



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis gather at the scene of a car bomb in the Kazimiyeh district of Baghdad yesterday. Four people were killed and 22 others wounded, including five children, when a car bomb exploded in a northern Baghdad of the city, Iraqi police said.

UN envoy defends Iraq government

AFP, Baghdad

UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday responded to criticism of US involvement in the nomination of the new Iraqi government by stressing Washington was still the dominant force in the country.

"I would remind you the Americans are governing the country so their point of view was certainly taken into consideration," he said at a news conference.

"I don't think he'd mind my saying this: Bremer is the dictator of Iraq. He has the money, he has the signature," said Brahimi after stressing he had been invited to choose the new cabinet at the request of the Americans and the now-disbanded Governing Council.

The final line-up was the product of haggling, notably between the US-led coalition and the council. The sides formed a working committee along with Brahimi to vet the list of contenders, the envoy said.

Representing the Governing Council in those talks were Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, Shiite and Communist party leader Hamid Majid Mussa and Sunni tribal sheikh Ghazi al-Yawar, the envoy said.

Yawar was tapped Tuesday after a bruising competition with fellow Sunni leader Adnan Pachachi for the largely ceremonial role of the interim government's president.

"Ultimately you know that you have very, very complicated issues. What you have to do then is a com-

promise, with strengths and weaknesses. And the overall picture is positive ... very much positive," Brahimi said.

But he admitted that the new Iraqi executive unveiled Tuesday was not ideal and stressed its members would have to work hard to earn legitimacy.

"None of us should forget that ultimately it is only an elected government that can legitimately claim to represent the people of Iraq," Brahimi said.

"Meanwhile the members of this government know and should not forget that they have not been elected."

"This government will therefore have its work cut out for it. It will not be easy for them to prove the sceptics wrong."

Americans under attack in Saudi capital again

REUTERS, Riyadh

Two suspected militants shot at US military personnel in the Saudi Arabian capital yesterday just days after a major al Qaeda attack in the country killed 22 people, mainly foreigners.

Security sources said nobody was hurt in the latest incident outside the vast, heavily fortified Iskan US military compound in southern Riyadh.

They said a convoy of three cars carrying US and Saudi personnel was leaving the compound when the gunmen, armed with automatic rifles, shot at one car. The gunmen then fled.

"There has been shooting in Riyadh against Americans this morning," said a Western diplomat.

The shooting heightened fears of further militant attacks in Saudi Arabia, a key US ally and the world's biggest oil exporter, after the weekend shooting and hostage-taking spree in the eastern oil city of Khobar in which 22 people were killed, including 19 Westerners and other foreigners.

The British embassy warned more attacks were probable. Some 35,000 Americans live in Saudi Arabia and last month, the State Department urged them to leave the kingdom, citing possible militant attacks.

Last August, with neighboring Iraq now under its control, the United States ended more than a decade of military operations in Saudi Arabia amid resentment by

Saudis over the American military presence near Islam's holiest sites.

But the US and Saudi militaries still cooperate on training.

Saudi-born Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda network had reviled the US military presence and in 1996, a suspected al Qaeda suicide truck bomb in Khobar killed 19 American soldiers and wounded nearly 400 at a US military housing complex.

A purported al Qaeda statement also claimed the latest Khobar assault, the second in a month on the oil industry.

Saudi Arabia has been battling al Qaeda militants for over a year and the top al Qaeda leader in Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz al-Muqrin, vowed in a purported Internet statement that 2004 would be "bloody and miserable" for the kingdom.

In a separate incident, Saudi forces killed two gunmen after clashes in the Western city of Ta'if, security sources said.

They said both were wanted "terrorists" but not linked to the Khobar attack. One of them, Abdul Rahman Mohamed Yazji, was on a list of the country's 26 most wanted militants, they said.

The shootout in Ta'if, close to the holy Muslim city of Mecca, began on Tuesday when gunmen fired on a police checkpoint in the mountainous region.

Saudi forces had launched a huge manhunt for three militants who fled after the Khobar attack, setting up checkpoints and road-blocks across the kingdom.

Draft UN resolution boosts sovereignty

Iraqi cabinet gets ready for transfer of power

AFP, Baghdad

The newly-appointed Iraqi government began preparing for full sovereignty handover from US-led occupation authorities at the end of the month, and received a boost from a new US-British UN resolution draft giving it increased security control.

While coalition officials hailed the diversity of the line-up presented Tuesday by prime minister Iyad Allawi, some Iraqis were dismissive of a cabinet consisting chiefly of former exiles.

UN chief Kofi Annan could not disguise his displeasure that Brahimi was frozen out of the process by Iraqi and US officials opposed to his vision for a technocratic government.

