

Gunmen kill Iraqi journalist, seize govt official

Four Iraqi police killed in Baghdad, Gas pipeline damaged in Kirkuk

AGENCIES, Baghdad, Basra

Gunmen killed an Iraqi journalist working for a US-funded television network in Basra and seized a senior Interior Ministry official in Baghdad yesterday in the latest attacks following the historic Jan. 30 election.

Police in Basra, 340 miles south-east of Baghdad, said Alhurra correspondent Abdul-Hussein Khazal was shot dead at his home in the mainly Shi'ite city. Alhurra is a Virginia-based satellite news network set up with US funding to compete with Arabic channels like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya.

Alhurra said one of Khazal's sons was also killed in the attack. He was three years old.

In Baghdad, gunmen dragged a senior government official from his

car in the south of the capital. The Interior Ministry said Colonel Riyadh Katei Aliwi worked in its operations department.

Millions of Iraqis braved suicide bombs and mortar attacks to vote in last month's poll, defying threats by insurgents who had vowed to wreck the election. But in recent days, guerrillas trying to overthrow the U.S.-backed government have struck back.

In Paris, Foreign Minister Michel Barnier said France was doing all it could to secure the release of journalist Florence Aubenas who was kidnapped in Baghdad last month.

She has been missing since leaving a Baghdad hotel on Jan. 5 in the company of her translator.

An Italian journalist, Giuliana Sgrena, was also kidnapped in

Baghdad last month. Internet statements from two militant groups have given conflicting accounts of her fate, but no group has provided any proof that it is holding her.

Earlier four Iraqi policemen were killed in a roadside bombing early yesterday, adding to a grim tally of insurgent attacks on the country's security forces that have left more than 35 people dead in two days.

"Four policemen were killed and two wounded by the blast, which destroyed two of their vehicles," Lieutenant Colonel Nayef Hammid told AFP of the attack in the restive Sunni city of Samarra, north of Baghdad.

Interior Minister Falah al-Naqib said 18 members of Hezbollah had been detained, pointing the finger of blame at Iran for most of Iraq's

problems.

A suicide bombing against army recruits and a string of other attacks left more than 30 people dead on Tuesday, with Al-Qaeda and its allies claiming responsibility for much of the bloodshed.

Elsewhere in the capital, gunmen ambushed the car of Mithal al-Alusi, an outspoken politician who favours normalising ties with Israel.

Also in the north, a gas pipeline linking the oil hub of Kirkuk to the Baiji refinery was damaged by a rocket attack, a source at the North Oil Co. said.

As further possible proof of the former regime's involvement in violence, the Iraqi government said it had arrested last month Bashir Matar al-Tikriti, a relative of deposed president Saddam Hussein.

Gas blast kills 17 in Russian mine

AFP, Moscow

A methane blast in a coal mine in southern Siberia killed 17 people early Wednesday, with nine others presumed to be still trapped underground, the Russian emergencies ministry said.

Local rescue officials quoted by news agencies had earlier reported that four miners and six rescuers were killed in the mine in Kuzbass.

But the death toll suddenly climbed to 17 as more bodies were recovered from the scene, a spokesman for the emergencies ministry in Moscow told AFP. Four people were injured, one of whom

was hospitalized.

Over 30 miners and rescuers were underground at the time of the blast, walling off the mine's old shafts.

A fire had broken out on Tuesday in the mine, which explained the presence of rescue personnel.

The blast in the Kemerovo region was the latest disaster to strike Russia's coal mining industry, which is largely unprofitable, suffering from chronic under funding and notoriously accident-prone.

The coal-rich Kemerovo region has taken the brunt of the accidents, usually caused by methane explosions.



PHOTO: AFP

TV-grab from Russian NTV channel taken yesterday shows rescue workers resting outside the Yesaulskaya mine in the Kemerovo region, some 3000 km east of Moscow.



PHOTO: AFP

Mithal al-Alusi (R), an outspoken Iraqi politician, fires gunshots during the funeral of his two sons yesterday in Baghdad a day after they were killed by gunmen targeting him in front of his Baghdad house. After he became the first Iraqi politician to visit the Jewish state, Alusi and his Democratic Party of the Iraqi Nation were expelled from the Iraqi National Congress, the party of the maverick Ahmed Chalabi.

Jammu-Kashmir highway remains closed for 3rd day
PTI, Jammu

The Jammu-Srinagar National Highway remained closed for the third day on Wednesday with Meteorological office warning of avalanche along the highway in next two days, officials said.

The continuous snowfall is making the highway clearance operation by the Border Road Organisation difficult, Deputy Inspector General (Traffic) Mehmood Niyaz told the agency.

Fresh snowfall and landslides have occurred in Banihal, Panthal and Khooni areas. A record 9 feet snowfall has been reported from Jawahir tunnel, 5 feet in Patnitop, he said.

