



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi man holds his hand to his head as he queues up with others to reach an information booth outside the Abu Ghraib prison yesterday. Hundreds of anxious Iraqis crowd everyday outside the detention centre in an effort to find news about their loved ones and to hopefully get an appointment slip for the near future to visit them.

Israeli troops comb Gaza for soldiers' remains

AFP, Gaza

Israeli troops were combing the Gaza City neighbourhood of Zeitun Wednesday for the remains of six soldiers killed a day earlier in a bomb attack which militants threatened to use as bargaining chips.

Meanwhile an Israeli helicopter fired a missile at a house in Zeitun, as Palestinian security sources said Egyptian diplomats were talking Wednesday with the Islamic Jihad group for the return of the missing parts.

The deaths of the soldiers, blown up in their armoured personnel carrier as they took part in a heavy Israeli raid into Zeitun, sparked a crisis in the Israeli government amid plans by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to pull out of the Gaza Strip.

Israeli infantry backed by helicopters resumed the search for the remains of their comrades Wednesday morning, after Sharon's security cabinet decided the night before that the operation would go on until all missing body parts were found.

"We will continue our search operation until we find the bodies and the remains of our soldiers," an army spokesman said.

The six were killed when their armoured personnel carrier was blown to bits by militants who had planted bombs during an army raid into Zeitun to destroy equipment used by Palestinian groups to manufacture rockets.

Eight Palestinians were also killed in the fighting, along with a child who died in a helicopter strike

on a neighbouring district.

Meanwhile an Israeli helicopter gunship fired a missile near a mosque in Gaza City yesterday killing three Palestinians and wounding at least eight, most of them women and children, witnesses and medics said.

The Israeli army said it fired at a group laying explosives against Israeli forces in the Zeitoun neighbourhood, where Palestinian militants blew up six Israeli soldiers in a troop carrier during a raid on Tuesday.

"We understand it hit civilians, but they (the militants) are carrying explosives in civilian areas and if we hadn't hit them we would have seen another event like the one yesterday," an army spokeswoman said.

'Britain should not support US unconditionally'

AFP, London

Britain should not give unconditional support to the United States, a former conservative defence and foreign minister said on Wednesday, complaining that Prime Minister Tony Blair never publicly voiced reservations about Washington's policies.

"Tony Blair must realise that, yes, all British prime ministers give their support to the United States as a general principle. But it must not be unconditional support," former minister Malcolm Rifkind told BBC radio.

"If he has reservations and concerns about United States policy, of course he will express these privately and in a friendly way. But sometimes these concerns have to be made public.

"That is what Mrs Thatcher believed. That is what Jim Callaghan, Harold Wilson believed - all prime ministers of various political complexions," Rifkind said.

Syria calls US sanctions unjustified, ineffective

AFP, Damascus

Syrian officials dismissed Wednesday the newly-imposed US sanctions on Damascus over charges of supporting terrorism, saying they would have no impact on their country and its economy.

The sanctions "will have no effect on the national economy or the agriculture sector", Agriculture Minister Adel Safar told journalists here.

"But we feel that the pressure being applied by the United States smacks of injustice and double standards being applied" in the Middle East, the minister said.

He charged that Washington was "carrying out Israeli policy in the region".

"The principle of imposing sanctions on Syria is a joke," the speaker of the Syrian parliament, Mahmud al-Abrash, told AFP in Amman on the sidelines of a meeting of his counterparts from Iraq's neighbours.

"We are not in an elementary school for the teacher to come and impose sanctions on an undisciplined student. Syria is a country that has its dignity and respects international legislation," he added.

"We in parliament consider the US action a humiliation and totally rejected."

Abrash accused the United States of constantly putting pressure on Syria, but said that Damascus "will never submit" to Washington's will.

US President George W. Bush imposed the new sanctions on Tuesday, charging Damascus supported terrorism and failed to close its borders to insurgents looking to fight US forces in Iraq.

The sanctions, which come on top of existing US terrorism penalties, include a near-blanket ban on US exports to Syria and the power to freeze Syrian assets in the United States, the White House said.

