

Politicians ask Iraqis to take up arms

US pullout may mean Iraqi civil war: FM

AP, Baghdad

Prominent Shia and Sunni politicians called on Iraqi civilians to take up arms to defend themselves after a weekend of violence that claimed more than 220 lives, including 60 who died Sunday in a surge of bombings and shootings around Baghdad.

The calls reflect growing frustration with the inability of Iraqi security forces to prevent extremist attacks.

The weekend deaths included two American soldiers, one killed Sunday in a suicide bombing on the western outskirts of Baghdad and another who died in combat Saturday in Salahuddin province north of the capital, the US command said. Three soldiers were wounded in the Sunday blast.

Sunday's deadliest attack occurred when a bomb struck a truckload of newly recruited Iraqi soldiers on the outskirts of Baghdad, killing 15 and wounding 20, a police official at the nearest police station said on condition of anonymity because he was not

authorised to release the information.

Also Sunday, two car bombs exploded near simultaneously in Baghdad's mostly Shia Karrada district, killing eight people.

The first detonated at 10:30 a.m. near a closed restaurant, destroying stalls and soft drink stands. Two passers-by were killed and eight wounded, a police official said.

About five minutes later, the second car exploded about a mile away near shops selling leather jackets and shoes. Six people were killed and seven wounded, said the official, who also spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to talk to the media.

The Karrada area includes the offices of the Supreme Islamic Council in Iraq, the biggest Shia party in parliament, and is considered among the safest parts of the capital.

Elsewhere, a bomb hidden under a car detonated Sunday at the entrance of Shorja market, a mostly Shia area of central Baghdad that has been hit repeat-

edly by insurgents killing three civilians and wounding five, police said.

Police also reported they found the bodies of 29 men Sunday scattered across Baghdad presumed victims of sectarian death squads. Four other people were killed Sunday in separate shootings in Baghdad, police said on condition of anonymity because they were not supposed to release the information.

Meanwhile, Iraq's foreign minister warned Monday that a quick American troop withdrawal could lead to civil war and the collapse of the Iraqi state, adding that the US has a responsibility to build Iraqi forces so that they take over.

Hoshyar Zebari told reporters that the Iraqis "understand the huge pressure that will increase more and more in the United States" ahead of a September report to Congress by US Ambassador Ryan Crocker and military commander Gen David Petraeus.

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Nepali Maoists want 'absolute power'

Warns US

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists are still bent on seizing "absolute power" over the country even though they have signed up for peace with mainstream parties, the US ambassador to Kathmandu said yesterday.

James Moriarty, whose three-year tenure in the Himalayan nation ends this week, also said the former rebels will remain featured on the United States' list of foreign "terrorist" organisations unless they change their ways.

"They continue to use violence and continue to threaten the (peace) process itself if they don't get everything they want," Moriarty told reporters.

"Everything that they want is power, absolute power, not part of a multi-party democracy," said the diplomat, a long-term critic of the Maoists.

The ultra-leftist Maoists officially ended a decade-long "people's war" last November and earlier this year they were also given seats in an interim parliament and cabinet.

Under the peace deal, they have confined their fighters and weap-

ons to UN-monitored camps.

But the ex-rebels continue to face allegations of using mafia-like tactics, including beatings, kidnappings and extortion.

"There is no commitment on the part of the Maoists to give up violence, but if they make that commitment and begin to implement it then, sure, we are going to consider taking them off the terrorist list," the ambassador said, in an apparent concession to the former rebels.

But he also alleged that the Maoists were grappling with an internal dispute over how to proceed politically.

Maoist leader Prachanda and his second in command Baburam Bhattarai advocate staying within the political mainstream to "force the government into a rolling series of concessions that ultimately result in them grabbing full power," Moriarty said.

The other faction within the group, led by Maoist military commanders, believes that "there has got to be confrontation and its got to happen now when the Maoists are relatively strong."



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan army soldiers man positions during the siege of the Lal Masjid where militants with links to al-Qaeda have taken control in Islamabad yesterday. Facing growing pressure at home and abroad, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf met with key security staff in an attempt to end a deadly stand-off at a pro-Taliban mosque.

US considers peace treaty with N Korea

AFP, Washington

The US government is studying the possibility of signing a formal peace treaty with North Korea after more than half a century of tense standoff, The Wall Street Journal reported yesterday.

Citing unnamed senior officials, the newspaper said the administration of President George W Bush was exploring how to implement a peace accord to officially end the 1950-53 Korean War.

