

Britain to send troops to Iraqi hotspots

Baghdad frets lack of UN staff for polls, 2 Iraqi guards, woman killed in shooting

AP, AFP, London/Baghdad

Britain agreed yesterday to meet a US request for British troops to be moved into volatile central Iraq, a proposal that has met strong opposition within the governing Labour Party.

The redeployment of troops from the relatively peaceful south aims at freeing up American forces to intensify attacks on insurgents as the coalition tries to stabilise Iraq ahead of elections in January.

"After careful evaluation, the chiefs of staff have advised me that UK forces are able to undertake the proposed operation, that there is a compelling military operational justification for doing so, and that it entails a militarily acceptable level of risk for UK forces," Defense

Secretary Geoff Hoon told the House of Commons.

Hoon said there were no plans to raise British troop numbers within Iraq.

US military commanders asked on Oct. 10 whether Britain would send a unit currently stationed in southern Iraq to the US-controlled sector farther north.

AFP adds: Iraq expressed concern over a lack of UN staff to help with vital elections as Britain announced a military redeployment to danger spots and a US soldier faced sentencing for prisoner abuse.

Underscoring the interim government's struggle to restore stability to the country ahead of nationwide elections promised in January, there was no news on the Baghdad chief

of international aid group Care who was kidnapped on Tuesday.

Margaret Hassan, a British-Iraqi born in Ireland, is the latest victim of a foreign hostage crisis that has already claimed scores of lives in Iraq and prompted many other international humanitarian agencies to flee.

Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari regretted the insufficient number of workers on the ground from the United Nations to help with the task of preparing the landmark polls.

"The number of UN experts is no more than 30, while there were more than 300 in Timor," Zebari told a news conference on Wednesday, while reaffirming the government's commitment to holding the vote as scheduled.

The United Nations pulled out

most of its Iraq-contingent after its Baghdad headquarters was targeted in a suicide car bombing in August 2003 that killed 22 staff.

Meanwhile, two members of Iraq's national guard and a woman were killed Thursday in a drive by shooting as they were travelling in Baghdad, the interior ministry said.

The two security officers were attacked by unidentified gunmen in Baghdad's central Mansour neighbourhood, said ministry spokesman Adnan Abdul Rahman.

Another official at the ministry also said that one of two women travelling in the car was killed and the other injured.

Attacks on security forces are frequent in violence-plagued Iraq.



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese miners sit by as they watch rescuers carry a body of a fellow miner from the Daping coal mine near Xinmi in central China's Henan province yesterday after an underground gas explosion ripped through the mine killing at least 60 workers and leaving nearly 88 missing in one of the worst mining disasters in recent memory.

Yudhoyono urges new cabinet to produce results not rhetoric

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia's newly appointed ministers should produce results rather than rhetoric to allay public doubts about their capability, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said yesterday as his cabinet was sworn in.

Yudhoyono, who was inducted as Indonesia's sixth president Wednesday promising to personally lead a war on endemic graft and revive a stale economy, told ministers they should focus on their tasks instead of replying to critics.

"There is no need for you to answer the worries and the doubts of the people about us, about you, with words. Answer them with work," Yudhoyono said at a ceremony in Jakarta.

He also warned that they had a duty to avoid corruption, or face dismissal.

"If you are involved in any violation, including corruption, and are declared guilty under the law, you must be prepared to resign and accept sanctions under the prevailing laws," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

A mother carries her injured son after being treated at a local hospital in the city of Samarra, 125km north of Baghdad Wednesday following explosions. Eight people, including four children, were killed and at least 23 others wounded in a double car bombing in the path of a US army convoy near a nursery school in the Iraqi city of Samarra.

PALESTINIAN MINISTER SAYS

ME 'roadmap' in a coma

'Sharon assured of majority in Gaza pullout vote'

AFP, Madrid

The so-called roadmap for an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is currently in a "coma," visiting Palestinian foreign minister Nabil Shaath said here late Wednesday.

Seeing the time as ripe to launch a "peace offensive" Shaath said following talks with Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos he had asked himself if the international community would only "act when it is tragically late" to end the ongoing Middle East violence.

Moratinos insisted that "the roadmap is not dead, (but) it must be immediately applied as a matter of urgency.

Shaath retorted that "it is in a coma" and blamed Israeli aggression, while adding that "we want to revive it".

Moratinos, former EU envoy to the Middle East, told reporters that diplomatic efforts to reach a solution had to take on board an Israeli government proposition to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, "a withdrawal which Palestinians and the interna-

tional community alike support".

Shaath, who is on a tour of European states, on Monday in London restated the Palestinian Authority's commitment to the peace roadmap and to a simultaneous ceasefire by Israel and the Palestinians.

But he added that during the recent three-week Israeli offensive which left 129 Palestinians dead his people had felt "very alone."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon appears on course for a clear majority in next week's crucial parliamentary vote on his Gaza pullout plan, media estimates, Israeli media predicted yesterday.

