

CPI-M to stick to not sending troops to Iraq

SAKYASEN MITRA, Kolkata

The CPI-M will maintain its steadfast stance against sending troops to Iraq even under the UN banner.

"There is talk in some quarters of sending troops to Iraq under the UN flag, but we will not allow the sending of even one soldier," said Anil Biswas, a top leader of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), the largest Left group in parliament.

He added, "We are a non-communist country. So why should we antagonize Iraq when we have always maintained good relations with them. The CPI-M accounts for 43 of the 62 Left MPs, whose support to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's coalition government is crucial.

Biswas said the "bogey of the UN mandate" in support of sending Indian troops to Iraq rings hollow because the US and its allies had earlier ignored the same organisation when they went ahead with their military strike against the country.

"If the UN resolutions are a yardstick, then how did the US and its allies ignore the resolution against military aggression on Iraq?" the CPI-M politburo member asked at a lecture here Tuesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri (L) gestures as he talks with US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage during a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Armitage has started a day of intensive talks with Pakistani leaders here on counterterrorism, Pakistan-India relations and developments in Iraq.

## Foreign workers in Saudi systematically abused

Some even treated like slaves: Rights group

AFP, London

Foreign workers in Saudi Arabia are systematically abused and exploited, some of them living in conditions akin to slavery, Human Rights Watch (HRW) charged yesterday.

"We found men and women in conditions resembling slavery," said Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of HRW's Middle East and North Africa Division, summing up a 135-page report by the New York-based rights watchdog released here.

Discrimination against women in the conservative oil-rich kingdom compounds the plight of female workers, some of whom have been victims of sexual abuse and forced confinement, according to the report.

Asians form the bulk of foreign workers in Saudi Arabia, who according to Labor Minister Ghazi al-Gosaibi number 8.8 million.

This compares to an indigenous population of about 17 million.

The report details "the pervasive abuses foreign workers endure," showing "the abysmal and exploitative labor conditions many workers

face, and the utter failure of the justice system to provide redress," HRW said in a statement.

HRW "documented how foreign workers detained in Saudi Arabia have been denied consular visits and forced to sign confessions that they could not read," the statement said.

The report also lists "cases of beheading in which the embassies and families of the condemned men were not informed of the executions until after they were carried out," it said.

Information obtained from Asian women who had recently worked in Saudi Arabia pointed to a "widespread practice of forced, around-the-clock confinement of women in unsafe conditions," the rights watchdog said.

In one case, some 300 women from India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines worked 12-hour shifts, six days a week, cleaning hospitals in Jeddah.

At the end of each work day, they were returned to crowded, dormitory-style housing, with 14 women sharing one small room lined with bunk beds. The doors to the rooms were locked from the outside, deny-

ing the women any freedom of movement for the two or three years of their contracts," it said.

HRW said it examined four cases of women who were victims of forced confinement and sexual abuse, including rape.

In all four cases, the perpetrators -- three of whom were alleged rapists -- did not face criminal investigation or prosecution. The report also has information about women whom Human Rights Watch found in a prison in Riyadh who were serving sentences for illegal pregnancies, the statement said.

HRW said it conducted most of the interviews for the report in India, Bangladesh and the Philippines with workers who had recently returned from Saudi Arabia after it was denied permission to carry out field research there even though a delegation was invited to the kingdom last year for talks with officials.

In a series of recommendations, HRW urged Riyadh to "suspend implementation of death sentences for Saudi citizens and foreigners until it can be determined independently that torture was not used and confessions were not coerced."

Mandela, Bill Gates team up to fight TB

AFP, Bangkok

The charisma of Nelson Mandela and the cheque book of Bill Gates joined forces at the world AIDS conference here yesterday to lay assault on tuberculosis, a companion killer disease to HIV.

Mandela, an iconic figure at the global AIDS forum, branded tuberculosis -- of which he himself was once a victim -- a silent slayer in the HIV/AIDS pandemic, while Gates' charity unveiled a 44.7-million-dollar grant to help the search for fighting TB at the grassroots.

"Tuberculosis remains ignored. Today we are calling the world to recognise that we can't fight AIDS unless we take on TB, as well," Mandela said at a press conference.

Mandela recalled his own experience with TB during his long imprisonment on Robben Island during South Africa's apartheid years, and his diagnosis with prostate cancer after his release.

In both cases, it had been vital to him to tell his friends and family about his health status and to closely follow the counsel of his doctors.

"In both cases I spoke about it openly, because once people were aware of the facts, they would support me," Mandela said.

A state-run food warehouse was stripped of its stocks while the town administrator's flooded headquarters was also ransacked, they added.

Military helicopters, meanwhile, were air dropping food packets on the town jail where the rising waters have forced inmates to take refuge on the roof.

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