



PHOTO: AFP
A seriously wounded boy is rushed to hospital in Kufa yesterday after being shot during a demonstration by supporters of radical Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr and Shia spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani as they marched from Kufa to Najaf past an Iraqi national guard base at the entrance of Najaf.

Sudan dismisses UN ultimatum on Darfur

AFP, REUTERS, Abuja

Sudan will ignore a UN Security Council deadline to end militia attacks in Darfur by the end of the month and instead resolve the crisis through African Union peace talks, Khartoum's chief negotiator said yesterday.

Asked whether Sudan would seek to meet the terms of the United Nations' ultimatum, which expires on August 30, Agriculture Minister Majzoub al-Khalifa said: "Not at all. It's never crossed our minds or our hearts."

"We are working towards our duties to our people. We are a dignified people. It's not our aim to set dates. What is going to happen is that the deadline will pass and we are going to continue negotiations," he said.

"I think this thing (the Abuja peace talks) will finish in three or four or five days," he added.

Last month the United Nations gave Sudan until the end of August to disarm the Janjaweed Arab militia, which has been accused of attacking and massacring civilians during Darfur's 18-month-old civil war, or face sanctions.

More than 1.2 million people have been driven from their homes during the fighting, and more than 30,000 killed, according to the United Nations.

Since Monday, Sudanese government officials and Darfur's two rebel movements have been meeting in the Nigerian capital at the invitation of the African Union to try to reach a peace settlement.

Israel closes highway, Rafah crossing

UN intervention sought to prevent 'disaster'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday closed down the checkpoints along the trans-Gaza highway and the Rafah border crossing with Egypt after specific warnings about militant attacks, an army spokesman said.

"The Tancher road was closed because of the Qassam rockets which were fired last night and this morning and due to specific attack warnings," he said, using the army's name for the trans-Gaza highway, which is known by the Palestinians as Salah al-Din Street.

There are two main checkpoints along the highway -- the first just south of Gaza City, and the second, just outside the southern town of Khan Yunis, which is known as the Abu Gholi checkpoint.

The Rafah border crossing was also closed earlier on Thursday due to "a specific alert about a suicide bombing", he added.

Palestinian security sources confirmed the information, saying no traffic was able to move along the road.

They also said the army closed the northern Erez crossing into Israel and the Karni industrial crossing, but the

army said neither crossing point had been affected by the closure.

Earlier on Thursday, two makeshift Qassam rockets fired by Palestinian militants in the northern Gaza Strip landed on the southern Israeli town of Sderot but caused no injuries, police sources said.

Israeli military sources also said Palestinian mortar bombs had landed near the Jewish settlement of Morag in southern Gaza, without causing any injuries.

Meanwhile, Palestinians being held in Israeli prisons appealed Thursday for intervention from human rights organisations and the United Nations to prevent their hunger strike developing into a "humanitarian disaster."

"We ask human rights organisations all around the world, and especially the UN, represented by its Secretary General Kofi Annan, to take a stand and help us end the miserable circumstances we are living," a spokesman for prisoners at a military-run detention center in the southern Negev desert told AFP by telephone.

"We ask you to assume the legal and ethical responsibility by taking a quick and effective action to prevent a

humanitarian disaster," added the prisoner, who would only give his name as Rami, reading from a statement in English.

Around half of the 8,000 Palestinians currently being held in Israeli prisons are observing an open-ended hunger strike which is now in its 12th day.

The prisoners are hoping that their protest will lead to an across-the-board improvement in their conditions, including statutory visiting rights and an end to what they see as "humiliating" body and cell searches.

"The unbearable treatment had pushed us to go on this hunger strike after all our tries to obtain a change had failed and the prisons' administration had refused to respond to our simple needs as human beings," Rami said.

"We ask the Israelis to respect our dignity, improve our conditions and allow family visits, stop the naked searching policy, the solitary confinement policy for a huge number of prisoners, improve the food quality and quantity and improve health care".

Albright blasts Bush's Iraq policy

AFP, Stockholm

Former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright harshly criticised President George W. Bush and especially his Iraq policy during a visit to Stockholm on a book tour, Swedish media reported yesterday.

"Our (US) actions over the past three years don't make me proud. I see America as a force of good, so it makes me very sad to see how America currently receives no respect and how our credibility is questioned," Albright was quoted as saying in an interview with daily paper Dagens Nyheter.

Describing the US presence in Iraq as "a hopeless mess", Albright insisted in the interview that former vice president Al Gore and Democratic presidential nominee in 2000 would not have invaded the country had he been president today.

"There would have been no difference in American actions against the Taliban in Afghanistan in the hunt for Osama bin Laden after the terrorist attacks (on New York and Washington) three years ago ... but in Iraq things would have been different," she said.

"We didn't see Saddam Hussein as an immediate threat. No, there would not have been an invasion under president Gore," Albright, secretary of state from 1997 to 2001 during the second term of US president Bill Clinton, said.

Terrorism main focus of plane crash probe

'Black boxes' damaged

AFP, Moscow

An official close to Russian President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that the probe into the near-simultaneous crash of two planes regarded a terrorist attack as the leading hypothesis, ITAR-TASS news agency reported.

In a brief dispatch, ITAR-TASS quoted Vladimir Yakovlev, Putin's representative in southern Russia, as saying that "a terrorist act remains" the main version of events being looked at by investigators.

