

Daughter, backers hold Saddam's Chehlum in Yemen

REUTERS, Sanaa

Saddam Hussein's daughter Raghd and several Yemeni political groups held a Chehlum (memorial ceremony) in the Yemeni capital to honour the former Iraqi leader on Wednesday, 40 days after his execution, in line with Islamic tradition.

"No one can ignore that he was a hero and one of the Arab nation's symbols," Raghd told Wednesday's gathering of several hundred in a Sanaa hall decorated with pictures of her father.

"He met God with a clean heart and a clear conscience," added Raghd, who arrived in the Yemeni capital on Tuesday for the ceremony, also attended by one of his lawyers.

Saddam was hanged on December 30 for crimes against humanity after US troops invaded his country in 2003 and toppled his Baathist government.

On the day of his execution, a source close Saddam's family said Raghd, who lives in exile in Jordan, had asked that her father be buried in Yemen, which had urged the United States and Iraq against the hanging, saying it would fuel violence in Iraq.



PHOTO: AFP

Saddam Hussein's grandson Ali Saddam Kamel (R) attends Chehlum (memorial service) with other unidentified family members held in the Yemeni capital Sanaa on the 40th day after the deposed Iraqi leader's execution on Wednesday.

N Korea ready to talk nuke disarmament

AP, Beijing

North Korea expressed readiness yesterday to discuss initial steps of its nuclear disarmament, raising hopes for the first tangible progress at international talks on Pyongyang's atomic weapons programme since they began more than three years ago.

"We are prepared to discuss first-stage measures," the North's nuclear envoy Kim Kye Gwan said on arriving in Beijing for the six-nation negotiations, which began later Thursday when head delegates gathered at a Chinese state guesthouse.

American experts who visited Kim in Pyongyang last week said the North would propose a freeze of its main nuclear reactor and allowing international inspectors in exchange for energy aid and normalizing relations with the US.

Kim said Thursday that any moves by North Korea would be determined by the United States' attitude.

"We are going to make a judgment based on whether the United States will give up its hostile policy and come out toward peaceful coexistence," he said, adding that Washington was "well-aware" of what it had to do.

Iran threatens to hit back at US if attacked

Washington seeks more UN action against Tehran

AFP, REUTERS, Tehran/Washington

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei Thursday vowed the Islamic republic would hit back at US interests worldwide if attacked, amid mounting tension with the West over its nuclear programme.

"They should not intimidate Iranian people with these things, since the US has previously attacked Iran," Khamenei said, referring to speculation Washington is planning a strike on Iran to halt its atomic drive.

"The enemies understand well that the Iranian nation will give a comprehensive response to the aggressors and their interests worldwide," Khamenei added, according to state-run television.

Khamenei did not specify what such retaliation would involve but he expressed confidence that

Iran's arch-enemy the United States would not be tempted to launch a strike.

"We believe that no one will make such irrational and erroneous move and will not jeopardise his nation's interest," he was quoted as telling Iranian air force commanders during a ceremony celebrating the anniversary of the Islamic revolution.

"Of course some say the US President (George W. Bush) does not think about the consequences of his actions, but some sanity could be put into the head of even these people," Khamenei added.

"The American politicians and analysts know that Iranian people have never let any aggression go unanswered," he said.

His comments came on the second and final day of war games carried by Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards.

They have so far successfully test-fired a new Russian-made air defence missile system and a land-to-sea missile with a range of about 350 kilometres (210 miles).

Iran's leaders have repeatedly said the country's armed forces are ready for any eventuality in the current standoff with the West over its nuclear programme.

Although the United States has said it wants the standoff solved through diplomacy, Washington has never ruled out military action to thwart Iran's atomic drive.

