



A video grab from Arabic-language Iranian television Al-Alam shows live footage of the returning British sailors boarding a Royal Navy helicopter at Heathrow International Airport in London yesterday. The fifteen British naval personnel returned home Thursday, overjoyed after their surprise release by Iran's president ended a two-week diplomatic battle.

India rules out Kashmir demilitarisation

AFP, Srinagar

India's top representative in revolt-hit Kashmir on Thursday ruled out demilitarisation of the Himalayan state, saying the army must remain in the region to protect Indian borders.

"The army has to be permanently located in Kashmir to defend its borders," governor S.K. Sinha said in a statement.

"Demilitarisation per se cannot take place in Jammu and Kashmir just as there can be no demilitarisation in Punjab, Rajasthan or any other border state of the country," he said.

The states border nuclear rival Pakistan, which has linked Kashmir's demilitarisation to forging a lasting peace with India.

Sinha, who served as lieutenant general in India's army, added troop cuts could only come after a

17-year-old Islamic separatist insurgency ends in Indian Kashmir.

"The present additional role of the army in terms of restoring internal peace in a state, which is a victim of terrorism, can cease only when peace is restored," he said.

The troops, Sinha said, can then return to barracks or their overall strength in the state can be reduced "but that will not be demilitarisation."

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has called for Kashmir's demilitarisation as a move toward finally ending the six decades of hostility between India and Pakistan over the region.

Some dozen rebel groups are active in Kashmir, most of them fighting to break Kashmir away from India and join it with Pakistan. Few want the region, once a hit tourist spot, to be an independent state.

The region's chief minister, Ghulam Nabi Azad, objected earlier this week to any demilitarisation or cut in troop levels in the state, saying it would "directly help" Islamic militants.

New Delhi last week set up a panel to review a possible cut in troop levels, after demands by a regional ally of the federal ruling Congress party, which is part of a coalition governing Kashmir.

The announcement came after a fall in violence in the state.

India has deployed an estimated half a million troops and paramilitary soldiers in Kashmir, the trigger of two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since their 1947 independence from the British.

Many Kashmiri politicians have long pushed for the withdrawal of troops from the region.



This handout picture from the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) shows Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz (R) shaking hands with US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (L) in Riyadh Wednesday. Pelosi arrived in key-regional ally Saudi Arabia, the latest destination on her Middle East tour Thursday.

7 killed in Lankan violence

Troops find mine on airport road

AFP, Colombo

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels shot dead four civilians in eastern Sri Lanka yesterday, the defence ministry said, as the military reported killing three guerrillas.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) gunmen opened fire on farmers in Polonnaruwa district as they travelled to sell their rice crops, the ministry said.

"It is reported that four villagers have been killed in the incident," a ministry statement said.

The attack came as the military said they killed three suspected rebels along the de facto border in northern Sri Lanka after the air force bombed guerrilla targets in the northeast.

Security forces shot dead three men who tried to infiltrate the army's defence lines at Muhamalai in the Jaffna peninsula on Wednesday night, they said.

The shooting came hours after the air force bombed what it called the main Sea Tiger headquarters of the LTTE, a claim rejected by the guerrillas.

The LTTE said two civilians were killed and four more were wounded in the aerial bombardment in Mullaitivu district.

A first air raid hit the "White Pigeon" charity which helps victims of landmines, the LTTE said, adding that the civilians died in further

aerial bombing in the same area.

The Sri Lankan air force suffered a humiliating blow last week when Tiger light aircraft bombed its main base next to the island's only international airport and managed to escape unchallenged.

The LTTE has waged a 35-year campaign for independence that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

Earlier Sri Lankan security forces on Thursday found a powerful landmine in a shop along the main road to the island's only international airport, police said.

The "Claymore" mine, a type frequently used for roadside attacks, was found at a shop in Wattala, just outside the capital and along the main highway to Bandaranaike international airport, a police official said.

"The Claymore was found following a tip off," the spokesman said. "It was hidden and not ready to be exploded. We have taken into custody five people after the bomb was found."

The discovery was made as President Mahinda Rajapakse returned to the island early Thursday after attending a South Asian summit in New Delhi.

However the president travelled to the city, a distance of 35km, by helicopter, a spokesman for the president's office said.

