

Turkey-Iraq hold crunch talks over PKK threat

AFP, Ankara

Iraqi ministers held crisis talks here yesterday seeking to persuade Turkey increasingly impatient Turkey against launching military strikes against rebel Kurd bases in northern Iraq.

Crisis talks yesterday between Iraqi and Turkish ministers over the presence of rebel Kurd bases in northern Iraq produced "positive" results, Iraqi defence ministry spokesman Mohammed Askeri said.

"Very important talks are under way. There are positive results, everything is happening as planned," Askeri told journalists, adding that a second round of talks would follow the initial 90-minute session later in the day.

The talks broke up after 90 minutes however and it was not immediately known if and when they would resume.

One day after Turkish leaders

reaffirmed their determination to wipe out Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) bases across the border, Iraq's Defence Minister Abdel Qader Mohammed Jassim and National Security Minister Shirwan al-Waeli met Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan and Interior Minister Besir Atalay.

One Iraqi embassy official said the talks were originally scheduled to last three hours. After the meeting broke up, the Iraqis returned to their Ankara lodgings in a police guesthouse.

The Iraqis said they were awaiting word from their Turkish counterparts and Turkish officials were unavailable for comment.

The NTV news channel reported that Babacan was consulting with the military leadership and that Atalay had left to telephone Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was on a visit to Romania.

Tensions have risen since the Turkish parliament last week

authorised the government to order military incursions against the bases of the PKK, which has been waging a bloody campaign for self-rule in southeast Turkey since 1974.

They peaked after the PKK ambushed a military patrol last Sunday killing 12 soldiers and capturing eight.

The Turkish army has since massed men and materiel along the border, and reported it had killed more than 60 Kurdish rebels in fighting since Sunday's ambush.

The Turks have long complained of what they call US and Iraqi inaction in dealing with the PKK in northern Iraq, where the rebels enjoy safe haven.

Washington and Baghdad have vowed to make good on promises to crack down on the PKK, but Turkish leaders, facing strong domestic pressure for rapid military action, have voiced mounting exasperation.

"We respect the territorial integ-

ity and unity of Iraq, (but) we are running out of patience and we will not tolerate the use of Iraqi soil for terrorist activities," President Abdullah Gul said Thursday. "We are fully determined to take all necessary steps to end this threat."

"Our security forces are determined to move as soon as the situation allows," Erdogan warned Thursday, lashing out at US calls for restraint.

The Iraqi delegation here includes Iraq's intelligence chief and representatives of the two major Kurdish parties in northern Iraq, as well as a US military officer.

"We came with concrete steps, concrete proposals," the Anatolia news agency quoted Iraqi Defence Minister Jassim as saying after his arrival Thursday.

This appeared to be a response to the Turkish foreign minister who said this week that the Iraqi visit would be useless unless it contained such proposals.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani paramilitary soldiers take position at a roadside bunkers in Mingora, a town of the North West Frontier Province yesterday. Troops surrounded a militant cleric's hideout in northwest Pakistan, fighting heavy clashes with his supporters a day after a deadly bombing, officials and witnesses said.

Nine Muslims get life terms for India blasts

AFP, Coimbatore, India

A court sentenced nine Muslim men to life imprisonment on Thursday for carrying out serial blasts targeting a top politician that killed nearly 60 people in southern India.

Nineteen explosions rocked the city of Coimbatore on February 14, 1998 as then-home minister Lal Krishna Advani arrived to campaign in support of his ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Thirty-one people were given life sentences on Wednesday in the same case.

In India a life sentence usually means the imprisoned has to spend the rest of their life in jail, but the term can be commuted on grounds of good behaviour.

Another 20 people were given jail terms of varying periods for their roles in the plot, which also wounded 250 people.

A total of 158 people were convicted in August for carrying out the violence.

