

IRAN SAYS

Meddling in Iraq would be 'great insult'

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami declared himself Wednesday to be against any interference by his country in Iraqi affairs, labelling any meddling as an "insult" to the Iraqi people.

"Any inappropriate interference in Iraq's internal affairs and the changing of people's paths would be a great insult to the Iraqi people," Khatami was quoted as saying by the official news agency IRNA.

The moderate president's comments were made in a meeting with visiting Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh, in Iran on a mission from his US-backed government to press Iran to stop interfering.

According to IRNA, Khatami sought to reassure Saleh by saying "the security of regional countries is interdependent, and therefore insecurity in Iraq jeopardises the peace in countries of the region."

His visit comes amid an effort to ease a recent war of words between the two neighbours about the insurgency in Iraq.



PHOTO: AFP
Nepalese protestors stand outside the burning offices of Qatar Airways after a mob destroyed the buildings in Kathmandu, yesterday to protest against the killing of twelve Nepalese hostages in Iraq. Around 4,000 people set Kathmandu's biggest mosque ablaze and smashed up private job recruitment agencies in protest.

Indians, other truckers freed in Iraq

AFP, Fallujah

Islamic militant kidnapers on Wednesday released seven truck drivers held hostage in Iraq for six weeks, an AFP correspondent witnessed in the rebel-dominated western city of Fallujah.

The hostages — three Indians, three Kenyans and an Egyptian — were set free by a group calling itself the Black Banners Brigade of the Secret Islamic Army (SIA) and then gave interviews on al-Arabiya television.

The seven, who were seized on July 21, appeared happy and healthy as they spoke at length with the Dubai-based channel.

Asked how they were treated, Egyptian hostage Mohammed Sanad told Arabiya: "They taught us religion and how to pray."

All seven truck drivers were then whisked to the Indian embassy in Baghdad and then to the airport, a source at the embassy said.

The kidnapers declared victory, boasting that they had forced the hostages Kuwaiti employer to leave Iraq and vowing to carry out more attacks on anyone assisting US troops.

Israel blows up bomber's home

Govt plans to speed up barrier constructions

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel vowed a global pursuit of Hamas leaders and to accelerate construction of its West Bank barrier Wednesday after the deadliest Palestinian attack in nearly a year.

As soldiers demolished the family home of one of the two Hamas bombers, a senior government source said that its battle against the Islamist group and its leadership would not be constrained by geographical borders.

The source said that Tuesday's bombings, which left 16 people dead as well as the two bombers in the southern desert city of Beersheva, bore the fingerprints of Hamas' Damascus-based leaders.

"There will be a continuation of our targeted operations against the heads of Hamas," the source told

AFP on condition of anonymity. "There will be no geographical barrier in pursuing the terrorists and their leadership. Any place they are, there will be no immunity."

"It's Damascus that's calling the shots, the orders are coming from there."

The attacks in Beersheva were the deadliest since a suicide bombing in a restaurant in the northern port city of Haifa last October, which left 21 people and the female bomber dead.

Israel responded to that attack, carried out by smaller Islamic Jihad organisation, with an air strike on an alleged Palestinian militant training camp deep inside Syria.

Hamas has said that the Beersheva bombings, carried out by two members of its armed wing from the southern West Bank city of Hebron, were in response to the assassination of two of its leaders

earlier this year. Israeli officials were quick to argue that the Beersheva attacks were launched from an area of the West Bank which is not currently cut off from Israel by the controversial barrier.

Work on the barrier, which is eventually expected to stretch across the territory, has so far been concentrated in the north of the West Bank.

"If there was a fence in that area it would have been much harder to get into Beersheva from Hebron," Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's chief spokesman, Ranaan Gissin, told AFP.

"Now we will expedite and speed up the building of the fence there (in the south of the West Bank)," Ranaan Gissin told AFP.

"We will build the fence where it provides the best protection, not where the world decides."

Kerry says US must win war on terror

Bush changes tone

REUTERS, Nashville

Seizing upon President Bush's remark that the war on terror may never be won, Democratic presidential challenger John Kerry said on Tuesday the United States will prevail by waging a smarter, more effective campaign.

