

UN extends Iraq mission for a yr

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council voted unanimously Thursday to extend the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq by one year.

The mandate for the mission, created on August 14, 2003, expired yesterday.

The brief resolution was approved 15-0, "reaffirming that the United Nations should play a leading role in assisting the Iraqi people and government in the formation of institutions for representative government."

It also reaffirmed the "independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Iraq."

The UN mission in Iraq provides aid and advice to Iraqi authorities who will hold the country's national conference, scheduled to open on Sunday.

The conference is aimed at launching the political process ahead of general elections in January 2005.

"This was a necessary decision," said council member Munir Akram, Pakistan's UN ambassador.

"It was an indication of the continued commitment of the United Nations and of the Security Council to play a role in bringing peace and security to Iraq," he said.

"Of course, the exact nature of the

role will have to be determined ... as circumstances permit.

"Obviously, this decision would have to be made by the secretary general (of the United Nations, Kofi Annan) with regard to the exact role the UN can play as the situation evolves," said Akram.

UN envoy to Iraq, Ashraf Jehangir Qazi, will be in Iraq in time for the opening of the conference. The United Nations would not release his itinerary for security reasons. He replaces Sergio Vieira de Mello, who was among 22 people killed in a bombing of UN headquarters in Baghdad on August 19 of last year, prompting the world body to pull out of Iraq.

The UN mission to Iraq is currently operating out of Jordan.

UN officials are still negotiating with several countries for forces to secure UN staff in Iraq, Annan said earlier.

"As regards to the provision of forces, I believe the secretary general is in contact with a number of countries," Akram told journalists.

"Obviously it's a decision for each country to make according to its own evaluation of the situation."

'Israel may hand Golan Heights back to Syria'

Palestinian, Israeli settler killed

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel could hand back the Golan Heights seized from Syria in 1967 as part of an eventual peace deal with Syria, armed forces chief General Moshe Yaalon said in an interview published yesterday.

"From the point of view of military requirements we could reach an agreement with Syria by giving up the Golan," Yaalon told the Yediot Aharonot daily.

"The army could defend Israel's borders wherever they are, if the political authority makes the decision" to withdraw from the Golan, he said.

A senior official close to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made it clear however that such a decision was not imminent.

"We will only negotiate with Syria if it first gives up its support for terrorist acts against Israel and makes no preconditions about the nature of a final agreement," he said.

Israel accuses Syria of supporting radical Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, whose militia clash sporadically with Israeli troops over a disputed border region.

Sharon himself has frequently voiced opposition to giving up the Golan Heights, which Israel annexed in 1981.

In the last talks between the two sides which broke down in January 2000 Israel's then Labour government offered to give up the territory captured in 1967 except for a strip on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, which Syria would not accept.

Meanwhile, a Palestinian militant killed a Jewish settler and wounded another before being shot dead in the West Bank yesterday, a military source said.

The Palestinian opened fire on the settlers' car near the settlement of Itamar, in the northern West Bank, fatally wounding one and injuring the other less seriously.

Al-Qsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, claimed responsibility for the attack, naming the militant as Yussef Ahmed Hanani, 25, a lieutenant in the Palestinian preventive security police.

The deaths brought to 4,228 the

overall toll since the September 2000 launch of the intifada, or Palestinian uprising, including 3,230 Palestinians and 927 Israelis, according to an AFP tally.

Earlier Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert revealed Thursday that Israel is set to remove "many more settlements," although his comments reportedly irritated his boss Ariel Sharon.

"We are intending to remove four settlements from Samaria (the northern West Bank), but they will not be the last ones," Olmert was quoted as telling private Channel 2 television as he toured two Jewish settlements near the West Bank city of Ramallah.

"We will clear many more settlements, not because we want to but because we have no choice if we want to reduce our confrontation with the rest of the world."