Except for food and medicine and items intended for certain exempt entities such as the US embassy, foreign diplomatic missions and UN agencies, all US exports to Syria, estimated to be worth 100 million dollars a year, are now banned.

That prohibition is expected to hit US companies, particularly oil firms, working in Syria.

Prime Minister Mohammed Najj Otri said late Tuesday the sanctions were "unjust and unjustified", while adding that they "will not have any effect on Syria."

He called on Washington to "reverse its decision and not provoke problems between the two countries."

In an interview published Wednesday in the Spanish daily El Pais but given before the sanctions were imposed, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad accused the United States of being a source of instability in the Middle East and warned that hatred toward Americans was growing in the region.

US probes Afghan prisoner abuse

AFP, Kabul

The US military said yesterday it was investigating claims that an Afghan police officer was stripped, kicked and photographed naked in custody at a US army base in eastern Afghanistan.

"Yesterday afternoon coalition leaders were notified of an allegation of detainee abuse," US military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Tucker Mansager said.

"On notification, coalition forces immediately launched an investigation into this matter. The investigation continues," he told Kabul press conference.

The inquiry will report to Combined Force Command Afghanistan by officers from the army criminal investigation division, he added.

The investigation follows a report in the New York Times about an Afghan police officer who was held at the US military headquarters at Bagram air base, north of Kabul,

and a base in southeastern city Gardez in August 2003.

He told the paper he was stripped naked, kicked and subjected to sexual taunts. The American embassy in Kabul also confirmed Wednesday that an inquiry into an allegation of prisoner abuse was underway.

"The US military has launched an investigation," the embassy said in a statement. US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad said he was confident "appropriate action" would be taken if the allegations were found to be true.

"To the best of our knowledge this is the first time that anyone in the military chain of command or the United States embassy has heard of this alleged mistreatment," he said in the statement.

The embassy was unaware of the existence of any photos of the alleged incident, he added.

Abuse by British troops condoned 'from the top'

AFP, London

Iraqi prisoners were routinely beaten or otherwise abused by British troops, with the mistreatment "condoned all the way from the top", a British newspaper on Wednesday quoted a reservist as saying.

Mistreatment included soldiers urinating on or spitting at detainees in Iraq, the Daily Mirror reported, as the furor of the treatment of Iraqi prisoners by coalition forces continued.

The man, identified by the newspaper only as "Soldier E", said he had been "sickened" by what he witnessed in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, where British forces are

based. "It wasn't right ... and it was condoned all the way from the top," he was quoted as saying.

Soldier E recounted seeing troops take turns to assault one prisoner inside an armoured personnel carrier.

"The decision was made to allow the soldiers to go in individually, one by one, into the back and beat this fellow up."

"When it was my turn I refused to do it. I took off his sandbag and gave him water. His nose was half way across his face," he said.

According to the Daily Mirror, the soldier, a member of the Territorial Army reserve, was attached to the

Queen's Lancashire Regiment which has been at the centre of allegations of British mistreatment.

The regiment is currently based in Cyprus.

On May 1, the Daily Mirror ran photographs apparently showing troops from the regiment beating and urinating on a detainee.

Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said Monday the photos looked "increasingly like a hoax".

But Soldier E said the pictures -- which the Daily Mirror has vehemently defended -- were genuine, and that he has contacted rights group Amnesty International about what he witnessed.

Norway fails to secure deal in Lanka peace talks

PTI, Colombo

Norway's latest shuttle diplomacy failed to secure an agreement on restarting Sri Lanka's stalled peace talks, but the warring sides pledged their commitment to a political settlement, officials said.

Norway's Foreign Minister Jan Petersen returned to the capital Colombo on Tuesday after talks with the elusive Tiger supremo, Velupillai Prabhakaran, on resuming negotiations, but there was no deal.

"Some issues need to be discussed further before negotiations can start," the Norwegian embassy

said in a brief statement after separate talks with Prabhakaran as well as President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

"Norway will continue to consult with the government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in the coming weeks."

