

Iraq terror group posts killing tape

AP, Baghdad

An al-Qaeda-affiliated group said Saturday it killed 18 kidnapped government security forces in retaliation for the alleged rape of a Sunni woman by members of the Shia-dominated police, posting an online video of the officers being shot in the back of their heads while kneeling in a field.

The authenticity of the three-minute video, posted on a Web site previously used by the Islamic State of Iraq, could not be immediately verified.

The group also said it had killed 14 policemen, whose bodies were found Friday in the northeast province of Diyala, in retaliation for the alleged rape. Some of the victims were decapitated, according to an Associated Press photographer.

Meanwhile, gunmen rounded up two Sunni families that had received death threats for joining US-organised talks with local Shias, hauling away the men and boys and killing all six Saturday as suspected insurgents expanded a campaign of fear against opponents.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan protesters shout anti-America slogans during a demonstration at Marko, some 50kms from Jalalabad yesterday after a suicide car bomb attack on an US convoy. US troops killed up to 16 civilians and wounded more than 30 when they opened fire after a suicide car bomb struck a military vehicle in eastern Afghanistan.

Iran rejects US talks at Iraq conference

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said it was still considering whether to take part in a conference next month on Iraq's security and had no intention of holding bilateral talks with the United States at the meeting.

The Baghdad conference aimed at quelling the violence in Iraq is set to include the United States and neighbours of Iraq such as Iran and Syria, in a rare opportunity for the enemies to sit down at one table.

"No bilateral meetings (with the United States) are planned at the Baghdad conference," foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Hosseini told reporters.

"We are in the process of examining our participation in the Baghdad conference. If it is our interests we will participate."

Hosseini also repeated that the United States had made "proposals" for talks with Iran although he did not specify if these concerned the Baghdad conference.

"Recently the Americans have

made proposals for talks through different channels about Iraq and security in that country. We are in the process of examining these requests."

"Our priority is to help the Iraqi government to reinforce stability and security in the country. Insecurity in Iraq is not in our interests. There is a historic relationship between our two countries"

Iran's top security official Ali Larjani said last week that Tehran would take part in the conference on the condition that it was in the interests of its violence-plagued neighbour.

Iran and the United States have had no diplomatic relations since Washington severed ties in 1980 in the wake of the seizure of its embassy in Tehran by Islamist students.

Any official contacts between the two sides would mark a major break in the frozen relations, which have been marked by mutual recriminations and enmity over almost three decades.

Tigers accuse troops of killing 6 civilians

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels Sunday accused Sri Lankan forces of killing at least six civilians in the embattled north-east as police investigated the execution-style murders of five men near the capital.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said five civilians, including a businessman, were killed by security forces while the sixth, a student, was killed in a mortar bomb attack by troops.

The LTTE also said security forces had killed 66 civilians last month, and blamed the forces for the "disappearance" of another 62 Tamils, claims denied by the military.

The military said the Tigers had kept up artillery and mortar attacks against security forces in the island's northern and eastern regions at the weekend and troops retaliated.

The defence ministry said top

commanders visited the restive eastern province on Saturday to discuss "the security measures to be taken against the LTTE atrocities in the area."

Elsewhere, security forces in the northern town of Vavuniya on Sunday found two Tamil labourers shot in the head, local officials said.

Near the capital Colombo, police on Saturday found five men shot in the head after being blindfolded in an apparent execution-style killing. An investigation is underway.

The grisly find in a marsh at Kandana, 15km north of the capital, was made after a child spied one of the bodies, a police spokesman said.

Both local and international human rights activists have said abductions and killings are rampant in Sri Lanka amid an escalation of fighting between government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels in a 35-year-old ethnic conflict.

Kuwaiti cabinet resigns ahead of no-confidence vote

AFP, Kuwait City

The Kuwaiti cabinet, in office for barely eight months, resigned yesterday ahead of a no-confidence vote against a senior minister, the latest political crisis in the oil-rich emirate.

"All members of the government have submitted their resignations to Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammad Nasser al-Ahmad al-Sabah," Deputy Prime Minister Ismail al-Shatti told state television.

The move came after the government failed to secure enough support in parliament to avoid voting Health Minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah al-Sabah out of office in a session scheduled for Monday.

To pass, the motion would have required a simple majority of 25 MPs in the 50-seat parliament in the emirate ruled by Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah.

Sheikh Ahmad, a senior member of the ruling Al-Sabah family, faced the possibility of being dismissed from office after 10 lawmakers filed a motion of no-confidence against him following a grilling on February 19.

