



British Prime Minister Tony Blair (C) with troops at Shaiba Logistics Base in Basra, Iraq yesterday. Blair insisted the goal of a stable Iraq was worth fighting for as he made a surprise trip 22 December to meet his troops and hold talks about the future of the war-torn country. PHOTO: AFP

Blair signals route home for troops

REUTERS, Basra

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, on a lightning trip to Iraq, promised his country's troops on Thursday they could go home once local forces were managing their own security.

Blair, speaking to soldiers in the British-controlled southeastern area around Basra, told troops who will be stationed in the country over Christmas they were helping to secure Iraq, the region and the wider world against terrorism.

"The importance of this is to try to help the country and the only way to do that is to provide security so the Iraqi forces can build up, and then we can eventually draw down on our own capability."

Earlier, Blair met US and British military chiefs to discuss the security situation after last week's Iraqi election and future troop levels.

General George Casey, US military commander in Iraq, told the prime minister that by the summer of next year, Iraqis will be in charge of 75 percent of security in some areas

of the country.

Blair, on his fourth visit to Iraq since the March 2003 US-led invasion, mingled with soldiers at Shaiba logistics base near Basra, where he was serenaded by a group of Fijian soldiers in what commanders said was an impromptu performance.

He also broke through the ranks of British staff to greet Iraqi mechanics and engineers before addressing soldiers from the top of a mobile tank carrier.

"If we manage to defeat terrorism here, we'll have dealt it a huge body blow worldwide," he said.

Tight security surrounded Blair's visit with a news blackout in place until he touched down from Kuwait on a Hercules transport aircraft, for fear of attacks by insurgents.

British officials will not publicly discuss a timetable for troop withdrawal but they see the election as the latest step on the long road to an eventual pull-out of Britain's 8,000 troops.

France adopts tough anti-terrorism law

AFP, Paris

The French parliament Thursday adopted a tough new anti-terrorist law inspired by British measures used to identify the bombers who carried out the July bomb attacks in London.

Deputies voted 202 to 122 in favour of the law, which will increase video surveillance of railways stations, airports and other public areas, permit official snooping of Internet and mobile telephone records, and lengthen the period of detention for terrorist suspects.

Civil rights groups and left-wing opposition parties have expressed concern over the law, which they fear gives authorities too much power to invade citizens' privacy and encourages confusion between immigration and terrorism.

Worst floods kill at least 130 in SE Asia

AP, Bangkok

Spawed by unrelenting rains, some of the severest floods in decades have killed at least 130 people in peninsular Southeast Asia, according to the latest reports Thursday.

Three weeks of flooding in southern Thailand have left 52 people dead and thousands stranded without provisions in remote areas while 69 people have perished in central Vietnam, some of them in landslides. Northern Malaysia, where nine are reported dead, is suffering the worst floods in 30 years.

In Thailand, a local government official said tens of thousands of people were stranded without necessary supplies as floods affected nine of 14 provinces in the south.

"Food and water are running out for thousands of families who live in remote areas that the rescue team

has not yet reached," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he did not want to be seen as criticizing the government.

This year's flooding is regarded as the country's worst in 40 years.

In Vietnam, the coastal Khanh Hoa province has been the worst-hit with 32 deaths. Nearby Phu Yen province had 14 deaths while Binh Dinh province had 11 and central Quang Ngai province had five deaths.

Officials at the national weather center in Hanoi said Wednesday that rains will continue through the weekend, giving little relief to the heavily soaked region. River levels remain high but have started receding.

The latest victims in Malaysia were two brothers who drowned while fishing in floodwaters in Kedah state, said police officer Shahidan Ladin.

New York visitors take strike in stride

AFP, New York

Many of the tourists visiting New York took the city's transport strike literally in their stride on Thursday, since walking was the only effective way of getting around.

"We changed our plans and chose places we could walk to," said Marianne Eliopoulos, an American visiting from France.

"For old people it's hard, and in the post office everything is slow because (only) half of the people are working. But we support the strikers, and it is something to talk about," Eliopoulos said.

Marie Mueller, a young German on her first visit to New York, was unfazed even though her hotel is in Manhattan's northernmost Harlem district. "I love it," she said, although she has given up on the idea of visiting Staten Island, New York's southernmost borough.

Others were not so pleased. "It took us a whole day to go to the Statue of Liberty! We took a tour with a bus, but there was a lot of traffic. It cost us a lot of money. We

couldn't find a taxi. Somebody drove us and we had to pay 75 dollars. It's a lot, but what can you do?" said British pensioner John Stainer, visiting with his wife.

The strikers "picked the wrong time," said JoAnn Emma, who came from North Carolina for the Christmas holiday. "We'd like to go downtown, to go shopping in Canal Street and go to Little Italy."

Beggy Carpio, whose parents were visiting from El Salvador, said: "We want to go to the Rockefeller Center, Fifth Avenue, Saint Patrick's. One of my cousins took us to Manhattan, but it's not easy."

"It's difficult to walk. It's too cold for my parents, there's tropical weather in our country!" she added.

Hotels apparently do not foresee many cancellations because of the strike.

Most tourists are able to get in from the airport, said Quality Hotel manager Alvaro Villegas. "The subway is the biggest inconvenience, but a lot of people are here for shopping," which are within walking distance, he noted.

Hariri accuses Syrian 'terrorist regime' of waging war

AFP, Lebanon

Lebanese MP Saad Hariri, the son and political heir of slain ex-premier Rafiq Hariri, has accused the "terrorist regime" in Syria of seeking to topple the Beirut government, newspapers said Thursday.

"I am convinced that a war is being launched against us by a terrorist regime which is seeking to change the Lebanese democratic regime," Hariri was quoted as saying in extracts from an interview to be aired later Thursday by Dubai-based Al-Arabiya television.

Rafiq Hariri's assassination in a Beirut bomb blast on February 14 led to protests and international pressure that forced Syria to end its 29-year military presence in its smaller neighbor.

Syria was the key powerbroker in Lebanon for nearly three decades.

Israel kills 3 Palestinians amid more rockets

AFP, Nablus

Israel shot dead three Palestinian militants in the West Bank Thursday and threatened to sever power supplies to the Gaza Strip as more makeshift rockets were fired from the territory.

Although there were no Israeli fatalities in the latest batch of rocket attacks, five soldiers were slightly wounded and the country's sixth largest city came under attack.

The main Palestinian factions have been observing a ceasefire since the start of the year while Israel had largely held off arrest operations in the West Bank except against members of the small Islamic Jihad movement.

The unofficial deal however appears to be unravelling fast, with Israel voicing fears of an explosion in Palestinian violence ahead of legislative elections in five weeks' time.

The three killed in Nablus included a military leader of the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and two members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of the

ruling Fatah faction.

The PFLP's Bashar Hanani and the Al-Aqsa followers Anas al-Sheikh and Ahmed al-Jayussi were all killed as they tried to break out of a building besieged by Israeli troops in the West Bank city of Nablus.

Witnesses said around 15 Israeli jeeps and two army bulldozers had entered the city in the early hours and opened fire on a house they had surrounded.

Israeli military sources said three armed Palestinians had attempted to flee from the house and were "hit" by gunfire.

It was not immediately clear what Palestinian faction was behind the latest rocket attacks into southern Israel, launched from northern Gaza.

One of the Qassams, which take their name from the armed wing of the Islamist movement Hamas, lightly wounded five Israeli soldiers when it landed on their base near the border.