

Car bomb outside petrol queue kills 3 in Baquba

REUTERS, Baquba

A car bomb that targeted a long row of cars queuing outside an Iraqi petrol station killed at least three civilians and injured another in the city of Baquba on Wednesday, police said.

"We found three civilians' bodies torn completely apart," said Lieutenant-Colonel Thair al-Izzi.

Eyewitnesses said no security force personnel -- frequent targets of insurgent attacks -- had been near the car at the time of the blast, 65 km (40 miles) north of Baghdad.

"A man came and placed his car next to the queue of cars outside the station and then he got out and disappeared. A few minutes later the car exploded, I saw the inferno come toward me, so I took my son and ran," said Ahmed Ali, a motorist whose car was among three that were burned out in the blast.

Long queues at petrol stations are common in Iraq despite its vast oil reserves. Sanctions, war and the current violence have damaged production plants, leaving the country dependent on imports to meet needs for refined fuels.



US soldiers detain two men following a car bomb in the al-Sada region, 5kms from the northeastern city of Baquba, 60 kms from Baghdad yesterday. Three people were killed when a car bomb parked close to a gas station detonated. The car bomb is believed to have been targeting a passing US military convoy.

PHOTO: AFP

22 killed in Ethiopia clashes

Govt defends police action, blames opposition

AFP, Addis Ababa

At least 22 people were killed and more than 100 wounded in Addis Ababa Wednesday as Ethiopian police battled demonstrators protesting alleged fraud in last month's disputed elections for a third day, hospital sources told AFP.

Doctors at three hospitals in central Addis Ababa said 22 people had either been brought to their facilities dead or died shortly after arriving following clashes in the downtown area between security forces and protesters.

Eleven of the dead were at the Black Lion hospital where at least 100 injured people, many with gunshot wounds, crowded the emergency room, according to an AFP correspondent who saw the bodies.

The AFP correspondent said there were more than 40 injured people, most with gunshot wounds,

at Saint Paulus.

The dead and injured were caught in clashes between police and protesters in three downtown districts, particularly in the Mercato area where diplomatic sources said a bus had been set on fire.

Three people being treated for gunshot injuries sustained in the Mercato area at the Black Lion hospital denied having been involved in any demonstration.

"I was looking for my son, I opened the door and I was shot," said 39-year-old Ateneyesh Mamo, a mother of two with a wound to the pelvis.

"I'm very angry because I wasn't protesting, I wasn't doing anything, I was just looking for my seven-year-old son," she said. "I don't understand what happened."

The city administration said it had ordered security forces to deal severely with a rash of "hooliganism" linked to the demonstrations,

including the blocking of roads, housebreaking and "gatherings and protests."

The government defended the actions of security forces which they said were necessary to prevent hooligans from looting and destroying property and blamed the opposition for the violence.

Information Minister Berekat Simon said the government regretted any deaths but insisted the crackdown had been necessary to protect the population of Addis Ababa from opposition-inspired looting and crime.

He placed blame for the violence squarely on the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), which has been complaining of massive ruling party fraud in last month's disputed elections.

At least 19 dead, 86 hospitalised in China coal mine gas leak

AFP, Beijing

At least 19 miners died Wednesday, two remained missing and 86 were rushed to hospital after a gas leak at a coal mine in central China, state media reported.

The accident happened around 11am (0300 GMT) at the Zijiang coal mine in Loudi city, Hunan province, the Xinhua news agency said.

China Central Television reported that 19 bodies had been found and two workers were unaccounted for.

It said 86 miners were in hospital but gave no news on their condition.

A worker at the Zijiang Hospital told AFP the men who had been brought in were in various states of health.

"The people who have been sent to us, most have headaches or are vomiting," she said.

"Some have difficulty breathing."

A Hunan work safety bureau official told AFP that 224 miners were in the pit at the time while an official at the Zijiang Coal Mine Work Safety Bureau said the gas that leaked was likely methane.

Schroeder denies resignation rumours

AFP, Berlin

Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder found himself mired in resignation rumours Wednesday, forcing the German leader and his senior allies to rubbish reports that expose his fragility ahead of early elections.

Schroeder himself dismissed a rumour allegedly sourced to a top official in his ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD).

"I have no intention of commenting on the sort of rubbish which is put out by this or that person," he said late Tuesday.

The SPD official, speaking in the German press under cover of anonymity, said Schroeder was under pressure from within the party to make way for Franz Muentefering, the party's chairman.

Muentefering has led a recent campaign to try to re-engage the SPD with its traditional, working-class supporters by attacking what he sees as rampant capitalism.

Guantanamo "professional and humane"

Claims Rumsfeld

AFP, Stavanger

Visiting US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Wednesday defended the treatment of detainees at the Guantanamo prison as "professional and humane" and said Washington was not considering closing down the facility.

"I know of no one in the US government in the executive branch that is considering closing Guantanamo. It is unfortunately something that is necessary in the world we're living in," Rumsfeld told reporters.

"It's something the folks in charge of it are doing in a very

professional and humane way," he added.

Asked about Norwegian media reports that US aircrafts ferrying detainees to other countries had made stopovers in Norway, Rumsfeld said he had no such knowledge.

"Everything I know is that there isn't an ounce of connection between those aircraft and the department of defence to my knowledge," he said.

Media outlets worldwide have reported that the US Central Intelligence Agency has spirited terror suspects out of their country of residence to states suspected of

using torture, despite laws that ban the expulsion or extradition of individuals to countries where torture occurs.

While Rumsfeld insisted that the US Department of Defence had no knowledge of such so-called renditions, he said that "obviously you don't know what you don't know".

