

Brother hoping for release of British hostage

AFP, London

The release of two Italian women hostages in Iraq has given the family of British hostage Ken Bigley hope that he may also be freed soon, his younger brother said in remarks published Wednesday.

"We are all heartened by this. I'm overjoyed for their families. Those wonderful women went through hell and back and so did their loved ones," Paul Bigley told The Times newspaper at his home in the Netherlands.

"I realise that their kidnappers are a different kettle of fish to those holding my brother but they are still baddies," Paul Bigley was quoted as saying.

The Bigley family believes that a diplomatic campaign by the Italian government spurred the release of the two women, The Times said.

A British Muslim delegation said in England after a 48-hour mission to Baghdad that they had received "very encouraging advice and promises that we hope, inshallah (God willing), will lead to the release" of Bigley.

Italy celebrates release of hostages in Iraq

AFP, BBC ONLINE, Rome

Italians celebrated Wednesday the release of two female aid workers who had been held hostage in Iraq with the country's two leading newspapers expressing the relief felt nationwide with the headline "They're Home" alongside pictures of the two smiling women.

"It has been a long time since Italy enjoyed a true and spontaneous feeling of joy, capable of uniting the entire nation," said the leading daily Corriere della Sera in an editorial.

"The time has now come to feel relieved and to analyse what happened during these 21 days of anguish," it added. "Above all, the crisis was handled with intelligent firmness and without pomposity by the government and security services."

Corriere hailed the country's politicians for putting aside differences and "almost miraculously working together without trying to take advantage of the situation".

Simona Torretta and Simona Pari, both 29, were released by their Iraqi kidnappers on Tuesday after the government reportedly paid a one-million-dollar ransom. Two Iraqi

colleagues seized with them on September 7 were also freed as were four Egyptians taken in a separate kidnapping.

The two Simonas arrived at Rome's Ciampino military airport late Tuesday to be greeted by their families and leading politicians, including Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Wearing long tunics, they smiled broadly and appeared in good health as they stepped off the plane.

"We were treated well and with a lot of respect," Simona Torretta said. "Now everything is OK, we are surrounded by affection."

She said though the two women's three weeks of captivity were difficult, they knew they would be released.

"They understood our work and from that moment on the situation improved," said the other hostage, Simona Torretta.

Torretta said she planned to return to Baghdad.

"I would do it all over again with all the consequences that carries even though I'm sorry for all the suffering my mother went through and didn't deserve," she said.



PHOTO: AFP

Simona Torretta (R), and Simona Pari, volunteers for the Italian aid organization 'Un Ponte Per Baghdad' (A Bridge for Baghdad) are pictured on their arrival at Rome's Ciampino military airport, Tuesday evening, by an Italian Red Cross special plane, after being released from a three-week hostage ordeal in Iraq. Their relatives and Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi boarded the Italian air force plane to welcome them.

Labour struggles to shift focus from Iraq

Blair admits popularity dented over Iraq war

AFP, Brighton

Britain's ruling Labour Party was struggling Wednesday to shift the pre-election focus to domestic politics, as Prime Minister Tony Blair was called on yet again to defend the war in Iraq.

A day after Blair admitted to the party faithful that Iraq had not possessed any useable weapons of mass destruction ahead of last year's conflict, Labour was hoping to instead trumpet achievements in areas such as crime and health.

The conference in the southern English seaside resort of Brighton is likely to be the last before Labour and Blair try to win a third successive term in office in a general election expected in the middle of next year.

Mindful of the British public's doubts over Iraq, Labour is desperate to fight the election battle on home issues, but the war issue refuses to budge, not least because

of fears for Ken Bigley, a British engineer held by Islamic militants in Baghdad since earlier this month.

In a combative interview broadcast Wednesday morning, Blair rejected the view of UN head Kofi Annan that the Iraq war was illegal, also insisting he would be trusted by the British people to take them to war again.

"That's his view," Blair told BBC Radio of Annan's comments earlier this month that the conflict did not comply with the UN charter and was thus illegal, adding: "I don't accept that."

