

9/11 COMMISSION

Bush, Cheney grilled for three hours

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush said he and Vice President Dick Cheney answered every question on Thursday from the panel investigating the Sept. 11 attacks and denied their joint appearance was aimed at keeping their story straight.

In comments afterward in the White House Rose Garden, Bush declared the extraordinary, three-hour-and-10-minute session a success that he hoped would lead to recommendations about how to guard against future attacks because "we are still vulnerable to attack."

He dismissed criticism from Democrats that he wanted to appear together with Cheney so they would not contradict each other.

"Look, if we had something to hide we wouldn't have met with them in the first place. We answered all their questions. As I say, I came away good about the session because I wanted them to know how I set strategy, how we run the White House, how we deal with threats," Bush said.

The president had only agreed to meet the commission under pressure from victims' families and the panel, and only on condition he have Cheney at his side and they meet in private, with no recording of the session. They were not under oath.

Against a backdrop of a presidential campaign year and amid fears that al Qaeda operatives are planning a new attack in the United States, Bush and Cheney gathered with the five Republicans and five Democrats on the commission in

the very heart of presidential power, the Oval Office.

Bush and Cheney were seated on chairs by the fireplace, and commission members were scattered on couches and chairs. Their talks went back to the transition period between the departing Clinton White House and the incoming Bush team.

A commission source said the meeting turned up some new information for the panel. "We learned a lot," the source said without elaborating. "There was quite a bit we hadn't known."

Citing several sources, NBC News reported Bush revealed new details about the chaos of Sept. 11. In one example of the confusion of that day, officials at the White House were worried about a flight from Spain and wanted permission to

shoot it down if necessary, NBC said. Bush told the commission he issued that order after arriving at Strategic Command headquarters in Omaha, Neb. and learned later the plane had turned back to Madrid, according to the report.

NBC also reported that Bush was critical of his former counterterrorism chief, Richard Clarke. Clarke has said Bush did not heed his warnings that al Qaeda was an urgent threat.

The White House, reluctant to provide details, acknowledged one area of questioning was related to Bush's response to an Aug. 6, 2001, presidential intelligence memo entitled "Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US" that Bush released under pressure from the commission on April 10.



PHOTO:AFP

Iraqi policemen, carrying their personal belongings, walk in the destroyed city of Fallujah yesterday. US marine started pulling back from Fallujah and said they will handover security in the battered city to the newly-Fallujah Protection Army, headed by Iraqi Major General, Jassem Mohamed Saleh.

Powell urges Italy to stand firm in hostage crisis

AFP, Rome

US Secretary of State Colin Powell urged Italy on Friday to stand firm in dealing with its hostage crisis involving three Italians kidnapped in Iraq, saying the country must not give in to terrorists.

The daily La Stampa said Powell called on Italy to do everything to find the hostages and free them.

He added, however, that the country must stand firm in the face of terrorism and must not give the impression of compromising.

Otherwise Italians will end up sending a message that kidnapping bears fruit and that those that do it can use hostages for political means, Powell told the newspaper.

Three Italian nationals -- Maurizio Agliana, 37, Umberto Cupertino, 35, and Salvatore Stefo, 34 -- have been held hostage in Iraq since April 12. A fourth hostage, Fabrizio Quattrocchi, 36, who was kidnapped the same day, was killed two days later.