"We all have to recognise that the process wasn't perfect," Annan said Tuesday.

Kurdish leaders took plum posts in the government and tribal leader Ghazi al-Yawar was named president after elder statesman Adnan Pachachi refused the post.

The US-backed Allawi hailed the nomination of the new government as an historic step towards sovereignty but showed no sign of rushing to ease the coalition out of Iraq.

"We Iraqis are just like the rest of the peoples in the world. We don't want our country to remain under occupation," he said but then went on to stress that Baghdad would still rely heavily on the US-led coalition.

At the United Nations, changes were made to a UN Security Council resolution sponsored by Britain and the United States after an outcry from other council nations about sending a clear signal that Iraq will gain full sov-

erignty when the US-led occupation on June 30 hands power to the interim government.

Under the new draft, obtained by AFP, the mandate of US-led troops who will remain in Iraq after this month would expire "upon completion of the political process" to create a constitutionally elected Iraqi government.

But with that expected to take until late 2005 or even early 2006, it was not immediately clear if the changes would satisfy opposition to the first text led by China, France and Germany.

And the draft still fails to clarify the level of sovereignty the Iraqi leadership will enjoy after June 30, in the run-up to elections next year.

Iraq's interim foreign minister Hoshiyar Zebari who flew to New York on Tuesday was expected to meet Security Council members on Thursday.

India's new parliament begins its journey

PTI, New Delhi

The 14th Lok Sabha of India yesterday began its first session that saw reversal of roles with the Congress-led alliance occupying treasury benches after a gap of over eight years and BJP along with supporting parties sitting in Opposition rows as new members took oath, marking start of the proceedings.

Leader of the House and Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Leader of the Opposition LK Advani, former Prime Minister and NDA Chairman Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Congress Parliamentary Party Chairperson Sonia Gandhi were among the first to take oath as members.

Veteran CPI-M leader Somnath Chatterjee, who was sworn in as the pro tem Speaker on Wednesday morning by President APJ Abdul Kalam, chaired the proceedings.

Chatterjee, who is all set to be elected as the new Speaker on Friday, urged members to main-

tain high traditions of House and strengthen roots of Parliamentary democracy.

Soon after the House assembled and national anthem was played, members stood in silence for a while to mark the solemn occasion of the first sitting of the House.

Before announcing the panel of names to conduct the oath or affirmation to members, Chatterjee congratulated them on their election to the Lok Sabha.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who greeted Vajpayee, Advani and leaders of various parties soon after entering the House, is a member of the Rajya Sabha.

Over hundred members including Cabinet Ministers, Ministers of State (Independent charge) and Ministers of State had taken oath when the House adjourned for lunch.

RJD chief Laloo Prasad and NCP President Sharad Pawar, who are both Cabinet Ministers, occupied the front row of ruling benches.

During the first session, the Speaker will be elected on June four followed by address to the joint sitting of Parliament by the President on June 07.

Mukherjee, the Leader of the House, occupied the seat next to that of the Prime Minister, while Gandhi sat in the first row of treasury benches with senior party member ABA Ghani Khan Choudhary sitting by her side.

Advani occupied the seat of Leader of the Opposition and former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee sat next to him in the front row.

Members of Congress and its allies were seen greeting Sonia Gandhi. Her son Rahul Gandhi occupied the third row behind his mother.

Several film personalities including Dharmendra and Vinod Khanna (both BJP), Sunil Dutt (Congress) and Jayaprada (Samajwadi Party) were among the members present in the House.

NDA will play role of constructive oppn

PTI, New Delhi

Noting that "old days are back" for him, former Prime Minister and chairman of BJP Parliamentary Party Atal Bihari Vajpayee yesterday said his party would play the role of a "constructive opposition" and raise important issues in the interest of people in Parliament.

"Old days are back," Vajpayee quipped as he came out of Parliament after taking oath as a member in the Lok Sabha.

Asked about the role of his party, he told reporters its members would not indulge in unruly actions in the House.

BJP would raise "important issues" and those relating to interests of the people, he said adding it would play the role of a constructive opposition.

To a question, he said there was a "lot of difference" between the NDA's agenda for governance and UPA's Common Minimum Programme (CMP) but did not elaborate.

Earlier breaking his silence over his party's electoral debacle, Vajpayee on Tuesday attributed the defeat to "complacency" and "failure to identify the rival."

"While in the battle field, the enemy is always identified, it was not so in this case," he said apparently referring to one of the party's campaign planks "Vajpayee versus question mark".

Vajpayee said 90 sitting MPs of the party had lost the election while there were others, who had served five to six terms have been returned. This showed that "there was need for the newcomers to learn lessons from this."

