

Iraqi Nat'l Conference postponed

REUTERS, Baghdad

A major political conference to plot Iraq's future, due to start tomorrow, has been postponed until next month, a source on the preparatory committee said.

"I can tell you that the conference has been delayed, we are writing the statement saying that now," the source told Reuters. A second source sitting with the preparatory committee said it had been put off until Aug. 15.

The United Nations had been pushing for a postponement, saying more time was needed to make it truly representative.

"Everybody is very much aware that the conference should take place in the best possible conditions, that it should be as inclusive as possible and that it should generate substantive debate on the country's future," said Jamal Benomar, a UN representative sent to Iraq to help plan the event.

"The time is very short to organise such a big undertaking, and that is why the United Nations favors putting it off."

Iran defies pressure, resumes N-plant test

REUTERS, Vienna

Iran has defied international pressure and resumed testing a facility for converting uranium, a key part of the process of enriching the element for use as fuel or in a nuclear bomb, diplomats said yesterday.

The European Union's "big three" -- France, Britain and Germany -- strongly criticised Iran when it tested the site in March, saying it sent the wrong signal and would make it harder for Tehran to regain international confidence.

The EU three were due to meet Iranian officials in Paris yesterday to discuss Tehran's nuclear programme.

The United States says Iran is stringing the international community along with talks over its nuclear program while buying time to make an atomic bomb. Iran denies the charge, saying it is only interested in generating electricity.

While Iran said in April it intended to run the tests at its uranium conversion facility near the central city of Isfahan, the move snubs a request by the UN nuclear watchdog for it not to test the site.

Maoists rally in Andhra as ban is lifted

AFP, Hyderabad

Thousands of Maoists and their supporters began gathering in a southern Indian town Wednesday for their first public rally since an eight-year ban on them was lifted last week, police said.

The ban on the People's War Group (PWG) and its six front organisations was lifted after a new government came to power in Andhra Pradesh state.

The two sides are now engaged in peace talks.

Wednesday's rally at Warangal, 140km northeast of state capital Hyderabad, had been called to mark "martyrs' day" commemorating PWG cadre killed in recent years fighting the police.

The Maoists are also planning to erect a memorial in Moglicharala village of the district.

"This turnout is proof of the spontaneous support of the people for the movement," Gaddar, one of the negotiators representing the PWG in the talks, told AFP by telephone from Warangal.

Nato battles for accord on Iraq mission

AFP, Brussels

Nato diplomats continued intensive negotiations yesterday to resolve differences over a pledge to train Iraqi security forces, hoping to overcome resistance notably from France, diplomats said.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) leaders agreed in principle at a summit in Istanbul last month to provide such training after the handover of powers to Baghdad from the US-led coalition.

But they left details to be hammered out, and France is notably standing firm in rejecting a Nato mission in Iraq itself, pressing for training to take place outside the war-scarred country, diplomats say.

One Nato official was upbeat after a first meeting of ambassadors Thursday morning.

"They are narrowing down the outstanding issues," he said. "We feel optimistic that it is possible to reach an agreement today, at the latest Friday," he said.