Under the terms of Sharon's so-called disengagement plan, Israel is to withdraw all its soldiers and settlers from the Gaza Strip and from four other settlements in the northern West Bank by the end of 2005.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians look for their names on lists posted by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees UNRWA for food distribution yesterday in the Zeitun neighborhood in Gaza City. The European Commission announced aid of 1.35 million euros for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip whose houses have been demolished, and accused Israel of "reckless disregard" for civilian lives.



PHOTO: AFP

A man clears the way for a police car adorned with pictures of radical Iraqi Shia Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr during a massive demonstration yesterday in front of the so-called Green Zone in the center of Baghdad. A Sadr spokesman urged thousands of Iraqis in Baghdad to march to the besieged holy city of Najaf on foot after Juma (Friday) prayers.

Protests erupt in cities against Najaf fighting

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

Protests against the US-led military campaign in the sacred Shia Muslim city of Najaf broke out in five Iraqi cities yesterday, with some demonstrators calling for interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi to step down.

In one of the biggest protests, enraged Iraqis in the southern town of Diwaniya swarmed over the local office of his political party, ripping down signs and throwing rocks.

A military offensive by U.S. and Iraqi forces against militiamen of radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has inflamed passions among Iraq's majority Shias.

Thousands also protested in central Baghdad, Kufa and Samawa. The military campaign infuriated residents of the Sunni-dominated town of Falluja, a hotbed of resistance.

About 3 thousand demonstrators

marched in the center of Falluja carrying pictures of Sadr and placards denouncing the US bombing of Najaf, where the cleric and his followers are surrounded.

"Long live Sadr. Falluja stands by Najaf against America," the demonstrators shouted.

Thousands of supporters of Shia Muslim militia leader Moqtada Sadr, who was reported wounded yesterday in the besieged city of Najaf, marched through Baghdad, saying they were willing to die as his martyrs.

The crowd set out from the cleric's Baghdad bastion of Sadr City, in the northeast of the capital, for the heavily fortified Green Zone, which houses some government offices.

"We want to be martyrs for you Moqtada Sadr" and "He's the bridge to paradise," the men chanted as they walked and drove through the centre of the city packed into buses, trucks and

cars, said an AFP correspondent.

The men, none of them armed, denounced Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, who has pressed Sadr's Mehdi Army to surrender after more than a week of fierce fighting against US troops and Iraqi forces in the holy city of Najaf.

"We want to hold a peaceful demonstration outside the convention centre" inside the Green Zone, said one of the protesters, who refused to give his name.

The men held aloft a sea of flags and carried banners reading "Shoot Down American Planes" and "Leave Moqtada Sadr".

At one point along the route, police were called out to defuse a multiple car bomb that would have caused carnage had it detonated.

Security alert in India for Independence Day

AFP, New Delhi

India has stepped up security across the country ahead of tomorrow's Independence day celebrations, especially in flashpoint areas of Indian Kashmir as well as in the capital New Delhi, officials said.

The Red Fort, a 17th-century Mughal-built complex where Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will deliver his maiden Independence Day address, was sealed off Friday as commandos carried out mock drills against possible attacks.

"We are taking all possible measures for ensuring security on Independence Day. For this airspace (over the capital) has been blocked," Delhi Police Commissioner K.K. Paul said.

Armed police and paramilitary troops set up road blocks at the city's 18 entrances from adjoining states. The air force said it would deploy fighter jets to prevent possible aerial attacks on

Sunday.

The security measures came in the wake of intelligence reports that the pan-Islamic militant groups Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba planned attacks during celebrations marking the 57th anniversary of independence from Britain, a home ministry official said.

The two groups were blamed for a December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament that nearly set off a war with rival Pakistan.

Tight security was also imposed in other parts of India including the insurgency-hit northeast and Kashmir, where separatists call strikes each year on the anniversary.

Police said troops had Friday recovered rockets and explosives dumped in a field near Bakshi Stadium, the main venue for Independence Day celebrations in the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar.

Republicans, Democrats clash over anti-terror war

AFP, Washington

Republicans and Democrats clashed bitterly Thursday over the war on terrorism, with Vice President Dick Cheney heaping scorn on a call by presidential candidate John Kerry for a more "sensitive" campaign involving other nations.

