

Six Imams kicked out of US flight: US Islamic group

AFP, Washington

Six Muslim imams were handcuffed and removed from a US Airways flight at a Minnesota airport over "suspicious activity," a US Islamic civil liberties group said yesterday.

The six Imams were questioned by authorities before being released Monday following their removal from the airplane at the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, according to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).

"The Imams, who were questioned Monday evening by authorities and then released, told CAIR that they were removed from the US Airways flight 'for no reason' and were 'humiliated' by being handcuffed and taken off the plane in the view of other passengers," the Islamic group said in a statement.

Syria, Iraq restore ties to combat militants

Tehran invites Iraqi, Syrian presidents for summit

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad/ Tehran

Iraq and Syria agreed to restore full diplomatic relations yesterday after a break of a quarter of a century, a move Iraq hopes may help stem what it says is Syrian support for militants.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem, making the first visit by a Syrian minister to Iraq since the US-led invasion in 2003, signed an accord with Iraqi counterpart Hoshiyar Zebari in which they agreed US troops should stay in Iraq for now.

Moualem had earlier called for the setting of a timetable for the withdrawal of 140,000 US troops. The document said troops should gradually withdraw once they were not needed.

US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe called on Syria to demonstrate its commitment to helping the Iraqi government. "One of the first steps Syria could take is to strengthen its border with Iraq and stop the



PHOTO: AFP

Visiting Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem (L) and Iraqi Foreign Affairs Minister Hoshiyar Zebari attend a press conference yesterday. Iraq and Syria announced the restoration of diplomatic ties severed 26 years ago and said they had agreed to cooperate on security matters.

flow of foreign fighters into that country," he said in a statement.

In an apparent bid to counter US influence in the region, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad invited his Iraqi and Syrian counterparts to a weekend summit in Tehran to tackle the chaos in Iraq, Iraqi lawmakers said Monday.

The diplomatic gambit coincided with a groundbreaking visit to Baghdad by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem, who was challenged over Damascus' role in supporting the Sunni insurgency.

The Iraqi government said diplomatic relations between the two countries severed nearly a quarter-century ago would be restored by Tuesday.

How far either foreign government can limit mounting sectarian violence in Iraq is unclear, as hundreds of deaths a week fuel fear and hatred at the heart of Iraqi society.

Nepali Maoists, govt ink peace deal

AFP, REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist insurgents and interim government signed a landmark peace accord yesterday to end a decade of violence that has claimed at least 12,500 lives in the impoverished Himalayan nation.

There was applause from hundreds of politicians, diplomats and journalists as rebel leader Prachanda -- whose name means "the fierce one" -- and Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala signed off on a deal that formally brings the insurgents into the political mainstream.

Under the deal, the rebels are to end their "people's war", join an interim government and enter parliament. They must also place their arms and their troops, who control large swathes of the countryside, under UN monitoring.

Once deadly foes, the multi-party

government and Maoist rebels have observed a ceasefire for more than six months after they cooperated in April to organise mass protests that forced King Gyanendra to restore parliament and end direct rule.

The peace deal leaves the king facing an uncertain future, with the strongly republican rebels vowing they will continue to campaign -- albeit peacefully -- until Nepal's almost 240-year-old monarchy is abolished.

Some of the parties in the coalition, however, favour a ceremonial role for the king, who is revered by many as a Hindu deity.

The rebels say they have abandoned violence and are undergoing a major political makeover, but they are also under pressure to put an end to activities such as alleged forced recruitment.

The deal cleared the way for the insurgents to join an interim

government that will oversee special elections for an assembly charged with preparing a new constitution.

The assembly vote would in turn satisfy the rebels' key demand to end a revolt in which more than 13,000 people have died. They have vowed to honour the outcome, which they believe will see the monarchy abolished.

The rebels and government have observed a ceasefire for more than six months, but human rights groups say extortion and conscription by the rebels have continued or even accelerated.

Early this month, the ruling seven-party alliance and Maoists struck a deal under which the guerrillas agreed to restrict their fighters to 28 camps and store their weapons in UN supervised containers.

Israeli forces launch deep Gaza raids

Two more Palestinians killed

REUTERS, Gaza

Israeli troops with tanks launched a deep raid into the Gaza Strip to strike a Palestinian militant stronghold yesterday, killing a gunman during clashes in which a woman also died, witnesses and hospital officials said.

Hospital officials named the militant killed in Gaza City's Zeitoun district as Aiman Hassanein, a senior member of the governing Hamas faction. Witnesses said his brother was detained by troops.

A 70-year-old Palestinian woman was shot dead in the Zeitoun clashes, hospital officials said. It was not immediately clear who had fired at her.

An Israeli military spokeswoman confirmed an operation was under way in Zeitoun but did not give further details.

Israeli forces also entered the nearby refugee camp of Jabalya as well as Beit Lahiya, a northern Gaza

town frequently used by militants to launch cross-border rocket salvos.

Israel has intensified its raids in Gaza since militants captured an Israeli soldier in a cross-border raid in June.

Israeli forces have killed more than 370 Palestinians in Gaza, about half of them civilians, since it began the offensive, Palestinian medical officials and residents say.

Three Israeli soldiers have been killed and a woman in an Israeli border town died in a Palestinian rocket strike.

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz said on Monday Israel would press its fight against Palestinian militants firing rockets against the Jewish state but had no intention of reoccupying Gaza, which it quit last year.

"I emphasise that our hand is outstretched in peace, but anybody who rejects it ... should know that ... we will do all we can to sever the hand which uses terror," Peretz said in a speech carried by Israeli radio.

Bush crosses time zones, eats many meals

AP, Bogor

Who eats two dinners in a day? President Bush for one, especially when he's crossing time zones.

