

Iraqi leaders tired of war, want a unified Iraq

Says US Defence Secretary

AP, Kirkuk

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates told American troops yesterday in a meeting at northern city of Iraq that their mission in Iraq remains critical despite the nation's focus on Afghanistan and that plans are on track to reduce forces starting in March as Iraqi leaders are tired of war and want a unified Iraq.

Gates said plans to draw down forces there after Iraq's March elections remain intact. When asked whether political turmoil might threaten that timeline, Gates said he didn't think so because all indications were that Iraqi leaders were tired of war and wanted a unified Iraq.

In a town hall meeting, Gates spoke with about 300 soldiers and airmen gathered outside on a sunny day at an airbase.

On Afghanistan, he predicted a 'tough fight' but that the security situation would improve as more troops arrive.

The town hall meeting came hours after Gates and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki met in Baghdad for about 45 minutes on Friday morning. US officials said the meeting was similar to one a day earlier between Gates and Iraqi President Jalal Talibani, in which Gates expressed his condolences for a wave of bombings that have claimed 127 lives and rattled the country's government, and offered any assistance Iraq might need.

The third leg of Gates' unannounced tour of two major US war zones came as al-Qaeda's umbrella group in Iraq claimed responsibility Thursday for the strikes. The bombings wounded 500 people; the group warned of more to come.

Senior US military officials defended the Iraqi forces' efforts even after al-Maliki expressed his displeasure by dismissing his head of security operations.

"It would be tough for any country, any government to prevent these kinds of attacks," said Lt Gen Charles Jacoby, the No 2 US commander in Iraq.

Jacoby and other US officials said the attack was a sign that al-Qaeda's grip on the fractured nation was weakening. With fewer fighters, the Iraqi insurgent force has turned its focus from seizing territory to occasional high-profile suicide bombings aimed at destabilizing the government.

"I think it's all about the election right now," Jacoby said.

Regardless, the bombings have raised tough questions for al-Maliki about the ability of Iraq's security forces ahead of next year's planned withdrawal of US combat troops. The US says it plans to keep the bulk of its 120,000 forces in Iraq through the country's March 7 elections to counter violence; but it plans to leave the country entirely by December 2011.

Cambodia's king pardons Thai spy

AP, Phnom Penh

Cambodia's King pardoned a Thai man yesterday three days after he was sentenced to seven years in prison for spying on Thailand's fugitive ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a case that soured relations between the neighbours.

Thai national Siwarak Choitipong, 31, will be released from prison Monday following his pardon by King Norodom Sihamoni, who said he had accepted the request after the jailed man, his mother and lawyer submitted it to Prime Minister Hun Sen, said government spokesman Khieu Kanharith. He did not elaborate.

The conviction Tuesday followed Cambodia's decision last month to name Thaksin, a fugitive from justice in Thailand, as its special economic adviser. The appointment and Thaksin's subsequent visit to Cambodia angered the government in Bangkok, and resulted in a recall of ambassadors from both sides.



British Prime Minister Gordon Brown (L) talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel prior to a working session at an EU summit at the European Council headquarters in Brussels yesterday. European Union nations have agreed to give 7.2 billion euros to help developing nations tackle climate change and boost faltering UN climate talks in Copenhagen.

Philippine rebels warn of killing hostages

AFP, Prosperidad

Tribal gunmen in the southern Philippines warned yesterday they would massacre dozens of hostages if police made a rescue bid, as hundreds of security forces surrounded their mountain lair.

The two-day hostage drama was the latest unrest to hit the Philippines' volatile Mindanao region, after a political massacre last month shocked the nation and triggered martial law in one province.

"I will kill the hostages if police attempt to rescue them," the gunmen's leader Ondo Perez told an AFP reporter who accompanied a government

negotiator to the remote site.

But Perez released 10 of his 57 hostages shortly afterwards, according to the negotiator, Josefina Bajade. Nine of those released were women and the other was a boy, Bajade told AFP.

Bajade gave more cause for optimism as dusk fell, saying she was confident after speaking with the kidnappers that all 47 remaining hostages would be released soon.

"I expect them (the gunmen) to release the hostages any moment now," Bajade told reporters, although she gave no details on whether any concessions had been made to secure an agreement on ending the ordeal.

Global temperature may hit record level in 2010

BBC ONLINE

The global average temperature could reach a record high in 2010, according to the UK's Met Office.

Forecasters predict that the annual figure for 2010 will be 14.58C (58.24F), 0.58C (1.04F) above the long-term average of 14.0C (57.2F).