Both the top-selling Yediot Aharonot daily and army radio said Sharon should secure at least 66 votes from among the 120 members of the Knesset when they give their verdict on his disengagement plan next Tuesday.

Yediot predicted that 18 MPs from Sharon's own Likud party will vote against the government.

But as well as the support of the other 22 Likud members, all 21

deputies from the main opposition Labour party, the 14-strong Shinui faction, the six MPs from the left-wing Yahad party and three independents will vote with the government, the paper added.

That figure could rise further if the 11 MPs of the main ultra-Orthodox Shas party vote also vote with the government. Sharon's camp and opponents have been holding a frantic last round of talks with Shas leaders.

Army radio also predicted that Sharon had the support of 66 MPs without giving such a detailed breakdown.

Under the terms of the disengagement plan, all 8,000 Jewish residents of Gaza will be uprooted from their homes next year along with several hundred residents of four small Jewish enclaves in the northern West Bank.

In turn Sharon is looking to strengthen Israeli control over larger West Bank settlements where the vast majority of settlers live.

Karzai smells victory in Afghan polls

AP, Kabul

US-backed interim leader Hamid Karzai was nearing victory in Afghanistan's presidential vote, election officials said, as the number of ballots counted passed the half way mark.

A win in the Oct. 9 election would make him the country's first directly leader after a quarter-century of conflict. Results Thursday showed Karzai with 59.8 percent support and a 42-point lead over his nearest challenger, former Education Minister Yunus Qanooni.

Reginald Austin, chief technical adviser to the election's UN and Afghan organizers, said that by the end of the day, more than 60 percent of the votes should have been counted and "it should be fairly clear what the situation is."

"By Thursday, we should be able to make a sufficient determination," he said.

Election spokeswoman Silvana Puizina expected another 1 million votes to be counted Thursday. She said counting was set to continue on Friday, the Muslim holy day usually taken as a holiday in Afghanistan.

Iraqi prisoner dies in US custody

AFP, Baghdad

An Iraqi detainee has died in US custody at the Camp Bucca detention centre in southern Iraq, the military said in a statement Wednesday.

The 26-year-old prisoner alerted guards that he was suffering a health problem at 4:20 pm (1320 GMT) Tuesday and was carried out for medical care, but died at 5 pm, the military said.

The detainee, who had been in custody at both Camp Bucca, near the southern port of Umm Qasr, and at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison, was in US custody since November 2003, it added.

Temporary truce goes into effect in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese thronged markets and stores Wednesday as a temporary truce agreed by the government and Maoist rebels to mark a Hindu festival came into effect.

Taking advantage of the peace, people across the country went shopping for new clothes, groceries, edible oil, sugar, rice, wheat and meat to celebrate the festival of Dasain.

Hindus rushed to buy chickens, goats and ducks to be slaughtered on Friday to appease the goddess Durga and receive her blessings for longevity, prosperity and a happy life.

French Muslim girls expelled over veils

BBC ONLINE

Three more Muslim girls have been expelled from schools in France for defying the new ban on headscarves.

They join two girls expelled on Tuesday - one of whom told a French newspaper it had destroyed her life.

The expulsions came as the education ministry gave schools the go-ahead to begin proceedings against 72 students who have refused to obey the law.

The law bans conspicuous religious symbols in schools and is meant to protect the principle of secularism.

But many Muslims protest it is a fundamental breach of human rights and is intended as a specific attack on their religion.

Kerry camp deploys army of lawyers in Florida

AFP, Miami

Still reeling from the 2000 election debacle in Florida, Democrats have deployed an army of lawyers in the battleground state that gave George W. Bush the presidency after five weeks of recounts and legal wrangling.

Less than two weeks from the November 2 presidential election, the legal team of Democratic contender John Kerry, as well as activist groups, have already filed a number of voting-related lawsuits in the state.

Many Democrats claim the Republicans stole the 2000 election after the Supreme Court halted 36 days of recounts and legal battles in Florida, leaving Bush with a 537-vote lead in the state that delivered him the presidency.

Iran to hear EU's final nuclear offer

BBC ONLINE

European states are to offer Iran a final chance to provide assurances that its nuclear energy programme is not aimed at acquiring weapons.

France, the UK and Germany are to offer incentives at talks in Vienna just over a month before the United Nations rules on whether or not Iran is co-operating.

Iran has said it will reveal its own proposals to reduce concern once it sees the European offer in writing.

It has insisted it will not agree to demands to abandon uranium enrichment.

Abandonment of enrichment - a key process for the production of atomic bombs - is a key demand on the European side.

The United States has led international concern over Iran's intentions, questioning why a country rich in oil and gas deposits would require nuclear energy too.

Iran test-fired a long-range missile on Wednesday in what appears to have been a deliberately timed show of military strength a day

before the talks in Vienna, the BBC's Frances Harrison reports from Tehran.

