

Embattled Bush pleads for patience over Iraq

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush pleaded late Tuesday with a weary US public to give his unpopular Iraq strategy a chance, warning that a US defeat could ignite an "epic battle" engulfing the entire Middle East.

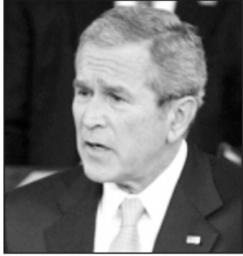
"For America, this is a nightmare scenario. For the enemy, this is the objective," Bush said in his annual State of the Union speech, striking a more defiant than downbeat tone despite his mounting political woes.

Two weeks after unveiling a new strategy centered on sending 21,500 more soldiers into battle, the embattled president gave no ground to his critics and urged lawmakers and the US public: "Give it a chance to work."

Bush, fighting to save his presidency and derail pending congressional action against his Iraq plan, also laid out a handful of domestic policies to cut US gasoline use and pollution, expand health care, and reform immigration.

But the chief goal of the 49-minute televised speech was to win a reprieve on Iraq from a skeptical US public and an increasingly hostile US Congress, led by opposition Democrats for the first time in a dozen years.

With his poll numbers mired at record lows, and many Americans dubious that the war launched in March 2003 can be won, Bush insisted that: "On this day, at this hour, it is still within our power to shape the



outcome of this battle."

"So let us find our resolve, and turn events towards victory," he said, as lawmakers prepared to take up symbolic legislation sharply critical of deepening US military involvement in the war.

Mindful that roughly two in three Americans oppose his plan, Bush said that he and US military commanders had looked at all options in Iraq. "In the end, I chose this course of action because it provides the best chance for success," he said.

The president also acknowledged a dramatic upsurge in sectarian violence, telling Americans leery of seeing US troops caught in the crossfire: "This is not the fight we entered in Iraq, but it is the fight we are in."

That appeared to be a reversal from Bush's promise, made at an October 25, 2006 press conference,

that "Americans have no intention of taking sides in a sectarian struggle or standing in the crossfire between rival factions."

In fact, while Bush tied events in Iraq to the war on terrorism -- which he declared in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks -- he focused on the threat of future sectarian strife.

"If American forces step back before Baghdad is secure, the Iraqi government would be overrun by extremists on all sides," he said.

"We could expect an epic battle between Shia extremists backed by Iran, and Sunni extremists aided by Al-Qaeda and supporters of the old regime. A contagion of violence could spill out across the country, and in time the entire region could be drawn into the conflict," he said.

In an answer to global critics who accuse him of neglecting climate change, Bush called for a 20-percent cut in US gasoline use by 2017, a move the White House said would lead to steep cuts in emissions partly blamed for global warming.

He also called for a doubling of US emergency oil reserves by 2027, and made a renewed push for a sweeping immigration reform plan that, with its emphasis on a guest worker program, could draw more support from Democrats than from his own Republicans.

Bush also called for tax code-based health care reforms that seemed to have little chance of becoming law, and

vowed to submit spending plans in two weeks that would balance the budget in five years.

He congratulated the Democrats on winning the November 2006 elections, retaking Congress for the first time since 1994, and paid a special tribute to Pelosi as the first woman speaker of the House.

The official Democratic response to the speech, delivered by Senator Jim Webb -- a Vietnam veteran whose son is a Marine in Iraq -- was tough and blunt.

"The president took us into this war recklessly," said Webb. "The majority of the nation no longer supports the way this war is being fought, nor does the majority of our military, nor does Congress. We need a new direction."

Webb said the Democrats are calling for "an immediate shift toward strong regionally based diplomacy, a policy that takes our soldiers off the streets of Iraq's cities and a formula that will in short order allow our combat forces to leave Iraq."

He then invoked past Republican presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower, describing how the former helped heal domestic class divisions and the latter brought US soldiers home from the Korean war.

"Tonight we are calling on this president to take similar action," Webb said.

"If he does, we will join him. If he does not, we will be showing him the way."



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala (C) addresses members of parliament, while Maoist chairman Prachanda (R) and Nepal Communist Party General Secretary Madhav Kumar Nepal (L) listen, at a reception in Kathmandu yesterday.



Sonia most popular politician in India: poll

AFP, New Delhi

Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born chief of India's ruling Congress party, is the country's favourite politician, according to an opinion poll published yesterday.

The poll, carried by the Hindustan Times newspaper, also found that most Indians think Prime Minister Manmohan Singh -- ushered into office after Gandhi turned down the job in 2004 -- is doing a good job.

Former Indian premier Atal Behari Vajpayee of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fell behind Gandhi, who turned 60 last month, in the popularity stakes, with 18.5 percent of votes against 28.3 percent for the Congress leader.

Opinion polls in the past had put Gandhi behind Vajpayee, credited with bringing India out of the nuclear closet in 1998.

The New Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies interviewed 15,373 randomly selected people from 19 of India's 29 states for the study, commissioned by the Hindustan Times and CNN-IBN news channel.

