

AMNESTY OFFICIAL SAYS US running 'archipelago' of secret prisons

AFP, Washington

The US government is running an "archipelago" of prisons around the world, many of them secret camps into which people are being "literally disappeared," a top Amnesty International official said yesterday.

Executive Director William Schulz criticised the administration of US President George W. Bush for holding alleged opponents in "indefinite incommunicado detention" without access to lawyers in an interview with Fox News yesterday.

The right's group representative was pressed to substantiate Amnesty's claim that the prison camp at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba -- where hundreds of foreign terror suspects are being held indefinitely -- represents the "gulag of our times."

The gulag claim, referring to the notorious prison camps of the Soviet Union, has been fiercely criticised by Bush -- who called the claim "absurd" -- Vice President

Dick Cheney, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other top US officials.

Schulz said the gulag reference was not "an exact or a literal analogy."

"But there are some similarities. The United States is maintaining an archipelago of prisons around the world, many of them secret prisons into which people are being literally disappeared -- held in indefinite incommunicado detention without access to lawyers," Schulz said.

Asked to explain the "moral equivalency" between the detentions of millions of Soviet citizens in the original gulag system and purported anti-US combatants taken on the battlefield, Schulz replied that some of those held in Guantanamo "happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"We do know that at least some of the 200 some prisoners who have been released from Guantanamo Bay have made pretty persuasive

cases that they were imprisoned there, not because they were involved in military conflict but simply because they were enemies of the Northern Alliance," he said.

Schulz called for an official probe into the alleged rights abuses at US detention centres around the globe.

The United States "should be the one that should investigate those who are alleged at least to be architects of torture, not just the foot soldiers who may have inflicted the torture directly, but those who authorized it or encouraged it or provided rationales for it or in the case of Rumsfeld, provided the exact rules, 27 of them in fact, for interrogations, some of which do constitute torture or cruel, inhumane treatment," Schulz said.

The New York Times newspaper said Sunday that the Guantanamo Bay prison should be closed down by the Bush administration, saying it had become "a national shame" and a "propaganda gift to America's enemies."

Taiwan test-fires missiles

REUTERS, AFP, Taipei

Taiwan has successfully tested its domestically developed Hsiung Feng anti-ship missile, the China Times newspaper said yesterday, as the island attempts to beef up its defence capability against China's growing military threat.

"Once deployed, it would mark the first time that Taiwan is able to put 'strategic weapons' into use. Its political and military impact would be far-reaching," the paper said.

Taiwan could begin "small initial production" of the Hsiung Feng, with a 1,000-km range that could hit military bases in China's southeast, this year or in 2006, the Chinese-language newspaper said, quoting unidentified sources.

The defence ministry declined to comment on the report.

The newspaper said Defence Minister Lee Jye witnessed the test firing of the missile from Chiupeng military base in the southern Pingtung county. The missile flew over 500km (300 miles) before hitting its target.

The report did not specify when the test took place but speculated that it could have been in March.



Residents watch as rising water rush against the bank of the river in China's southwestern municipality of Chongqing Saturday. A week of torrential rains and heavy flooding has killed 204 people in China, with 79 others missing, and caused widespread damage.

Palestinian militants raid PA offices

REUTERS, Nablus

Palestinian militants raided two Palestinian Authority offices yesterday to demand jobs and protection in a further sign of lawlessness in the West Bank and Gaza.

About 15 members of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, part of President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction, fired in the air at the entrance to Nablus Governor Mohammed al-Alul's office and stormed into the Interior Ministry in the West Bank city.

Witnesses said an employee at the governor's office was slightly wounded in the incident. A spokesman for the brigades said the gunman shot him accidentally.

The militants, wanted by Israel, shouted out demands for jobs and Palestinian Authority guarantees of their safety under any deal to transfer Nablus, now encircled and periodically raided by Israeli troops, to Palestinian security control.

Militants fear a deal on a Nablus pullback would include a demand they hand over their weapons to the Palestinian Authority, making them more vulnerable should Israel decide to go after them.



Former Miss Universe and popular Bollywood actress Sushmita Sen (C) is surrounded by Kashmiri children during a cultural show at an orphanage in Srinagar yesterday. Thousands of Kashmiri children have become orphans and women have been widowed during the 16-year armed conflict in the disputed Himalayan state.