They say the United States hopes to start discussions with North Korea by the end of the year, the report said.

In February, North Korea pledged to begin dismantling its nuclear-weapons programme in exchange for economic aid and eventually diplomatic relations with the United States and its allies.

Now, some Bush administration officials hope those so-called six-party talks can evolve into a permanent forum for defusing security threats in Northeast Asia, the paper said.

US and Asian diplomats foresee a forum along the lines of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, The Journal said.

Bush administration officials stress that pursuing broader regional security aims in Northeast Asia would be contingent upon North Korean leader Kim Jong Il permanently dismantling his nuclear-arms programmes, according to the report.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents take shelter in a temple compound after fleeing their flooded residential quarters in Bago district, some 50km north-east of Yangon. Thousands of people were left homeless after floods swept through central Myanmar, washing out bridges, closing schools and forcing a suspension in rail service, state media said yesterday.

Iran has slowed down nuke work: ElBaradei

IAEA envoy due in Iran as West ups pressure

AFP, Vienna/ Tehran

Iran has slowed down the expansion of its nuclear enrichment capabilities at its strategic plant in Natanz, UN nuclear chief Mohamed ElBaradei said yesterday.

"We have seen a fairly slow development in commissioning new cascades," ElBaradei told reporters, referring to the installation of centrifuges which enrich uranium into fuel for civilian reactors or, in its highly refined state, atom bomb material. ElBaradei has called on Iran to freeze new enrichment work, holding it at current levels, in return for the United Nations holding off on new sanctions against Iran for its failure to heed UN Security Council calls for it to halt all enrichment work."

Iran has not yet frozen the work, ElBaradei said.

The Council has already imposed two rounds of sanctions.

ElBaradei has said he is seeking a "time-out" in the international confrontation fuelled by fears Iran is using its civilian atomic energy programme as a cover for the secret development of nuclear weapons.

Iran has so far said it will not halt or slow down its enrichment work.

ElBaradei said IAEA inspectors had noticed Iran's slowdown "in commissioning new cascades for the treatment of nuclear material" while on a visit to Natanz last week.

IAEA approves sending inspectors to N Korea

AFP, Vienna

The UN atomic agency gave the green light Monday for inspectors to return to North Korea for the first time since 2002 to monitor the communist state's dismantling of its nuclear weapons programme.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) 35-nation board of governors approved by consensus a request for a North Korea mission from agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei, diplomats said.

A nine-member IAEA inspector team, expected to travel to North Korea within the next 10 days, will re-establish international monitoring almost five years after the agency was kicked out in December 2002 as Pyongyang moved to re-start its Yongbyon plutonium-producing nuclear reactor and resume weapons work.

The reclusive, Stalinist state conducted its first test atomic

explosion in October last year. It is believed to have several plutonium bombs.

North Korea has now agreed to shut down Yongbyon, in a six-party agreement reached February 13 that will get it fuel supplies. The accord is a first step towards Pyongyang giving up its nuclear weapons.

US ambassador Gregory Schulte told reporters Monday that the shutdown of the facilities at Yongbyon, together with IAEA monitoring and verification, will be "an important step toward achieving the common goal of a Korean peninsula free of nuclear weapons."

But actual disarmament may remain elusive, with the United States suspecting that North Korea is hiding a uranium enrichment program that can also make atom bombs.

Pak opposition leaders ask Musharraf to resign

AFP, London

Pakistani opposition leaders on Sunday called for President Pervez Musharraf to resign and for former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif to be permitted to return to the country.

In a joint declaration issued at the end of a weekend conference in London, the All Parties Conference (APC) said that Musharraf's military rule had "brought Pakistan to the edge of a precipice, leading to strife, chaos and the threat of disintegration."

"Parliament has been marginalised, and stripped of all its powers ... Both houses (of parliament) have been reduced to a rubber stamp for the Chief of Army Staff who unconstitutionally occupies the Office of the President," the

declaration continued.

The conference came amid increasing domestic turmoil in Pakistan, as authorities in Islamabad on Sunday moved closer to an all-out raid on the besieged Red Mosque after officials said al-Qaeda-linked rebels had seized control and may start killing hostages.

According to government estimates, at least 24 people have been killed in the six days since the siege of the mosque began. The mosque's firebrand deputy leader, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, however told local television that 335 people had died in Sunday's fighting alone.

The siege comes after months of rioting over Musharraf's suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in March, which sparked the biggest crisis of the president's time in power.