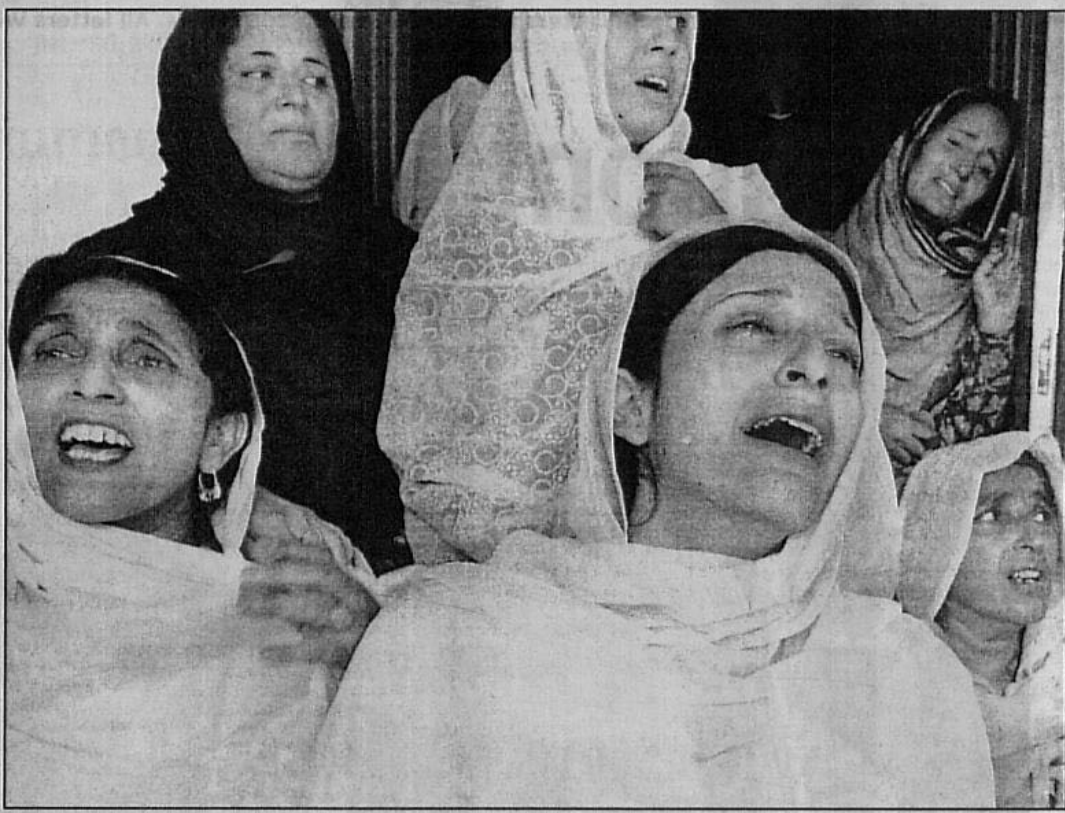


PHOTO: AFP

The sister of Pakistani Sajid Naeem, Ruma Naeem (front-R), his mother Zarina Naeem (L) and other relatives cry as they mourn his death yesterday in Rawalakot, some 75km northeast of Islamabad. Pakistan's embassy in Baghdad confirmed the executions of migrant workers Sajid Naeem, 29, and Azad Hussein Khan, 49, after Arabic television station Al-Jazeera broke the news late Wednesday without airing footage of their corpses.

BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY REPORT SAYS

Coalition failures turn Iraq into al-Qaeda battleground

AFP, London

The US-led coalition's failure to restore security has turned Iraq into a battleground for the likes of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, a British parliamentary committee said yesterday.

In a major report on the war on terrorism, the House of Commons foreign affairs committee said the lack of law and order had created a "vacuum" for criminals and militias, with "appalling consequences" for the Iraqi people.

It added that Iraq's own police and armed forces are still "a long way from being able to maintain security," and warned that ongoing violence could mar elections planned for early next year.

"We conclude that the violence in Iraq stems from a number of sources, including members of the former regime, local Islamists,

criminal gangs and al-Qaeda," the committee said.

"Iraq has become a 'battleground' for al-Qaeda, with appalling consequences for the Iraqi people," it added.

"However, we also conclude that the coalition's failure to bring law and order to parts of Iraq created a vacuum into which criminal elements and militias have stepped," it said.

It blamed an "insufficient number of troops" for contributing to the breakdown in security, adding that it was "disappointing" that some countries -- which it did not name -- had not committed forces to Iraq.

"It is therefore of the utmost importance that current problems are resolved in favour of the forces of order and that those who seek to impede Iraq's transition to a free and democratic state are defeated."

The 181-page report was published by the 13-member cross-

party committee a month and a day after the June 28 handover of sovereignty to an interim Iraqi administration in Baghdad.

It also came just a day after a suicide bombing outside a police station and a wave of attacks around the Iraq left more than 120 dead.

Iraq's hostage crisis meanwhile deepened Thursday with confirmation that two Pakistani nationals who disappeared six days earlier had been executed by their kidnappers.

Titled "Foreign Policy Aspects of the War Against Terrorism," the report was likely to give fresh ammunition to critics of Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to join the US invasion of Iraq in March last year.

