

Turkey-Iraq hold crunch talks over PKK threat

AFP, Ankara

Iraqi ministers held crisis talks here yesterday seeking to persuade an 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 Muhammed 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 southeastern 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-

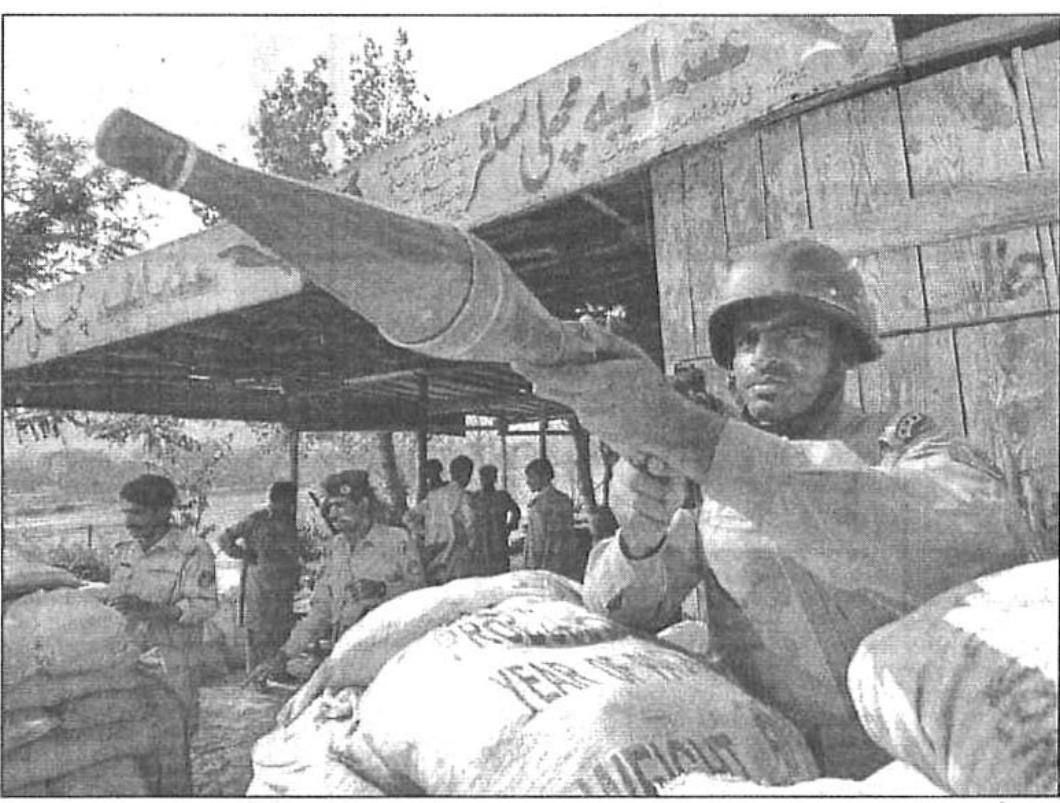
rity and unity of Iraq, (but) we are running out of patience and we will not tolerate the use of Iraqi soil for terrorist activities," President Abdullah Gul said Thursday. "We are fully determined to take all necessary steps to end this threat."

"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.



Pakistani paramilitary soldiers take position at a roadside bunker 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.

PHOTO: AFP

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.

