

British MPs call for World Court ruling on Iraq war

REUTERS, London

Forty British parliamentarians have asked UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to seek the opinion of the UN's International Court of Justice on the legality of the Iraq war, the Daily Mirror newspaper reported yesterday.

It said that the cross-party group, which had written a letter to Annan dated July 20, believes Prime Minister Tony Blair's government breached the UN's charter when it joined the US-led invasion of Iraq.

The letter asked for an "advisory opinion" from the court in the Hague.

"Lots of people have concerns about the legitimacy of the war and it seems we do need to have clarification on this," said Alan Simpson, an MP from Blair's own ruling Labour party, who is leading the group.

The British public has long been suspicious of the motives behind the

invasion of Iraq and a report earlier this month by former civil servant Lord Butler has given Blair's critics fresh ammunition to question his credibility.

Butler cleared Blair of distorting spies' assessments on Iraq but exposed faulty intelligence. He criticized Blair's informal style of government and its closeness of secret agents.

The parliamentarians' letter to Annan said: "It is clear that, in Britain and the United States, war was justified on the basis of intelligence reports of current and serious threats from weapons of mass destruction, purportedly held by Iraq, all of which turned out to be without foundation."

"We look to the court for an advisory opinion on this war, not only to address the casualties and damage done to the people and country of Iraq, but also to offer clear guidelines for the future about the legality of pre-emptive wars."

Hostage-takers threaten to kill 2 Pakistanis

Families cheer as captors stay slaying of 7 others

AFP, Doha

Al-Jazeera television carried a statement yesterday in which an armed group in Iraq calling itself the Islamic Army threatened to kill an Iraqi and two Pakistani hostages it said it was holding.

Video footage was shown of the Pakistanis' identity cards, which carried their photographs and named them as Azad Hussein Khan and Sajjad Naeem.

"One of the two Pakistanis works as technician for the American forces and the second is a driver for these forces," said the statement, adding that after investigation, "it was decided to execute the two" Pakistanis.

A date was not given for the threatened execution.

The statement said an Iraqi had also been kidnapped, and like the two Pakistanis, worked for a Kuwaiti company.

Early on Sunday, Islamabad said

two Pakistanis working in Iraq had gone missing and were believed to have been kidnapped.

Reuters adds: A militant Islamic group holding seven foreigners hostage in Iraq said it had extended the deadline for negotiations to spare their lives and repeated a demand that their Kuwaiti employer pull out of the country.

The hostages -- three Indians, three Kenyans and an Egyptian, all truck drivers for a Kuwaiti firm -- were seized last week by a little-known group calling itself the "Black Banners" brigade of the Islamic Secret Army.

In a video tape released to news organisations yesterday, a masked member of the group read a statement as two armed and masked men stood at his side, behind the kneeling hostages, who were dressed in white smocks.

Moreover, families of three Indians being held hostage in Iraq along with four other truck drivers cheered Monday on receiving news that the

captors had stayed their threat to start killing the men one by one.

"This is good news. Very good news. The entire village prayed today and we shall continue," said Ram Dass, grand uncle of hostage Antaryami, who uses one name.

Dass, speaking to AFP by telephone from his village of Dehlon, some 430km north of New Delhi, acknowledged the efforts of the Indian government to free the truckers.

"We have no complaints with the Indian government. They are trying their best," Dass said, adding however, "but let us also not make irresponsible comments."

Ram Dass said he had just one appeal to make: "Please release our boys. We want nothing else. We are also appealing to our god."

The parents of another hostage, Sukhdev Singh, were too weak from the trauma to attend a telephone call but the 26-year-old trucker's aunt, Bibi Jimer Kaur exploded with joy.



PHOTO: AFP
People gather behind the wreckage of a car bomb that detonated close to the Sarafia bridge over the Tigris River in Baghdad yesterday wounding two people but causing no deaths.