Blair is on holiday outside Britain this week, but he has been hoping that Iraq will fade from the public spotlight as his governing Labour party gears up for a general election likely to be held next year.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians inspect their homes demolished by the Israeli army at the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. Since August 2002 the army has dynamited hundreds of houses in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, targeting the homes of Palestinians implicated in attacks. A further 2,000 houses have been razed "for security reasons" mainly in the Rafah area of the southern Gaza Strip.

3 PALESTINIANS KILLED

Rockets fired at Israel in ME violence flare-up

AFP, Nablis

Three Palestinian militants, including a local military leader, were killed in a flare-up of violence yesterday, which also saw the firing of two rockets at a town in southern Israel.

Two of the militants were killed in the southern Gaza Strip when a device they had planted near the Jewish settlement of Netzer Serani exploded, Palestinian security sources said.

One of the two, Yunis al Abadla, was a member of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, while the second victim was named as Mohammed Odwan, a member of Islamic Jihad's armed wing.

A local leader of Jihad's military outfit, the Al-Quds Brigades, was also killed in a firefight with Israeli

troops in the northern West Bank, Palestinian security officials said.

Zahel al Ashkar, 27, was shot dead in a field outside the village of Ilar, near the town of Tulkarem, the sources said.

Dozens of jeeps had entered the area overnight where they carried out a series of arrests and searches of homes before becoming involved in the gun battle with Ashkar, who was wanted by the army in connection with a series of anti-Israeli attacks.

A military spokesman confirmed the Palestinian's death, adding that he had opened fire on the troops.

The latest deaths brought the overall toll since the September 2000 start of the Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, to 4,203, including 3,206 Palestinians and 926 Israelis, according to an AFP count.

Meanwhile two homemade Palestinian rockets fired from the Gaza Strip landed in the southern

Israeli town of Sderot on Thursday but without causing any casualties, a military source said.

A number of shops and cars were damaged when the rockets exploded in a street, leaving some residents in a state of shock.

The latest attack comes despite the continuation of an Israeli offensive in the nearby Gaza town of Beit Hanun designed to put an end to such attacks after two people were killed by a rocket in Sderot on June 28, an attack claimed by the militant Islamist movement Hamas.

Meanwhile military sources said that the family home of a Hamas activist had been destroyed in a controlled explosion near the central West Bank city of Ramallah.

Salah Musa has already been arrested over his alleged involvement in a suicide attack on a cafe in Jerusalem in September last year.

Lanka willing to talk Tigers' self-rule demand

Opposition offers cooperation for peace

PTI, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government took a key step toward restarting stalled peace talks with Tamil rebels yesterday when it dropped a longstanding refusal to discuss the guerrillas' self-rule proposal, a day after a peace envoy warned new warfare could break out.

The Norwegian peace envoy, Vidar Helgesen, left Sri Lanka on Thursday after failing to revive the talks and warning that a cease-fire signed in 2002 was in jeopardy.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has repeatedly refused to hold talks with the rebels on their proposal to set up a self-rule interim authority in Tamil-majority parts of the country in the east and north unless they were linked to a final peace settlement.

But Jayantha Dhanapala, the government's top official handling

the peace process, said the government was now willing to discuss the rebels' demand for an Interim Self-Governing Authority, or ISGA.

"The president is willing to discuss the ISGA along with government proposals to set up an interim authority," Dhanapala said.

The Tigers began fighting in 1983 to create a separate state for minority Tamils, accusing the majority Sinhalese of discrimination.

The war has left 65,000 people dead. Subsequent peace talks were stalled in April 2003 over rebel demands for wide autonomy.

AFP adds: Sri Lanka's main opposition yesterday offered an unexpected life line to the minority government to revive peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels despite differences within the shaky coalition.

Opposition spokesman Rajitha Senarathne said his United National Party (UNP) would offer the

required majority in parliament for President Chandrika Kumaratunga's administration to revive the talks.

The remarks came a day after Norway's top peace envoy, Vidar Helgesen, said he was convinced of Kumaratunga's commitment to the peace process but that she needed help from others in government.

Helgesen did not elaborate, but his remarks were seen as a reference to Kumaratunga's main partner, the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front which is opposed to any concessions to the Tigers.

Another Tamil group, the Eelam People's Democratic Party, which is also a constituent member of the minority government, bitterly opposes the Tigers.

Senarathne said the UNP, which was accused by Kumaratunga of making too many concessions to the Tigers when it was in power, wanted

Kumaratunga to start peace talks with the Tigers based on the rebel proposal for self-rule.

