

IRAN SAYS
Iraq admits
arresting
missing
journalists

AFP, Tehran

Iraq's US-backed caretaker government has now admitted that three reporters for Iran's state IRNA news agency who went missing on August 9 were detained by police, a senior interior ministry official said in comments published here Saturday.

"Now that the Iraqi government has officially acknowledged that it arrested the IRNA reporter and his staff, it is responsible for their safety," Amir Hossein Motahar told Tehran dailies.

Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi had announced on Thursday that he had assurances that IRNA's Baghdad bureau chief Mostafa Darban, who went missing with Iraqi colleagues Mohammad Khafaji and Mohsen Madani, was in good health.

Pakistan blocks
media website
for anti-military
stance

PTI, New York

Pakistan has blocked the web site of South Asia Tribune, which is run by a well-known journalist of the country, apparently for its anti-military stance.

The site, run by Shaheen Sehbai, is known for posting stories which question the military regime's actions and it advocates democracy for the country.

Condemning the Pakistani government action, SAT said yesterday that it "directly contradicts" the "loud claims about press freedom in Pakistan."

In a statement, SAT's Editor Sehbai said the site was originally blocked in May 2003 but three months ago, some Internet providers had unblocked it and readers had started accessing without using bypass routes.

But he promised the readers that SAT would continue provide alternate routes to enable them access the site.

3 convicted drug
traffickers hanged
in public in Iran

AFP, Tehran

Three Iranian men convicted of drug trafficking have been hanged in a square in the historic city of Kerman in southeast Iran on Thursday, the conservative Jomhuri Eslami daily reported Saturday.

The report, quoting the local judiciary and giving only their first names, said Gholamreza, Mohammad and Hamid, were convicted of drug and arms trafficking.

Gholamreza was also found guilty of dealing in alcohol, which is strictly banned in Islamic Iran.

Some 3,500 kilos (nearly 7700 pounds) of opium and morphine, 11 Kalashnikovs, and other weapons that were in possession of the last two were seized, the report said.

Murder, armed robbery, rape, apostasy and serious drug trafficking are all punishable by death in the Islamic republic.

Accused Hamas
leader denies
terror charges

AFP, Damascus

A senior official of the Palestinian militant group Hamas indicted in the United States for conspiring to fund terror attacks against Israel denied the accusations and said the charges were driven by election-year politics in the United States.

"This is election campaigning," Mousa Abu Marzook, deputy chief of the Hamas political bureau, told The Associated Press in Damascus on Friday. "They (US officials) want to say to the American public that they are succeeding in fighting terrorism."

"Every week they come up with a new case before the American public, but these (the cases) are drawn from files that are tens of years old," he said.

Speaking by telephone from Damascus, where he has been living for several years, Abu Marzook said he had "nothing to do with" the accusations.

In Washington on Friday, US Attorney General John Ashcroft announced that Abu Marzook, Abdelhaleem Hasan Abdelraziq Ashqar, who lives in Alexandria, Va., and Muhammad Hamid Khalil Salah of Chicago, were indicted for their roles in 15-year racketeering conspiracy in the United States and abroad.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi Shiite Muslim shows mortar shrapnels fired by US forces and landed inside the Shrine of Imam Ali in the holy city of Najaf, yesterday. Insistence from a top Moqtada Sadr aide, Ali Smeisim, that the keys to Imam Ali mausoleum, one of the holiest pilgrimage sites in the world, were still firmly in the Medhi Army's possession contradicted reports from other sources that they had been delivered to Iraq's top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. A spokesman for Sistani, who is in London recovering from medical treatment, and Sadr's junior spokesman Sheikh Ahmed al-Shabani had both said the keys had been given up.

One dead as Nepal rebels vow to step up blockade

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels who have cut off Nepal's capital for four days, pledged to expand their campaign to the Tibetan border as fresh violence left a police officer dead.

The rebel defiance came a day after the government appealed to the Maoists to call off the blockade and resume negotiations to end the increasingly deadly insurgency which has claimed nearly 10,000 lives since 1996.

