

US warns Iran to stop aiding Iraqi insurgents

Tehran kicks off revolution fete with nuke defiance

REUTERS, AFP, Washington/ Tehran

Iran is supplying Iraqi insurgents with weapons technology used to kill American troops, a senior US diplomat said on Wednesday, sending another warning to Iran against interfering in Iraq.

"We have picked up individuals who we believe are giving very sophisticated explosive technology to Shia insurgent groups who then use that technology to target and kill American soldiers," said Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns.

"It's a very serious situation. And the message from the United States is, Iran should cease and desist."

The United States has been tracking Iranian involvement in Iraqi insurgent attacks for about two years and has found increasing

evidence that Iran has given assistance to Shia in Southern Iraq, Burns said in an interview with NPR taped for broadcast on Thursday.

"They have attacked British soldiers near Basra and they've now begun to mount those operations throughout the country - at least in the Baghdad region as well," Burns said.

Washington officials have charged that Iran is providing Shias with high-grade explosives capable of tearing through the armour on military vehicles.

The Bush administration has repeatedly warned Iran against fuelling violence in Iraq and US forces have detained a number of Iranian officials in raids over the past month.

"We warned Iran privately on a number of occasions over the last

year and a half and the Iranians, of course, did not appear to listen to that, so now we've begun to detain those Iranian officials," Burns said in the interview.

"We think it's absolutely within our rights to do so under Article 51 of the UN charter, which is self-defence."

Washington accuses Tehran of undermining efforts to stabilize Iraq and of pursuing nuclear weapons. Iran says its nuclear ambitions are for generating electricity.

President Bush said in an interview that the conflict over Iran's nuclear ambitions can be resolved peacefully. But he repeated a vow the United States would respond firmly if Iran stirs up violence in Iraq.

"I'm also concerned about Iranian influence into Iraq and have made it clear to the Iranians that if

we catch them moving weapons they'll be dealt with," Bush told the Wall Street Journal in an interview posted on its Web site on Wednesday.

Bush's tough comments have revived speculation in Washington about a possible US attack on Iran.

Meanwhile, Iran yesterday kicked off a series of anniversary festivities for the Islamic revolution by shrugging off UN sanctions over its nuclear programme and urging national unity against US "conspiracies".

Iranian officials have promised a major announcement of progress in its controversial programme during the 10-day celebration, but leaders first focused on emphasising Iran's defiance in the nuclear standoff and its position of strength.

Israel PM quizzed by Lebanon war commission

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was being grilled yesterday by an Israeli commission probing failures of the Lebanon war, amid a string of scandals that have left his government teetering.

The premier, whose approval ratings have slumped to unprecedented lows, became the last in a string of about 70 senior political and military officials to testify before the government commission since it was set up in September.

The panel was set up amid heavy public criticism of the country's leadership over the 34-day war against the Hezbollah militia that failed to achieve its main goals of freeing two captured soldiers and halting rocket fire.

Many observers believe Olmert's future depends on the outcome of the commission and that if directly blamed for any failures, he could be forced to resign in keeping with growing public calls for his head to roll.



Chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Government, Sonia Gandhi (R) watches performance of folk dancers during the 21st Surajkund Crafts Mela (fair) in Faridabad, some 30km south of New Delhi Wednesday. The annual Surajkund Crafts Mela takes place from February 1 to 15 and attracts artisans from across the country and also from various Saarc countries to showcase their traditional crafts and culture.



Sri Lanka's leader of the opposition Ranil Wickremesinghe (L) talks with former Indian prime minister and leader of the BJP Atal Bihari Vajpayee (C) as India's leader of the opposition Lal Krishna Advani looks on during a meeting at Vajpayee's residence in New Delhi yester. Wickremesinghe is in India on a five-day visit.

CASH-FOR-HONOURS PROBE Blair quizzed again

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has been questioned by police for a second time over a "cash-for-honours" probe clouding his final months in office, his Downing Street office said yesterday.