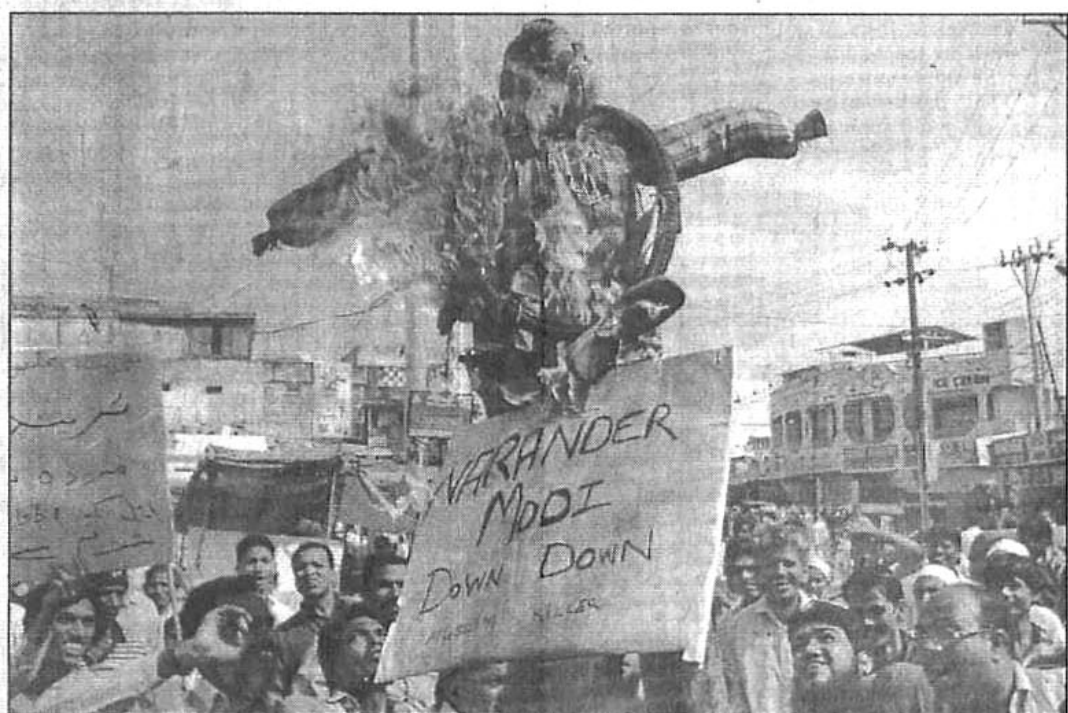


PHOTO: AFP

Members of Majlis-e-Itehadul Muslimeen (MIM) protest and burn the effigy of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi in the old city of Hyderabad yesterday. The MIM protested following the revelations by a private television news network which broadcast footage of men accused of taking part in deadly Gujarat riots in 2002 apparently admitting that the Hindu-ruled local government supported violence against Muslims.

Lanka needs 4 months to replace lost planes

Tigers claim killing 6 sailors

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military will need up to four months to replace aircraft lost in a suicide attack staged by Tamil Tiger rebels, a top official said yesterday.

Eight aircraft, including a twin-turbo prop Beechcraft surveillance plane were destroyed when a crack Tamil Tiger suicide squad struck a key air base in Anuradhapura, 210 kilometres (130 miles) north of Colombo, on Monday.

"We estimate our loss at about 15 million dollars," air force chief Roshan Goonetilleke told reporters here.

"The Beechcraft alone costs about three to four million dollars, other ancillary equipment another six million dollars or so... It should take about three to four months to replace our fleet," Goonetilleke said.

He said the air force's attack capabilities "have not been reduced in any way" and the fleet of Russian MiG-27 and Israeli Kfir jets remained intact.

"The aircraft were hit by LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) ground attacks and not by their planes. There were many more aircraft at the camp and they were not damaged," he said.

Goonetilleke said the island's Indian-installed radar system had given an early warning.

"However, the air defence system has not been installed throughout the country yet... about 70 percent is covered... Some areas are vulnerable, some not. We can't protect the whole of Sri Lanka right now," he said.

Goonetilleke said sophisticated air defence systems usually took about five to six years to install, but Sri Lankan authorities are hoping to complete the process within a year.

Meanwhile, Tamil Tiger rebels Thursday said they killed six navy personnel near a Sri Lankan wildlife sanctuary, but officials denied the claim and said there were no injuries.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a statement,

said they opened fire at a bus carrying the sailors in Tissamaharama on Thursday afternoon.

"The LTTE commando squad, a peripheral unit of Ampara regional command, confirms that six Sri Lanka navy personnel were killed and more than 12 others were wounded in the incident," Tiger spokesman Rasiyah Ilanthiriyar said.

Tens of thousands of people have died since the LTTE launched a military campaign for autonomy in the island's north and east.

Sri Lanka on Friday ordered the closure of a Colombo radio station, charging that it had sparked panic with a false report of a rebel attack against civilians, officials said.