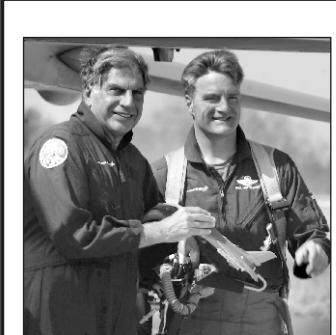
The United States accuses Iran of seeking a nuclear weapon, a charge vehemently denied by Tehran which insists its atomic programme is peaceful in nature.

Earlier the United States said non-military measures can be effective against Iran's nuclear

ambitions and called for a new round of tougher UN sanctions if Tehran fails to halt nuclear enrichment that could be used to produce weapons.

After the bitter process that produced a first sanctions resolution last December, senior US officials said they were inclined to shift focus away from UN action to unilateral measures, like a US crackdown on Iran's overseas banks, to put pressure on the Tehran government.

But speaking to a conference in Munich, Gregory Schulte, US ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, said that if Iran continues to defy UN Security Council demands on halting enrichment the council "must stand ready to consider additional measures" after receiving an IAEA report on Feb 21.



Ratan Tata (L)

Ratan Tata shows steel in F-16 stunt

AFP, Bangalore

Indian tycoon Ratan Tata, who staked seven billion pounds to buy Anglo-Dutch steelmaker Corus last month, showed his risk-taking instincts extend beyond the boardroom when he flew an F-16 fighter plane here Thursday.

The silver-haired chairman of the Tata group appeared shaken less by his 40-minute flight and more by the scores of reporters, photographers and TV crews who mobbed him at the Yelahanka Air Base when he emerged from the plane.

Israeli-Lebanese forces trade fire

UN boosts border presence

AFP, Jerusalem

UN peacekeepers boosted their presence on the volatile Lebanese-Israeli border yesterday after a clash between the armies of both sides, the first such incident in decades.

Dozens of Italian and French soldiers deployed after the first direct clash involving Lebanese troops, who moved into the border area after Israel's 34-day war with Lebanese Shiite Muslim Hezbollah last summer.

The peacekeepers, backed by armour, took up position along a five-kilometre (three-mile) stretch between the villages of Yaroun and Maroun ar-Ras, near the site of the overnight shooting.

Lebanese and Israeli troops exchanged fire across the border late on Wednesday, causing no casualties, in an incident sparked by Israeli sappers moving towards the border to clear unexploded ord-

nance.

Tension remained high on Thursday as Israeli aircraft continued to fly over the border after Israeli officials pledged that warplanes will intensify controversial flights over Lebanon.

Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora ordered the army to respond to any new Israeli violation, the state National News Agency reported.

Meanwhile, Israel intensified controversial military flights over the Lebanon border yesterday but stressed it wanted no escalation after Israeli and Lebanese soldiers traded fire for the first time in decades.

"We are going to continue our flights and even bolster our aerial activities over Lebanon," General Alon Friedman told public radio hours after the exchange on the volatile Israeli-Lebanese border.

Syria blames US for Iraqi 'humanitarian catastrophe'

AFP, Damascus

Syria's vice president yesterday blamed Washington for the "humanitarian catastrophe" caused by an outflow of refugees from war-torn Iraq, official media reported.

"The invasion of Iraq has led to an outpouring of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees to Syria and neighbouring countries," Faruq al-Shara said after meeting the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, the SANA news agency said.

The influx of refugees has "imposed heavy economic, social and security burdens," Shara was quoted as saying during his talks with Guterres in the Syrian capital.

"The United States assumes the largest share of responsibility in this humanitarian catastrophe," Shara said.

Guterres expressed his "profound respect for Syria's hosting of a large number of Iraqi refugees and for its efforts to alleviate their suffer-

ing," SANA said.

The visit by Guterres, who is on a tour of the Middle East to assess programmes for hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees in the region, coincided with recently imposed measures by Damascus to limit the stays of Iraqis.

Dozens of Iraqis in Syria have protested this month against new residency limits for civilians and their families fleeing the bloodshed across the border back home.