In his address to the Labour gathering on Tuesday, the prime minister admitted mistakes with intelligence about the threat posed by Iraq, but stressed he still thought the war was the correct thing to do.

Speaking on Wednesday, Blair acknowledged his choice to back the US-led conflict to remove Saddam Hussein was "a decision

that in terms of let's say popular support has not done me a great deal of good".

But asked whether the public would "laugh" if he tried to persuade them that another country posed a threat and had to be invaded, Blair was bullish.

"I'm afraid I don't accept that people won't trust a judgement that is made provided the evidence is given to them. And of course, it's absolutely right that the evidence given to them has got to be credible," he said.

"I thought, and still think, that it was absolutely essential we take this stand," Blair said.

In his speech on Tuesday, Blair acknowledged evidence about Saddam Hussein having actual weapons of mass destruction was wrong.. But the prime minister told Labour delegates in Brighton he could not apologise for having been involved in the effort to remove Saddam Hussein.



PHOTO: AFP

Pro democracy lawmakers-elect Lee Cheuk Yan (L) and Leung Kwok Hung (R) pose next to part of a record breaking attempt quilt in Hong Kong yesterday. Leung, rebel Hong Kong lawmaker-elected stirred controversy 29 September by threatening to sue the government for not letting him amend the wording of the oath of office he must take next week.

7 Palestinians killed by Israeli troops

AFP, Jabalia

Seven Palestinians, including three teenage boys and two militants, were killed by Israeli fire in the occupied territories Wednesday as the army pressed on with a massive raid into the northern Gaza Strip and Jenin.

Israeli tanks and jeeps, backed by helicopters, swarmed into the Gaza Strip near the Jabalia refugee camp late Tuesday in an operation it says is aimed at halting rocket attacks.

Three Palestinians were killed and 17 wounded as Israeli troops clashed with gunmen around Jabalia. The dead were identified as 22-year-old Tawfik Ali Sharafi, a fighter with Hamas' armed wing the Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades, and teenage boys Ahmed Madi, 17, and Said Abu Eish, 14.

Another boy, 13-year-old Mohammed Jaber, was killed when Israeli soldiers opened fire on stone-throwing youths near the Jewish settlement of Netzarim further south

in the Gaza Strip, medics said.

And in the West Bank, Israeli troops killed a wanted Palestinian militant at down in the northern city of Nablus, Palestinian security sources said.

Two more Palestinians were killed by Israeli troops as they were driving in the West Bank town of Jenin on Wednesday, medics said.

The victims were a taxi driver and his passenger, whose wife was also wounded, they said.

The latest deaths bring to 4,353 the number of people killed since the start of the Palestinian intifada or uprising four years ago, including 3,334 Palestinians and 948 Israelis, according to an AFP count.

In Jabalia, gunmen were hiding in the camp's narrow alleys as several helicopters were flying overhead, surveying the area. Several tanks were blocking the camp's entrance and troops had taken over at least one residential building as a makeshift base.

Two al-Qaeda men to die for bombing USS Cole

AFP, Sanaa

A Yemeni court Wednesday sentenced to death two al-Qaeda militants for the October 2000 bombing of the US Navy destroyer Cole which claimed the lives of 17 US sailors.

Another four defendants were given jail sentences ranging from five to 10 years.

Chief suspect Abdel Rahim al-Nashiri, who is currently in US custody and was sentenced in absentia, and Jamal Mohammed al-Bedawi, 30, were both given the death penalty over the October 12,

2000 attack.

The pair were found guilty of "forming an armed group, taking part in the finalising, preparation and execution of the attack on the USS Cole and of the killings," said judge Najib Qadiri.

The sailors were killed when an explosives-laden rubber dingy rammed the guided missile destroyer while it was in the southern port of Aden, blasting a hole in one of the most technologically advanced vessels in the US Navy.

The 8,300 ton ship, which had pulled into Aden to refuel, was heading to the Gulf to join the US-

led maritime interception operations in support of UN sanctions that were then in force against Iraq.

Born in Saudi Arabia of Yemeni descent, Nashiri was described at the time as al-Qaeda's chief for naval operations and its operations chief in the Gulf. He was arrested in the United Arab Emirates in October 2002 and handed over to Washington.