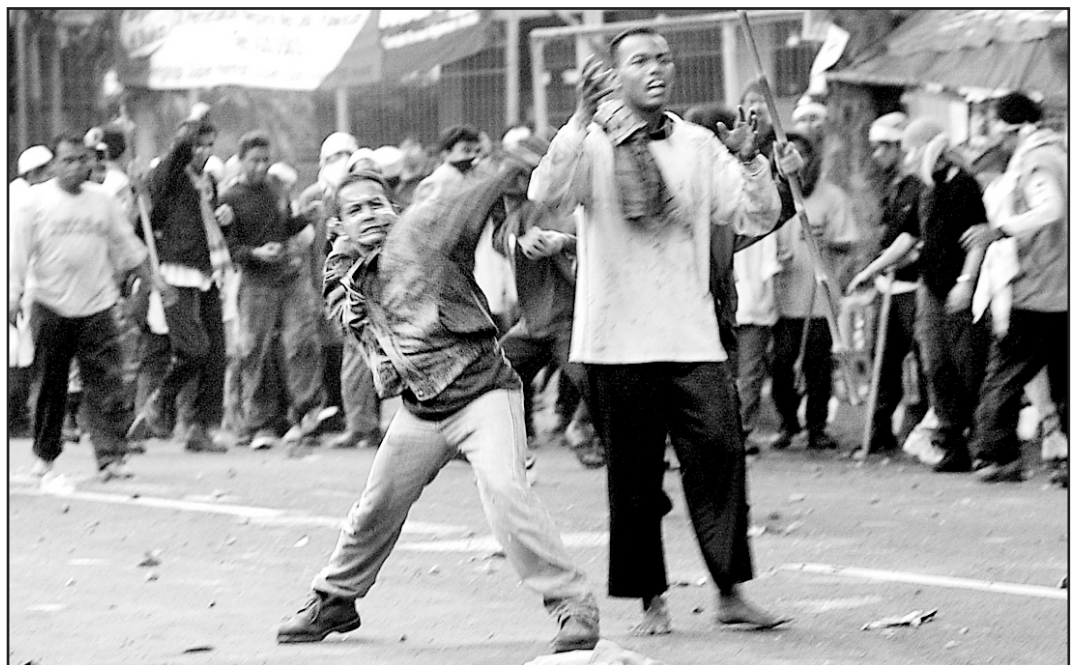


PHOTO:AFP

Supporters of Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir hurl rocks at riot police during clashes outside the Salemba jail, in Jakarta yesterday. Indonesian police arrested Bashir as a terror suspect after firing tear and water cannon to disperse hundreds of his supporters.

Bashir to face Bali bombing charge

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian police have re-arrested radical Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir moments after he stepped free from prison, and say he will be charged with the Bali bombings and other terror attacks.

Paramilitary police in riot gear fired tear gas and water cannon to disperse hundreds of rock-throwing supporters outside Jakarta's Salemba jail before Bashir emerged after serving a sentence for immigration offences.

He was re-arrested under an anti-terror law, telling reporters after being taken to national police headquarters by armoured vehicle, "God's will must be accepted."

Police said Bashir, as alleged former leader of the Al-Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI)

network, would be charged with the Bali nightclub attacks which killed 202 people in October 2002. Most victims were young Western holidaymakers.

Asked what charges Bashir faced, national detective chief Suyatno Landung said: "Many cases from 1999 to 2002, (including) that one in Bali."

Ansyaad Mbai, who heads the security ministry's anti-terrorism desk, told AFP Bashir would face charges relating to "terrorism cases in Indonesia, starting in 2000 until the Bali bombing and the Marriott bombing."

"The culprits are JI and JI is led by him. That is the connection," Mbai said. "Now the police have proof that Abu Bakar Bashir is the leader of JI."

IRAQI PRISONER ABUSE

US General to face disciplinary action

REUTERS, Washington

The US military is weighing disciplinary action against the Army general who was in charge of a prison on the western outskirts of Baghdad where American troops were accused of abusing Iraqi prisoners, officials said on Thursday. The CBS News program "60 Minutes II" on Wednesday aired photographs taken at the prison late last year showing American troops abusing some of the Iraqis held at the Abu Ghraib prison, a notorious center of torture and executions under toppled President Saddam Hussein's government.

The pictures showed US troops smiling, posing, laughing or giving the thumbs-up sign as naked, male Iraqi prisoners were stacked in a pyramid or positioned to simulate sex acts with one another.

One Iraqi man had a slur written on his skin in English. Another was directed by Americans to stand on a box with his head covered, and wires attached to his hands, and was informed that if he fell off the box, he would be electrocuted.

