

UN warns Iraq sliding into sectarian abyss

Bush defends Iraq policy in speech

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

A UN envoy said yesterday Iraq was sliding "into the abyss of sectarianism" and urged Iraqi political and religious leaders to halt the violence after two car bombs in a Baghdad market killed 88 people.

Shia Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki blamed the car bombs on followers of Saddam Hussein, whose botched execution last month angered many among his fellow minority Sunnis.

The US military said Iraqi and US troops were taking a "balanced approach" in attacking Shia and Sunni Arab militant groups -- apparently responding to charges by the once dominant Sunnis that Maliki's government has failed to

crack down on Shia militias loyal to some of his political allies.

Some 600 members of radical young Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's Mehdi Army are in custody, the military said.

Cracking down on Shia militias, US commanders say, is new and is key to a planned new security operation in Baghdad, backed by close to 20,000 American reinforcements. President George W. Bush is expected to defend sending more troops in his annual State of the Union address to Congress later on Tuesday.

A US military statement said that in the past 45 days, 52 raids had targeted the Mehdi Army, and 42 were focused on Sunni Arab insurgents. It did not say when

600 Mehdi Army members who are awaiting prosecution were detained.

Monday's blasts killed at least 88 and wounded 160 at a second-hand goods market in Bab al-Sharqi, a busy commercial area that is home to both Sunni Arab and Shia shopkeepers and traders in central Baghdad.

UN envoy Ashraf Qazi condemned the attacks and called on politicians and religious leaders to stop the violence and "save the country from sliding further into the abyss of sectarianism."

"These deplorable outrages again underscore the urgent need for all Iraqis to reject violence and together choose the path of peace and reconciliation," Qazi said in a

statement.

Maliki has vowed to tackle all illegal groups, regardless of sect, in the new crackdown in Baghdad, which senior Shia allies say may be the last chance to avert a collapse of the new state brought about by the US invasion of 2003.

Meanwhile, President George W. Bush prepared to defend his unpopular Iraq strategy in the annual State of the Union address on Tuesday, with support for the US leader at an all-time low.

The president is scheduled to speak at 9:00 pm Tuesday (0200 GMT Wednesday) at a time when US forces in Iraq face some of the worst violence since the March 2003 invasion.

Strike paralyses life in Lebanon

REUTERS, Beirut

Thousands of Lebanese protesters blocked main roads in Beirut and around the country with rubble and burning tyres yesterday at the start of a general strike called by the opposition to try to topple the government.

A gunman fired on protesters in the ancient Christian town of Byblos, wounding three people, security sources said. Soldiers arrested the gunman and seized weapons from his house.

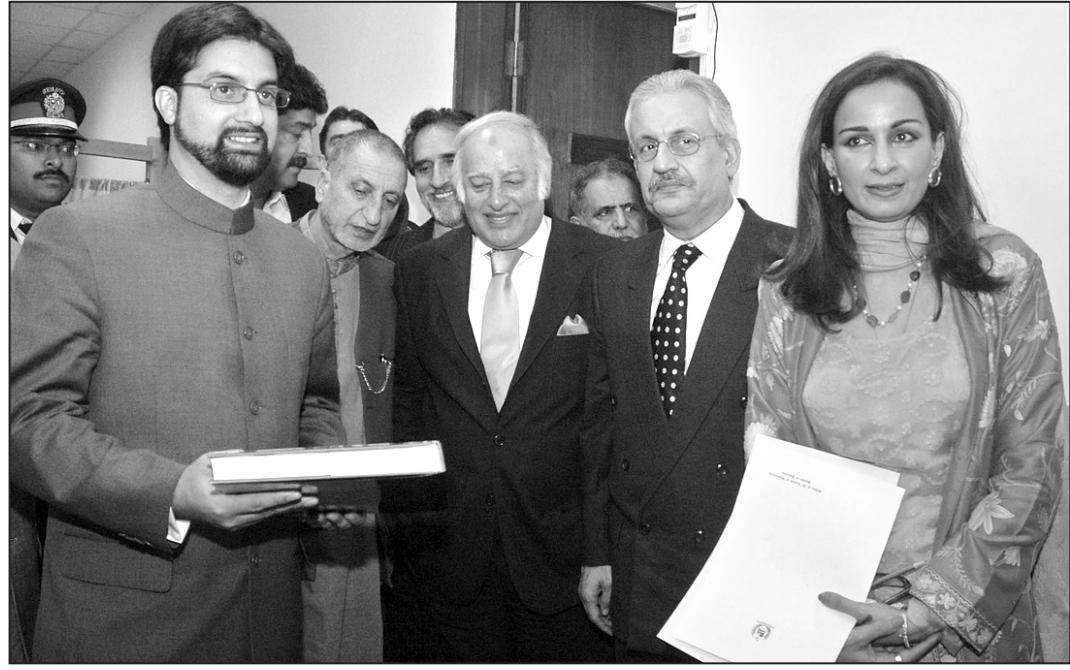
Two protesters were wounded in a similar shooting in Batroun. No other gunfire was reported during the demonstrations across Lebanon, but some scuffles broke out between protesters and pro-government loyalists, especially in Christian areas.