He is also suspected of involvement in attacks against the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998 that killed 224 people.

'Rebel attacks in Iraq are wider than told'

AFP, Washington

Rebel violence in Iraq affects nearly every major population center and is more widespread than Iraqi government officials describe, according to a study by a private security company with access to US military intelligence and its own informants in Iraq, The New York Times said Wednesday.

"If you look at incident data and you put incident data on the map, it's not a few provinces," said Adam Collins, a security expert and the chief intelligence official in Iraq for the Las Vegas-based Special Operations Consulting-Security Management Group Inc.

The group said more than 2,300 attacks of all types have been directed over the past 30 days against civilians and military targets, averaging about 80 a day and affecting areas from Nineveh and Salahuddin provinces in the northwest to Babylon and Diyala in the center and Basra in the south.

The number of attacks was lower than a peak in April, when they averaged 120 a day, but not a single Iraqi province went without an attack in the 30-day period, the

report said.

The study's conclusions ran contrary to the picture Iraq's interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi painted of his country during his visit here last week, when he insisted that 14 of Iraq's 18 provinces "are completely safe, there are no problems."

The US government has also attempted to put Americans at ease over the ongoing violence in Iraq, especially considering voter confidence prior to the November 2 presidential election, but lately it has warned of a possible surge in rebel activity aimed at derailing President George W. Bush's chances of reelection.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell warned Sunday that the insurgency in Iraq was "getting worse" and could hinder the organization of Iraqi elections planned for January.

The Washington Post on Wednesday said a growing number of career professionals with national security agencies also believe the situation in Iraq is much worse, and the road to success much more tenuous than is being expressed in public by top Bush administration officials.

Brunei changes constitution, opens door to elections

AFP, Bandar Seri Begawan

The Sultan of Brunei on Wednesday cleared the way for the oil-rich kingdom's first elections in more than 40 years, but said pro-democracy reforms should be implemented with caution.

Dressed in white military regalia with golden tassels, 58-year-old Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah signed an amendment to the 1959 Constitution to allow a parliament with 15 elected members and up to 30 appointed MPs.

The appointed members will include all nine cabinet ministers and Hassanah, who is also prime minister, finance minister and defence minister.

"With these amendments, the constitution becomes a stronger foundation to fulfill my vision for this nation-state," Hassanah said in a speech at the signing ceremony.

The sultan surprised many diplomats and observers when he began political reforms in July, but he cautioned on Wednesday that the monarchy would introduce democratic changes only gradually.

US troops arrest militants trapped by Pakistan

AFP, Kabul

US-led troops in Afghanistan captured 15 Taliban militants when they were trapped on the border with Pakistan after attacking a coalition patrol, a US military spokesman said Wednesday.

Pakistani troops prevented the insurgents from crossing the border near insurgency-hit Shkin district as they were being pursued by coalition forces after a brief gun battle, the spokesman said.

The capture of the militants Monday was the result of "increased cooperation" by Pakistani troops, who answered a call for assistance from US military headquarters in Afghanistan, said Major Scott Nelson, spokesman for the 18,000-strong coalition force.

"This happened in Shkin. One of our patrols was taken under fire by anti-coalition (forces). They engaged them and pushed them back," Nelson told a regular news conference in Kabul.

"The ACM (anti-coalition militias)

continued to move toward the Pakistani border. Our headquarters contacted the Pakistani military and they moved forces up to a blocking position to hold the ACM within Afghanistan," he said.

"They were basically trapped between our forces and Pakistani forces."

Nelson was unsure if anyone was killed in the incident.

"When air support came in we destroyed one fighting position, one ACM vehicle, I don't have the number of ACM killed but we detained 15 ACM in that incident," he said.

The major praised the Pakistan military's action.

"We are pleased that the government of Pakistan has intensified its operations on its side of the border to help ensure election security in Afghanistan," he said.

"This never happened a year ago, two years ago, just the matter of the cooperation between coalition forces and Pakistani forces really improved," Nelson said.