"We can, we must and we will win the war on terror," Kerry told hundreds of cheering supporters who greeted him at Nashville International Airport before he speaks on Wednesday to the American Legion -- the largest US veterans' group.

"The way to win the war on terror is to fight a smarter, more effective war on terror," Kerry said. "That begins by electing a president to bring other nations to our side to share the responsibilities."

Republicans have made the war on terror a centerpiece of Bush's re-election drive. But Bush's bid to convince Americans they should not change presidents in the middle of a war was not helped by an interview Monday with NBC's "Today" show, when he was asked if the war on terrorism would ever be won.

"I don't think you can win it," Bush replied. "But I think you can create conditions so that those who use terror as a tool are less acceptable in parts of the world."

On Tuesday, Bush sought to explain his earlier remarks by saying the war was not a conventional one but that the United States would win.

As he prepared to address the Republican Party convention in New York on Thursday, Bush found himself forced to adjust his mes-

sage in a central issue for his re-election campaign.

"We meet today in a time of war for our country, a war we did not start, but one that we will win," Bush told the American Legion, the nation's largest veterans group.

"It's a different type of war. We may never sit down at a peace table, but make no mistake about it, we are winning and we will win," he said in a speech which repeated this refrain four times.

Bush's response to the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks and his ability to win the war on terror are central to his appeal to Americans for their vote.

The Republican president has consistently performed better than his Democratic rival John Kerry when voters are asked about who they most trust to keep America safe from another attack.

Mortar fire greets Iraq's new interim parliament

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's interim parliament was sworn in on Wednesday, completing the set-up of the caretaker administration in a ceremony rocked by mortar fire near the high-security building where the lawmakers were gathered.

"Today, an important step has been taken towards the democratic process to build a new democratic parliamentary united Iraq," Vice President Roj Nuri Shawas said in an address to the new assembly.

"Ahead of you lies a lot of work to let all political camps and parties reach a unified position on solving Iraq's problem peacefully and within the framework of law," he said.

The assembly's 100 members will be tasked with advising the interim government in the run-up to the planned January 2005 elections.

The opening session was rocked by mortar attacks on the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad where the

delegates were gathered. One person was injured.

Several prominent figures of the Iraqi political scene and former members of the now-defunct US-appointed Governing Council were not present to take the oath and had sent delegates.

Among them were the two main Kurdish leaders Jalal Talabani, Massud Barzani, independent Kurdish politician Mahmud Othman, as well as Abdelaziz Hakim, a senior Shiite leader from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and former Sunni interior minister Samir Sumeida.

"Today's Iraq is a country where Kurds are not to be tracked down nor is it a place where Shiites should be killed. It is an Iraq where chemical weapons are not to be used against its people and lands and where there is no room for mass graves," Shawas said.



PHOTO: AFP
Ahmed Chalabi (1st R), the head of the Iraqi National Congress and members of the Iraqi interim parliament swear in during a ceremony, yesterday in Baghdad.



PHOTO: AFP

Leader of the opposition in the Indian Parliament and former Indian deputy prime minister LK Advani waves out of a police van after being arrested along with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporters during a protest in Bangalore, yesterday. Advani along with senior party leaders addressed a rally of around 5000 BJP supporters to launch an agitation against the arrest of firebrand Hindu nun and former chief minister of Madhya Pradesh state Uma Bharti. Police said that all the detained supporters and leaders of BJP including Advani would be released later in the day.

Opposition seeks to meet Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's opposition has asked the country's military regime to allow a meeting with their detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi amid calls for a party overhaul, officials said Wednesday.

Members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) want to boost the leadership, whose numbers have dwindled because of detentions, resignations and deaths, and to rejuvenate an ageing party.

"We haven't get their (the government's) reply yet and we are expecting to meet her. We have many things to discuss," NLD spokesman U Lwin told AFP.

Any meeting would be the first since May when NLD leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, held a series of discussions before boycotting a national convention held by the junta.

