

Russia vetoes UN resolution on Annan's Cyprus plan

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan made a last-ditch appeal to the people of Cyprus Wednesday to end their 30-year division when they decide the fate of his peace plan this weekend.

But the UN chief, who has overseen four years of tough negotiations leading up to Saturday's vote on reunification, was dealt an unexpected setback when Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution backing the plan.

"After 40 years of conflict and 30 years of division, the choice before you this Saturday is one of truly historic importance," Annan said in a taped message broadcast in both the Greek and Turkish parts of the island.

"Let me reassure you," he said. "The world stands ready to help you make this plan work."

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey invaded and occupied the northern third following a coup, which tried to join the island to Greece. Turkey still has around 30,000 troops in its self-declared northern statelet.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis burn a US flag yesterday during protest in the southern city of Basra against US and British forces in Iraq. Hundreds of backers of radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr took to the streets of the city to vent their anger at British occupation forces whom they blamed for the suicide bomb attacks that killed 73 people in the area.

Basra grieves after suicide bombings

REUTERS, Basra

Iraq's southern city of Basra mourned its dead on Thursday after suicide bombers killed 73 people, 17 of them children burned alive on their way to school.

Five of the 99 people wounded in the blasts died overnight, hospital officials said, raising the death toll to 73.

Streets were quiet and most schools were closed after Wednesday's co-ordinated bombings of police stations.

Among the victims were eight kindergarten children and nine pupils of the Amjad Intermediate School for Girls whose minibuses flamed into an inferno after one explosion.

The girls' school shut its gates on Thursday. "We are going to attend the funerals," said Leila Abdullah, an administrator.

The blasts at three police stations in the Shia city, and at the police academy in nearby Zubeir, a mainly Sunni town, were the bloodiest attacks in British-controlled Basra since the start of the US-led occupation a year ago.

President Bush accused Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network of being behind the morning rush-hour attacks. "They just blew up innocent

Iraqis," he said in Washington.

A senior military official in Baghdad said the simultaneous strikes bore the hallmarks of al-Qaeda or its affiliates. "The method, the mode is consistent time after time -- a spectacular event and a symbolic target," he said.

He pointed the finger at Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian militant with suspected links to al-Qaeda who is accused by US officials of orchestrating suicide attacks to spark a civil war between Iraq's minority Sunnis and majority Shias.

An explosion damaged a car near a police academy in the northern city of Kirkuk, but there were no casualties, police said. The cause of the blast was not immediately clear.

The Basra attacks shocked a city which had seen little of the violence exploding elsewhere in Iraq this month.

US forces have intensified battles with Sunni insurgents in the western city of Falluja and rolled back an uprising led by radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in the south.

About 1,000 Sadr supporters carried mock coffins through Basra streets to protest against the police station bombings. "Long live Sadr. No, no to America," they chanted.

US won't tolerate nuke-armed Iran

US intelligence good, not perfect: Bush

REUTERS, Washington

A nuclear-armed Iran would pose an intolerable threat to peace in the Middle East and a mortal danger to Israel, President Bush said on Wednesday, adding that any such threat would be "dealt with" by the United States and its allies.

In strongly worded remarks before an audience of newspaper editors and publishers, the Republican president pressed the secretive leadership of the Islamic republic to heed US and European demands not to pursue a nuclear weapons programme.

"It would be intolerable to peace and stability in the Middle East if they get a nuclear weapon, particularly since their stated objective is the destruction of Israel," Bush said in answer to a question about international cooperation against militant attacks.

"The development of a nuclear weapon in Iran is intolerable. And a programme is intolerable. Otherwise they will be dealt with,

starting through the United Nations."

The United States accuses Iran of pursuing a nuclear weapons programme, but Tehran says its nuclear ambitions are confined to generating electricity. Washington hard-liners have been pressing for UN sanctions against the Islamic state.

The president's remarks come at a time of turmoil for US policy in the Middle East, including Iran's neighbor Iraq, which the United States invaded last year after a stormy UN Security Council debate over whether the Arab nation possessed weapons of mass destruction.

No such weapons have been found and deteriorating conditions marked by a heightened insurgency have been followed by troop withdrawal announcements from Spain, Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

Poland, a key US ally in Iraq, has also placed its position under review, while Thailand has said it will withdraw medical and engineering

troops if they are attacked. But the White House points to continued support from nations like Britain, Japan, Italy and Portugal as evidence the coalition remains strong.

Meanwhile, Washington is facing a backlash from the Arab world over Bush's decision to endorse Israeli plans to retain Jewish settlements on West Bank land captured during the 1967 Middle East war.

Reuters adds: President Bush Wednesday acknowledged difficulties in trying to head off another Sept. 11-type attack on the United States because America is a "hard country to defend" and US intelligence is never perfect.

Bush, who is running for reelection on his record of fighting terrorism, made the comments as he and Vice President Dick Cheney set April 29 as the day they will answer questions together and in private before the commission investigating the Sept. 11, 2001, hijacked airliner attacks.

US faces \$4b shortfall of Iraq war budget

AP, Washington

Two days of Capitol Hill hearings on Iraq have produced some new details on Bush administration plans for the beleaguered campaign, but not all that lawmakers had hoped for.

The final session this week was scheduled for Thursday before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. National security adviser Condoleezza Rice also planned a rare visit to the Capitol yesterday to meet with Republican lawmakers.

Her meetings were planned to

give lawmakers a chance to hear a review of developments in Iraq and pose questions to one of President Bush's closest advisers, officials said Wednesday.

The Pentagon's top general said Wednesday that increased violence in Iraq is pushing the cost of the war over budget, threatening a \$4 billion shortfall by late summer.

Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the recent decision to extend the stay of some 20,000 troops will cost roughly \$700 million more over three months. And the White House kept open the possibility that it will

seek additional funds before the end of this election year.

"When the service chiefs last talked about this, there was, I think, a \$4 billion shortfall," Myers told the House Armed Services Committee. "We thought we could get through all of August. We'd have to figure out how to do September."

The war is costing about \$4.7 billion a month, officials said. Defense officials are studying their budget, which runs through Sept. 30, to determine whether some money can be moved from purchase programmes or other Pentagon accounts, Myers said.

US to rehire Baathists to shore up Sunni support in Iraq

AFP, Washington

The United States is set to rehire thousands of members of fallen Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's Baath party and former Iraqi military to help rebuild Iraq. The Washington Post said yesterday citing US officials.

The move, proposed by US administrator for Iraq Paul Bremer, is aimed at enticing the Sunni minority back into politics and weaken support for the insurgency in the Sunni triangle, the officials said.

After the US-led occupation of Iraq, all Baath Party members who were teachers, doctors or in top government positions were systematically fired, sowing discontent among the Sunnis.

"Iraq has a highly marginalised Sunni minority, and the more that people of standing can be taken off the pariah list, the more that community will become involved politically,"

a senior envoy from a coalition country told the daily.

Already the US-led coalition has brought back around six generals from Saddam's army to provide leadership to the new Iraqi army, US officials said.

They said President George W. Bush's aides hope to finish working out the reinstatement plan in detail this week.

While it remains to be decided how far up the top layers of the Baath Party to go, they said, those reinstated must have clean records to hold positions in government or the military.

The plan, which the daily said US officials refuse to call a policy reversal, will likely be launched by reinstating about 11,000 teachers and hundreds of professors who were fired when Saddam was toppled a year ago, the officials added.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents sift through the remains of their homes Wednesday in Utica, Illinois. Rescue crews recovered the bodies of four more people from the rubble of a Midwestern town, bringing the death toll from a string of tornadoes to eight.