Blair was interviewed last Friday as a witness in the investigation into alleged illicit financing of his ruling Labour Party, rather than as a suspect, it said in a statement.

"Last Friday the prime minister was briefly interviewed by the police as a witness," said Downing Street, adding that the questioning -- which lasted less than an hour -- was kept secret at the request of police.

The announcement came just two days after Lord Michael Levy, his Middle East envoy and chief fundraiser, was arrested for a second time in the probe.

Two weeks ago, another key figure close to Blair, Ruth Turner, director of government relations at

his Downing Street office, was also arrested.

Levy was arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to pervert the course of justice before being released on bail, while Turner was held on suspicion of breaching the Honours Act 1925 and perverting the course of justice.

Their arrests have prompted speculation that the police investigation is snowballing. Officers investigating the case requested a news blackout on the interview, which was only lifted Thursday.

The so-called "cash-for-honours" probe was launched last March and has seen Blair and his entire cabinet interviewed by detectives.

It is trying to establish if his Labour party and other parties illegally offered seats in Britain's unelected upper chamber of parliament, the House of Lords, in return for financial assistance.

Grenade hits office of Kashmiri separatists

Thousands greet militants on return from Pak trip

REUTERS, AFP, Srinagar

Suspected Muslim militants threw a grenade at the main office of Kashmir's separatist alliance nearly a week after a senior leader called on guerrillas to support peace moves, but no one was hurt, police said.

Thousands welcomed moderate separatist leaders in Indian Kashmir home yesterday after a month of peace talks in Pakistan.

The attack on the All Parties Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference headquarters late on Wednesday came days after some of its leaders travelled to Pakistan for meetings with officials and top Kashmiri militants based there.

"The grenade exploded inside the premises of the Hurriyat office

damaging a vehicle," a police official said.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack.

Minwaiz Umar Farooq, chairman of Hurriyat, returned to Srinagar yesterday along with two senior separatist leaders after the Pakistan visit.

Chanting "We want freedom" and "Long live Pakistan," supporters on rooftops of cars, buses and jeeps cheered the leaders as they appeared in cars from the summer capital Srinagar's high-security airport.

Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, the head cleric at Srinagar's main mosque, travelled with close associates last month to Pakistan in a bid to influence a peace process between New Delhi and Islamabad over the dis-

puted Kashmir region.

The moderate leaders, as opposed to hardline separatists who advocate violence to overturn New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir, met Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf among others.

The moderate group has faced criticism and violence for advocating an end to an insurgency in Indian Kashmir that has claimed at least 44,000 lives since 1989.

On Wednesday a grenade was thrown at Farooq's headquarters by suspected militants but no one was injured, police said. Last month militants tried to bomb Farooq's house but were thwarted.

India and Pakistan began a peace process in January 2004 aimed at reducing a tense military standoff over Kashmir.

Nepali PM promises federal state

Ethnic leader urges Koirala to act

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's prime minister promised on Wednesday to turn Nepal into a federal state after this year's constituent assembly elections, a move to stem protests by ethnic Madhesi people in which 11 people have died.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala also vowed to redraw constituencies for the planned vote, the first in eight years, on the basis of population and geography to raise the representation of different groups, including the Madhesi people, in the assembly.

Hours after his comments, Madhesi protesters clashed with police in Biratnagar, Koirala's home town in southeast Nepal. A police officer and a protester were killed, police said.

Protesters ransacked a police post and stole a pistol, two rifles, a police officer said.

A group behind recent bloody unrest in southeastern Nepal urged

yesterday the nation's prime minister to act swiftly on his offer of talks to prevent further deadly protests.

The Mahadhesi Janadhikar Forum welcomed the premier's pledge on Wednesday for discussions to resolve the unrest in Terai region, the impoverished lowlands bordering India.

"We welcome the call for dialogue, we are in favour of it. But the government should form immediately a team," said Upendra Yadav, leader of the forum, the main group involved in the protests.