The regime, which has ruled the country since a 1962 coup, said the convention was the first step in its programme of democratic development but the international community has dismissed it as a sham.

Investigators look for clues to Russia blast

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian investigators were under pressure on Wednesday to establish quickly who was behind a suicide bomb attack on a busy Moscow street that killed 10 people and injured 51.

Russian officials have made no public accusations, but the attack by a female bomber bore hallmarks of actions by Chechen rebels seeking independence for their Caucasus mountain region.

It came a week after 90 people were killed in two simultaneous air crashes officials blame on suicide bombers and followed a sensitive Chechen elections on Sunday.

"We cannot rule out a Chechen trail," Itar-Tass news agency quoted an Interior Ministry source as saying after the attack toward the end of the evening rush hour near a metro station and crowded shopping center.

Officials said 14 people were still in a serious condition in hospital with wounds from the bomb which had been packed with bolts and other shrapnel and which caused two parked cars to explode into flames.

Chalabi escapes assassination bid

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi politician and disgraced former Pentagon favourite Ahmed Chalabi said he escaped unharmed after an assassination attempt Wednesday which left two of his bodyguards wounded.

"I was coming back from Najaf, where I had met with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani the previous day, and when we reached Latifiya, a car started following us and opened fire on our convoy," said Chalabi, head of the Iraqi National Congress.

"Two of my bodyguards were wounded, one of them seriously," said Chalabi, speaking ahead of the first meeting of Iraq's interim parliament in Baghdad.

Latifiya is a town south of Baghdad which commands access to the main road heading to the holy Shiite cities of Najaf and Karbala on which drive-by shootings and kidnappings are frequent.

Chalabi, a leading figure of the exiled opposition to Saddam Hussein before the US-led invasion, fell out of favour with his US protectors over suspicion of leaking intelligence to Iran.

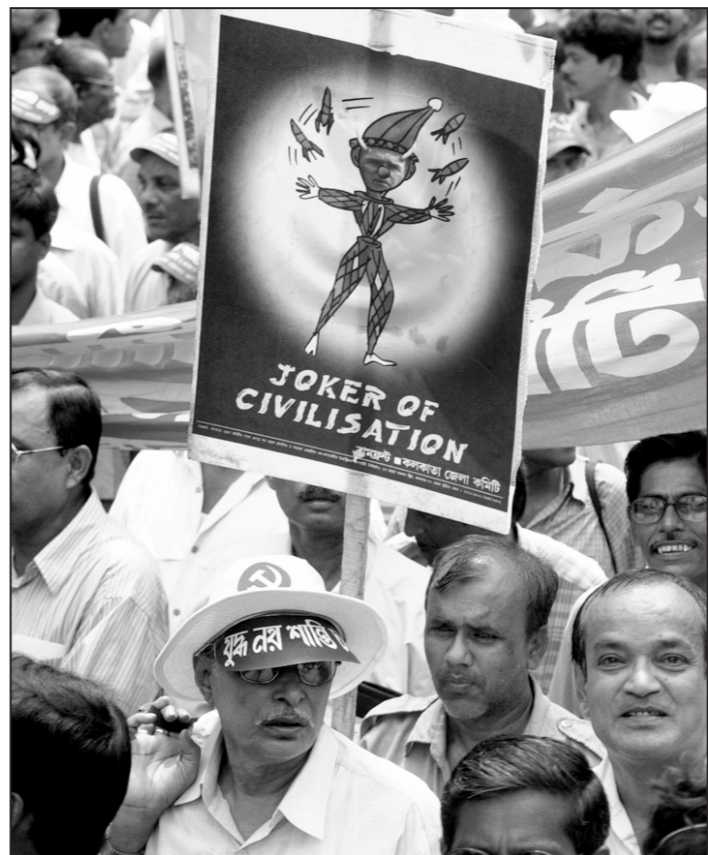


PHOTO: AFP
Indian Left-wing activists march holding placards, posters and shout slogans in Calcutta yesterday. More than a million people took part in the march of some eight km to observe 'Anti-Imperialist Day'.