

Fears for French hostages in Iraq grow

AFP, Paris

French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin was to gather his top ministers on Wednesday for talks on the situation of two French journalists held hostage in Iraq for nearly three weeks, Raffarin's aides said.

The talks, due to begin at midday (1000 GMT) after a morning cabinet meeting, were aimed at providing the ministers with an update on the situation, the aides said.

Radio France correspondent Christian Chesnot, Le Figaro reporter Georges Malbrunot and their Syrian driver were kidnapped in Iraq on August 20 by the so-called Islamic Army in Iraq.

The shadowy group demanded that Paris rescind its ban on the wearing of Islamic headscarves and other "conspicuous" religious insignia in state schools, but the law went into effect last Thursday as planned.

On Monday, a statement purportedly from the kidnappers was posted on an Islamist website, giving France 48 hours to accept three new conditions for the journalists' release.



A burning US Humvee lies on the road after it was hit by a roadside bomb on the outskirts of Baghdad, yesterday. As the US death toll surpassed 1,000, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld predicted more attacks against US forces in Iraq but insisted the country is better off than before US forces invaded in March 2003.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel says no deal with Syria

Troops return to northern Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon poured cold water on the prospects of a peace deal with Syria Wednesday, accusing Damascus of "influencing terror" against the Jewish state by sheltering the leadership of Hamas.

Sharon said in an interview with the Jerusalem Post that recent reported declarations by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that he wanted a peace deal were a public relations gesture and that he had to show real intent by shutting down the offices of hardline Palestinian factions based in Damascus.

"Syria is a factor which influences the terror against Israel," Sharon told the English-language daily.

"The headquarters for terrorist organizations -- Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front (for the Liberation of Palestine or PFLP), and a number of others -- operate in Damascus. The orders are given from there (for anti-Israeli attacks), and reports are sent back there."

His comments also appeared to kill off prospects of progress towards a peace deal with Syria, sparked by a report this week that Assad recently told visiting former US diplomats he would be ready to resume negotiations with Israel if Sharon would similarly oblige.

"Syria is under US pressure today because of its position on Iraq, and because it allows terrorists to go through its territory on the way to Iraq," Sharon said.

"So it is clear to me that the Syrians, in order to make life easier for themselves, find it convenient to say there are contacts, negotiations."

In an attempt to prevent Hamas firing more of its makeshift Qassam missiles into southern Israel, troops staged an overnight incursion into the northern Gaza Strip.

About 20 tanks accompanied by bulldozers and backed by attack helicopters entered the eastern part of the town of Jabalya and took up positions near the limits of the town of Beit Lahya and on hills.

The nearby town of Beit Hanun was surrounded by Israeli troops and its residents prevented from leaving the area, Palestinian security sources said.

Arafat and Qorei at loggerheads again!

AFP, Ramallah

Prime minister Ahmed Qorei has again threatened to resign over differences with Yasser Arafat ahead of a meeting of donor countries who help fund the Palestinian Authority, officials said Wednesday.

The pair are understood to have clashed on Tuesday over the timing of an international donors meeting in New York planned for next month, with Qorei arguing that it should be postponed while Arafat was pushing for representatives to attend the session as planned on September 23.

A senior Palestinian official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Qorei "had raised the possibility of resigning as he said he couldn't carry on working this way."

However Arafat later phoned Qorei on Wednesday in a bid to cool tempers, the source added.

Qorei formally submitted his resignation on July 17 but retracted his offer 10 days later after agreeing to bury the hatchet with Arafat.

GODHRA CARNAGE

Lalu to probe leakage of documents

PTI, Patna

Launching a counter-attack on BJP for accusing him of influencing the probe into the Godhra train burning incident, India's railway minister Lalu Prasad on Wednesday charged the Narendra Modi Government with having violated the official secrecy.

He said that the Modi Government did this by allegedly leaking the report and has called for a high-level probe.

"It is in blatant violation of the official secrecy by the Narendra Modi Government and (I have) called for a high-level probe into it," Prasad said.

"I am surprise how did this confidential letter written by Dahiya to the Gujarat Home commissioner fall into the hands of SK Modi," Prasad said.

Anwar's lawyers bid to clear his name

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Prosecutors fabricated evidence in the corruption trial of former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim, his lawyers charged as they made a final bid to clear his name in Malaysia's highest court Wednesday.

The accusation sparked a walk-out by Attorney General Abdul Gani Patail, who led the 1999 prosecution of Anwar and is appearing for the government in a Federal Court review of the case.

