

Conference on Iraq backs war on insurgents

AP, Sharm el-Sheik

The gathering of 20 world powers and regional countries, including many opposed to the US-led invasion, represented an acknowledgement of the need for international cooperation to deal with the consequences of the war.

While sharp differences remain on how to proceed, the participating nations and world bodies have committed to supporting the US-backed Iraqi interim government and finalised a draft statement, obtained by The Associated Press.

In it, they gave strong backing to the Iraqi government's war against insurgents but did not set a deadline for withdrawing US-led forces from Iraq, despite a push by France and some Arab countries.

The draft communiqué for the two-day conference, which ends Tuesday, also says the interim Iraqi government should meet with its opponents to try to persuade them to take part in the general elections scheduled for Jan. 30.

The meeting brought together Iraq's six neighbors: Iran, Syria, Turkey, Kuwait, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, as well as Egypt and several other Arab countries, China and

regional bodies such as the Group of Eight, the United Nations, the European Union, the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Syria's foreign minister, Farouk al-Sharaa, had tried to seek support for setting a deadline for the withdrawal of foreign forces in Iraq. But the draft communiqué allows the Iraqi government to decide when the US-led troops should depart. It does remind them that their mandate is "not open-ended."

For all its bloodshed, the insurgency enjoys a certain support in the Arab world, where many see the US and other troops as occupiers.

The draft communiqué says the participants condemn "all acts of terrorism in Iraq" and call for the immediate cessation of all such acts in order to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people."

In what could be the most contentious part of the conference, Iraq has said it will ask neighboring states to tighten their borders against the infiltration of would-be insurgents and to share information about groups supporting the militants.

Iraq's interim leader, Ayad Allawi, in an interview with the AP on Monday, said neighboring coun-

tries haven't pulled their weight against the insurgency.

"Certainly, some brothers and leaders in some neighboring nations did not do enough," Allawi said. "They should have tried to help us at a time when we needed help."

On his arrival Monday, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari shrugged off calls by some Sunni Muslims for Iraqis to boycott the elections, set for Jan. 30.

"They do not represent all Sunnis. If they want to prove their popularity, the only way is through the ballot box," Zebari said.

In Baghdad, Allawi also dismissed boycott advocates as "the eventual losers," and said his government was determined to hold the elections on time.

France, which opposed the invasion of Iraq, had urged the conference to invite government opponents. Such groups are not attending, but Ghazi, Egypt's foreign minister, said the views of the Association of Muslim Scholars will be aired.

At dinner on Monday night, host Egypt sat Powell next to his Iranian counterpart, Kamal Kharrazi, but a senior State Department official said only polite dinner conversation was exchanged.

Ukrainians slam election as fraudulent

AP, Kiev

Tens of thousands of demonstrators jammed downtown Kiev in freezing temperatures Monday night, denouncing Ukraine's presidential runoff election as fraudulent and chanting the name of their reformist candidate who authorities said was trailing in the vote count.

Viktor Yushchenko stood beaming on a platform with campaign aides and flashed a "V" for victory sign even though the Central Election Commission said earlier that with nearly all the votes counted, he was losing to Kremlin-backed Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich.

"Yushchenko our president" chanted the crowd, many of whom waved orange scarves his campaign color in Independence Square. Others had set up a tent camp along central Khreshchatyk Street, and organizers were inundated with piles of winter clothes donated for protesters expected to arrive from other cities.

The election commission's announcement galvanized widespread dismay and anger among the former Soviet republic's 48 million people. The capital's city council and several other municipal governments rejected the official results and a major chocolate factory closed plants in protest.

Although official results, with more than 99 percent of precincts counted, showed Yanukovich with 49.4 percent to 46.70 percent for Yushchenko, several exit polls had found Yushchenko the winner.

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3 UN hostages released

REUTERS, Kabul

Three foreign UN workers held hostage in Afghanistan were freed unharmed yesterday, almost four weeks after they were abducted at gunpoint on the streets of the capital Kabul, the United Nations said.

Annette Flanigan from Northern Ireland, Kosovar Shajpe Hebib and Filipino diplomat Angelito Nayan were kidnapped in Kabul on Oct. 28 after helping run a presidential election won by US-backed incumbent Hamid Karzai.

"We are very, very happy and very relieved. Staff in UN offices are in jubilation that their friends are back," said UN spokesman Manoel de Almeida e Silva.

