

'Iraq risks collapse'

US-Iran talks to begin May 28

AFP, AP, London/ Baghdad

Iraq, its government already largely irrelevant, is on the "verge of becoming a failed state" that risks collapse and fragmentation, a leading think tank warned yesterday.

"The coming year will be pivotal for Iraq," said Gareth Stansfield, author of the report "Accepting Realities in Iraq" for the Chatham House research institute in London.

"The internecine fighting and continual struggle for power threatens the nation's very existence in its current form," he said.

The report said US-led coalition forces are struggling to promote security in a country torn apart by not just one civil war but several insurgencies involving different

religious, ethnic and political groups.

Despite their recent "surge" to boost security in Baghdad, US forces appear to have "simply pushed insurgent activity to neighboring cities" and cannot create conditions that will resolve political differences among various groups.

"A political solution will require Sunni Arab representatives' participation in government, the recognition of (radical Shiite Muslim leader Moqtada al-Sadr as a legitimate political partner, and a positive response to Kurdish concerns," the report said.

"Within this warring society, the Iraqi government is only one among many 'state-like' actors, and is largely irrelevant in terms of ordering social, economic, and political life," the report said.

"It is now possible to argue that Iraq is on the verge of being a failed state which faces the distinct possibility of collapse and fragmentation," it added.

The report added that although the terror network al-Qaeda is challenged by local groups, there "is momentum behind its activity."

It added that Iraq's neighbours Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey all "have different reasons for seeing the instability in Iraq continue, and each uses different methods to influence developments."

Meanwhile, Iran talks about Iraq's security will begin in Iraq on May 28, Iran's foreign minister said yesterday.

Manouchehr Mottaki said the negotiations would be exclusively about Iraq and that a first meeting in the presence of Iraqi officials would try to set a more detailed

agenda.

"Nothing but Iraq is on the agenda," he told reporters in Islamabad, where he has been attending a ministerial meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

"The talks will strictly be focused on the security situation in Iraq," he added, saying the meeting would be held in the presence of Iraqi officials.

US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker is to lead the American side and Mottaki said Iran would send "one of its senior diplomats" at the level of ambassador as its chief negotiator.

Mottaki didn't detail what Iran wanted to discuss, but underlined Tehran's argument that the continued US military presence as well as terrorism in its western neighbour was part of the problem.

Twin blasts kill 10 Afghan policemen

AP, Kandahar

Two bomb blasts 15 minutes apart killed 10 police yesterday, an official said. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the coordinated attacks.

The first blast a remote control bomb targeting a police vehicle killed four officers, said Gul Zaman, a police official.

About 15 minutes later, a secondary blast hit police attending to the wreckage of the first bomb, killing another six police and wounding five, Zaman said.

An Associated Press reporter was among the journalists at the scene when the second blast went off, bloodying some officers who began shouting and carrying bodies away in the chaos.

Kandahar has seen such double-attacks before a tactic often used by insurgents in Iraq but they are still comparatively rare in Afghanistan.



PHOTO: AFP

Bangladeshi Adviser for Foreign Affairs Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury (2L) sits with his delegation as he attends the closing ceremony of the three-day Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers in Islamabad yesterday. The conference of Muslim Foreign Ministers called for establishment of an independent Palestinian state, peaceful resolution of Iran's nuclear issue, stability of Iraq and support to the people of Jammu and Kashmir for their right to self-determination.



PHOTO: AFP

A train from North Korea arrives as a South Korean station employee (L) waves a red flag at the Jejin railway station in Goseong, east of Seoul yesterday near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) dividing North and South Korea. Trains from North and South Korea crossed the heavily fortified border for the first time since the 1950-53 war, in what both sides described as a milestone for reconciliation.

Trains cross border dividing Koreas

AP, Munsan

The divided Koreas sent trains lumbering through their heavily armed border for the first time in more than half a century yesterday, reaching another symbolic milestone in a reconciliation process often hindered by the North's nuclear weapons ambitions.

