



News in Brief

White House Stalled bin Laden Hunt



The White House has blocked a secret Pentagon plan to pursue Osama bin Laden in the tribal areas of Pakistan, it has been reported.

For six months, the possibility of killing or capturing the Al-Qaeda leader and mastermind of the September 11 terrorist attacks has diminished because of political in-fighting, according to the "New York Times".

Late last year, the newspaper said, senior Bush administration officials, casting aside long-held concerns about the diplomatic ramifications, drafted a plan to enable US Special Forces to operate in the lawless tribal areas.

But the classified Pentagon order, which was designed to mark a shift from what some officials saw as an aversion to risk, became bogged down in a Bush administration turf war and has not been carried out.

Codenamed "Operation Cannonball" by the CIA, the hunt for leading Al-Qaeda figures in Pakistan is seen by CIA officers in Afghanistan as best way to prevent another attack on the United States.

But the newspaper reported that CIA operatives in Pakistan had played down the Al-Qaeda presence there and senior CIA figures at the agency's headquarters had intervened to ease tensions between its Kabul and Islamabad stations.

Intelligence agencies have concluded that bin Laden has re-established a network of new training camps and recruits have risen to up to 2,000 in recent months from 200 earlier this year.

But sending US forces into Pakistan would carry significant risks both politically and militarily. The tribal areas are populated by bin Laden sympathizers, making it unlikely that even the best-planned raid could succeed.

Foreign Powers Blamed For Lebanese Cabinet Conflict



Lebanese Christian opposition Leader Michel Aoun said foreign intervention is preventing the formation of a new government in the country, local "An-Nahar" daily reported on Tuesday.

"Some international and regional players who had left the domestic game have returned again through the cabinet line-up," Aoun was hinting to the United States and Saudi Arabia whom he considered that they have left the game when Doha accord was reached in May.

According to Xinhua, an agreement between Lebanese rival leaders was reached in the Qatari capital Doha on May 21 due to Qatari efforts and mediation to end the 18 month political deadlock in Lebanon.

The agreement's first phase guaranteed the election of President Michel Suleiman on May 25 following six months of presidential vacancy.

The second phase which is the formation of a national unity government is still blocked due to the disagreement between Lebanese rival leaders on the cabinet line-up, and distribution of key portfolios.

Afghanistan Deadlier Than Iraq For Occupiers



More US and NATO troops have been killed in Afghanistan than in Iraq for the second straight month.

An Associated Press count finds that attacks in Afghanistan killed at least 44 international troops in June.

About 30 international troops have died in Iraq this month.

A record number of US and NATO troops now patrol Afghanistan's dangerous countryside, exposing more soldiers than ever to danger. But Taliban attacks are becoming increasingly complex, and in June, increasingly deadly.

Four attacks in June killed four soldiers. No single attack had killed more than three international troops since last August.

In other news, the German military took over leadership of the Quick Reaction Force in Afghanistan at a ceremony on Monday in Mazar-e-Sharif in the country's northern Balkh province.

It marks the first time Germany has provided a combat unit under the auspices of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The German Quick Reaction Force comprises 200 soldiers, the "Earth Times" reported.

Syria Denies Nuclear Allegations



Syria's foreign minister on Monday denied US allegations that it had been building a secret nuclear reactor at a site bombed by Israel last year.

Walid Al-Moualem, making Syria's first official comments on last week's visit to the site by UN nuclear investigators, said it had been handled solely by Syrian security officials, Reuters reported.

"Syria would not have allowed the inspectors in if it had such a secret (nuclear) program," Moualem told reporters after meeting his Norwegian counterpart, Jonas Gahr Storer.

"As a private citizen, I wish Syria had this program quite simply because Israel has made huge advances in its manufacturing of nuclear bombs," the foreign minister said.

Syria has accused the United States of helping Israel conduct the September 6 raid that Washington said destroyed a reactor built with the help of North Korea. Syria said the site was a normal military complex. Israeli officials have kept quiet on the nature of the target.

Unlike Syria, Israel has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It is widely believed to have the only nuclear arsenal in the Middle East, developed over decades with Western help.

Investigators from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said after a four-day visit to Syria last week that the inquiry was off to a good start, with Syria's cooperation satisfactory so far.

Israel Withdrawal Only by Referendum

The Knesset approved on Monday the referendum law, which mandates a national referendum or a two thirds Knesset majority prior to a withdrawal from any territory under Israeli territory.

The law was approved in its first reading by a majority of 65 Knesset members to 18, according to Haaretz.

The vote came as indirect peace talks were underway between Israel and Syria, revolving around the Syrian demand that Israel return the Golan Heights, which it occupied from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War, in return for peace. A third round of talks was to begin this week.

Earlier Monday, the "Golan Lobby" convened at the Knesset ahead of the vote. The meeting was attended by Deputy Prime Minister and Trade Minister Eli Yishai (Shas), who said that the law is a positive and important measure, though his party generally opposes holding referendums.

