

THE WAR IN IRAQ

Officials limit access to Iraq from Iran, Syria

Government suspends flights, closes border crossing

By QASSIM ABDUL ZAHRA
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

Iraq indefinitely halted all flights to and from Syria and closed a border crossing with Iran as the government prepares for a new security crackdown aimed at crushing violence in the capital and surrounding regions, a member of parliament and an airport official said Wednesday.

The airport official said flights to and from Syria would be canceled for at least two weeks and that service had been interrupted on Tuesday. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to reveal the information.

Hassan al-Sunneid, a legislator and member of the parliament Defense and Security Committee, said the move "was in preparation for the security plan. The state will decide when the flights will resume."

The actions were seen as a signal to both countries not to interfere in Iraq's affairs as U.S. and Iraqi forces prepare for the major crackdown on armed groups in the capital.

Syria is believed to be harboring former Baath party officials who support the Sunni insurgency and has been accused of allowing foreign fighters to slip across its border with Iraq. And U.S. officials have complained that Iran smuggles weapons to Shiite extremists who have killed Americans and provides Shiite militia with training and support.

Syrian authorities on Wednesday denied reports arising elsewhere that it had halted Iraqi Airways flights but said it would bar landings by Iraqi airliners lacking safety requirements or those arriving without advance permission.

The official Syrian news agency said the measure was agreed to last week by the Iraqi Civil Aviation Authority after Syrian technical teams found that some Iraqi planes did not meet safety codes, or that they entered Syrian airspace without notice or permission from Syrian authorities.

Iraqi Airways is now the only airline linking the Syrian and Iraqi capitals.

The United Nations says about a million Iraqis have fled to Syria, which has become the refuge of choice because of



Iraqis clean up after a car bomb blast in a predominantly Shiite area of eastern Baghdad, Iraq, on Wednesday. At least 43 people were killed across the country Wednesday.

its relaxed entry regulations for Arabs, the relatively low cost of living and availability of schools and health care.

Al-Sunneid refused to confirm reports that Syrian border crossings also would be closed, saying only that more decisions would be taken.

He said the Sheeb border crossing with Iran "also was closed in preparation for the (security) plan."

Iraq said last week that closures of Iranian crossings involved the border checkpoints at Sheeb, in Maysan province, and the Shalamja border checkpoint in Basra province. Authorities in Baghdad said the two crossings had been shut down ahead of the Ashoura festivities, the Shiite ceremony in which tens of thousands of pilgrims, many from Iran, descend the Shiite holy city of Karbala. The festival reached its climax Tuesday.

Iranian television said Sunday that Iran had closed several border crossings with Iraq ahead of Ashoura, citing a decision by the government in Tehran. It said the crossings were closed to "contain the large number of pilgrims" bound for

Karbala without legal documents.

Meanwhile, car bombs struck mostly Shiite targets in Baghdad on Wednesday, and the bodies of three Sunni professors and a student were found days after they were seized while leaving their campus in a Shiite part of the city.

At least 43 people were reported killed across Iraq, including a U.S. soldier.

Maamoun Abdel-Hadi said he was standing with a friend near his car when a mortar shell fell on the predominantly Sunni neighborhood of Azamiyah in northern Baghdad. The area was hit by nine mortar shells that damaged houses, shops and streets, killing six people and wounding 20, police and hospital officials said.

"We fell on the ground ... I saw four wounded persons lying on the ground and screaming for help. We put them in the car and rushed them to the hospital," Abdel-Hadi said. "We are peaceful people who have nothing to do with any militias or armed groups. What is the guilt of innocent children, women and men who were walking in the street?"

Same-sex marriage measure advances

Committee votes along party lines

By MIKE SMITH
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

INDIANAPOLIS

Mary Ann Cantwell walked to a podium and told an Indiana Senate committee that she has eight children. Seven of them can marry in Indiana, she said, but her son Mike can't because he's gay.

"None of them would be hurt if Mike is given the right they have, and I can't see how anyone would be harmed," said Cantwell. Her son Louis Mahern is a former state senator and her son Ed Mahern is a former state representative.

"God made Mike and he made him a homosexual," Cantwell said. "Are you going to argue with God's creation?"

Cantwell was one of several people who testified Wednesday on a proposed state constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage. The General Assembly overwhelmingly approved it two years ago, but it must pass this session or next without any changes and then win a statewide vote in the 2008 general election to become official.

The Senate Judiciary Committee heard three hours of debate on the amendment Wednesday before endorsing it 7-4 along party lines, with all Republicans voting for it and all four Democrats against.

