

Iraq hints at dialogue with insurgents

Car bombings kill 16 in Baghdad

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Some Iraqi rebel groups say they are ready to engage in the political process, a top aide to President Jalal Talabani said yesterday, after the government warned of a renewed offensive against insurgents.

"We have received calls from people who said they belonged to armed groups," Talabani's national security advisor Lieutenant-General Wafeeq al-Sammarai told AFP, adding that the callers "said they were ready to join the political process."

They included Islamists and Baathists from the now banned party of deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein,

said Sammarai, who was the head of Iraqi military intelligence in the 1991 Gulf War.

At a meeting of Iraqi political leaders in Cairo last weekend, Talabani said he was prepared to talk to rebels in a bid to end the deadly insurgency that has gripped the country since Saddam's downfall in 2003.

"If those who describe themselves as the Iraqi resistance want to get in touch with me, they are welcome to do so," Talabani said.

The Cairo meeting was held to pave the ground for a reconciliation conference next year in Baghdad and to encourage minority Sunni Arabs, seen as backing the insurgency, to join the

political process instead.

Sammarai gave no further details on which rebel groups might have been in touch, or how much of a following they might have within the insurgency which US forces described as multi-faceted.

In violence on Saturday, a suicide bomber drove his pickup truck into a crowded gas station north of Baghdad yesterday and killed 12 people while a second car bomb targeting a convoy of foreigners killed four others in the capital, police said.

In central Baghdad, a parked car bomb detonated when two armoured cars carrying foreigners drove by, killing four Iraqi civilians, Lt. Thaer Mahmoud

said. No one in the convoy was injured, but one of the armoured cars was damaged and removed by US forces, Mahmoud said. The foreigners were not immediately identified, but none of them were injured, he added.

More than 250 people have been killed since Nov. 18 in car bombings and suicide attacks against Shia targets.

US officials hope that a big Sunni turnout will encourage members of the community to turn away from the insurgency, hastening the day when American and other international troops can go home. Sunnis form about 20 percent of Iraq's 27 million people but are the backbone of the insurgency.



PHOTO: AP

Local resident Lei Wanlian cries after her daughter died in the earthquake in Xixinqiao village, Jiujiang county of east China's Jiangxi Province yesterday. A magnitude 5.7 earthquake shook parts of central China Saturday, killing at least 14 people and injuring 377.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers watch as a navy helicopter hovers over the scene after an accident involving two passenger buses at Ramanathapuram, some 600km south of Chennai yesterday. More than 110 people were feared dead after two packed passenger buses skidded off bridges in southern India amid heavy rains.

110 feared dead as 2 buses washed away by floods in India

AFP, New Delhi

More than 110 people were feared dead after two packed passenger buses skidded off bridges in southern India amid heavy rains, police and officials said yesterday.

The bridges had been swamped by water due to the worst rains in years, which have turned some parts of the state of Tamil Nadu into lakes.

Television footage showed one bus upended in a fast-flowing river.

A police spokesman at the scene of one of the accidents near the town of Pattukottai in remote Thanjavur district said at least 49 people died when a bus plunged into a canal.

"Of the 49 bodies recovered there are two bodies which are not identified. The rest have been handed over to the relatives," the spokesman said.

"Bodies are being recovered as far as 15 kilometres (nine miles) from the

spot where the bus was washed away," he said.

Crowds of frantic relatives and friends stood on riverbanks watching as police and fire rescue teams searched for more bodies.

"It's hard to estimate the number of people who were in the bus. Eighty people is only a fair estimate," he added. He had no figures on the number of survivors.

A police official said that 63 people drowned at the site of a second accident in Ramanathapuram district's Sanavelli area, where a bus was washed away by flood waters from the swollen Sirugani river.

"The bus was caught on the road by the flood waters. Sixty-three passengers died and 22 were rescued by the police and public," M. Alagu, inspector of police special branch, told AFP from the site.

Lawyers vow to defend Saddam despite threats

AFP, Amman

Lawyers for Saddam Hussein say they are determined to defend the ousted Iraqi leader in court when his trial resumes tomorrow, despite the murder of two colleagues and repeated threats to their lives.

The Amman-based defence team said Saddam's Iraqi counsel would turn up in court, ending a protest boycott of its proceedings, for fear that judges would otherwise appoint a duty attorney to represent him.

"We will never abandon the president (Saddam) and we will not give the court the opportunity to appoint a lawyer to defend him," said team spokesman Issam Ghazzawi.

Lead counsel "Khalil al-Dulaimi will be in court on Monday although we have not received any security guarantees until now," Ghazzawi told AFP.