AP, Washington

Iran emerged with a measure of strength from its standoff with Britain over the captured sailors deflecting attention from its disputed nuclear programme and proving it can cause trouble in the Middle East when it chooses.

Yet the country's hardline leaders also shied away from all-out confrontation with the West, backing down once they had flexed their power, apparently worried they might go too far.

In that way, the standoff proved one thing above all else: Iran's internal decision-making process remains largely mysterious to the West.

Split between ultra-hardline and more moderate factions, the Iranian regime moved back and forth on the seizures, sending mixed messages until suddenly, startlingly, announcing Wednesday that it would free the 15 sailors.

"The thing ... about Iran's negotiating strategy is that they say, 'No, no, no,' until it suddenly becomes 'Yes,'" said Patrick Clawson, deputy director for research at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Whether that is a sign of internal dissent in Iran or finely honed, clever brinkmanship, Iran clearly gained some respect from the dispute at least enough to make

the West cautious that the Islamic regime would be willing to dive into such a tussle again.

"It allowed the Iranians to demonstrate that they can't be trifled with. They have a capacity to take action, and that will undoubtedly make people more careful," said James Dobbins, a former Bush administration envoy to Afghanistan who now heads military analysis for the RAND Corp. think tank in the United States.

That could affect the aggressiveness of future British navy patrols in the Persian Gulf near Iraq. It also could affect any future actions by US military forces inside Iraq.

The United States says its policy is to arrest Iranians in Iraq who are funneling arms or money to Shia militias there. But the Americans may be more cautious if it thinks hardliners in Iran are willing to retaliate by seizing US troops. Iranian and US forces already had one dustup at the Iraqi border last September, apparently based on confusion over border lines, that was defused.

If Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards, who are believed to be responsible for the capture of the British sailors, are able to operate inside parts of Iraq, they could clearly target US forces.

Iran said all along that its sei-

zure of the British had nothing to do with Iranian prisoners held by the US in Iraq, blaming it instead on the sailors' illegal entrance into its waters.

But there is no disputing that one Iranian diplomat, held by unknown captors in Iraq, was released this week, either by coincidence or a deal.

And if the seizures of the 15 British sailors were actually planned, as some experts believe, Iran may have targeted Britons rather than Americans as a way to show its capabilities without directly tangling with the United States.

None of that means Britain came out the loser: In fact, Iran did not get the main thing it sought a public apology. Britain insists it never offered a quid pro quo, either, instead relying on quiet diplomacy.

"In contrast to the Americans, the Brits have tried to play down the confrontation and adopted a more conciliatory line, and that probably helped," said Dobbins.

Iran may have chosen to end the dispute because it feared it would lose ground if it pushed the confrontation too far. It also may have been trying to moderate hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reputation, allowing him to announce the releases in order to appear benevolent.

AP, London

A British navy crew returned home Thursday from Iranian captivity to the relief of a nation, after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced their surprise release and ended the two-week crisis.

The 15 sailors and marines broke open champagne and changed into fresh uniforms on the flight home. After landing, they smiled and stood at attention before being whisked by helicopter to the Royal Marines base at Chivenor, southwest of London.

Wednesday's announcement of their release in Tehran was a breakthrough in a crisis that had escalated over nearly two weeks, raising oil prices and fears of mili-

tary conflict in the volatile region. The move to release the sailors suggested that Iran's hard-line leadership decided it had shown its strength but did not want to push the stand-off too far.

Iran did not get the main thing it sought a public apology for entering Iranian waters. Britain, which said its crew was in Iraqi waters when seized, insists it never offered a quid pro quo, either, instead relying on quiet diplomacy. Syria, Iran's close ally, said it played a role in winning the release.

Tony Blair welcomed the sailors' return Thursday but called for continued international pressure on Tehran following the deaths of

four servicemen in an attack in southern Iraq earlier in the day.

The soldiers were killed in an ambush involving a roadside bomb and small-arms fire, the military said. It was the biggest loss of life for British forces since Nov. 12, when four were killed while on patrol on the Shatt Al-Arab waterway in Basra.

"On the one hand we are glad that our service personnel return safe and unharmed from their captivity, but on the other we return to the sober and ugly reality of what is happening through terrorism in Iraq, terrorism designed specifically to thwart the will of the international community," Blair said.