Syria's allies scent victory in south Lebanon polls

REUTERS, Houla

Voters went to the polls in south Lebanon yesterday where Syria's staunchest allies Hezbollah and Amal were set to triumph in the first general elections since Syrian troops left the country.

Many in the Shia Muslim heartland see a vote for Hezbollah as a vote for retaining the group's arms as resistance against neighbouring Israel which occupied the south for 22 years.

"I am going to vote for Hezbollah because they liberated the south," said Zeinab Yasin, adjusting a veil concealing her hair. "We owe them our blood," she said in the border town of Houla, among the first to be abandoned by Israeli troops in 2000.

Staunchly anti-Israel Hezbollah, which Washington labels a terrorist group, and the more moderate Amal are the dominant forces among the Shias, Lebanon's largest sect.

Voting got off to a slow start as the Amal-Hezbollah alliance, dubbed the "steamroller," had already won six of the 23 seats in the south by default, due to a lack of challengers.

But Interior Minister Hassan al-Sabaa said turnout among the 675,000 eligible voters in the south was "good."

Damascus backed both Amal and Hezbollah during and after the 1975-1990 civil war, and Shias largely stayed away from anti-Syrian street protests that swept Beirut after the Feb. 14 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri.

US troops find huge Iraqi rebel bunker Sadr moves into mainstream

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad

US troops have discovered a huge insurgent bunker complex dug into a quarry in western Iraq, with air conditioning, showers and a large stockpile of weapons, the American military said.

The Marines said the complex was 170 meters (yards) wide and 275 meters long, making it one of the biggest insurgent hideouts discovered in Iraq. They said nobody was in the bunker when it was found.

"Within the various rooms making up the facility, Iraqi security and coalition forces discovered four fully furnished living spaces, a kitchen with fresh food, two shower facilities and a working air conditioner," said Captain Jeffrey Pool of the 2nd Marine Division.

"In one portion of this insurgent lair, coalition forces and Iraqi security forces found numerous types of machine guns, ordnance including mortars, rockets and artillery rounds, black uniforms, ski masks, compasses, log books, night vision goggles, and fully charged cell phones."

The bunker system was close to the town of Karma near Falluja, around 50km west of Baghdad.

Iraq's western Anbar province is the area of Iraq where the insurgency is strongest -- more US troops have been killed there than in any other province. Most of the

province is desert, and the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim population is concentrated mainly in towns along the Euphrates River.

The US military says al-Qaeda's network in Iraq brings weapons, cash and foreign Arab fighters into the country through the western border with Syria.

Foreign suicide bombers stay in a succession of safe houses in Anbar on their way to launch attacks, officers say.

Falluja was controlled by insurgents for several months last year after the US military pulled its troops out of the city. Following an offensive to drive out guerrillas in November, Marines said they found several bomb-making factories, guerrilla training centres and buildings where hostages were kept.

AP adds: Arguably Iraq's most popular Shia group, followers of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr have packed away their guns and now speak of "political resistance" rather than martyrdom in battle.

Once dismissed as an upstart, the portly al-Sadr has been transformed into a respectable political figure, commanding the loyalty of key lawmakers and several Cabinet ministers.

"We are growing stronger and our appeal is becoming wider," Ibrahim al-Jaberi, a senior official at al-Sadr's office in Sadr City, said Saturday.

Naga rebels threaten to resume war

AFP, Dimapur

A powerful rebel group in India's northeastern state of Nagaland threatened yesterday to end a ceasefire in place since 1997 if the government did not meet its demands for a separate homeland.

"We may be forced to fight again and hence are prepared for the worst," National Socialist Council of Nagaland spokesman Kraibo Chawang told AFP in Dimapur, the commercial hub of Nagaland.

Leaders of the guerrilla group have held at least 20 rounds of peace talks with Indian negotiators this year in a bid to end nearly six decades of violent insurgency in the region.

"The pace of the talks has been slow and we are not at all happy," Chawang said.

The group is the oldest and most powerful of around 30 rebel armies in India's northeast and wants the creation of a "Greater Nagaland", which would include parts of the neighbouring states of Assam, Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh that have sizeable Naga tribal populations.

"There cannot be any solution without unification of all Naga tribal inhabited areas in the northeast," Chawang said.

But the neighbouring state governments have already rejected demands for unification of Naga-dominated areas.

