

'Rampant corruption hobbling global poverty fight'

AFP, London

Corruption is crippling the battle against poverty and robbing oil-rich countries such as Iraq of their development potential, a respected global graft watchdog said yesterday in an annual report on sleaze.

Haiti and Bangladesh were perceived as the world's most corrupt nations in the survey of 146 countries by Transparency International, closely followed by Nigeria, Myanmar and Chad.

"This is an amazing evidence again that corruption is still rampant all over the world," the organisation's chairman Peter Eigen told a press conference in London.

"In most countries economic policy is still perverted by corruption... and therefore poverty cannot be effectively addressed."

The index by the Berlin-based watchdog looks at perceived corruption among public officials and politicians.

Just below the worst five countries were Paraguay and Azerbaijan, all seven of which

scored less than two out of a best possible score of 10.

Sixty countries failed to score three out of 10, the mark corresponding to Transparency's benchmark for "rampant corruption," while 106, fully two thirds of those surveyed, scored less than five.

The countries with the cleanest slate were Finland, New Zealand, Denmark, Iceland and Singapore.

Eigen said developing countries in particular must root out sleaze in public works if they hoped to improve the quality of life of their citizens.

"Corruption in large-scale public projects is a daunting obstacle to sustainable development, and results in a major loss of public funds needed for education, health care and poverty alleviation, both in developed and developing countries," he said in a statement.

"If we hope to reach the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people living in extreme poverty by 2015, governments need to seriously tackle corruption in public contracting," he

said, referring to a United Nations target set in 2000.

He added that nations rich in natural resources too often undermined their own prospects with widespread graft and kickbacks among local leaders and foreign investors.

"Oil-rich Angola, Azerbaijan, Chad, Ecuador, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Libya, Nigeria, Russia, Sudan, Venezuela and Yemen all have extremely low scores," he said, indicating high corruption.

"In these countries, public contracting in the oil sector is plagued by revenues vanishing into the pockets of Western oil executives, middlemen and local officials."

The anti-corruption official issued a particular warning over Iraq, which he said was at risk because of its combination of oil reserves and post-conflict instability.

"Whenever there is a rush and a push (for reconstruction), particularly when petroleum is involved, the danger of corruption is immense,"

Eigen said.

He and Jeremy Carver, head of international law at the London firm Clifford Chance, said procurement of large-scale public contracts, such as those being disbursed for Iraq's reconstruction and stabilization, were potential sources of corruption.

Referring to the US contractor Halliburton, winner of a multi-billion-dollar no-bid contract from the US government for work in Iraq, Carver said: "This is an absolutely clear example of what happens in the post-conflict zone."

"Without strict anti-bribery measures, the reconstruction of Iraq will be wrecked by a wasteful diversion of resources to corrupt elites," Eigen said.

He urged Western countries to require oil companies to open their books to show what they pay in fees, royalties and other payments to host governments and state oil companies.



PHOTO: AFP
New Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (L) and his wife Kristiani Herawati (R) wave to journalists after the swearing in ceremony at Parliament, in Jakarta yesterday. Former army general Yudhoyono took the oath as Indonesia's sixth president, replacing Megawati Sukarnoputri whom he defeated in the country's first direct election.

US soldier pleads guilty to prisoner abuse

AFP, Baghdad

One of the US soldiers at the heart of the prisoner abuse scandal at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison pleaded guilty to five charges of maltreatment and indecency at a court martial in Baghdad yesterday.

Responding to charges ranging from conspiracy to abuse of prisoners, dereliction of duty, assault and indecency, Staff Sergeant Ivan "Chip" Frederick, however, admitted guilt to only elements of some of the charges.

On the first of a two-day hearing on a military base at Baghdad's international airport, Frederick, 38, offered a rare insight into what took place behind the bars of the notorious detention centre.

Pictures of grinning US soldiers posing by a heap of naked Iraqi men revealed earlier in the year sparked worldwide outrage that has continued to dog the US administration.

Referring to a photograph of a pyramid of seven prisoners taken at Abu Ghraib — one of the most notorious images from the prison outrage — the sergeant said they were criminal suspects who had been hooded with their hands tied.