Between 600,000 and one million Iraqi refugees are believed to have fled to Syria, and around 750,000 are estimated to be in neighbouring Jordan.

During a visit to Jordan on Wednesday, Guterres appealed for worldwide support for "the countries that are making such a huge sacrifice, particularly Jordan and Syria."

Last month the UNHCR launched an appeal for 60 million dollars and has so far received 9.1 million dollars in donations for its activities.



PHOTO: AFP

(L-R) Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz (C) walks with Hamas supremo Khaled Meshaal (L), Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya (back R) and Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas (R) during a meeting in Makkah on Wedn4esdsay.

Nepali protesters call off road blockade

PM offers seats to ethnic group

AFP, REUTERS, Kathmandu

An ethnic group spearheading protests in Nepal's southeast on Thursday said it was suspending a crippling road blockade of Kathmandu to pave the way for talks with the government.

Essential supplies to the landlocked capital from the Terai, known as Nepal's breadbasket, had been blocked for the past three weeks by the protesters belonging to the marginalised Mahadhesi community.

"We will postpone our transportation blockade and general strike from today for ten days so the government can create the environment for talks," Upendra Yadhav, leader of the group organising the protests, told reporters here.

The blockade had caused severe fuel shortages.

In a move to defuse protests by ethnic Madhesis, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala vowed to increase electoral

seats in the southern plains for this year's constituent assembly elections.

He also pledged to provide for an equal number of seats for the region on the basis of proportional representation in the assembly that is meant to map out the country's political future, including that of the king.

"People from all sections including Madhesis, Dalits (lower caste), women and those from underprivileged regions will be proportionately represented," he said.

Koirala's pledges were aimed at quelling the unrest.

The talks would be aimed at ending the unrest in which police say at least 21 people have been killed and dozens injured in clashes between police and protesters.

Yadhav said Thursday that the death toll from the clashes totalled 38 with 700 injured.

"We want to resolve the crisis through talks," Yadhav said.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepal's Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala (L) addresses the Nation in Kathmandu Wednesday, next to the leader of Nepal's Maoists(R). Koirala said that the temporary interim constitution would be amended immediately to address the demands of the ethnic Mahadhesi, following nearly three weeks of violent protest in the south of the country, that has claimed at least 21 lives.

Terror law in focus as troubled Manipur votes

REUTERS, Ukhrul

Tribal women wrapped in colourful shawls and men in winter coats braved rain to vote in troubled northeastern state of Manipur yesterday in polls they hope will help lift a much-reviled anti-terror law.

The revolt-torn state is one of three governed by ruling Congress party voting for new assemblies this month in contests centred mostly around local issues.

Although the polls are not seen as a mid-term referendum of the central government's performance, the outcome is expected to reflect on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's coalition at a time economic growth and inflation are surging hand-in-hand.

Heavy snow shuts airports, causes disruption in UK

AFP, London

Airline passengers were grounded on Thursday after unusually heavy snow forced the temporary closure of runways at several airports in England and Wales and caused disruption on the roads and rails.

Between 10 and 15 centimetres (four and six inches) of snow fell overnight on large parts of southern and central England and Wales, with about five centimetres on London.

Just three weeks ago, Exeter in south-west England recorded temperatures of 15.5 degrees Celsius (59.9 degrees Fahrenheit), in what was the warmest January since 1921 and the fifth warmest since records began almost 350 years ago.

"It's one of the most significant snowfall events in this part of the country for several years," Keith Fenwick, a forecaster at the country's Met Office weather centre, told AFP about the affected areas.

"A previous significant snowfall event would be in late December 2000 that affected quite a large area in and around London."

The snow -- an increasingly rare event outside of mountainous areas of Britain -- forced London's City, Gatwick, Luton and Stansted airports to shut their runways for several hours.

Birmingham, Bristol and Cardiff airports also closed their runways as snow fell thickest outside London. Up to 10 centimetres of snow came down on the Welsh capital.