

US House rebukes Bush over new Iraq strategy

REUTERS, Washington

The US House of Representatives denounced President George W Bush's Iraq troop buildup on Friday in a symbolic challenge to his unpopular war strategy that is expected to lead to a mighty struggle over financing the extra troops.

The Democratic-led House voted 246-182 for a resolution that voices support for US forces but opposes the Republican president's decision to send 21,500 more troops to bolster security in Baghdad and violent Anbar province.

In Baghdad, US and Iraqi forces sweeping through the city encountered little resistance to their offensive. Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, under heavy US pressure to show progress, told Bush the effort had been a "brilliant success" so far, while Bush said US patience was not unlimited.

The House measure would not force Bush to act, but its supporters hope to pressure him to reverse

course and start bringing US forces home from the conflict, which has killed more than 3,100 American troops.

"Our troops have done a magnificent job (but) they cannot afford to continue to be policemen in a civil war," said Rep. Walter Jones (news, bio, voting record), a North Carolina Republican who co-sponsored the measure with Democrats.

As their next step, Democrats are considering ways to restrict Bush's use of \$93.4 billion in new war funds to keep him from using it for the troop buildup. Several Republicans condemned that as a "slow bleed" of the war effort.

"What we are saying today to the president is that 'we need a new direction,'" House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a California Democrat, said after the vote.

The Senate, which usually acts first in major foreign policy matters, has been deadlocked on procedural issues surrounding the

Iraq debate. Senate Democrats will try to break the impasse again on Saturday with a vote on whether to consider the House Iraq resolution.

The House vote put it on record for the first time rejecting Bush's conduct of the nearly four-year war, which Congress authorized in October 2002. The vote followed three days of debate, with hundreds of lawmakers speaking.

The resolution passed with support of all but two of the House's 233 Democrats and 17 of its 201 Republicans, many worried about their political fate should they stick with Bush. Polls say most Americans oppose adding troops in Iraq.

Republican Whip Roy Blunt of Missouri said his party's defections were fewer than the 40 to 60 some expected, and said Democrats now faced divisions in the debate over whether to restrict war funds. "The future of this debate is much more unifying for us and much more dividing for them," he said.

US expert panel doubts N Korea will give up nuke weapons

AFP, Washington

Four days after a landmark nuclear accord with North Korea, an independent US report warned Friday that the Stalinist state's leader, Kim Jong-Il, continues to distrust Washington and views US aid as a "poison apple."

The report by an influential panel of Asia specialists also ruled out the possibility of Kim emulating China's former paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in embracing economic reforms to open up reclusive and impoverished North Korea.

"Our conclusion is that the Kim regime would prefer to muddle through, despite the dim future for 21 million North Koreans, than to take the risk of opening up a la Deng Xiaoping," said the report. "US-Japan Alliance: Getting Asia Right Through 2020."

Some experts have previously proposed a "grand bargain" by which the US and its allies could defuse North Korea's military threat through its reforms and weapons cuts in exchange for more aid.



Hugh Grant, Jemima part their ways

AFP, London

One of Britain's most glamorous couples, actor Hugh Grant and socialite Jemima Khan, have decided to go their separate ways, the US website People.com reported Friday.

"Hugh and Jemima have decided to split amicably," Grant's publicist Robert Garlock said on the website.

The news came the same day that Grant's ex-girlfriend, British model and actress Elizabeth Hurley, and Indian businessman Arun Nayar told officials of their plan to wed.

Grant's long relationship with Hurley ended in 2000.

For the last three years Grant, 46, has been dating the 33-year-old Khan, the ex-wife of cricketer Imran Khan and daughter of the late Euroskeptic tycoon Sir James Goldsmith.



Prince Harry Set for Iraq deployment

REUTERS, London

Britain's Prince Harry, an army officer and third in line to the throne, could be deployed to Iraq by the end of February, a newspaper reported yesterday.

The 22-year-old will be sent to Basra, southern Iraq, where Britain has more than 7,000 troops, the Daily Mirror said, citing an unnamed senior military source.

A royal family spokesman declined to comment on the report, while the Ministry of Defence said it was "entirely speculative."

"No final decisions have been made on which units are even taking over," a spokeswoman said.

"When it is made, then parliament will be told first in the normal way."

Warmest January ever recorded in 2007

AFP, New York

World temperatures in January were the highest ever recorded for that month of the year, US government scientists said Friday.

"The combined global land and ocean surface temperature was the highest for any January on record," according to scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Climate Data Centre in Asheville, North Carolina.

Palestinians begin cobbling together new government

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian Prime Minister-designate Ismail Haniya forged ahead yesterday in efforts to form a national unity government that can appease rival factions and end a punishing 11-month long Western aid freeze.

Haniya, who resigned late Thursday only to be recommissioned by his long-term rival president Mahmud Abbas with forming a unity administration, has said he hopes to form a new broad-based government within three weeks.

The incoming Palestinian government and its stance on key conditions are likely to top Monday's three-way talks between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Abbas and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Keen to allay concerns in the West, which boycotts Haniya's Hamas movement as a terrorist group, the moderate Abbas has stressed that the question of negotiations with Israel will remain his exclusive domain.

Israel, meanwhile, continued to express scepticism about Abbas' power-sharing agreement with Hamas, ahead of the first meeting between Abbas and Olmert since December.

"Monday's meeting will allow us to hear from Abbas the precise details of the policy of the new Palestinian government and decide if it will meet the conditions of the quartet," Israeli government spokesman Avi Pazner told AFP.

The quartet of main players in the Middle East peace process -- the European Union, Russia, the United

Nations and the United States -- has called for any new administration to renounce violence and recognize Israel and past peace deals.

"That way we can know if we have a partner for the continuation of dialogue... or if, in fact, Fatah has sided with Hamas," he added.

Rice has vowed to adopt a wait-and-see attitude and has postponed any decision about resuming aid to the beleaguered Palestinian Authority until after Haniya forms his power-sharing cabinet with Abbas' Fatah faction.

As Israel and Palestinian officials readied for Rice's arrival, Haniya began to lay out the composition and governing programme of a unity cabinet.

"The official talks will begin today," said Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum.



Iraqis rush to the site where two car bombs exploded in quick succession at a garage in the oil rich city of Kirkuk, north of Baghdad yesterday. Ten people were killed and 48 others were wounded in the blast according to police sources.

Hunger kills 18,000 kids each day: UN

AP, United Nations

Some 18,000 children die every day because of hunger and malnutrition and 850 million people go to bed every night with empty stomachs, a "terrible indictment of the world in 2007," the head of the UN food agency said.

James Morris called for students and young people, faith-based groups, the business community and governments to join forces in a global movement to alleviate and eliminate hunger especially among children.

"The little girl in Malawi who's fed, and goes to school: 50 percent less likely to be HIV-positive, 50 percent less likely to give birth to a low birth weight baby," he said in an interview Friday. "Everything about her life changes for the better and it's the most important, significant, humanitarian, political, or economic investment the world can make in its future."

'Bionic eye' offers hope to blind

AFP, San Francisco

People who have gone blind are a step closer to one day regaining some of their sight, courtesy of a groundbreaking "bionic eye" being developed by US scientists.

Researchers at the University of Southern California's Doheny Eye Institute have unveiled technology they hope will help patients with retinitis pigmentosa regain vision by using an implanted artificial retina.

Mark Humayun, professor of ophthalmology at USC's Keck School of Medicine, said the Food and Drug Administration had recently approved clinical studies of the new device, dubbed the Argus II Retinal Prosthetic System.

The device aims to take the place of damaged photoreceptor cells in the retina, which capture and process light.



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