



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) greets United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Chairperson and Congress Party President, Sonia Gandhi (L) and his cabinet ministers at his residence in New Delhi yesterday before his departure to France and New York.

## Iraq closes Syria border

REUTERS, Tal Afar

Iraq's government said it launched thousands of troops against rebels in the city of Tal Afar on Saturday and ordered the nearby border with Syria closed to stem what Baghdad calls an influx of foreign fighters.

Keen to show off the muscle of their US-trained forces, ministers said other towns were in the line of fire and state television ran repetitive footage from recent days in Tal Afar of Iraqi soldiers hunting and detaining men described as rebels.

Residents reported US air strikes overnight, gunfire and an encirclement of US armour in parts of the town as

Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari announced an offensive had begun.

"At 2 a.m. today (2200 GMT), acting on my orders, Iraqi forces commenced an operation to remove all remaining terrorist elements from the city of Tal Afar," he said in a statement.

Later in the day, a dust storm hindered the offensive, US officers in Tal Afar said. State television ran fresh footage, however, of more arrests and soldiers moving through a town that US troops have seized in the past before withdrawing again.

Jaafari said the troops were responding to appeals for help from "all the different religious and ethnic

elements in Tal Afar." The town, west of the northern city of Mosul and near the Syrian border, is mostly populated by ethnic Turkmen.

Civilians had been taken out of the town in recent days as military operations were stepped up, officials said.

US and Iraqi forces have long said Tal Afar was being used as a conduit for equipment and foreign Sunni Arab fighters smuggled in from Syria to fight the Shia and Kurdish-led Iraqi government and occupying US forces across the country.

## Manmohan may ink sub deal with France

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday left for a two-nation tour, which will take him to Paris, where he seeks to bolster nuclear and defence ties with France, and in New York he will hold a meeting with Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf.

In a departure statement to the media, Singh said his visit to Paris was aimed at strengthening India's strategic partnership with France and expanding bilateral ties in trade, space, defence, nuclear, science and technology, civil aviation and culture.

Singh will have talks with French President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique Villepin today covering a wide range of bilateral and international issues.

The two countries are likely to sign a multi-billion dollar deal for

France's supply of submarines to India, which has been hanging for some time now.

From India's point of view, France is a key European Union ally as Paris has been supportive of India's increasingly important role to global affairs and willing to allow access to high technology in various fields including nuclear cooperation.

In New York, the Indian prime minister said he would meet US President George W Bush, Pak President Pervez Musharraf, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Hu Jintao and an array of other prominent world leaders besides addressing the UN general assembly.

Singh's meeting with Bush will serve as an opportunity to be a follow-up discussion of the meeting between them in Washington this July when India and the United States signed a landmark deal to

cooperate in civilian nuclear energy sector.

The deal virtually ended India's nuclear apartheid status imposed following the 1998 testing of nuclear devices and paved the way for similar cooperation between India and other Western countries.

Last week, at the European Union and India summit here, British Prime Minister and current EU Council President Tony Blair invited India to join Europe's International Thermonuclear Reactor programme.

The spotlight, of course, would be on Singh's meeting with Musharraf on September 14, their second in five months. The two leaders had met in Delhi in April when the Pakistan president had come here to watch a one-day cricket match between India and Pakistan.

## Musharraf to confront image issues in US

REUTERS, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf left for New York yesterday with a mission to counter criticism of Pakistan's record on women's rights, to improve Muslim-Jewish relations and to boost a flagging peace process with India.

Like many other leaders congregating there for the UN General Assembly days after the fourth anniversary of al-Qaeda's September 11 attacks on the United States, Musharraf can also be expected to deliver a strong message on the war on terrorism.

The Pakistani leader, who has survived several al-Qaeda-inspired assassination attempts since becoming one of Washington's principle allies in the Islamic world, has still to win over US media, which often says his actions don't match his words.

When not questioning how known militant groups have survived repeated crackdowns, Western media raise doubts about

Musharraf's commitment to developing democracy, or focus on rape cases to depict violence against women in Pakistan.

"I believe demonstrations have been planned by human rights groups who are far more annoyed at the human rights situation in Pakistan than General Musharraf," said Samina Ahmed of the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

"We will see how far he addresses these concerns."

Before setting off, Musharraf itemized these issues, telling reporters: "I would like to achieve many things, basically covering whatever negatives there are on Pakistan, and to project Pakistan in a strong way."

His schedule in the United States shows his intentions.

On September 17 he is due to address the American Jewish Congress and an audience of Pakistani American women at Columbia University.

## UN summit gets only scaled-down reforms

AFP, United Nations

More than 170 leaders gather here from Wednesday for the largest summit ever to review a scaled-down version of UN chief Kofi Annan's ambitious plan to reform the 60-year-old world body.

Amid predictions of failure after six months of wrangling over a 39-page reform document, the leaders were to debate a slimmed-down text with many compromises over the competing interests of rich and poor nations.

The two sides will seek during the September 14-16 summit to paper over differences on fighting terrorism and global poverty while promoting human rights and preventing Rwanda-like genocides.

Gabon's Jean Ping, the president of the current General

Assembly, has been leading crisis talks by a 33-member core group of member states to settle contentious issues.

The centrepiece of Annan's reform package to make the UN better able to meet 21st-century challenges – a proposed enlargement of the UN Security Council – has been shelved in the face of stiff opposition from the United States and China and disagreement among other countries.

So at Washington's suggestion, member states were haggling over seven issues: development, terrorism, disarmament and non-proliferation, genocide prevention, UN management reform and setting up a revamped, and more effective Human Rights Council and a peace-building commission.