Anwar's lawyers want his conviction for corruption thrown out, which would allow him to return immediately to politics after being freed last week after nearly six years in jail when the same court overturned his sodomy conviction.

The Federal Court, which agreed unanimously Tuesday to review its own 2002 decision to reject his

appeal in the corruption case, on Wednesday set September 15 to deliver its verdict after hearing arguments from both sides.

"We will reserve our decision to September 15," said Justice Malek Ahmad, who heads a three-man bench.

Anwar's lawyers were hopeful of a positive outcome but said the court could also call for a new appeal hearing to allow fresh evidence to be cited, or send the case to be heard by a new panel of judges.

Earlier, they told the court their client was denied a fair hearing and attacked Gani's credibility.

"In this case there was compelling evidence that the two prosecutors, one of whom is unfortunately Abdul Gani Patail, were caught red handed in attempting to fabricate evidence against Anwar," said lawyer Christopher Fernando.

Terrorists behead three Muslims in Kashmir

AP, Jammu

Three Muslims were dragged out of their homes and beheaded amid rising civilian deaths in Jammu and Kashmir, police said on Wednesday.

Police suspect that the three were killed because they were informants of the security forces. There was no way to independently verify the police claim.

Terrorists stormed into the village of Mara Doria in the Rajouri region, 180 kilometres northwest of Jammu, according to the duty officer at the Rajouri police station.

Kalu Din, 25, and Mishri Gujjar, 35, were taken from their homes to a nearby forest and beheaded, he said.

In the adjoining Fabri Dhok village, the attackers took Ghulam Shah, 50, and also decapitated him, the officer said on customary condition of anonymity.

KASHMIR ISSUE

Pakistani papers blame India for little progress

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani press Wednesday blamed India for a stalemate in talks on the thorny dispute of Kashmir, saying the new leadership in New Delhi was obstructing the journey towards peace.

India's stand is "not in consonance with the changing world scenario," The News daily commented as the first ministerial meeting in three years ended in New Delhi on Monday.

"In fact on the contrary it is creating a hurdle in the journey towards mutual understanding between the two countries."

The English-language newspaper said, "Indian leaders say they

want to talk to Pakistan on all issues including Kashmir, but are not willing for a real movement towards the solution of the core issue between the two countries," it said.

After two days of talks Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri agreed to extend a ceasefire in force along the Line of Control, the de facto border in Kashmir. But they repeated long-held differences over the territory, which has caused two of their three wars.

The Nation daily, asserting that the talks led to "virtually no progress" on the Kashmir issue, said peripheral issues such as train and bus services served Indian pur-

poses more than Pakistan's. "The foreign ministry must learn to distinguish between skilful diplomacy and abject surrender," it said.

Slamming the lack of progress on Kashmir, its Urdu-language sister paper Nawa-i-Waqt said Pakistan should "stop this mockery of dialogue which is benefitting India."

The influential Dawn was more cautious, noting that the Kashmir issue was not expected to be resolved in one swoop.

"Although sceptics have questioned the speed of the dialogue and the failure to make progress on Kashmir, it is unwise to be so impatient at this stage," it said.

US army captain in hearing over murder of Iraqi

AFP, Hanau

A US army captain charged with murdering an Iraqi follower of a radical Shiite Muslim cleric appeared Wednesday at a military hearing here to determine whether he should face a court martial.

Captain Rogelio Maynulet, 29, is charged with murdering the man on May 21 in an incident during which US troops fired at a civilian vehicle suspected of containing militia forces near the central Iraqi town of Kufa.

Two men were in the vehicle. One died instantly, while the second was injured but was later killed at close range, according to an army statement.

Nine witnesses were due to be heard Wednesday, some via video link, in the pre-trial hearing, known as an Article 32 investigation, at a large US military base outside the town of Hanau, near Frankfurt, western Germany.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan National Army soldiers stand at attention during a ceremony to mark the third death anniversary of Afghan resistance hero Ahmad Shah Masood (pictured on billboard) during a ceremony at Kabul national stadium, yesterday. Masood, nicknamed "Lion of the Panjshir" for his armed struggle against the Taliban that ruled Afghanistan at the time, died September 9, 2001 when two Tunisians posing as journalists with fake Belgian passports detonated a bomb hidden in the camera as they pretended to interview him. His death, just two days before the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington, has been linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network by US officials.