UNSC presses Syria on Lebanon pullout

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Tuesday called unanimously for Syria to pull its troops out of neighbouring Lebanon, a demand that the Syrians quickly rejected.

Syria instead blamed the United States and France for trying to manipulate the council and underlined it had taken no action in the face of the deadly Israeli offensive against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Capping days of diplomatic haggling, the 15-member council agreed on a statement calling on Damascus to comply with a previous resolution pushed through the council in September, which demanded the military pullout.

The United States and France battled to get the statement adopted despite strong opposition on the council, which only passed the September resolution with the minimum of nine votes in favour and six abstentions.



PHOTO: AFP
New Zealand's Prime Minister Helen Clarke (L) shakes hands with her Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh prior to a ceremonial reception at the Presidential Palace, in New Delhi yesterday. Clarke is on a five-day visit in India, during which she is scheduled to hold discussions with Indian leaders on a wide range of important bilateral, regional and international issues of mutual concern.

BLAIR SAYS No decision yet on UK troops redeployment

AFP, London

Britain has not yet decided whether to send 650 troops to relieve US forces in Iraq, Prime Minister Tony Blair said yesterday, while rejecting suggestions that such a move would be aimed at boosting US President George W. Bush's electoral campaign.

"No, a decision has not been taken," Blair told parliament in a stormy question-and-answer session in which he was repeatedly quizzed as to the reasons for the possible deployment.

Blair insisted it had nothing to do with close ally Bush's prospects in the US presidential election on November 2.

"This is nothing to do with the American elections. It has everything, however, to do with the Iraqi elections in January," Blair said.

The prime minister was due later Wednesday to meet with Iraqi interim Vice President Rowsh Shawayes.

On Monday, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon announced that US

generals had asked for some British troops to fill in for American forces as they battled insurgents elsewhere in the country.

It has not been revealed where the British personnel might be sent, but a series of reports have pointed to violence-wracked towns close to Baghdad.

Some politicians have expressed concern about increased casualties among British forces, who are currently based in the less violent southern Iraqi city of Basra.

Concern has been deep among deputies from Blair's own Labour Party, many of whom opposed the premier's decision to support the invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Blair was pressed Wednesday as to why the United States, which has more than 130,000 troops in Iraq, needed help from Britain, with only 8,500 in the country.

Labour lawmaker Marsha Singh urged him Wednesday to refuse the US request, saying that the "hole dug over Iraq is big enough".

'Iraq to ask foreign troops to leave after Jan vote'

Care suspends Iraq operations, 6 of a family killed in US airstrikes

AFP, AP, Rome/ Baghdad

The Iraqi government to be elected in January will ask foreign forces operating in the US-led military coalition to leave shortly after taking office, Italian Defence Minister Antonio Martino said in an interview yesterday.

"In January there will be elections that will lead to the creation of a fully legitimate Iraqi government which will want to rapidly free itself of coalition forces," Martino told the daily Corriere della Sera.

But he cautioned that the United States and its war allies would not be willing to withdraw their troops from the oil-rich country until and unless the Iraqi armed forces gained the upper hand over extremists operating throughout the violence-wracked nation.

"Already the Iraqis are showing they intend to manage on their own.

They have more than 100,000 well-trained and well-equipped soldiers and police officers," Martino said.

Martino said interim Iraqi Prime Minister Iyad Allawi wanted to hasten the departure of coalition troops and that Washington would be happy to pull its nearly 140,000 soldiers out — if and when Iraqi forces succeeded in reining in extremists.

"Allawi wants to speed up the departure of the coalition's men. Allawi is described as a US puppet but he is not in the United States' grip. He thinks if the coalition forces had a lower visibility it could help the democratic process," Martino said.

Meanwhile, US air raids destroyed two buildings said to belong to top Islamic militant Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi in the Iraqi city of Fallujah yesterday where witnesses claimed a family of six were

killed.

Earlier a suicide car bomb exploded on the road to Baghdad's international airport yesterday but killed only the driver, while a roadside bomb blew up near a US vehicle but caused no casualties, the US army said.

