

Baku conference decries Western 'Islamophobia'

AFP, Baku

A conference of Muslim countries in Azerbaijan this week decried growing Islamophobia in the West in the wake of a furor sparked by the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed in several European newspapers.

Ekmeladdin Ihsanoglu, secretary-general of the 57-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), blamed anti-Muslim sentiment on "the rising dominance of the extremist right wing in Europe" in a report obtained by AFP and addressed to Muslim diplomats.

The document, which conference delegates are expected to approve as a resolution ahead of the close of the three-day meeting today, described Islamophobia as "spreading" through Western

media.

"This phenomenon has been spreading in the impactful areas of information, education and art, which are fertile grounds for the dissemination of the open hostility to Islam and the entrenchment of hatred against it," it said.

The OIC chief described a "pathological fear" of Islam caused by "cases of total ignorance of Islam and its teachings" in Western public opinion stemming from rivalries between Christians and Muslims that have existed since the Crusades.

In order to counter Islamophobia, Ihsanoglu called on OIC members to support Islamic non-governmental groups in Europe and strengthen ties with international bodies such as the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

He urged Muslim countries to enact a "new media strategy" to highlight the "true image of Islam" and said pro-Islamic television programs should target a Western audience.

Ihsanoglu also blamed Western media as a "major factor in the formation of collective misperceptions about Islam and Muslims in Europe."

Dialogue with political parties, civil society groups and policy makers should be directed at influencing the school curriculum in Europe, which has a "distorted image of Islam" that is "passed on from generation to generation," he continued.

At the Gulistan conference centre, a bunker-shaped structure on the shores of the Caspian Sea, references to "Islamophobia" were frequent in speeches made by delegates from

across the Muslim world.

"In some countries, the media have made attempts to compare Islam with terror. We cannot accept that. We can't equate Islam with terror," Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev said in remarks to the assembled officials at the start of the conference on Monday.

Several OIC members called for an agreed definition of the word "terrorist," saying that little distinction was being made between "freedom fighters" and "terrorists" by Western governments since the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington.

"Terrorism, which we condemn, should not be equated with the rights for people to self-determination, which is recognized" by international law, a Lebanese delegate said on Monday.

Tom Cruise wants ten children

AFP, Tokyo

Hollywood superstar Tom Cruise said Tuesday he would be happy to father ten children after he and his fiancée Katie Holmes had their first baby girl.

"I always wanted to be a father. I remember my whole life, I wanted to be a father. So I'm hoping maybe I have 10 children," he said with laughter at a press conference in Tokyo.

Cruise, 43, also has two adopted children from a previous marriage to actress Nicole Kidman, who is now set to wed country music singer Keith Urban.

Asked how he felt about his new baby, Suri, who was born in April, Cruise said, "Very, very very happy."

"It was the best Father's Day," he said of Sunday which he spent with his children and Holmes.

"I think you all know how, what a gift it is, children," he said.

Cruise, ranked last week by Forbes magazine as the world's most powerful celebrity, was in Tokyo to promote "Mission Impossible 3," which is partially set in Shanghai.



PHOTO: AFP

Hollywood superstar Tom Cruise (C), accompanied by actresses Maggie (L) and Keri Russell (R), speaks to journalists after a news conference to promote his movie "Mission Impossible III" in Tokyo yesterday. The movie will open in Japan July 8.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi firefighter douses fire at the site where a car bomb exploded in a market in Baghdad's Sadr City neighborhood yesterday. At least 3 people were killed in the blast despite a massive security crackdown.

Japan ends milestone Iraq military mission

AFP, Tokyo

Japan on Tuesday ordered its 600 troops to leave Iraq, ending its first military mission since World War II to a country where fighting is under way.

The pullout brings closure to one of the signature but domestically unpopular policies of outgoing Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, which was seen as a way to exert Japanese influence beyond that of an economic power.

"After closely consulting with the United States, the multinational forces, Britain and Australia, I made the decision because I judged that the humanitarian mission has completed a certain achievement in the region," Koizumi, who steps down in September, told a news conference.

The troops were given immedi-

ate orders to arrange for their withdrawal, defense chief Fukushima Nukaga said. Media reports said the last troops were expected to return by late July.

But Nukaga said the Japanese air force would remain active in Iraq, transporting goods and personnel to Baghdad for the US-led coalition.