The Maoists have not physically surrounded the city but have warned transporters not to enter the Kathmandu Valley, leading to a siege mentality that has sent some prices soaring in local markets.

The rebels announced they would start a new blockade next Saturday to prevent transport from the only land

connection into Tibet, the Kodari pass, 115 kilometers (70 miles) north of Kathmandu.

"This blockade will stop all vehicles from moving to the frontier," read a statement from Devi Khadka, also known as Asita, who is the Maoist general secretary for three districts near the border.

While the blockade of the Tibetan border is unlikely to have an immediate impact on Kathmandu, it could hinder the growing overland trade with China and for tourists who cross the Himalayas into Tibet.

The Maoists are fighting to abolish the monarchy and draw inspiration from communist China's founder Mao Zedong, although they are disavowed by Beijing, which this month hosted Nepal's Crown Prince Paras.

PAKISTAN ARMY SAYS

Militants linked with al-Qaeda killed

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani forces have killed "a few" militants in operations to flush out Al-Qaeda linked rebels in the northwestern tribal region near the border with Afghanistan, the military said Saturday.

"A few miscreants were killed and a few others injured when regular troops clashed with militants in Santoi, north of Shakai, in South Waziristan tribal region on Friday," military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP.

He did not specify the number of militants killed but said there were no military casualties.

Sultan said security forces retrieved

the body of a foreign militant and recovered arms and ammunition.

"Some miscreants who were injured, managed to get away," he said. "The activities are underway to flush out one of their hideouts, but this is not a new operation, it is part of an ongoing operation launched in June."

Pakistan's military launched an air and ground offensive in the Shakai valley, 25 kilometers (15 miles) northeast of Wana, the main town in South Waziristan, on June 11.

The operation was in response to an attack on a military post on June 9 which left 14 security personnel dead. Some 65 militants and 18 soldiers were killed

during the fighting.

Since mid-July security agencies have arrested more than 60 Al-Qaeda suspects in urban centers in Pakistan.

They include key operatives such as Al-Qaeda's Pakistani computer whizz Naeem Noor Khan and Tanzanian Ahmed Khalfan Gailani, a suspect in the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in East Africa.

Their capture yielded information on Al-Qaeda and led to the discovery of fresh plans to launch attacks in Britain, Pakistan and the United States ahead of US presidential elections in November, intelligence officials say.

Kerry blasts war record critics

AFP, Fort Myers

Democratic White House hopeful John Kerry's campaign has formally alleged that a group attacking his Vietnam war record had illegal ties to US President George W. Bush's reelection bid.

The White House has consistently denied any linkages between Bush's campaign and the group, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, and said it respects Kerry's wartime service, but refused categorically to repudiate the charges against him.

In a statement Friday, the Kerry campaign said it had "filed a legal complaint against Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT) before the Federal Election Commission (FEC) for violating the law with inaccurate ads that are illegally coordinated with the Bush-Cheney presidential campaign."

The complaint asks that the Republican National Committee, Bush's reelection campaign, and the veterans group "be enjoined from further violations, be required to repay their illegal contributions and be fined the maximum amount permitted by law."

SBVT spokesman John O'Neill dismissed the complaint as "completely frivolous."

"Sadly, it represents a direct attack by large law firms, employed by Senator Kerry, on his fellow veterans," O'Neill said in a statement.

"Even more sadly, it represents a direct attack by Kerry on the right of

Sadr's men continue to hold shrine

REUTERS, Najaf

Fighters loyal to rebel Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr were firmly in control of Najaf's Imam Ali mosque yesterday, giving the lie to government claims that police had taken control of the shrine.

Militiamen brandished weapons defiantly and mocked Iraq's interim government around the mosque, at the center of a confrontation with US forces that has helped drive oil prices to record highs and presented the government with its biggest crisis yet.