AP adds: Care International suspended operations in Iraq yesterday after gunmen kidnapped the woman who ran the humanitarian organisation's work in the country. The victim's Iraqi husband said her captors had not contacted the family or her employer.

Margaret Hassan, who holds British, Irish and Iraqi citizenship, was seized early Tuesday on her way to work in western Baghdad after gunmen blocked her route and dragged the driver and a companion from the car, her husband said.

US ELECTION 2004

Bush, Kerry sidestep ME conflict

AFP, Washington

Locked in a bitter battle for the US presidency, incumbent President George W. Bush and challenger John Kerry have all but ignored one of the most pressing foreign policy issues of the day: The ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

With less than two weeks to go before the November 2 election, the Bush and Kerry campaigns appear to have made a concerted effort to avoid discussion of what has been a hallmark of US diplomatic efforts for the past 30 years.

Perhaps preoccupied with the insurgency in Iraq and fearful of compromising the support of Jewish voters — key to victory in the battleground state of Florida, where the 2000 election was

decided — neither Bush nor Kerry have enunciated any new proposal for the Middle East.

As violence continues to rage and Bush's once-vaunted "roadmap" for peace founders amid a sea of mutual Israeli-Palestinian recriminations, the candidates have refused to address the matter beyond platitudes, analysts say.

"The most revealing foreign policy aspect of this foreign policy debate was what was not discussed and what neither candidate chose to raise on (his) own," said Robin Niblett of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think-tank.

Speaking shortly after Bush and Kerry squared off in their first televised debate last month, Niblett suggested that the rivals were intentionally avoiding the Middle

East for political reasons.

Omitting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is likely explained by "a desire by both candidates to avoid upsetting an important electoral constituency," he said, referring to the Jewish vote.

Indeed, in the days since the first debate, the candidates have marched in lockstep supporting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and denouncing what they say is Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's failed leadership.

"Mr. Arafat has proven his unwillingness and incapacity to be able to act as a legitimate partner in the peace process," Kerry said in Florida on October 9 in remarks strikingly similar to those Bush made 24 hours earlier.

Pak army helicopters attack militant hideouts in tribal region

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani helicopter gunships yesterday attacked suspected hideouts of al-Qaeda-linked militants in a remote tribal region near the Afghan border, a day after an ambush killed several soldiers, residents said.

Witnesses said the gunships targeted hideouts in Spinkai Raghzai. The town is a stronghold of tribal militant commander Abdullah Mahsud, the man behind the recent kidnapping of two Chinese engineers.

"I saw two helicopters firing into the town early this morning but I am not aware of any casualties," resident Dost Mohammad told AFP by telephone.

No immediate confirmation of the raid was available from military officials.

On Tuesday militants believed to be Mahsud loyalists attacked an army convoy, killing five soldiers and wounding seven.

Initial reports put the toll at three soldiers dead and five injured.

Mahsud, a former prisoner at Guantanamo Bay, is being hunted for the abduction of two Chinese engineers, which ended last Thursday when commandos killed five kidnappers and rescued one Chinese. The other Chinese died of bullet wounds suffered during the rescue.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said the kidnapper mastermind would be brought to justice and severely punished.

The military has launched several previous operations in the wild South Waziristan region against hundreds of militants, including foreigners, who are believed to be hiding there with local help.

On Tuesday the head of operations for the tribal territory gave a new casualty count.

Lieutenant General Safdar Hussain said 246 militants including 100 foreigners had been killed along with 171 soldiers since March.



PHOTO: AFP
Newly reappointed president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) L. K. Advani addresses a press conference at the party headquarters, in New Delhi yesterday. Sharpening his tirade against the ruling Congress Party, Advani said his first task as BJP President would be to counter the "ideological assault" launched by it against the saffron party.

Commuter jet crashes in US: 8 killed

AP, Kirksville

A twin-engine turboprop commuter plane crashed in the woods about three miles from the airport where it was preparing to land, killing at least eight of the 15 people on board, officials said.