Brig. Gen. Janice Karpinski, in charge of the prison, could be relieved of her command, blocked from promotion or receive a letter of reprimand after a noncriminal administrative investigation relating to events at Abu Ghraib prison, said

Col. Jill Morgenthaler, a military spokeswoman in Baghdad.

"We found it very abhorrent that American soldiers indulged in those acts of humiliation. And second of all, they photographed these acts. It's very shameful," Morgenthaler said.

Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the top US officer in Iraq, "responded swiftly" upon learning of the conduct with criminal and administrative investigations, Morgenthaler said.

The US military now holds several thousand prisoners at Abu Ghraib, most of them rounded up on suspicion of carrying out attacks against US-led forces.

Indian Election

Modi to campaign for BJP in UP

HC asks EC to cancel polls where criminals are in fray

AFP, New Delhi

With exit polls showing the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party faring worse than expected in India's marathon parliamentary vote, the party has pressed firebrand Hindu nationalist leader Narendra Modi into campaigning.

Modi, chief minister of western Gujarat state which was wracked by communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in 2002, will campaign in the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh from Sunday, a BJP official said.

"Yes, he is coming here. We will take a decision (later) on the constituencies where he will be campaigning," Hridaynarayan Dixit, the BJP's Uttar Pradesh spokesman, told AFP.

Modi has a huge following among Hindu hardliners and was seen as a key figure in helping the BJP win crucial state elections last

year, including in Gujarat.

His government has been accused of turning a blind eye to the riots in his state in which nearly 2,000 people died, mostly Muslims.

Political analysts said they were surprised at the BJP's decision to field Modi as its leaders have been trying to court Muslims, who make up 20 percent of Uttar Pradesh's population.

"He will probably be used very strategically in specific political constituencies. It is a daring move to think that you can woo the Muslims and at the same time get Modi to campaign," said political expert Yogendra Radav.

"It is a new political morality and a sign that spin doctoring is entering India. I don't know whether it will be rewarding," he added.

The Hindustan Times newspaper said that the move was aimed at unifying the majority Hindu popula-

tion's vote for the BJP, while at the same time fielding more moderate leaders, such as Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, to reach out to Muslims.

With Uttar Pradesh boasting 80 political constituencies, the BJP has thrown its entire top rung of leadership into the campaign trail in the state ahead of the two remaining rounds of polls on May 5 and 10.

PTI adds: The Patna High Court yesterday asked the Election Commission to consider countering the elections to the constituencies where the prisoners, whose voting right have been suspended under the election laws, had entered the fray.

A division bench passed the order on a PIL seeking disqualification of those who entered the poll fray from jail and whose voting rights were automatically suspended by the law.

Pakistan asks India to downsize Army

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan asked India to reciprocate its decision to downsize its army by 50,000 troops to "improve the regional security situation", according to reports on Thursday.

"The decision to cut the tail of the (Pakistan Army) by 50,000 troops was Pakistan's unilateral decision but the idea of reduction in troops could be discussed with New Delhi if India agrees to a mutual agreement in this regard," military spokesman Maj. Gen. Shaukat Sultan told a TV channel.

Sultan, the director general of the Inter-Services Public Relations, said a joint formula could be agreed on in this regard for improving the regional situation.

Pakistan did not want to join any arms race or increase the strength of its army but would maintain a minimum deterrence for its defence purposes, he asserted.

A meeting of Pakistan Army commanders chaired by President Pervez Musharraf, who is also the army chief, formally announced Wednesday that the force would be made leaner by pruning non-combatants.

The Formation Commanders' Conference at Rawalpindi also reviewed the new war doctrine of the Indian Army.

Commenting on the Formation Commanders' Conference's decision, Sultan said it was aimed at generating more resources for fulfilling the army's technical requirements.

The army would save Rs.11 billion with the removal of batmen. The decision would also help in enhancing professional skill and efficiency and in inducting the latest technology for the army, he noted.