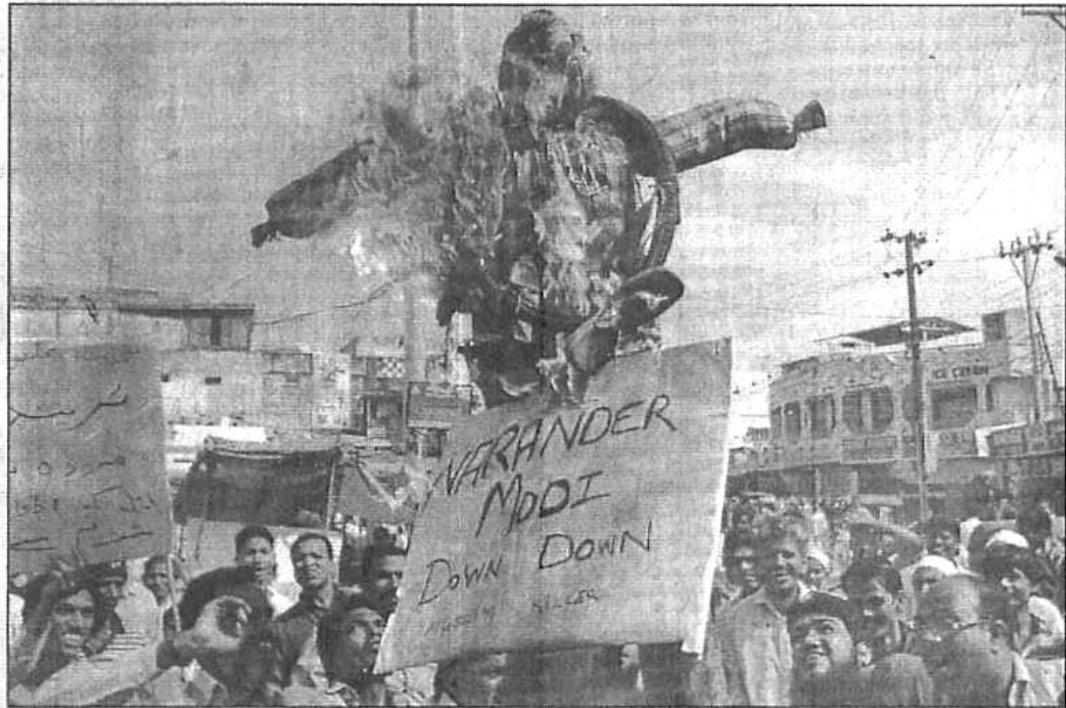
Nineteen explosions rocked the city of Coimbatore on February 14, 1994, as then-home minister Lal Krishna Advani arrived to campaign in support of his ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

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.



Members of Majlis-e-Ittehadul 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.

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 Rasiah Ilanthiriyam said.

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.

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.



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.

Israeli forces kill 5 militants in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli air strikes and troops killed five Palestinian fighters in Gaza yesterday, as the Jewish state pressed its campaign to curb rocket fire after backing moves to cut power to the territory.

The bitter clashes marked the deadliest day of Israeli-Palestinian violence in the Hamas-run Gaza Strip for a month and came as Israeli and Palestinian leaders Ehud Olmert and Mahmud Abbas were holding political talks in Jerusalem.

Two Israeli air strikes in the Shujayeh neighbourhood of eastern Gaza City killed three Islamist militants and wounded five, medical officials said as Israeli forces and Palestinian fighters clashed on the ground.

Two of the dead and two of the wounded belonged to the armed wing of hardline movement Islamic Jihad. The third dead milit-

tant was named as Mahmud Hasouna, 25, from the armed wing of the Islamist movement Hamas.

An Israeli army spokeswoman confirmed that two air strikes were called in against gunmen approaching an Israeli force, which thrust into the Shujayeh area in an incursion early on Friday.

Earlier ground clashes between Israeli troops and Palestinian fighters left two Gaza gunmen dead -- one from Hamas near Jabaliya in northern Gaza and the other from the rival Islamic Jihad in southern Gaza, medics said.

An army spokesman said one gunman was hit in southern Gaza and two were hit in the north when gunmen approached Israeli soldiers. Two soldiers were lightly wounded in the northern clashes, he said.

The army said Palestinian militants had also fired at least 20 rockets and mortar shells towards Israel in the past 24 hours.

"To assault the prime minister in Iraq, with to date heretofore

unsubstantiated allegations or uncorroborated allegations in a setting that would simply fuel those allegations ... would be deeply wrong," Rice said.

