

UN chief urges Iraq to suspend executions

AFP, United Nations

UN chief Ban Ki-moon on Saturday "strongly" urged the Iraqi government to suspend imminent executions amid an international outcry over the bungled hanging of Saddam Hussein a week ago.

Iraq's embattled prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, meanwhile, threatened to "review" relations with countries that criticised Saddam's execution and announced a new security crackdown in the chaos-wracked country.

In a statement released by the United Nations, Ban "strongly urged the Government of Iraq to grant a stay of execution to those whose death sentences may be carried out in the near future."

Ban's cabinet chief, Vijay Nambiar, sent a letter Saturday to Iraq's UN representative reiterating Ban's backing of a call by the top UN human rights official "for restraint by the Government of Iraq in the execution of death sentences imposed by the Iraqi High Tribunal," the statement said.

Abbas stands firm in standoff with Hamas

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas dug in his heels in a standoff with the ruling Hamas movement yesterday, amid fears that the political tensions could again erupt into deadly factional violence in Gaza.

Abbas told top officials from his Fatah party that he intended to go ahead with his plan to call early elections -- a move rejected by Hamas when it was first announced in mid-December, sparking interne-cine bloodshed.

"I will not go back on holding early parliamentary and presidential elections," Eissa Karaqaa, a senior Fatah official in Bethlehem, quoted Abbas as telling the Fatah closed-door meeting in the town on Sunday.

"This plan is not a tactic. All paths to forming a government of national unity are closed and there is no other choice except these elections," Abbas said, adding that

Fatah should "prepare" for the polls.

The Palestinian leader first issued his call for early polls on December 16, sparking armed clashes between Fatah and Hamas supporters that killed 15 people in Gaza before a truce was reached four days later.

Simmering factional tensions boiled over into armed clashes again last Wednesday, killing 16 people and wounding more than 70 others since then.

Israel weighed in on the Palestinian tensions on Sunday, with Deputy Prime Minister Shimon Peres warning that neither Fatah nor Hamas seemed fully in control of their forces.

"Both sides are trying to prevent civil war, but I'm not sure they're in full control of their forces," Peres told reporters before the weekly cabinet meeting. "Clearly civil war would be a tragedy for Palestinians, for peace and for Israel."

In the West Bank, around 400

Palestinians protested against the internecine violence.

"No to internal fighting!" shouted the protestors, who carried signs reading "Internal fighting is the last nail in the Palestinian coffin" and "We want law and order."

Gaza remained on edge on Sunday ahead of a huge Fatah rally planned for the afternoon in Gaza City to celebrate 42 years since the party's founding.

On Saturday, Abbas upped the stakes in his face-off with Hamas, when he demanded that it disband its interior ministry's "executive force," saying it was illegal and should be integrated into existing security structures.

"The executive force (controlled by Hamas) is illegal... and will be treated as such if it is not immediately integrated... into legal security services as stipulated by basic law," said a statement from the presidency.

Hamas slammed Abbas's call as

a "mistake", warned against a crackdown, and declared that it intended to more than double the size of the 5,500-strong armed force, taking it to 12,000 men.

"It's not true that the executive force is outside of the security services," Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, a key Hamas figure, said in Gaza late Saturday. "It works legally according to the orders of the interior ministry."

"There are certain people who don't want the Palestinian people to live in peace and stability. And they don't want the situation to calm down in order to create a serious and deep dialogue to reach a unity government."

Hamas deployed its "executive force" on the streets of Gaza in May two months after assuming power, despite Abbas's warnings that all armed troops needed to be integrated into security structures loyal to him.