At least two people on the Corporate Airlines flight from St. Louis on Tuesday night survived and were being treated at a hospital, and five were missing, said Adair County Chief Deputy Larry Logston. The plane carried 13 passengers and two crew members, both of whom died, Logston said.

The last communication from the Jetstream 32 indicated it was on a normal approach to Kirksville Regional Airport in northeastern Missouri, and there was no mention of any problems, said Elizabeth Isham Cory, a spokesman for the Federal Aviation Administration in Chicago.

Logston said the plane's flight data recorder was recovered. Emergency crews searched woods and open fields early Wednesday for the missing passengers.



PHOTO: AFP
A family spend the night outdoors after their home was damaged in Baoshan prefecture, southwest China's Yunnan province early yesterday after an earthquake measuring 5.0 on the Richter scale struck the area. Twelve people were injured and hundreds of homes devastated in southwestern China populated by a large number of ethnic minorities.

ASIAN NEIGHBOURS SAY Shake-up may hurt Myanmar's reforms

AFP, Bangkok

The sacking of Myanmar's prime minister prompted concern among the country's neighbours yesterday, with key players warning that the change could be a blow to hopes of democracy in the military-ruled state.

Developments after senior junta figure Soe Win replaced Khin Nyunt were being watched particularly closely by fellow Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) members, including Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.

Indonesia said the leadership change, which Myanmar attributed to health reasons, further reduced the chance of detained opposition leader and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi being released.

"We were hoping that under

Prime Minister Khin Nyunt, Aung San Suu Kyi would be released but that did not happen," Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda told reporters.

"Now, hopes that she would be released under the current administration are even slimmer."

Malaysia's Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the ousting could adversely affect the junta's "road map" to democracy, which was launched with a national convention earlier this year.

"I'm worried in case that happens. I hope the road map to democracy will not be affected with the change of the prime minister-ship," he told reporters in Jakarta after attending the inauguration of Indonesia's new president.

11 killed as typhoon pounds Japan

AFP, Tokyo

At least 11 people were killed and 62 injured yesterday as the biggest typhoon to hit Japan for more than a decade battered the south of the country with heavy rain and powerful winds, officials said.

Typhoon Tokage, which also left eight people missing, became a record 10th typhoon to land on the main Japanese islands in the past year. The storms have claimed at least 113 lives.

Nearly 500 domestic flights were cancelled, affecting 44,000 passengers, and tens of thousands of homes lost electricity as the typhoon raced northeast at 50 kilometers (30 miles) an hour, with Tokyo in its sights overnight.

The downpour was heavy enough for the Central Japan Railway Co. to cancel the bullet train between Tokyo and Osaka.

With an 800-kilometer radius of powerful winds, Tokage is the biggest typhoon to land in Japan since the Meteorological Agency began its classification system in 1991.

A police statement said 11 people were killed and 62 injured across Japan.

The typhoon hit land 700 kilometers southwest of Tokyo in Kochi prefecture, where a 20-meter (22-yard) high dike gave way at Muroto due to high waves, destroying several houses.

"At least three bodies were found in the area. There might be more," a local police official said.

Among the other eight killed, a 31-year-old man was found dead near a flooded river in Miyazaki prefecture after his vehicle skidded at a bridge, police said.

In southwestern Ehime prefecture, a 24-year-old woman died after being buried by a landslide. Also in

Ehime, two elderly men and a woman went missing after separate landslides destroyed their houses.

Other people who went missing included a 75-year-old fisherman pulled into the ocean as he inspected his boat in Kochi, a 63-year-old farmer swept away in a ricefield in Miyazaki and a newspaper deliveryman who disappeared in Oita prefecture.

In Chiba prefecture just east of Tokyo, two workers building an embankment along a coastline were pulled into the Pacific by high waves, a government official said.

Packing wind speeds of 144 kilometers per hour, Typhoon Tokage triggered landslides and sent objects flying.

Among the injured were four people trapped in an office building which was crushed in Oita, a 68-year-old man in Saga Prefecture who fell from his roof while fixing it and an 83-year-old woman who fell and broke her thigh.