

Syria hands Saddam's half Brother to Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Iraqi officials said Sunday that Syria captured and handed over Saddam Hussein's half brother, a most-wanted leader in the Sunni-based insurgency, ending months of Syrian denials that it was harbouring fugitives from the ousted Saddam regime.

Iraq authorities said Damascus acted in a gesture of goodwill.

Sabawi Ibrahim al-Hassan, who shared a mother with Saddam, was nabbed along with 29 other fugitive members of the former dictator's Baath Party in Hasakah in north-eastern Syria, 30 miles from the Iraqi border, the officials said on condition of anonymity. The US military in Iraq had no immediate comment.

On Monday, a suicide car bomber drove into a crowd of people applying for work in a government office south of Baghdad and detonated his explosives, killing 25 people and wounded 71, a senior Interior Ministry official and witnesses said.

US close to decision on offering Iran incentives

AFP, Washington

Washington is close to a decision on joining Europe in offering incentives to Iran in exchange for giving up plans to develop nuclear weapons, The Washington Post reported yesterday.

The new willingness comes after President George W. Bush's talks with German and French leaders in Europe last week and a meeting with key cabinet members and Vice President Dick Cheney on Friday.

"There's no timetable," a senior State Department official said, speaking on condition of anonymity, "but we're looking for a decision."

Officials told the Post that after "really good" meetings in Europe last week the White House "wants to move quickly to finalize a list of incentives to offer Tehran as part of European talks with Iran," the daily said.

Israel poised for U-turn on Gaza settlements

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel looked set yesterday for a U-turn by deciding not to destroy the homes of settlers due to be uprooted from Gaza, as a special unit was established to combat extremist violence threatening the pullout.

Previously determined to raze some 2,000 Jewish homes and buildings in the Gaza Strip when the



PHOTO: AFP

Opposition supporters run over barbed wire as they break a security cordon during an anti-Syria rally in downtown Beirut yesterday. Thousands of people defied a ban to mass in the streets of the Lebanese capital ahead of a showdown in parliament where the Lebanese opposition plans a vote to try to bring down the pro-Syrian government.

HR Watch blames Nepali army for widespread 'disappearances'

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's army, which backed King Gyanendras February 1 seizure of power, is responsible for widespread enforced disappearances and rights abuses, Human Rights Watch said today.

In the course of their nine-year battle with Maoist rebels, "Nepali security forces have established themselves as one of the worlds worst perpetrators of enforced disappearances," the group said in a report.

It said local human rights groups had recorded more than 1,200 disappearances in the past five years alone.

"Given the scale of disappearances we have documented, the heightened role of the army after the kings seizure of power is frightening," said Brad Adams, Asia director of the New York-based group.

Gyanendra a month ago sacked the government and declared emergency rule, saying the previous ruling coalition could not deal with the rebels who are fighting to establish a communist republic in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

Shortly after the power grab, the king made an offer of unconditional peace talks to the rebels, who had branded him a "national betrayer". Security forces said the guerrillas face tough action if they refuse the call.

"Maoist forces have a horrendous record of killings, torture and intimidation, but the response cant be to unleash an army that has been responsible for so many disappearances and other egregious human rights abuses," Adams said.

The international community should act immediately to prevent a deepening "disappearances" crisis in the wake of the royal takeover, he added.

The 171-page report documents more than 200 enforced disappearances it says were perpetrated by Nepal's army and police.

The group said its research had indicated that the actual number of "disappearances" may be significantly under-reported since many families feared to approach the authorities.

In almost all cases documented in the study, witnesses claimed that individuals who "disappeared" had last been seen in the custody of security forces, who had rounded them up in large scale operations, at checkpoints, on the streets or from their places of work or study.

Anti-Syrian protesters fill Beirut streets

Parliament debates no-confidence motion against govt

AP, Beirut

Defying a ban on protests, about 10,000 people demonstrated against Syrian interference in Lebanon yesterday, as parliament debated a motion of confidence in the pro-Syrian government.

Hundreds of soldiers and police blocked off Beirut's central Martyrs' Square, but there was no violence, even as more and more protesters managed to evade the cordon and join the demonstration.

Protest leaders urged their followers not to provoke the security forces, who refrained from trying to disperse the crowd.

Opposition legislators sought to bring down the pro-Syrian government of Prime Minister Omar Karami in Monday's confidence debate. It was the first time the legislature discussed the Feb. 14

assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who was killed with 16 other people in a massive bomb blast.

