

Top Democrat calls for closure of Guantanamo Bay prison

AFP, Washington

The top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee urged the Bush administration Sunday to close a terrorist prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, calling it more trouble than it was worth.

"I think we should end up shutting it down, moving those prisoners," Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware said as he appeared on ABC's "This Week" programme.

He said inmates who still have intelligence value should be moved to other locations, but the rest should be sent back to their home countries.

The detention centre at a US naval base in Guantanamo Bay was set up in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks for terrorism suspects captured in Afghan-istan and other parts of the world. About 550 detainees have been held there on average since the beginning of the war on terror.

Multi-party system takes effect in Maldives

Parties seek recognition

AFP, Colombo

Several political parties, including the self-exiled main opposition party, have applied for official recognition as the Maldives heads for multi-party democracy, officials said yesterday.

Maldives officials said that at least three political groups have come forward since the new multi-party system became operative Sunday following a landmark vote authorising new parties in the national parliament last week.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who has ruled the South Asian country since 1978, said the shift towards the party system was a "great achievement for the reform agenda".

Gayoom, as leader of the new Dhivehi Raiyithunge Party, or

Maldivian People's Party, also applied for recognition under the new setup, spokesman Mohamed Hussain Shareef said.

"Political parties are crucial to the effective functioning of a modern democracy and represent an indispensable mechanism for the people to exercise their rights," Gayoom was quoted as saying by Shareef.

The dissident Maldivian Democratic Party, which operates from neighbouring Sri Lanka, said it had started the process for official recognition.

"The (party) has now been able to complete the first stage of registering it as a political party," a spokesman in Colombo said, adding that they were yet to complete all the formalities.

Party leader Mohamed Nasheed, who had been living

abroad in self-imposed exile, returned home in April to start political activities ahead of obtaining recognition for his group.

Gayoom, 67, said in January that he expected the political reform process to be completed through the newly elected parliament this year so that the country could begin 2006 with a new constitution.

"I think within one year's time we should be able to complete the constitutional reform process... I am hoping that the Majlis (parliament) will be able to complete their work within one year," he said.

The nation's economy was badly hit following the December 26 tsunami that knocked out its tourism infrastructure. Most of the hotels are back in business, but the number of tourists visiting have fallen.

Hezbollah sweeps S Lebanon polls

AP, Beirut

Pro-Syrian Shia political parties swept parliamentary elections along Lebanon's southern border with Israel, a victory that poses a challenge to the growing opposition to Syria's longtime influence over Lebanon.

The militant group Hezbollah and its allies have won all 23 seats in south Lebanon, the Interior Minister said. Hezbollah hopes Sunday's victory will prove its strength and send a message of defiance to the Washington.

The United States considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization and has called for its disarmament in line with a UN Security Council resolution. Hezbollah has refused, backed by the Lebanese government, which argues that the militants are legitimately resisting Israel's alleged occupation of territory on the border.

Israel's foreign ministry expressed alarm about Hezbollah's strong showing in the region.

"If Hezbollah was only a political party, we in Israel wouldn't be as concerned as we are," said Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Reggev.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai Muslim residents gather near the destroyed electricity poles following a bomb blast in the troubled southern Yala province yesterday. Four people were shot dead by rebels while three policemen were injured in a bomb blast in the latest wave of violence in Thailand's troubled south.



PHOTO: AFP

The head of the pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) Yasin Malik (C) is carried by Pakistani supporters as he arrives with other leaders of the moderate faction of the main Indian Kashmiri separatist alliance, All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), to visit a monument in Lahore yesterday.

Pakistan for tripartite talks on Kashmir row

Pak minister plans to board bus

AP, AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's prime minister assured Muslim separatist leaders from Indian Kashmir on Sunday that his country wants Kashmiris involved in talks to settle the dispute over the Himalayan region.

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz spoke in a meeting with leaders from the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an alliance of political groups in Indian-controlled Kashmir that wants independence from India's rule.

