

2ND INVASION ANNIVERSARY

Killing goes on in Iraq as Bush defends war

Anti-war protests in London

AFP, Baghdad

At least seven Iraqis died yesterday, including three policemen blown up as they buried a murdered colleague...

President George W. Bush yesterday defended his decision to order the invasion of Iraq two years ago, hailing the campaign as a landmark event in the history of freedom.

Though the invasion that started on March 20, 2003, remains controversial, Bush insisted in his weekly radio address that the war had made America safer and was inspiring change across the Middle East.

"Today we are seeing hopeful signs across the broader Middle East. The victory of freedom in Iraq is strengthening a new ally in the war on terror, and inspiring democratic reformers from Beirut to Tehran."

Bush said he ordered Operation Iraqi Freedom "to disarm a brutal regime, free its people, and defend the world from a grave danger."

"Because we acted, Iraq's government is no longer a threat to the world or its own people. Today the Iraqi people are taking charge of their own destiny," Bush said, highlighting the country's landmark January 30 elections and this week's first meeting of the transitional national assembly.

"Today, Iraqis can take pride in building a government that answers to its people and honours their country's unique heritage."

Bush paid tribute to the 1,500-plus American soldiers who have been killed in Iraq and also sought to reassure the public that he was taking measures to start the withdrawal of the 130,000 US troops still in Iraq.

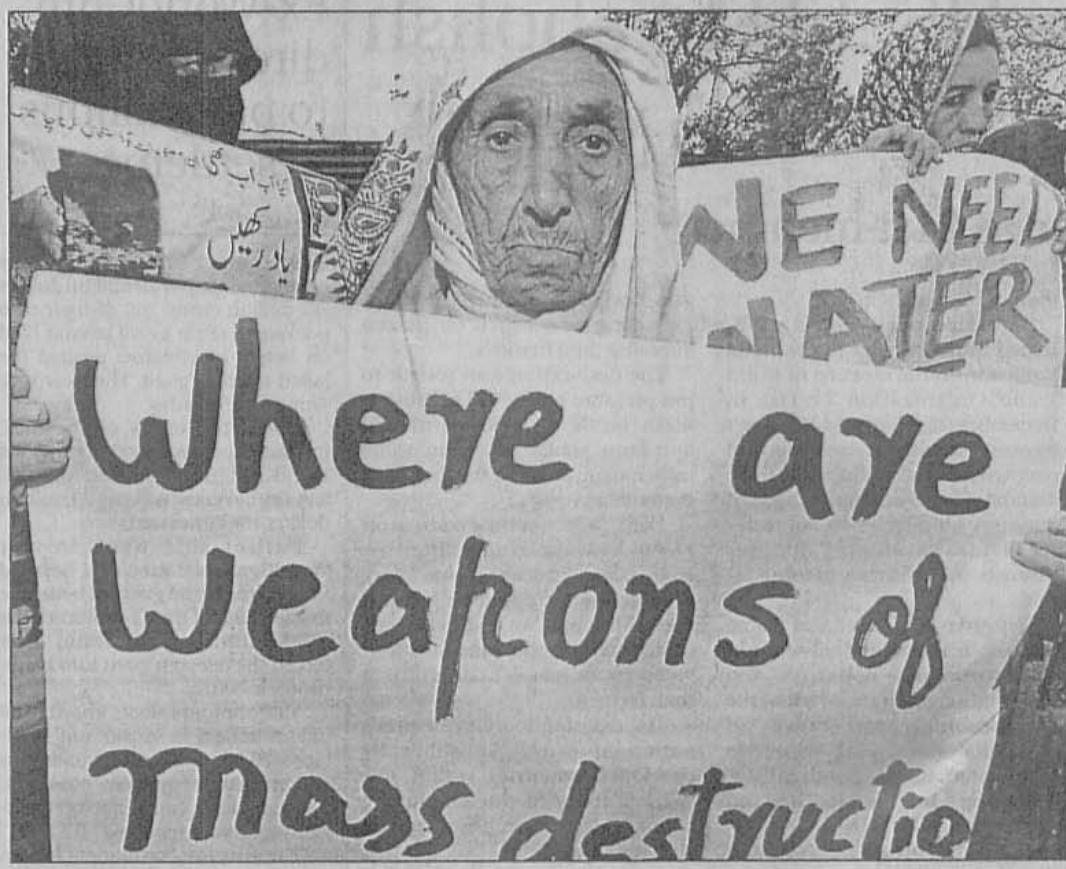
The policemen were killed and seven others wounded when a bomb exploded in the tense northern oil centre of Kirkuk as the funeral cortege of a comrade killed the previous day passed by police chief General Turhan Yusef said.