They say the combination of climate change and a moderate warming of the tropical Pacific Ocean are set to drive up temperatures next year.

The current record is 14.52C (58.14F), which was set in 1998.

"The latest forecast from our climate scientists shows the global temperature is forecast to be almost 0.6C above the 1961-90 long-term average," a Met Office statement said.

"This means that it is more likely than not 2010 will be the warmest in the instrumental record that dates back to 1860."

However it added: "A record warm year in 2010 is not a certainty, especially if the current El Nino was to unexpectedly decline rapidly near the start of 2010, or if there was a large

volcanic eruption.

"We will review the forecast during 2010 as observation data become available."

The Met Office, in collaboration with the University of East Anglia, maintains one of the three global temperature records that is used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

The current record year, 1998, was dominated by an "extreme El Nino" condition - the warming of surface waters in the eastern Pacific that releases heat stored in the deep ocean into the atmosphere, raising temperatures globally.

Earlier this week, the Met Office and the World Meteorological Organization said that the first decade of this century was "by far" the warmest since the instrumental record began.

Their analyses also showed that 2009 would almost certainly be the fifth warmest in the 160-year record.

Burgeoning El Nino conditions, adding to man-made greenhouse warming, had pushed 2009 into the "top 10" years, the organisations explained.

T rex 'little cousin' discovered

BBC ONLINE

Researchers have unveiled a new species of dinosaur from the late Triassic period - a small, early relative of T rex and Velociraptor.

The 2m-long dinosaur, named *Tawa hallae*, was found in a "bone bed" on the Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, US.

The discovery of this early theropod, reported in the journal *Science*, sheds light on early dinosaur evolution.

The team says the find also highlights how dinosaurs dispersed across what was then the "super continent" Pangaea.

Sterling Nesbitt, a researcher at the University of Texas at Austin in the US, led a team from a number of US research institutes that studied the fossilised dinosaur bones.



Ondo Perez (R), leader of the armed gunmen who are holding dozens of hostages, talks over a mobile phone next to a provincial Crisis Management team head, Josefina Bajade (L), during negotiations on the outskirts of Prosperidad in Mindanao island yesterday.

Israel arrests Palestinian protest leader

AP, Ramallah

A leader of the most persistent Palestinian protest movement against Israel's West Bank separation barrier was asleep in his home when troops broke down his door and arrested him.

Supporters of Abdullah Abu Rahme, a 38-year-old teacher, said his pre-dawn arrest on Thursday by dozens of troops is part of a recent, heavy-handed campaign by Israel to shut down a five-year-old movement that is the last source of unrest in the West Bank.

Since 2005, demonstrators led by Abu Rahme have marched every Friday from the West Bank village of Bilin to the nearby separation barrier that slices off 60 percent of the village land. Their acts of protest, which have also included chaining themselves to trees, have won praise from Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu and support among Israeli peace activists.

N Korea agrees on nuke support with US

AP, AFP, Seoul/Moscow

North Korea said yesterday it will work with the United States to resolve unspecified "differences" remaining after rare high-level talks with President Barack Obama's envoy aimed at restarting international nuclear negotiations.

North Korea's Foreign Ministry also said it understands the need to resume the six-party nuclear disarmament talks that the communist nation walked away from earlier this year vowing never to return before conducting its second-ever nuclear test. Russia on Friday welcomed North Korea's avowal of the need to resume six-party nuclear talks as a step in the right direction, the Interfax news agency quoted a Russian foreign ministry source as saying.

"If the report on North Korea's readiness to return to the six-party talks is true, then this would be a step in the right direction by Pyongyang," the ministry sources said.

It was North Korea's first reaction to three days of talks with Obama's special envoy,

Stephen Bosworth. Upon returning to Seoul from North Korea, Bosworth said Thursday that the two sides reached a "common understanding" on the need to restart the nuclear talks.

Though North Korea stopped short of making a firm commitment to return to the negotiating table, its reaction was positive and raised hopes that the stalled disarmament process could resume.

The North's Foreign Ministry said the meetings with the US "deepened the mutual understanding, narrowed their differences and found not a few common points."

The two sides "also reached a series of common understandings of the need to resume the six-party talks and the importance of implementing" a 2005 disarmament pact, it said in a statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency.

"Both sides agreed to continue to cooperate with each other in the future to narrow down the remaining differences," it said, without elaborating on the remaining differences.

US media positive on Obama's Nobel speech

AFP, Washington

US media and leading opinion makers yesterday had largely positive views of Barack Obama's Nobel Peace award speech in Oslo, with US conservatives especially delighted with his choice of words.