"We are committed to a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute in line with the wishes and aspirations of the Kashmiri people," Aziz told reporters. "We have always said that there are three stake holders in the Kashmir issue the people of Kashmir, Pakistan and India."

The delegation of separatists arrived Thursday in Pakistan's portion of Kashmir on a historic bus that resumed service in April to link the two parts of Kashmir.

"We feel that the time has come when India and Pakistan have to move forward vis-a-vis the dispute on Kashmir and the people of Kashmir have to be a part of it to make this process a complete one

and successful one," Umar Farooq, head of the delegation, said at a news conference.

Pakistan and India both claim Kashmir in its entirety.

The two countries initiated steps more than a year ago to normalise relations and try to settle the Kashmir issue. The nuclear-armed neighbours have fought two wars over Kashmir since their independence from British rule in 1947.

Pakistan will accept a solution for Kashmir, which would be acceptable to all the three parties India, Pakistan and Kashmiris, Aziz said.

Meanwhile, Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Rashid said yesterday he plans to travel by bus to the Indian-held part of Kashmir, in the first visit of its kind by a senior Islamabad official.

Rashid, the government's public face in the Pakistani media, said he wanted to visit his ancestral home in the divided Himalayan region, from which his parents migrated after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947.

"I will file my application for a travel permit on Tuesday," the minister told AFP.

Violence erupts outside Al-Aqsa Mosque

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli police faced off against Palestinians throwing rocks at Jews outside Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque yesterday during Israel's annual celebration of its capture of all of Arab East Jerusalem 38 years ago.

Police, who hurled several stun grenades as they moved into the area known to Jews as Temple Mount and to Muslims as al-Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary), pulled away from the shrine about an hour later after calm was restored.

Jerusalem police spokesman Shmuel Ben-Ruby said Palestinians had thrown stones at groups of Jews visiting the compound on "Jerusalem Day," which marks Israel's takeover of East Jerusalem in the 1967 Middle East war.

Two Jews were slightly injured and one Palestinian was arrested, he added.

Israel Radio said local Muslim religious authorities had appealed to several hundred chanting Palestinians who faced off against police and waved green Islamic flags outside Al-Aqsa Mosque to avoid violence.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, commenting on the incident, told reporters in the West Bank that visits by right-wing Jews to the holy site, one of the most politically sensitive in Jerusalem, could have "dire circumstances."

Britain shelves plan for referendum

Fresh blow to EU constitution

AFP, London/ Brussels

Britain announced yesterday that it was shelving plans for a referendum on the EU constitution until its fate became clearer, driving another stake into the heart of the beleaguered treaty.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Tony Blair said the move would be announced by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw in a statement to parliament later yesterday.

It comes despite pleas by London's EU partners, notably France and Germany, to hold off, arguing it would bury the bloc's grand integration project after French and Dutch referendums last week which rejected the treaty.

The official told AFP the move was to allow Britain time to reflect on the fallout from those twin rejections.

"There is a need for a debate and obviously a need for certain European leaders to get together and talk about how we're going to take this forward," he said in a telephone interview.

European leaders are due to discuss the crisis at a June 16-17 summit in Brussels.

Blair's official spokesman told

reporters earlier that Blair was "not running away" from a referendum but it "does not make sense" to press ahead regardless of the "no" votes.

"If there is a constitution to vote on there will be a referendum in this country," he said.

"The position at the moment is that obviously, following the French and Dutch votes, there is an issue to be discussed at the European Council," he said, referring to the summit.

"Now given that, it does not make sense to proceed at this point, but that does not mean that we are withdrawing the possibility of British people voting if there is a constitution to vote on."

The spokesman insisted Britain was not pre-empting any decisions the summit may make. "What we are doing is reflecting the fact that we are in uncertain times," he said.

"In uncertain times you should not just give a knee-jerk response."

However, with analysts and some EU countries already saying the treaty is virtually dead in the water, putting plans for a referendum in Britain on the ice is seen as tantamount to signing its death certificate.