking a new United Nations resolution to ensure the handover of power in Iraq on 30 June.

After meeting UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in New York, Blair said there was now a common purpose in the international community over Iraq.

He also denied being disappointed with the US endorsement of Israel's plan for withdrawal from Gaza.

The talks came ahead of Blair's meeting with President George W Bush.

One year after the fall of Saddam Hussein, coalition troops are up against renewed uprisings across the country.

Critics claim the Americans' use of overwhelming firepower to put down such opposition is serving

only to unite the people of Iraq against the occupying forces.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has announced that some 20,000 US troops now serving in Iraq are to have their tours of duty extended.

At a joint news conference in New York with Annan, Blair confirmed that circumstances would require a new UN resolution ahead of the June handover.

He also confirmed that talks were continuing and that he and President Bush were waiting for the UN special envoy in Iraq, Lakhdar Brahimi, to come back with proposals which he has been discussing with the parties and stakeholders on the ground.

"We have to make sure we give Iraqis the opportunity they seek," he said.

Annan said that divisions in the international community caused by the Iraq war were "beginning to

heal", adding that he was hoping for the full co-operation of member states over a new resolution.

Turning to the US decision to back Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's unilateral plan for withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and some parts of the West Bank, Blair denied that the roadmap for peace had been sidelined.

AFP adds: Britain remains "completely committed" to the handover of power to an Iraqi government at the end of June, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Friday despite a wave of violence in the country. "The situation in Iraq is serious," Straw acknowledged as he arrived for a European Union meeting.

"But it is the interest of all Iraqis as well as the international community that we make as much progress as we can to secure a democratic and representative Iraq for the benefit of the Iraqi people," he said.

ARF members can't agree on Pak entry

AFP, Jakarta

Members of a major security forum still cannot agree on whether Pakistan should be admitted, Indonesia's foreign ministry said yesterday.

The Asean Regional Forum (ARF) meets in Jakarta from June 29-July 2 following a meeting of foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

"One issue that would be discussed no doubt would be the question of admission of Pakistan into the ARF," said ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa.

"There has been an Asean decision to include Pakistan within the ARF but there has not been a consensus on this - I don't have to mention which country is likely to oppose it," he said in apparent reference to India.

"We're still working to establish a consensus."

The ARF is the main forum for security dialogue in Asia and draws 23 countries from the Asia-Pacific region including the 10 Asean countries and India.

ANC records historic polls win in S Africa

AFP, Johannesburg

President Thabo Mbeki's African National Congress coasted to a record electoral landslide after a decade in power in the new South Africa, bagging almost 70 percent of the vote, partial results showed yesterday.

Africa's oldest liberation movement, which in 1994 forced an end to some five decades of white racist rule, won a two-thirds majority in Wednesday's landmark polls - a magic figure it had failed to garner in the country's last two elections.

The ANC was set to celebrate its pioneering win at a victory party later Friday in Johannesburg with Mbeki due to attend the ceremony at a posh convention centre in the upmarket Sandton suburb.

"We want to thank our workers and supporters. Unfortunately we will not be able to fit in everyone," ANC spokesman Steyn Speed said of the bash.

Trailing behind the ANC in was the Democratic Alliance with 13 percent of the vote, with 61.2 per-

cent of the ballots counted.

The Independent Electoral Commission said preliminary estimates showed that the turnout was likely to be around 75 percent of the nearly 21 million registered voters, down from the previous two democratic elections.

As Mbeki braced for a second and last term in power, the party issued a statement declaring that it had won a "decisive mandate to fight poverty and create work" from voters from all races and classes.

"We have good reason to be pleased, our expectations were a decisive majority... the results show that people really appreciate what we have achieved in the last 10 years," ANC's Speed told AFP.

Critics have charged that the ANC onslaught was a fait accompli in a country where 78 percent of the population is black and where people largely vote along ethnic lines, warning that South Africa ran the risk of turning into a single-party state.