The roads to Lebanon's only international airport and to Beirut port were blocked and several Arab and international airlines suspended flights to Beirut, though the national flag carrier Middle East Airlines (MEA) made no announcement on its plans.



PHOTO: AFP

A Lebanese soldier clears a road at Nahr al-Mot area at the northern entrance of Beirut yesterday. Five people were wounded by gunshots at dawn Tuesday as militants blocked roads across the country at the start of a one-day strike called by the opposition in its latest bid to topple the Western-backed government.



Putin eyes arms, nuke reactor sales to India

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin flies to India this week hoping to move Moscow closer to its long-term Asian partner and to seal lucrative new contracts for nuclear reactors and arms sales.

Putin will meet Indian leaders on Thursday and Friday and attend as guest of honour official celebrations of India's Republic Day -- a reflection of the historically close ties between the two countries.

India and Russia "have been time-tested partners and friends and we will continue to be just that in future", Putin told Indian journalists in an interview released by the Kremlin on Tuesday.

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov, who arrived in India ahead of

Putin, said on Monday he expected a multi-billion-dollar deal to build additional nuclear reactors.

Two Russian reactors are already under construction in India, where rapid economic growth is driving a demand for additional supplies of energy.

Ivanov also said Russia would pitch its MiG-35 combat jet in an Indian tender for 126 fighter aircraft and told reporters that Moscow was interested in inviting Indian investment in the Sakhalin-3 oil and gas exploration blocks in the Pacific.

After the Cold War alliance between Moscow and New Delhi collapsed together with the Soviet Union, Russia has maintained a "strategic partnership" with India, supporting its Asian ally's quest for a bigger international role.

Nepal slaps curfews to halt anti-govt protests

Unrest clouds peace process

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Authorities imposed day curfews in two southeastern Nepal towns yesterday after violent anti-government protests by ethnic Madhesis, which have clouded a peace process aimed at ending a decade of civil war.

Four people were killed and dozens wounded in Monday's clashes between police and protesters from Nepal's southern plains who say they have been sidelined by the peace deal that brought former Maoist rebels into the political mainstream.

The latest violence in the town of Lahan, 125km southeast of the capital Kathmandu, was the worst since the November peace deal that ended a decade of killings, abductions and disappearances that left 13,000 people dead.

The government held an emergency meeting on Tuesday and called for talks with political groups involved in the conflict, including the Madhesi People's Rights Forum that had organised the protests.

The forum says the peace deal offers little for people living in the

Terai, which is the bread basket of impoverished Nepal.

"We want a federal structure of government and regional autonomy for Terai ... We want elimination of discriminations against the people of Terai including racial, lingual, cultural and economic," the group's president Upendra Yadav told Reuters.