UK Muslims take up action plan to tackle extremism

ANSAR AHMED ULLAH, from London

Separate working groups of British Muslim community have put forward several practical proposals recently to the government for a community-led response to extremism.

Following the London bombings in July, the British Home Secretary set up seven working groups to look into issues for better integration of minority youths with the mainstream to tackle the extremist elements in the British Muslim community.

The proposals were made from the final reports of the seven 'Preventing Extremism Together' Working Groups, which took the first step of practical actions for long-term partnership between the UK government and British Muslim communities.

Responding to the proposals,

Home Office Minister Hazel Blears said at a press briefing on November 10, "This report represents real progress and a unique achievement given the challenge set and the time available. Working group members came together from a wide variety of backgrounds and traditions to contribute to the reports with their views. Their input has been invaluable and we will continue to support and consult informally with them as their proposals are put into practice".

"This process started in the summer when Paul Goggins and I met with more than 1,000 people during community exchanges across the country. The working groups have taken up the issues raised during this consultation and turned them into an ambitious set of concrete proposals", Blears said.

Tigers honour dead amid renewed fears of war

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday honoured 17,000 "heroes" killed in the movement's drive for independence amid fears of a return to ethnic civil war on the tropical South Asian island.

The Tigers offered flowers and lit coconut oil lamps in front of photographs of the dead guerrillas during Heroes' Week celebrations, which were due to conclude Sunday with a key speech by rebel leader Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they were holding religious services in rebel-held territory as part of the memorial ceremonies.

The annual commemorations are held on the anniversary of the 1982 death of the first Tiger militant killed by Sri Lankan troops -- a rebel known as Shankar.

Prabhakaran, who turned 51 on

Saturday, was to deliver a policy speech that will be closely watched by the Sri Lankan government and diplomats seeking direction in the island's troubled Norwegian-backed peace process.

Diplomats close to the peace drive said they expected Prabhakaran to respond to new President Mahinda Rajapakse's call for the launch of a fresh peace process and "revision" of the tenuous truce in place since 2002.

"Prabhakaran's speech will be more important than anything else at this time," said former air force chief Harry Gunatillake. "We can expect a hardening of his stance and I fear he may signal a drift towards hostilities."

In signs of a hardening tone, the pro-Tamil website quoted LTTE intelligence chief Pottu Amman as praising the rebels' "military feats" during Heroes' Week events and saying the sacrifices of the dead must lead to "sovereignty".

"The Tamil nation gained unprecedented strength through our military feats in the series of battles in (the rebel-held northern region of) Vanni against Sri Lankan armed forces who were intent on annihilating us," he said. "The sacrifices of the 17,000 martyrs will be worth it only when we are victorious in achieving unfettered sovereignty," he added.

Rajapakse, in his first policy speech to parliament since his election win earlier this month, said he would not tolerate "terrorism" and the recruitment of child soldiers.

The remarks were seen by analysts as a direct reference to the Tigers' record of violence and recruiting underage combatants.

Pakistan, UK worried about terror links

AFP, Valletta

Britain and Pakistan have gained a clearer and worrying picture of terrorist links between them since the July 7 bombings in London, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said yesterday.

During a briefing with reporters on the sidelines of the Commonwealth summit in Malta, Blair confirmed that the British and Pakistani governments were exchanging information on suspected militants travelling between both countries.

When asked by AFP if there was a list of Britons meeting militant groups in Pakistan, and whether any of the four presumed London bombers were on it, Blair replied: "I'd better refer you to the police for any details of this."

But he added that he and his Pakistani counterpart Shaukat Aziz devoted "a major part" of their conversation on Friday to counter-terrorism, and "we're working very closely with the Pakistani government on this."

"And obviously one of the things we're trying to do is to identify whether

there are British people who have gone to Pakistan or Pakistanis who have come to Britain that have links with these terrorist organizations," Blair said.

For the "numbers, and the details in relation to these four, I think I'd better refer you to them (the police). It obviously is a serious worry for both of us," Blair added, speaking in a lounge of a highly-secured seafront hotel complex.

"What's interesting is the degree of cooperation we're getting from Pakistan is very great," the prime minister said.

When asked if British intelligence was gaining a more accurate picture of the terrorism ties, he replied: "Yes, we are."

On July 7, four presumed Islamic militant suicide bombers killed 56 people, including themselves, when they detonated bombs on three London subway trains and a bus, the worst terror attack in Britain.



PHOTO: AFP

(L to R) Indian Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz and Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi are seen during the first executive session of the Commonwealth heads of government meeting (CHOGM) at the Mediterranean conference centre in Valletta Friday.