The ABC radio station was ordered off the air following an investigation into a report broadcast Wednesday, media ministry officials said.

"They reported a rebel attack and caused panic among residents in the area," an official said. "There was no attack at all. But the news report caused a scare."

Major fall in Kashmir violence: Police

AFP, Srinagar

Violence in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir has declined by up to 60 percent because residents of the Himalayan region are turning against militants, a senior police official said yesterday.

There has also been a 40 percent decrease in violence in other parts of Kashmir this year, said police inspector general Shri Murari Sahai, citing "people's cooperation" in the decline.

Srinagar is the summer capital of Indian Kashmir and the urban hub of Muslim militants who launched an insurgency against Indian rule in 1989.

Muslim rebels, whom India says are backed by neighbouring Pakistan, had realised that "the mood of the people of Kashmir was against violence," Sahai said in a statement.

The region is held in part by India and Pakistan but both claim it in full. The insurgency has so far left more than 42,000 dead by official count, although human rights groups put the toll at 60,000 dead and 10,000 missing.

The reported fall in violence has been attributed to a peace process launched by India and Pakistan in January 2004.

Sonia meets China's Hu and Wen

AFP, Beijing

India's ruling Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi met with China's top leaders Friday on a visit widely seen as a sign of improving relations between the world's two most populous nations.

Accompanied by her son Rahul, Sonia Gandhi met with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao at the Zhongnanhai leadership compound and later met with President Hu Jintao at the Great Hall of the People.

The gesture indicated the level of importance China attaches to Sonia Gandhi's visit as its top leaders normally only officially meet with other heads of state.

Sonia Gandhi described her trip as "a milestone in strengthening the relations between the two countries," when she met with Chinese Communist Party official Wang Jiarui earlier Friday, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

"I am amazed and astounded at the progress made by the people of China and its leadership," she said.

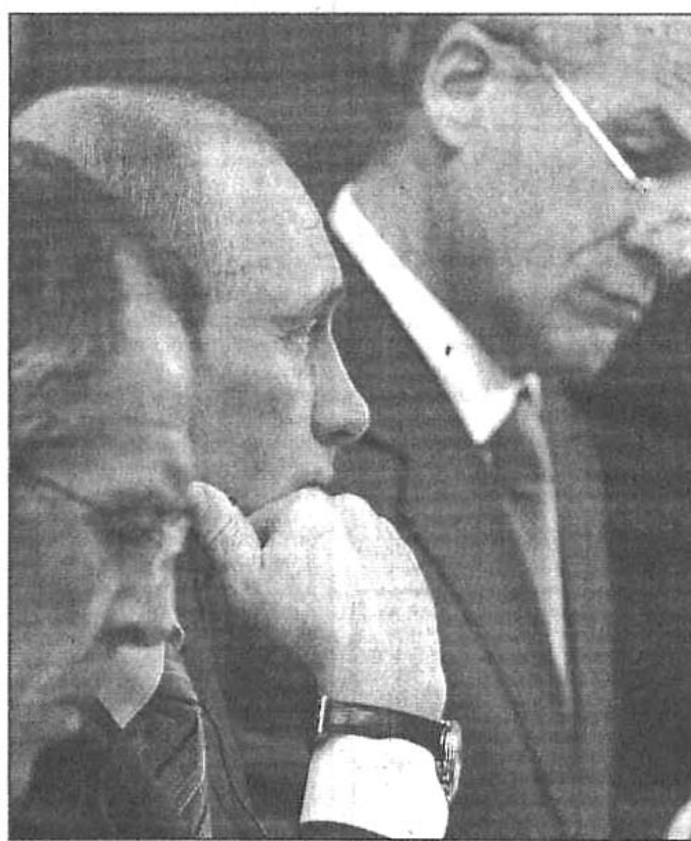


PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (C) flanked by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (L) and Sergei Yastrzhembsky (R), the special envoy for EU-Russian relations, attend the EU-Russia summit in Mafra yesterday. The EU-Russia summit, which marks 10 years since Brussels and Moscow signed a partnership agreement, takes place in the former Portuguese royal residence of Mafra, some 40km outside Lisbon.

Putin warns Europe ahead of summit

AFP, Mafra

Russia's President Vladimir Putin issued a new warning to Europe over the Iran nuclear standoff and Kosovo's push for independence ahead of a summit with EU leaders in Portugal yesterday.

The European Union had been hoping to patch up relations with Putin.

