

AIRSTRIKE ON IRAN

Israel in talks for use of Iraq airspace

AP, REUTERS, London/ Sydney

Israel opened negotiations to fly through US controlled airspace in Iraq to carry out strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, a British newspaper reported yesterday. Israel's deputy defence minister denied the claim.

The Daily Telegraph newspaper quoted an unnamed Israeli defence official as saying the talks were aimed at planning for all scenarios, including any future decision to target Iran's nuclear programme.

Israeli bombers would need a corridor through US-administered airspace in Iraq to carry out any strikes, the official was quoted as saying by the newspaper.

Ephraim Sneh, Israel's Deputy Defence Minister, told The Associated Press on Saturday that the report was incorrect. "This is baseless information," Sneh said. "Maybe people like to divert (attention from) the need for immediate economic sanctions (with) stories about imminent Israeli action, which is not on the agenda."

The international community's

focus should be on imposing economic sanctions on Iran for defying UN Security Council resolutions, he said.

Senior officials of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council Britain, the US, France, China and Russia and Germany are meeting Monday for an emergency summit in London to discuss measures against Tehran.

The US and its Western allies insist Iran must suspend uranium enrichment before any negotiations over its nuclear program take place and accused Tehran of using a civilian program as a cover to develop weapons.

Iran, has rejected the condition to suspend enrichment and insists that its nuclear program is peaceful.

Earlier Vice President Dick Cheney said yesterday that the United States and its allies must not allow Iran to become a nuclear power and raised concerns about Tehran's actions and "inflammatory" rhetoric.

The stern comments from Cheney, who is known for his hawkish views, followed Tehran's refusal to heed a UN deadline to halt uranium enrichment and a vow by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to stand up to the rest of the world and not show weakness by acceding to the West's demands.

"They have made some fairly inflammatory statements," Cheney said of Iran at a joint Sydney news conference with Australian Prime Minister John Howard. "They appear to be pursuing the development of nuclear weapons."

"We are deeply concerned and have made it very clear we're deeply concerned about Iran's activities," he said.

Iran insists that it is not trying to acquire nuclear weapons and its enrichment activities are for peaceful purposes.

In addition to Iran, the two leaders touched on issues ranging from the Iraq war to China and Australian Guantanamo Bay inmate David Hicks.

Italy president asks Prodi to stay PM, face vote

REUTERS, Rome

Italy's president asked Romano Prodi on Saturday to stay on as prime minister and face a confidence vote to test his majority in parliament.

Prodi resigned on Wednesday after he lost a vote on foreign policy in the upper house of parliament, the Senate, plunging the country into political uncertainty.

He must now win a vote in both chambers of parliament to show that he has enough support to govern. The votes are likely to be held next week.

"I will go to parliament as soon as possible, with the support of a cohesive coalition determined to help the country at this difficult stage and speed up the economic recovery under way," Prodi said, thanking the president for his support.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian workers of the Waqf Board and local Muslim residents bury unidentified victims of the Samjhauta Express train blasts during a mass funeral ceremony at the Mehrana village outside Panipat, some 100 km north of New Delhi yesterday.

Indians overrun barriers at burial of unknown train blast victims

AFP, Mehrana

Hundreds of Indian Muslims clamored across barricades Saturday to force their way into a mass funeral of 23 Pakistanis killed in a firebomb attack on a cross-border train.

"They may have come from across the borders but we are brothers," shouted Indian mourner Usman Ali as police cordoned off the mass burial site in the northern Indian village of Mehrana, 100km north of New Delhi.

Undertakers, wearing surgical gloves and medical face masks against the stench of rotting flesh, lowered cheap wooden coffins into shallow graves as some mourners wiped tears.

But it was a funeral of strangers with the remains of 23 victims charred beyond recognition.

They were among 68 people killed in twin blasts last Sunday at midnight aboard the Pakistan-bound "Friendship Express" which prompted worldwide condemnation and an intense manhunt across India for the attackers.