Both Kumaratunga and Tiger leader Prabhakaran, however, "reaffirmed their request to Norway to act as facilitator for the process," the statement said.

It quoted Petersen as saying they had "constructive and positive meetings with both parties" and that "there is a clear commitment from the

government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to resume direct negotiations."

The new government here wanted future talks conducted at a venue within Sri Lanka in contrast to the six rounds of talks with the previous government held at overseas venues in Germany, Japan, Norway and Thailand.

But, the Tigers were keen that negotiations be held outside Sri Lanka and be based on their proposal for self-rule, a demand rejected by Kumaratunga before her Marxist-backed Freedom Alliance came to power in April, official sources said.

US to release 20 Pakistanis from Guantanamo Bay

AFP, Islamabad

The United States is expected to release 20 Pakistanis detained at its Guantanamo Bay camp in Cuba by the end of May, a senior interior ministry official said Wednesday.

"Some 20 Pakistani prisoners in Guantanamo Bay are likely to be handed over to the government of Pakistan, hopefully by the end of the month," the interior ministry's National Crisis Management Cell chief Brigadier Javed Cheema said.

The US authorities have released 24 prisoners since November 2002, he told AFP, adding that efforts were underway to secure the release of around 40 Pakistanis still detained at the base in Cuba.

Cheema last month led a three-member government delegation to

Washington for talks with US State Department officials on the release of the Pakistanis.

Pakistan and United States agreed in March to put in place a process to screen Pakistani prisoners for their possible release from detention.

Thousands of Pakistanis were captured in Afghanistan following the ouster of the hardline Islamic Taliban regime in late 2001.

Some 64 were transferred to the US naval detention center while hundreds of others are still locked in Afghan jails, officials said.

Since November 2002, around 24 Pakistanis have been freed from Guantanamo, they said.

Securing the release of Pakistani prisoners has been a major concern for Islamabad, a key US-ally in the war on terror.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators march in front of burning tyres in a street near the Royal Palace in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's major cities including the capital Kathmandu ground to a halt on the second day of a 48-hour strike to pressure the king into restoring democracy.

Clinton wants his 'life back'

REUTERS, New York

Former President Bill Clinton joked that he needs to finish his memoirs because "I need my life back."

Appearing at a political fundraiser, Clinton said he had been in "writer's jail" at his home in Chappaqua, NY, finishing his manu-

script for publishing house Alfred A Knopf.

"For three months I have done nothing but try to finish the story of my life that was hard enough to live the first time," he said at a fundraiser sponsored by Voices for Working Families and Moveon.org at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem just blocks from Clinton's offices.

The highly anticipated autobiography entitled "My Life," for which Clinton was reportedly paid between \$10 million and \$12 million, is due out in late June.

"I've got to finish the book," he said. "I need my life back."

The book, which the publisher has said will candidly discuss Clinton's scandal-plagued White House years, will reportedly run some 900 pages.

The former president will embark on a worldwide tour when his book is released, Knopf said. He is slated to make his first promotional book appearance on June 3 at the book industry's BookExpo America annual convention in Chicago.

Plans call for a first printing of 1.5 million copies.

Knopf is the flagship imprint of the Knopf Publishing Group, which is a division of Random House Inc, whose parent company is Bertelsmann AG.

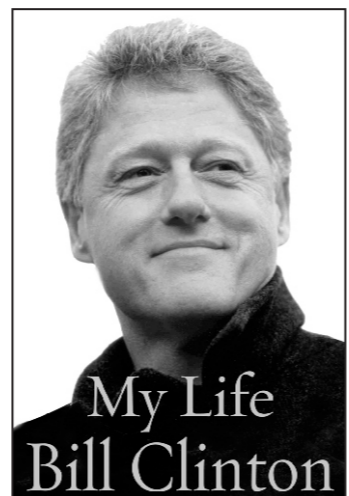


PHOTO: AFP

The cover of former US president Bill Clinton's memoir "My Life" released on Tuesday evening in New York. Clinton has finished writing his memoirs and has given the completed manuscript to editors.