"Now it is far too early to say that the particular terrorist act that killed

our forces was an act committed by terrorists that were backed by any elements of the Iranian regime, so I make no allegation in respect of that particular incident," Blair said.

Blair said Britain had managed to secure release of crew without any deal or negotiations.

On Wednesday, Iranian state media reported that an Iranian envoy would be allowed to meet five Iranians detained by US forces in northern Iraq. A US military spokesman in Baghdad said American authorities were considering the request, although an international Red Cross team, including one Iranian, had visited the prisoners.

Three charged over London bombings

AFP, London

Three suspects were charged yesterday in connection with the July 7, 2005 suicide bombings in London, which killed 52 commuters, prosecutors and police said.

Their arrests last month were the first major detentions since the bombings, in which near-simultaneous blasts caused devastation on the London transport system during the morning rush-hour.

The three men were involved in the "reconnaissance and planning" of the attacks, in which four bombers blew themselves up on underground trains and a bus, Scotland Yard said.

The three were charged that between November 1 and June 29, 2005 "they unlawfully and maliciously conspired ... to cause explosions on the Transport for London system and/or tourist attractions in London," prosecutors said.

Congress, BJP fight for control of Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

The 15 million population of India's capital enjoyed a day off yesterday for municipal elections seen as a trial of strength between the ruling Congress and Hindu nationalists.

Shops, businesses, schools and banks closed for the ballot in the 272 constituencies of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD).

The opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is battling to win control from the Congress Party of a city grappling with a series of issues from inadequate infrastructure to power shortages.

The Congress swept federal parliamentary elections in 2004 and went on to wrest control of the New Delhi state assembly and the municipal council from the nationalists.

The municipal polls are seen as a stepping stone for politicians aspiring to enter the 543-seat

national parliament.

Election officials said 2,575 hopefuls including 1,261 independent candidates were in the fray.

With 10 million voters, 60,000 police officers and federal troops were deployed at 9,649 polling booths. Security was also reinforced in 307 "violence-prone" constituencies.

The Delhi High Court appointed a retired judge as a poll observer to try to prevent fraud.

Meanwhile, officials in Uttar Pradesh were on edge as they geared up for the epic voting exercise in a state with 100 million voters on the rolls, though past elections show only about a 50 percent turnout.

On the first day of elections on Saturday, voters will choose among 783 candidates competing for 62 seats under the gaze of some 60,000 paramilitary troops.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai (R) unveils a plaque during the road-naming ceremony in New Delhi yesterday as Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee (L) and Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit (C) look on. The road was named Ahmad Shah Massoud Marg-Road to honour the great leader of Afghanistan.

New al-Qaeda leaders emerging in Pakistan

Say US experts

AFP, Washington

New al-Qaeda leaders appear to be emerging in Pakistan near the Afghan border, casting doubt on the idea of a sustained weakening of the global terrorist network, US experts say.

"There is a sense that al-Qaeda is reconstituting sort of high-level operational leadership in Pakistan, particularly in the area near Afghanistan, certainly one of the best places for them because there is little (Pakistani) government there," John Lumpkin, senior fellow at GlobalSecurity.org, said in an interview with AFP.

According to an article this week in The New York Times, citing US intelligence and counter-terrorism authorities who spoke on condition of anonymity, the new al-Qaeda

leaders have grown more important after the death or capture of the members of the network who had formed al-Qaeda before the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US.

"There are a number of new players who have advanced through the ranks as a result of the death or capture of key Al-Qaeda senior-level managers," such as September 11 mastermind Khaled Sheikh Mohammed and the Indonesian suspect Hambali, Bruce Hoffman, a professor at Georgetown University, recently told the US House of Representatives Armed Services subcommittee on terrorism.

Both Mohammed and Hambali are among the "war on terror" suspects being held at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay,

Cuba.

The New York Times said the emergence of these new al-Qaeda leaders had surprised the US intelligence authorities, who became aware of them through communications intercepted in Pakistani tribal areas and interrogations of suspects accused of trying to blow up commercial aircraft between London and the United States last year.

The US intelligence community also concluded that an Egyptian paramilitary commander, Abu Ayub al-Masri, a veteran of wars in Afghanistan, had orchestrated that attack.

According to the Times, other names are also surfacing, such as Khalid Habib, a Moroccan, and Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi, a Kurd who served in Saddam Hussein's army.