

US secretly meets with Iraqi insurgents

Court grills Saddam aides

AP, London

US officials held secret talks in Iraq with the commanders of several Iraqi insurgent groups recently in an attempt to open a dialogue with them, a British newspaper reported yesterday.

The commanders "apparently came face to face" with four American officials during meetings on June 3 and June 13 at a summer villa near Balad, about 25 miles north of Baghdad, the Iraqi capital, according to The Sunday Times.

The Sunday Times said neither the Iraqi government nor US officials in Baghdad would confirm its report about the talks.

Military officials in Baghdad did not immediately respond to a request by The Associated Press for

comment on the Times article early Sunday morning.

The story, which quoted unidentified Iraqis whose groups were purportedly involved in the talks, said those at the first meeting included Ansar al-Sunnah Army, which has claimed responsibility for suicide bombings in Iraq and an attack that killed 22 people in the dining hall of a US base at Mosul last Christmas.

Two others were Jaish Mohammed, or Mohammed's Army, and the Islamic Army in Iraq, which in August reportedly killed Italian journalist Enzo Baldoni, the newspaper said.

One of the Americans at the talks introduced himself as a Pentagon representative and declared himself ready to "find ways of stopping the bloodshed on both sides and to

listen to demands and grievances," The Sunday Times said.

It said the official indicated that the results of the talks would be relayed to his superiors in Washington.

The US officials tried to gather information about the structure, leadership and operations of the insurgent groups, which irritated some members, who had been told the talks would consider their main demand, a timetable for the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, the report said.

The newspaper report follows accounts of indirect talks with the insurgents using Iraqi intermediaries.

A senior US official said earlier this month that American authorities have negotiated with key Sunni leaders, who are in turn talking with

insurgents and trying to persuade them to lay down their arms. The official, who did not give his name so as not to undercut the new government's authority, did not name the Sunni leaders engaged in dialogue.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi court charged with trying ousted leader Saddam Hussein and his top aides on Sunday released footage of six of his lieutenants being interrogated about alleged crimes against Kurds.

Among those questioned a week ago were two of Saddam's half-brothers Barzan and Watban Ibrahim Hassan al-Tikriti as well as the commander of the former paramilitary Quds Army, Iyad Fatah Khalifa, a statement from the Iraqi Special Tribunal said.



PHOTO: AFP

A nightingale cools off from a tap water in Islamabad yesterday. The blistering heatwave resulting in the highest temperature in more than a decade in Pakistan have killed at least 106 people across the country. Hundreds more have been left seriously ill from heat stroke and gastro-enteritis as the temperatures soar up to 50 degrees Celsius in some parts of the country.

US lawmakers see progress at Guantanamo

AP, Guantanamo Bay Naval Base

During a tour of the US prison for suspected terrorists on Saturday, House Republicans and Democrats, including one who has advocated closing the facility, said the United States has made progress in improving conditions and protecting detainees' rights.

The US lawmakers witnessed interrogations, toured cellblocks and ate the same lunch given to detainees on the first congressional visit to the prison for suspected terrorists since criticism of it intensified in the spring. A Senate delegation also was visiting this weekend.

"The Guantanamo we saw today is not the Guantanamo we heard about a few years ago," said Rep. Ellen Tauscher, D-Calif.

Still, lawmakers from both parties agree more still must be done to ensure an adequate legal process is in place to handle detainee cases. In the meantime, said Rep. Joe Schwarz, R-Mich., "I think they're doing the best they can to define due process here."

Maoists attack soldiers in Nepal: Several killed

AFP, Kathmandu

Scores of Maoist rebels attacked a large contingent of soldiers in the southwest of Nepal, causing several casualties in a day-long battle, a senior army officer said yesterday.

The rebels attacked on Saturday in the Arghakhanchi district, a Maoist stronghold 335km southwest of the capital, said the army officer, who declined to be identified.

"The clashes began early Saturday and lasted until the evening," he said, without being able to provide details. "We are waiting for detailed reports."

The officer declined to comment on a The Nepali newspaper report that several soldiers and rebels were killed in the attack.

There was no immediate rebel comment.

In an attack reported on Saturday, at least two rebels and a soldier were killed on Friday when hundreds of Maoists stormed an army checkpoint also in the southwest of the country.

The army launched an air and land counter-attack near the Royal Bardiyia National Park, 535km southwest of Kathmandu, an army spokesman said.



PHOTO: AFP

Iran's president-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (L) is greeted by Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of late revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, as he paid a visit to the Khomeini's tomb on the southern part of Tehran yesterday.

TENSION WITH WEST TO REMAIN HIGH Ahmadinejad will harden policies

REUTERS, Tehran

President-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election victory completes a conservative grip on Iran's main levers of power that will likely lead to greater tension with the West and a more isolationist economic policy.

But a tougher Iranian stance on its controversial nuclear program and other issues will emerge only slowly through Iran's system of clerical rule that gives Supreme Leader Ali Ayatollah Khamenei the final say in state affairs, analysts say.

