

Saddam survives with 'sticks & stones'!

AP, New York

The ruler accused of making "weapons of mass destruction" is harrising the world's most sophisticated military with the 21st century equivalent of sticks and stones: guns and grenades used as weapons of mass obstruction.

Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, who has hammered away at assertions that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was a global threat arming himself with chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, turned his ire on Iraq's conventional arms on Friday.

He slammed Syria for supplying Saddam with equipment that the Iraqi ruler is using guerrilla-style to inflict casualties and slow the US-led invasion force's march on Baghdad.

"We have information that shipments of military supplies have been crossing the border from Syria into Iraq, including night vision goggles," Rumsfeld said. "We consider such trafficking as

hostile acts and will hold the Syrian government accountable for such shipments."

Saddam has been known to use illegal shipments of crude oil both to raise money and to barter for supplies, and the authoritative industry journal Oil Daily said last month that Syria planned to import 230,000 barrels of Iraqi oil in March.

Yet Iraq is also known to have had at least 40 conventional weapons plants operating since the 1991 war. Though Saddam has yet to unleash any deadly diseases or poison gases, he's had enough bullets and bodies for a guerrilla campaign that so far has kept him undefeated, a propaganda victory in itself.

"Now it's easier for Saddam's people to say look, 'The Americans can be beaten,'" said Richard K. Betts, a former National Security Council and Senate intelligence staffer.

"We've given him all the time in

the world to get ready. I've called this the most telegraphed punch in military history. It's no wonder he's come up with some tricky things."

The 1991 Persian Gulf War and subsequent UN trade sanctions have left Saddam with a ragtag army with little air support, obsolete battle tanks and few missiles. He's concentrated his power in the cities, where Iraqi reliance on small arms and rocket-propelled grenades will further level the playing field.

The prolonged fighting in Basra, the second-largest Iraqi city, is an example of the Iraqi strategy of digging into urban areas to make it easier to resupply troops and to maximise the effectiveness of inferior arms.

"The Republican Guard dug in around Baghdad will be well supplied with ammunition," said William Hopkinson, an analyst with the Royal Institute for Strategic Studies in London.

"I don't think they will run out of

ammunition in the next week or two," he said. "Eventually ... they will run out, but one can't rely on that as a way forward."

A siege of Baghdad is a nightmare scenario for the Americans and their allies. Small groups of guerrillas can wreak havoc for years.

"You don't need big weapons to hold up and make difficult an advance on the city," Betts said. "If somebody shoots at you from a building, do you go into the building and try to get the sniper-or just level the building?"

The prospect of mass civilian deaths from combat, hunger and disease would be a devastating blow to the United States' embattled global image.

The last time US troops captured a city was during World War II, the German town of Leipzig. It wasn't easy. "My father was blown off a tank," said Betts. "I think the Americans were less judicious about civilian casualties in 1945."



An Indian woman takes part in a peace prayer vigil organised for the war victims in Iraq at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in New Delhi on Friday. Since US and British troops began their invasion on March 20, demonstrations have taken place on a daily basis across Asia.



US Marines from the 2nd battalion, 8th Regiment exchange fire with Iraqis during clashes that left two armed Iraqis in civilian clothes dead on March 24 in Nasiriyah, southern Iraq. One US soldier was killed and five others were injured in central Iraq on March 29 when their Bradley fighting vehicle rolled over, central command said.

Online bet on Saddam's future

REUTERS, New York

Do you think Saddam Hussein's days are numbered? Care to put a little money on it?

Tune up your Web browser to one of the many Internet gambling sites taking bets on how long the United States' most wanted despot will hold onto the presidency of Iraq.

Big money is riding on the question about \$1.25 million in wagers just on one site, www.tradesports.com.

Late Thursday, the site put Saddam's chances of lasting in office through Monday at about 90 per cent. But he was given only a 1 in 3 chance of being in power at the end of April.