Each soldier would be given a rifle, night vision equipment, laser sights, bulletproof jackets and other equipment. The funds for this would be generated through indigenous means instead of putting a burden on the national exchequer.

Sultan said downsizing would help in providing professional training to soldiers. More educated youths were joining the Pakistan Army, he said, noting that 70 percent of new recruits were matriculates, 15 percent had completed intermediate school while one percent were BA degree holders.

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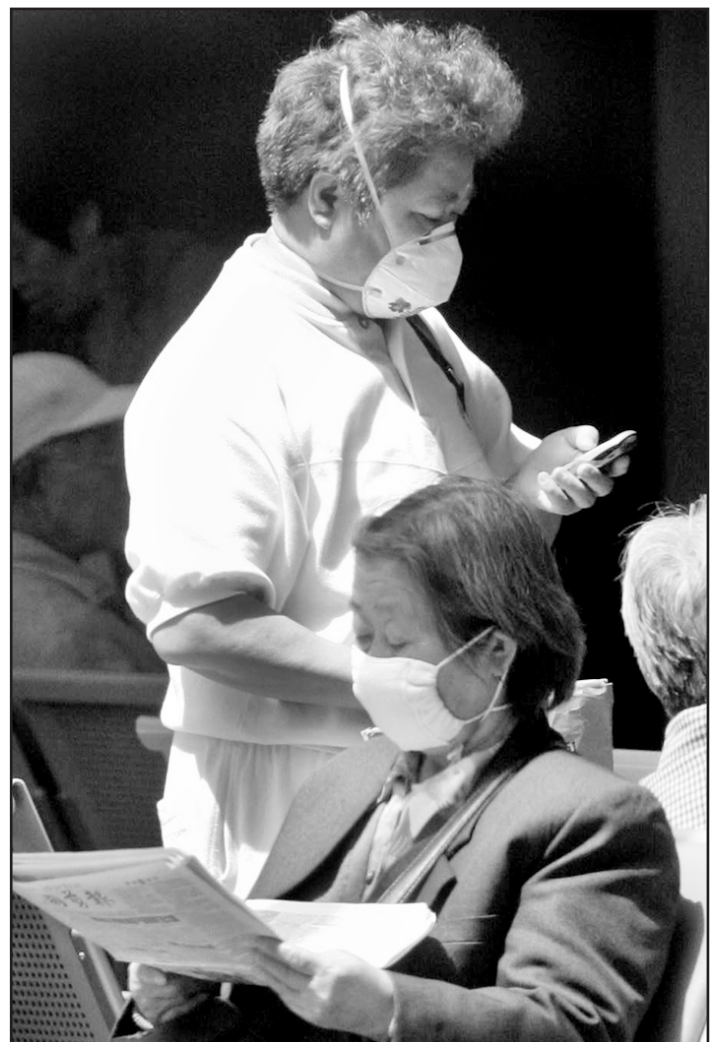


PHOTO:AFP

Two Chinese citizens wear masks while reading a newspaper at a Beijing hospital yesterday.

First SARS casualty in China in 9 months

AFP, Beijing

China reported its first death from SARS in nine months yesterday, as week-long Labour Day holidays got under way with millions of people thronging transport hubs under-terred by the deadly disease.

The dead woman, surnamed Wei, was the mother of a researcher who became the first person to be confirmed as a Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) patient in this latest outbreak.

She was previously listed as a suspect case and died on April 19 in eastern Anhui province.

Her death is the first attributed to the respiratory disease in China since July 27 last year, when a deadly outbreak claimed the lives of 349 people here. Almost 800 people died worldwide.

The confirmation that Wei had SARS brought to five the number of confirmed cases in Beijing and Anhui. One was listed in critical condition. There were also four

suspected cases, all in Beijing.

All the cases can be traced back to the Institute of Virology in Beijing where the researcher worked, health officials have said. It has since been shut down while investigations are carried out.

Although the outbreak appeared to be isolated to the laboratory, central authorities were taking no chances, issuing an urgent notice ordering all local governments to step up prevention work to stop the disease spreading.