Firecrackers and white balloons filled the skies near the border as a five-car train started rolling north on a restored track on the west side of the peninsula. On the eastern side, a North Korean train crossed into the South on another reconnected rail line where it was greeted by children bearing flowers.

It was the first train crossing of the 2.5-mile-wide no man's land dividing the two sides since inter-Korean rail links were cut off early in the 1950-53 Korean War.

The trial run was the latest sym-

bol of a historic reconciliation that the longtime foes began pursuing with the first-ever summit of their leaders in 2000. That summit has led to a series of exchange projects, including the opening of cross-border roads that thousands of South Koreans cross each year as tourists, or to work in special enclaves in the North.

The detente has often stalled, mainly because of tensions over North Korea's nuclear programmes.

Thursday's one-time test run came after repeated delays since the rail lines were linked in 2003.

"It is not simply a test run. It means reconnecting the severed bloodline of our people. It means that the heart of the Korean peninsula is beating again," Unification Minister Lee Jae-joung said at a ceremony at Munsan station, about 8 miles south of the Demilitarised Zone, before boarding the train.

Israeli airstrikes pound Hamas targets

AP, Gaza City

An Israeli aircraft attacked a Palestinian car carrying Hamas militants in Gaza City yesterday, killing one militant and wounding another, Hamas said.

The Israeli army said the airstrike had targeted a Palestinian rocket squad. Israel has promised a harsh response to repeated rocket fire in recent days by Hamas militants.

Earlier Thursday, an Israeli airstrike destroyed a Hamas compound in central Gaza City, killing one and wounding at least 45 people, Palestinian witnesses and medical officials said.

The strike came a day after 22 Palestinians were killed across Gaza City in the most widespread factional fighting in nearly a year

between Hamas and Fatah. The raging street battles have turned the densely populated seaside city into a war zone, putting terrified civilians increasingly at risk.

The army confirmed it carried out the airstrike, which came after Israel threatened "harsh" action in response to repeated Palestinian rocket attacks.

The explosion sent heavy plumes of smoke into the Gaza sky, completely destroying the structure and several others around it and sending terrified residents scurrying.

Hamas said the target was an administration building of its elite bodyguards unit. The two-story structure is normally filled with Hamas personnel.

In a text message sent to report-

ers, Hamas military wing spokesman Abu Obaida vowed revenge against Israel, possibly by suicide bombing.

"The Zionist enemy are launching an open war against Hamas. Therefore, reprisal options are open, including self-sacrifice operations," he said. "We advise the Zionist settlers to go immediately to the basement of their residence because our rockets will not spare any of them."

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas postponed a planned visit to the Gaza Strip after the latest violence in the area, officials said.

"The reason for the trip is to stop the fighting," presidential aide Saeb Erekat said, adding Abbas was determined to travel to Gaza in the next day or two.

Pak, Afghan troops trade mortar fire

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani and Afghan troops exchanged mortar and gun fire on their disputed border yesterday, days after clashes on the frontier claimed more than a dozen lives.

The two-hour battle erupted after Afghan forces fired a mortar at Pakistani soldiers near the Teri Mangal area in the Kurram tribal district, Pakistani military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad told AFP.

"The exchange of fire continued until 5:00 am. There was a brief resumption of firing around 7:00 am, but it ended quickly," he said, adding that there were no Pakistani casualties and that he was unaware of any on the Afghan side.

The Afghan ministry of defence said 20 rockets were fired at Afghan military bases and that two members of its security forces were wounded.

The incident happened near an area where a US soldier and a Pakistani trooper were shot dead on Monday after a meeting, also involving Afghan officials, that was aimed at calming tensions.

The Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) in Afghanistan said Wednesday there were reports the gunman was in Pakistani paramilitary uniform. It

demanding that Pakistan investigate the incident.

Thursday's fighting had been reported to a joint intelligence centre set up last year between Afghan, Pakistani and Nato forces, Isaf spokesman Major John Thomas said.

"They are involved in trying to resolve it," he added.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai called for the clashes to cease, adding that he had ordered his forces not to use artillery fire, even if provoked, to avoid civilian casualties.

"We want an end to these skirmishes. It is not in the interest of any country," he said at a joint news conference with visiting Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

"Afghanistan will continue to cooperate but at the same time will continue strongly to defend the country."

Afghan officials have accused Pakistan of starting clashes in the same area on Sunday that continued into Monday, saying Pakistani troops pushed four kilometres (2.5 miles) over the disputed border. Pakistan denied the charges.

Thirteen Afghans were killed in the fighting, which included rocket fire, Afghan officials said.

Blair makes farewell visit to White House

AP, Washington

Prime Minister Tony Blair is making the final White House visit of his tenure to mark a friendship with President Bush that many believe tarnished the legacy of the once popular British leader.

The British leader's visit was designed to honour the long-term Bush-Blair partnership and was expected to produce no major results. The two men planned to discuss a range of issues Thursday, then hold a joint news conference.

Blair began his visit Wednesday with a private, working dinner at the White House. That was to be followed by a rare overnight stay for a foreign leader in the US executive mansion. He was staying in the Queen's Bedroom that was used by Winston Churchill during the former British leader's frequent World War II-era visits to Washington.

Blair's White House visit was one of a series of meetings with foreign leaders during a carefully choreographed exit after his announcement last week that he would step down as prime minister on June 27.

"I think the visit is more sentimental and social than substantive," said Henry Catto, a US ambassador to London under former President Bush and current chairman of the Atlantic Council of the United States.

Russian church reunites, ending 80-year split

AFP, Moscow

The domestic and exiled branches of the Russian Orthodox Church reunited in a ceremony here yesterday in the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin, ending an 80-year split over communism.

The head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Alexy II, and the leader of the church's branch in exile, Metropolitan Lavr, signed the historic reunification agreement during an elaborate ceremony at Moscow's largest cathedral.

"By this Act, canonical communion within the Local Russian Orthodox Church is hereby restored," the act read, according to a transcript published on the web site of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia.

Dozens of bearded priests flanked Alexy II, dressed in flowing

green robes, while he and the blue-clad Lavr signed the act and embraced.

Putin then stepped forward to accept Alexy's congratulations for his "service to the faith and country."

The Russian leader, a former KGB officer who has since publicly embraced Christianity, told the thousands gathered that the reunification was a moment of renaissance for the country.

"The rebirth of church unity today is the most important condition for restoring the lost unity of the entire Russian world," Putin said in remarks broadcast on state-run television.

At the culmination of the service, the once rival church leaders were due to take communion from the same chalice in a gesture to seal the spiritual reunification.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) delivers a speech as Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II (R) and Metropolitan Laurus (L), the New York-based leader of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia attend a church service after the signing of the reunification agreement during an elaborate ceremony at Christ the Saviour cathedral in Moscow yesterday.

Dog nurses tiger triplets

AP, Beijing

It's a dog's life for three newborn tiger triplets in eastern China.

The cubs, whom officials at the Jinan Paomaling Wild Animal World in Shandong province are so far just calling "One," "Two" and "Three," have been nursed by a dog since they were rejected by their tiger mother shortly after birth, said Paomaling manager Chen Yucui.

The trio's adoptive mother, a mixed breed farm dog called "Huanli," is expected to nurse them for about a month or until

their appetites outpace her supply, Chen said.

Chen said it is common for Chinese zoos to use surrogate dog mothers to nurse rejected tiger cubs and that Huani has nursed tigers before.

In the past, Paomaling put dog urine on their rejected cub's fur to make the surrogate think she was nursing one of her own puppies but the zoo didn't bother with Huani because she seemed not to mind nursing the tigers, he said.

"The family is getting along well and seems to enjoy each other," Chen said.



PHOTO: AP

In this photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, a dog feeds tiger triplets and her own puppy, right, at the Paomaling Zoo in Jinan, capital of east China's Shandong Province on Wednesday. The tiger triplets were rejected by their mother shortly after their birth.