And they say the latest conservative victory will expose internal rifts in the conservative camp and may encourage more political pragmatism because they no longer have reformists under outgoing President Mohammad Khatami to blame for failures.

Ahmadinejad, who swept to victory in Friday's presidential vote over moderate cleric Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, takes over in August from Khatami,

whose own policies of political reforms and detente with the West were ambushed by hardline bodies.

"Over time, we will see a hardening of the (Iran's) position. It will not be immediate," said Iranian analyst Mahmoud Alinejad, adding it would involve a more chauvinistic foreign policy and a focus on domestic, not foreign, investment.

"It will be a policy that has the danger of confrontation although there are pragmatic people who might try to prevent that," he said, adding that Ahmadinejad had won over Iran's religious poor by presenting himself as an outsider.

Ahmadinejad's victory was the latest by a new breed of hardline politicians, many of them former Revolutionary Guardsmen, who won local council and parliamentary elections in 2003 and 2004 amid disillusionment with the slow pace of change and frustration among the poor that their lot had not improved.

India issues flood alert in Himachal

Thousands evacuated after breach in Tibet lake

AFP, Shimla

Thousands of people were evacuated Sunday in India's northern Himachal Pradesh state after a breach in an artificial lake in neighbouring Tibet threatened downstream villages, officials said.

A flood warning was issued as the level of the Parechu river, which flows from China's Tibet to India, rose 40 to 50 feet (12-15 metres) after an artificial lake formed by a landslide breached its banks, said Amandeep Garg, a senior official in the Himachal Pradesh state government.

Indian officials evacuated residents in the Sutlej river valley, 400 kilometres (250 miles) north of the state capital Shimla, as a precaution, Garg said.

No injuries have been reported

but Garg said three makeshift bridges were destroyed on Sutlej tributaries north of the town of Kalpa, the start of the Sutlej river valley in Himachal Pradesh.

By late Sunday the waters had reached the town of Rampur in the Sutlej river valley and flooded low-lying areas which had already been evacuated, a state official said.

"We have informed the Indian home ministry, just in case there is a further rise in the waters of the Sutlej and the army's help is needed," said Surjit Singh Parmar, the top official in the Himachal Pradesh state government.

India's federal cabinet held a meeting and put 30 air force helicopters on alert for any emergency rescue, according to a television report.

In August last year China warned

that the lake in Tibet's Ali prefecture could burst through the landslide debris and release a torrent of water. The threat was averted as the lake froze in the winter.

"Although the river level will drop gradually downstream, we are taking no chances and have asked people to evacuate their homes in places close to the river banks," Garg said.

He said the sluice gates to the 1,500 megawatt Nathpa hydro power project downstream on the Sutlej had been partially opened to ease water pressure on the embankments.

Floods along the Sutlej killed nearly 150 people and left a trail of destruction five years ago.

Israel bows to US over arms exports

Arms deal with China cancelled

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel has bowed to US pressure to cancel an arms deal with China and will impose tighter controls on its weapons exports in general, Israel's Haaretz newspaper reported on Sunday.

The dispute with the United States centres on Israel's sale of Harpy attack drones and other advanced technology to China which the Pentagon fears could tilt the balance of power and make it difficult to defend Taiwan.

Agreeing to US demands, Israel will not return Harpy spare parts that China sent to their Israeli manufacturer for upgrading, Haaretz said.

Israel, the newspaper said, also accepted a US demand to implement the 34-nation Wassenaar Arrangement on export controls for conventional arms and dual-use goods and technologies.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz made the decisions ahead of a visit this week to Washington by an

Israeli delegation that will negotiate a memorandum of understanding on Israeli weapons exports, Haaretz reported.

Israeli officials were not immediately available to comment on the report.

Last week, Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom publicly apologised to Washington over arms exports to China, saying "things were done that were not acceptable to the Americans" and insisting Israel had not meant to harm US interests.

Meanwhile, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark restored diplomatic relations with Israel yesterday immediately after accepting an official apology for the activities of two Israelis caught spying here 15 months ago.

In a brief letter dated June 26, Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom expressed regret about the activities of two alleged Mossad agents arrested in March 2004 and charged with trying to fraudulently obtain New Zealand passports.

Lankan Muslim party threatens to quit govt

AFP, Colombo

A key Muslim party threatened yesterday to resign from the Sri Lankan government over a controversial tsunami aid-sharing deal with Tamil Tiger rebels.

The National Unity Alliance, a member of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's ruling coalition, said it will quit in two days unless she drops a deal clinched with the Tigers on Friday to distribute billions of dollars in tsunami aid from international donors.

"We have decided to give the government 48 hours' notice and thereafter we will leave," deputy leader M.L.M. Hizbullah said, adding that as a first step he quit the politically-appointed post of chief of airports.

Following the withdrawal of support by Marxist allies earlier this month, Kumaratunga lost a majority in parliament.