The Kerry camp struck back by accusing President George W. Bush of dangerously alienating US allies and said that "arrogance isn't a virtue" when it comes to defending the country after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Cheney kicked off the latest exchange with a broadside at Kerry's pledge last week to wage a "more effective, more thoughtful, more strategic, more proactive, more sensitive war on terror" that reaches out to other countries.

"A sensitive war will not destroy the evil men who killed 3,000 people and developed weapons to kill hundreds of thousands more," Cheney said while

campaigning in the key midwestern state of Ohio.

"The people who beheaded (Wall Street Journal reporter) Daniel Pearl and (US contractor) Paul Johnson will not be impressed by our sensitivity," he said.

Cheney said the United States was in a "fight to preserve our freedom and our way of life... (and) those who threaten us and kill innocents around the world do not need to be treated more sensitively. They need to be destroyed."

In response to Cheney's comments, Kerry told ABC News: "It's sad that they can only be negative. They have nothing to say about the future vision of America. I think Americans want a positive vision for the future."

The Democratic candidate's campaign issued a statement from nine retired senior military officers, including former NATO supreme commander Wesley Clark, and one active lieutenant general, accusing Cheney and Bush of

taking "their campaign to the gutter."

With the November 2 election shaping up as a cliffhanger, the Republicans have stepped up their attacks on Kerry's credentials as a commander-in-chief which the Massachusetts senator highlighted at his nominating convention last month.

"The job of the commander-in-chief as he sees it is to use America's military strength to respond to attacks," Cheney said. "But September 11 showed us, as surely as anything can, that we must act against gathering dangers, not wait to be attacked." "In the world we live in now, responding to attacks is not enough. We must do everything in our power to prevent attacks, and that includes using military force," said Cheney, a key architect of the US invasion of Iraq.

Bush admn fails to find out evidence on 'imminent attack'

AP, Washington

Two weeks ago, when Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge warned of possible al-Qaeda attacks, the "where" was very specific: Financial institutions in New York City, Washington and Newark, New Jersey.

The "when," however, was a mystery. And since Ridge's announcement, the Bush administration has discovered no evidence of imminent plans by terrorists to attack US buildings, a White House official acknowledged Thursday.

Some documents and computer files seized in al-Qaeda raids included surveillance reports of the financial buildings during 2000 and 2001, which prompted warnings Aug. 1 from the White House about possible threats. But nothing in the documents themselves has suggested any attack was planned

soon, the official said.

"I have not seen an indication of an imminent operation," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity with reporters from nearly a dozen news organisations. Investigators are still poring over volumes of the seized information.

Immediately after the warning, police sealed off some streets near the Citigroup Center building and the New York Stock Exchange in New York; put employees at the International Monetary Fund and World Bank buildings in Washington through extra security checks; and added barricades and a heavily armed presence around Prudential Financial Inc.'s headquarters in Newark.



PHOTO: AFP

A man makes his way in flooded street as shopkeepers clean their storefronts yesterday in Wenling, in southeast China's Zhejiang province. At least 115 people were killed and more than 1,800 injured as powerful typhoon Rananmin ripped through the coastal province overnight.

Manipur state to partially lift anti-terror law

AFP, New Delhi

India's northeastern state of Manipur Thursday said it was lifting a controversial anti-terror law in some areas after weeks of bitter and often violent demonstrations.

The state has been rocked by protests since the alleged killing in military custody of a 30-year-old woman, Thangjam Manorama, on July 11. Paramilitary forces say she was a leading rebel and died in a gunbattle.

Rights groups have demanded an end to the law which gives the military sweeping powers to shoot on sight and detain without warrant as part of its crackdown on Manipur's insurgency.

The state's chief minister Okram Ibobi Singh announced the decision after a two-hour cabinet meeting in the state capital Imphal, an official told AFP by telephone.