Peace hopes rise as India backs Lankan aid deal

AFP, Colombo

Lanka's hopes of reviving peace talks with Tiger rebels were raised after India gave its backing to a controversial aid-sharing deal with the guerrillas, a senior diplomat and analysts said yesterday.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga Friday secured support of the powerful northern neighbour for a deal with Tamil Tigers who remain outlawed by New Delhi since 1992 for their role in the slaying of former premier Rajiv Gandhi.

New Delhi's support, announced in a joint statement, capped months of efforts by Kumaratunga to line up billions of dollars in international donor aid to rebuild the country after the December 26 tsunamis.

The worst natural disaster to hit the island left 31,000 dead and one million people initially homeless, with the rebel held northeast bearing the brunt of the devastation.

Kumaratunga is now expected to tackle opposition from her main coalition ally to the aid deal which analysts say will assure the rebels that the government is committed to rebuilding the country and pursuing peace talks.

"India supports it, the US and Europe supports it, the IMF and the World Bank and other lending agencies support it, so she can't retract now," said political analyst

Harry Gunatillake, a former air force chief.

"This is the best thing that can happen for the country."

The aid deal would bring the government and rebels into close cooperation on rebuilding, including from the decades of civil war that has left tens of thousands dead, and act as a spur to peace talks brokered by Norway that have been stalled since April 2003, a senior Asian diplomat said.

Gunatillake noted Kumaratunga was now in a position to ignore opposition from Buddhist monks and her coalition ally, the Marxist JVP, because of the overwhelming backing from others in parliament and the international community.

Press reports said the JVP had threatened to sit in the opposition if Kumaratunga went ahead with the deal, called a joint mechanism.

"This won't lead to the collapse of the government because the others (opposition parties) will have to support her given their commitment to the joint mechanism," Gunatillake said.

Meanwhile, unidentified gunmen shot dead two men in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo yesterday in killings that may be linked to factional fighting among Tamil rebels, a defence ministry spokesman said.

The victims were gunned down in Sunday morning, the spokesman said.

Swiss approve freer rein for EU travellers

AFP, Geneva

Swiss voters appeared yesterday to have narrowly backed the abolition of most border controls with their neighbours, with 52 percent in favour in a referendum, according to the national broadcaster's exit polls.

With results declared in 17 of Switzerland's 26 cantons -- or states -- the "yes" campaign had managed to fend off stiff opposition to the Schengen accord with EU nations Iceland and Norway, according to the Gfs Insite, which analyses referendums for the SSR-SRG broadcast network.

Full results were expected around 5:00 pm (1500 GMT).

A narrow win for the "yes" had been expected.

The last opinion poll, 12 days ago, showed 55 percent in favour, despite continued euroscepticism from Swiss voters.

Switzerland is not a member of the EU.

MUSHARRAF SAYS Quran desecration 'unpardonable'

AFP, Abu Dhabi/ Kabul

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf condemned Saturday the reported desecration of the Koran by US interrogators at the Guantanamo Bay detention centre in Cuba, saying it was "unpardonable".

"Our government believes that the most terrible act has taken place," Musharraf said.

"Whoever has done it must be punished. The incident must be investigated, and those responsible should be taken to task," he told reporters, during a two-day visit to the United Arab Emirates.

"It is unpardonable," he added. Pakistan's senate on Wednesday demanded an impartial international probe into the reported desecration, saying in a resolution adopted unanimously that "this

reprensible act of the sacrilege has hurt the sentiments of Muslims the world over."

Protests erupted in Pakistan, a key ally in the US-led war on terror, after a report in Newsweek magazine in early May said Guantanamo Bay interrogators threw a Koran in a toilet to rattle Muslim inmates.

The Pentagon, which wrapped up an investigation Saturday, said US military personnel at Guantanamo Bay once kicked the Koran, and a copy was sprayed with urine in another incident, but overall US soldiers at the camp handled the Islamic holy book with respect.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan regrets the desecration of the Quran at the US' Guantanamo Bay detention centre in Cuba and welcomes a US investigation into abuse of the Muslim holy book, the Afghan foreign minister said yesterday.



Indian opposition leader Lal Krishna Advani (R), along with his wife Kamla Advani (L), arrives to visit his birth place in Karachi yesterday. Advani said the peace process started between Pakistan and India will be irreversible if solving problems between the two rivals are pursued with optimism and determination.