

Malaysian PM urges end to violence in Najaf

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia, which currently heads the world's biggest grouping of Islamic countries, called Monday for an end to violence in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf.

Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, chairman of the 57-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference, urged the United Nations to act to end the fighting.

"If the confrontation in Najaf is not defused, it will inflame emotions and may create unpredictable conditions," Abdullah said in a statement to the official Bernama news agency.

"It will also erode the fragile stability in the country and affect the preparations for the holding of the national elections in Iraq scheduled in January 2005," said Abdullah, who is in South Korea for a three-day visit.

"The people of Iraq deserve to have peace and not more suffering," he said.

Australia boosts anti-terror steps at small airports

AFP, Melbourne

The Australian government announced on Monday a major security upgrade for nearly 150 small airports, including the creation of police rapid response teams to deal with possible terrorist attacks.

Transport Minister John Anderson said 48 million dollars (34 million US) would be spent over four years on security and anti-terrorism measures at 146 small regional airports around the country.

As part of the plan, four eight-member rapid response teams would be formed using officers from the Australian Federal Police and bomb experts from other agencies, Anderson said.

Regional airport and airline staff will get extra security training, cockpit doors on charter planes will be strengthened and closed-circuit surveillance systems will be trialled at some sites, he said.

Australia, one of Washington's closest allies, has been singled out as a prime target for future attacks by Al-Qaeda and related groups, notably since Howard contributed forces for the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Total power outage hits Bahrain

AFP, Manama

A total power blackout hit the tiny Gulf state of Bahrain Monday, leaving the entire country without electricity and air conditioning at a time when temperatures soar above 50 degrees Celsius.

The electricity was cut off at 0600 GMT. Officials could not be reached to explain the cause of the power outage, which could be due to a breakdown in the main Al-Jufair power station, south of the capital.

Some people needed help after getting stuck in elevators while shops and other businesses closed and many people returned home from work.

Some buildings, including hospitals, are relying on their own generators, which most residents do not have.

Power cuts are common in Bahrain during the summer, when the capacity is not sufficient to meet the added demand of air conditioners and refrigerators.

Bahrain, which hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, is 700 square kilometres (277 sq miles) in size and home to some 650,000 people, including 378,000 Bahrainis.

INTERNATIONAL

Israel to build 300 new homes in WB

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel has given the green light for the construction of more than 300 new homes in West Bank settlements near Jerusalem, a spokeswoman for the lands authority said Monday.

A total of 200 of the housing units would be built in Har-Gilo while a further 101 would be constructed in Haradar, added the spokeswoman of the body which is headed by Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

The announcement comes after it emerged that Washington had given its tacit approval for expansion of existing Jewish settlements to accommodate "natural growth", in apparent contradiction of the US-backed roadmap peace plan which calls for a freeze on all settlement activity.

A report in Monday's Yediot Aharonot daily said more than 500 new houses would be built in settlements including Haradar and Har-

Gilo lying close to Jerusalem and the West Bank town of Bethlehem after adjoining land had been "rezoned".

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon last week approved the construction of around 1,000 new homes in four of the largest of the West Bank settlements in a move which was widely interpreted as a bid to placate opponents of his plan to pull troops and settlers out of the Gaza Strip.

Yediot reported that a total of 2,167 construction permits for West Bank houses had been issued this year even though only 908 houses were put on the market last year.

It means that the number of homes constructed in the West Bank this year will account for 12 percent of the national total even though only 3.6 percent of the Israeli population live there.

The roadmap peace plan has made next to no progress since it was launched last year amid accusations by

the Palestinians that the Israelis are blatantly violating their commitment to freeze settlement activity.

Israel in turn accuses the Palestinian Authority of failing to meet its side of the bargain by failing to halt attacks by militant groups.

While backing the roadmap, US President George W. Bush has said that the size of some of the largest settlements meant it was "unrealistic" to expect Israel to withdraw totally from the West Bank in any final settlement.

Palestinians reacted furiously on Sunday after it emerged that the United States had given the nod to further construction in existing settlements, saying such a move would wreck the roadmap.