'Bush drew up Iraq war plan 2 months after Kabul strike'

AP, Washington

President Bush secretly ordered a war plan drawn up against Iraq less than two months after US forces attacked Afghanistan and was so worried the decision would cause a furor he did not tell everyone on his national security team, says a new book on his Iraq policy.

Bush feared that if news got out about the Iraq plan as U.S. forces were fighting another conflict, people would think he was too eager for war, journalist Bob Woodward writes in "Plan of Attack," a behind-the-scenes account of the 16 months leading to the Iraq invasion.

The Associated Press obtained a copy of the book, which will be available in book stores next week.

"I knew what would happen if people thought we were developing a potential war plan for Iraq," Bush is quoted as telling Woodward.

Sonia accuses BJP of unleashing tension

PTI, Kolar

Congress president Sonia Gandhi yesterday lashed out at the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), accusing it of unleashing tension and fear in the country during four and a half year rule of the party-led alliance and asked the people to vote it out "to save" the nation from "fascist forces".

Coming down heavily on the performance of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at an election meeting in Kolar, Karnataka she said they promised to remove fear and tension in the society, but what happened in Gujarat was a "classic example" of its alleged failure to honour its promise.

The NDA had assured to remove poverty and hunger and to control prices, but had failed to fulfil them and was following "anti-farmers' policies", she charged.

Sonia Gandhi said hunger and poverty was increasing and the

farmers were in distress and blamed the NDA rule for it. One crore jobs a year was assured but the youths remained jobless, she said.

The NDA government had also promised corruption free Government, but its tenure was riddled with "scams and rampant corruption", Sonia Gandhi alleged.

Sonia Gandhi made a scathing attack on the BJP and Sangh Parivar outfits, accusing them of dividing the people on religious lines and calling them "enemies of the people".

She said if the Congress led alliance was voted to power, it would provide a "pro-poor, pro-farmer and pro-people" Government. She also sought a renewed mandate for the Congress Government led by S M Krishna in Karnataka, noting that it had implemented several welfare programmes, particularly for women and weaker sections.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian opposition leader and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi waves to supporters at an election rally in Kolar some 70km north-west of Bangalore yesterday. Sonia was in the southern Indian state of Karnataka on a day-long election campaign ahead of the upcoming general elections. India- the world's largest democracy goes to polls for its five phased parliamentary elections beginning April 20 to elect its 14th parliament.



PHOTO: AFP

The first Russian plane carrying the evacuated civilians from former Soviet republics arrives at Zhukovskiy airport outside Moscow, under heavy rain Thursday. The first three cargo jets sent in by Russia's emergencies ministry left Baghdad in quick succession with 365 energy consultants and repair workers on board.

Pro-govt Uri Party sweeps ROK polls

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

The pro-government Uri Party was marching toward a simple majority in hotly contested general elections yesterday, brightening the political future of impeached President Roh Moo-hyun.

The Uri Party, loyal to the embattled president, secured 128 constituencies and its rival Grand National Party obtained 103 of the districts whose votes had been counted as of midnight.

The 17th legislative polls elected 243 National Assembly members by direct voting and 56 by proportional representation.

Exit polls, and earlier partial vote counting by the major broadcasting companies, had predicted that Uri would clinch the majority by garnering 150 seats in the 299-seat National Assembly. The liberal Uri Party held 49 seats in the outgoing parliament.

The conservative GNP was

expected to take 122 seats when all the votes were counted, down from its current 137, as its popularity plunged due to its push for the impeachment and irregularities of some of its members. The second opposition Millennium Democratic Party and the progressive Democratic Labor Party would each garner nine seats, the polls predicted.

Political analysts said the public gave huge support to Uri in a backlash against the opposition-led impeachment of the president and because it hoped to see more reforms in Korea's corrupt politics.

With the resounding victory of the de facto ruling Uri, the liberal Roh administration is expected to forge smooth cooperation with the incoming parliament in implementing its reform policies, compared with its continued conflicts with the outgoing National Assembly that was dominated by the opposition forces.