The poll also found that the Congress party and its allies would win 300 of the 545 seats in parliament if mid-term elections were called now.

Congress and its allies currently have 222 seats, and the government is surviving with the support of 61 Communist MPs.

According to the survey, Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist party-led opposition coalition would get only 115 seats, down from the 189 it now has in parliament.

Although Prime Minister Singh came in third in the political popularity stakes with 13.1 percent of votes, 76 percent of the respondents said they were satisfied with his government.

Nepal govt, Maoists promise to work with UN monitors

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government and Maoists pledged yesterday to work with UN peace monitors, a day after the UN Security Council agreed to send a team to back up the Himalayan nation's historic peace process.

"The UN Security Council's decision is definitely welcome," a spokesman for the former Maoist rebels, Krishna Bahadur Mahara, told AFP.

"We are looking forward to working together with the UN team, so that free and fair constituent assembly elections can be held on time," he said, referring to plans for new elections to be held in the country this year.

A government spokesman also welcomed the decision, which he said had been taken "in accordance with the spirit of Nepal's peace process."

"We are hopeful the UN mission will successfully oversee the whole peace process," Dilendra Prasad Badu said.

Both sides had asked the world body to support the nine-month-old peace process until elections to a body that will rewrite the constitution permanently are held later this year.

The Maoists have already started liaising with UN officials, after agreeing to register their weapons and renounce violence as part of last year's peace deal to end

their bloody and decade-long "people's war".

"We are already engaged in the verification of weapons and troops with the UN arms monitoring team, and so far everything is working smoothly," the Maoist spokesman said.

The Security Council on Tuesday unanimously agreed to set up a small UN political mission in Nepal.

"This resolution now opens the way for the recruitment of the full complement of arms monitors and electoral advisors so that the UN support is on the ground as quickly as possible," a UN source said.

The UN mission to Nepal will eventually comprise 186 military monitors assisted by about 60 civilians, officials said.

The Maoists formally entered parliament last week after a new temporary constitution was approved that brought the former rebels into an interim parliament and stripped King Gyanendra of his executive powers.

The Maoists are to join the cabinet after negotiations on which posts they will hold.

The new parliament will oversee elections expected in June 2007 to a body that will draft a new permanent constitution and tackle the controversial issue of the monarchy's fate.

Watergate plotter Howard Hunt dead

AFP, Miami

Howard Hunt, the veteran CIA spy who helped plan the break-in at Washington's Watergate complex which brought down president Richard Nixon in the most notorious political scandal in US history, has died at 88, his church said.

Hunt, who reportedly had battled pneumonia, plotted the night-time burglary on June 17, 1972 at the Watergate offices of the Democratic National Committee, together with fellow White House conspirator G. Gordon Liddy.

The accidental discovery of the break-in snowballed into the scandal which embroiled the White House and led to Nixon's stepping down.

"He passed away today, in Miami," said a source who did not wish to be identified at Hunt's Miami Shores Presbyterian church, where he was a regular worshipper.

"He died from natural causes." Hunt served 33 months in jail for conspiracy, wiretapping and burglary for his part in Watergate, which revealed the existence of a secret White House slush fund, sparked a cover-up and eventually saw Nixon become the only US president to resign in August 1974.

Fellow Nixon operative Liddy went to prison for four-and-a-half years for the break-in, which aimed to plant listening devices to spy on the Democrats during the Republican president's reelection campaign.

Hunt's phone number was famously found in address books belonging to the Watergate burglars, and helped investigators and famed Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein link the break-in to Nixon's campaign.

Immigration sweep in US

AFP, Los Angeles

More than 750 foreign nationals have been expelled from the United States or are facing deportation following a week-long sweep by immigration authorities, officials said Tuesday.

A statement from the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement said Operation "Return to Sender" had netted hundreds of criminal illegal aliens and immigration fugitives in five districts near Los Angeles.

Among those detained were two fugitives from Mexico wanted for murder, the statement said.

4 killed in Assam violence

AFP, Guwahati

Four people including a ruling Congress party official were killed overnight in India's northeastern Assam state, authorities said, bringing the toll from a three-week wave of violence to at least 87.

Rebels believed to belong to Assam's dominant separatist group, the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), late Tuesday shot dead Chandra Chutia, the leader of a village unit of the Congress party in Assam's eastern Dibrugarh district.

"The ULFA rebels fired at Chutia from close range with automatic weapons, killing him on the spot," a police official in Assam's main city of Guwahati said.

The rebels threatened 10 days ago to target Congress party workers and leaders if New Delhi did not cease a military offensive launched against the outfit in the wake of militant attacks that killed 73 people earlier this month.

In a separate incident, three civilians were shot dead early Wednesday by paramilitary soldiers who took them for rebels, a police official said.

The three young men were riding a motorcycle when they were asked to halt at a security checkpoint at an oil installation but kept moving, police official B.J. Mahanta told AFP from eastern Sibsagar district.