Rumsfeld made the comments at a press conference with Norwegian Defence Minister Kristin Krohn Devold where they signed a memorandum of understanding on continued prepositioning of US military supplies in NATO member Norway.

Advani refuses to budge

BJP in turmoil, top leaders meet to choose successor

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Leader of Opposition LK Advani on Wednesday once again ruled out taking back his resignation from the post of BJP President.

"I am thankful to my party colleagues, including Mr Vajpayee, who wanted me to reconsider my decision to resign from the post. My decision stays", said Advani, after meeting Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The meeting was to brief the Prime Minister on his visit to Pakistan that raised the hackles of the Sangh Parivar over his description of Pakistan's founder leader Mohammad Ali Jinnah as secular.

Advani had on Tuesday also made it clear that he would not take back his resignation.

Top leaders of India's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party was meeting last evening to consider the situation that has thrown the party in a turmoil.

The meeting of central office-bearers and parliamentary board of BJP is likely to go through the mandatory request to Advani to review his resignation.

As the entire political drama triggered by Advani's resignation was played out throughout the day on Tuesday, it became increasingly clear that he has been virtually isolated in the party over his reappraisal of Jinnah, the proponent of the two-nation theory, and not many leaders, including some of his own ardent supporters in BJP, came on record to his defence.

The only silver lining in the gath-

ering clouds over Advani's continuance as party chief was the backing he got from former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and key allies of BJP in the National Democratic Alliance spearheaded by the party.

Interestingly, there were several voices of dissent which went public against Advani's remarks made in Karachi last week. Senior BJP leader and former External Affairs and Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha, who is from a socialist and not RSS background, termed Advani's utterances as "unnecessary and avoidable" and demanded a complete overhaul of the party organization.

Fiery BJP leader Uma Bharti also went on record to say that Advani's views on Jinnah and Babri Masjid demolition were debatable although she did criticize the vitriolic attack mounted by VHP on the former Deputy Prime Minister.

By contrast, there was virtually no voice of support within the party which went public for Advani in the lower run of BJP leadership except that of former Delhi Chief Minister Sahib Singh Verma who is however a party lightweight.

Having quit as party chief, it now remains to be whether Advani also steps down as the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament.

With indications that Advani unlikely to retrace his step, there is speculation as to who will succeed him as party President.

Venkaiah Naidu is likely to officiate as the interim President while the names of former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Rajnath Singh, former

party chief Murlu Manohar Joshi, and Sushma Swaraj are doing the rounds in party circles to step into Advani's shoes.

The scale at present seems to be tilted in favour of Rajnath Singh, who is now one of the party general

secretaries, given that he is non-controversial, an articulate speaker, belongs to Thakur caste, could also fit in BJP's bid to woo back its support base among the upper castes, party sources said.



Indian opposition leader Lal Krishna Advani leaves Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's residence following a meeting in New Delhi yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP
German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder at a press conference yesterday.

Kashmiri separatists may drop referendum call

AFP, Islamabad

Indian Kashmiri separatist leaders indicated Wednesday they may abandon their 57-year stance on holding a referendum in the divided Himalayan region after meeting Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf.

Minwaiz Omar Farooq of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella group of some two dozen parties, said a solution could

emerge from outside a series of decades-old United Nations resolutions calling for a plebiscite.

Until now the separatists have always backed the resolutions, which were adopted from 1948 onwards, as the only acceptable path to end the bitter dispute over the scenic territory.

"It looks as if we are moving towards a negotiated settlement. We have to move from our traditional positions," Farooq told AFP

after a group of moderate separatists met Musharraf late Tuesday.

The Hurriyat leaders are making an unprecedented visit to the Pakistani side of the border as part of a peace process launched between Pakistan and India last year.

"We support the step by step strategy and we understand that a solution to the problem cannot be found in one go. We are very hopeful after meeting with Musharraf."

Nepal court overturns closure order of radio centre

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Supreme Court has overturned a government order to close a media centre in Kathmandu that supplies radio programming to community stations across the country, the centre said Wednesday.

The court Tuesday found that the closure order served on the Communication Corner by the Ministry for Information and Communications was illegal, the centre's chairman, Montessori Rajbhandari, told AFP.

The Communication Corner had petitioned the court to reverse the order, which was served on the centre on May 27 as part of an ongoing media crackdown following King

Gyanendra's power grab in February.

Rajbhandari said the court had ordered the government to allow the Communication Corner, which provides programming to 14 of the 50 private FM radio stations across the country, to continue working.

The king ordered a halt to all radio bulletins when he dismissed the government and seized power on February 1.

Since then the centre said it had been producing programming dealing with social issues such as health, community development and religion.

On Wednesday, police arrested 48 members of the Federation of Nepal Journalists for protesting the continued ban on new broadcasts.

"Unfreeze our money and we'll talk"

Iran's Rafsanjani tells US

AFP, Tehran

Iran will agree to renew dialogue with arch-foe Washington if it releases Iranian assets frozen since the Islamic revolution, presidential frontrunner Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was quoted as saying Wednesday.

"As I have said before, a goodwill gesture on the part of the United States would be for them to unblock our assets," the top Shiite cleric said in an interview with the hardline Jomhuri Islami newspaper.

"If such a gesture was made, we could enter into negotiations. This has been my position and I still think the same way," the 70-year-old Rafsanjani said.

Iran and the United States cut off

relations in 1980, a year after the revolution, and Iranian assets in the US were frozen. Rafsanjani has previously said the figure is at least eight billion dollars plus interest.

"The United States has still not responded. But if they do respond, I will speak to the guide (supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) and we can start to negotiate," Rafsanjani said.

The charismatic politician, who has already served as Iran's president from 1989 to 1997, is campaigning for a comeback on a platform of closer engagement with the international community and moving away from hardline revolutionary values.