

US to issue 'bleak' Maliki assessment

Hasty Iraq pullout would trigger bloodbath: Bush

AFP, Washington/ Kansas City

US intelligence agencies express strong doubts about the leadership of Iraq Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in a report to be made public yesterday, the New York Times reported.

The Times said in its Thursday edition that US government officials familiar with the report say it gives "a bleak outlook" on Maliki's ability to make progress in unifying Iraq.

"The report says that there's been little political progress to date, and it's very gloomy on the chances for political progress in the future," a Congressional official told the Times.

The administration of George W. Bush is to make public parts of the report Thursday, the Times said, one day after Bush reaffirmed his support for the embattled Iraqi leader, saying "Prime Minister Maliki's a good guy, good man, with a difficult job, and I support him."

This week senior US lawmakers including leading Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton called for Maliki to step down, and

Bush's own backing for Maliki appeared to be on the wane before his strong declaration of support Wednesday.

The intelligence report, entitled "Prospects for Iraq's Stability," concludes that majority Shiite groups continue to support Maliki despite his lack of progress in unifying the country mainly because forming a new government bridging differences between Shiite, Sunni, Kurdish and other Iraqis would be very difficult, the Times said.

The report said that the US "surge" troop hike has delivered some success in quelling sectarian violence, but it also warns that pulling US troops out early would result in greater chaos.

A government official told the Times the report "leaves you with the sense that what we've been doing hasn't been working, but we can't let up, or it'll get worse."

The report could play a key role in the looming debate over US and Iraqi government progress in building security in Iraq.

In September the White House

and the US military leadership in Iraq are to report to Congress on the progress of the 30,000-troop surge that Bush launched last January as a last-ditch effort to overcome sectarian and insurgent violence.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush has warned that a hasty withdrawal from Iraq would trigger a bloodbath like the one in Southeast Asia after the US defeat and retreat from Vietnam.

"Three decades later, there is a legitimate debate about how we got into the Vietnam War and how we left," Bush said Wednesday in an effort to turn on its head the analogy by critics who liken the Iraq war to the Vietnam quagmire.

"Whatever your position is on that debate, one unmistakable legacy of Vietnam is that the price of America's withdrawal was paid by millions of innocent citizens whose agonies would add to our vocabulary new terms, like 'boat people,' 'reeducation camps,' and 'killing fields,'" he said.

Israel to buy advanced Patriot missiles

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli air force is to buy advanced US-made missiles, capable of intercepting aircraft and long-range ballistic missiles, to upgrade the current air defence system, a report said on Thursday.

The Patriot PAC-3 missiles, which will replace the PAC-2 currently in use, is capable of intercepting missiles possessed by foe Syria, the Ynet news website said, citing unnamed sources.

There was no immediate comment from the defence ministry.

The PAC-3 missile is made to intercept ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and aircraft, according to the website of its manufacturer, Lockheed Martin.

The missile, weighing 320 kg (700 pounds), increases the firepower of the Patriot battery, as 16 of them fit on a Patriot launcher, compared with four PAC-2s, it said.

Israel first deployed the Patriot system in 1991, when then Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein fired Scuds on the country during the first Gulf War.



Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) activists shout slogans against Prime Minister Manmohan Singh government during a demonstration protesting the Indo-US nuclear deal in New Delhi yesterday.

Protesters defy Myanmar junta with new protest

AFP, Yangon

Pro-democracy supporters defied the junta in Myanmar to stage their third protest within a week Thursday, underlining what analysts say is deepening public anger at crippling economic hardships.

Such public defiance on the streets to a government that deals harshly with dissent has not been seen in Myanmar in at least nine years, they said.

The protests were sparked by a massive hike in fuel prices last week, and have thrown a global spotlight on the isolated and impoverished country.

About 40 protesters, most of them from the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), were on their way to party headquarters when about 20 members of the security forces and pro-government militia blocked their path.

The protesters tried to resist by forming a human chain on the pavement but they were yanked apart, thrown into trucks and carted off.

About 100 people watched the confrontation in silence near downtown Yangon, the main city in the secretive country formerly known as Burma.



Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe gestures as he attends a programme at 'Netaji Bhavan', the house of Indian nationalist Subhash Chandra Bose, in Kolkata yesterday.

Abe praises Indians who backed Japan in WWII

AFP, Kolkata

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe voiced admiration yesterday for two controversial Indians who stood up to colonial ruler Britain during World War II and sided with Tokyo.

Abe visited the eastern city of Kolkata to meet relatives of nationalist Subhash Chandra Bose, who advocated violent resistance, and Radhabind Pal, the sole judge who dissented at the Allied tribunal that condemned to death war-time Japanese leaders.

"Many Japanese have been moved deeply by such persons of strong will and action of the independence of India like Subhash Chandra Bose," Abe said in a speech at the opening of the Indo-Japan Cultural Centre.

"Even to this day, many Japanese revere Radhabind Pal."

The premier, wrapping up a three-day official visit to India, has dismissed suggestions back home that meeting Pal's son would anger other Asian nations resentful over Japan's wartime atrocities.

In a dissenting opinion, Pal questioned the legitimacy of the tribunal, sealing a friendship

between Pal and Abe's grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, who was charged but never tried as a war criminal.

Prashanto Pal, 81, told AFP he was "very, very happy to see" Abe. "I feel proud of the fact that my father is still remembered for his contribution that was only correct and just. How can you blame only one side for war crimes and not the others?"

Abe's stop in Kolkata came at the end of a high-profile visit during which India and Japan vowed to seal an economic partnership deal by December.

The premier held talks with West Bengal state's Marxist chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee and toured a museum dedicated to Bose.

After WWII broke out, Bose escaped his British watchers, sought help from Nazi Germany and later went to Tokyo, where he organised an army.

Abe spent time looking at black and white photos of Bose as a young boy, his May 1942 meeting with Adolf Hitler in Berlin and a picture of his German wife, Emilie Schenk, holding their baby girl.

Benazir details deal with Musharraf

AP, Islamabad

Former premier Benazir Bhutto has detailed for the first time a plan to keep Pakistan's US-allied president in office under a power-sharing deal she said would strengthen the fight against terrorism.

President Gen Pervez Musharraf is seeking a new five-year presidential term but faces mounting pressure to step down as army chief and restore democracy, eight years after he seized power in a coup.

In remarks broadcast Tuesday, Benazir outlined an agreement that would reduce Musharraf's power while allowing her to return from exile and perhaps to government.

"So we're not trying to bail out a military dictator by saying we will come there on your terms. What we are seeking is a compromise that could help bring about a stable, democratic, civilian order," Benazir Bhutto said on PBS' "NewsHour With Jim Lehrer."

"What we're negotiating for are certain changes that will empower the Parliament to take on the militants," she said.

A deal with Benazir offers Musharraf a chance to fend off challenges to his continued rule and make good on pledges to combat

the Taliban and al-Qaeda, viewed with growing skepticism in Washington and other Nato capitals with troops in neighbouring Afghanistan.

However, he has given no clear indication that he will make concessions demanded by Benazir, including quitting the powerful post of army chief.

Musharraf's spokesman was not immediately available for comment Wednesday.

Benazir said Musharraf had to lift a ban on twice-elected prime ministers such as herself and another exiled former leader, Nawaz Sharif from serving again.

Graft charges against herself and other ex-officials must be dropped, she said. Both Benazir Bhutto and Sharif have vowed to return to Pakistan this year, further raising the political temperature.

Sharif has asked the Supreme Court to ensure he is not arrested or deported on arrival.

Government lawyers on Wednesday gave the court a copy of what they said was the pledge signed in 2003 by Sharif that he would leave Pakistan for 10 years.

In return, the government released him from a jail sentence and let him leave for Saudi Arabia.

The government denied Sharif

had been forced into exile and said he would be "dealt with in accordance with law" if he came back.

Sharif acknowledged the "understanding" with Saudi Arabia, but denied any agreement with Musharraf. "I think all their talk is absolutely fraud and drama," he told Geo TV in a telephone interview from Germany.

