



Australian Prime Minister John Howard (3rd R-at podium) delivers the final declaration at a ceremony on the final day of the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit in Sydney yesterday.

Bush advisers favour current war strategy

AP, Washington

President Bush's top two military and political advisers on Iraq will warn Congress on Monday that making any significant changes to the current war strategy will jeopardize the limited security and political progress made so far, The Associated Press has learned.

US Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who has been less forthcoming than Gen. David Petraeus in advance of his testimony, will join Petraeus in pushing for maintaining the US troop surge, seeing it as the only viable option to prevent Iraq and the region from plunging into further chaos, US officials said.

Crocker and Petraeus planned to meet on Sunday to go over their remarks and responses to expected tough questioning from lawmakers including sceptical Republicans. But they will not consult Bush or their immediate bosses before their appearances Monday and Tuesday, in order to preserve the "independence and the integrity of their testimony," said one official.

Petraeus and Crocker did have lengthy discussions with the president, Defence Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice when Bush visited Iraq on Labour Day.

Crocker, a career diplomat with extensive experience in the Middle East who opposed the war when it began in 2003, is pushing for political change where progress has been elusive and the administration's options are limited under the fragile Shia-led government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Yet the diplomat will say that as poorly as al-Maliki's government has performed, it would not be advisable at the moment for the US to support new leadership or lobby for a different coalition of Iraq's fractious Shias, Sunnis and Kurds, the officials said.

Crocker also will discuss the challenges of corruption, reconciliation, de-Baathification and the difficulties of enacting wide-ranging legislation such as an oil law, according to officials. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were discussing internal deliberations.

Both Crocker and Petraeus will say the buildup of 30,000 troops, bringing the current US total to nearly 170,000, has achieved some success and is working better than any previous effort to quell the insurgency and restore stability, according to officials familiar with their thinking.

Petraeus, the commander of US forces in Iraq, and Crocker were in the Washington area on Saturday working separately on final drafts of opening testimony on Capitol Hill. Later in the week, Bush plans a national address.

The assessments by Petraeus and Crocker are intended to be considered equally. But officials expect Congress to focus on military matters, particularly possible troop withdrawals. Unless there are changes, the increase comes to a natural end starting in the spring and continuing through the end of next summer.



Taiwanese protesters illuminate candles ahead of a vigil in Taipei yesterday marking the one-year anniversary of a campaign to oust President Chen Shui-bian over alleged corruption.

Missing girl's parents back in England

AP, Castle Donington

A British couple named as suspects in the disappearance of their 4-year-old daughter returned to England Sunday, days after being grilled by Portuguese police about new forensic evidence authorities believe ties them to the case.

An easyJet flight carrying Kate and Gerry McCann landed at East Midlands Airport, near their central England home, at 12:15 pm (7:15 am EDT). The couple flew from Faro in southern Portugal with their 2-year-old twins.

On Friday, Portuguese police named the McCanns as suspects in the disappearance of their daughter Madeleine but did not confiscate their passports or restrict their movements.

A family spokeswoman, Justine McGuinness, read out a brief statement Sunday, saying the McCanns were "returning to Britain after careful thought" and in order to give their twins a more normal life.

Israel PM vows to carry on Gaza strikes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed on Sunday to continue military operations in the Gaza Strip targeting Palestinian militants in the Hamas-ruled territory.

"I'd like to express my appreciation to the army's and the defence establishment's unrelenting operations aimed at getting the terrorists and their leaders in the Gaza Strip," Olmert told the weekly cabinet meeting.

"This is a continuing and incessant activity which we will pursue," Olmert's statement came one day after the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas claimed that Israeli special forces captured a senior commander of the movement's security forces.

Mohawah al-Qadi, a senior member of Hamas's armed wing and commander in its paramilitary Executive Force, was nabbed on Friday by undercover troops in the town of Rafah in southern Gaza, it said.

But a spokesman for the Israeli army told AFP that "we have no knowledge of any such operation."

The Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades said Israeli soldiers in Executive Force uniforms hustled Qadi into a Subaru which then sped off to the Sufa crossing into Israel.

Al-Qadi, seized together with his assistant Sager Abd al-Al, was "responsible for the Executive Force public relations," the group said.

The Israeli army has carried out dozens of ground and air raids into Gaza in recent months in a bid to

weaken Hamas, which seized control in the territory on June 15 after a week of factional clashes and ousted its Fatah rivals.

