

Blast at Indonesian embassy in Paris

AFP, Paris

Ten people were lightly injured when a bomb exploded outside the Indonesian embassy in Paris yesterday, breaking windows and damaging vehicles but causing no serious destruction.

Nine of the injured -- who included four embassy staff members -- were treated for cuts in local hospitals and the tenth was tended at the scene in the exclusive 16th district in the west of the capital.

The explosive device was left on the pavement beneath the Indonesian flag flying from the embassy building on a narrow street corner and went off shortly after 5:00 am (0300 GMT).

It left a small crater some 50 centimetres (20 inches) wide by 20 centimetres deep, which anti-terrorist experts were examining three hours later amid the morning rush hour. Streets around the embassy were sealed off as workmen cleared up the debris of broken glass.

European, Asian leaders call for UN to lead anti-terror battle

AFP, Hanoi

European and Asian leaders called yesterday for the United Nations to spearhead the fight against international terrorism in veiled criticism of the unilateral US approach to global threats.

Enlarging the UN Security Council, instability in Iraq, tension on the Korean peninsula, weapons non-proliferation and disease control were also discussed on the opening day of the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem).

"The leaders agreed that the United Nations should play the leading role in preserving international peace and security," 25 European Union and 13 Asian nations said in a statement at the talks here.

On the sidelines of the two-day

summit, which has been overshadowed by deep divisions over Myanmar, China pressed for the EU to lift an arms embargo imposed after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

European and Asian leaders emphasized the need for stronger ties between the two regions to balance their respective strong bonds with the United States, with particular focus on security issues.

"For the most part the speakers specifically stressed the increasing role on the United Nations in dealing with this problem (of terrorism)," Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot, whose country holds the EU's rotating presidency, said terrorism was a "global problem" that required global solutions, but was gentler towards the United States.

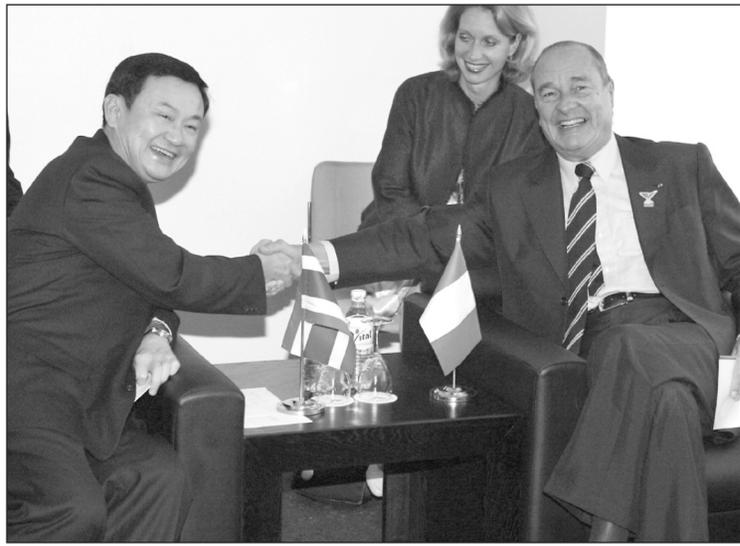
"The UN of course as a world-wide organisation is best placed to take the initiative. I have the feeling also that the United States shares these views," he said.

French President Jacques Chirac, who headed to China from Vietnam, was more blunt in his criticism of Washington, attacking the war in Iraq as illegal without UN backing and expressing grave fears for the country's future.

"I believe it was a bad solution which didn't conform with legality and with international law, and so it was a mistake," he told China Central TV.

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French President Jacques Chirac (R) holds talk with Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra during a bilateral meeting yesterday in Hanoi, on the sidelines of the fifth Asia-Europe meeting (Asem).

British minister apologises for false Iraq data

AFP, London

Britain's Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt has apologised for false government intelligence information about weapons of mass destruction that was the basis for Britain joining the Iraq invasion last year.

But like Prime Minister Tony Blair earlier, she insisted Britain had nevertheless been right to go ahead with the intervention despite faulty data which has caused controversy in Britain.

"I certainly want to say that all of us, from the prime minister down, all of us who were involved in making an incredibly difficult decision are very sorry and do apologise for the fact that that information was wrong," she said on BBC television late Thursday.

"But I don't think we were wrong to go in," she added, in response to a question.