Benazir said Musharraf must also explain how organisers will prevent parliamentary elections to be held by January from being "stolen in the field" and give back to Parliament some of the sweeping powers he took after ousting Sharif in 1999.

Asked what she was offering in return, Benazir sketched a path through the legal labyrinth that other opposition parties insist preclude Musharraf's staying in power.

"There are going to be two presidential elections. The first presidential election is going to take place in September, when General Musharraf is still wearing the (military) uniform," Benazir Bhutto said.

New UN-Iran N-accord has 'limitations': US

AFP, Vienna

The United States on Wednesday said an Iranian agreement with the UN atomic agency to clarify its contested nuclear programme had "real limitations" and accused Tehran of employing delaying tactics to avoid further UN sanctions.

The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Iran announced on Tuesday that they had agreed a timetable for Tehran to answer long-standing questions about its atomic drive, which Washington claims is aimed at making a nuclear bomb.

"We understand there are real limitations with the (timetable) plan," US ambassador Gregory Schulte told reporters in a telephone press conference in Vienna, citing Tehran's "continued refusal" to

implement the IAEA's additional protocol on wider inspections.

"Moreover, Iran's leadership has made clear that implementation of the plan is dependent on no (UN) Security Council action," Schulte said.

The Council has imposed two rounds of sanctions to get Iran to suspend enriching uranium, which can be used as power reactor fuel but also atom bomb material, and to cooperate fully with IAEA inspectors.

Schulte insisted that the United States would continue pushing for a third round of sanctions, which diplomats said Washington wanted to happen in September.

Iran "is clearly trying to distract attention from its continued development of bomb-making capability. I don't think the Security Council will be distracted," Schulte said.

"Of course, we welcome any progress in resolving troubling questions about Iran's nuclear activities," Schulte said, but Iran must honour "the core requirement of suspension and full cooperation."

Diplomats said however that Russia, backed by China and perhaps even some European states, would block more sanctions at the Security Council as long as the new IAEA-Iran cooperation continued.

Non-proliferation analyst Gary Samore told AFP from New York: "Unfortunately I think the Iranians are going to buy themselves some time. There is no prospect of a resolution as long as Iran is seen to be moving on resolving the issues."

This could put off any chance of sanctions until the end of the year, Samore said.

Downgraded Dean drenches Mexico, raises flood fears

AFP, Poza Rica

Tropical storm Dean pummelled central Mexico with torrential rains yesterday, raising concerns over mudslides and floods after pounding the Gulf coast as a category two hurricane.

At least one person was reported killed in Mexico as a result of the storm, which first roared across Mexico's Caribbean coast on Tuesday as a potentially catastrophic category five hurricane, then made landfall a second time Wednesday.

Before its double strike on Mexico, the deadly storm killed nine people in Haiti where it flattened houses and left around 4,000 people homeless, and also left four dead in Jamaica, two in the Dominican Republic, and two in Martinique.



Local residents salvage their belongings from the debris Wednesday in Mahahual beach, 80km from Chetumal, Mexico, after the authorities allowed residents to go back to pick up their belongings. The eye of the Hurricane Dean hit directly Mahahual's beaches, destroying most of the establishments in this tiny seaside resort.

Sanjay Dutt steps out of jail

AFP, Mumbai

Bollywood star Sanjay Dutt walked out of jail Thursday after being granted interim bail from his six-year sentence for arms possession, an AFP photographer said.

A smiling Dutt shook hands with police officials, hugged a few of them and waved to scores of journalists as he walked out of Yerwada prison in western Pune city.

Dutt was last month sentenced to six years for possessing illegal weapons received from plotters of the 1993 Mumbai bombings, which killed 257 people and injured 800 more.

The Supreme Court on Monday ordered his release on a technicality, as the Mumbai court had failed to provide a copy of its full judgement to Dutt.