"We've said before ... that awarding President Obama the Nobel Peace Prize after so short a time in office and so few concrete accomplishments was a mistake," wrote the Los Angeles Times in its newspaper editorial.

However the acceptance speech was "a blockbuster even by Obama's lofty standards."

The speech "should serve as a blueprint to guide international decisions on alleviating conflict, poverty and tyranny," the LA Times wrote.

For the New York Times, Obama "gave the speech he needed to give, but we suspect not precisely the one the Nobel committee wanted to hear" by constantly mentioning the Afghanistan conflict.



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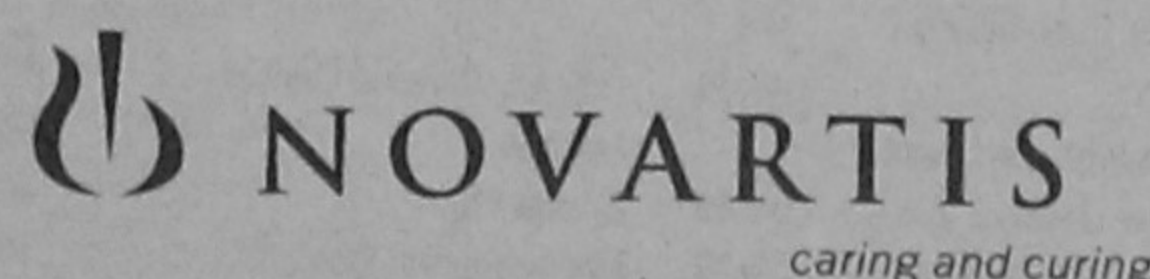
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Unfit water vessels pose risks of disaster

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to shortage of manpower. The government's General Shipping Statistics show that 2,089 passenger-carrier water vessels were registered and only 693 completed their annual fitness survey till 2007.

The deadline for registration of old vessels has already expired and they have become run-down too.

Unfit and unregistered vehicles are mainly responsible for frequent launch capsizes in the country's river routes. On the day of Eid-ul-Azha, an overloaded launch with homebound people overturned in Bhola leaving 85 passengers dead.

During a spot visit it was found that some launches declared unfit by an inspection team formed by the shipping ministry are plying without facing any obstruction from the authorities concerned.

In the organogram of the DoS it is clearly mentioned that it must have 53 officials and workers to oversee its activities while the current number is only 28.

Five stations -- Dhaka, Narayanganj, Barisal, Chittagong and Khulna-- issue and renew registration and fitness licence of the river transports. As per the rules each station should be under the direct supervision of a permanent naval architect or marine engineer. But a permanent official runs only one of those five stations.

Of the remaining four, Chief Engineer of the Department of Shipping AKM Fakrul Islam has taken the charge of Narayanganj station while two ship surveyors of mercantile marine department and an official of Bangladesh shipping corporation have been appointed temporarily.

Former president Hossain Muhammad Ershad during his tenure made a law that allowed the launches or trawlers of 16 horsepower to ply without registration because they travel between short distances.

Taking the advantage of the law a group of crooked businessmen in connivance with some

corrupt officials of BIWTA and the department of shipping are now plying both heavy vessels and 16 horsepower launches in the long route without registration resulting in technical glitch for which the passengers eventually suffer.

BIWTA and department of shipping sources said some dishonest and influential launch owners have set 16 horsepower engine in heavy launches, which are more than 30 feet long and plying on the long routes.

Another survey of Journalists Forum for Communication and Environment (JFCE) reveals that on average 22 accidents occur every year on different river routes across the country leaving around 300 people dead a year.

The unregistered and unfit vessels are causing tragic accidents leaving hundreds of people dead and incurring a loss of at least Tk 40 crores per year on average, said the study.

Ashis Kumar Dey, general secretary of JFCE, said most of the unregistered launches are plying on the local routes in the

southern part of the country and registration and fitness certificates of most of them from Dhaka to southern part of the country have already expired.

But the launch owners have no headache to get them renewed as they manage the government officials through illegal means.

Talking to The Daily Star Chief Engineer of Department of Shipping AKM Fakrul Islam said all the launches moving through long routes are registered. "But some small ones running on the local routes are still unregistered," he added.

"We have already issued letters to different district administrations to draft a list of unregistered mechanised boats. After examination we will give registrations to them," he said.

Replying to a question on manpower crisis in the department of shipping he said the recruitment procedures of some officials are on the cards. The Public Service Commission (PSC) will complete the recruitment process.