Indo-China border talks begin

PTI, New Delhi

India and China on Monday held third round of crucial talks between their Special Representatives (SRs) aimed at expediting resolution of the vexed border question, first since the UPA Government came to power.

National Security Adviser JN Dixit warmly received his Chinese counterpart and Executive Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo at his South Block office before the two sides commenced the parleys.

During the two-day talks, they will have an in-depth exchange of views on the guiding principles that were formulated during the earlier meetings.

The earlier two rounds of border talks with Dai were held between the then National Security Adviser of NDA Government Brajesh Mishra. The Cabinet Committee on Security had on Saturday finalised the brief for the meeting.

It is also the first time that National Security Adviser and India's Special Representative JN Dixit met Dai Bingguo for the two-day talks.



PHOTO: AFP
Demonstrators protest the war in Iraq as they march to the site of the Democratic National Convention before its start in Boston, Massachusetts. The convention started yesterday and will continue till July 29.

Democrats open convention

AFP, Boston

US Democrats gathered here yesterday to kick off a four-day political pageant to crown John Kerry as their man to battle Republican President George W. Bush for the White House in November.

With the US election 100 days away, the Democratic National Convention opened here in the birthplace of American democracy with hopes riding high that Kerry can capitalise on anger over Iraq to out Bush from power.

Security was heightened as Americans readied for their first national political convention since the September 11 attacks in 2001, with barricades up, streets closed, and police sharpshooters watching out from rooftops.

The Democrats assembled a star-studded lineup, including former president Bill Clinton, to galvanise the party faithful as well as the crucial voters who remain undecided with Bush and Kerry running neck-and-neck in the polls.

Party leaders said speakers would focus on the main slogan -- making the United States "stronger at home and respected in the world" -- before Kerry caps the rally on Thursday by taking the stage to accept the nomination.

Kerry and Democratic officials have pledged to minimise criticism of Bush and instead put the spotlight

on a campaign platform to rebuild US relations abroad, bolster the economy and strengthen national security.

"There won't be any bashing of the president," said Bill Richardson, the former US ambassador to the United Nations and co-chairman of the convention. "Well, hang on -- there will be some of that."

But there will be no avoiding the deep political divide over the war in Iraq, with visitors from around 120 countries expected to be in attendance.

"The number of foreigners reflects that we are in a new international climate," said former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright.

"There is generally concern about what is happening in this country," she said.

Kerry hopes to convince voters that he can be tough in defending the United States while repairing alliances damaged by the war that brought down Saddam Hussein.

Polls show Kerry and his southern populist running mate, Senator John Edwards of North Carolina, in a dead heat with Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney.

With Bush under fire for his handling of the war on terror and Iraq, and his job approval rating stuck below 50 percent, history appears to be on the side of the challengers.

Militants kill 8, troops gun down 5 rebels in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Suspected Kashmiri rebels killed eight people, three by beheading, and injured 30 others, while Indian troops gunned down five militants in Indian Kashmir, police said yesterday.

One of the civilian deaths was caused when suspected rebels tossed a grenade at paramilitary troops near the main hospital in Baramulla town, 55 kilometers (35 miles) north of the summer capital Srinagar, police said.

"The grenade exploded among the paramilitary men and civilian patients and attendants," a police spokesman said, adding that 30 people were injured in the blast.

"The hospital was abuzz with activity when the explosion took place," the spokesman said, adding two of the injured were with India's Border Security Force.

No group has claimed responsibility for the blast. The region's dominant rebel group, Hizbul Mujahedin this month criticised attacks by rebels in crowded places and urged other groups to refrain from such actions.

Meanwhile, armed rebels barged into the house of a man named Mohammed Shafi in southern Rajouri district and beheaded him, police said. His son and daughter were also beheaded minutes after his killing.

Ex-general wins Indonesian polls

Megawati to fight race in second-round

AFP, Jakarta

needed more than 50 percent of the vote to avoid the runoff, appealed for tighter security.

