

US, Britain plan phased Iraq pullout after polls

Iraqis disapprove of American presence, Sunni politician killed in attack

AFP, REUTERS, London/ Baghdad

The United States and Britain are planning a phased withdrawal of their military forces from Iraq as soon as a permanent government is installed in Baghdad, the Times newspaper reported yesterday.

In a dispatch from the Iraqi capital ahead of Thursday's parliamentary elections, it said British and US officials view the end of Iraq's transitional period as the "green light" to begin withdrawing troops as early as next March.

"One of the first things we will talk about (with the new Iraqi government) is the phased transfer of security, particularly in cities and provinces," it quoted a senior Western diplomat in Baghdad as saying.

"It will happen progressively over the next year."

The United States has more than 160,000 troops in central and northern Iraq, while Britain has about 8,000 in four southern provinces. The two nations invaded in March 2003 to overthrow Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.

The Times said "contingency plans" were in place for British units in Dhiqar and Muthana provinces to go as early as spring 2006, followed by those in the most restive province of Misan.

The United States is meanwhile "planning to pull out 30,000 (troops) by the New Year" and reduce their presence to below 100,000 personnel "in the coming months," it said, without giving a source.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari told The Times that a hasty withdrawal could hurt his country into more violence.

In opinion poll majority of Iraqis are opposed to the presence of US forces in their country and view negatively the US-led invasion, but a large percentage are nonetheless optimistic about the future.

The poll released Monday, conducted by ABC News, Time Magazine and other media outlets, showed that 65 percent of the 1,711 Iraqis questioned are opposed to the presence of US troops in Iraq and nearly half would like to see American forces leave soon.

However, 76 percent expressed confidence that this week's elections in Iraq will produce a stable government and 42 percent are very confident of it.

The poll also showed that 59 percent believe US and coalition forces have done a bad job in the country since the 2003 invasion

against 36 percent who feel they have done a good job.

In violence a leading Sunni Muslim Arab politician was shot dead in Iraq yesterday just two days before the nation votes for a new parliament.

Mizhar al-Dulaimi, head of the Free Progressive Iraqi Party, was killed while campaigning in the center of Ramadi, capital of the restive Anbar province in western Iraq, police said. Three of his bodyguards were wounded.

A well-known Sunni Arab, Dulaimi had appeared on television the previous night, urging Iraqis to vote.

Many Sunni Arabs are standing in Thursday's poll after largely boycotting the January 30 election for an interim assembly.

