

Chechen warlord threatens more attacks after Beslan

Putin mulls preventive terror actions

REUTERS, AP, Moscow

Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev claimed responsibility yesterday for the Russian school siege in which more than 320 hostages were killed, half of them children, and threatened further attacks by any means he saw fit.

Basayev, Russia's most wanted man, expressed regret for the bloody outcome in Beslan, which he blamed on the Kremlin. But he made clear there would be no let-up in rebel attacks in the future in the campaign for an independent Chechnya.

"We are not bound by any circumstances, or to anybody, and we will continue to fight as is convenient and advantageous to us, and by our rules," he said in an unrepentant statement published on a rebel Web site.

Basayev's statement appeared

on www.kavkazcenter.com a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin ruled out negotiations with Chechen rebels.

Dismissing the Beslan attackers as part of a "terrorist internationale" he pledged to stick to a course of "legality and toughness" to defeat the separatists.

Putin's tough stance has disappointed many western leaders who had hoped for a softer line after Beslan to end the 10-year conflict in Chechnya which has cost thousands of lives.

Basayev also confirmed Russian suspicions that his group had masterminded suicide bomb blasts that brought down two passenger planes over Russia on August 24 with the deaths of 90 people and two other bomb attacks in Moscow.

Basayev said armed units of the Riyadus-Salikhin group which he

heads carried out the September 1 attack on the school in southern Russia, seizing more than 1,000 hostages.

The assault led to a standoff that ended in a bloodbath on September 3 with Russian special forces storming the building amid bomb blasts and shooting.

Basayev said the group had demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya and, in the absence of this, the resignation of Putin.

He said the group had told intermediaries the hostages would be given food and water and the youngest children released if the Russian side began to meet their demands.

Basayev, taking up Putin's charges of links between Chechen separatists and a wider international network of terror, pointedly denied any links with al-Qaeda leader

Osama bin Laden.

"I don't know bin Laden. I don't get money from him, but I wouldn't turn it down," he said.

The heavily-bearded Basayev has been fighting Russian forces for most of the past 13 years and has been behind many sensational Chechen rebel operations.

AP adds: President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that Russia was preparing to take preventive action against terrorists, the Interfax news agency reported.

Putin said that "now in Russia, we are seriously preparing to act preventively against terrorists," Interfax reported.

Lower-level officials including Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov have threatened pre-emptive strikes against terrorists abroad, and it was not immediately clear whether Putin was referring to actions only at home or abroad, too.

Europeans launch military police force

AFP, Noordwijk

Five EU states signed an accord yesterday creating a new European military police force deployable to crisis situations worldwide, the latest tool in Europe's developing security arsenal.

Dutch Defence Minister Henk Kamp called the European Gendarmerie Force (EGF) - initially involving France, Italy, Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands, but open to others later - a "milestone" in Europe's developing military muscle.

"I'm certain that this force will become an important capability, bridging the gap between military forces and civil police forces," said Kamp, chairing an informal meeting of EU counterparts.

Under the initiative, a 900-strong force with headquarters in Italy is expected to be set up by next year, to be deployed anywhere in the world within 30 days of a decision.

"There's no geographical limitation. If the EU decides it would be good to send it to Africa or Asia, it could be done," said a Dutch EU presidency diplomat.

Annan calls for UN action over Darfur

BBC ONLINE

The UN secretary-general has urged Security Council members to take immediate action over a US draft resolution on Sudan's Darfur region.

Kofi Annan said civilians were being attacked "even as we speak" despite Khartoum's pledge to stop the violence.

He was speaking as council members debated a new draft of the resolution.

The US says it would like a vote to be taken by Saturday, but some members, including China, which has a veto, have opposed the threat of sanctions.

The new resolution under discussion calls for an enlarged African Union (AU) monitoring force in Darfur.

It also asks Annan to set up an international commission to investigate whether human rights violations in the region amount to genocide.



PHOTO: AFP

Two wounded Iraqi children lay in a hospital bed in Fallujah, after several overnight air raids hit their village of Zoba, some 16km south of Fallujah yesterday. US forces killed at least 60 people near the radical bastion of Fallujah in a fresh overnight onslaught against the network of extremist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as fighting flared in a Baghdad neighborhood loyal to Saddam Hussein.

Powell disputes Annan, insists Iraq war legal

'UN chief sending wrong message at wrong time'

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Colin Powell disputed UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's assertion that the US-led war in Iraq was illegal and said in an interview published yesterday the comment was "not a very useful statement to make at this point."

"What does it gain anyone? We should all be gathering around the idea of helping the Iraqis, not getting into these kinds of side issues," Powell said in an interview with The Washington Times.

Powell added that he was sure he would have the opportunity to talk to Annan about the comments the UN chief made to the BBC on Wednesday.

Asked whether the US-led invasion of Iraq broke international law, Annan said, "Yes, if you wish. I have indicated it was not in conformity with the UN Charter from our point of view, and from the Charter point of view it was illegal."

