

Captors of Germans in Iraq issue ultimatum

AFP, Dubai

The kidnapers of two German engineers in Iraq have threatened to kill their captives unless Berlin cuts all links with Baghdad within 72 hours, according to a video aired by Al-Jazeera satellite news channel.

The footage, aired overnight Wednesday, showed the hostages apparently kneeling or sitting on the floor with four hooded men standing behind them, two of whom were armed while a third read out the kidnapers' demands, though his voice was not heard.

The kidnapers, who call themselves Brigade of Ansar al-Tawheed wal Sunnah (Followers of Unity and Prophetic Tradition), asked the German government to "close its embassy in Baghdad, withdraw German firms and cease all forms of cooperation with the Iraqi government," said the presenter of the Qatar-based television.

The captors threatened to "kill the two hostages if their demands were not met within 72 hours," he added.



A Nepalese opposition activist throws rocks at riot policemen charging on a small group of opposition activists during a protest in Kathmandu yesterday. A massive police presence thwarted plans by Nepal's opposition parties to stage a large protest in Kathmandu marking the first anniversary of King Gyanendra's seizure of power. Some 100 activists staged small protests clashing with riot police.

Maoist rebels kill 20 law enforcers

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra marked the first anniversary Wednesday of his seizure of power with a promise to push ahead with controversial local elections, as Maoist rebels launched major raids which killed at least 20 people.

A huge police presence meanwhile thwarted plans by Nepal's political opposition, which had branded the anniversary a "black day", to stage a mass protest rally in Kathmandu. Gyanendra's speech drew an angry response from the parties -- sidelined in the king's powergrab -- who said the aid-dependent country was being pushed further into chaos.

An army official said around 1,000 rebel Maoists attacked at least five targets in Palpa district, 400 km west of Kathmandu, late Tuesday in ferocious assaults that lasted until dawn.

"After the fighting finished, we

found (the bodies of) three army personnel and 17 police officers," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The attacks began near midnight Tuesday and lasted until dawn Wednesday, he said, adding that of the 230 police officers on duty in Palpa overnight, 143 were still missing.

Gyanendra in a 20-minute televised address said the local elections, which he set for February 8 as part of his "road map" to restore democracy, would still be held. The rebels have threatened to "take action" against anyone taking part.

"The first and foremost preconditions for consolidating democracy are to gain the support of the people through the ballot and respect their mandate," the king said in his pre-recorded address.

"The process to reinstate all the elected bodies through free and fair elections has been initiated," he said, calling on the rebels to give up their campaign but making no direct

reference to his takeover of power last year.

"His address today has made it clear that he wants to prolong his autocratic regime," said the spokesman for the Nepali Congress Party, Krishna Prasad Sitaula.

"His address has pushed the country into further crisis and chaos. The demonstrations will continue."

However, the parties' plans for a mass rally at Kathmandu's Durbar Square, scene of violent clashes between police and protesters last month, fell flat after police moved in to prevent crowds gathering.

From midday scores of police, some armed, were seen stopping pedestrians, patting them down and searching their bags around the square, the historical heart of the capital.

Fewer than 100 protesters made it to the square for the rally called for 2:00 pm (0815 GMT) and handfuls of young men threw stones at riot police.

Iraqi, Iranian and Pakistani 'terrorists' seized in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Counter-terrorism police have arrested an Iraqi, an Iranian and three Pakistanis allegedly planning attacks in insurgency-hit southern Afghanistan, the interior ministry said Wednesday.

The men had entered Afghanistan's Nimroz province from neighbouring Iran, ministry spokesman Yousuf Stanizai said.

"They are all terrorists. They had crossed illegally into Nimroz from Iran and wanted to go to other provinces to carry out terrorist attacks," he told AFP.

"They all had documents proving their identities. The investigation is ongoing."

Stanizai said the Iraqi, whose name was not disclosed, was on his way to southern Kandahar province.

The province is a hotbed of an insurgency that erupted after the Taliban government was ousted in late 2001. It has suffered frequent suicide and car bomb attacks that officials often blame on foreigners allied with the Taliban.

Bomb kills at least eight in Baghdad

REUTERS, Baghdad

At least eight people were killed on Wednesday when a suicide bomber strapped with explosives attacked a crowd of labourers in central Baghdad, an Interior Ministry source said.

Hospital sources said at least 65 people were wounded.

"We were eating breakfast and we heard an explosion. We went to see what happened and we saw people torn apart on the pavement," said Mohammed Daoud, a laborer.

The attack took place in New Baghdad. Police sources said earlier the explosion hit the Baab al-Sharjee area of Baghdad.

Insurgents waging a campaign to topple the government have killed many thousands of security forces and civilians.