The current law eliminated the need to enact a Basic Law. Instead, it requires that territorial concessions be approved by a national referendum or general elections or a majority of 80 Knesset members.

> New Settlements

Israel has announced a new construction plan for setting up of 10,000 new houses in the occupied lands of Beit-ul-Moqaddas, a move which can deal a further blow to the so-called peace talks with the Palestinians.

Khalil Al-Tufekchi, head of the Maps Bureau of the East Beit-ul-Moqaddas Organization, told Alalam on Monday that the Israeli regime plans to construct new houses in Wadi Al-Helwah and the Prophets Shrines neighborhoods in an old section of Beit-ul-Moqaddas, known as "the Sacred Pond".

Little progress has been made between Palestinians and Israelis since the US-sponsored peace talks in Annapolis, Maryland, with the thorny settlements issue one of the major bones of contention.

East Beit-ul-Moqaddas was occupied by the Israeli regime in 1967 and later annexed in a move never recognized by the international community.



Iraqi Inmates Sue Torture Contractors



File photo shows detainees stand inside the Abu Ghraib prison, west of Baghdad, waiting to be released.

Three Iraqis and a Jordanian filed federal lawsuits Monday alleging they were tortured by US defense contractors while detained at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in 2003 and 2004.

According to AP, the lawsuits allege that those arrested and taken to the prison were subjected to forced nudity, electrical shocks, mock executions and other inhumane treatment.

They seek payments high enough to compensate the detainees for their injuries, and to deter contractors from such conduct in the future.

"These innocent men were senselessly tortured by US companies that profited from their misery," said lead attorney Susan L. Burke, of the Philadelphia law firm Burke O'Neil.

Allegations of abuse at the Baghdad prison first erupted in 2004 with the release of pictures of grinning US soldiers posing with detainees, some naked, being held on leashes or in painful and sexually humiliating positions. Eleven US soldiers were convicted and five others disciplined in the scandal.

The contractors named as defendants in the lawsuit are CACI International Inc. of Arlington, Va., and New York-based L-3 Communications Corp., formerly Titan Corp.

Three of the complaints were filed in US district courts in Seattle, Greenbelt, Md., and Columbus, Ohio, where the three of the defendants reside. The fourth was filed in Detroit, where L-3 recruited heavily for translators, according to that complaint. L-3 didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Three of the lawsuits also name individual employees of those companies as defendants. They are Adel

L. Nakhla, a former L-3 translator, of Montgomery Village; Daniel "DJ" Johnson of Renton, Wash., who worked as a CACI interrogator, and Timothy L. Dugan of Pataaskala, Ohio, who also worked as a CACI interrogator, according to the complaints.

> Jordan's Iraq Envoy

In another development, Jordan's King Abdullah II has named a new ambassador to Iraq. The official Petra news agency said Nayef Al-Zaidan was sworn in at a brief ceremony Monday at the royal palace, attended by the king and his top aides.

Earlier in June, Abdullah promised visiting Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki that he would soon send an envoy to Baghdad. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain also promised to reopen their embassies in Baghdad.

The Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad is run by a charge d'affaires and Amman hasn't sent an ambassador because of security concerns. Al-Zaidan has served as Jordan's consul general in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

> Sunni Bloc Back

Also on Iraq, the country's largest Sunni Arab parliamentary bloc is set to join the Shiite-led cabinet of Maliki after boycotting it for nearly a year, the spokesman for the faction said on Tuesday.

Saleem Abdallah, MP and spokesman of the National Concord Front, said his group had given a list of new candidates for the five ministerial posts which it previously held in Maliki's cabinet.

Last August the Sunni bloc, which has 44 MPs in the 275-member parliament, pulled its five minis-

ters from the cabinet in protest at what it viewed as the monopolization of power by the other factions in government.

> Bush War Bill

In other news, US President George Bush on Monday signed legislation to pay for the war operations in Iraq and Afghanistan for the rest of his presidency and beyond, halting the \$162 billion plan as a rare product of bipartisan cooperation.

"This bill shows the American people that even in an election year, Republicans and Democrats can come together to stand behind our troops and their families," AP quoted Bush in an Oval Office ceremony as saying.

The legislation will bring to more than \$650 billion the amount Congress has provided for the Iraq war since it began more than five years ago. For operations in Afghanistan, the total is nearly \$200 billion, according to congressional officials.

> More Troops Ahead

Meanwhile, the United States will send six additional combat units, totaling some 33,000 soldiers and marines, to Iraq in early 2009, the Pentagon announced Monday.

Officials said the units would replace troops currently serving in Iraq, and will allow the Pentagon to hold steady at 15 fighting brigades there, AP reported.

"This is a planning effort to sustain the current level of operations," said spokesman Bryan Whitman, who added that US military leaders "can always have units that redeploy earlier and deploy later" as needed.