The international community considers all Israeli settlement in the occupied territories to be illegal.

Families of Nepal hostages in Iraq wait for news

AFP, Kathmandu

Relatives of 12 Nepalese workers missing in Iraq were desperately seeking information Monday after an Islamist website showed alleged pictures of them in captivity.

The families said the men had traveled to Iraq in hopes of escaping poverty in the Himalayan kingdom, which is ravaged by a Maoist insurgency.

"I told him not to go there but he refused my advice. He told me, 'There may be conflict there, but there is also conflict here, so I should go earn some money,'" said Jit Bahadur Khadka, whose son Ramesh Khadka went missing.

Family members, who are manual labourers, were in tears as they clutched a portrait of their son at their modest home in Lele on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

The Nepalese government says it has little information about the hostages as it has no diplomatic representation in Iraq.

US soldier face court for Iraq prison abuse

AFP, Mannheim

The suspected ring-leader of a group of US soldiers accused of abusing prisoners in Iraq faced a military judge in Germany on Monday in a pre-trial hearing ahead of a court martial.

Specialist Charles Graner is charged with cruelty and mistreatment, assault, conspiracy and dereliction of duty over the abuses at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad.

In the opening session of the hearing in Mannheim, southwest Germany, Graner's military and civilian lawyers made submissions to have the court drop a statement he made on January 14 to a military investigator.

They also tried to stop a computer used by Graner that was seized from being used in evidence in the court martial, for which no date has been set.

Graner, who sat impassively during

the hearing, talking occasionally to his counsel, is one of four US soldiers to face the judge on Monday and Tuesday accused of humiliating Iraqi prisoners under their supervision.

The abuse was shown in souvenir-style photographs, taken by some of the accused and released by the media in April, which caused outrage around the world.

The prisoners were photographed naked, in itself deeply humiliating and particularly for Muslims, and being forced to perform sexual acts, piled naked in a pyramid, covering from dogs or with electrodes attached to them.

The hearing, known as an Article 39a session, is a one-off procedure, and was moved to Germany following complaints about security from some of the defence lawyers.

Fierce fighting erupts around Najaf shrine

4 killed in US airstrike; Iraqi govt still hopeful to solve crisis thru' talks

AP, NAJAF, Iraq

US forces and Shia militants fought fierce battles in Najaf yesterday, with airstrikes near a revered shrine and exchanges of mortar fire and artillery, as the US military stepped up pressure on the insurgents to quickly hand over the holy site to Shia religious authorities.

Gunfire rang in the city throughout the day yesterday, and black smoke rose over the Old City neighborhood, where much of the fighting has been centered and where militiamen loyal to radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr still control the Imam Ali Shrine. Militiamen early yesterday fired mortars at US troops, who responded with artillery.

In Baghdad's heavily Shia Sadr City neighborhood, an explosion, appar-

ently from a US air attack, killed four people and injured nine others yesterday, said Dr. Qasim Saddam, director of Sadr Hospital. The US military said it was unaware of the incident.

In the southern city of Nasiriyah, US journalist Micah Garen said after his release from more a week in captivity that he hoped to stay in Iraq to continue working on a documentary project he'd started about the looting of archaeological sites.

Late Sunday, US warplanes and helicopters attacked positions in Najaf's Old City for the second night, witnesses said. Leaders of al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia said the Imam Ali Shrine compound's outer walls were damaged in the attacks. The US military said it had fired on sites south of the

shrine, from which militants were shooting, and did not hit the compound wall.

The renewed clashes in Najaf appeared more intense than in recent days as US forces sealed off the Old City. But Iraqi government officials counseled patience, saying they intended to resolve the crisis without raiding the shrine, one of Shia Islam's holiest.

"The government will leave no stone unturned to reach a peaceful settlement," Iraqi National Security adviser Mouaffaq al-Rubaie told the news agency. "It has no intention or interest in killing more people or having even the most trivial damage to the shrine. We have a vested interest in a peaceful settlement."

