

Four Muslims charged with terrorism in Denmark

AFP, Copenhagen

Four young Muslims were charged in Denmark yesterday with planning terrorist bombings in Denmark or abroad, the justice ministry said.

The four men were accused of acquiring chemicals and laboratory instruments to make triacetone triperoxide (TATP) explosives, often used by suicide bombers.

TATP bombs were used in the July 2005 London bombings.

The identities of the four were not disclosed. They are residents of Denmark but do not hold Danish citizenship.

The men were part of a group of nine people arrested in a September 2006 swoop in Odense in central Denmark.

Three of the nine had been remanded in custody, while the six others, including the fourth person indicted on Wednesday, were released.

Britain's appeal court clears 'The Da Vinci Code' author

AFP, London

Britain's Court of Appeal ruled yesterday that American author Dan Brown did not steal key elements from an earlier book for his blockbuster novel "The Da Vinci Code".

Last April, Brown was cleared by the High Court of accusations that he breached copyright by plagiarising passages and ideas from "The Holy Blood And The Holy Grail", for his 2003 book.

Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, two of the earlier book's authors, took their case to the appeal court and now face a legal costs bill approaching three million pounds (six million dollars, 4.5 million euros).

"The Da Vinci Code" has sold more than 40 million copies around the world, has been translated into 44 languages and has made Brown into a dollar multi-millionaire.

The best-selling author did not attend the appeal hearing.

Britain freezes all contacts with Iran over sailor row

AFP, London

Britain yesterday froze all contacts with Iran as a dispute over 15 detained sailors intensified with Prime Minister Tony Blair vowing to step up pressure on the Islamic Republic.

Britain produced evidence which it said proved that the sailors and marines were in Iraqi waters when detained last Friday in the Gulf. Iran insisted the Britons were in its territory.

Turkey said meanwhile that its diplomats might be allowed to see the 14 men and one woman who are being kept at a secret location despite international calls for Iran to free them.

"We will ... be imposing a freeze on all other official bilateral business with Iran" until the navy personnel are released, Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said in a statement to lawmakers on the crisis.

A few minutes earlier, Blair emphasised British determination in the dispute.

"It is now time to ratchet up the diplomatic and international pressure" on Tehran, Blair told parliament, adding that "there was no

justification whatever" for the detention of the Britons.

"These personnel were patrolling in Iraqi waters under a United Nations mandate. Their boarding and checking of the Indian merchant vessel was routine. There was no justification whatever, therefore, for their detention," Blair told lawmakers.

"It was completely unacceptable, wrong and illegal," he said.

The prime minister said Britain was in contact with "all our key allies" over the dispute and to "step up the pressure" on the Iranian government to release the captured Britons.

British military chiefs used maps and GPS coordinates to argue that the navy personnel were 1.7 nautical miles (3.15 kilometres) within Iraqi waters at the northern end of the Gulf.

"The action by Iranian forces in arresting and detaining our people is unjustified and wrong. As such it is a matter of deep concern to us," Vice-Admiral Charles Style, deputy chief of the defence staff, told reporters.

Britain is now taking a much line after Blair warned Tuesday that nego-

tiations would enter a "different phase" if the 15 were not released.

In its presentation, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) "unambiguously" contested the coordinates provided by Tehran for where the interception took place.

In a statement received by Sky News television, the Iranian embassy in London responded by insisting that the British personnel had "illegally entered" Iranian territorial waters.

"This was a violation of (an) international border ... an intrusive act justified their detention," the statement said.

London argues that the eight sailors and seven marines were conducting "routine" anti-smuggling operations when they were seized at gunpoint.

Diplomatic efforts seemed to have hit a stumbling block Tuesday when Beckett cut short a visit to Turkey to brief parliament on the stand-off, having got nowhere in talks with her Iranian counterpart Manouchehr Mottaki.

British Home Secretary John Reid, a former defence secretary, said the situation was delicate and "very dangerous."

"Let's just hope we get a speedy and a satisfactory resolution to this," Reid told Sky News television.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said diplomats from his country may be granted access to the British military personnel, after he held talks with the Iranian foreign minister.

Britain could not immediately confirm this. "For the moment, the point is that we want access to them," said a Foreign Office spokesman, urging that the claim be treated with "caution."

Beckett unexpectedly curtailed her Turkey trip after speaking to Mottaki in "very robust terms," according to a Foreign Office spokesman.

Citing unnamed sources, the BBC has said the British military personnel were being grilled at a Revolutionary Guards base in Tehran to find out if they were on an intelligence-gathering mission.

The BBC also reported that Iranian hardliners believe the 15 could be useful pawns, either to trade for five Iranians being held by US forces in Iraq or for concessions over Iran's controversial nuclear programme.



PHOTO: AFP

The world's tallest living man, Bao Xishun, 56, and Xia Shujun (R), 28, will tie the knot in Chifeng, China's Inner Mongolia region this summer.