The policeman killed on Friday died when a patrol went to investigate a bag that two masked men had left in the street near the police academy, and a bomb inside exploded, Lieutenant Colonel Khattab Arif told AFP.

In other violence, an Iraqi soldier and two civilians, one an interpreter working for coalition forces, were killed in the north of the country, and the body of a man shot in the head execution-style was found.

Meanwhile, thousands of people gathered at Speaker's Corner in London's Hyde Park yesterday brandishing posters denouncing the "war on terror", marking the second anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Pictures of US President George W. Bush under the title "World's Number One Terrorist" and banners saying "No War in Iran" mingled with others warning British Prime Minister Tony Blair that people would not vote for him in an expected general election in May due to his support for the invasion.



Pakistani leftists display anti-war placards during a demonstration in Rawalpindi yesterday. The demonstration was organised to mark the second anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq.

Modi will still address US meet

PTI, New York

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, whose visa has been revoked by the US, is now expected to address via satellite a scheduled public meeting in New York yesterday.

The Association of Indians of North America (AINA), the organiser of the public meeting in the Madison Square Garden in New York, said they plan to put up a huge screen in the hall to telecast Modi's speech live from Gandhinagar.

Deploing the US decision to deny diplomatic visa to and revoke tourist/business visa of Modi, its officials said at a hurriedly convened press conference on Friday that the association was "shocked and bewildered" by the denial of visa to a democratically elected Chief Minister.

An AINA spokesperson claimed that the organisation represented the point of view of the majority of Indian-Americans in the United States.

But the Coalition Against Genocide, which had planned to hold a protest outside the Madison Square Garden, too claimed that it represented the majority of the Indian-Americans and praised the decision to revoke Modi's visa, saying his effort to put up a moderate face had failed.

Lebanon president to skip Arab summit after bomb blast

AFP, Beirut

Lebanese President Emile Lahoud issued a plea for national dialogue yesterday and cancelled plans to attend an Arab summit hours after a bomb blast in a Beirut suburb sparked fears of a return to sectarian violence.

With political tension mounting, 11 people were wounded shortly after midnight when the bomb exploded beneath a car in the Christian residential neighbourhood of Jdeide, causing extensive damage, police said.

Citing "exceptional circumstances," Lahoud called for dialogue between the country's anti-Syrian opposition and parties sympathetic to Damascus, an encounter he said was critical in order to "protect Lebanon."

Lahoud's office later announced that the president would not attend a two-day Arab summit starting Tuesday in Algeria "because of the situation" in Lebanon.

Saturday's blast was the first serious incident since popular former premier Rafiq Hariri and 18 other people were killed in a huge bombing in Beirut February 28, an attack that ignited public fury and stepped up calls for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon.



Lebanese army explosive experts investigate the site where a car bomb exploded, wounding eight people and destroying the first floor of a residential block in a Christian neighbourhood of Beirut early yesterday.

US keeps pre-emptive strike strategy intact

REUTERS, Washington

The Pentagon said on Friday it will now include allies in top-secret US defence strategy sessions, but stressed that Washington could still launch unilateral, preemptive strikes to protect itself.

The invitation to Britain and other countries to this year's previously closed Quadrennial Defence Review meetings at the Pentagon is to foster cooperation in the US war on terrorism, Undersecretary of Defence Douglas Feith said.

But pressed on whether the Bush administration might soften its preemptive strike strategy to defend the country, Feith said at a news conference that the country would still go it alone if necessary.

"The president has the obligation to protect the country. And I don't think that there's anything in our Constitution that says that the president should not protect the country unless he gets some non-Americans' participation or approval of that," he said.