"The government is not taking the unrest seriously enough," Yadav told AFP.

At least two towns remained under curfew on Wednesday as the protests continued to cripple Terai, Nepal's economic and industrial hub which borders India.

Protests from Madhesi people, who live in Nepal's fertile southern lowlands, have cast a shadow over the landmark deal in 2006 that declared an end to the decade-old

Maoist revolt in which more than 13,000 people were killed.

The constituent assembly, a key demand of the former Maoist rebels, is meant to draw up a permanent constitution for the country and map out its political future.

"The new constitution to be prepared by the constituent assembly will create a federal democratic system," Koirala, wearing a black Nepali cap and a matching jacket, said in a nationally televised address.

The move is seen aimed at ending centuries of central rule and appeasing ethnic groups complaining of government neglect.

"We are passing through epoch-making times in the history of our country. Therefore, everyone must contribute to make free, fair and peaceful elections possible," Koirala said.

Palestinian truce enters third day

3 Palestinians killed

AP, Gaza City/ Nablus

A truce between warring Palestinian factions entered its third day yesterday, marred by sporadic shootings.

Early Thursday, unknown gunmen opened fire at Fawzi Barhoum, a Hamas spokesman, as he drove with three bodyguards in his white sedan near Gaza City, according to an official Hamas announcement sent to reporters in Gaza. There were no casualties.

The announcement blamed "coup-seekers" meaning militants from Fatah which Hamas believes is trying to forcibly unseat the Hamas-led government.

But the incident and another shooting Wednesday that critically wounded a Fatah man didn't unravel the ceasefire, declared early Tuesday by leaders of Fatah and Hamas. The truce is meant to bring an end to internal fighting that has left more than 60 Palestinians dead since early December.

Meanwhile, Israeli soldiers shot dead two Palestinian militants and

a teenager in the occupied West Bank on Thursday, local medical and security sources said.

The two militants from the nebulous Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a group loosely affiliated to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party, were shot and killed in the northern town of Nablus, the faction said.

Amer Qalibny, 21, was killed in a shootout with Israeli soldiers and Wuahel Awad, 21, died from his wounds after the clash.

"We identified hitting two armed men," an Israeli military spokeswoman said.

A 17-year-old Palestinian was killed by troops near the controversial barrier being built by Israel across the West Bank, medical and security sources said.

Taha Mohammed Qalajawi was shot by Israeli gunfire near the barrier at Qalandiya between Jerusalem and the West Bank political capital of Ramallah.

He was taken to hospital in Ramallah where he was pronounced dead.



Schoolchildren waded through a flooded street on their way back home in Jakarta yesterday. Heavy seasonal rains caused flooding in the low-lying area of the capital leaving hundreds of poor residents homeless.

India extends Taslima Nasreen's visa for 6 more months

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian government has extended the visa of controversial Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen for six more months.

Sources in Indian Home Ministry said the six-month residential permit granted to her was due to expire on February 17, but it has been extended by another six months until August 17.

Nasreen, who had applied to the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) in December for a six-month extension of her visa, is interested in obtaining citizenship or permanent resident status in India.

Initially, Nasreen was granted a one-year residential permit in 2005. Presently staying in Kolkata on a Swedish passport, Nasreen has been living in exile for the last 12 years.

She was forced to flee from her residence in Dhaka to Sweden following fundamentalist threat for her book 'Lajja (Shame)' which was published in 1993.

Besides 'Lajja', Nasreen's four autobiographical books are banned in Bangladesh.

Putin seeks advice from family dog, Persian poet

AFP, Moscow

When the going gets tough, President Vladimir Putin turns to his Labrador Connie and 11th-century Persian Poet Omar Khayyam for advice, the Russian leader said at his annual press conference yesterday.

"As far as bad moods go, of course I have them like any other person, but in those cases I try to consult with my dog Connie. She gives me good advice," Putin said, referring to the black Labrador retriever who frequently appears with him at meetings with journalists and foreign leaders.