The troop mission, which has helped reconstruct the relatively peaceful area around the southern city of Samawa since January 2004, is the first of its kind since Japan was forced by the United States to renounce war after World War II.

Due to its 1947 constitution, Japan relies on British and Australian troops for protection in Iraq as its own troops are barred from using force.

The troops have suffered no casualties and never even fired their state-of-the-art weapons.

But the military mission has still been criticized by China, which is haunted by Japan's past aggression, and opposed by a majority of the public in opinion polls.

Koizumi's government has broken other post-war taboos. It has proposed a revision of the constitution to recognize that Japan has a military, and not the euphemistically named Self-Defense Forces.

"Including this deployment, the activities of the Self-Defense Forces around the world have helped improve Japan's brand image," Foreign Minister Taro Aso said.

Iraqi troops will next month take over security from the coalition in Muthanna province which includes Samawa -- the first such transfer of power since the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.

Disgraced cloning expert says sorry, admits blame

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's disgraced cloning expert Hwang Woo-Suk went on trial Tuesday on fraud, embezzlement and ethical charges related to his faked stem cell research.

Hwang, once referred to as South Korea's "supreme scientist", was indicted on May 12 with five other scientists on charges in connection with the bogus research and the disappearance of millions of dollars in donations.

During the hearing, prosecutors accused Hwang of fabricating research data to obtain millions of dollars in funds.

Some 100 supporters of Hwang disrupted the hearing with boos and shouts despite the presence of dozens of police inside and outside the court.

Several times presiding judge Hwang Hyon-ju had to call the hearing to order and demand silence from the public.

Hwang apologized through his lawyer while admitting he was partly responsible for the fraudulent stem-cell research featured in the 2004 and 2005 papers published in the US Journal Science.

Hwang, 52, became a national hero last year when he claimed that he had created 11 patient-specific stem cells in landmark research on cloning.

But a panel of experts at Seoul National University, where Hwang worked as a professor, concluded in January that the stem-cell claims were bogus.

The panel also concluded that a 2004 paper by Hwang in which he claimed to have produced a stem cell from a cloned human embryo was fabricated.

Prosecutors said their probe had confirmed that Hwang's claims regarding stem cells were fraudulent. Specifically, they confirmed the academic panel's conclusion that no cloned stem cells of any kind were ever created by Hwang.

If convicted on all charges, Hwang could face up to five years in prison, legal experts said. The trial is expected to wrap up next month.

Tigers recommit to truce, safety of monitors

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers on Tuesday recommitted to the island's 2002 ceasefire and said they had told mediator Norway that they will ensure the safety of Nordic truce monitors.

But while both the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government have now told Norway that they will honour the truce, many fear it is just a matter of time before rash of attacks and clashes reignite a two-decade civil war.

"We have committed to the ceasefire agreement and Norway's facilitation role and giving diplomatic immunity and protection to the SLMM monitors who are working in the northeast," S. Puleedevan, head of the Tigers' peace secretariat, told Reuters referring to the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission.

"When it comes to the protection of the SLMM, on the part of

the LTTE, we can give a 100 per cent security guarantee," he added by telephone from the northern rebel stronghold of Kilinochchi.

The Tigers said they had sent a letter to Norway to respond to a set of questions asked after the rebels walked out of crunch talks in Oslo earlier this month without meeting the Sri Lankan government delegation.

That in turn came after the Tigers warned the monitors to stay away from navy boats after a close shave in May when the rebels fired at a patrol boat with a monitor aboard. Violence has since soared.

The Tigers did not comment on their previous demand that members of the monitoring mission from European Union nations leave after the EU banned them as terrorists.

"We don't want to comment on that at the moment since we have just sent the letter to the Norwegians," Puleedevan said.

Second bus route opens across divided Kashmir

AFP, Muzaffarabad

A second bus service rolled between the Indian and Pakistani zones of disputed Kashmir on Tuesday, 14 months after an initial launch was hailed as a symbol of peace between the rivals.

Pakistan and India agreed to start the Rawlakot to Poonch service to help reunite families living on either side of Kashmir's Line of Control (LoC), a de facto border that has split the mountainous region for decades.

Amid heavy security, India's ruling Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi launched the service when the bus arrived at Chakandabagh on the border after it had travelled the 10 kilometers (six miles) from Poonch in Indian Kashmir.

Passengers were to cross the frontier on foot before a separate bus took them to Rawlakot in the Pakistani zone.