White House warns against Iraq pullout

AP, Washington

Brushing aside criticism from the White House, Senate Democrats said Friday their next challenge to President Bush's Iraq war policy would require the gradual withdrawal of US combat troops beginning within 120 days.

The draft legislation also declares the war "requires principally a political solution" rather than a military one.

The provisions are included in a measure that would repeal the authority that lawmakers gave Bush in 2002, months before the invasion of Iraq, and replace it with a far more limited mission.

Democrats have said they are likely to seek a vote on the proposal within two weeks. The odds against it ever becoming law are high, and the White House and Senate Republicans were quick to denounce it.

White House spokesman Tony Fratto said the administration "of course" would oppose an attempt to alter the existing authorization, and he warned that a pullout of US troops could bring chaos to Iraq. "We're operating under a mandate," he said.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky dismissed the proposal as an attempt by Democrats to produce "what could best be described as a Goldilocks resolution: one that is hot enough for the radical left wing, but cool enough for party leaders to claim that they are for the troops."

A spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said the White House is not only confused, but in denial.

"They can spin all they want, but the fact is that President Bush is ignoring a

bipartisan majority of Congress, his own military commanders, and the American public in escalating the war," said Jim Manley. "The American people have demanded a change of course in Iraq and Democrats are committed to holding President Bush accountable."

As currently drafted, the Democratic legislation says the military "shall commence phased redeployment of US forces from Iraq not later than 120 days" after the bill's enactment. The goal is to complete the withdrawal by March 31, 2008.

In the interim, the military would be required to transition to a new mission involving "targeted anti-terrorism operations," as well as providing training and logistical support for the Iraqis and helping them protect their own borders.

The measure also pledges that Congress will "continue to support and protect" the armed forces, renewing a commitment that was included in an earlier nonbinding measure that also criticized Bush's plans to deploy an additional 21,500 troops.

Republicans blocked action on the measure last week, demanding that Democrats allow a vote on an alternative that would rule out cutting off funds for the troops.

At the White House, Fratto said that changes in the existing authority for use of military force were unnecessary even though it dates from the days when Saddam Hussein was in power and there was an assumption later proved false that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. The White House said that Democrats were in a state of confusion about Iraq but left room for compromise.

Europe to resume aid, says Hamas

3 Palestinians killed

AFP, AP, Cairo/ Gaza

Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal said on Friday some European countries had decided to resume aid to the Palestinian government, which has been crippled by a Western funding freeze since Hamas rose to power.

"Some European countries have decided on an annual support sum for the Palestinian government and have been in contact with Palestinian officials," the exiled Hamas politburo chief told a news conference in Cairo.

He declined to specify which countries so as "to not hamper" what he described as a positive move.

Meshaal is on a tour of various

capitals to push acceptance of the so-called Makkah Accord, signed on February 8 between rivals Hamas and Fatah in order to forge a new unity government.

At a top-level meeting in Berlin on Wednesday, the Quartet on the Middle East -- United States, Russia, European Union and United Nations -- said it would wait until the new Palestinian government takes office to decide whether or not to lift sanctions, which have been in place for nearly a year.

"The blockade is a crime, in the past as it is today," Meshaal said. "It is unjustifiable. But after the Makkah accord, and after the formation of a unity government, it must not continue

for another instant."

Meanwhile, three Palestinians were killed and 15 wounded in shootings late Friday and early Saturday, threatening the calm that has accompanied a power-sharing deal between Islamic Hamas militants and the rival Fatah Party.

The violence began shortly before midnight Saturday when Mohammed Ghelban, a 28-year-old commander from Hamas' military wing, was killed in a drive-by shooting outside his home. A 22-year-old man from a Fatah family, Hazem Karouah, was killed several hours later, as was 75-year-old Ismail Sabah, who was caught in the cross-fire.



PHOTO: AFP

French President Jacques Chirac (L) welcomes Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas yesterday at the Elysee palace in Paris before a meeting. Abbas is touring Europe seeking to persuade key powers to deal with a new unity government and resume vital aid.