The remark drew laughter from the crowd of over 1,200 Russian and foreign journalists gathered for the president's annual press conference, which was televised live.

"My wife recently gave me a good book, the poems of Omar Khayyam," Putin added. "There are many interesting things there that can help in such cases. I recommend it."



Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (L) shakes hands with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Malaysia, the chair of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, denied that a new Middle East peace initiative driven by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf would undermine the grouping.

Musharraf lobbies OIC to back his ME plan

REUTERS, The Mides

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf lobbied the head of the Islamic world's largest grouping yesterday to back his idea for Muslim nations to come up with a new Middle East peace initiative.

Musharraf, who began his diplomatic push with a surprise visit to Indonesia on Wednesday, met Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who chairs the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), later that night and again on Thursday.

Later, both men spoke in support of the idea of bringing Muslim nations together to come up with a new approach to ending the violence in the Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan.

"This is a process of consultation toward a fresh initiative," said Musharraf, whose trip to two of Asia's biggest Muslim nations was wrapped in secrecy and surprisingly light security.

"There's no harm in adopting a new approach and trying for suc-

cess," he added. "At the moment ... things are deteriorating, worsening. What one can try is to convert this downward slide toward upward momentum, toward resolution of disputes."

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless military coup in 1999, is seeking to take the lead in Middle East diplomacy and bolster his international standing in the run-up to a general election due sometime between November and January 2008.

But in travelling to Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, and to Malaysia he was taking more than political risks: Musharraf is a target for Islamist militants and has survived at least three assassination attempts since he brought Pakistan into the US-led war on terrorism in 2001.

Malaysia's premier said he hoped Musharraf's efforts would lead to a meeting of Muslim nations where the causes of Middle East conflicts could be discussed and new strategies devised.

Mass arrests after Lanka blasts kill 12

'Military crackdown on Tigers to continue'

AFP, Colombo/ New Delhi

Tamil Tiger rebels set off a roadside bomb in Sri Lanka's troubled north yesterday, killing a soldier as police carried out mass arrests after a similar blast killed 11 people, officials said.

The latest Claymore mine attack was in the district of Vavuniya where soldiers were on routine operations sweeping for mines along the main road, a local police official said.

In the island's restive east, police arrested 58 people, including undergraduates and teachers, following Wednesday's mine attack which killed 11 people -- six policemen, four soldiers and a civilian.

Sixteen others were wounded in Wednesday's blast blamed on the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the killings.

Nearly two weeks ago, government troops captured the main Tiger

bastion of Vakarai town in Batticaloa district, where the guerrillas maintained a de facto separate state for over a decade.

Sri Lanka has vowed to crush "terrorism" following weeks of fighting that officially left 45 soldiers and 331 Tigers killed at Vakarai.

Over 4,000 people have been killed since December 2005 despite a truce that came into effect in February 2002.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's new foreign minister said Wednesday there would be no let-up in military operations against the separatist Tamil Tigers rebels as he urged them to return to the negotiating table.

"We want the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) to become a stakeholder in the peace process" launched in 2002, Rohitha Bogollagama told reporters in New Delhi.

"But if they adopt terrorism, that we cannot tolerate," said Bogollagama, who was in New

Delhi on a brief visit to meet Indian leaders.

Bogollagama's comments Wednesday followed pressure on Colombo from international donors, who this week pledged 4.5 billion dollars in aid, to return to the negotiating table and start talks with the Tamil Tiger rebels.

"Our government is committed to eliminate terrorism but we are also committed to peace," the minister said, adding later: "We encourage the peace negotiations to begin as early as possible."

The minister's comments came 12 days after the Sri Lankan army captured a key rebel stronghold of Vakarai in the island's east.

The 2002 ceasefire agreement, brokered by Norway, has been repeatedly punctured by fighting between Colombo and the Tigers, who want a separate state for the island's Tamil minority.