Just before the vote, a group of gay-rights activists in the Senate gallery started singing "We Shall Overcome" in protest of an outcome they obviously thought was certain. Sen. Richard Bray, R-Martinsville, the committee chairman, said demonstrations were out of order but the people only sang louder before they were escorted out of the gallery by state troopers.

It was a more subdued protest

AT THE STATEHOUSE

Cancer vaccine bill amended

A Senate committee watered down a bill Wednesday that would have vaccinated most sixth-grade girls against a sexually transmitted disease that can cause cervical cancer, a move designed to address concerns from some family groups.

The new version of the legislation would send home information about the link between human papillomavirus, or HPV, and cervical cancer and would tell parents that an HPV vaccine is available.

The amended version pleased some opponents who wanted parents to have more choice over whether their children were vaccinated.

BMV bill clears committee

A bill that would shift administration of the Bureau of Motor Vehicles from its current governor-appointed post to one chosen by Indiana's voters, the secretary of state, cleared a House committee on Wednesday.

The House Roads and Transportation Committee heard about an hour of testimony before voting 7-5 to send the legislation to the full House for debate.

Would-be lotto leasers abound

A bill that would allow Gov. Mitch Daniels to lease the Hoosier Lottery to a private operator has generated lots of interest among companies that would like to handle the game's outsourcing, the state's budget director said.

Monday was the deadline for preliminary proposals for taking over the lottery.

State Budget Director Charles Schalliol said the Indiana Finance Authority was encouraged by potential bidders' response through its so-called "requests for qualifications" — the broad criteria firms would have to meet to be eligible to bid on any final contract.

than in 2005, when some opponents yelled "Shame!" after yes votes were announced in a House committee and a large group marched down to the governor's office chanting the same.

Proponents of the amendment said Wednesday that even though state law prohibits gay marriage, a constitutional ban is needed to protect the sanctity of traditional marriage from lawsuits and activist judges.

"If you choose not to let the people vote on this amendment, the state of Indiana and its citizens who cherish marriage will be placed in the position of defense," said Christopher Stovall, an attorney member of the Marriage Litigation Fund at the Arizona-based Alliance Defense Fund.

Reports: British police uncover plot to behead Muslim soldier

By ROB HARRIS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BIRMINGHAM, England

Police foiled a major kidnaping plot, the first of its kind in Britain, with the arrests Wednesday of nine terror suspects who reportedly planned to torture and behead a British Muslim soldier and broadcast the killing on the Internet.

The alleged plot, said by British media to mirror the brutal executions of foreign hostages in Iraq, was in its final stages and uncovered during a six-month surveillance operation by anti-terror officers in this city of more than 1 million in the heart of England. The arrests came in a pre-dawn raid on homes and businesses in several Birmingham neighborhoods, which were mostly Pakistani.

"The threat from terrorism remains very real," said Assistant Chief Constable David Shaw, who would not confirm reports from the British Broadcasting Corp. and other media outlets that the intended victim was an army soldier to be killed in an execution and broadcast on the Internet.



A local resident talks to police officers who are standing guard outside a police cordon in Birmingham, England, on Wednesday.

Britain has been at the heart of several thwarted alleged terror plots, including a scheme by a British Muslim to blow up the New York Stock Exchange and other landmarks, and a plan by Muslim extremists to use liquid explosives to blow up as many as 10 flights between the United States and Britain.

But the Birmingham kidnaping plot raised fears that a new type of terrorism has reached Britain, one which uses individual victims to send a message through kidnappings and publicized beheadings. Although the

motive in the new plot was not disclosed, the announcement coincides with other indications that young British Muslims are becoming increasingly angry over this country's involvement in the American-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the U.S. detention camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The four British Muslims who attacked London's transit system in Europe's first suicide bombings had expressed rage over Britain's role in the wars. Their attack at rush hour on July 7, 2005, killed 52 people.

In the past year, the object of that anger has spilled over to the 330 Muslims who serve in the 180,000-strong British armed forces.

The potential victim of the latest plot was reportedly a British Muslim soldier who was under police protection, British media reported, though the Defense Ministry would not confirm this.

Britain's first Muslim soldier to be killed in Afghanistan last year was from Birmingham, where the death prompted militant Islamist Web sites to denounce Cpl. Jabron Hashmi, 24, as a traitor. One site — that of extremist British sect al-Ghurabaa — posted an image of the soldier surrounded by flames.

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