

GOVERNING COUNCIL MEMBER SAYS
Iraq prisons must come under domestic control

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's new leaders will demand that they be allowed to run the country's prisons after sovereignty is handed over on June 30, a member of the US-installed Governing Council was quoted as saying in an interview yesterday.

"All prisons should be under the control of a sovereign Iraqi government. There is no question about that," Adnan Pachachi told The Times, according to the newspaper's Thursday edition.

Pachachi, a Sunni Muslim, has previously criticised the US-led coalition in Iraq, last month calling military operations against Iraqi insurgents in the town of Fallujah "illegal and totally unacceptable".

His latest comments follow allegations of widespread torture and other abuses of Iraqi prisoners by both US and British forces.



PHOTO: AFP

A Canadian activist holds a placard showing pictures of Iraqi prisoners abused by US soldiers, US President George W. Bush, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, near the US embassy in Awkar, north of Beirut yesterday. Rumsfeld made a surprise visit to Iraq to meet with US troops and commanders amid a scandal over abuse of Iraqi prisoners that has damaged US image.

ICRC hands US critical report on Guantanamo prison: Officials

AFP, Baghdad

The International Committee of the Red Cross has presented the US government with a new report that is critical of the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, a senior defense official said yesterday.

The report was turned over to Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz by the State Department on Tuesday, said the official, who was traveling with US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the report had not yet been analyzed in detail but was critical.

Rumsfeld noted the report in an interview with reporters traveling with him on an unannounced trip to Iraq to meet with US troops and their commanders.

Rumsfeld said there would always be differences of opinions over whether the treatment of detainees at Guantanamo met the standards of the Geneva Conventions.

"There is a constant review of that, and people will say different

things when they walk out," he said. "Some will say, gee, that's unbelievable how well that's done."

"Some will say that's terrific except that in my view it is mental torture to do something that is inconvenient in a certain way to a detainee, like standing up for a long period, or some other thing that someone else might say is not in any way abusive or harmful."

"There is no way to get everybody to agree because, when Geneva was prepared and agreed upon, they didn't go to that level of detail," he said.

Traveling with Rumsfeld was the defense department's general counsel, James Haynes, and Vice Admiral Albert Church, the US navy's inspector general, who just concluded a two-day review of conditions at Guantanamo.

Church said his investigation was focused on whether the secretary's orders and directions regarding the detention of detainees at Guantanamo were being carried out.

Norwegian envoy strikes deal with Tigers on talks

US backs peace move

AFP, Colombo

A top Norwegian envoy clinched an agreement with Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels on reviving peace talks and would make a formal announcement on the resumption shortly, the guerrillas said.

The Tamil Tiger rebels said a date and location for peace negotiations could be announced within a day or two after Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen held surprise talks with them in the rebel-held north yesterday.

The chief peace negotiator of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Anton Balasingham, told reporters in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi that Oslo would announce the deal to resume the talks between the Tigers and the Colombo government to end a decades-old civil conflict.

Earlier a top Norwegian envoy made a surprise visit to Sri Lanka's rebel-held north yesterday two days

after a similar bid failed to revive peace talks between Colombo and Tamil Tiger guerrillas, official sources said.

Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen stayed in Sri Lanka for the fresh attempt after his boss, Jan Petersen, left Wednesday failing to secure agreement on resuming negotiations stalled since April last year.

Helgesen travelled to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi, 330km north of Colombo, in a military helicopter for fresh talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leadership, official sources said.

"He travelled to Kilinochchi for talks with Tiger leaders after consultations with several key government figures yesterday (Wednesday)," an official source said, adding Helgesen would leave Sri Lanka later Thursday.

The sudden move came as the new Sri Lankan government

Wednesday expressed hope of opening initial talks with the Tigers within the next three months even after Petersen's failed bid.

"It will be talks about talks," government spokesman Reginold Cooray Cooray said. "The president is keen to solve this matter through a dialogue."

Moreover the United States backs the new Sri Lankan government's bid to forge peace with Tamil Tiger separatists, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said Wednesday after talks with Secretary of State Colin Powell and other US officials.

"I see no difficulty whatsoever from the United States, consistent with the message I received from Mr Powell that the US government fully supports the government that has newly come to office which endeavours to solve the problem," said Kadirgamar, who has been in Washington since Monday.

NAM urges UN to send peacekeepers to ME

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The United Nations should deploy peacekeepers to prevent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict sliding into fully-fledged war, the chairman of the 117-nation Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) said yesterday.

Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who currently heads the group of developing nations -- the biggest world body outside of the UN -- made the call in an opening address to a special meeting of the organisation's Committee on Palestine.

"The grim situation on the ground risks sliding dangerously towards a precipice and full-fledged war," Abdullah said, accusing Israel of repression, violence and "state

terrorism".