"They appear to be good health and good spirits," he said, adding that they were expected to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible. Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali said the hostages had been left at an unidentified location in Kabul at about 6 a.m. and there had been no military action to free them.

Akbar Agha, the leader of the Taliban splinter faction, the Jaish-e-Muslimeen (Army of Muslims), that had claimed to be holding the hostages, said they had been released in exchange for 24 Taliban prisoners, but Jalali denied this.

"No prisoners were released, no money was paid, no demand was met of the hostage takers," Jalali told a news conference. "And to my knowledge no other parties paid money."

Jalali described the kidnappers as "criminals" but said it was possible a gang had been hired by Jaish-e-Muslimeen, given that the militants



PHOTO: AFP

The brother of freed Filipino hostage Angelito Nayan, Bernard Nayan (L) with daughter Anna and wife Angie (R) and the rest of the family rejoice after giving a statement on the release of Angelito Nayan at the overseas workers center in Manila yesterday.

had openly claimed to be holding the workers. He vowed that those responsible would be brought to justice.

The three workers were snatched from their UN vehicle from a busy Kabul street just a few hundred meters (yards) from their office, raising fears in the foreign community that local militants had begun copying tactics of insurgents in Iraq.

Jaish-e-Muslimeen had threatened to kill the hostages if its

demands for the release of Taliban prisoners was not met but the kidnappers let repeated deadlines pass without incident and even allowed the three hostages to phone home.

Agha, asked by the Afghan Islamic Press whether his group would carry out more kidnappings, replied: "We will use every tactic to secure the release of the Taliban held either by the US forces or the government."

Jalali said two military raids had

been mounted Monday and some suspects detained. One person was killed and four wounded in one raid, but there was no military activity on Tuesday, he said.

US-led troops searching for the hostages blasted their way into several compounds in Kabul Monday and detained 12 people, including a doctor working for the United Nations, but it was unclear if this raid had helped rescue the hostages.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (L) shakes hands with Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh (R), upon his arrival at New Delhi airport yesterday. Aziz arrived in New Delhi for talks with his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh. Aziz and Indian officials are expected to review recent developments in the peace process between their two countries, including the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir.

PLO chief vows to follow Arafat's path

Quartet moves to revive peace process

AFP, Ramallah

New PLO chief Mahmud Abbas pledged to follow in the footsteps of Yasser Arafat yesterday after he was picked by the dominant Fatah faction as its candidate to succeed the late Palestinian leader.

"We promise that we will continue on the same path that you (Arafat) have paved to achieve the dream that has always lived with you... establishing an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital," Abbas told MPs in a special session of parliament to honour the late leader.

Abbas was unanimously adopted by Fatah's decision-making central committee at a meeting late Monday, a move which will be rubber-stamped by the Revolutionary Council on Thursday.

He is now the overwhelming favourite to win the January 9 elec-

Saddam lawyers mull war crimes suit against US

AFP, Amman

Lawyers for ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein announced Monday that they were asking the International Court of Justice to prosecute the United States for war crimes, even though individuals are not allowed to petition the tribunal.

Defense team spokesman Ziad Khassawneh acknowledged that the petition would have to be signed by a member of the ousted regime as the world court only hears cases forwarded by states and "duly authorised international organs and agencies".

However, like all of Saddam's counsel, Khassawneh insisted that the ousted president remained Iraq's legitimate head of state, given what he described as the illegal nature of last year's US-led invasion.

"We are all encouraged. We reaffirmed our determination to the ousted president remained Iraq's legitimate head of state, given what he described as the illegal nature of last year's US-led invasion.

"We must give them all the necessary support. There is an opportunity to... move ahead with the roadmap," the spokesman said.

Oceans yield thousands of new species

AFP, Washington

A huge international collaboration involving hundreds of scientists has plunged into the deep, literally, revealing thousands of previously unknown marine species lurking in the shadowy depths and currents of the world's oceans.

Excited project leaders believe the "rapid ongoing discovery of new marine species shows no end in sight" according to the findings of the first global Census of Marine Life.

About 230,000 marine species have been documented by scientists, but the eventual count of such species is likely to be several times this number, researchers said.

"We have barely skimmed the surface," said Frederick Grassle of Rutgers University, director of the Ocean Biogeographic Information System (OBIS), a 9.5 million dollar program which is attempting to map all the world's marine species.