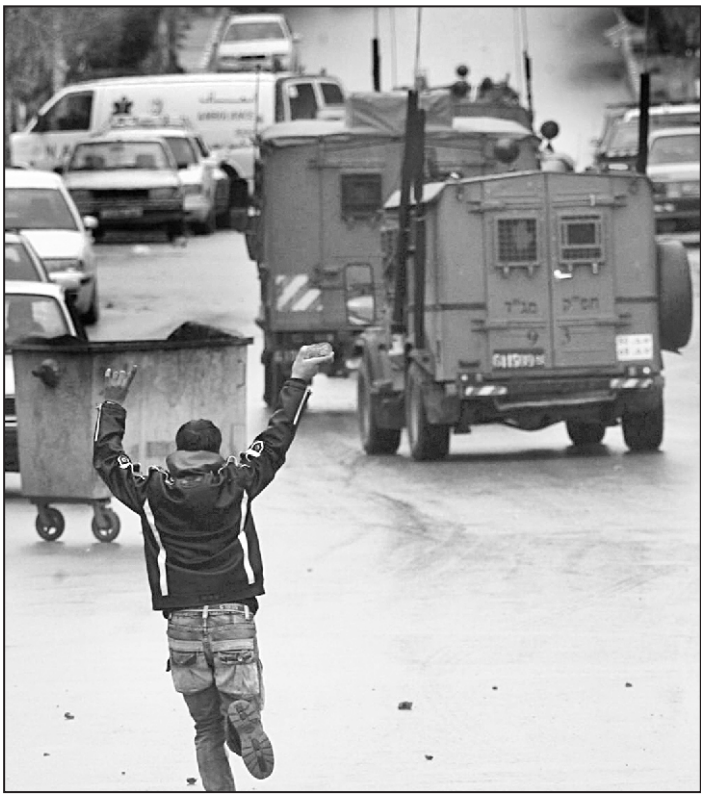


PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian youth throws stones at Israeli army vehicles during a military operation in the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday. The Israeli army arrested a total of eight Palestinians in Ramallah, Bethlehem, Tulkarm and Hebron Saturday night.

ETA bomb marks 'full stop' in peace process

Says Spanish PM

AFP, Madrid

In his strongest comments since a deadly ETA bombing a week ago, Spain's prime minister said Saturday that the blast marked a "full stop" in efforts to negotiate a lasting peace in the Basque region.

Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's remarks came after King Juan Carlos called for Spaniards to stand united in the face of terrorism as the capital marked a day of mourning.

Zapatero, whose left-wing government launched efforts to negotiate a lasting peace in March 2006 after an ETA ceasefire, had previously stopped short of saying the blast had destroyed his efforts.

Interior Minister Alfredo Perez Rubalcaba said on Tuesday that ETA "broke off, liquidated, finished the peace process" with the blast, but Zapatero himself had appeared to keep the door open.

Immediately after the bombing, Zapatero said only that he was "suspending" peace efforts, adding on Thursday that he was more determined than ever to see the process through.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters demonstrate against the bungled execution of Saddam Hussein outside a revered Shia shrine in Samarra yesterday.

Saddam was hanged in 'deplorable' way Says Brown

REUTERS, London

British finance minister Gordon Brown has condemned the way Saddam Hussein was hanged as "deplorable" -- in contrast to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who has so far stayed silent on the execution.

Brown, expected to take over as premier when Blair steps down this year, said: "Now that we know the full picture of what happened, we can sum this up as a deplorable set of events."

A mobile phone video showed observers taunting Saddam with shouts of "Go to hell" and chanting the name of a Shia cleric before the former Iraqi leader fell through a gallows trapdoor.

The images provoked international criticism and further inflamed

sectarian passions in Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has pledged to investigate the way the hanging was conducted.

Asked about the hanging when visiting a London hospital on Friday, Blair said: "I've decided to talk about health today. I will talk about all those other issues next week."

Blair was on holiday at the Miami home of pop star Robin Gibb of the Bee Gees when the execution took place.

President Bush has said Saddam's hanging should have been carried out in a "more dignified way" but argued that he received justice, unlike his victims.

Brown, laying out his stall as a future prime minister in a BBC TV interview to be broadcast on Sunday, said:

Iran vows to cooperate with UN atomic agency

AFP, Tehran

Iran vowed on Sunday to continue cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) despite the UN Security Council sanctions imposed over its nuclear programme.