Feith, as other administration officials have done in response to criticism about the invasion of Iraq, said that "it was just wrong" to charge that the strategy was a departure from long-held rights of any country to protect itself.

Woman leads Muslim prayer service in New York

AFP, New York

A woman professor led an Islamic prayer service attended by both men and women Friday in New York, braving condemnation by Muslim religious leaders and even death threats.

The service, claimed by its organisers as the first of its type to be held by a woman, was held at Synod House at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine -- an Episcopal church in Manhattan.

Three local mosques had refused to act as a venue and plans to hold the service in an art gallery were shelved following a bomb threat. Islamic law forbids women from leading prayers if there are men in the congregation.

Around 150 Muslims, the majority of them female, turned up for the special prayers, where the role traditionally played by a male imam was taken by Amina Wadud, a professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University.

In her sermon, which she peppered with verses from the Koran, Wadud stressed the theme of the unity of God and creation in Islam and applied it to the concept of race and sex equality.

N Korea must stop its nuke plan: Rice

US secy of state visits command post

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said an international coalition remains committed to negotiating an end to North Korea's nuclear weapons programme, but warned yesterday that North Korea cannot stall forever.

Rice also appealed to China, communist North Korea's closest ally, to use its leverage to bring North Korea back to disarmament talks.

"We are committed to diplomacy, but I think it goes without saying that no one is going to be prepared to allow the North Koreans to just go down a road that threatens everyone," Rice said.

"We have been very careful to have people choose their own diplomatic paths and their own mix of incentives and leverage to deal with the North Korean problem," she said.

Rice spoke from Tokyo before flying to South Korea. The North Koreans have not responded to a US-backed peace-making proposal. Pyongyang has complained that Rice unfairly labelled the country an "outpost of tyranny" earlier this year, and demanded an apology.

UN reminds members to sign anti-torture protocol

AFP, Geneva

The UN called on all countries Friday to sign an anti-torture protocol that would allow surprise visits at detention centres after only six nations signed up to it in the two years since it was first adopted.

"Torture has resurfaced as a critical international human rights issue," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour said Friday as she presented an annual report.

The protocol is designed to prevent torture rather than act after lives have already been destroyed by abuse while in detention.

So far only Albania, Argentina, Denmark, Liberia, Malta and the United Kingdom have signed the protocol (that could only come into effect once 20 nations have signed it) after the UN general assembly added it to the convention against torture in December 2002.

Arbour, a Canadian judge, said recent instances "give the impression not only that the practice (of torture) is increasing across a range of member states but that the very existence of the absolute prohibition on the use of torture is being questioned."

India to bar rebels from availing Kashmir bus

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian army, battling Islamic insurgents in disputed Kashmir, said Friday it would keep rebels from using a historic bus between the two zones of the divided Himalayan territory.

The warning came as the cross-border service was set to start April 7 between Srinagar in the Indian part of Kashmir and Muzaffarabad, capital of the Pakistani zone.

Indian army chief general J.J. Singh said soldiers in Kashmir were preparing plans to prevent travel by wanted insurgents between the two cities onboard the bus.

"We have given a great deal of thought and chalked out necessary preventive measures to check any such misuse," Singh said, adding that army engineers were also scouring the route for landmines planted during the first war between India and Pakistan.

"We expect the road to be safe for travel by the due date," he said of the 170-km route which winds through rugged terrain where bands of militants are believed to be holed up.

The inter-Kashmir bus service is the most dramatic gesture yet in the 14-month-old peace process between nuclear armed rivals India and Pakistan, coming after months of stalled negotiations.

Europe's support for US on Iraq falls

AFP, Prague

US President George W. Bush's previously faithful and proud New European allies are gradually withdrawing their support for his cause in Iraq.

In the space of just a few months, Bush's more faithful allies in central and Eastern Europe have one by one begun a complete or partial withdrawal of their troops from Iraq.

Yet, only two years ago, the heads of former communist bloc countries were prepared to brave the irritation of France and Germany, standing firmly at the United States' side.

Recognising the role played by Washington in helping fall of communism, they were sympathetic to the Bush crusade for freedom.