But the Russian leader outlined sharp differences as he arrived, likening supporters of tough policies on Iran to "mad people wielding razor blades" and calling for "patience" on Kosovo's future.

Western powers suspect that Iran is trying to build up a secret nuclear weapons capability. Iran insists that its nuclear programme is aimed only at producing energy.

Russia is helping to build a reactor in Iran and has gone against most Western powers by opposing tighter UN sanctions against Iran and blocking moves towards independence for Kosovo, a southern Serbian province.

The EU-Russia summit, which marks 10 years since Brussels and Moscow signed a partnership agreement, was held in the former Portuguese royal residence of Mafra, some 40 kilometres (25

miles) outside Lisbon.

The last summit near the Russian city of Samara earlier this year was marred by bitter disputes between Putin and EU leaders over the state of democracy in Russia and EU officials had been hoping to improve relations.

Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Socrates, whose country holds the EU presidency, hosted Friday's talks alongside EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso.

Economic relations between Brussels and Moscow have boomed despite frequent rows, with trade turnover going up 3.5 times to an annual 300 billion dollars (209 billion euros) since Putin became president in 2000, officials said.

But political negotiations to formulate a new EU-Russia partnership agreement remain stalled because of a Polish veto imposed after Russia banned the import of meat from Poland in 2005 over food safety concerns.

A new partnership accord is seen as particularly important for the European Union because it is intended to regulate also energy ties as Europe increases its reliance on Russian oil and gas imports.



PHOTO: AFP

Sonia Gandhi (L), head of ruling Congress Party-led UPA, meets with Chinese President Hu Jintao (R) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Sonia Gandhi began a five-day visit to China on October 25, the latest sign of improving relations between the world's two most populous nations.

Iran nuclear crisis heats up with US sanctions

AFP, Washington

Undaunted by three decades of failed sanctions on Iran, the United States is taking new measures to punish the Islamic republic's nuclear ambitions and alleged sponsorship of terrorism.

While Iran reacted scornfully to the unilateral US sanctions announced Thursday, Washington insisted that they were a wake-up call both to the clerical regime and the international community.

But analysts questioned the sanctions' effectiveness in the absence of concerted UN action against Iran, and opposition Democrats saw worrying parallels to the drumbeats of war that preceded the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

"Every day now, it seems that the confrontational rhetoric between the United States and Iran escalates," senior Democratic Senator Robert Byrd said. President (George W.) Bush

needs to understand that the Congress will not be kept out of the loop while his administration plots another march to war."

The sanctions targeted the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, accused of spreading weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and the IRGC's elite Quds Force, which was designated as a supporter of terrorism.

Three Iranian state-owned banks were also blacklisted, along with IRGC-controlled companies and the logistics arm of Iran's defence ministry, as the United States stepped up a drive to squeeze Iran out of global banking.

Through ever-stricter sanctions, Washington has tried and failed to exert pressure on Iran ever since the US embassy hostage crisis that erupted following the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Responding to Thursday's move, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali

Hosseini said the United States would fail again.

"The hostile American policies towards the respectable people of Iran and the country's legal institutions are contrary to international law, without value and -- as in the past -- doomed to failure," he said.

But for the Bush administration, the "axis of evil" member foments global Islamic extremism, supports insurgents attacking US troops in Iraq, and is hell-bent on making nuclear weapons.

Bush suggested last week that a nuclear-armed Iran could trigger "World War III," while Vice President Dick Cheney spoke on Sunday of "serious consequences" unless the Islamic republic comes to heel.

Cheney's language matched the 2002 resolutions of the UN Security Council that warned Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein of "serious consequences" unless he came clean on his alleged stockpiles of WMD.

6 burned bodies found in California

AP, San Diego

On a day when firefighters methodically beat back several of the wildfires menacing Southern California and thousands of evacuees were allowed home, authorities said Thursday they had found six bodies burned by the flames.

Border Patrol agents on routine patrol found four bodies in a wooded area near Barrett Junction, just east of San Diego and along the Mexican border, agency spokeswoman Gloria Chavez said. The area is near a major corridor for illegal immigrants who often walk hours or even days to cross into the United States from Mexico.

Authorities said they discovered the bodies Thursday afternoon but did not know how long ago the victims died or whether the flames were responsible for their deaths.

"They could have been out there a while," said Paul Parker, a spokesman for the San Diego County medical examiner's office. They were tentatively identified as three men and one woman.