

Bush warns Syria over Lebanon, Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

President George W. Bush declined to comment on the suicide on Wednesday of a Syrian government minister who had been questioned by a UN probe about the assassination of a former Lebanese prime minister, but said Syria is still too involved in Lebanon.

Bush also repeated US warnings that Syria must stop foreign fighters from crossing its border into Iraq.

Syrian Interior Minister Ghazi Kanaan killed himself in his office just three weeks after he was questioned by a UN team investigating the assassination in February of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiqal-Hariri.

The UN team, led by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, is

expected to submit its report on October 21.

"I don't want to prejudge the report that's coming out -- the Mehlis report," Bush told reporters when asked about Kanaan's death and its implications for the investigation into Hariri's assassination.

But he added, "It's one thing to have been asked to remove troops and all intelligence services. Now the world wants for -- expects -- Syria to honour the democracy in the country of Lebanon."

Shortly before news of Kanaan's suicide broke, President Bashar al-Assad told CNN Syria was not involved in Hariri's death and that he could never have ordered it.

If the UN probe concludes Syrians were involved, those people would be regarded as traitors who

would be charged with treason and face either an international court or the Syrian judicial process, CNN quoted Assad as saying.

US State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said it would be up to Syrian officials to make assessments about the circumstances of Kanaan's death.

"We don't know what Mr. Mehlis' findings are or what his conclusions, which have not yet been written, will be," Ereli told a briefing.

"So I wouldn't make, frankly, any connections between this event and the Mehlis report and what the Mehlis report might say, other than to note that Mr. Kanaan was a central figure in Syria's occupation of Lebanon for many years."

Bush's remarks, during a meeting with visiting Polish President

Aleksander Kwasniewski, followed warnings to Syria by Zalmay Khalilzad, the US ambassador to Baghdad, who said last month "patience is running out with Syria" for failing to stop foreign fighters from crossing into Iraq.

"We expect Syria to do everything in her power to shut down the transshipment of suiciders and killers into Iraq," Bush said. "We expect Syria to be a good neighbour to Iraq. We expect Syria not to agitate killers in the Palestinian territories."

Syria has blamed the United States for the infiltration of insurgents into Iraq, saying Washington failed to secure the border or deliver technical help that it had promised.



PHOTO: AFP

A TV grab from Russian NTV channel taken yesterday shows Russian soldiers guarding an special operation area in the southern city of Nalchik. Russian President Vladimir Putin has ordered the southern city of Nalchik to be sealed off and has issued shoot-to-kill orders for any person who puts up armed resistance to law enforcement personnel there, a senior Russian official said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (L) puts Tilak (colour spots) to men dressed as Lord Rama and Laxman during a function marking the last day of the Hindu festival of Dussehra in New Delhi Wednesday. The annual festival of Dussehra celebrates the victory of the mythological Hindu warrior King Rama over the evil symbolised by the demon Ravana.

Iraq shuts down as early voting starts

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq prepared to seal itself off from the outside world and clamp down on movement around the country to ward off threats from insurgents bent on wrecking Saturday's referendum on a new constitution.

Announcing the measures on Thursday, as the first Iraqis cast early ballots in hospitals and prisons, Interior Minister Bayan Jabbar said frontiers would be closed from midnight until Sunday. Businesses were closed for a four-day public holiday and private vehicles will be banned from Friday night.

An explosion damaged the offices of a Sunni Arab political group in the restive city of Falluja, west of Baghdad, after the Iraqi Islamic Party broke ranks

on Wednesday and agreed to back the constitution as part of a US-brokered deal to foster national unity and curb sectarian and ethnic feuding.

A White House spokesman greeted the deal as "positive" and said it would encourage more Iraqis to participate in politics. Washington is keen to see a strong government in Baghdad that can defend itself and allow American troops to start leaving.

At Baghdad's Yarmouk hospital, often the theatre for the human misery left by guerrilla attacks in the capital, doctors as well as patients were able to vote on Thursday at a polling station set up in the building, one of some 6,000 across Iraq.

"There's been high turnout. People feel good about this new

change and about the deal the political parties reached. God willing the voting will go well," said one member of staff, who gave his name simply as Hussein, after casting his ballot.

Thousands of detainees, including guerrilla suspects held without charge in Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere, also had the chance to vote on Thursday, although officials are coy on whether this also applies to former president Saddam Hussein, who faces trial next week for crimes against humanity.