"I suggest that the United Nations can and must intervene effectively by establishing a UN mission or authorizing an international presence to monitor the situation, ease the tension and maintain peace and security."

Without spelling out details, Abdullah called for "a UN peace-keeping force or an international monitoring mechanism" to ensure that the "roadmap" for peace was implemented.

"The United Nations, notably the Security Council, remains the last hope for the Palestinian people," he said.

Abdullah told a news conference later that with all previous negotiations and agreements "torpedoed and torn to pieces", NAM members

currently on the UN Security Council hoped to win a new Security Council resolution for the resumption of peace talks.

Abdullah condemned US President George W. Bush's support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's unilateral disengagement plan, saying it risked derailing the entire peace process.

The plan includes a partial withdrawal from the Gaza Strip but also provides for continued Israeli sovereignty over parts of the occupied West Bank.

Abdullah said US support for the plan, along with the denial of the right of Palestinian refugees to their former homes in Israel, had dealt "a serious if not fatal blow to the roadmap" for peace.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH SAYS US abuse of Afghan prisoners 'systemic'

AFP, London

Mistreatment of prisoners by US military and intelligence personnel in Afghanistan is 'systemic', Human Rights Watch said yesterday, a day after the United States launched a probe into alleged abuse.

The watchdog called for the immediate release of results of past investigations into misconduct by US personnel in the war-torn country, including details about three Afghan detainees who died in US custody.

"Afghans have been telling us for well over a year about mistreatment in US custody," HRW's Afghanistan researcher John Sifton said in a statement, adding that the group had repeatedly alerted US officials to the problem.

"It's time now for the United

States to publicize the results of its investigations of abuse, fully prosecute those responsible, and provide access to independent monitors."

On Wednesday a former Afghan police officer told AFP how he suffered regular beatings, taunts about his sexual habits and sleep deprivation when he was detained by US forces last year.

The US military and embassy in the Afghan capital Kabul said they were investigating the claims of Khwaja Sayed Nabi Siddiqi, who also alleged he was stripped, kicked and photographed naked in custody at US bases.

The United States has drawn international criticism for its treatment of detainees in Iraq, captured in graphic photographs published worldwide.



PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar's opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) spokesman, U Lwin surrounded by press at NLD headquarters in Yangon yesterday. Top leaders of Myanmar's opposition including Aung San Suu Kyi have met ahead of next week's national convention as delegates began registering for the forum yesterday.

Syria for dialogue with US

Neighbours slam sanctions

AFP, Damascus

Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara urged Washington to open a dialogue with his government to address its concerns, saying the unilateral sanctions imposed Tuesday were in nobody's interest.

Meanwhile officials and newspapers in other countries of the region attacked the sanctions, with the head of the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council warning they could cause instability.

Damascus wants a "constructive and objective dialogue to settle outstanding issues" with the United States, Shara said in comments published Thursday by the London-based Arabic-language daily Al-Hayat.

The sweeping sanctions introduced by US President George W. Bush did "not serve the interests of the American people," he said.

"It is through a constructive and objective dialogue that we will settle the problems of the Middle East and not through a policy of pressure, threats and sanctions."

Syrian President Bashar al-

Assad also stressed the importance of dialogue in a meeting with visiting US journalists, the official news agency Sana said Thursday.

"Dialogue is important", it quoted Assad as saying when he explained Syria's views on US policy in the Middle East to the 19 journalists from US media.

Bush imposed the sanctions on Tuesday, charging that Damascus supported terrorism and failed to close its borders to insurgents fighting US-led forces in Iraq.

The sanctions include a near-blanket ban on US exports to Syria and the power to freeze Syrian assets in the United States, measures that are expected to hit US companies, particularly oil firms, working in Syria.

GCC Secretary General Abdulrahman al-Attiah said the decision was "unacceptable and does not serve stability in the region," in a statement released at GCC headquarters in Riyadh.

It was "astonishing" that Bush should impose sanctions on Syria on the pretext that it backs terrorism when Damascus has repeatedly voiced its opposition to terrorist acts, he said.

"The policy of imposing sanctions on Arab countries cannot be conducive to stability in the region, but will increase tension," warned the head of the alliance grouping Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"It is Israel and the government of (Ariel) Sharon that should be subjected to sanctions because of their ongoing attacks against the defenseless Palestinian people and continuous violations of international norms and laws," Attiyah said, urging Washington to reconsider its decision.

The press in Lebanon, which is politically and militarily dominated by Syria, said the United States should be sanctioned due to its wars and occupation of other countries.

"Had there been the least minimum of justice in this world, all the free countries would have drafted laws to impose sanctions on the United States and Israel for their behaviour and the weapons of destruction that they have while fighting against others", the daily Al-Liwaa said in an editorial.

