

Saddam trial hears defence testimony

AFP, Baghdad

The trial of ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein over the killing of Shias in the 1980s yesterday heard the testimony of defence witnesses, as a new phase in the long-running process gained momentum.

Saddam and his chief lieutenants were not in the chamber and only the more minor of the seven accused were present while their defence witnesses took the stand behind a curtain and maintained the innocence of the defendants.

The day earlier, Judge Rauf Abdel Rahman read out the official charges against all the defendants, which included murder, torture and the execution of minors, marking the end of the initial phase of the trial and the beginning of the defence phase. As the trial began Tuesday, Najib al-Nuaimi, one of Saddam's defence lawyers and the former Qatari minister of justice, asked the judge why his client could not be present for the testimony.

"One of the witnesses here may give testimony against our clients and they should be here and we should be here to defend them," he said.

The judge replied that they would just listen to witnesses for these defendants initially and there was no need for the other defendants.



PHOTO: AFP

As Mount Merapi churns smokes in the backdrop, a father drives his bike with his son in Tlogolele village in Central Java yesterday. Many Indonesian villagers living on the slopes of volcano disregarded warnings to stay away even though it spewed clouds of hot gas and ash Monday night.

Russia, China rule out use of force against Iran

AFP, Beijing

Russia and China will "definitely not" approve the use of force against Iran over its nuclear programme, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said here yesterday after meeting with China's leaders.

"Russia and China definitely will not vote for a resolution which could be an excuse for the use of force," Lavrov said through a translator after meeting with his Chinese counterpart, Li Zhaoxing, and President Hu Jintao.

"We believe we shouldn't isolate Iran or increase pressure. This will not only not reduce the possibility of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, it will have the opposite effect."

Lavrov's comments come after a US push for a binding United Nations' resolution on Iran, which could have opened the way to economic sanctions and military action, ground to a halt due to Russian and Chinese resistance.

Lavrov said Russia and China were similarly in agreement over the

non-use of force to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

"We agreed these two issues should be solved politically, through diplomacy, and that we shouldn't threaten these two countries. Even more importantly we shouldn't use force," he said in reference to Iran and North Korea.

However Lavrov did hold Iran up for some criticism, saying Tehran needed to do more to cooperate with the United Nations nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"Iran at the moment has not completely replied to and given explanations on the questions raised by the IAEA investigation," Lavrov said.

"We regret this very much. We hope the Iran side will give a reply at an early date."

The IAEA has been investigating Iran since 2003 and says it is not yet able to certify that the Iranian nuclear programme is strictly peaceful.

Iran says its nuclear programme is a peaceful drive to generate electricity but the United States and other Western nations say it is a

cover for the secret development of atomic weapons.

China and Russia are permanent, veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council along with the United States, France and Britain.

With its moves for a UN resolution stymied by China and Russia, the United States has given its European allies "a couple of weeks" to draft a fresh approach.

In response, the European Union said Monday it would make a "bold" offer to persuade Iran to curb its atomic ambitions, including possible security guarantees and help to develop peaceful nuclear power.

The EU has until Friday -- when negotiators from the Security Council's five permanent members plus Germany meet in London -- to complete its package.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said Tuesday his nation welcomed the European Union's latest diplomatic efforts, although he did not comment specifically on the contents of the EU's plan.

US asks EU to ban LTTE

AFP, Colombo

The United States asked the European Union to follow its lead and ban Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels to cut off their arms supplies, a visiting US State Department official said yesterday.

"We have encouraged the EU to list the LTTE" as a terrorist group, US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Camp said at the end of his two-day visit.

"We think the LTTE is very deserving of that label. We think it will help cut off financial supplies and weapons procurement and the like."

Violence between the government and the rebels has surged in the past month with more than 200 people killed despite a four-year truce in an ethnic conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

The US banned the LTTE in October 1997, five years after India proscribed the LTTE after accusing the guerrillas of involvement in the assassination of former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi.

Britain banned the Tigers in February 2001 while the EU in October slapped travel restrictions on them after holding the LTTE responsible for the August 2005 assassination of Sri Lankan foreign

minister Lakshman Kadirgamar.

However, Camp said that Washington would continue to encourage the government and the Tigers to resume peace negotiations which were put on hold in April 2003 after six rounds of face-to-face talks begun in September 2002.

"The trend lines are discouraging in terms of the increasing provocations by the LTTE, the fact that killings are increasing, all of these suggest that Sri Lanka is not on the way back to a lasting ceasefire, Camp told reporters.

"We would like to do everything we can, as an outside party, to encourage a return to the peace process" Cam added, and said that Sri Lanka can count on the "moral support" of the United States.

But he also noted that the government must also address complaints of violence by the LTTE, which controls swathes of territory in the northeast.

"Certainly, the LTTE is a terrorist group of the first order. That said, there's no question that the government of Sri Lanka has responsibilities as well.

"One of those, which the government has certainly acknowledged, is to address the legitimate grievances of the Tamil people. That includes, of course, dealing with the disturbing number of killings in recent months," he said.