Meanwhile, defying Hamas, scores of schools and shops shut their doors in Gaza on Sunday, observing a PLO-called strike to protest violence by the Islamist movement ruling the Palestinian territory.

In the normally bustling Rimal neighbourhood of Gaza City, most store fronts were shuttered and only a handful of shops open and there were noticeably fewer people about on what is normally the busy first day of the work week.

The universities of Al-Azhar, Al-Quds and Al-Aqsa were closed, as were the majority of state schools in the impoverished coastal strip

where Hamas seized power in a bloody takeover nearly three months ago.

Schools operated by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) remained open.

The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) called on Friday for a one-day general strike to protest the use of force by Hamas paramilitaries in dispersing rallies, which the Islamist movement had not authorised.

It marked the latest escalation between the Western-shunned Hamas, and the Western-backed president Mahmud Abbas and the new government he appointed after the Islamists' seizure of Gaza on June 15.

Every day is like 9/11, say Iraqis

AFP, Baghdad

When the dust of a devastating blast that rocked an inner Baghdad suburb six weeks ago had settled, Um Wafa'a was a widow.

Her husband was one of dozens of people caught in the wrong place at the wrong time -- in Karrada neighbourhood on a Thursday afternoon in late July when it was crowded with shoppers ahead of the Muslim day of rest.

Um Wafa'a says while the world will next week mourn the loss of those killed in the September 11 attacks in the United States six years ago, they will hardly shed a tear for the car bomb dead of Baghdad.

In her eyes at least, the attack on the World Trade Centre and the bomb that killed her husband on July 26 are directly linked.

"I believe our suffering began on September 11," 44-year-old Um Wafa'a told AFP. "Now we are daily paying the price of the actions of the terrorists."

The official toll of the Karrada bombing was 25, but in the days that followed the names of 92 victims were listed on posters hastily stuck up on walls of the suburb.

The attack was just another in the litany of violence that has rocked Iraq since the United States declared its war on terror in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and on the Pentagon.

Car bombs, suicide bombers, militia, death squads and snipers have killed tens of thousands of people across Iraq, but no one is keeping an accurate count of those killed.



Palestinians walk past closed shops during a one-day strike in Gaza City yesterday. Defying Hamas, scores of schools and shops shut their doors in Gaza Sunday, observing a Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) called strike to protest violence by the Islamist movement ruling the Palestinian territory.

Israeli, Palestinian leaders meet today

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert will meet today, but expectations are low since Israel has refused central Palestinian requests, officials said.

The two leaders will meet in Jerusalem for the latest in a series of talks ahead of a international peace conference called for by US President George W. Bush later this year, Israeli and Palestinian officials told AFP.

A senior Israeli official said that the two leaders would discuss "the core issues of the Middle East conflict, including refugees, Jerusalem and borders."

But he downplayed the chances of progress, saying the Israeli leader would not accede to requests made by Abbas in previous meetings.

These include releasing prisoners ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins this week, and lifting some of the myriad roadblocks Israel has established in the occupied West Bank.

"There won't be any prisoner

release before Ramadan as was requested by Abbas during their last meeting," the official said on condition of anonymity.

And "there won't be any discussions on removal of roadblocks. That's not on tomorrow's agenda."

Releasing some of the more than 11,000 prisoners and lifting some of the more than 500 West Bank roadblocks are two major demands that the Palestinian leadership has made during previous encounters.

AFP, New York

America marks the sixth anniversary of the September 11 attacks on Tuesday with more low key commemorations than in the past and in the face of mounting concern over the US-led "war on terror."

In New York, where more than 2,700 people were killed when two hijacked planes ploughed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre, rescue workers were to read out the names of the dead in a

solemn ceremony on Tuesday.

As in previous years, al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden released a taped message ahead of the commemorations, mocking the United States as "weak" and threatening to escalate the increasingly unpopular war in Iraq.

Unlike past commemorations, most of Tuesday's ceremony will be held at a park near Ground Zero, the area where the Twin Towers once stood, and not in the site itself, where work is under

way on new skyscrapers and a memorial.

In what has become an annual ritual, the reading of the names will pause for four moments of silence to mark the exact times that the planes hit the towers and when the massive office blocks collapsed.

Church bells are to toll at 8:46 am (1246 GMT) to mark the exact moment that the first plane, American Airlines Flight 11, crashed into the North Tower.