Foreign ministry officials from the three European countries are due to meet an Iranian envoy at a secret location in Vienna to avoid media attention, diplomats told AFP news agency.

The Austrian capital is home to the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, which is due to rule on 25 November on the level of Iran's co-operation.

A negative decision could lead to the issue being referred to the UN Security Council with the threat of sanctions.

According to a document leaked to news agencies, incentives likely to be offered on Thursday include an offer of nuclear technology such as a light-water reactor in return for proof that Tehran is not covertly trying to build weapons.

The US state department has queried the wisdom of offering Iran - which largely relies on Russia for its programme - further new technology.

Japan cleans up after deadliest typhoon

Death toll rises to 66

AFP, REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan was searching for survivors yesterday after the country's deadliest typhoon in more than a decade killed at least 66 people as it crushed houses, overturned trains and stranded passengers on flooded highways.

Typhoon Tokage, which tore up the archipelago for a day before easing Thursday morning, killed 66 people and left 22 missing, according to public broadcaster NHK. Police reported that 269 people were injured.

Rescuers searched by boat among flooded houses for the missing. Trains that had stopped before the storm were toppled by the fierce winds.

Sixty houses were damaged, with some reduced to rubble, after 591 landslides that took their heaviest toll in southern Japan. Some 9,210 households were flooded, an official with the National Police Agency told AFP.

Helicopters and rafts overnight

rescued 37 people, most of them in their mid-60s, who were stranded on top of a tourist bus trapped in floodwater at Maizuru 400km west of Tokyo.

"We were standing on the roof of the bus and I was shaking as the water level went up to my knees. My knees still hurt," one male passenger told NHK.

Sixteen other residents in Maizuru were also rescued by helicopters and boats from the armed forces, Jiji Press said.

Some 170 rescue operators including 101 troops spent the day digging through mud for a potential survivor of a massive landslide at Tamano in western Okayama prefecture, but discovered late Thursday that he was dead.

"Unfortunately, we found the body of the remaining one after discovering four others in the morning from the site, where seven houses were destroyed by the mudslide," said Koichiro Yonezawa, an official of the city's anti-disaster office.



PHOTO: AFP

People remove mud from a street in Toyooka, Hyogo Prefecture yesterday. Japan was searching for survivors after the country's deadliest typhoon in more than a decade killed at least 61 people as it crushed houses, overturned trains and left passengers stranded on flooded highways.

Unrest flares in Manipur over killing of civilian

AFP, Guwahati

Protesters in India's revolt-hit Manipur state staged a 24-hour general strike yesterday over the police killing of a civilian.

The strike badly disrupted life across the remote state and added new fuel to calls for the scrapping of an anti-terror law that gives authorities sweeping arrest and shoot-on-sight powers.

Residents also put up road-blocks to protest the killing of the 35-year-old man. He was shot dead Wednesday after he failed to give way to a police scooter in the state capital Imphal.

"The strike has brought life to a near total halt across Manipur," a senior police official said from Imphal.

Police suspended an officer while they investigated the death.



PHOTO: AFP

Apparently healthy adult Bengal tigers lounge in their enclosure at the Sri Racha Tiger Zoo in Chon Buri province, eastern Thailand yesterday. The death toll of endangered tigers that contracted bird flu at the world's largest breeding farm has risen to 53, with another 30 animals threatened with culling.



US ELECTION 2004

Kerry to hunt for male American votes

AFP, Waterloo, Iowa

US Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry switched to macho politics yesterday when he made an atypical hunting trip to rural Ohio in a bid to woo traditionalist male voters, while President George W. Bush courts Catholics in Pennsylvania less than two week before election day.

Kerry has repeatedly said he supports the constitutional right of US citizens to own firearms, distancing himself from some members of his own party that insist on more rigid gun control.

But the National Rifle Association, the nation's leading gun lobby, is not buying these entreaties.

It has endorsed Bush and has vowed to spend about 20 million dollars on advertising and direct mailings highlighting what it sees as Kerry's efforts to curb gun ownership rights.

Bush, meanwhile, is scheduled to travel to Downingtown, Pennsylvania, where he is expected to emphasize his opposition to gay marriage. He is scheduled to meet with the archbishop of Philadelphia in an attempt to attract the Catholic vote.

The events follow a day of bitter partisan fighting Wednesday, when Kerry said Bush's "failures" had left the United States more exposed to terrorism and the president blasted his challenger for failing to see the

"true dangers" of the a post-September 11 world.

Kerry and Bush traded blows on Iraq and national security as their bitter race for the White House raced towards an increasingly tight finish.

Ahead of the November 2 ballot, polls showed the candidates running neck and neck nationally but Kerry edging up in several critical states that could decide the presidency.

The veteran Massachusetts Democrat accused Bush of showing "contempt" for US allies and of embarking on a "profound diversion" from the "war on terror" in Iraq.