Jailed 'American Taliban' seeks early release

REUTERS, San Francisco

John Walker Lindh, serving 20 years in jail for fighting alongside the Taliban, asked the US government on Tuesday to lessen his sentence after it decided to release a second American captured in Afghanistan.

Lindh, 23, dubbed the "American Taliban," was captured in 2001 during the Afghanistan war and was sentenced in 2002 after a plea deal.

His lawyer, James Brosnahan, said he had filed an appeal to commute the sentence after news that a long-held accused enemy combatant, Yaser Hamdi, was to be flown from the United States to Saudi Arabia on Tuesday. A Saudi-born US citizen, Hamdi was captured on the same day and place as Lindh.

"I hope America can find it in her heart to forgive John," Lindh's mother Marilyn Walker, a homemaker, told a news conference. "John has admitted he made a mistake when he went to Afghanistan in June 2001 to fight in

the civil war between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance."

"Despite what people may think, John Lindh took no action whatsoever against his native country."

Reviled by many Americans as a traitor, Lindh was caught in Afghanistan in late November 2001 while fighting with the Taliban. He was a convert to Islam.

Under his plea deal, Lindh was spared a possible life prison sentence and all terrorism charges against him were dropped. In exchange, he pleaded guilty to two charges of aiding the Taliban and carrying explosives and agreed to cooperate with authorities and be interrogated.

"We do hope for clemency in the meantime. We do hope that at some point the president would see fit to release John," Lindh's father, Frank, an attorney, told the news conference.

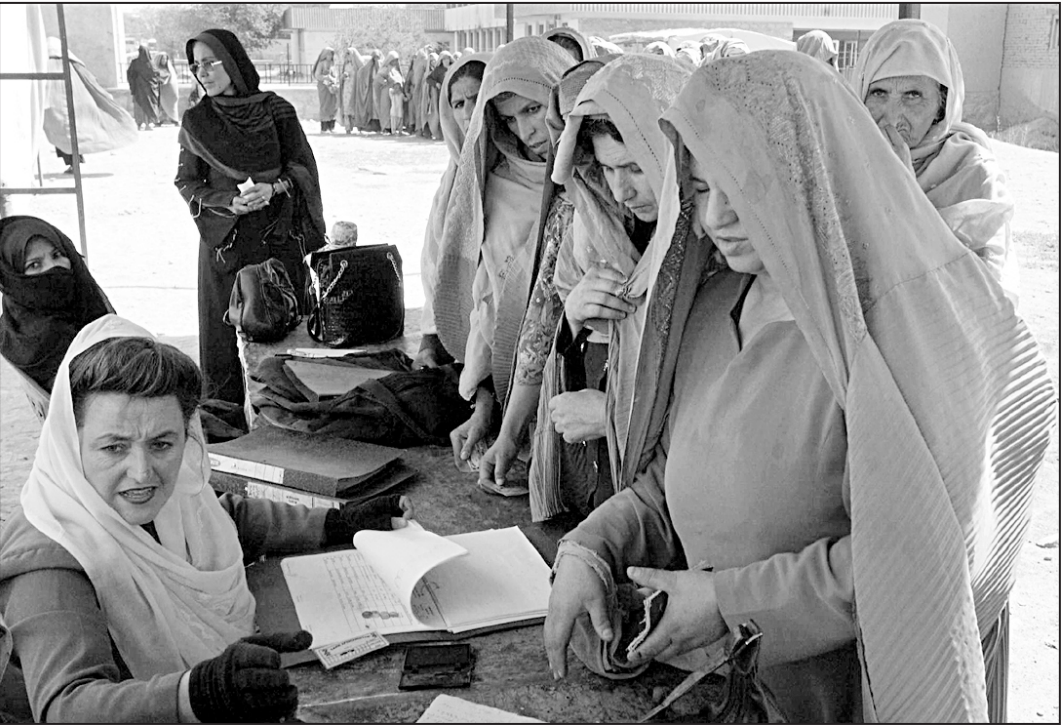


PHOTO: AFP

A group of Afghan widows await their turn to register at a food distribution center for widows in Kabul, yesterday as aid workers take down their details. Hundreds of Afghan widows gathered to collect food aid for their families.