The Terai region, home to nearly half of Nepal's 26 million people, is a narrow strip of fertile flat land. Its Madhesi inhabitants share closer cultural links with neighbouring India than with Nepalis in the Himalayan mountains of the north.

Pakistan summons US, British envoys over border killing

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday said it had summoned the US and British envoys after coalition forces in Afghanistan killed a Pakistani soldier and wounded two others in cross-border fire.

US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and British High Commissioner Robert Brinkley were called to the Pakistani foreign office separately and a "strong protest" was lodged with coalition authorities, an official statement said.

In a major crackdown launched in the past few weeks against the Mahdi Army -- the militia headed by Sadr and considered the biggest security threat to Iraq by the Pentagon -- more than 600 fighters and 16 militia leaders have been detained, the military said.

"There are currently over 600 illegal Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia in detention awaiting prosecution from the government of Iraq," a statement said.

It said Iraqi and US forces had also detained 16 high-level militia men and killed one commander in a series of operations against the Mahdi Army, known for its fiercely anti-American stance.

"They were told that the coalition authorities should investigate the incident and ensure that such incidents do not occur in the future," the foreign office statement said.

The diplomats expressed "deep regrets and said that the incident was being investigated," it added.

The casualties occurred on Monday afternoon when coalition troops stationed on the Afghan side of the porous border fired upon one of Pakistan's checkpoints near Shawal, in the troubled North Waziristan tribal district.

Suicide bomber kills 10 in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

A suicide bomber blew himself up outside a US military base in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, killing 10 people and wounding 14 others, an Afghan official said.

The bomber approached a group of Afghan men who were waiting outside the base in the city of Khost, in Khost province, before triggering an explosive strapped to his chest, said Jamal Arsalah, the province's governor.

Maj Matt Hackathorn, a US military spokesman, confirmed the blast, but said that there were no US military casualties known so far.

Jamal said the men were daily workers, lining up to get into the base at the time of the blast.

Suicide attacks have increased as Taliban militants intensify their insurgency against Afghan government forces and foreign troops. According to US military figures, there were 139 suicide attacks during 2006, up from 27 in 2005.

In 2006, Taliban carried out a record number of attacks suicide and otherwise and some 4,000 people died in the insurgency-related violence, according to a tally by The Associated Press based on reports from Afghan, Nato and coalition officials.

Khost, where Tuesday's attack was carried out, is a former al-Qaeda stronghold on the mountainous Pakistani border that has been a focus of militant activity.

600 Sadr fighters captured in Iraq

3 more US troops, 8 Iraqis killed

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi and US forces have captured more than 600 fighters loyal to firebrand Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, the US military said yesterday, after a day of carnage that left 100 dead in a string of bombings in and around Baghdad.

In fresh attacks, three more US troops have been killed in Iraq, the American military announced on Tuesday, raising to 30 the number of deaths it has suffered this month.

A marine "died Sunday from wounds sustained due to enemy action" during an operation south of Baghdad, and a soldier died Monday in similar circumstances in the restive western province of Anbar, a military statement said.

Eight people were killed in violence in Baghdad and the northern Iraqi city of Mosul Tuesday, security and medical sources said.

ARF holds 1st operational security exercise

AFP, Singapore

Asia's leading security forum took a crucial step from talk to action this week, carrying out its first operational exercise aimed at shoring up defences against maritime security threats.

Singapore's defence ministry said 21 nations including the United States, Russia and Asian powers China, India and Japan were involved in the onshore simulated exercise held Monday and Tuesday.

This is the first time an operational exercise has been carried out under the umbrella of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), it said, signalling the security grouping's progression.

Such exercises are aimed at honing the interoperability of the different security agencies in dealing with potential threats, delegates said.

"With this exercise, we have taken a significant step in the right direction," said Singapore Navy fleet commander Rear Admiral Tan Kai Hoe.