According to the dispatch, only the words "a terrorist act remains" were directly attributed to Yakovlev. It was the ITAR-TASS report itself -- not Yakovlev -- that described the terrorism theory as "the main version" being studied.

So far Russian officials across the board have carefully avoided saying that the possibility of terrorism was any more likely than any of the other possible explanations for the crashes, including bad weather, pilot error and contaminated fuel.

The authorities however were hammered in Russia's printed media Thursday for failing to acknowledge that the planes were, according to the news-

papers, brought down by terrorists.

A spokesman for Russia's FSB intelligence service said Wednesday that investigators had so far found no evidence of terrorist involvement in the crashes.

Meanwhile, the recording devices recovered from two planes that simultaneously crashed in Russia are damaged and it remains unclear when the black boxes can be repaired, a Russian official said yesterday.

"We have to determine how badly the tapes are damaged before we can say when they can be read," the RIA Novosti news agency quoted an official with the government aviation committee, Oleg Yermolov, as saying.

The comments came amid a furious media scramble for information on the twin plane crashes, which killed 89 people on the eve of controversial presidential elections in Chechnya, shaking Russia.

Russian officials said they were not excluding any theory, including a hijacking or a bombing attack, or possibly bad weather conditions or pilot error.



PHOTO: AFP
Russian rescuers search the wreckage of the Tupolev-154 passenger jet as it lies near Gluboky, a village some 140km outside Rostov on Don Wednesday. A Tu-154 owned by carrier Sibir and carrying 46 people from Moscow to the Black Sea resort of Sochi disappeared from radar screens in Rostov on Don region.

Kerry calls for Rumsfeld's resignation

REUTERS, Green Bay

Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry renewed his call Wednesday for Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's resignation and said the official investigation into abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison demonstrated a failure of civilian leadership.

"It's about leadership and it's about accountability," Kerry told supporters packed into a Philadelphia steamfitters' union hall where he spoke before traveling to Wisconsin.

Americans "want the truth and they want accountability," he said.

The report issued on Tuesday by an independent four-member panel headed by former Defence Secretary James Schlesinger showed there was a "failure of the civilian chain of command," the Democratic presidential challengers said.

"It's not just the little person at the bottom who ought to pay the price ... the buck doesn't stop at the Pentagon," he said.

Taiwanese village buried by mudslide

Asian typhoon toll mounts

AFP, Taipei

Rescuers yesterday recovered the bodies of 15 people buried by a mudslide which flattened a village in northern Taiwan, as East Asia cleaned up and counted the cost of Typhoon Aere.

The bodies were pulled from the mud in Tochang in the mountains of Hsinshu County where over 20 houses were destroyed by a landslide triggered by the typhoon late Wednesday, rescue official Lin Guan-cheng said.

The typhoon left at least 24 people dead and nine others missing presumed dead in Taiwan. Extreme weather linked to Aere also left 12 dead or missing in the Philippines, two dead in Japan and one dead in China.

The typhoon packing winds of 80 miles (130 kilometres) per hour ripped through the southern island of Japan Monday before buffeting Taiwan and slamming into southeastern China on

Wednesday.

The Hong Kong Observatory Thursday downgraded Aere to a tropical storm which it said was moving towards China's southeastern Guangdong province.

In remote villages in Hsinshu county of Taiwan, stunned villagers were plucked to safety by helicopters as days of torrential rain threatened fresh landslides.

"We had lived such a peaceful life in the past 20 years and now ... it came so suddenly ... like a nightmare," a sobbing woman told reporters after being airlifted to safety from the stricken village of Tochang.

Among the other victims in Taiwan was a preacher who had been washed away by floods in central Nantou County. His body was recovered Thursday but his wife is still missing and presumed dead.

A thirsty world awaits better access to potable water

AFP, Geneva

2.6 billion human beings -- over 40 percent of the planet's inhabitants -- lack basic sanitation, and more than one billion people still drink unsafe water, two UN organisations warned yesterday.

Entitled "Meeting the Millen-nium Development Goals," their report is a mid-course appraisal of a 25-year plan ending in 2015 to dramatically improve sanitation conditions and access to clean drinking water throughout the world. The report covers the period from 1990-2002.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) say the plan is "on track" for drinking water, but that half a billion people -- mainly in rural Africa and Asia -- fell short of the sanitation targets set for 2002.

The world's poorest and least developed nations, notably those in sub-Saharan Africa, suffer most from the diseases caused by poor hygiene, which hit children hardest of all.

"The growing disparity between the have and the have-nots in terms of access to basic services is killing around 4000 children every day and underlies many more of the 10 million child deaths every year," Bellamy said. "We have to act now to close this gap or the death toll will certainly rise," she added.

Diarrhea kills 1.8 million persons every year, mainly children under five, and the search for scarce drinking water results in 40 billion hours of lost work in Africa alone, the report says.

But there are also "worrying trends," aggravated by rapid industrialization in

many industrialized countries, where the percentage of people with access to clean drinking water and basic sanitation actually dropped by two percent between 1990 and 2002.

In the ex-Soviet Union, for example, only 83 percent of the population live in conditions of adequate sanitation.

"Water and sanitation are among the most important determinants of public health," noted WHO Director-General Lee Jong-wook. "Wherever people achieve reliable access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation they have won a major battle against a wide range of diseases," he added.