But the Bush regime has remained largely ungrateful for their efforts.

So now even Bulgaria, which orchestrated Eastern Europe's support for the campaign against Saddam Hussein, announced on Thursday that it would reduce its presence in Iraq by 100 soldiers at the end of June.

Bulgarian Defence Minister Nicolas Svinarov said his government would examine the question of the withdrawal before the end of March.

The Baltic former Soviet republic of Latvia already reduced its small contingent in November, Hungary has withdrawn all its 300 troops and Poland cut its troops at the time of the Iraqi parliamentary elections on January 30, from 2,400 soldiers to 1,700.

Poland, which controls a zone to the south of Baghdad, predicts that it will recall several hundred more troops from July.

East European governments have played down their decisions. "This is not a political decision, the contingent's reduction was dictated by practical reasons," Latvia's Defence Minister Atis Slakteris said.

And Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski used the Iraqi elections to claim that a new era had begun for the country.

Anxious to hold on to one of its better allies in Europe, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice quietly accepted Poland's arguments. Less diplomatic was her Danish counterpart Per Stig Moeller, who harshly criticised Poland.

Preparations for Israel's Gaza pullout gather pace

AFP, Jerusalem

Preparations quickened yesterday for Israel's pullout from the Gaza Strip as a Palestinian militant splinter group ended its informal truce, the first small chink in the fragile demilitarisation of the four-year-old uprising.

The Israeli army is to begin pulling non-essential equipment out of Gaza within the next two weeks, in preparation for its withdrawal, a military source said.

He said the equipment that would be moved out initially would not be essential to the security of either troops or Jewish settlers in Gaza.

The army also started work Tuesday building bases in southern Israel to house the troops that are to redeploy by the end of the year, the source said.

The pullout of settlers is due to start on July 20 and be completed within a few weeks.

On Thursday, the army issued an order barring settlers from moving into Gaza.

The head of the southern command, Lieutenant General Dan Harel, signed a decree on March 17 prohibiting the relocation of Israeli citizens into the Gaza Strip, an army statement said.

The Yediot Aharonot daily reported Friday that the decision was taken by Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz after reports that hundreds of people had moved to Gaza settlements in a bid to prevent their evacuation.

Figures collated by the army showed that more than 500 people have recently changed their address to the Gush Katif settlement bloc, although settler sources put the number of new residents as high as 800, the paper said.

Jewish settlers are fiercely opposed to the Gaza pullout and are planning a campaign of civil disobedience in a bid to thwart what they deride as the "forcible transfer of Jews".

During the withdrawal period, the army is expected to declare a closed military zone in all the affected areas in order to prevent the widely expected protests.

Supporters of the withdrawal were due to take to the streets for the first time Saturday to demonstrate their approval of a move they regard as essential to Middle East peace.

Some 1,000 security personnel were deployed to police the evening rally in Tel Aviv.



French President Jacques Chirac (R) makes a gesture to German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder outside the Elysee Palace Friday in Paris. French, German, Russian and Spanish heads of states gathered in Paris for the first-ever four-way summit.

Paris summit calls for 'complete pullout' of Syria from Lebanon

AFP, Paris

Russia joined the leaders of France, Germany and Spain on Friday in an appeal for a rapid and "complete pullout" of all Syrian troops and intelligence forces from Lebanon, a joint declaration said.

In their statement the presidents of France and Russia, Jacques Chirac and Vladimir Putin, as well as Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder of Germany and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero committed themselves to the implementation of UN resolution 1559 which calls for the full withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon.

The resolution was adopted in September last year.

Putin's agreement was important because of Moscow's long-standing links with Damascus.

Russia is currently negotiating the sale to Syria of close-range air defence missiles in spite of US reservations.

Russian security commission chief Igor Ivanov said Monday Moscow was prepared to allow Israeli experts to check that the missiles pose no danger for the Jewish state's security.

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Local Government Engineering Department
Office of the Upazila Engineer
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Table with 4 columns: Sl No, Package No., Modified time for work completion, Modified tender validity period, Modified last date, time & place of selling tender documents. Contains 13 rows of tender information.