Muslim ministers in Pakistan for talks

AFP, Islamabad

The foreign ministers of seven key Muslim nations started arriving in Pakistan yesterday for talks on a collective push to end the turmoil in the Middle East.

The foreign ministers will prepare the ground for a summit of their leaders to be hosted in Saudi Arabia by King Abdullah at a later date, Pakistan foreign office spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam said.

"The meeting here will consider the Palestinian crisis, the situation in Iraq and the Iran-US tensions," Aslam said.

The meeting follows a recent diplomatic shuttle around the Islamic world by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, a key US ally, who is warning that the unrest in the Middle East could spread worldwide.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Hasan Wirayuda had already arrived while his counterparts from Egypt, Jordan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, were due late in the evening, a government official said.

Iranian forces kill 17 rebels in clashes

AFP, Tehran

Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards on Saturday killed 17 rebels described as "mercenary elements" opposing the Islamic republic in clashes in the northwest of the country, state media reported.

The state-run IRNA agency said the clashes took place after Revolutionary Guards ground forces descended on the area, 17km from the Turkish border, in pursuit of the rebels.

"The Revolutionary Guards besieged these elements and started neutralising them. In this operation at least 17 mercenary anti-revolution elements were killed and some were injured," the report quoted a Guards statement assaying.

It said that the commander of the ground force carrying out the

operation had an "accident due to bad weather" while flying by helicopter with eight others to check on the area.

The report did not say if there were casualties in the accident.

The Guards were continuing "to fully clean-up the region of anti-revolutionary elements," the report said, without giving further details about the rebels.

Iran's northwestern West Azarbaijan province, which has borders with Turkey and restive Iraq, is home to a minority of ethnic Kurds.

The area has already been the scene of regular armed clashes between Iranian border guards and Kurdish militant parties, in particular Pejak -- a group linked to Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).



PHOTO: AFP

Railway engineers inspect a Virgin Pendolino train that derailed on the west coast main line near Kendal in the Lake District, north-west England yesterday. One person died and 77 people injured in the train, which was travelling between London and Glasgow.

All 63 BSP MLAs resign from UP assembly

PTI, Lucknow

In a pressure tactics that may actually help the Mulayam Singh Yadav government in the trust vote on February 26, all the 63 BSP MLAs along with some BJP and SP members are said to have resigned from the Assembly, attacking Speaker Mata Prasad Pandey.

The dramatic action was announced by party chief Mayawati who described the Samajwadi Party-led coalition government as "unconstitutional" in the wake of Supreme Court judgement disqualifying 13 breakaway BSP MLAs.

"All my party MLAs and 11 other members, including two independents, 5 of BJP and four of SP have handed over their resignations to me. I am forwarding it to the Speaker for acceptance," BSP supremo Mayawati told reporters here.

Lanka troops take Tiger bases

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops overran three Tamil Tiger rebel bases this week, the defence ministry said yesterday after the guerrillas declared a five-year-old ceasefire all but dead.

The ministry said security forces carried out a three-day operation around Friday's truce anniversary in the eastern coastal district of Trincomalee where it accused the rebels of attacking troops and civilians.

"During the past 72 hours the army, supported by artillery and mortars, successfully neutralised the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) build-up, including three LTTE bases in the Kumburupiddi jungles.

"Troops are still continuing their search and clearing operations to provide safety and security for the civilians and troops," the ministry said in a statement.

India to seek extradition of arms scandal fugitive

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is to ask Argentina to extradite an Italian businessman wanted in a high-profile arms scandal and linked to the head of India's ruling party following his detention there this month, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) said.

Ottavio Quattrocchi, a key accused in the Bofors gun scandal, was taken into preventive custody on Feb. 6 at Iguazu International Airport in the Argentine province of Misiones while in transit to Buenos Aires, the CBI said in a statement late on Friday.

The CBI, "after confirming the veracity of Quattrocchi's identity and detention, has requested the Ministry of External Affairs for sending the extradition request through diplomatic channels to the government of Argentina," it said.