



A detained Iraqi faces a wall after he was arrested by US Marines in the town of Haklanyah, west of Baghdad yesterday. US forces pursued increased security operations throughout the Sunni Muslim rebel province of Al-Anbar where the military said a Marine had been killed the previous day.

Putin reaffirms commitment to democracy

AP, Bratislava

Prodded by President Bush to reaffirm his country's commitment to democracy, Russian President Vladimir Putin insisted his government was not backsliding. Russia chose democracy 14 years ago, Putin said, and "there can be no return to what we used to have before."

In a joint news conference Thursday, Bush said he told Putin, "Strong countries are built by developing strong democracies."

The US president added, "I think Vladimir heard me loud and clear."

The two leaders talked for 2 1/2 hours in hopes of easing mounting distrust between Moscow and Washington.

Bush challenged Putin about his government's behavior, saying democracies reflect a country's customs and culture but must have "a rule of law and protection of

minorities, a free press and a viable political opposition." He said he talked with Putin about his "concerns about Russia's commitment in fulfilling these universal principles" and about Putin's restrictions on the press.

"I'm not the minister of propaganda," Putin said, standing alongside Bush at a news conference.

They also confronted differences over Moscow's arms sales to Syria and Russia's help for Iran's nuclear program. While Bush tried to keep a smile on his face throughout the session with reporters, Putin seemed tense.

It was their first meeting since Bush opened his second term promising to spread democracy and freedom and asserting that relations with all leaders would be predicated on how they treat their people.

Putin compared his move to end direct popular election of regional governors to the American process

of electing presidents through the Electoral College rather than by the results of the popular vote. "And it's not considered undemocratic, is it?" Putin said.

He suggested that Russians who oppose his actions, such as a campaign against the Yukos oil company and his shutdown of independent media outlets, can sway public opinion because they "are richer than those who are in favor."

"We often do not pay the attention to that," Putin said.

Bush was challenged by a Russian journalist who asked about "violations of the rights of journalists in the United States" without giving specifics.

"People do get fired in American press," the president said, adding that they get fired by editors or producers or others not by government.

Security operation increased in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

US forces pursued increased security operations throughout the Sunni Muslim rebel province of Al-Anbar where the military said another Marine had been killed the previous day.

Security sources, meanwhile, said five more people including two insurgents, had been killed in other incidents.

The marine from I Marine Expeditionary Force "was killed in action while taking part February 24 in a security and stabilization operation in Al-Anbar province," the statement said.

Operation River Blitz moved into its sixth day on Friday after a day of further bloodshed in which at least 23 people were killed in the war-ravaged country.

In Baghdad on Friday, a member of the United Iraqi Alliance, the coalition of Shiite parties that won the country's January election, said it had set up a commission that began formal talks on a new government and that would seek to incorporate all political camps.

The nine-strong commission is also seeking to get agreement with other parties, including the Kurds who emerged as the second main political force, to set a date for the first meeting of the new parliament, Ibrahim Bahr al-Ulum, an alliance MP, told AFP.

The five deaths reported by security sources on Friday were those of an Iraqi soldier killed in an ambush overnight, a policeman shot as he returned home, a petrol-tanker driver in a convoy protected by the US military and two rebels.

India to be most populous by 2030

PTI, United Nations

India will surpass China as the world's most populous nation by 2030, the United Nations has said in a new study which forecasts that the global population will soar by 40 per cent to 9.1 billion by 2050.

In its revised report for 2004, the United Nations Population Division predicted that India and China will exchange places, mainly because of differences in fertility.

India, at 1.103 billion people this year would reach 1.593 billion by 2050, which China which has 1.316 billion now will reach 1.392 billion.

"We have been saying for a while that India will cross China. But the crossover has been getting earlier and earlier and we now say it will happen before 2030 (not including Hong Kong). This is five years earlier than we said two years ago," UN demographer Cheryl Sawyer

said.

The report also said that the world's population will reach 6.5 billion by July and, despite lower expected fertility rates, is likely to reach 9.1 billion by 2050, with most of the increase taking place in developing countries.

Just eight countries - India, Pakistan, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Bangladesh, Uganda, the United States, Ethiopia and China are likely to contribute half of the world's population increase between 2005 and 2050, while the population would at least triple in Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Congo, the DRC, Timor-Leste, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger and Uganda.

Fertility in the 44 developed countries remains generally low, with any increases being small, the report says.

Palestinian truce talks set for Cairo

REUTERS, Gaza

Palestinian officials will meet militant leaders in Cairo on March 5 to discuss whether the factions will formalize their de facto truce with Israel, officials and militants said Friday.

The Palestinian Authority and Israel agreed a cease-fire at a summit in Egypt on Feb. 8. But the armed groups say they are not bound by it, though they continue to maintain calm.

"We will evaluate the current calm and the developments in recent weeks in order to shape a national position regarding the whole issue and the issue of a truce," said Mushir al-Masri, a spokesman for the Hamas Islamic militant group in Gaza.

Hamas and other factions at the forefront of a four-year-old uprising say they are still not satisfied with Israeli gestures meant to build confidence -- such as prisoner releases and an end to army raids and assassinations.

They demand the release of many more than the 500 Palestinian prisoners who have been freed so far and insist that Israel, now holding about 7,500 Palestinians, should include prisoners convicted for hurting or killing Israelis.

The groups also want a more sweeping Israeli pullback from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"One of the main issues to be discussed in Cairo is how we maintain calm and await Israeli responses to Palestinian demands in preparation for a truce," said Sakher Bseisso, a Palestinian minister who has negotiated with Hamas in the past.

"One cannot expect a speedy and 100 percent perfect Israeli response to our demands because of internal differences inside Israel, but we should put pressure on Israel by all means available."

Also up for discussion in Cairo will be parliamentary elections that are scheduled for July.



Nepalese members of the Jyapu community play on their instruments during a pro-King rally in Kathmandu yesterday. Over 1,500 people from various ethnic groups participated in a rally welcoming a statement made by Nepalese King Gyanendra during a press meet 24 February. King Gyanendra, in his first meeting with journalists after seizing power, has called on the world community to help Nepal fight Maoist rebels, even as a rights group demanded he be further isolated until he restores fundamental rights.