"This bus service is bound to strengthen the relationship between India and Pakistan,"

Gandhi said.

The Indian bus is carrying 66 passengers, 36 of whom are from Pakistani Kashmir who would be returning home after a visit to the Indian zone, according to district police chief S.D.S. Jamwal.

On the Pakistani side 55 passengers gathered at Titirnot border post before boarding the bus. The bus then took the passengers just over a kilometre up to the LoC.

Passengers from both sides will cross the border on foot before being driven to their destinations. The buses themselves will not cross.

"This is a good omen for the divided Kashmiri families," Sardar Sikandar Hayat, the prime minister of Pakistani Kashmir, said ahead of the launch of the service.

The fortnightly service is the latest step in attempts to normalise ties between the nuclear-armed rivals, who have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947 -- two of them over Kashmir.

Taylor flown out for trial in the Hague



Charles Taylor

AFP, Freetown

Liberia's former president Charles Taylor, once one of Africa's most feared warlords, was flown out of Sierra Leone on an unmarked UN aircraft Tuesday to stand trial for some of the continent's worst war crimes.

Court officials and government sources said Taylor, 58, was en route to the Netherlands where he will be tried at a UN-backed special tribunal created to handle crimes committed during Sierra Leone's brutal civil war.

Dutch foreign ministry spokesman Gijs Gerlag said Taylor was being carried on a UN flight but would not say when he would land.

"He is en route for The Hague," he said, adding that he could not give any more information "be-

cause of security concerns."

Earlier, Taylor was transported by helicopter from the Freetown compound of the Special Court for Sierra Leone to Lungi international airport.

Court officials were at Lungi, 40 kilometres (25 miles) north of Freetown, where he boarded an unmarked UN plane, according to an airport source.

Taylor had been detained in Freetown since late March following his capture in Nigeria where he had been living in exile.

"I can confirm he was flown out this morning to The Hague," President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah's spokesman Kanji Daramy told AFP in Dakar by telephone.

"This follows the pronouncement by Britain that it will provide a

prison for Mr Taylor should he be found guilty for crimes for which he stands accused," Daramy said.

Taylor has been indicted by the Special Court on charges of crimes against humanity, war crimes and violations of international human rights.

He is seen as the single most powerful figure behind a series of civil wars in Liberia and neighbouring Sierra Leone between 1989 and 2003, which left around 400,000 people dead.

Specifically, he is accused of sponsoring and aiding rebel groups which perpetrated murder, sexual slavery, mutilation and conscription of child soldiers in Sierra Leone's civil war in exchange for a share in the lucrative diamond trade.

52 arrested in Sicily Mafia crackdown

AFP, Sicily

Fifty-two people, including the alleged heads of 13 Mafia families, were arrested at dawn Tuesday in Sicily in a major crackdown on organizing crime, anti-Mafia prosecutor Piero Grasso said.

Grasso told Italian news agency Ansa that the investigation had uncovered evidence "linking Mafia cells with businessmen and politicians," including a list of candidates in recent elections whom the crime group deemed "reliable."

"The leaders of 13 Mafia families were arrested," Grasso said, adding that the operation -- code-named "Gotha" -- was the result of a long investigation which enabled police to "piece together the current organizational chart of Palermo's Mafia association."

The 52 arrest warrants were issued by anti-Mafia investigative judges for extortion and participating in Mafia-linked associations.

Investigators relied on numerous secretly recorded conversations between alleged Mafia bosses that took place inside a garage in Palermo used as a meeting place.

Also used as evidence were documents, later decoded, found

among the personal belongings of the Mafia's "boss of bosses" Bernardo Provenzano, who was arrested on April 11 after evading capture for more than 40 years.

Investigators said their work had confirmed that Provenzano was, as suspected, the lynchpin figure in the "Cosa Nostra" and that all important decisions passed through him.

"Thanks to modern technology, it was possible to record an impressive number of conversations" that shed light on the structure and organization of the Palermo Mafia's leadership, Grasso said.

"The arrested Mafia bosses all have been convicted in the past for Mafia activities and all served their sentences. Once they got out of prison, they all plunged back in," he said.

Palermo's anti-Mafia unit now has hundreds of hours of intercepted conversation that took place over two years, all recorded in the little hideaway in which the alleged crime bosses "openly and calmly discussed their criminal business."

Having installed a scrambling device, they thought their conversations were protected from police eavesdropping.

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