Meanwhile US troops in Iraq fired warning shots at the Canadian envoy's car on Tuesday after his convoy failed to slow down while approaching an American military convoy, the US

military said on Wednesday.

A statement said the shots were fired inside the heavily fortified Green Zone, which houses the Iraqi government and diplomats and is the headquarters of the US military.

"The Canadian ambassador's vehicle did sustain damage yesterday from US military gunfire," said the statement.

"The rear guard on a US convoy signaled the vehicle to stay back. After it failed to do so and continued moving toward the convoy from behind, warning shots were aimed at the front of the vehicle, away from the passenger area."

The US military said there were no injuries.

"The incident is under review to determine why it was necessary to fire warning shots," said the statement.

Iraqis often complain that US troops are too quick to fire. American soldiers, who have come under attack by suicide bombers in cars, say they give motorists ample time to slow down before firing shots.

Israeli forces, settlers clash at West Bank outpost

REUTERS, Amona Outpost

Israeli riot police clashed with stone-throwing settlers trying to block the demolition of part of an unauthorized Jewish outpost in the West Bank in violent scenes reminiscent of Israel's Gaza pullout.

Black smoke from tires protesters set alight rose above the hilltop Amona outpost on Wednesday where thousands of Israeli ultra-nationalists barricaded themselves in houses vowing to fight the destruction of nine uninhabited buildings.

Riot police on horseback, coming under a hail of rocks, used clubs to beat back the crowd made up mostly of religious youngsters, some wearing the orange ribbons that had symbolized resistance to the Gaza withdrawal five months ago.

About 40 protesters and several policemen were hurt.

Amona was the latest battleground for settlers angry over the unilateral Gaza pullout and keen to

prevent additional withdrawals in the occupied West Bank if interim Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's Kadima party is elected in a March 28 election.

"The state has declared war on some of its citizens," settler Orit Caspi said at Amona.

Olmert has targeted 24 settlement outposts for removal in a bid to implement a long-standing commitment under a U.S.-backed peace "road map" and assert control after assuming the powers of an incapacitated Ariel Sharon.

He hinted on he would remove isolated West Bank settlements if elected, telling Kadima supporters that after the poll he would "shape the permanent borders of Israel as a country with a clear and solid Jewish majority."

Palestinians, who voted into power the Islamic militant group Hamas last week, fear go-it-alone moves by Israel would deny them a viable state.

Bulldozers stood at the ready at Amona to move on the nine build-

ings, where protesters had prepared an arsenal of stones, glass bottles and buckets of cooking oil and paint.

Police wearing helmets and visors waded into crowds, knocking heads with their clubs as blood ran down the faces of some of the protesters.

Despite the operation, Israel intended to allow several dozen families in trailer homes to remain at Amona pending further discussion and possible legal moves.

"Every house that is destroyed is a victory for Hamas," said a sign held by protesters.

In Washington, US President George W. Bush demanded that Hamas "recognize Israel, disarm, reject terrorism and work for lasting peace" in his State of the Union address.

Hamas is sworn to Israel's destruction and has led a campaign of suicide bombings and attacks against Israel, although the group has largely held to a year-long ceasefire.



Settlers clash with Israeli security forces yesterday, as they try to prevent the destruction of an unauthorised settlement outpost in the occupied West Bank, at the Amona outpost, close to the Palestinian city of Ramallah. The clashes broke out shortly after the Israeli supreme court gave its green light to the dismantling of around half a dozen homes.



Indian airport workers shout slogans as they take part in a protest outside the international terminal building of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Airport in Kolkata yesterday, following a nationwide call to cease work by airlines workers. Thousands of workers have picketed airports across India to protest government plans to privatise the country's two largest landing facilities at New Delhi and Mumbai. The protests gathered momentum after the government announced that construction firm GMR Industries, based in southern Hyderabad and partnered by Germany's Fraport, had won a bid to privatise Delhi airport. India's GVK group and the South African airport authority won the bid to privatise Mumbai airport.

BUSH SAYS US must kick the oil habit

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush said on Tuesday "America is addicted to oil" from the Middle East and must break its dependence, in a State of the Union speech that promised aggressive US engagement around the world in defiance of critics.

The former oilman outlined a green agenda in a 52-minute speech that was interrupted at least 60 times by applause. He called for improving technologies in order to reduce U.S. oil imports from the Middle East 75 percent by 2025.

Looking to restore confidence in his leadership, Bush stood before members of the Congress and the rest of Washington's power elite in the House chamber to map out an election-year agenda for Republicans with a speech that was at times optimistic and at others combative.