"It is not on Iran's agenda to halt cooperation with the IAEA," foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini said. "Tehran's cooperation with the agency will continue within the previous framework."

The Iranian government said on Tuesday it was keeping open the option of quitting the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), if Western countries stepped up pressure on the Islamic republic over its atomic program.

Hosseini said "if a special condition is created, a decision will be made for that", without specifying Iran's reaction.

More troops for Iraq 'too little, too late' Says former Nato commander

AFP, London

The former commander of Nato forces in Kosovo, General Wesley Clark, said Sunday that sending more US troops to Iraq would be "too little, too late", and could worsen the situation for coalition forces.

US President George W Bush is expected to announce reinforcements for Iraq but Clark said the time for a military solution was past and a region-wide initiative was needed to try to end the bloody sectarian violence.

Such a recommendation was put forward in the US Iraq Study Group report last year and has been backed by Bush's key ally in Iraq and the so-called "war on terror", British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

"We've never had enough troops in Iraq," Clark, the former Supreme Allied Commander of Nato forces

from 1997-2000, wrote in Britain's Independent on Sunday newspaper.

"In Kosovo, we had 40,000 troops for a population of two million. For Iraq, that ratio would call for at least 500,000 troops, so adding 20,000 now is too little, too late."

"What the surge would do is put more American troops in harm's way, further undercut US forces' morale, and risk further alienation of elements of the Iraqi populace."

News reports in the United States last week said Bush would announce an increase in troop numbers in the coming days, estimating the figure between 9,000 and 40,000. Several outlets put the numbers at 20,000.

There are currently 132,000 US troops in Iraq as well as 17,000 members of the US-led coalition from 25 other countries, the Pentagon said Thursday.

US, N Korea to hold talks on Jan 22

AP, Seoul

The United States and North Korea have provisionally agreed to hold talks on a dispute over US financial restrictions against the communist regime in the week starting Jan 22, South Korea's foreign minister was quoted as saying yesterday.

Song Min-soon made the remark after arriving from Washington, where he held talks with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Friday, according to the Yonhap news agency.

"A date has not been set, but I understand that the North and the US provisionally agreed to hold the talks in the week starting Jan. 22," he told reporters. "I think it will be held around that time."

20 killed in El Salvador prison riots

AP, San Salvador

Riots erupted in a maximum-security prison in western El Salvador, leaving at least 20 inmates dead, officials said Saturday.

The first wave of rioting was sparked late Friday at the prison in Apanteos, 40 miles west of San Salvador, when a jailed gang member got into an argument with a guard as inmates were going into their cells to go to sleep, authorities said.



PHOTO: AP

A group of people look at the 22-foot snowman, Snowzilla in Anchorage, Alaska on Friday. Snowzilla may be a smash hit with shutterbugs, but some neighbours of the two-story high snowman say they're fed up with the hordes of onlookers clogging the street.

Alaska snowman has some neighbours fuming

AP, Anchorage

Snowzilla may be a smash hit with shutterbugs, but the towering snowman has detractors closer to home.

Some neighbours of the two-story high snowman say they're fed up with the hordes of gawkiers clogging their street.

"When you get 20 people out there in their cars, now the whole street comes to a stop and nobody can get through," said Anthony Bahler, who can see Snowzilla from his front window. "They just stand out there, in the middle of road, talking about a snowman."

Bahler's neighbour, Billy Powers, supervised construction of the original Snowzilla last year. Through the Internet, it became a media sensation, drawing crowds of visitors and TV crews from Japan and Russia before it melted in the spring.

This year, Powers resurrected the snowman and its giant hat made from tomato cages, corn cob pipe and beer-bottle eyes. At 22 feet, the new Snowzilla is six feet taller than its predecessor.

Once again, traffic is streaming through the neighbourhood.

"Everybody likes it," Powers said. "That's the reason I do it, really, I like the smiling faces."