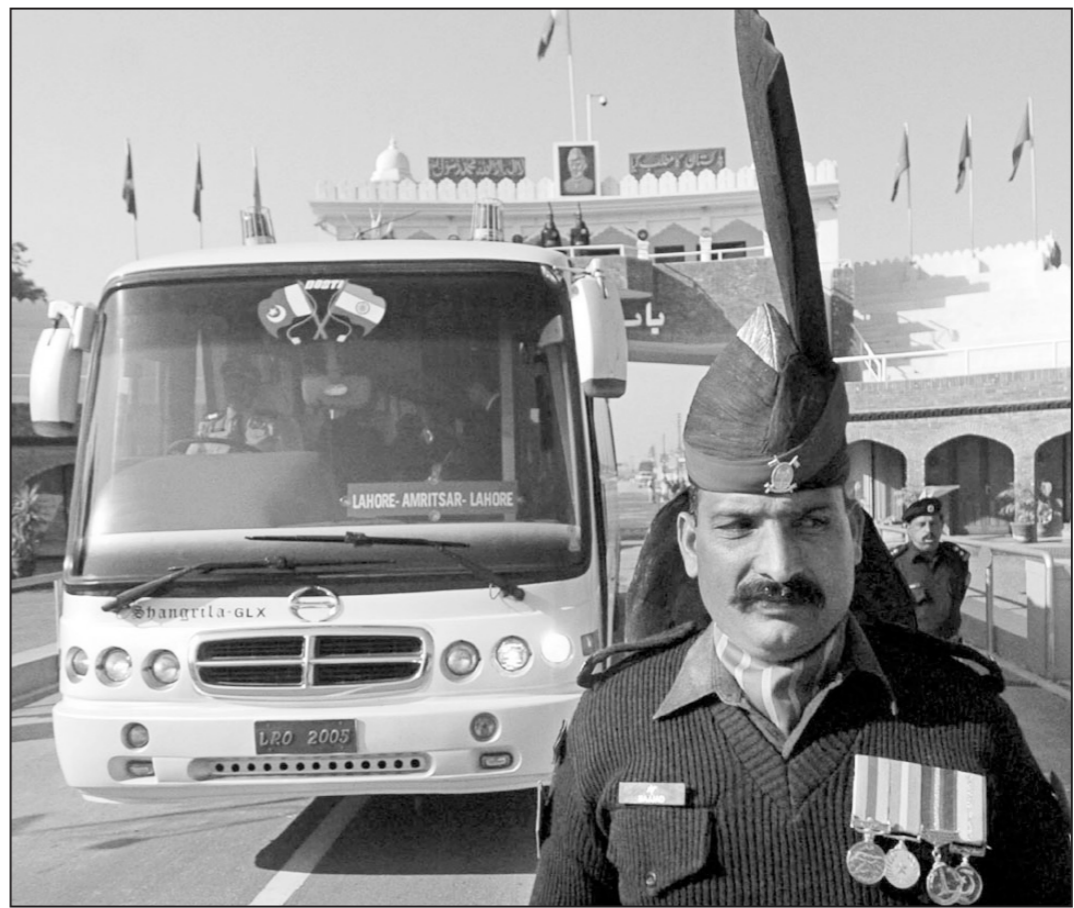


PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani border security guard escorts a bus carrying Pakistani officials from Lahore after it crosses the India-Pakistan border at Wagah yesterday on its way to Amritsar as part of a trial run for a new bus service.

Dancers, flowers greet Pakistani bus in India

REUTERS, Amritsar

Drummers and dancers greeted a Pakistani bus as it crossed into India yesterday in the latest step in a slow-moving peace process to establish stronger transport links between the nuclear rivals.

The bus, to ply between the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore and the Amritsar in Punjab, was on a trial run and carried nine people, including Pakistani tourism officials.

People threw marigold petals on the green and white bus, which had "Dosti" and the flags of both countries painted on it, as it crossed the Wagah border point into Punjab before heading to Amritsar.

A police band beat drums while Punjabi folk artists performed a traditional dance as they escorted it to the Wagah customs office in a test run which followed one by an Indian bus in the opposite direction on Sunday.

A regular, twice-a-week service between the two cities, just 60 km apart, was due to start in the last week of this month, Hashim Khan, director-general of the Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation, told reporters before the bus set off.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian youth run after throwing stones at Israeli forces in the northern West Bank city of Nablus yesterday. Fierce gun battles erupted during an army incursion in the largest West Bank city leaving one Palestinian dead and 25 others wounded along with two Israeli soldiers.

Palestinian forces launch crackdown on militants

AP, Nablus

Masked Palestinian security forces have arrested dozens of Islamic Jihad activists in a series of overnight raids across the West Bank in recent days an operation the Palestinian Authority says is aimed at bringing those behind attacks on Israel to justice.

However, the biggest crackdown on militants since Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas took office a year ago has netted only low-level operatives, and some suspect the goal is to appease the United States and Israel rather than crush the militant group.

At the same time, analysts and Israeli security officials said the arrests have sent an important message to the Palestinians and Israelis that militant groups can no longer operate with impunity.

"It is a symbolic way to tell everybody, 'I am serious,'" said Israeli security analyst Boaz Ganor.

The last major Palestinian crackdown on militant groups took place four years ago when former leader

Yasser Arafat, under intense pressure from Israel to stop attacks, ordered his security forces to arrest more than 200 Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants, placed Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin under house arrest and closed down many Hamas offices in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Since Abbas took office in January following Arafat's death, he has resisted calls by Israel and the United States to dismantle the armed groups, fearing it would touch off a civil war. Others are concerned that his myriad and competing security forces, devastated after five years of fighting with Israel, would be unable or unwilling to take on the militants.

Instead, Abbas negotiated a shaky cease-fire with the militants to end attacks on Israel. It greatly reduced violence but has been repeatedly violated by Islamic Jihad.

After Islamic Jihad carried out its fifth suicide bombing since the truce took effect in February, killing five Israelis outside a mall in the Israeli

city of Netanya last week, Abbas suddenly promised to take action.