"The assembly seeks answers to one question: 'Who killed Rafik Hariri?'" parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri said as he opened the debate, calling on the government to expedite its investigation.

Many Lebanese say Karami's administration and Syria were behind the attack a charge both governments deny.

The session began with a moment of silence for the slain legislator.

Then Hariri's sister, legislator Bahiya Hariri, addressed the parliament and called on the government to resign.

"All the Lebanese want to know their enemy, the enemy of Lebanon who killed the martyr Rafik Hariri,

those who took the decision, planned and executed it, those who ignored and prevented the truth from coming out," Bahiya said, struggling to hold back tears.

Karami asked parliament for a vote of support, outlining his government's accomplishments and promising to hold elections as scheduled in April and May.

About 200 yards away, the demonstrators stood a light rain, waving the national flag and chanting, "We want no other army in Lebanon except the Lebanese army!" About 3,000 had spent the night in the square to beat the ban on demonstrations, which took effect at daybreak Monday.

The assassination of Hariri has intensified world and Lebanese opposition pressure for Syria to withdraw its 15,000 troops from Lebanon.

HRW voices concern over US mines in Iraq

AFP, Washington

Human Rights Watch raised a red flag yesterday over US plans to deploy a new system of remote-controlled anti-personnel mines in Iraq.

The New York-based rights watchdog said the US Army had failed to answer critical questions regarding the potential harm the mines might pose to civilians.

The new system, called Matrix, allows a soldier with a laptop computer to detonate Claymore mines remotely via radio signal from several kilometers away.

While Claymores normally propel lethal fragments from 40 to 60 meters (130-200 feet) across a 60-degree arc, Human Right Watch said US Army tests indicated that the hazard range for the new system was as far as 300 meters.

"A faraway blip on a laptop screen is hardly a surefire method of determining if you are about to kill an enemy combatant or an unsuspecting civilian," said Steve Goose, executive director of the watchdog's arms division.

UK struggles to push thru' tough anti-terror laws

AFP, London

Britain's government faced a tough battle yesterday to force controversial anti-terror laws through parliament allowing suspects to be put under limited house arrest, amid predictions ministers could be forced into a humiliating climbdown.

Opposition parties have threatened to derail attempts by the government to rush the Prevention of Terrorism Bill through parliament unless they are offered significant concessions.

The proposed law allows the government to impose so-called "control orders" on terrorism suspects, under which they could face measures such as electronic tagging, or even being placed under a form of indefinite house arrest, without trial.

Human rights activists vehemently oppose the orders, saying the fact they are imposed by the interior minister rather than a judge makes them highly illiberal and open to abuse.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Prince Charles shakes hands with Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse (R) as the country's President Chandrika Kumaratunga (C) and Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar (L) look on in Colombo yesterday. Prince Charles stopped over in Sri Lanka on a brief visit to inspect tsunami damage on his way to Australia.

Cong, BJP battling to forge alliance in Bihar

AFP, New Delhi

India's two main parties, Congress and the Hindu nationalist BJP, were battling yesterday to forge alliances to gain control of a key Indian state after elections produced a hung parliament.

Leaders of the two parties were trying to woo independents in order to secure power, with Congress officials anxious to derail the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s resurgence.

Bihar, with a population of 80 million people, is the second biggest supplier of MPs to national parliament. Political developments at state level are seen as having an impact on national politics further down the line.

With only seven of 243 seats still to be declared Monday, Bihar's ruling Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) had won 73, the Lok Janshakti Party 29 and Congress 10. For a majority, a party or a coalition needs to have at least 123 seats.

The three parties are partners at national level but bitter political

compulsions and caste politics made them each go their own ways at state level in Bihar, resulting in the splitting of the vote.

The opposition BJP benefited from the infighting to emerge with 87 seats and political analysts said it possibly could wrest power from the RJD's president Laloo Prasad Yadav, who has ruled Bihar for 15 years.

The BJP has already offered chief ministership to LJP chief Ram Vilas Paswan, who has so far declined to state his position in the jockeying.

The outcome of the Bihar vote has created strains within the federal coalition but according to analysts not enough to affect stability of central government.

Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi was to meet Yadav and Paswan separately on Monday and Tuesday in a bid to stitch up a solution that would keep out the Hindu nationalists -- even if it means rule by central government, in Bihar, party sources said.



PHOTO: AFP

An illegal Indonesian immigrant carries her baby while waiting for a bus to the port as she leaves the city in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Illegal immigrants are rushing to leave the country on the last day of an amnesty to avoid being caught, caned and imprisoned.