Sharon faces domestic battle over pullout plan

Islamic states set date for emergency meeting on ME

AP, AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon arrived home yesterday from Washington, facing a tough domestic battle over his "unilateral disengagement" plan despite a boost from his talks with President Bush.

On Thursday evening, Israeli forces foiled a bombing attempt near a West Bank Jewish settlement that is on Sharon's list of places to maintain in any peace agreement with the Palestinians.

The incident outside the settlement of Ariel illustrated the tensions in the West Bank after Sharon named Ariel and four other locations that would remain in Israeli hands. Bush backed the concept that Israel would retain some West Bank territory, angering Palestinians.

Sharon was planning an immediate start to his campaign to persuade skeptical members of his own Likud Party to support his plan a pullout from all of the Gaza Strip and a small part of the West Bank aided by Bush's endorsement of the Israeli side in two key disagreements with the Palestinians.

Besides noting that final borders must take into account the main Israeli settlements, Bush also said that a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem must be found in the context of a Palestinian state, not Israel.

Palestinians demand a state in all of the West Bank and Gaza and removal of all Jewish settlements. They also claim the "right of return" of hundreds of thousands who fled or were evicted from their homes during the two-year war that followed Israel's

creation in 1948, along with their descendants about 4 million people altogether.

Bush gave Sharon an important lift at home, where he faces hard-line opposition to his plan. Sharon has scheduled a May 2 referendum on the withdrawal among members of his Likud Party and the chances of approval are uncertain.

AFP adds: The world's Islamic nations will hold an emergency meeting on developments in the Middle East and Iraq on April 22, Malaysia said Friday.

Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said the meeting would focus on the Palestinian issue after a major policy shift announced by US President George W. Bush Wednesday, but it would also address the deteriorating situation in Iraq.

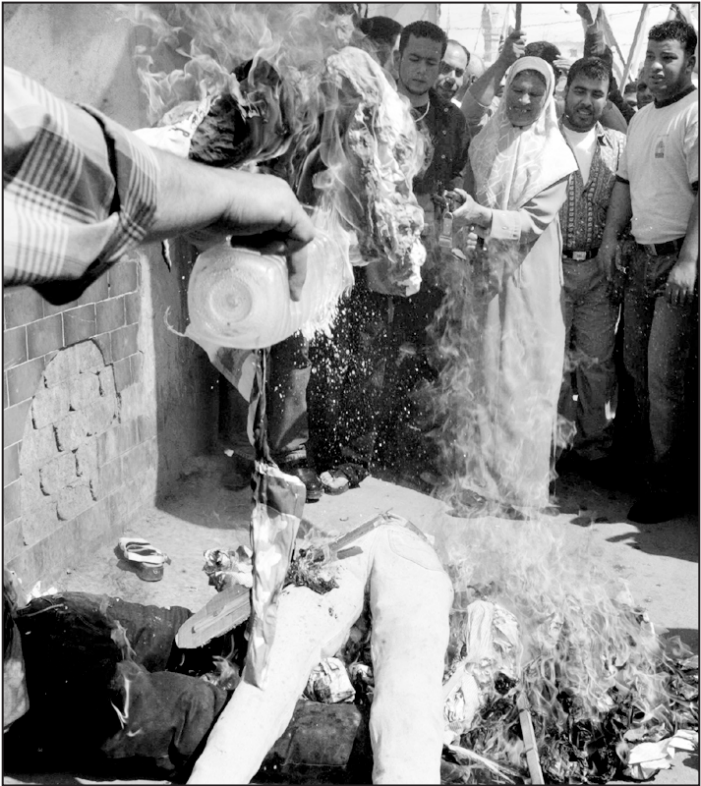


PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians burn an effigy of US President George w. Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon during a demonstration in Lebanon's largest Palestinian refugee camp of Ain el-Helweh yesterday in the south of the country. Some 1500 refugees took part in a protest demanding the right of return to their homes in Israel, two days after Bush backed an Israeli blueprint for the occupied territories.