Nepal PM seeks Indian help to tackle Maoists

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Nepal's Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, is expected to solicit crucial support from India in tackling a deadly Maoist insurgency. Mr Deuba began a five-day visit on Wednesday during which he will hold talks with senior Indian officials. Nepal is facing a deepening crisis after increased rebel violence in the past few weeks.

India, Nepal's biggest neighbour, has expressed its concern over the violence spilling over the border. Mr Deuba is leading a large team of senior ministers and business leaders to Delhi.

"The visit is expected to... solicit goodwill of the government of India to resolve the Maoist problem," Nepal government spokesman Mohammad Mohsin told reporters.

Several big businesses in Nepal have shut recently after facing threats from the rebels. India is also worried at increasing rebel attacks on Indian businesses in Nepal.

Nepal is also expected to seek more defence supplies for its armed forces to help it fight the rebels. In the past, India has supplied helicopters, trucks as well as arms and ammunition.

Beslan residents say hostage tape had to be shown

AFP, Beslan

Still seeking answers to a tragedy that left hundreds of their loved ones dead, residents of Beslan on Wednesday had no doubt it was right to show a video of their children and friends held hostage in the gym of the town's School No 1.

"I think that it was right to show the images to people, the entire world has a right to see them," said Rima Somartova, 57, held hostage with her two grandchildren, who both survived.

She was speaking amid the burned out debris of Beslan school, where 1,200 were held hostage by armed militants. Dozens of bottles of water have been placed in the courtyard of the school, in memory of how the hostages were not allowed to drink.

The remaining doors of the school were still covered with the blood shed in the unplanned raid by security forces that ended the siege but left hundreds dead amid horrific scenes of carnage.

Shoes and watches still sit on the

floor, now layered with dust. Locals have placed candles and icons in the interior, making it resemble the altar of a church.

But there is now little that remains from the school gymnasium shown in the video, which according to its broadcaster NTV television was recorded by the militants in the first hours of the hostage taking on September 1.

The footage showed the hostages, sitting down, some with their hands behind their heads, surrounded by masked militants.

The hostages were sitting in apparent silence, rigid with fear but with no sign of panic. Some did not look up. A streak of blood was visible in the centre of the gym.

The video showed one masked man placing his foot over a book on the ground that possibly contained explosive material. He theatrically pointed towards the object with his index finger.

"These (militants) are just animals, and so many children died. But people have to know everything," said Olga Beovayeva, 60.



PHOTO: AFP

Bride-to-be Sarah Salleh sits on a dias during a traditional Malay powdering ceremony at the Nurul Iman royal palace in Bandar Seri Begawan on September 5, 2004. Brunei's Crown Prince Al-Muhtadee Billah Bolkhiah, 30, and seventeen-year-old commoner Sarah Salleh are set to wed today in a marriage with ceremonies showcasing centuries of Bruneian tradition.

Floridians begin rebuilding life

AP, Fort Pierce

Thousands of Floridians beginning the recovery process in the destructive path of Hurricane Frances were hampered by long lines, congested highways and sticky heat, while the White House and teams of relief workers promised that help was on the way.

President Bush was to meet Wednesday with relief workers in Fort Pierce and hurricane specialists in Miami while discussing a \$2 billion disaster relief package for victims of both Frances and Charley, which ravaged southwest Florida last month.

Congress rushed to approve the emergency money late Tuesday and Bush was expected to sign the aid bill before leaving for Florida. The funding would provide direct aid for families, debris removal, repairs and emergency food and shelter, which has been a critical need for residents returning to battered homes.

"I wasn't ready to see such disaster to my house," said Agnes Johnston, a Port St. Lucie nurse whose three-bedroom home suf-

fered damage to its roof, ceilings and walls. "You look next door and see the next house in perfect condition. I wasn't ready for that either."

Many Floridians went home Tuesday for the first time since Frances pounded the state Sunday, jamming parts of Interstate 95, a major highway along the Atlantic coast. Federal Emergency Management Agency workers trying to reach Martin County on the southeast coast got stuck in traffic.

About 3 million Floridians learned it could take up to a week to restore power to all, with the longest wait for Daytona Beach. For many, there was plenty of waiting for gasoline, for ice and water and for the chance at buying a portable generator all amid high humidity and temperatures in the 90s.

"It's a very low comfort level," said Richard Freeburg of Jensen Beach, who waited 1 1/2 hours Tuesday for ice. "It's like a sauna inside your home and people really aren't happy."

One man was so desperate for ice that he shot the lock off a freezer.