"Not only is it potentially damaging to relationships that we are very dependent on... it is wrong."

Rice argued that publicly taking about specific corruption cases risked exposing intelligence sources in Iraq, but said any official or document was available to the committee in closed session.

Democrats say such discussions must be in public, including documents, which could damage the administration's claims of success in Iraq.

The hearing represented the latest sharp confrontation between Congress and the Bush administration, three days after the White House asked lawmakers for another 196 billion dollars in funding for the Iraq and Afghan wars.

On Wednesday, anger mounted

after the Congressional Budget Office said the cost of the "war on terror" could hit 2.4 trillion dollars by 2017.

As tempers flared in the hearing of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Waxman confronted Rice with a document purportedly from the Iraqi Prime Minister's office signed by its manager, Tariq Najim Abdullah.

The order said no official from the presidential office, council of ministers or current or previous ministers should be sent to court with Maliki's express approval.

The document, dated 04/01/2007, was handed to the committee Judge Radhi Hamza al-Radhi, former head of the Iraqi Commission on Public Integrity who has fled to the United States.

"Is the prime minister one of the people that cares about fighting corruption in Iraq?" Waxman asked.

Lawmakers skewer Rice on Iraqi corruption

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice fought off an inquisition by lawmakers Thursday over claims that Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was shielding top ministers from corruption probes.

Democratic lawmaker Henry Waxman, who has demanded answers from Rice on various aspects of the US operation in Iraq for months, got his chance at a hearing of a key House of Representatives committee.

He raised claims that Maliki had issued a decree requiring his approval before any minister or official in the presidential office was brought before a court on corruption charges.

Rice refused to respond directly but said US officials took all allegations of corruption in Iraq seriously and pledged to review the case.

"To assault the prime minister in Iraq, with to date heretofore

Putin warns Europe ahead of summit

AFP, Mafra

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

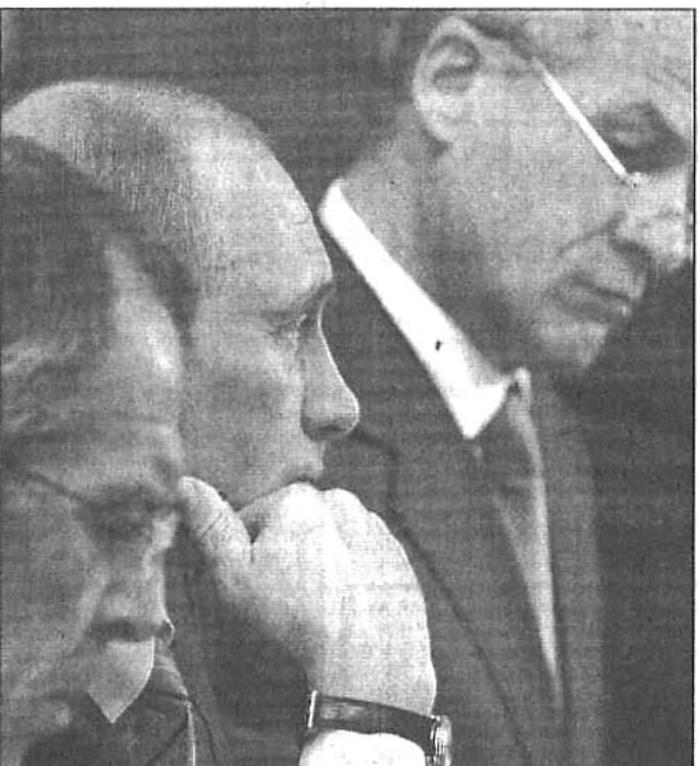
The European Union had been hoping to patch up relations with Putin.

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, southern Serbian province.

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 40 km outside Lisbon.



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 40 km outside Lisbon.

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

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.

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

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

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.