

Blast kills 21 Iraqis outside army base

Politician watches as 2 sons, bodyguard slain

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

A suicide bomber killed at least 21 people and injured 27 outside an Iraqi army recruitment center in Baghdad yesterday in the deadliest insurgent attack since last month's historic election, the US army said.

Nine other Iraqis, including two sons of a politician and his bodyguard, were killed in separate attacks across Iraq.

The blast came a day after suicide bombers killed 27 people in attacks in two Iraqi cities. Between them, the three bombs have shattered the lull in violence which followed the poll.

Police said the attacker's target was a truck carrying recruits into the base in a disused airport in Baghdad. The US military said the

bomber was believed to have been on foot.

A plume of black smoke rose into the sky above the recruitment center and ambulances raced to the scene. Hospital officials said all the victims appeared to be young men.

Guerrillas have frequently attacked Iraqis queuing up to join the police and army. Most of those killed in Monday's blasts in the cities of Mosul and Baquba were either policemen or civilians looking for work with the police.

al-Qaeda's wing in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, claimed responsibility for those blasts and vowed further attacks on "apostates and their masters," an apparent reference to US-led forces and the Iraqis who work with them.

Elsewhere in Baghdad, police

said a bomb outside a popular restaurant killed one Iraqi, and gunmen ambushed the convoy of an Iraqi politician, killing two of his sons and his bodyguard.

"Yes, my two sons died and my bodyguard as well. It was a gunfire attack on my car near my house," said the 52-year-old Alusi.

Three Iraqi soldiers and two insurgents were killed in a firefight on a road leading south from Baghdad to the city of Hillah, the Iraqi army said. Eighteen insurgents were arrested.

Five policemen were wounded by a roadside bomb in Baquba, a police source said. In nearby Samarra, police said an Iraqi civilian was killed and three relatives were wounded when three mortar rounds hit their house.

Rice threatens Syria with 'isolation'

AFP, Rome

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice warned Syria yesterday that if it wants to avoid being "isolated" it must end support for Islamic militants intent on wrecking the Middle East peace process.

"It is time for Syria to demonstrate that it does not want to be isolated, that it does not want to have bad relations with the United States," Rice said after talks here with Italy's Foreign Minister Gianfranco Fini.

In a joint press conference dominated by the Middle East as Israeli and Palestinian leaders met in Egypt to discuss a ceasefire, the US official had harsh words for Syria, saying it has been "unhelpful" by supporting Islamic militants intent on wrecking the process.

"I can't say strongly enough. You can't say on one hand that you want a process of peace and on the other hand support the people who are determined to blow it up."

"Syria has been unhelpful in a

number of ways" including support for terrorists and militants operating out of South Lebanon, she said.

"There's a long list and while we sometimes make what I call minimal progress, it is by no means the kind of progress we need to make," said Rice, making her first foreign tour since succeeding Colin Powell as President George W. Bush's top envoy last month.

She said the Islamic militants opposed to a Middle East peace "cannot be allowed to continue to try to orchestrate the process".

Washington has imposed trade and investment sanctions against Syria under the Syrian Accountability Act passed at the end of 2003 but US officials acknowledge they have nothing new in the pipeline beyond the latest sanctions imposed last May.

"The ties of Syria or Iran to these terrorist organisations really need to be the subject of more discussion not just by the Israelis and Palestinians but of course the Europeans and we as well," said Rice.



PHOTO: AFP
Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (R) and Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas meet in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm El-Sheikh yesterday before a landmark summit with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Jordanian King Abdullah II, in the first top-level contacts between Israel and the Palestinians in over four years.

46 killed in Philippines fighting with Moros

AFP, Zamboanga

More than 30 Moro rebels and 16 soldiers have been killed in two days of fierce gunbattles in the southern Philippine island of Jolo, the military said yesterday.

Fighting between followers of Nur Misuari, a jailed politician and former separatist guerrilla leader, and troops was concentrated in four towns in Jolo, a stronghold of Islamic militants.

Thirteen soldiers were killed in a rebel ambush in the town of Patikul on Monday, Lieutenant Colonel Buenaventura Pascual said. Another soldier was killed in fighting in Panamao town the same day.

Also Monday two Muslim soldiers who were rebuilding a mosque as part of a civic project died in an attack in Parang, said Brigadier General Agustin Dema-ala.



PHOTO: AFP
Nato-led International Security and Assistance Force (ISAF) soldiers inspect the wreckage of the Kam Air Boeing 737-200 that hit a mountain in the east of Kabul on Monday. ISAF troops said the recovery of all the bodies from the wreckage of the Afghan private jet carrying 104 people could take several weeks due to bad weather.