Last week Blair refused to apologise for the Iraq war.

"I can't, sincerely at least, apologise for removing Saddam. The world is a better place with Saddam in prison, not in power," Blair told the annual conference of his Labour Party.

Swiss FM to visit Lanka to aid talks with Tigers

AFP, Geneva

Swiss Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey was set to visit Sri Lanka yesterday to try to revive peace talks between the government and Tamil rebels, ministry sources said.

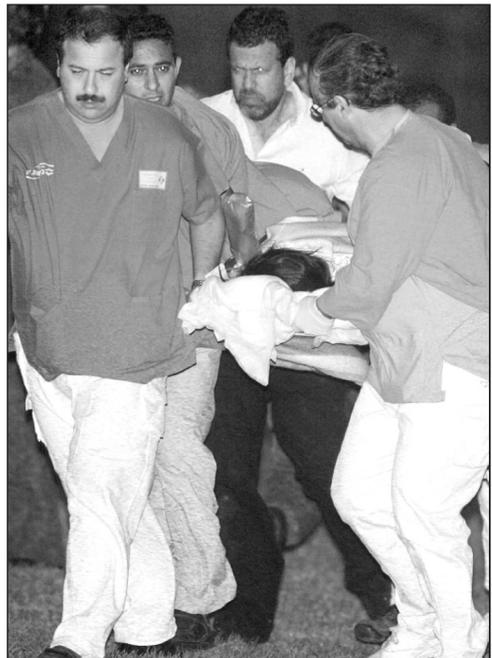
Last week leaders of the Tamil Tiger rebel group began a week-long meeting in Switzerland to prepare for the next round of peace talks with the Sri Lankan government.

Calmy-Rey is to meet Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and government and Tamil opposition figures.

Talks have been stalled since April 2003 but the Swiss foreign ministry said last week it "welcomes the LTTE's continuing willingness to negotiate, and calls for peace talks to be resumed as soon as possible."

The LTTE has blamed the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga for the delay in reviving negotiations which the rebels themselves suspended in April last year.

But Kumaratunga said last month that the Tigers, who want an independent state in the northeast of the island, were holding up talks aimed at ending a conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.



One of the wounded is rushed to hospital after arriving by helicopter in Beersheva in southern Israel yesterday. The unidentified man was wounded in a blast that ripped through Hilton hotel in the Red Sea resort of Taba in Egypt's Sinai peninsula late Thursday.

World leaders condemn Sinai attacks

AFP, Paris

World leaders condemned triple bombings in Egypt's Sinai peninsula claiming at least 26 victims, and renewed calls for international cooperation to stamp out terrorism.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and France's President Jacques Chirac were among the first to issue condemnations.

Speaking from Hanoi where they were attending a Europe-Asia conference, both called for a united front against terrorism.

"There is no other solution to peace in the Middle East than what is laid out in the roadmap for peace. Despite all this brutality we have to continue to pursue this goal," Schroeder said.

The attacks underscored the need for a united front, he said, adding: "We, as the international community, must fight terrorism wherever it occurs."

Three suspected car bombs ripped through beach resorts packed with Israeli tourists on the Red Sea coast of Egypt's Sinai desert late Thursday.

France, like the entire international community, "condemns these barbaric acts of terrorism and joins in the mourning of the Israeli people," Chirac said in a message to Israeli President Ariel Sharon.

In another message to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Chirac condemned "these terrorist acts, which once again have claimed innocent victims".

An early condemnation came from Russia, one of whose citizens was among the victims.

"The news of the beastly terror acts in Egyptian cities ... have deeply shaken me," President Vladimir Putin said, urging solidarity, consolidation and coordination by the international community.

One Russian died and eight were injured in the blasts in Egypt, a popular holiday destination for Russians.

In London, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw expressed shock.

"I offer my sympathies to the families and loved ones of those who have died and to those who have been injured," he said.

"We are in close touch with the Egyptian and Israeli authorities. Staff from the British Embassy in Cairo are on the ground providing consular assistance."

"We invite all regional countries to cooperate against terrorism."

In Gaza City, a spokesman for the headline Islamic Jihad group denied Palestinian militant groups had carried out the attacks.

Nato agrees plans for Iraq training mission

'US plans to pacify 30 hotspots before polls'

AFP, REUTERS, Brussels/ New York

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation agreed yesterday detailed plans for its mission to train Iraqi security forces, involving up to 300 instructors and commanded by a senior US officer, officials said.