"We have decided to partially lift the Armed Forces Special Powers Act on a trial basis from 27 municipal areas in the capital Imphal, besides parts of greater Imphal, comprising east and west districts," Singh told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian students from the country's northeastern state of Manipur take part in a rally in Bangalore yesterday to protest the alleged killing in military custody of a 30-year-old woman, Thangjam Manorama on July 11. Manipur, which has been rocked by protests since the death of Manorama, is to lift the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, a controversial anti-terror law, in some areas after weeks of bitter and often violent demonstrations.

Rome awaits al-Qaeda deadline with huge security deployment

AFP, Paris

Thousands of members of the Italian security forces and hundreds of ambulances were preparing to deploy on Rome's streets at the weekend ahead of an al-Qaeda linked group's deadline for the government to pull its troops out of Iraq.

A statement published in an Arab newspaper on August 1 in the name of the group -- the Abu Hafs al-Masri Brigades -- had threatened to attack Italians everywhere unless Rome withdraws its nearly 3,000 troops within 15 days.

"Some 3,000 members of the security forces will be deployed between Saturday and Sunday to carry out checks in the city. The fire brigade and traffic police will also be mobilised and special guards are envisaged at police headquarters," said the daily Corriere della Sera.

Another daily, Il Messaggero, said a total of 5,000 people will be looking after security in the Italian capital at the weekend, while the Corriere said 200 ambulances and 300 doctors would be on call 24 hours to cope with emergencies.

Special controls were to be put in place around the Vatican City, the world-famous Roman landmark the Coliseum, as well as the airport and the US embassy.

Some 150,000 foreign tourists are expected to be in the Italian capital over the weekend. According to the authorities, Rome contains 5,000-6,000 of the 13,000 sites in the country that could potentially be targeted by extremists.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who will be spending the weekend at his holiday residence on the Mediterranean island of Sardinia, has been a high profile supporter of the US-led "war on terrorism".

New Jersey governor resigns, admits having gay affair

AFP, New York

The Democratic Governor of New Jersey, Jim McGreevey, resigned Thursday, after declaring his homosexuality and confessing to having an adulterous affair with another man.

With his wife Dina standing by his side, McGreevey, 47, told a packed press conference: "My truth is that I am a gay American."

McGreevey, a Catholic, said he had decided to publicly acknowledge his homosexuality after engaging in an "adult consensual affair" with another man.

"It was wrong. It was foolish. It was inexcusable. And for this, I ask the forgiveness and the grace of my wife," he said.

"Given the circumstances surrounding the affair, and its likely impact upon my family and my ability to govern, I have decided the right course of action is to resign," he said.

Deadly spectre of bird flu returns to Vietnam 3 people die

AFP, Hanoi

The deadly spectre of bird flu has returned to Asia with Vietnam confirming yesterday that three people have died from the disease more than four months after declaring it had been contained.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said further tests were needed to see if three other people who have died over the past fortnight in the communist nation from a similar illness had also been infected with avian influenza.

The latest confirmed deaths take the number of Vietnamese victims of the disease this year to 19, according to the Ministry of Health. Eight people have also died in Thailand but the last death there occurred on March 12.

Vietnamese health authorities said the H5 virus had been detected in samples taken from the three latest victims but that further tests were needed to determine if the virus belonged to the deadly H5N1 strain.

The H5N1 is the only strain of the H5 subtype known to pass from infected poultry and cause illness in humans.

The WHO described their deaths as a worrying development that "confirmed the continuing ability of the virus to transmit to humans".

"Every human case raises the risk of avian and human viruses mingling, and the development of a pandemic strain," Peter Cordingley, spokesman for the WHO's Western Pacific Office in Manila, told AFP.

"Outbreaks in poultry are not under control. The virus is widespread in the environment and will take concentrated efforts over a long period to remove it."

Vietnam was widely criticised for acting prematurely and recklessly when it announced on March 30 that the country was free of the disease.

The WHO urged all Asian governments to exercise maximum caution and surveillance.