"All places and all departments should pay high importance to SARS prevention and control work," the State Council said on the eve of holidays, which see a large chunk of China's 1.3 billion people crowd onto public transport.

The order, reported in the People's Daily, also demanded authorities "do not cover-up, delay or deny SARS reports".

China initially covered up SARS last year. The disease spread to some 30 countries.

Blair appalled at treatment of Iraqi prisoners

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was appalled at photographs apparently showing US soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners in a Baghdad jail, his official spokesman said yesterday.

"The US army spokesman has said this morning that he is appalled, that those responsible have let their fellow soldiers down, and those are views that we would associate the UK government with," the spokesman told reporters at Downing Street.

Asked if Blair was similarly appalled, he replied: "The government view is the same as that of the US army."

Talibans poison schoolgirls to discourage education

AFP, Khost

Three Afghan schoolgirls were in critical condition after being poisoned in the southeastern town of Khost in what officials said yesterday was a Taliban attempt to discourage female education in the region.

A Taliban spokesman denied the allegation.

The girls, aged between 10 and 15, ate poisoned biscuits offered to them by a man on Wednesday, said the spokeswoman for the provincial department of Women's Affairs, Shahina Sharif.

The military commander of the province Khabab Khan said the ousted Taliban militia were behind the poisoning to "deter girls from going to school."

However, Taliban spokesman Litfullah Hakim, speaking to AFP from an unknown location, denied the allegation.

The girls had been attending the only school which accepts females in Khost.

Meanwhile, Afghan officials said they had arrested a man who was carrying a bomb in the city near the Pakistani border.

"A male foreigner was arrested on Wednesday late in the afternoon near a checkpoint in the east of the city," provincial police chief Sabur Allayar said.

"He was in possession of a bomb and a Kalashnikov assault rifle -- he was trying to enter the city to commit terrorist acts," he said.



PHOTO:AFP

Dutch astronaut of the European Space Agency Andre Kuipers (L) and US astronaut Mike Foale (C) arrive at a press conference in Kostonay airport yesterday. The Soyuz vessel touched down near the city of Arkalyk in the Kazakh Steppes at 0011 GMT yesterday, with US astronaut Michael Foale, his Russian colleague Alexander Kalery and Andre Kuipers from the Netherlands on board.

Soyuz makes 'bull's eye' landing

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Russia's Soyuz capsule with three crew from the International Space Station has landed in Kazakhstan's steppes.

The capsule touched down safely at 0011 GMT, Russia's mission control centre in Korolyov, outside Moscow, reported.

Russian Alexander Kalery and British-born Michael Foale have been in space for six months; Dutchman Andre Kuipers returns with them from an 11-day stint.

The Soyuz craft has taken over trips to and from the space station, after the Columbia shuttle disaster last year.

American astronaut Michael Fincke and Russia's Gennady Padalka will remain behind to man the space station, having arrived there on 21 April.

"It was a soft landing," a spokesman at Korolyov was quoted as saying by Reuters news agency.

"It was right on the money, almost a bull's eye landing for Soyuz," said Nasa spokesman Robert Navias at the landing site near the city of

Arkalyk, in northern Kazakhstan.

Russia's ground recovery teams pulled the crew out of the charred capsule and allowed them to relax in reclining chairs before conducting the mandatory medical checks.

"This is tea, not cognac," said Foale, as he was drinking from a plastic cup.

"It all went off very smoothly and the landing was surprisingly soft," the astronaut added.

Several hours earlier - at 2052 GMT - the trio's craft began its return to Earth by disengaging from the ISS.

Colonel Mikhail Polukhin, who co-ordinates the Russian space agency's search and rescue work, said earlier his team were fully prepared.

He said the operation to recover the capsule from its landing position involved 160 people, as well as eight helicopters, two aircraft and two all-terrain vehicles.

On Wednesday, Russian officials said the Soyuz was leaking helium. But both they and their American colleagues said the leak was minor and would not affect the landing.