Stargazers watch total lunar eclipse

AP, London

The moon darkened, reddened, and turned shades of gray and orange Saturday night during the first total lunar eclipse in nearly three years, thrilling stargazers and astronomers around the world.

The Earth's shadow took over six hours to crawl across the moon's surface, eating it into a crescent shape before engulfing it completely in a spectacle at least partly visible on every continent.

About a dozen amateur astronomers braved the cold and mud outside the Croydon Observatory in southeast London to watch the start of the eclipse.

"It's starting to go!" said Alex Gikas, 8, a Cub Scout who was studying for his astronomy badge. "I've never seen anything like it before. I'm really excited."

By the time greatest eclipse, shortly after 5:44 pm EST, the light of the full moon was replaced by near-total obscurity.

"It was really very dark," said Paul Harper, Chairman of the Croydon Astronomical Society, who estimated that moon had lost over four-fifths of its luminosity. "It was quite a nice one."



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Kashmiri Muslims shout anti-India slogans during a demonstration in Srinagar yesterday. The protest was held to seek information from the authorities about Kashmiri man Javed Ahmed Shalla who went missing in 1991 allegedly after his arrest by Indian security forces.

Indian dam threatens tribes, tigers & temples

REUTERS, Chegondapalli

For the government, the Polavaram dam in southern India will produce more power, irrigate thousands of acres of land, provide drinking water to millions of villagers and control floods.

But its opponents say the controversial dam will lead to the displacement of tens of thousands of poor tribespeople, the destruction of a unique ecosystem where the endangered tiger roams and drown ancient Hindu temples.

Since the project was announced three years ago, the dam on the Godavari river in Andhra Pradesh has created strong opposition.

"The displacement of up to 300,000 people, most of them tribals who have lived in the forests for generations, will be a human tragedy," said Biksham Gujja, senior policy adviser of WWF's global freshwater programme.

"It will also submerge much of Godavari valley, a unique ecosystem which is also a tiger habitat and threatens many species which we believe are endemic to that area."

The dam, Gujja said, also threatens one of the most important sacred Hindu towns, Bhadrachalam, where hundreds of thousands of pilgrims gather every year to worship at ancient temples dedicated to Lord Ram.

The state government-funded \$3.5 billion Polavaram dam is one of several new dams being built by energy-hungry India that have pitted the needs of a booming economy against local inhabitants and the environment.

Authorities say the dam will provide enough water to irrigate 716,600 acres of land and drinking water to about two million people in 600 villages.

The dam is also touted by authorities as a solution to the annual

Key powers fail to settle differences on Iran

REUTERS, Washington

Major powers failed on Saturday to settle all their differences over a second UN sanctions resolution against Iran for its nuclear work but remain committed to passing one soon, the United States said.

"There is still some work to be done on a few outstanding issues, but all parties remain committed to a second resolution in the near future," State Department spokesman Kurtis Cooper said in a statement issued after the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany held a conference call to discuss a new UN Security Council resolution against Iran.

The United States and leading European countries suspect Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons under the cover of a civilian atomic programme. Tehran denies the

charge and says its programme is for generating electricity.

The new measures under discussion are a follow-up to a key Security Council resolution passed on December 23 that imposed trade sanctions on sensitive nuclear materials and technology as well as other penalties after Iran refused to suspend uranium enrichment. The sanctions would be suspended if Iran complied.

The State Department put a positive gloss on Saturday's discussions but they appeared to have fallen short of US hopes that the group -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States as well as Germany -- would be able to agree on the elements of a resolution during the conference call.

They had a good discussion in keeping with the positive atmosphere of their conversations last

week," Cooper said in a brief written statement. "Discussions will now move to New York, where our United Nations permanent representatives (ambassadors) will take up work on the issue."

US and European diplomats have said the new sanctions are expected to include a mandatory travel ban on Iranian officials involved in the nuclear programme and an expansion of the list of banned nuclear material and technology Iran may import and export.

Also under consideration is enlarging the list of Iranian officials whose assets were frozen in the December resolution. But envoys said proposals for a total arms embargo would be dropped because of Russian objections as would a ban on visas for students studying nuclear technology abroad.

Negotiators have also discussed restricting export credits provided by governments to companies doing business in Iran. Washington has pushed for Europe to end such credits.

The United States has made no secret of its desire to get a second resolution quickly to keep up momentum in its diplomatic effort to persuade Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment work, which can provide fuel for power plants or for bombs.

Iran has repeatedly refused to do so.

On Friday, the president of the UN Security Council said he expected the 15-member body to have a draft resolution in the coming week on additional sanctions to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions, barring last minute snags.