And while he vowed to work to improve the tone of debate in Washington, he stuck to national security themes that may be crucial to Republican hopes in November, defending a domestic spying program that has Democrats outraged,

and telling his harshest critics on Iraq that "second-guessing is not a strategy."

With three years left in office, Bush is hoping to lift his political fortunes and those of his Republican allies in an election year with control of Congress up for grabs. He is coming off one of the toughest stretches of his presidency, and his job approval ratings hover in the high 30s to low 40s in most polls.

Soaring gasoline prices are a central factor in Bush's fall from grace with Americans. Oil prices are close to record levels and Exxon just reported record profits of \$10.7 billion in the fourth quarter of 2005.

"America is addicted to oil, which is often imported from unstable parts of the world," Bush said. "The best way to break this addiction is through technology."

He set a six-year goal for making the alternative fuel ethanol practical and competitive, and vowed to fund additional research into ways to make ethanol not just from the commonly used corn but also from wood-chips or grasses.

Be brave on Kashmir, Musharraf tells India

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has asked India to take "brave decisions" on his self-governance and demilitarisation proposals to resolve the Kashmir issue.

In a meeting with British historian Alistair Lamb on Tuesday, he said the two proposals were "bold and well-considered" in the context of a finding a solution to the Kashmir issue which would be acceptable to Pakistan, India and the people of Kashmir.

Musharraf said India would have to take brave decisions in this regard.

Lamb in his book titled Kashmir: A Disputed Legacy propounded a theory that British government "conspired" with the Indian union at the time of partition to prevent Kashmir's accession to Pakistan because it (Britain) needed a vantage point in Central Asia.

Lamb is on an official invitation to speak in different meetings, including in a seminar being organised by the Pakistan government on Kashmir Day, observed by Pakistan on February 5.

Parliament defeats question Blair's authority

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair faced fresh questions about his authority Wednesday after his government suffered a shock double defeat over a key part of new legislation to combat religious hatred.

Until Tuesday night, Blair had only suffered one defeat in parliament over planned legislation since coming to power in 1997 -- a controversial move to hold terrorist suspects for up to 90 days without charge.

But just over two months after that setback, the lower House of Commons twice voted against him on the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill, backing the unelected upper House of Lords which had already blocked aspects of the proposals.

In further embarrassment, it emerged that Blair did not take part in the second of two votes on amending the bill -- which the government then lost by just one vote due to a sizeable revolt amongst Labour backbenchers.

Northern Ireland Secretary Peter

Hain admitted the government had been taken by surprise and said a period of reflection was needed, particularly to find a "better way forward" with "regular (Labour party) rebels" who opposed Blair.

Asked on BBC radio if the prime minister's no-show at what we were trying to do, this is very controversial legislation. We are in a situation where Muslims don't have the protection that, for example, Jews and black citizens do and there remains an anomaly."

In the wake of the defeats, Home Secretary Charles Clarke announced that the government would bow to the Commons' will and send the bill for royal assent, minus its defeated amendments.

Blair has personally campaigned for tougher measures to confront global terrorism in the wake of the July 7 attacks in London which left 56 people dead, including four suicide bombers.

Saddam trial opens with closed session

AFP, Baghdad

The trial of deposed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein began on Wednesday after a delay of three hours with a closed session between defendants and the judge to discuss "procedural matters", said a court source.

Judge Rauf Rasheed Abdel Rahman, whose no-nonsense court style resulted in the ejection of half the defendants on Sunday, called for the closed session with the defendants to discuss procedural matters.

It is not clear if the session included all the defendants or just the four minor accused who remained on Sunday.

The defense lawyers, most of whom are out of the country, issued a statement boycotting the trial and calling for the removal of the presiding judge.

The court official said the closed session would only last half an hour and the ensuing open session would relate the events of the closed session.

Earlier procedural wrangling again delayed the resumption of Saddam Hussein's trial, amid increasing enmity between the no-nonsense new judge and an indignant defence team.

Judge Rauf Rasheed Abdel Rahman made his mark in the first session of the trial under his control Sunday, forcing the former Iraqi president out of the court and ordering guards to eject his half-brother Barzan al-Tikriti.

Neither a clearly irate Saddam, his defence team, nor any of the high profile defendants were expected to attend Wednesday's hearing amid continued questioning of the credibility of the tribunal.



Following a closed session of court, the chair of Saddam Hussein remains empty, as his co-defendants, 1st row left to right, Mohammed Azawi Ali, Abdullah Kadhem Ruaid: and, 2nd row center, Ali Dayim Ali, appear for their trial held under tight security in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone yesterday. The Iraqi High Tribunal convened Wednesday for the ninth hearing of the trial of Saddam and seven co-defendants, accused in the 1982 killing of more than 140 Shites after an assassination attempt against the president in Dujail.