"The troopers opened fire at the youths, killing two on the spot. Another died in a hospital," said Mahanta.

A government inquiry was ordered into the shooting after local residents in Geleki town, some 370 kilometres from Guwahati, identified the three as traders, the official said.

The deaths are the latest in a three-week wave of violence, including 12 explosions in the past seven days in the oil, tea and timber-rich state.

PUTIN ARRIVES IN DELHI TODAY

Russia, India agree on two arms deals

AFP, New Delhi

India and Russia agreed two arms deals yesterday meant to bring bilateral military ties into a new era, a day before Russian President Vladimir Putin's arrival here for a two-day summit.

At a signing ceremony, members of a bilateral military-technical commission signed a contract for joint production of RD-33 jet engines and a protocol of intent on joint development and production of multi-purpose transport planes.

"Russian-Indian military-technical cooperation has a large-scale and dynamic character, and is a real manifestation of the strategic partnership of our countries," Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov said at the ceremony.

The two sides also discussed further cooperation on development of the BRAHMOS cruise missile, joint development and production of fifth-generation fighter planes, and future supplies and licensed production of MIG35 jet engines, Ivanov said.

Although about 70 percent of India's military hardware is of Soviet and Russian origin, the relationship has shifted as New Delhi has turned to other sellers and come to favour joint production to simple purchases.

"Our cooperation today is not just a simple buyer-seller relationship," Indian Minister of Defence A.K. Antony said.

The deals came on the eve of a two-day summit between Putin and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that will culminate in Friday's Republic Day parade, where the Russian leader will be guest of honour.

Ivanov was set to meet with Indian National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan, Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, and Singh later

Wednesday, when he said talks would turn to nuclear and space cooperation.

The packed agenda reflects the urgency of updating the countries' traditional ties -- which Ivanov called "one of Russia's main foreign policy priorities" -- for a new era.

Putin told news agency PTI that "somewhere by 2010, we can

Russia's resources," Singh said in an interview published Wednesday in Russian daily newspaper Izvestia.

Indian Oil Minister Murlu Deora said he would meet Putin separately on Thursday to press for a greater participation for Indian oil companies in Russia's energy market.

Deora said New Delhi was



PHOTO: AFP

Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov (L) shakes hands with Indian Minister of External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday.

achieve the level of 10 billion dollars' worth of (trade) turnover," up from about 3.1 billion dollars currently.

One of the key issues on the summit agenda is energy cooperation, a priority for India, which imports about 70 percent of its fuel requirements.

"There is a clear compatibility between India's demands and

looking for a stake in the Sakhalin-3 project and Vankor -- two vast oil and gas fields in eastern Russia.

India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corporation already owns a 20 percent stake in Russia's Sakhalin-1 field, which brings India 2.4 million tonnes of crude a year.

Muslims see no conflict between Islamic law and democracy

AFP, Washington

Muslims worldwide believe Islamic law is compatible with democracy and most admire values championed by the US but doubt Washington is serious about implementing them overseas, according to a poll released Tuesday.

The Gallup poll, conducted in the Palestinian territories as well as nine predominantly Muslim countries representing more than 80 percent of the global Muslim population, showed that majorities believe Sharia law and democracy can co-exist in a government and that Islamic law should be at least a source of legislation.

In Egypt, for example, 66 percent of those polled said Sharia must be the only source of legislation while in Pakistan 60 percent felt that way, in Iran 17 percent and in Turkey nine percent.

Interestingly, Gallup posed the same question to Americans, 55 percent of whom felt that the Bible must play a role in legislation.

Dalia Mogahed, a senior analyst at Gallup and executive director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, said she was surprised at

the findings which send a message to the US administration that it should rethink its policies when dealing with the Muslim world.

"This poll tells the United States that the rise of Islamic parties and their wins in elections are something that is not going to go away and that continuing to work on creating a secular alternative might not necessarily result in the kinds of electoral wins that they expect," Mogahed told AFP.

She added that the votes cast for Islamic parties should also not be viewed by Washington as simply protest votes as they reflect people's political values which cannot be ignored.

"If democracy is a stabilizing force that the US hopes to foster in the Middle East, that will mean engaging those people that the public is saying they want," Mogahed said. "There will have to be a greater openness to religiously oriented parties as long as they stay within the political process and don't resort to violence."

The poll found that though religion plays an important part in the daily lives of most of those questioned, they did not believe

religious leaders should directly be in charge of drafting legislation.

Overwhelming majorities -- 94 percent in Egypt and 92 percent in Iran -- also believe a constitution should include guarantees for free speech.

As to US foreign policy, the majority in several countries, including Iran and Pakistan, said they doubt Washington will allow people in the region to fashion their own political future without direct US influence.

They also don't believe the US is serious about supporting the establishment of democracy in Muslim countries.

The Gallup poll was conducted in Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Turkey and the Palestinian territories.

It involved about 1,000 adults who were interviewed in person in each country and was carried out between August and October of last year.

They survey in the Palestinian territories was conducted between December 2005 and January 2006.