Sharon hopes cabinet will endorse Gaza pullout plan

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli cabinet will endorse the controversial Gaza pullout plan at a meeting scheduled for Sunday, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon predicted yesterday.

"The plan will be adopted on Sunday," Sharon told reporters as he left a closed-door session of parliament's foreign affairs and defence committee.

Sharon was earlier quoted by army radio as telling the committee that he was determined that his project would be adopted in full and that opponents would not be allowed to cherry-pick clauses.

He was forced to postpone a vote at this week's meeting after failing to persuade enough of his 23 ministers to come onside.

The Bush administration, which enthusiastically endorsed Sharon's proposals in April, has warned opponents of the project that it will reject any alternative version or compromise agreement.

Clerics support Charles's wish to wed Camilla

AFP, London

The former archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, gave moral support yesterday to the controversial relationship between Prince Charles and his long-time lover, Camilla Parker-Bowles, saying it would be natural for them to marry.

"He is the heir of the throne and he loves her. The natural thing is that they should get married," Carey said in an interview splashed over the front page of The Times newspaper.

Parker-Bowles became one of the most unpopular women in Britain after Charles's late wife Diana was quoted as blaming her for the break-up in November 1992 of her 10-year marriage to the prince.

But Carey told The Times that Charles was more "sinned against than sinning" in his marriage to Diana. He described the relationship between Charles and Parker-Bowles, which began when they were young and continued after both were married, as "part of the fallibility of the human condition".

Parker-Bowles and her husband, Andrew, divorced in March 1995. Last year the Church of England changed its laws to allow divorcees to remarry in church, a decision widely interpreted as opening the way for Charles and Parker-Bowles to wed.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) is welcomed with flowers by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Guhlan Nabi Azad (L) as he arrives at Parliament House in New Delhi yesterday.

Nepal king reinstates PM after two years

AFP, Kathmandu

Two years of political turmoil in Nepal came full circle yesterday as the king reappointed the prime minister he had fired in 2002, when he declared elected leaders incompetent at running the troubled kingdom.

After two years of royal-appointed prime ministers, pro-democracy protests and a rising Maoist insurgency, King Gyanendra announced he was giving Sher Bahadur Deuba, the last elected premier, his job back.

A palace statement stopped short of saying Gyanendra regretted sacking the democratic government but said Deuba would be "invested with executive rights." Royal-appointed premiers could only take decisions with the king's approval.

"My demand for reinstatement has been fulfilled," Deuba told reporters.

"I am going to arrange for general elections with the cooperation of all political parties and will resume talks with the Maoists to maintain peace and security," Deuba said.

The royalist government had also called for renewed dialogue with the rebels, but to little avail. Opposition parties have

demanding that elections, which the king wants by April, be held under a "neutral" government.

Analysts saw the reappointment as a way for Gyanendra to save face and at the same time end massive street protests which were increasingly critical of the monarchy as an institution.

The demonstrations triggered the resignation on May 7 of the king's handpicked prime minister Surya Bahadur Thapa.

"The reappointment of Deuba shows the king wants to end the street protests and restart talks with the Maoists but without having to go down before the people and say he was wrong," political analyst Kapil Shrestha said.

Maoist rebels, who are fighting to end the monarchy and control much of the countryside, have exploited the power vacuum in Kathmandu to show their strength.

Most traffic was off the streets of Kathmandu yesterday in a transport shutdown called by the rebels in a prelude to a three-day nationwide strike called by the guerrillas from June 10.

Gyanendra in October 2002 had declared Deuba "incompetent" at developing Nepal's fragile economy and at fighting the Maoist insurgency, which has claimed more than 9,500 lives since 1996.

Iraqi group threatens to kill hostages

REUTERS, Dubai

Al Arabiya television aired footage yesterday of an Iraqi group threatening to kill an Egyptian and a Turkish hostage if their countries did not condemn the US-led occupation in Iraq.

"Death will be the fate of these people if their governments don't condemn the occupation," said a masked man holding an assault rifle as two men crouched in front of him holding up their passports.

"I deliver food stuffs from Kuwait to the US army," said one of the men, who was clean-shaven and spoke in Arabic with an Egyptian accent. The other man had a mustache and spoke in what sounded like Turkish.

Both men attempted to identify themselves on the tape, but the quality was so poor it was difficult for viewers to be sure of what they were saying.

Scores of foreigners have been taken hostage by Iraqi armed groups, who are battling the US-led presence in Iraq. Some hostages have been released but others have been killed.

On Tuesday, Iraq's new government was sworn in with the president-designate demanding the United Nations give "full sovereignty" when the US-led occupation authority is dissolved on June 30.