A spokesman for the tribunal confirmed the trial would open on Wednesday and said prosecutors had yet to determine whether they would demand the death penalty, as many Iraqis want.

Most Britons want troops out of Iraq

AFP, London

Almost a third of Britons think the country's troops should leave Iraq immediately, according to a poll published late Wednesday.

In the survey conducted for BBC television's "Newsnight" programme, 31 percent said the 8,000 or so British troops should leave now, which is below the 40 percent who believed they should remain until Iraqi security forces are ready to take over.

A further 23 percent said that while the soldiers should not be shipped out straight away, a firm date for their departure should be set, something not yet done by the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Overall, just 33 percent thought Blair's decision to back the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was a good idea, against 57 percent who believed it was "the wrong thing to do".

Almost three-quarters -- 73 percent -- thought the Iraq war had made terrorist attacks in Britain more likely, compared to 22 percent who said it made no difference and just two percent who said it made terrorism in Britain less likely.

Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw has predicted Iraq is likely to take up to a decade to become a stable democracy.

Speaking on a BBC television programme broadcast late Wednesday, Straw added that this estimate was in fact "optimistic", given the experience of other countries after wars or similar momentous changes.

Asked on the "Newsnight" programme when he expected Iraq to be a stable democracy, Straw said: "I am optimistic about Iraq. I think in five to 10 years we will see it becoming stable."

LANKAN ELECTION Opposition calls for foreign monitors

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition called yesterday for international observers to monitor next month's presidential election amid fears of violence.

Opposition leader and candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe said he wanted foreign monitors to be deployed ahead of the November 17 election.

"We welcome international observers and local organisations too to monitor the election," Wickremesinghe told reporters. "I have also asked the president (Chandrika Kumaratunga) to ensure a free and fair election."

Sri Lanka has a history of violent elections at which candidates have been killed and party supporters have attacked each other.

Elections chief Dayananda Dissanayake announced last month that he would allow full access to poll monitors, but there has been no formal word on foreign monitoring for the campaign as well as the vote.

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and Wickremesinghe are the main contenders for the presidency among a total of 11 candidates.

Meanwhile, two school principals were shot dead Wednesday in northern Sri Lanka in what appeared to be tit-for-tat attacks in worsening guerrilla factional fighting, defence officials said.

The head of the Jaffna Central College, K. Rajadurai was shot dead by suspected Tamil Tiger gunmen in the Jaffna peninsula Wednesday, the defence ministry said in a statement.

Press slams new UK anti-terror laws

AFP, London

Many newspapers slammed proposed new anti-terrorism laws, condemning a plan to let terror suspects be detained without trial for up to 90 days as an affront to ancient liberties.

Prime Minister Tony Blair, speaking to parliament before the Terrorism Bill was released on Wednesday, said the arguments made by police for extending the maximum detention period from the current 14 days were "absolutely compelling".

However, a series of newspapers rejected this, saying that even the bloody July 7 London bombings in which 56 people died, including four British Muslim men presumed to be the suicide attackers, did not justify the erosion of such freedoms.

The Daily Telegraph said it would

"strongly dispute the need for the new law, whether the police want it or not".

"It offends our love of freedom that anybody in Britain should be held for three months without trial," the paper said in an editorial.

The proposal "subverts one of the central pillars of a civilised society -- that people cannot be detained without charge," the Daily Mail newspaper argued.

Some new powers were needed it said, adding: "Yet in giving the police powers to detain suspects for 90 days without charge, the government is in danger of creating a whole new wave of political martyrs."

Three months was "too long" and likely to be counter-productive, The Guardian said, pointing out the fact that of 895 people arrested under terrorism laws in the past five years,

around 500 were released without charge.

"Nothing is more likely to unite communities in opposition to anti-terrorist operations than this kind of law," the paper said.

Most outspoken was the left-of-centre Independent, which ran the banner headline "90 Days" over a mock-up photograph of 90 lines scratched into the brick wall of a prison cell.

"The result of giving police such a power would be that suspects (most likely young Muslims) would 'disappear' for months," it said.

Other aspects of the planned law, such as proposals to outlaw the encouragement and glorification of terrorism were "dangerously vague", the paper said.



PHOTO: AFP

Communist Party of India (CPI) General Secretary, A.B. Bardhan (R) holds up a joint statement as Forward Block senior leader Debabrata Biswas (L) looks on during a meeting of Left Parties in New Delhi yesterday. The Left Parties declared they would resume their participation in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) - Left Coordination Committee.