"It is not that we support the Tiger ISGA (Interim Self-Governing Authority) proposal, but we think it can be a basis for talks," Senarathne said.

"If the JVP threatens to pull out and bring the government down, we will give her government the necessary support in parliament to remain in power. We will give her unconditional and unstinted support."

Helgesen admitted failure in Norway's latest attempt to revive Sri Lanka's stalled peace negotiations and warned of a resumption of war unless its leaders salvaged the faltering process.

He said Sri Lankans appeared to have taken peace for granted after an Oslo-brokered truce took effect in February 2002.

US should give up 'delusional hope' of Iraqi WMD: Kay

REUTERS, Washington

US officials should give up the "delusional hope" that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction so they can move forward with reform, David Kay, who once led the US hunt for banned weapons, said on Wednesday.

"I think it's most important that the president of the United States recognizes that in fact the weapons are not there," Kay told reporters after speaking at The Government Security Expo and Conference.

"It's because until you do that you will not take this fundamental reorganisation of the intel community on board," he said. Officials such as acting CIA Director John McLaughlin "hold out the delusional hope that eventually you'll find weapons," Kay said.

Kay stepped down from the CIA-appointed position of chief US weapons hunter in January, and said he did not believe Iraq had banned weapons when the United States invaded.

Ugandan army claims killing 120 LRA rebels in Sudan

AFP, Kampala

The Ugandan army claimed yesterday that it had killed 120 rebel Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) fighters during fighting Wednesday in southern Sudan and narrowly missed capturing the insurgents' leader.

"So far we have counted 120 rebel bodies at the scene of the battle" in the Bileniang area, army spokesman Major Shaban Bantariza told AFP in Kampala.

"We missed the LRA leader (Joseph Kony) by a whisker, but we managed to capture some of his personal belongings, including his pips, a walkie talkie, a VHF radio and his wives and a number of children," he added.

BRITISH COURT TOLD Laughing UK troops tortured Iraqis

REUTERS, London

Laughing British soldiers tortured Iraqi detainees by beating and kicking them, pouring freezing water on their heads and forcing them to recite names of English and Dutch football stars, a court heard on Wednesday.

The accusations -- which throw the spotlight back on troop behavior in the US-led occupation -- came from an Iraqi witness at London's High Court where families of six dead civilians have launched a test case against UK soldiers.

"The soldiers appeared to be thoroughly enjoying themselves as the beating was accompanied by laughter," said Kifah Taha al-Mutari. He was arrested in September, 2003, along with one of the six dead Iraqis, Baha Mousa, in a raid on a hotel in Basra.

Mousa later died in custody after alleged severe beatings.

"I could hear him moaning through the walls," added Mutari, whose statement was read out in his presence. "I heard him say 'I am dying ... blood ... blood.' I heard nothing further."

Relatives of the Iraqi civilians who died, represented by British lawyer Phil Shiner, are demanding that judges force Tony Blair's government to open independent probes.