Holding out hope for a peaceful resolution, one of Sadr's top aides said the rebel leader wanted to hand over Iraq's holiest Shi'ite shrine to Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the country's most influential Shi'ite cleric, and that talks on the mosque's future were underway.

"We would like to hand over the shrine to the religious establishment which has the right to control it," Sheikh Ahmad al-Sheibani told reporters. "It is only natural that Ayatollah Sistani should accept it."

Sistani, who usually lives in Najaf, is

now in Britain recovering from surgery.

But Sadr's aide later added that Sadr's militia would continue to guard the mosque after any handover, precisely the outcome that Iraq's interim government has vowed to prevent.

Sheibani said no time had been set for a handover of the mosque and called on the interim government of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, which has threatened to storm the mosque, to pursue a peaceful solution to the crisis.

Hundreds of young men inside the shrine chanted slogans vilifying Allawi, who has called on them to lay down their weapons and leave the golden-domed shrine.

Sheibani said Sadr had agreed to hand over the keys to the shrine to Sistani's aides, but did not say when. Such a handover would be largely symbolic if Sadr's fighters remained in place in and around the mosque, where they have been fighting off efforts by US and Iraqi government forces to dislodge them.

The sound of explosions echoed across the holy city early on Saturday,

though their causes was not clear. The blasts followed a relatively quiet night, the calm broken only sporadically by US aircraft flying overhead.

Meanwhile a senior policeman was shot dead early Saturday in the restive city of Ramadi, while three Iraqis were killed and 11 wounded in three home-made bomb explosions across the country, police and medics said.

Colonel Saad Samir al-Dulaimi, head of the crime fighting unit in the Sunni Muslim bastion of Ramadi, west of Baghdad, was gunned down as he left home at around 8:30 am (0430 GMT), said police Captain Ghassan Kadhim.

Further north, in the troubled city of Baquba, a roadside bomb exploded at about the same time, killing a peddler and wounding five dustmen, said police and medical sources.

Nepal checking
reports of
kidnapped
citizens in Iraq

AFP, Kathmandu

The government of Nepal said Saturday it was checking labour records for information on 12 of its citizens reportedly abducted in Iraq, where the Himalayan kingdom has no diplomatic representation.

"We have started checking files to see if any Nepalese went to Iraq through employment offices in Kathmandu," said an official at the ministry of labour and works.

"We are also investigating whether these people are Nepalese citizens or are people of Nepalese descent who hold other nationality," he said.

Information Minister Moham-mad Mohsin said separately that Nepal had instructed its embassy in Saudi Arabia to make contacts over the situation.

"The government at this point has no information about this incident," Mohsin said.

Nepal had advised its nationals not to go to Iraq, but media reports said employment agencies had tried to recruit Nepalese residents in neighbouring India.



PHOTO: AFP

Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi sits under a portrait of her late husband Rajiv Gandhi as she attends the inauguration ceremony for the All India Congress Committee (AICC) meeting at Rajiv Gandhi Nagar in New Delhi yesterday.

Burundi rebels
ready to face
international
court

AFP, Bujumbura

The Hutu rebel movement which has claimed responsibility for last week's massacre of about 160 Congolese Tutsis at a refugee camp in Burundi said on Saturday it was ready to appear before an international tribunal.

"We are never going to present ourselves in front of the Tutsi justice of Burundi... but we are ready to respond in front of an international tribunal," Pasteur Habimana, spokesman for the Hutu National Liberation Forces (FNL) told AFP by phone.

He said he backed the establishment of an "international tribunal which would judge all the crimes committed by Hutus and Tutsis in the region since the independence of Burundi" in 1962.

Burundi has issued international arrest warrants for Habimana as well as FNL leader, Agathon Rwasa for crimes against humanity and war crimes following the killings at Gatumba on August 13.

Burundi was plunged into civil war in 1993 when rebel groups drawn from the Hutu majority rose up against the government and army, then dominated by the Tutsis, who make up around 15 percent of the population.

The FNL is the last remaining Burundian rebel group still active.