Two Pakistani journalists killed

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's government and a top media rights group yesterday condemned an attack which killed two journalists and wounded an AFP stringer in a tribal area infested with suspected al-Qaeda militants.

Unidentified gunmen struck late Monday after a ceremony where the government granted amnesty to a rebel leader in return for his pledge to live peacefully in remote South Waziristan, close to the Afghan border.

Amir Nawab, a reporter for the Frontier Post, a national English language daily, and Allah Noor Wazir, who was working for Pushto language Khyber TV, died instantly in the hail of assault rifle fire.

AFP stringer Anwar Shakir was in hospital with a bullet injury in the back.

Under the peace deal tribal rebel Baitullah Mahsud -- an alleged ally of a former Guantanamo Bay inmate accused of kidnapping two Chinese engineers last year -- and dozens of supporters pledged not to harbour foreign militants.

Prior to the king's sacking of the government, the army reported almost daily bloodshed as the rebels pressed demands for a new constitution.

A government statement said

Dozens of Maoists killed in Nepali air strike

Govt may keep detained leaders in jail for 3-month

AFP, Kathmandu

Dozens of Maoist rebels have been killed in a Nepalese army air strike in western Dailiekh district, a report said yesterday.

The attack was reported by the private news website, Kantipuroline.com, which gave no further details, while military officials said they were still awaiting a full report.

The website said that aside from the air strike, Nepal's security forces have killed at least 13 Maoists in clashes in various parts of the country since King Gyanendra sacked the government and assumed power a week ago, declaring a state of emergency.

The rebels had previously said they would negotiate only with King Gyanendra or his representatives under an international mediator, with an agenda that includes holding a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution.

A government statement said

Himalayan outpost.

But the power grab has been accompanied by a crackdown on media and human rights groups, and a halt in communications which until lines were restored on Tuesday had virtually cut Nepal off from the outside world.

On Monday, state media reported that the new government headed by the king has offered to hold unconditional talks with the rebels to end the insurgency, which has claimed more than 11,000 lives since 1996.

The rebels had previously said they would negotiate only with King Gyanendra or his representatives under an international mediator, with an agenda that includes holding a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution.

those issues can be discussed if the rebels agree to meet a committee of cabinet ministers which has still to be appointed.

Gyanendra, who controls the army, last week fired the government led by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba for failing to organise elections and end the Maoist insurgency.

Meanwhile, political and student leaders held in the wake of King Gyanendra's seizure of power in Nepal a week ago could remain locked up for three months, army spokesman Brigadier General Dipak Gurung said Tuesday.

Gurung denied claims by political opposition groups, however, that around 1,000 people are being detained.

"It is an exaggerated figure," he told AFP in an interview here.

Kay warns US against repeating mistakes of Iraq strikes in Iran

REUTERS, Washington

The US official who declared the White House's hunt for illicit weapons in Iraq to be a failure driven by faulty intelligence has warned the Bush administration against repeating its mistakes in the current war of words with arch-foe

"There is an eerie similarity to the events preceding the Iraq war," David Kay, who led the search for banned weapons of mass destruction in postwar Iraq, said on Monday in an opinion piece in The Washington Post.

"Nuclear weapons in the hands of Iran would be a grave danger to the world. That is not what is in doubt," he wrote.

"What is in doubt is the ability (of) the US government to honestly

assess Iran's nuclear status and to craft a set of measures that will cope with that threat short of military action by the United States or Israel," Kay added.

President Bush justified the March 2003 invasion of Iraq by saying Saddam Hussein posed a threat because Baghdad had stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and was reviving its nuclear weapons program.

No such weapons were found. Kay told the Senate Armed Services Committee a year ago that US intelligence was "almost all wrong," and later urged reorganisation of the US intelligence services.

The US government accuses Tehran of pursuing nuclear weapons under the guise of a civilian nuclear energy programme, a charge Iran denies.

UK unveils tough immigration rules

AFP, London

he introduced the proposals in parliament.

"It will provide a simple and robust system for economic migration; it will tighten our rules for permanent settlement to ensure that those who stay do bring benefits to the United Kingdom," he said.

The Conservative Party, however, instantly rejected the plan, which excludes EU nationals, as "headline-grabbing" rhetoric before the election.

"It goes no way towards sorting out an asylum and immigration system, which is a total shambles," said shadow home secretary David Davis.

"This is the latest headline-grabbing initiative from a panic-stricken government in the run-up to a general election," he told ministers.

Britain currently admits 140,000 to 150,000 immigrants per year.