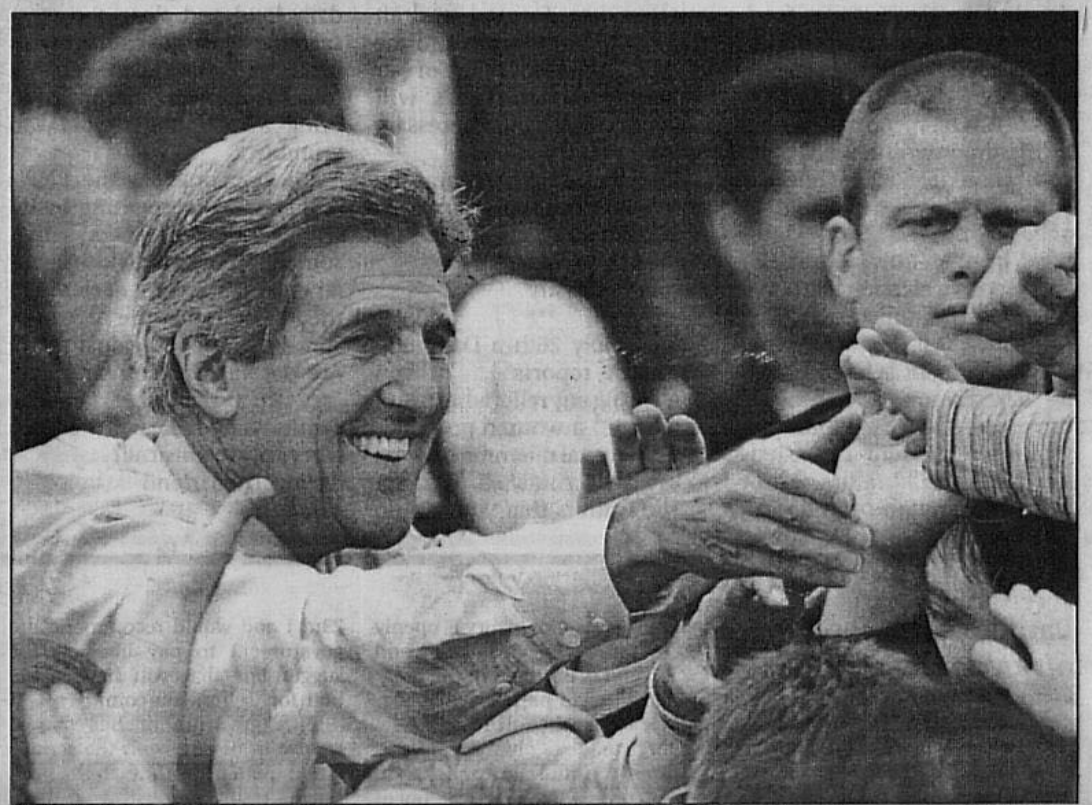


PHOTO: AFP

Democratic presidential candidate US Senator John Kerry (D-MA) greets supporters Wednesday at the Charlestown Navy Yard across the bay from the FleetCenter in Boston, Massachusetts. Kerry made his entrance into Boston ahead of formally accepting his party's presidential nomination yesterday.

DEMOCRATS FORMALLY NOMINATES HIM FOR PRESIDENCY

Kerry seeks to restore US world image

AP, Boston

His moment at hand, John Kerry claims the Democratic presidential nomination and asks Americans for the chance to build a country "stronger at home and respected in the world."

In a curtain raiser, running mate John Edwards praised Kerry as a born leader tested in Vietnam and now ready to protect the country in the age of terrorism.

"He wants to serve you your cause is his cause," Edwards said Wednesday night as a parade of Democrats tried to focus voters' attention on Kerry's qualifications to be commander in chief.

The Massachusetts senator, arriving here Wednesday in the company of 13 crewmates he fought with in the Mekong Delta, watched from his Beacon Hill home as Democrats formally nominated him for the presidency in a boisterous,

late-night roll call. Ohio put him over the top, just as he hopes it will on Nov. 2.

"I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to my opportunity a little more than 24 hours from now to share with you and all of America a vision for how we're going to make this country stronger at home and respected in the world," Kerry told supporters.

In his acceptance speech Thursday night, Kerry seeks to introduce himself to a larger audience, mostly unaware of who he is, polls show, and somewhat suspicious that his positions are too liberal.

The polls also show a tight race, and in a sign of the tough fight to come, President Bush taped new TV commercials, with his Texas ranch as the backdrop, in preparation for the resumption of a campaign ad war next month. The Democratic Party also is preparing

\$6 million in ads for launch this weekend, pitching the Kerry-Edwards ticket in more than a dozen battleground states.

Hours after the final gavel at the convention, Kerry will begin hitting every key state on a two-week cross country trip by train, bus and boat.

Flanked by his family, Edwards, whose Southern charm and oratorical skills are viewed as strengthening Kerry's weaknesses, criticized negative attacks by Republicans trying to portray Kerry as a waffling Massachusetts liberal who has failed to support US soldiers in a time of war.

The North Carolina senator urged voters to "reject the tired, old, hateful, negative politics of the past" and "embrace the politics of hope" instead.

Like dozens of other speakers at the convention, Edwards' script stressed the overriding national security theme.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Colin Powell meets with Saudi King Fahd in the Red Sea city of Jeddah Wednesday. The meeting with Fahd covered "the Palestinian issue, chiefly efforts to return the peace process to the right track, and latest developments in Iraq," in addition to boosting bilateral cooperation, the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported.