

Twin bombings kill 33 in Baghdad

8 US soldiers slain in blast, chopper crash, 4 Westerners kidnapped

AFP, Baghdad

Four Westerners were reported kidnapped in Baghdad yesterday amid an explosion of violence that killed at least 33 people in attacks at a prayer hall and busy square in the heart of the Iraqi capital.

The US military also announced that six of its soldiers were killed in a bombing on Monday and another two lost their lives when a helicopter crashed, making May the bloodiest month for American forces this year.

In the latest kidnapping to blight the war-ravaged country, a security official said four Germans working for the Iraqi finance ministry were reported kidnapped in Baghdad by men wearing national police uniforms.

The men are computer science experts training civil servants at the ministry's information department on Palestine Street in the city centre when 40 police vehicles surrounded the building, he said.

"The ministry is checking the reports of the suspected kidnappings of German citizens in Iraq," a German foreign ministry spokesman in Berlin told AFP.

Britain's Foreign Office also said it was urgently checking the reports after the BBC said five Britons were believed to be among a group of Westerners kidnapped in the Iraqi capital.

"We're aware of reports that a group of Western nationals has been taken in Baghdad," a spokesman told AFP, adding the situation was unclear, with reports speaking of Germans, Britons or Americans.

"We're urgently looking into the reports."

The security official said four men were taken out at gunpoint and driven off by men wearing the new uniforms of the national police, a heavily-armed paramilitary unit under the interior ministry.



(From L to R) EU Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri share a laugh prior to the first working session of the 8th Asem Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Hamburg Monday.

EU, Asia agree on Iran, differ on Darfur, climate

Asem sets 2009 climate pact deadline

AFP, AP, Hamburg

European foreign ministers yesterday tried to forge a common approach with Asian nations to the Iranian and North Korean nuclear crises and the Darfur conflict ahead of next week's G8 summit.

They agreed to issue a collective call to Iran to comply with United Nations demands to halt sensitive nuclear enrichment work, according to a declaration due to be issued at the close of the Asia-EU Meeting (Asem) in Hamburg.

European and Asian foreign ministers agreed to set a 2009 deadline to complete negotiations on a new international climate change pact to limit greenhouse gases, diplomats said Tuesday.

Under the agreement, which came during two-day talks here, Asian nations including China and India will not have to adhere to binding targets for reducing carbon dioxide emissions.

Instead, ministers outlined the responsibilities of richer and poorer nations in combating climate change, the diplomats said on condition of anonymity.

The meeting of the 40-some ministers, chaired by German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, also agreed to coordinate the promotion of more sustainable energy use, the diplomats said.

But diplomats said the 27 European and 18 Asian nations were unlikely to send a similar signal to North Korea as an accord in which Pyongyang agreed to give up its arsenal hangs in the balance.



Palestinian boys walk on the rubble of a destroyed building at a Hamas sports club following an Israeli air strike in Beit Hanun, northern Gaza strip yesterday. Four people were wounded including a woman and a child. Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said Tuesday he will meet Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert next week for the first time in nearly two months as the army continued to hammer Hamas targets in violence-wracked Gaza.

Colombo on alert after blasts kill 11

AFP, Colombo

Troops and police stepped up security in the Sri Lankan capital yesterday after two bomb blasts by suspected Tamil Tiger rebels in the past 24 hours killed 11 people, officials said.

All vehicles entering Colombo were searched by heavily-armed troops and police during a three-hour period, a police spokesman said.

The move, following a blast Monday evening at the edge of the capital, which claimed at least eight lives, caused huge traffic jams in the morning.

Just before the search got underway Tuesday, another blast in the island's north killed three people.

"All vehicles entering the city were checked," a police spokesman said. "This was a precautionary measure after yesterday's bomb attack."

A police commando wounded in Monday's bomb attack died of his injuries Tuesday, raising to eight the number of people killed in that attack at Ratmalana, near a major airbase.

Deliberations begin on fate of key Thai parties

AFP, Bangkok

Senior Thai judges began deliberating Tuesday on whether to dissolve the kingdom's two main political parties as thousands of troops were put on alert amid security fears ahead of the court verdict.

Thailand's Constitutional Tribunal must decide whether Thai Rak Thai (TRT), the party formed by ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and the Democrat Party are guilty of a slew of charges of electoral fraud related to annulled elections in April last year.

If the parties are found guilty, the nine judges assigned to the tribunal by Thailand's military-backed government have the power to dissolve them and ban their executives from politics for five years.

Bush imposes fresh sanctions on Sudan

AFP, Washington

The United States slapped fresh sanctions on Sudan over the Darfur conflict yesterday as it seeks a tough new UN Security Council resolution to punish Khartoum.

Expressing frustration with the Sudanese government over the plight of Darfur civilians, Bush said: "The Department of Treasury is tightening US economic sanctions on Sudan."

The president said the United States would "more aggressively enforce existing sanctions against Sudan's government" and pursue a new UN Security Council resolution against Khartoum.

Bomb kills 9 Nepalis

AFP, Kathmandu

A bomb exploded yesterday killing nine people inside a house in southwest Nepal, officials said.

The blast was reported from the remote village of Gothadi in Palpa district, 160km from Kathmandu.

"The explosion has totally damaged the house," killing a family of five and four guests, chief district officer Balkrishna Panthi told AFP by telephone.

Caste clash leaves 11 dead in India

AFP, AP, Jodhpur

At least 11 people were killed yesterday in clashes between police and thousands of people demanding government aid in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan, officials said.

Villagers surrounded police who tried to break up the protest, and the officers opened fire, killing nine people, Gupta said. Two police died in the ensuing melee.

Nearly 20,000 villagers blocked the roads to press officials to classify them as being on the lowest rung of India's complex social ladder so they could get government jobs reserved for such groups, said Madhukar Gupta, an administrator in Jaipur district.