Nepal police detain stripping protesters

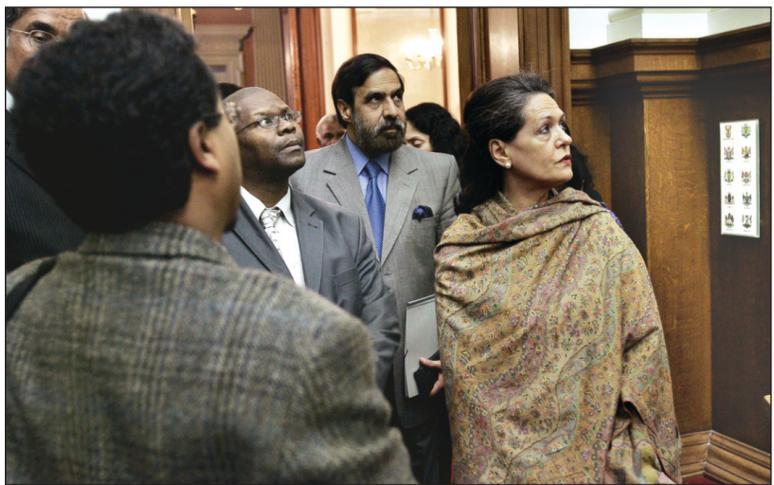
AFP, Kathmandu

Police in Nepal on Wednesday detained 13 men and women who tried to strip in front of parliament here to protest the decades-old practice of forcing girls from their community into prostitution.

"We detained five Badi men and eight Badi women as they tried to strip off their clothes during a demonstration" outside Nepal's parliament complex, Kathmandu police chief Sarbendra Khanal told AFP.

"This is a restricted area, and protesting is banned," he added.

Members of the poor Badi community are one of the most disadvantaged groups in the country. For generations, many have been forced into the sex trade because of a lack of other options.



Sonia Gandhi (R), the leader of Congress led ruling UPA visits the South African parliament in Cape Town yesterday as part of her four-day working visit to South Africa.

Rebels target Afghan police chief

AP, AFP, Kabul

Insurgents detonated a roadside bomb next to a convoy carrying the police chief in Afghanistan's violence-plagued Helmand province on Thursday, killing three civilians and wounding 13 others.

The blast in the southern province, which supplies much of the opium used in the world's heroin trade, followed an attack Wednesday that killed two Canadian soldiers and wounded a radio journalist.

The bomb was triggered by remote control in the town of Gereshek when Helmand police chief Mohammad Hussein passed by in a convoy of several cars, said Hussein, who was not hurt in the attack. Five of the injured were in critical condition, he said.

Pro-Taliban militants attack Pak paramilitary camp

AFP, Peshawar

Pro-Taliban militants attacked a paramilitary camp in northwestern Pakistan overnight in a clash that wounded a dozen soldiers, officials said yesterday.

One militant was killed in the hour-long shootout following the raid on the fort by more than a dozen heavily armed men outside the town of Hangu, local police chief Ghulam Mohammad said.

He said they attacked with rockets, hand grenades and Kalashnikov rifles, but were beaten off.

A military spokesman confirmed the clash but had no immediate details.

The attack, which came in the midst of a spike in violence in the region, shattered windows of the two-storey British era fort, he said.

The police official said the body of

a militant killed in the fighting was lying in the fort. Others fled in the darkness.

He said the attackers were thought to come from the nearby tribal region of North Waziristan where the army is hunting pro-Taliban and al-Qaeda militants who fled Afghanistan after a US-led invasion in late 2001.

Clashes between militants and the security forces have intensified in the lawless tribal regions since the breakdown in July of a peace deal signed by authorities and pro-Taliban groups last September.

Suspected pro-Taliban militants killed four Pakistani soldiers in two rocket attacks on an army camp and a security post in the volatile north-west tribal zones, officials said Wednesday.

Six paramilitary soldiers were wounded in a rocket attack on a checkpoint in the tribal town of Tiarza in

South Waziristan near the Afghan border, chief military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad said.

"One soldier later died of his injuries in a hospital," the general told AFP.

Three soldiers were killed overnight when several rockets struck an army camp at Bannu, close to the restive Waziristan region where Pakistani forces are battling al-Qaeda and Taliban militants, security officials said.