

Kyrgyz president's palace overrun

BBC ONLINE

Anti-government protesters have overrun the presidential palace, the White House, in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek.

Hundreds flooded into the compound as police opposition melted away, waving a flag from a second floor window and scattering documents, reporters said.

Earlier several thousand opposition protesters clashed with pro-government forces, fighting running battles with sticks, stones and shields.

The protesters are demanding that President Askar Akayev step down.

Officials were seen fleeing the palace - also the seat of government - by the back door.

The opposition said it had also taken over the state television channel.

Akayev's whereabouts were unknown, but there was speculation he was talking to officials from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in the outskirts of Bishkek.

"He is most likely in the OSCE mission. There is nowhere else he can be now," former foreign minister and opposition figure Muratbek Imanaliyev told the Russian government news agency Ria.

An OSCE spokesman denied the reports.

The events in the capital follow growing unrest in the south.

The protests were sparked by disputed elections in February, and a second round on 13 March, which saw the opposition reduced to just a handful of seats in the 75-member parliament.

Reporters said Akayev loyalists wearing civilian clothes with blue armbands chased protesters away, before the demonstrators returned and fought back.



Kyrgyz opposition activists attack presidential supporters on the central square of Bishkek yesterday. At least two people were injured in Kyrgyzstan's capital when an opposition rally turned violent in central Bishkek.



Demonstrators pray outside Woodside Hospice Wednesday, where Terri Schiavo is hospitalised in Pinellas Park, Florida. A US federal court rejected an appeal by the parents of Schiavo, who had asked that their daughter's feeding tube be reinserted.

Schiavo parents appeal to US Supreme Court

AFP, Washington

The parents of Terri Schiavo, a brain-damaged Florida woman who has been in a persistent vegetative state for the past 15 years, appealed late Wednesday to the US Supreme Court, seeking an order to resume their daughter's feeding through a tube, a court official said.

No other details have been provided.

However, legal experts said their chances of success were slim because the Supreme Court has ruled against them on four previous occasions.

Terri's father, Bob Schindler, appeared not to hold out much hope either.

"I don't think that the courts are going to be helpful at all," he told CNN television shortly before papers were filed.

Schindler comments came after petitions to save his daughter were rejected Wednesday by an Atlanta, Georgia appeals court and the Florida state senate.

As Schiavo, 41, entered her seventh day without nourishment, doctors having cut off her feeding tube last Friday, 10 protesters, including three children, were handcuffed and arrested by police for attempting to get water to her.

A supporter of Schiavo's right to live, Rev. Patrick Mahoney of the Christian Defence Coalition said: "The legislation in Florida is now dead."

FRESH PRE-POLLS BLOW TO BLAIR Iraq war's legality and planning challenged

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's government was challenged anew yesterday over whether the Iraq invasion was legal and how well it planned for the aftermath, just weeks before general elections.

The challenge came from publication of a resignation letter from an adviser who called the war "illegal" and a parliamentary panel's report that found the US-led coalition had failed to prepare enough for the ensuing insurgency.

The developments added to the pressure on a government, which has lost popularity over its decision to join the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, though analysts still predict it will win elections expected May 5.

The government's opposition

seized on the resignation letter from the Foreign Office's former deputy legal adviser Elizabeth Wilmshurst, who reportedly said the war amounted to an "unlawful act" and a "crime of aggression."

The BBC News website said Wilmshurst made the claim in her letter dated March 18, 2003, part of which was obtained by the broadcaster under the new Freedom of Information Act.

She was also quoted as saying: "Nor can I agree with such action in circumstances which are so detrimental to the international order and the rule of law."

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Gaza pullout opponents scramble to nail support for referendum

AFP, Jerusalem

Opponents of Israel's plan to withdraw from Gaza desperately scrambled yesterday to nail support for a referendum on the pullout as the government sailed towards winning a crucial vote on the 2005 state budget.

Billed as the last two political opportunities to stall Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plans to disengage from Gaza from July 20, opponents are battling to get parliament to legislate a referendum and reject the budget next week.

Failing by the end of the month to pass the budget, criticised by the left for its welfare cuts and seen as key to halting the evacuation by the right-wing, would bring down the government and so jeopardise the pullout.

Sharon fears any national plebiscite could seriously delay an evacuation already sanctioned by parliament and the cabinet.

Political machinations and

manipulations over the referendum have seen tension soar in Sharon's right-wing Likud party, a third of which oppose the Gaza withdrawal, in a stand off that has dogged the premier for months.

As things stand, the referendum is headed for failure. The mass-selling Yediot Aharonot daily predicted 64 out of the 120 MPs are opposed, including 14 Likud deputies, with only 38 in favour, among them 26 Likud members.

But what could swing the vote against Sharon is the support of the 11 MPs from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, which is deeply against the Gaza evacuation, but has traditionally opposed plebiscites on principle.

Late Wednesday, Likud member and Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held talks with Shas spiritual mentor Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, in a bid to try to convince him to support the referendum plan.

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Texas oil refinery explosion kills 14

REUTERS, Texas City

A powerful explosion at a BP oil refinery in Texas turned the complex into a raging inferno where at least 14 people died and another 100 were injured on Wednesday.

The blast at the giant 470,000-barrel-per-day (bpd) facility, the third-largest in the United States, was isolated to a unit used to upgrade the quality of gasoline, with the rest of the refinery operating normally, BP said.

Flames shot out from the twisted metal of the badly damaged facility and a huge cloud of black smoke rose high into the sky before firefighters doused the blaze.

Rescue teams combed through piles of rubble and the remains of shattered buildings in the plant to search for the dead and injured while ambulances raced the victims to hospitals where tearful family members waited for news of their loved ones.

"We believe 14 people lost their lives as a result of the fire," BP site director Don Parus told reporters.

"It's a sad day for BP."

cover.

BP did not suspect a terrorist attack had caused the blast at the sprawling 1,200-acre facility. "We have no reason to believe this was anything caused by an outside agent," said company spokesman Hugh Depland.

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US, UK warn of attacks in Philippines

AFP, Washington

The US and Britain have warned of imminent terror attacks in the Philippines as a massive manhunt continued for al-Qaeda-linked fighters following the arrests of two suspected militants, officials said yesterday.

The US State Department has warned that militants were planning multiple attacks in the archipelago and advised its citizens to "consider carefully the risks of travel to the Philippines".

"Terrorist groups, including Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu

Sayyaf Group, and radical elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front are planning multiple attacks throughout the Philippines," a US advisory said.

The British government had earlier issued a similar advisory to its citizens.

Military sources said some 10 Jemaah Islamiyah and Abu Sayyaf militants are still on the loose and could hit targets anywhere in the Philippines after authorities foiled an Abu Sayyaf plot to bomb "soft targets" in Manila during the Easter break.

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