Israeli minister makes peace pledge

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel's defence minister vowed that the Jewish state would make every effort for a peace deal with the Palestinians before undertaking any unilateral steps to set its border in the West Bank.

Israel Radio broadcast the remarks by Amir Peretz, the head of the left-of-centre Labour Party, on Tuesday, a day after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas cautioned Israel that any one-sided moves could fuel extremism in the region.

"We will, as the prime minister has committed himself to doing, make a sincere, serious and real effort to reach a settlement with the Palestinians before any decision to start the convergence plan unilaterally," Peretz said.

Peretz, a surprise choice as defence minister as he has limited

military experience, said the Jewish state should end its occupation of the West Bank as soon as possible.

"Ruling over another people hasn't done well by us. The sooner we relieve ourselves of this, the better," he said in a speech to a Jerusalem conference on Monday.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will visit the White House on May 23 to seek US support for Israel's plan to remove isolated Jewish settlements but bolster major enclaves in the occupied land to draw a permanent frontier, following last year's pull-out from Gaza.

He has said the "final borders" will largely follow the route of a barrier the Israelis are building in the West Bank. Israel says the barrier is for security but the Palestinians see it as a land grab.

Israeli officials have said that the government would wait up to a year before taking any steps on its own if

long-stalled peace talks aren't revived.

Chances for new peace talks have dimmed since a Palestinian government headed by militant group Hamas took office in March. Hamas's charter calls for Israel's destruction and the movement has ruled out any talks with Israel.

But Abbas, in a pre-recorded address broadcast on Monday on loudspeakers across the West Bank, urged Israel to avoid any unilateral steps and reiterated that he was ready to be a partner for peace negotiations.

"Let's make this year the year of peace, let's sit at the negotiations table away from the policy of diktats and unilateralism. Stop making excuses that there's no Palestinian partner, the partner is there," said Abbas, not a Hamas member.

14 killed in Baghdad market bombing

6 civilians, US die in attacks

AP, AFP, Baghdad

At least 14 people were killed and 33 others injured when a car bomb ripped through a packed market in Baghdad's Al-Shaab district yesterday, an Iraqi interior ministry source said.

Several women and children were among the dead in the attack, which targeted a mixed Sunni-Shia area of the capital.

Gunmen fired on the crowd just before the bombing and fled, leaving behind a car, which then exploded, the source said.

Earlier fighting between suspected insurgents and Iraqi police killed at least six civilians in Baghdad on Tuesday, and a roadside bomb killed a US soldier on a foot patrol in another part of the capital, officials said.

Another bomb destroyed a liquor store in Baghdad in what appeared to

be the third attack on the shop by militants who are determined to impose Islamic customs in Iraq by closing down establishments such as liquor stores and beauty parlours. That blast, one of three heard just past dawn, shook much of central Baghdad.

The gunbattle in Baghdad broke out at about 10:30 a.m. between suspected insurgents riding in three cars and Iraqi police in Dora, one of Baghdad's most violent neighbourhoods.

At least six civilians were killed and four wounded in the crossfire, said police 1st Lt. Maithem Abdel-Razaq.

The US Army soldier died when a roadside bomb exploded near Rasheed airfield, a former Iraqi air force installation in southern Baghdad, damaging a Humvee and also wounding an Iraqi civilian, said police Lt. Mohammed Hanoun.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese pedestrians look on as vehicles burn on a street at Thapathali in Kathmandu yesterday amid fresh protests against the delay in curtailing Nepalese King Gyanendra's power.

Thai courts reject Oct 22 polls date

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's three most powerful courts yesterday rejected a proposed October 22 date for new elections and demanded that the Election Commission (EC) resign for organising last month's controversial poll.

The Supreme, Constitutional and Supreme Administrative Courts said after a one-hour meeting that the current commissioners should not organise the next election.

"If the EC does not resign, then the courts cannot guarantee a free and fair election," said Supreme Court Justice Charan Pakdithanakul, speaking for the three courts.

"The EC must quit or they will be held accountable for any future damage to the country. There is no reason for this EC to keep organising the election," he told reporters.

10 die in clashes in Pakistan's tribal belt

REUTERS, Miranshah

Seven pro-Taliban militants and a Pakistani trooper were killed in a clash in Pakistan's troubled tribal region of North Waziristan yesterday, security officials said.

The clash occurred after the rebels ambushed a paramilitary vehicle in the Shawat area, around 12 km southwest of North Waziristan's main town of Miranshah, a military official said. "Seven miscreants were killed and one soldier died," he said.

Separately, militants shot dead two policemen in Miranshah overnight, a security official in the area told Reuters.

North Waziristan, a semi-autonomous area bordering Afghanistan, is the focus of a military campaign to rid the tribal lands of al-Qaeda remnants.

Clashes have intensified since an air strike on an al-Qaeda compound in early March and altogether security forces have killed over 300 militants, including around 75 foreigners, in North Waziristan since the middle of last year.