AP, Washington

Nearly a dozen detainees at the Guantanamo Bay prison camp contend they were wrongly imprisoned after repeated abuse by US troops in Afghanistan and Pakistan, including beatings with chains, electric shock and sodomy, their lawyer said Monday.

"These are classic stories of men who ended up in Guantanamo Bay by mistake," charged attorney Tom Wilner, who represents 11 Kuwaiti prisoners held in the detention center at the US Navy base in eastern Cuba.

Most of his clients say they falsely confessed to belonging to Afghanistan's ousted Taliban regime or the al-Qaeda terror network as a way to stop the abuse, Wilner said. He said one is too angry over his treatment to discuss details of his case, but all argue their detentions are unjustified.

Lanka risks war after killing of Tamil leader

AFP, Colombo

"The government calls on all concerned parties to prevent further violations of the ceasefire, gravely risking a return to conflict, and instead to support the peace process and move ahead," a statement said.

Military officials said they suspected Monday night's attack was carried out by a breakaway faction of the Tamil Tigers led by the former number two in the leadership, known as Karuna.

However, the pro-rebel

Tamilnet.com website said Tigers

blamed the attack on "paramilitary

operatives

working with the Sri

Lankan armed forces."

The military denied this.

The government condemned the

killings and called on all parties to prevent further violence, especially while the country is recovering from deadly tsunamis.

Koushalyan is the most senior Tiger to be gunned down since then. Peace talks have been deadlocked since April 2003.

Bickering between the two sides has increased in the last few weeks over distribution of tsunami aid in the rebel-controlled north and east.

Tiger activists urged residents in the Trincomalee district to protest Monday's killings by closing shops and staying indoors.

Military officials said security forces had gone on alert.

The Tigers said Koushalyan was returning from a meeting in the rebel political headquarters of Kilinochchi in the island's north, where they reviewed relief operations, when he was killed in Batticaloa district.

"It is no doubt that this will be a setback (to the peace process)," said a diplomatic source involved in the process.

Thousands stranded in snowfall-hit Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

At least nine people were killed as torrential rains lashed northern India while one person froze to death and thousands were stranded on a highway in Kashmir after heavy snowfall triggered avalanches, police said yesterday.

A police spokesman said nine deaths occurred through rain-related incidents, such as house collapses, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, where another seven people were injured and traffic disrupted.

The bad weather also brought unexpected winter rains to the national capital New Delhi and heavy snow to Indian Kashmir.

On Monday, seven troopers were killed when avalanches smashed into their mountain barracks at Jawahar Tunnel, in southern Indian-administered Kashmir. Several other members are still missing.

A police officer told AFP that around 3,000 people were stranded Tuesday between Jawahar Tunnel and Ramban, a 50-km stretch of the zig-zag highway connecting the summer capital Srinagar with Jammu, the winter capital.

A passenger on a bus thrown by the snow into a deep Kashmiri gorge died of hypothermia, police said. The passenger's frozen body was found inside the bus.



PHOTO: AFP
Egyptian Telecom engineers Ahmad Sueif (R), 23, and Mohammad al-Saidi (L), 25, both from Cairo, pose for the photographer inside the Egyptian Embassy in Baghdad. Both engineers and two other colleagues were released late Monday after being held hostages in Baghdad for 36 hours. Their kidnappers suspected them of working for the US forces.

EU warns Iranians about violating spirit of nuclear freeze

AFP, Geneva

Europeans were set to warn Iran about activities that violate the spirit of a nuclear fuel cycle freeze as talks began in Geneva yesterday getting Tehran to guarantee it is not developing atomic weapons, diplomats said.

Britain, France and Germany "are going to read the riot act to the Iranians," a diplomat close to the talks told AFP.

The European trio, leading negotiations for the European Union, will be providing advice from UN nuclear watchdog chief Mohamed ElBaradei "who has warned Iran in two letters in December and January" about quality control work on centrifuge parts despite the freeze, said the diplomat, who asked not to be named.

Centrifuges are used to spin uranium gas in order to turn out enriched uranium, which can be used as fuel for nuclear power plants but also as the explosive core of atomic bombs.

Iran, which in November pledged to suspend all uranium enrichment-related activities, has since then carried out maintenance work on centrifuge piping at an enrichment plant at Natanz, including taking parts such as valves to another location, Farayand, to test them, diplomats said.

The Geneva talks are being conducted in the strictest secrecy, with diplomats stressing that the long-term negotiations require confidence-building on both sides. Iran is waiting for incentive rewards, such as entry into the World Trade Organisation, for its temporarily suspending enrichment.

The United States would have to support this but