"There is still time to save this elections process which will go to the second round," he said.

"Don't let it (happening) happen in another place," said the man who led the country's fight against terrorism when he was Megawati's security minister.

If they are living in anxiety, it can influence the people in casting their votes, in doing the right thing in accordance with their conscience,"

Wiranto, who stood for the Golkar party of former dictator Suharto, has challenged his third placing. He claims the vote was flawed and his supporters say they may go to court to contest the result.

Any legal challenge would further intensify political uncertainty in Indonesia, which has been preoccupied with elections for almost the entire year. Separate legislative polls were held on April 5, with Golkar topping the vote.

The president has instructed us to get the perpetrator soon and prevent similar incidents taking place again," said national police chief Dai Bachtiar of the explosion, the third low-level blast in less than two weeks in the country.

Peep at Saddam's prison life

REUTERS, London



Amin said he had met Saddam's half brother Barzan al-Tikriti who had tried to persuade him that he was not like Saddam's other strongmen captured by US-led forces.

Israel behind Kennedy's killing, says Vanunu

PTI, Jerusalem

In a startling accusation, nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu has alleged that Jerusalem was behind the assassination of US President John F Kennedy, who was exerting pressure on the then Israeli head of the state to shed light on the Dimona nuclear plant.

In defiance of a ban on talking to media and meeting with foreigners, Vanunu is said to have made the accusation in an interview to London-based Al-Hayat newspaper.

As per the interview published in newspaper's Arabic supplement Al-Wasat on Saturday, Vanunu said according to "near-certain indications," Kennedy was assassinated due to "pressure he exerted on the then head of government, David Ben-Gurion, to shed light on Dimona's nuclear reactor."

"We do not know which irresponsible Israeli Prime Minister will take office and decide to use nuclear weapons in the struggle against neighbouring Arab countries," he is quoted to have said, adding "What has already been exposed about the weapons Israel is holding can destroy the region and kill millions."

10 drown as boat sinks in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Ten people drowned and four were reported missing after a boat capsized in the early evening in Morigaon, some 70km east of Guwahati, Assam's main city.

The accident, involving a vessel carrying about 50 passengers, took place in the early evening in Morigaon, some 70km east of Guwahati, Assam's main city.

A police official said four people were still unaccounted for. Locals had earlier saved 36 passengers.

Rescue efforts are under way to find the missing people, the police official added.

A US-drafted resolution seeking to threaten oil-producing Sudan with sanctions remains stalled in the United Nations Security Council by China and Russia -- two of the five veto-wielding permanent members.

No turning back on Gaza pullout: Sharon

6 Palestinians killed in Israeli fire

REUTERS, AFP, Jerusalem

He told army officers on Sunday "he does not intend to go back on the plan in light of the severe and dangerous economic and security situation that Israel would find itself in if it had no diplomatic plan," his office said on Monday.

Sharon's comments came during a long-day protest in which settlers and their right-wing supporters formed a human chain stretching from Jerusalem to the Gaza Strip.

It was another sign of the obstacles Sharon must overcome to implement his US-backed blueprint for "disengagement" from conflict with the Palestinians by removing all 21 settlements in Gaza and four of 120 in the West Bank by the end of 2005.

Sharon, once considered godfather of the settlement movement,

failed to get his own party to support the plan, though he did succeed in winning cabinet approval in early June.

Palestinians welcome an Israeli pullout, but fear the unilateral move does not alter Israel's intention to strengthen its hold on large swathes of West Bank land.

Meanwhile, six Palestinian militants were killed and two bystanders wounded during a raid by Israeli special forces in the northern West Bank town of Tulkarem Sunday, Palestinian medics said.

Among the dead was Hani Awidha, local commander of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's mainstream Fatah movement, the medics said.



PHOTO: AFP
Demonstrators shout slogans during a protest held by international peace activists against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip at the Huwara checkpoint at the entrance of the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday.

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General Manager (Com) I/C
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