US scholar defiant over 9/11 remarks

REUTERS, Boulder

A University of Colorado professor under fire for comparing World Trade Center victims to a Nazi war criminal on Tuesday refused to apologize for his remarks.

"I am not backing off an inch," said Ward Churchill, drawing an ovation from a standing-room-only crowd of about 1,200 students and backers gathered in a ballroom. "I owe no one an apology."

Churchill, who filed a lawsuit earlier in the day after officials at the state-funded university had threatened to cancel his speech, said his central message was that the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks had been provoked by US foreign policy.

Accused in parliament attack shot in India

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Syed Abul Rahman Geelani, the Delhi University teacher who was acquitted of involvement in the terrorist attack on Indian Parliament, was stated to be out danger after undergoing an operation a day after unidentified gunmen shot at and wounded him seriously here.

Geelani, a teacher of Arabic language in Zakir Hussain College, was operated on at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) where doctors removed bullets from his body, after he had been shot outside his lawyer Nandita Haksar's house in South Delhi last night.

Geelani was reportedly fired at

five times and three bullets hit him, two in the stomach and one in the shoulder.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court today asked Delhi police to submit a progress report on its investigations into the murderous attack on Geelani.

The terrorist attack on Indian Parliament had taken place on December 13, 2001, and Geelani was one of the four persons arrested by the Delhi police in connection with the incident. A year later, a fast-track anti-terrorism court found Geelani and four others guilty and awarded him death sentence.

But Delhi High Court acquitted him and one more person of the charge in October 2003.

Eta bomb hurts 31 in Madrid business park

AFP, Madrid

At least 31 people were injured on Wednesday when a car bomb exploded in a business park near Madrid shortly after a phone alert on behalf of the armed Basque separatist group ETA, rescue services said.

Most of those hurt were only slightly injured, in the blast, which occurred hours before Spanish King Juan Carlos was due to visit the area.

An anonymous caller claiming to represent ETA alerted the Basque newspaper Gara 30 minutes before the blast, which occurred at 9:35 am (0835 GMT) police said.

The car was parked on a roundabout near several tower blocks including the Spanish headquarters of the French computing company Bull, and the blast shattered the glass building's windows over five storeys, an interior ministry spokesman said.

Alleged Kuwaiti terror group leader dies in jail

AP, Kuwait City

The alleged ringleader of a terror group accused of attacking Americans and Kuwaiti security forces has died of heart failure while in prison, an Interior Ministry official said Wednesday.

Amer Khlaif al-Enezi, believed to be in his 30s, died on Tuesday, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The state-owned Kuwait News Agency said al-Enezi was "moved to the Armed Forces Hospital after he had trouble breathing" and died there.

Al-Qabas daily said al-Enezi was "in bad physical and psychological condition" when he was questioned by prosecutors Tuesday.

France, US proclaim new chapter in relations

AFP, Paris

France and the United States declared a "new chapter" in their rocky relationship, ending two years of feuding over Iraq with pledges of cooperation to help stabilize the Middle East.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on the most delicate stop of her fence-mending European tour, made a forceful appeal for improved transatlantic ties and was greeted by an unusually warm French response.

"It is time to turn away from the disagreements of the past. It is time to open a new chapter in our rela-

tionship, and a new chapter in our alliance," Rice said in a speech at a prestigious political sciences institute.

French President Jacques Chirac and Foreign Minister Michel Barnier, who met separately with Rice, responded effusively to her call for a halt to the bitter row sparked by the March 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Routinely referring to the chief US diplomat as "dear Condi," Barnier waxed enthusiastic on the meaning of Tuesday's rapprochement on the sixth leg of her whirlwind tour of eight European nations.

"Today the time has come to

open a new phase, to start a new chapter, to make a new beginning within this very old relationship," he said.

"I'd like to say in public how much better the world works when the United States and Europe work together," the Frenchman told a joint news conference with Rice in the foreign ministry's ornate Salon de L'Horloge.

A Chirac spokesman said he told Rice that "France attached great importance to bilateral and transatlantic cooperation and shares a common desire to keep up a constructive dialogue."

AMNESTY SAYS

China executed 650 ahead of 'New Year'

AFP, Beijing

China, which puts more people to death than the rest of the world combined, has executed at least 650 in the two months leading up to the Lunar New Year, rights group Amnesty International said Wednesday.

The executions reached a fearful crescendo in the last two weeks before the holiday, when 200 people were put to death, according to the London-based organization, which based its data on official Chinese media reports.

"The true figure is certainly much

higher, as China refuses to publish full details of all the people it executes," Amnesty said in a statement on China's "horrific New Year."

China usually executes large numbers of convicted criminals before major public holidays in order to warn pickpockets, con artists and others who might try to take advantage of large crowds gathering in public spaces.

The scare tactics is especially used for the week-long Lunar New Year holiday, which began Wednesday. It is the biggest festival in the Chinese calendar, with hundreds of millions traveling, shopping and sightseeing.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (C) listens to a harpist and a cellist yesterday in Paris.