Bush started Monday in Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon, in southern Vietnam, then hopped over to Indonesia for talks with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, an ally in the war on terror. The roughly six-hour visit ended with a state dinner in Bush's honor at Bogor Palace, the presidential mansion just south of the capital of Jakarta.

The media were not allowed in. Immediately afterward, Bush and his wife, Laura, boarded Air Force One for the 12-hour flight to Hawaii, their next stop, during which they will lose half a day.

Hu aims to boost trust with India

REUTERS, New Delhi

Chinese President Hu Jintao said in New Delhi yesterday that he hoped to strengthen the centuries-old amity between China and India and build a trusting relationship between the world's two most populous countries.

Hu, who arrived in New Delhi late on Monday for a four-day visit -- the first by a Chinese president in a decade and the second ever -- was given a ceremonial, military welcome at the British-built president's palace ahead of talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Both Asian giants are keen to develop their relationship, which is now marked by burgeoning two-way trade. But ties have been dogged by mistrust since a brutal border war of 1962, and they are still overshadowed by disputes over their frontier.

No major agreements were expected during Hu's visit.

"China and India are friendly countries and the exchanges of friendship between our two peoples date back centuries," Hu told reporters

after the welcoming ceremony.

"So the purposes of my visit to India is to strengthen our friendship, increase our mutual trust, expand our cooperation and chart a course for the future," he said, speaking through a translator.

Hu said he was looking forward to "deep-going" discussions with Indian leaders on issues of shared interests and working with them to further develop a strategic partnership.

"We have differences, but we want to build a cooperative relationship that is as wide and as deep as possible so that these differences lose their salience," a senior Indian foreign ministry official said.

Tension over the border was stirred last week when China's ambassador restated his country's claim to India's remote northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. The two countries' Himalayan border has never been demarcated.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Foreign Minister, Pranab Mukherjee (R) and Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Li Zhaoxing (L) sign agreements as Chinese President Hu Jintao (2L) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2R) look on in New Delhi yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Wounded Palestinian children are carried into the al-Shifa hospital following an air strike by the Israeli army on a vehicle in Gaza City Monday. Two Palestinian militants were killed and at least six other people wounded yesterday in an Israeli air strike on a vehicle in Gaza City.

Lanka air force pounds Tamil Tiger territory

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's air force bombed Tamil Tiger territory in the far north on Tuesday in what the military called a preemptive strike on a training base, but the rebels said it was an unprovoked attack near their stronghold.

The Tigers said at least 20 air force bombs fell near the village of Vaddakkachchi, which lies around 6 miles east of their northern nerve-centre of Kilinochchi.

The military said the air force had targeted a Sea Tiger training camp another 15 miles further southeast on a lagoon near the village of Puthukkudiyiruppu.

"We are being bombed," rebel military spokesman Rasiiah Ilanthiraiyan told Reuters. "The bombs are falling near Kilinochchi. The buildings in town are vibrating."

"They have dropped about 20 bombs so far," he added. "There was no provocation."

There were no immediate details of casualties or damage.

"According to air force information, there is a Sea Tiger training base at Puthukkudiyiruppu, so we've targeted that," said military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe.

"This was not due to provocation

as such. This was a known target. Every day the navy is getting hammered (in sea clashes), so to preempt that the air force has taken the target."

A litany of military clashes and attacks have killed more than 3,000 civilians, troops and Tiger fighters so far this year in a new chapter of the island's two-decade civil war.

Many ordinary Sri Lankans fear the violence will escalate now that the island's 2002 truce has disintegrated in all but name. Fighting since the conflict began in 1983 has killed more than 67,000 people.

Sri Lanka's main financial donors -- the United States, Japan, Norway and the European Union -- are meeting in Washington to discuss the island's deteriorating security situation, and are expected to call on Tuesday for a halt to hostilities and to the escalating rights abuses blamed on both sides.

President Mahinda Rajapakse, elected a year ago, has flatly rejected rebel demands for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east, where they already run a de facto state.

Tibetans breach security at Sino-India talks

AFP, New Delhi

Police arrested more than a dozen Tibetan activists in separate incidents in New Delhi Tuesday after they tried to storm venues of meetings between Indian and Chinese leaders, in protests that drew a rebuke from Beijing.

In one incident, four flag-draped Tibetan protesters managed to breach heavy security outside the ornate Hyderabad House, as Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Chinese President Hu Jintao held talks.

"China! Down, down," screamed a protester with 'Free Tibet' painted on his bare chest.

US 'trapped' in Iraq, says Annan

AFP, Geneva

US forces are trapped in Iraq, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan said yesterday, warning that Washington must find the right time to leave without plunging the country deeper into chaos.

"On the question of the military presence, it is a difficult issue. The US is in a way trapped in Iraq, trapped in the sense that it cannot stay and it cannot leave," Annan told a press conference.

"The timing of its departure will have to be optimal," he added.

An eventual withdrawal of US forces should "not lead to a further deterioration", Annan cautioned.

He said Washington should instead "try and get it to a level that when it withdraws, the Iraqis themselves will be able to maintain a situation that would ensure a reasonable secure environment".

The debate in the United States over options in Iraq has intensified in recent weeks, with the military reportedly ready to temporarily increase its troops there by up to 30,000 soldiers, while expanding training for Iraqi forces.

The Washington Post reported on Monday that three basic options had emerged from a strategy review at the Pentagon, led by a hybrid that would beef up US forces for a short period to dampen sectarian violence.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka army special motorcycle unit soldiers conduct a patrol through a flooded street in the capital Colombo yesterday. Heavy monsoon rains have flooded several parts of the island and caused the deaths of 45 people in three weeks.