Nato's top decision-making body, the North Atlantic Council (NAC), adopted a "concept of operations" for the mission, agreed after prolonged negotiations which notably pitted the United States against France and other countries.

The plans were aimed at "substantially enhancing Nato's assistance to the Iraqi interim government with the training of its security forces, as well as the coordination of offers of training and equipment, said a Nato statement.

The mission will be led by US Lieutenant General David Petraeus, who was at the meeting of Nato ambassadors, which agreed his appointment and the terms of mission.

Petraeus is currently commander of the Multinational Force training effort, and will become "dual-hatted" in taking on the running of the Nato mission as well. He

was due to give a press conference later Friday.

Under the plans senior Iraqi officers will be trained in a military academy in the Baghdad region. In all between 200-300 Nato trainers will be deployed, although the number of troops needed to protect the mission has not been set.

Nato has agreed to provide protection for the military academy itself, while the multi-national force in Iraq is to ensure a wider secure environment for the mission.

Nato leaders agreed in principle on the Iraqi training mission at a summit in Istanbul in June, but the alliance has struggled to hammer out the details.

France, Germany and Belgium -- the key opponents of the Iraq conflict, whose resistance plunged Nato into an unprecedented crisis last year -- have notably refused to deploy any troops inside Iraq as part of the training mission.

General James Jones, Nato's supreme allied commander, said last week as many as 3,000 Nato troops could be deployed to Iraq to help train Iraqi security forces.

But Nato officials have since sought to downplay that figure,

saying it is far too premature to say exactly how many troops will be needed to protect the training mission.

And a US defense official admitted this week that the mission is not likely to get there until next year -- too late to have an impact on the training of security forces ahead of Iraq's January elections.

"We'd like to see it happen sooner," the official said.

Reuters adds: US military and civilian officials have identified 20 to 30 towns and cities in Iraq that must be pacified before nationwide elections can be held in January, The New York Times reported yesterday.

Recent operations to stamp out unrest in Tal Afar, Samarra and the area south of Baghdad are the first signs of a new, six-pronged strategy for Iraq that has been approved at the highest levels of the Bush administration, the Times said.

Places specifically being looked at, according to unnamed administration officials, include Falluja, Ramadi and the northern Babil Province.

IAEA making 'progress' in verification work in Iran: ElBaradei

AFP, Tokyo

The UN nuclear watchdog is making "good progress" in its verification work in Iran but cannot yet say whether Tehran has diverted sensitive technology to weapons production, the agency chief said yesterday.

Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), said the agency's job was to make sure that assurances from Iranian leaders are "reflected on the ground".

"We are still in the verification process in Iran. We are making good progress there; we have not seen materials diverted towards nuclear weapons."

he told an audience of some 200 at the UN University in Tokyo.

"However, we have not yet completed our job to be able to say that no

undeclared activities exist in Iran," he said after delivering a speech on nuclear non-proliferation.

The IAEA board passed a resolution on September 18 calling on Iran to immediately widen a suspension of enrichment to include all uranium enrichment-related activities -- such as making centrifuges, converting yellowcake into UF6 feed gas and constructing a heavy water reactor.

Iran, facing a November 25 deadline, risks being referred to the UN Security Council if it fails to comply.

Iranian officials said Wednesday they would not bow to the demand for total suspension and were ready for confrontation.

The IAEA chief in the speech urged an eventual total ban on nuclear weapons which should one day be "perceived like genocide".

Pakistan on high alert, bans religious gatherings

AFP, Multan

Pakistan's army was on high alert yesterday ahead of anticipated protests over the killing of 41 people at a gathering of Sunni Muslims from an outlawed radical organisation, the sixth attack in a mounting wave of sectarian bloodletting this year.

"The government has directed the entire security apparatus to remain on a high state of alert, because of the threat posed by elements trying to destabilise the country through acts of terrorism," Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao announced after an emergency cabinet meeting late Thursday.

Troops are on standby in Multan, the central Pakistani city famous for its shrines to revered Muslim saints, where the extremist Sipah-e-Sahaba group had been mourning the first anniversary of leader Azam

Tariq's assassination when a high-intensity car-bomb shattered the pre-dawn darkness.

The bomb exploded at 4:30am as some 2,000 mourners were dispersing after an all-night prayer vigil.