Powell, however, said: "What we did was totally consistent with international law."

Officials in Britain, Australia and Poland also insisted the military action in Iraq was legal.

The United Nations played down Annan's statement, which spokesman Fred Eckhard said Annan felt was no different from what he has been saying for more than a year.

In the wide-ranging Washington Times interview, Powell also acknowledged the serious security situation in Iraq after months of violence. Nearly 200 Iraqis have been killed in bomb blasts, clashes and other attacks over the past few days.

Powell said US diplomats and military commanders recognized that Iraqi elections set for January cannot proceed under the current security conditions in certain areas of the country but predicted it would improve.

"We don't expect the security situation as it exists now on the 18th

of September to be the security situation" on the day Iraqis vote, Powell told the newspaper.

"We know and (interim Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi) knows that these areas have to be brought back firmly under government control."

AFP adds: The United States Thursday said UN Secretary General Kofi Annan should have kept silent after he re-ignited the angry debate over Iraq by calling the war illegal.

Annan's remarks sparked the ire of US allies just days before US President George W. Bush and other world leaders gather for the annual open debate at UN headquarters in New York, which last year centred on the war.

"If I had been his advisor, which I wasn't, I would have advised him not to say it at all -- and if he was going to say it at all, not to say it now," said US Ambassador John Danforth.

Bush failed to tell truth about Iraq, says Kerry

AFP, Las Vegas

Democratic challenger John Kerry on Thursday accused President George W. Bush of failing to tell Americans the truth about the war in Iraq.

"True leadership is about looking people in the eye and telling the truth, even when it's hard to hear," Kerry told members of the National Guard Association.

Kerry blasted Bush for failing "the fundamental test of leadership. He failed to tell you the truth."

"You deserve better. The commander in chief must level with the troops and the nation," he added. "And as president, I will always be straight with you -- on the good days, and the bad days."

The Massachusetts senator, who faces Bush in the November 2 election, chided the Republican president for not addressing the mounting violence in Iraq when he spoke to the National Guard Association on Tuesday.

"Two days ago, the President stood right where I'm standing and did not even acknowledge that more than 1,000 men and women have lost their lives in Iraq," Kerry said.

Diplomats in North Korea shown large building at mystery blast site

AFP, Beijing

Foreign diplomats taken to the area of a reported mystery explosion in North Korea were shown a large building site and told two blasts occurred but as part of construction of a hydro-electric power project.

Their trip came as South Korea indicated that the reports concerning the huge explosion were the result of a misreading by intelligence officers of satellite and seismological data made available in Seoul.

Suspicious were aroused that a nuclear test could have taken place after South Korean media said last week a massive mushroom cloud was kicked up in an area known to contain storage sites for missiles and explosives.

To prove this was not the case, North Korea took a group of foreign diplomats to what it said was the site of explosions in rugged Kimhyungjik county Thursday.

"They went to a huge building site," said a German diplomat in Pyongyang, who was briefed by German ambassador to North Korea Doris Hertramps who visited the area.

7 Asian nations in US drug blacklist

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush on Thursday removed Thailand from an annual US narcotics blacklist but maintained in it other Asian nations Afghanistan, Myanmar, China, India, Laos, Pakistan and Vietnam.

He also expressed deep concern about North Korean-linked drugs being trafficked to other East Asian countries, saying there was a "high likelihood" state agents from Pyongyang were involved in the illicit trade.

Despite frequent claims about North Korea links to the drugs trade, the Stalinist state is not included in the so called "Major's List" of the United States comprising key drug-transit or drug-producing countries.

Except for Thailand, the seven Asian nations remained in the list of 22 "major drug-transit or major illicit drug producing countries" accompanying the US government's

annual report to Congress. Nearly all the other nations were from Latin America. Bush authorised Secretary of State Colin Powell to submit to Congress the 2004 government report, the White House said in a statement.

The president said the black-listed countries "failed demonstrably to make substantial efforts" during the previous 12 months to adhere to international counter-narcotics agreements and take the counter-narcotics measures specified in US law.

Thailand was removed from the list because its opium poppy cultivation was well below the levels specified under US law, no heroin processing laboratories were found in the country for several years and it was no longer a significant direct source or transit point of illicit narcotics trade, the statement said.

Bush also reported to Congress

that Myanmar "failed demonstrably" during the last year to adhere to its obligations under international counter-narcotics agreements and to take the measures set forth in US law.

The United States had warned in March that while Myanmar had cut poppy cultivation it remained the world's second-ranked supplier of the drug from which derivatives such as heroin are made.

Thailand also said earlier this year that it was considering building a high-security fence along its border with Myanmar in a bid to stop smugglers trafficking illegal drugs into the kingdom.

On Afghanistan, Bush said despite "good-faith efforts" on the part of the government of US-backed President Hamid Karzai, there were "concerns about the increased opium crop production and the government's lack of capacity to prevail in the provinces."