However, the main opposition United National Party has said it will support the government to ensure implementation of the aid-sharing pact with Tamil rebels, who waged a 30-year conflict with the government until a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire in February 2002.

There was no immediate reac-

tion Sunday from the government to the resignation threat.

Hizbullah said the concerns of Muslims, the country's second largest minority after the Tamils, had been ignored and they lacked sufficient representation in the aid deal.

Muslims account for about 7.5 percent of the country's 19.5 million population. The majority Sinhalese represent 70 percent while the rest are ethnic Tamils.

The government and Tamil Tiger rebels ended months of secret negotiations by sealing a deal Friday to jointly distribute foreign aid in guerrilla-held areas, but the arrangement sparked protests.

Six months after giant waves destroyed much of the island's coastal infrastructure, killing 311,000 people and initially leaving a million homeless, the authorities have yet to name members to run the joint mechanism inked Friday.

Donors have pledged three billion dollars to rebuild Sri Lanka, twice the amount the government says it needs. But only a fraction of this has been received because of the delay in setting up the joint mechanism.



PHOTO: AFP

Chief Minister of West Bengal Buddhadeb Bhattacharya (R) greets Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2-R) and his wife Gursharan Kaur (L) at the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport in Kolkata yesterday. Singh was on a day-long private visit to attend the 'Chaucha' (funeral) ceremony of his brother-in-law Rajinder Singh who died recently.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents row boats along a flooded street in Wuzhou, southwestern China's Guangxi region Saturday, one of the worst-hit areas in this year's flood season. Workers erected flood control barriers and disinfected towns and villages against water-borne diseases as China braced for more rain after deluges that left more than 730 people dead or missing.

Jordan slaps ban on Saddam's new novel

REUTERS, Amman

Jordan has banned Saddam Hussein's new novel on the grounds the tale of an Arab tribesman who defeats a foreign intruder could hurt relations between the two countries, censors and the publisher said yesterday.

"Get out of here, curse you!" believed to have been penned by the ousted Iraqi leader before the US-led war, was set to be released in Jordan and other Arab countries on Thursday by a Jordanian company with the permission of Saddam's family.

"Publishing this novel will harm the Iraqi-Jordanian relationship and we are keen to have the best relations with Iraq. Jordan will not approve its publication. If they want to publish it they have to do it abroad," Ahmad al-Qudah, head of the government's Press and Publication Department, told Reuters.

US may offer India advanced weapons

PTI, New Delhi

Ahead of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Washington, the US has indicated its interest for cooperation with India in advanced weaponry and missile defence.

This was reinforced during talks visiting US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns had with Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and senior officials here this week.

Bilateral security cooperation is expected to be one of the key areas for discussions Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee will have with his American counterpart Donald Rumsfeld during his ongoing visit to the US.

He is also meeting Vice President Dick Cheney and National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley. Before leaving for Washington, Mukherjee has made it clear that he was not carrying any shopping list of defence hardware and his visit, the first by an Indian

Defence Minister to the US after a long gap, was exploratory in nature.

The US offer to supply to India F-16 warplanes is being debated in the Government here. The Defence Ministry is carrying out technical evaluation of the fighter aircraft but no decision has been taken so far to buy it.

While UN Security Council reforms is one of the important issues that will undoubtedly figure during the parleys Singh will have with President George W Bush, both American and Indian officials have contended that Indo-US relationship should not be viewed on the basis of any single issue.

Burns had struck positive chords saying India has the perfect right and met the criteria for permanent membership of the Security Council like being a large country with significant population, being democratic, giving substantial resources to the UN system, adhering to non-proliferation and counter-terrorism.

Witnesses at anti-war tribunal slam US HR abuses in Iraq

AFP, Istanbul

The World Tribunal on Iraq (WTI), an anti-war grouping of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), intellectuals and writers, Saturday heard witnesses condemn the United States for rights abuses and the worsening plight of Iraqi women.

A former US Air Force pilot called on US troops in Iraq to "resist" the orders of their superior officers in an "illegal war".

"Today Iraq has been turned into a vast prison," lawyer Amal Sawadi told the hearing.

"They come to people's houses in the middle of the night, when everyone is asleep, blow in the door. They point their weapons in people's faces... they search women in front of their families, they smash everything in the house."

She said lawyers had problems getting news of their imprisoned clients and spoke of rapes and humiliations which amounted to the "systematic practice of torture."

The only journalist present in the city of Fallujah when it was attacked in April and November 2004 said the assault on it amounted to "genocide".

Fadhil Al Bedrani, of the Al-Jazeera network, told how a 70-year-old man died for lack of medical supplies and of the stench of rotting bodies "abandoned in the streets and eaten by animals."

The plight of Iraqi women has worsened badly since the occupation, Hana Ibrahim, an Iraqi feminist said.

"From the day the occupation started there have been systematic violations of women's rights."