Most funerals were held Thursday afternoon, but Sunni leaders declared Friday a day of mourning and called for protests after midday prayers.

But the cabinet also declared a ban on religious gatherings, exempting only congregations in mosques.

"The federal government has decided to advise the provincial governments to impose bans on processions, religious gatherings and congregations until further orders, except for gatherings for prayers inside mosques," Sherpao told reporters after the meeting.



Pakistani Shia Muslim protesters burn a US flag in Karachi yesterday at a rally protesting against the killing of 30 Shia in a suicide bombing in the eastern city of Sialkot on October 1. The protesters were also condemning the killing of 41 Sunni Muslims on Thursday in a car bombing in central Pakistani city of Multan.



Indian residents of a low area at Pachanna Gram, close to Kolkata stand in floodwaters yesterday following a heavy downpour. At least 38 people have died and hundreds have been injured as torrential rains lash parts of Bangladesh and India, inundating large towns and forcing thousands to flee their homes.

House rejects Senate spy agency overhaul

REUTERS, Washington

The House of Representatives Thursday rejected a Senate-passed spy agency overhaul clearing the way for passage of a Republican-written measure that critics said includes controversial provisions that could snarl the bill in congressional wrangling.

The House voted 203-213 to reject the measure that was based on a bipartisan bill backed by Sept. 11 Commission members that overwhelmingly passed the Senate earlier this week.

House Republican leaders defended their version of the bill, which likely will be approved on Friday, saying it addresses the problems laid out by the commission, which found major failures in US intelligence before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

"The policies set forward in the bill before us are so obvious, so self-

evidently necessary that most Americans would probably be surprised to learn that they aren't already on the books," said House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, a Texas Republican.

The House bill has come under criticism from civil liberties groups who say some of its law enforcement and immigration provisions go beyond recommendations made by the commission.

"House Republicans are once again wrapping themselves in the flag, in 9/11 to hide the fact that they are loading up this bill with provisions that will not make us safer but will undermine our civil liberties," said Rep. Jerrold Nadler, a New York Democrat.

With national security a major issue in the Nov. 2 presidential and congressional elections, House and Senate leaders have been pushing to pass their respective bills before lawmakers break on Friday for final weeks of campaigning.

Cheney once pushed to lift Iran sanctions

AP, Washington

Vice President Dick Cheney, who has called Iran "the world's leading exporter of terror," pushed to lift US trade sanctions against Tehran while chairman of Halliburton Co. in the 1990s. And his company's offshore subsidiaries also expanded business in Iran.

Democratic vice presidential candidate John Edwards criticised Cheney in Tuesday night's debate for his position on Iran during the 1990s, and Edwards said he supports expanding the sanctions against Iran.

Cheney countered that he now supports sanctions against Iran but sidestepped the issue of Halliburton's involvement, saying it was being raised by Democrats "to try to confuse the voters."

Halliburton's foreign subsidiaries did about \$65 million in business with Iran last year, company documents say. A federal grand jury is investigating whether Halliburton or its executives deliberately violated the US ban on trade with Iran.

US base attacked as Afghans prepare to vote in polls

REUTERS, Kabul

Sporadic violence erupted in pockets of Afghanistan on the eve of a historic presidential election in the rugged war-torn land, highlighting the risks posed by Taliban militants, who have vowed to disrupt the vote.

A rocket exploded in the air above the US military compound in the capital, Kabul, before dawn, causing some damage to parked cars and providing a reminder of pledges by the Taliban and their extremist allies to disrupt the landmark election Saturday.

In the eastern city of Jalalabad, a rocket plowed into a house, wounding a young girl and an old man, officials said.

About 18,000 US-led troops are hunting al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders and helping a 42,000-strong Afghan police and military force and 8,000 Nato-led peacekeepers to

provide security for the poll. President Hamid Karzai is favorite to win.

Victory for the US-backed Karzai, who is from the majority Pashtun ethnic group that has traditionally ruled Afghanistan, would legitimize his rule and mark a turning point for a country shattered by more than a quarter-century of war.

"I have registered but now I don't want to vote because there is a growing feeling among people that the president is already chosen. So why bother?" said Shaziya, a 25-year-old woman in a Kabul market.

Two of the 18 candidates in the fray have decided to withdraw in Karzai's favor. One was not considered very popular but the other, Sayed Ishaq Gailani, is from one of Afghanistan's best-known families.