Saddam unlikely to be handed to Iraqis by June 30

REUTERS, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein is unlikely to be handed over to Iraqi authorities ahead of the June 30 transfer of sovereignty, and will probably stand trial in 2005, the director of the court that will try him said on Wednesday.

In a statement, Salem Chalabi, director of the Iraqi Special Tribunal, modified comments he made in Kuwait on Tuesday, when he said the former president could be handed to Iraqis along with other top detainees before the US-led occupying coalition hands over sovereignty.

"Chalabi stated that the US has indicated that it is willing to hand over individuals in custody -- when indicted -- to the Iraqi Special Tribunal, if the Iraqi Special Tribunal is ready to take custody of them," the statement said.

"When asked if that would be before June 30, Chalabi stated that it is unlikely the tribunal would be ready to take custody of the defendants before June 30."

The statement said it was premature to discuss timetables but that "some individuals may be indicted within the next few months and...should trials with respect to these individuals commence, it would likely be in 2005."

'CIA employs harsh interrogation methods on al-Qaeda suspects'

AFP, Washington

The CIA employs harsh interrogation methods for top-level al-Qaeda members it has in detention and some agents are concerned about the potential consequences of their actions, the New York Times said yesterday.

The methods, which current and former counter-terrorism officials said stopped short of torture, were authorised by a set of secret rules for high-level al-Qaeda prisoners endorsed by the US Justice Department after the September 11 attacks, the daily said.

Their adoption by the Central Intelligence Agency "may have helped establish a new understanding throughout the government that officials would have greater freedom to deal harshly with detainees", it said.

The US military is facing a major scandal over its abuse of prisoners in Iraq, with lawmakers calling for

the resignation of Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. An investigation over prisoner abuse by US forces has also begun in Afghanistan.

Seven US soldiers have been charged, three of whom face courts martial, but there is growing suspicion that they may have acted at least with the acquiescence of their superiors.

Defenders of the interrogation tactics used by the CIA said they did not violate US anti-torture statutes and were necessary to fight a nebulous enemy and find out if more extremist attacks were planned against the United States.

CIA agents used "graduated levels of force", including a technique known as "water boarding", in which a prisoner is strapped down, forcibly pushed under water and made to believe he might drown, the daily said.

US loses credibility in ME

AFP, Washington

America is facing a huge loss of credibility across the Middle East, amid the release of photos showing US soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners, that could last for years, US analysts said this week.

The fallout from the graphic images of abuse has significantly tarnished the standing of Washington, they said, in its bid to restabilize war-torn Iraq, but also in efforts to resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

"For many in the region, (the abuse) validates every criticism of the United States and vastly strengthens the hand of Islamic extremists, Sunni insurgents, Shia insurgents," said Anthony Cordesman of the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

In a study released Tuesday, Cordesman severely criticised the administration of President George W. Bush, saying "too many" US officials are "in a state of denial about the political realities of the Middle East."

US angst was raised

"Senior US officials have ignored the fact that roughly one-third of Sunnis and two-thirds of Shias support violence against the (US-led) coalition and want the coalition forces to leave Iraq immediately," the report states.

"They (US officials) do not see just how much the perceived US tilt towards Israel and (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon alienates Iraqis and Arabs in general," wrote Cordesman, a Middle East expert and former advisor to the US Defence Department.

"They do not admit the near total failure of US information operations" in the ongoing quest to win the hearts and minds of people across the Middle East, said the report.

Anti-American rhetoric has spiked across the Middle East in recent days following the release of the shocking photos of US troops abusing Iraqi inmates at Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad.

Groups of Iraqis at the jail, once used by Saddam Hussein, were piled into naked pyramids, sexually humiliated and pictured cowering in fear.

Wednesday after a grisly video was posted on an Islamist website showing Nick Berg, a US civilian from Pennsylvania, being beheaded with a large knife by a group of masked men claiming revenge for the abuse of Iraqi prisoners.

A May study published by the Pew research organisation meanwhile showed a large part of the Muslim world remains cynical toward Washington's arguments for going to war against Iraq.

According to its findings, 46 percent of respondents in Pakistan, 66 percent in Morocco and 70 percent in Jordan said suicide attacks against Americans and other westerners in Iraq were "justifiable."

President George W. Bush has dubbed events at Abu Ghraib "abhorrent" and promised justice for the Iraqi victims and punishment for those responsible.

But US Secretary of State Colin Powell has conceded that the abuse was "very damaging" and constitutes a "disaster" for US efforts abroad, particularly across the Middle East.



PHOTO: AFP

Unicef's Ambassador of Goodwill, British actress Vanessa Redgrave meets children at primary school in Sarajevo yesterday. Redgrave arrived in Sarajevo to attend inter-governmental conference "Make East Europe and Asia Fit for Children", which was opened yesterday.