Lanka worried at truce violation by Tigers

Norway fails to break peace deadlock

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka expressed concern over truce violations by Tiger rebels as a top Norwegian envoy prepared to return home empty-handed yesterday after failing to end the island's talks deadlock, officials said.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga told Norway's special envoy Erik Solheim that her government was unhappy at foot-dragging by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on resuming peace talks, an official said.

He said Solheim had failed to break the ice and bring the two sides back to the negotiating table despite his latest initiative to jumpstart the face-to-face talks that have remained suspended since April last year.

A statement from Kumaratunga's office said she had stressed that the LTTE's "current indecision" over resuming talks was "unsatisfactory", but reiterated her commitment to maintain the Oslo-brokered truce that has been in place since 2002.

"The president... expressed deep concern over the LTTE's violations of the ceasefire and the delay in the resumption of negotiations... despite the flexibility demon-

strated by the government," the statement said.

For their part, the Tigers said Solheim who had talks with them in the island's north had no new message to revive the negotiations aimed at hammering out a political solution to the drawn out conflict.

"The Norwegian facilitators did not bring any constructive message from the Sri Lankan government," LTTE political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan was quoted as saying by the pro-rebel Tamilnet website.

There was no immediate reaction from the Norwegians but Tamilnet quoted Solheim as saying that "all parties connected to the peace process are feeling a sense of frustration now."

Solheim travelled to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi for the talks Thursday, the second anniversary of the start of Norwegian-brokered peace negotiations which opened at a Thai naval base two years ago.

After six rounds, the Tigers withdrew from the talks accusing the Colombo government of trying to sideline them from the rehabilitation and reconstruction process.



PHOTO: AFP

Nelson Mandela (R) is led out of his office by India's President Abdul Kalam after their meeting in Johannesburg Thursday. An awestruck Indian President Abdul Kalam Thursday hailed anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela as a "mighty spirit" -- a term signifying near-divine status in his country -- after meeting with South Africa's most famous son.

US presses democratic reforms in Pakistan

AFP, Washington

The United States said it expected continued democratic reforms in Pakistan following a clarification by Islamabad over the military role of President Pervez Musharraf.

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, had promised to relinquish as military chief by this December under a deal with the six-party Islamic alliance of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA).

Pakistan Information Minister Sheikh Rashid had announced on Wednesday that Musharraf would not stand down as army chief but he clarified a day later that he meant to say he hoped the president would retain command of the armed forces.

"We've had a bit of time to understand the situation better and I have to say our understanding is President Musharraf has not taken a decision on this issue," US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters Thursday.

He said Pakistan's long term interest continued to be in a transi-

tion to a fully functioning democracy and "we do expect to see continuing progress towards this goal which is central to Pakistan becoming a moderate and modern Islamic state."

Boucher said that Musharraf, a key ally in the US-led war against terrorism, had made many statements over his term in office in support of Pakistan's continued path to democracy.

"His vision for his country he describes as one of enlightened moderation. This is a vision for Pakistan's future that we fully share," he said.

Under the deal Musharraf reached with the MMA, the alliance agreed to support a parliamentary vote to approve constitutional changes empowering the president to sack the government and to dissolve the elected parliament.

The Islamic parties had paralysed parliament for almost a year before the deal was reached.

Maldives regrets EU call for aid suspension

AFP, Colombo

The Maldivian government expressed regret yesterday over a European parliament resolution calling on the European Commission and EU states to halt non-humanitarian aid to the South Asian nation where emergency rule has been imposed.

The government of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, South Asia's longest serving leader, said they invited European parliamentary members to visit the atoll nation for a first-hand assessment but the offer was declined.

"We had invited a group of MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) to visit the Maldives and assess the situation on the ground before voting on the resolution," the Maldivian government said in a statement sent here.

"We regret that this offer was not taken up."

Colombo-based envoys from European Union (EU) nations said last week they were denied access to Maldivian dissidents detained by Gayoom although a lower-level fact finding mission was allowed to visit prisons.

Pak troops recover bodies of foreign rebels, seize arms depot

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani troops have recovered bodies of four foreign militants and also seized a large quantity of arms from a fortress-like house in the rugged tribal belt near the Afghan border, the military said yesterday.

The suspected al-Qaeda-linked militants were killed Tuesday in a clash with security forces in Khanigurram area near Wana, the main town in the troubled South Waziristan region, military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan said.

"They were all foreigners," Sultan told AFP, without giving their nationalities.

"Their bodies are with security forces" at a military post in the area, he added.

Sultan said troops engaged in siege and search operations in the area seized an arms dump from a house owned by a local cleric who claimed it was a madrassah (Islamic seminary) in Makin area, 60 km north of Wana.



PHOTO: AFP

A marina is flooded from Hurricane Ivan in Weeks Bay Thursday. At least 24 people died as Hurricane Ivan slammed the southern United States.