Nepal opposition calls for truce with Maoists

New killing in blockaded Kathmandu adds to panic

AGENCIES, Kathmandu

Suspected Maoist rebels yesterday gunned down a pedestrian in Nepal's capital Kathmandu, causing new jitters in a city weathering a guerrilla blockade for the past six days.

Prem Bahadur Thokare, a small-time contractor, was hit by two bullets as he walked past the tightly guarded home of an army officer in the capital's outlying Kapan Sawarawoti Nagar area, police said.

Dozens of panicked residents gathered around Thokare's bloodied body as it lay on the pavement, searching for a way to take him to hospital.

It was the latest targeted killing in the city of 1.5 million people, a strategy observers said was meant to trigger fear alongside the blockade which has been largely symbolic.

"The Maoists' main objective is to create panic. The closure of the roads has not been fully successful, so they are trying additional methods," said

academic and political analyst Prakash Joshi.

The government announced yesterday that a committee had been formed under Deputy Prime Minister Bharat Mohan Adhikari to monitor supplies of produce and ensure security for transporters.

The Maoists, who are fighting to overthrow the Himalayan state's monarchy, say the blockade should pressure the two-month-old government to agree to immediate peace talks. The blockade is being enforced mainly through psychological fear of reprisals rather than physical roadblocks.

Hundreds of trucks continue to venture daily into the Kathmandu Valley, where armed police and soldiers frisk incoming passengers and check the identity of all going out.

While local markets remain well stocked with produce, prices have shot up, leading to fears that a prolonged blockade could be devastating.

Transport operators said the hidden victims of the blockade have been those who depend on a normal flow of traffic.

"People who sell tea and fruits on the side of the highway are starving. This kind of blockade would not serve the interests of anybody," said Hira Udas, chairman of the Federation of Nepalese Transport Entrepreneurs.

The Maoists have announced a fresh blockade from next Saturday to stop traffic entering from the border with Tibet.

Joshi saw the blockade of the northern border as a pressure tactic aimed at the poor, who are the primary support base of the rebels in the largely agrarian kingdom.

Meanwhile Nepal's main opposition party urged the government yesterday to call a unilateral cease-fire with Maoist rebels and seek peace talks to end the road blockade that has cut the capital off from the rest of the country.



PHOTO: AFP

An employee sorts through the remains after a bomb exploded inside an office on the outskirts of Kathmandu, yesterday. There were no casualties when two Maoist rebels entered the building, planted the bomb and then fled the scene.



PHOTO: AFP

Outgoing Chief minister of the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, Uma Bharti (2-L) leaves her official residence along with cabinet ministers and members of the legislative assembly in Bhopal, yesterday. Firebrand Hindu nun and chief minister of the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh resigned, on Sunday after a court ordered her arrest in connection with a 10-year-old riot case, officials said. Uma Bharti, who dresses in saffron robes and is famous for her fiery speeches, submitted her resignation to Madhya Pradesh governor Balram Jharkhar less than 10 months after she led her the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party) to victory in state elections.

Row erupts in Malaysia over marital rape

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A row erupted Monday over comments made by Muslim leaders in Malaysia that a husband could not be guilty of raping his wife.

The Malaysian Human Rights Commission (Suhakam) had urged the government to make marital rape a crime, but Perak state mufti Harussani Zakaria said the move went against Islam.

"A husband has the right to be intimate with his wife and the wife must obey," he was quoted Sunday as saying by the Malay-language Mingguan Malaysia.

"If the wife refuses, then the rule of 'nusyuz' (disobedient) applies and the husband is not required to provide financial assistance to her," Harussani said.

Sharia lawyer Mohamad Zaidi Zain was quoted as saying that Muslim women were only allowed to refuse sex if their husbands were suffering from sexually-transmitted diseases or HIV/AIDS.

The Joint Action Group Against Violence Against Women (JAG), representing six women's rights groups, has submitted a memorandum to the government asking for an amendment to the penal code to define marital rape as an offence.