"The Palestinian Authority will not go easy on whoever is proved to be responsible for this operation," Abbas said in a statement.

In the following days, Palestinian security forces, many of them masked to protect themselves from reprisals, fanned out across the West Bank, surprising Islamic Jihad members at their houses in the middle of the night and arresting about 100 people.

Islamic Jihad has demanded an end to the raids. "These fighters were arrested to appease Israel," said an Islamic Jihad leader known only as Abu Majd, who implied that more arrests could spark retaliation from the militants.

Islamic Jihad leaders said many of those arrested were students, academics or political leaders of the group. Israel, which has been conducting its own simultaneous crackdown, has been targeting hard-core militants, they said.

US executes death row inmate Williams

AFP, San Quentin

US authorities yesterday executed Stanley "Tookie" Williams, a convicted killer who was at the centre of one of the biggest anti-death penalty campaigns in the United States in decades, a spokeswoman for San Quentin prison said.

Williams, executed by lethal injection, was declared dead at 12:35 am (0335 GMT), she added.

Several thousand people gathered outside the prison, on the shores of the Pacific Ocean south of San Francisco, raising their voices in anger when Williams' execution was announced.

"It's over, but it's not," said Reverend Jesse Jackson, one of several well known personalities who supported Williams in his quest to have his execution stayed.

Bush estimates 30,000 Iraqis killed in fighting

AP, Philadelphia

In a rare, unscripted moment, President Bush on Monday estimated 30,000 Iraqis have died in the war, the first time he has publicly acknowledged the high price Iraqis have paid in the push for democracy.

In the midst of a campaign to win support for the unpopular war, Bush unexpectedly invited questions from the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia after a speech asserting that Iraq was making progress despite violence, flawed elections and other setbacks.

He immediately was challenged about the number of Iraqis who have lost their lives since the beginning of the war.

"I would say 30,000, more or less, have died as a result of the initial incursion and the ongoing violence against Iraqis," Bush said. "We've lost about 2,140 of our own troops in Iraq."

The US military does not release its tally of Iraqi dead, but there is some consensus from outside experts that roughly 30,000 is a credible number. White House counsellor Dan Bartlett said Bush was not giving an official figure but simply repeating public estimates.

Strong quake causes panic in South Asia

AFP, Jalalabad

A strong tremor triggered panic yesterday among survivors of October's earthquake disaster in South Asia, forcing people out of temporary shelters and into the freezing Himalayan winter.

Four people were injured in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad after the 6.7-magnitude quake struck at 2:48 am (2148 GMT Monday) with an epicentre in the remote Hindu Kush mountains of northeastern Afghanistan.

"One house has been destroyed. So far we've received four wounded people, three of them slightly and only one woman was badly injured," said Ayoub Shinwari, a doctor at a Jalalabad hospital.

"Preliminary reports taken from

all the provinces were that there were no casualties. But we are asking them to check again," Afghanistan's interior ministry spokesman Yousuf Stanizai told AFP.

No damage was immediately reported either, Stanizai said.

Witnesses said it felt like the strongest tremor since the 7.6-magnitude earthquake on October 8 that killed more than 73,000 people in Pakistan alone.

That quake also left around 3.5 million people homeless, mainly in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and parts of the North West Frontier Province.

In Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir, many survivors of the October quake rushed from their tents and from houses still left

standing by the original disaster.

"It was very strong. People came out of their tents and started screaming and reciting verses from the Koran," resident Sarfraz Ahmad said.

"The people living in buildings spared by the big quake were the most terrified," he added.

"Now everyone is getting back into their shelters. They are reluctant, but they have no choice because the cold is unbearable." Despite the panic, Pakistani and Indian officials reported no immediate casualties.

"Our men are surveying positions in remote villages but there are no casualties so far," said a police spokesman in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, where over 1,300 people were killed in the October disaster.

Russia, Asean forge new partnership

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Russia and 10 Southeast Asian countries vowed yesterday to work together in fighting terrorism and stimulating wealth as part of a new partnership signed at the first Russia-Asean summit.

But despite being welcomed as a regular summit partner by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), Russia faced an uphill battle in its stated desire to play a more influential role in wider Asia-Pacific affairs.