World's tallest man finds his other half

AFP, Beijing

A lovelorn Chinese herdsman who is the world's tallest man has finally found his other half in a sales clerk who comes up to his elbow, state media reported yesterday.

Bao Xishun, who stands 2.36 metres (seven feet nine inches), will marry 1.68-metre Xia Shujun, who is also half the groom's age at just 28, the Beijing News reported.

The 56-year-old Bao had conducted a worldwide search for a bride who is up to becoming Mrs. Bao, but eventually found Xia, a saleswoman in a clothing store, in his own home region of Inner Mongolia in northern China, it said.

After a one-month courtship, they decided to get married and will tie the knot this summer, Xinhua news agency said.

"Xia said that as they got to know each other she stopped noticing how tall Bao was and was moved instead by his thoughtfulness," it said.

After a lifetime as a bachelor, Bao, who is a celebrity in China, began searching for a bride last year and heard back from more than 20 interested parties from across the country.

Bao was confirmed last year by the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's tallest living man.

Over 70 burned to death in Nigeria tanker fire

AFP, Lagos

More than 70 people were burned to death in northern Nigeria when a tanker lorry caught fire as they were scooping fuel from it, police said yesterday.

The accident happened in Kaduna State on Monday evening, the police spokesman for Kaduna, Saad Yahaya, said.

"More than 70 people have been confirmed dead. There are some survivors but we don't know exactly how many," the spokesman said.

"The tanker turned over, the villagers came to scoop fuel and then the tanker caught fire", he explained.

Yahaya said the tanker overturned while trying to park in the

village of Katugal, some 150 kilometres (90 miles) south of the state capital Kaduna.

The federal road safety chief for Kaduna, Charles Okpabio, confirmed that there were survivors but declined to say how many or where they are being treated.

It was not immediately clear if the impact of the accident caused fuel to leak from the tanker or whether the vehicle was vandalized.

Events perceived as giving a negative image of the country are not reported on by state media in Nigeria. This explains why news of the accident took so long to become public.

Road accidents with large casualty figures are common in Nigeria where vehicles are often poorly

maintained, overloaded and driven in a reckless fashion.

In November of last year a driver lost control of his lorry outside Kaduna during gubernatorial primaries and crashed into a crowd, crushing scores of people to death.

Almost equally common are fires where people perish whilst scooping fuel, be it from oil company installations or trucks.

Nigeria's tens of millions who live in poverty rarely pass up on opportunities to gather free fuel, which can always be sold in jerrycans to motorists who run out, from pipelines or vehicles that have either been damaged or vandalized.

Zimbabwe opposition chief held

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's main opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai was arrested yesterday in a raid at the headquarters of his Movement for Democratic Change in Harare, a party spokesman said.

"All members of staff and Morgan Tsvangirai have been arrested," the party's secretary general, Tendai Biti, told AFP.

"At least 20 people were in the office at the time," Biti added.

Dozens of police had sealed off the area around the party's offices in the upmarket 1st Street shopping mall during the raid, according to an AFP correspondent at the scene.

The security forces were armed with teargas cannisters, sticks, riot helmets and AK47 rifles.

Israeli cops oust jews from occupied settlement

AFP, Gaza City

Hundreds of Israeli police armed with batons yesterday cleared some 500 right-wing Jewish settlers from an abandoned West Bank settlement they had been occupying under army protection.

Helmeted police had to drag out some of the settlers, mostly youths and some with small children. The settlers this week had moved into the ruins of the Homesh homestead, cleared as part of Israel's so-called disengagement plan in 2005.

"We will be back!" shouted some of the settlers, who passively resisted the police officers.

Some of the settlers joined hands, others lay on the ground, while others tried to argue with the officers who carried the radicals to

waiting police buses.

"Around 500 people were evacuated including women and children without anyone arrested," police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told AFP.

"Police continue to be on the site and are searching in and around Homesh to make sure the area is clear of the individuals who have been there for 48 hours," he said, adding that there were no reports of injuries.

The settlers marched on the hilltop settlement under army protection on Monday vowing to reoccupy Homesh and rebuild homes razed by Israeli troops a year and a half ago.

They spent two nights at the site, even though authorities originally said they would not be allowed to remain past nightfall on Monday.

Israeli peace groups have blasted the army for caving into right-wing threats and allowing the march on the evacuated settlement.

Then prime minister Ariel Sharon evacuated Homesh and three other West Bank settlements as part of the now-defunct plan for a partial withdrawal from the territory Israel has occupied since 1967.

The West Bank settlements were cleared the same year Israel also evacuated 21 settlements and all army outposts from the Gaza Strip after a 38-year occupation.

Homesh, which was established as a military outpost in 1978, was turned over to settlers in 1980. Many of its 70 families were pious and militant zealots who believed they were doing God's work by resettling their biblical homeland of Samaria.