"Humans have explored less than five percent of the world's oceans... Thus opportunities abound to discover species and increase our knowledge," Grassle said.

According to OBIS, "near-surface" records account for 95 percent of all existing observations of ocean life, but less than 0.1 per-

cent are from the bottom half of the water column.

A species collected below 2,000 meters (6,000 feet) is about 50 times more likely to be new to science than one found at 50 meters, the researchers said.

Some 106 new species of marine fish have been added to the OBIS database so far this year, at an average of well over two new species per week, bringing the total of marine fish species to 15,482 at the latest count.

The project's coordinators have amassed 5.2 million new and previously existing records mapping the distribution of 38,000 marine species around the globe.

Recent findings will be discussed at a meeting of participating scientists in Hamburg, Germany on November 29.

Their work has also pulled back a curtain on the ebbing fortunes of different marine populations.

Comparison of historical and current data shows that the population of oceanic whitetip sharks in the Gulf of Mexico has plummeted by 99 percent since the mid-1950s.

However, the loss of the sharks and other predators sparked an explosion of corresponding magnitude in the population of pelagic stingrays.

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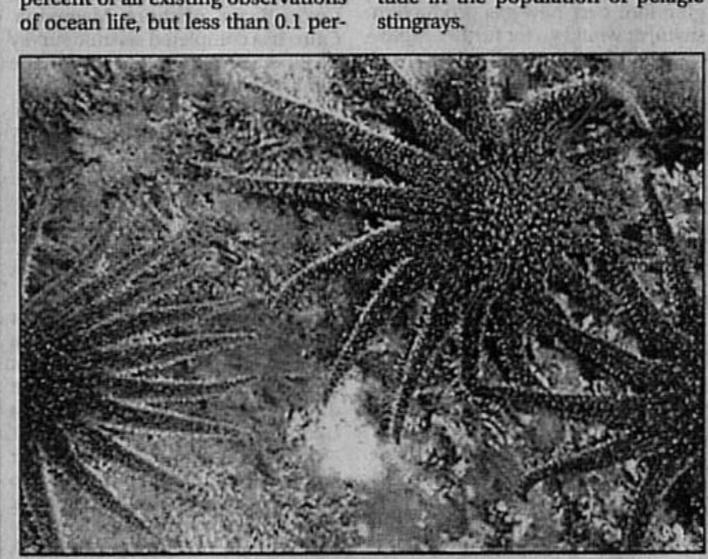
The report revealed alarming increases in the rates of infection among intravenous drug users in Jakarta now test positive for HIV, while in cities such as Pontianak (Indonesia) more than 70 percent of drug injectors are being found to be HIV-positive," the report said.

It added that drug-injectors in these countries were "kick-starting" wider epidemics by then having sex with non-injecting people, and recommended more nations adopt opiate substitution and needle-exchange programs to cut down on the use of dirty needles.

The report also said HIV epidemics were already deeply entrenched in countries such as India, Myanmar and China where current anti-AIDS campaigns were making limited headway.

Many sex workers were still prepared to work without condoms because some clients were willing to pay much higher prices for unprotected sex, it said. Fewer than one in five sex workers in Jakarta massage parlours reported using condoms.

The report said HIV rates were also rising sharply in several Asian



This May 2003 image released by the Census of Marine Life shows three sunflower sea stars, Pycnopodia helianthoides, photographed in Prince William Sound, Alaska.

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Asia at critical stage of AIDS battle

Infections top 8 million: UN

AFP, Paris

The battle against AIDS is at a critical stage in Asia after a sharp rise in infections driven by the booming sex industry has left more than eight million people living with HIV, the United Nations reported yesterday.

The number of Asians infected with the virus jumped by one million over the past two years, bringing the total number of infected people in the region to 8.2 million, according to an annual AIDS epidemic report by UNAIDS and the World Health Organisation.

Some 5.1 million of those infected people live in India, the highest number in the world except for South Africa, with the virus spreading fastest in Asia and Eastern Europe.

Asia, the world's most populous region with 3.9 billion people, has

been hit hardest by the AIDS epidemic, with infections rising from 1.2 million in 1990 to 8.2 million in 2002.

The report said HIV rates were also rising sharply in several Asian countries due to dramatic infection rates among illegal drug injectors, particularly in Indonesia, Nepal, Vietnam and parts of China.