President Vladimir Putin, who arrived in Kuala Lumpur a day after making a lightning dash to the war-torn Russian province of Chechnya, held inaugural summit talks with his Asean counterparts for around 90 minutes.

That meeting was capped by the signing of a joint 27-point declaration of "comprehensive partnership" between Russia and Asean along with a detailed action plan that officials described as a "road map" for the next 10 years.

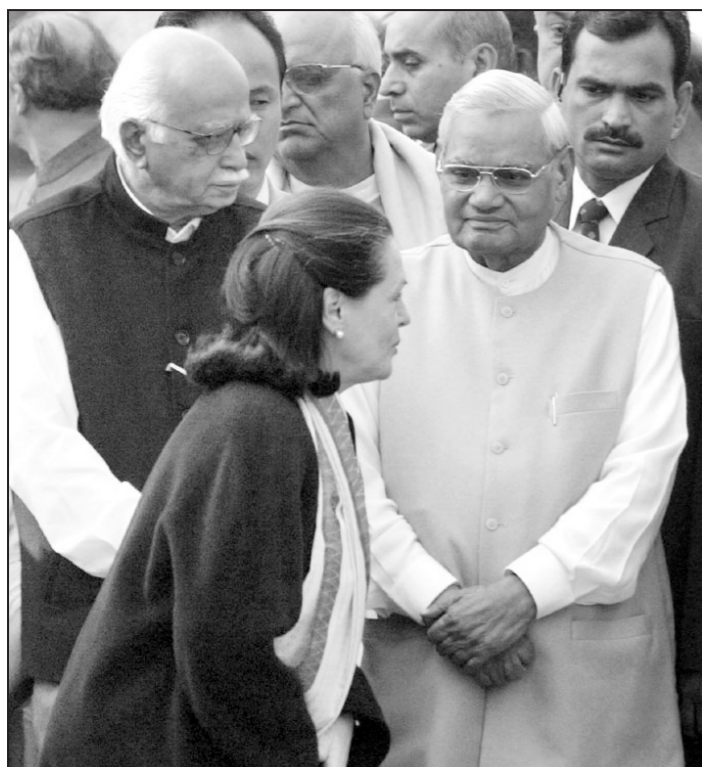


PHOTO: AFP

President of India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Lal Krishna Advani (L) and former Indian prime minister and senior BJP leader Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) look on as president of India's Congress Party and chairperson of the UPA government Sonia Gandhi walks with other leaders during prayers outside Parliament Building in New Delhi yesterday. They were paying homage to nine people killed in a rebel attack on the national parliament in 2001.

UNSC considers action on killings in Lebanon

REUTERS, United Nations

The 15-nation Security Council weighs its response yesterday to a UN investigation that accused Syria of hindering its probe into the slaying of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

The council first hears an oral presentation from Detlev Mehlis, the German prosecutor who led the inquiry. Mehlis said in a report delivered on Monday that his team had found new evidence implicating Syria in the truck bomb murder of Hariri and 22 others last February 14 in Beirut.

At the same time the 15-nation body this week is expected to extend the investigation into Hariri's death for up to another six months as requested by Lebanon and Mehlis, who will be leaving the probe.

And France said it was willing to expand the inquiry to include others killed in Lebanon, including Gebran Tueni, a newspaper publisher and lawmaker assassinated in a car bombing on Monday.

"If there is a request coming from the Lebanese government, my delegation will support such a request, and we will do our best to have the council going in the same

direction," said France's UN ambassador Jean-Marc de la Sabliere.

But the most controversial issue facing the council is a resolution, adopted October 31, that threatens "further action" against Syria if it did not cooperate fully with Mehlis's team. This could lead to sanctions.

Both Sabliere and US Ambassador John Bolton told reporters on Monday that Damascus had not yet met council requirements, despite some improvement.

"What precise steps we consider have not yet been decided, but there's no ambiguity here," Bolton said. "That is no cooperation."

But splits in the council are expected, with Algeria's UN Ambassador, Abdallah Baali, saying Syria's cooperation had improved after a slow start. Russia and China also are usually opposed to sanctions.

"I think at this stage it's premature to decide whether or not we're in favor of measures," British Ambassador Emyr Jones Parry said after he presided over a council meeting that condemned Monday's murder of Tueni.