Betonsports.com, which bills itself as the Internet's "largest, legal and licensed sportsbook," puts Saddam's chances of remaining in Baghdad until June 30 at 1 in 15. The site offers 5-to-1 odds he will be in US hands by then.

Iraq's dust storm season just starting

STAR TELEGRAM, Internet

The dust storm consultant who advised the British military before the Persian Gulf War in 1991 said the fierce storms that swept Iraq this week are just the start of a storm season.

"The worst months are yet to come," said Andrew Goudie. March is the beginning of dust storm season, a period in which they will grow in intensity and number through June.

Although the storms occur naturally, Goudie said the presence of so many heavy armored vehicles traveling all over Iraq and Kuwait is making it worse. The number of dust storms tripled during the North African campaign

of World War II, he said.

Much of the talk this week centered on the storm's effect on equipment and troop movement, but dust storms affect people, too, particularly Americans and British unaccustomed to them. Goudie said he would expect a sharp increase in the number of soldiers with conjunctivitis, sore throats and respiratory infections.

"The dust contains allergen spores, it contains feces, it contains all sorts of things it picks up off the ground," he said. "You're breathing these things."

He said the dust storms will affect the military in several other ways: They will reduce visibility, sometimes down to just a few feet; they create static electricity that

disrupts radio and cell phone communications; and they can damage hardware from electronics to helicopter rotors.

"Dust has an awful habit of getting into things," said Goudie, who has been in at least 20 major dust storms around the world, most of them in the Middle East.

Goudie, head of the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford, traveled to Fort Worth, Texas, this week to deliver a series of lectures on dust, global warming and other issues at Texas Christian University.

The US and British forces are in one of the worst places in the world for dust storms.

Nasiriyah averages 33 days of

dust storms a year. Basra averages 25, and Kuwait City averages 27. Baghdad averages 17 days. Compare that with Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which averages 7.5 days.

The dust storms - sandstorms are not the proper description, he said - typically begin in the Sahara Desert of North Africa and work their way northeast across the Red Sea and into the Middle East, picking up material as they go.

Goudie, a geomorphologist, or someone who studies the Earth's surface, describes the dust storms as "very beautiful," although he conceded that it may sound perverse.

Knives out in Washington

TIMES OF INDIA, Washington

It's not exactly bloodletting yet, but the knives are out in Washington. Setbacks to the United States' war on Iraq has resulted in insidious finger pointing and the blame game could get worse unless the Bush administration can set right the campaign.

First and immediate in the line of fire is Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who is getting the rap for short-changing the military on force levels and relying too much on the technological advances made by his old stomping ground, the American defence industry. Rumsfeld is being blamed for putting too few troops on the ground (250,000) compared to the more than half-million who were landed during in the 1991 Gulf War.

Before the start of the war, Rumsfeld and his aides were credited with the argument that the size of ground forces is no more a key to victory in war. Relatively small formations could be equally if not more effective because of technology force-multipliers -- advanced command-and-control

systems, improved reconnaissance, improved ground systems and new 'smart bombs'. Small, mobile but potent forces, they maintained, are the wave of the future.

Critics are now panning the thinking saying stealth planes and smart bombs cannot hold territory, and that it requires men on the ground to do that. With US supply lines stretched, stalled, and harassed on the road from Kuwait to Baghdad, Washington is rushing more than 100,000 troops to the region to keep it moving.

Also under scrutiny is Secretary of State Colin Powell, whose department is charged with mishandling the diplomatic tack with Turkey that denied US forces the foothold to attack Iraq from the north, thus allowing Saddam Hussein to concentrate his forces from Baghdad southward.

There is now a furious debate about whether the administration correctly read Turkey and played its cards right. Turkey has been a long time US ally and has always backed Washington in its every endeavour, but because of growing domestic opposition to the US

war (90 per cent were against it), Turkish leaders played hardball and bargained for money so as to sell the idea to the public.

While Washington and Ankara haggled over the price (US offered \$4 billion and finally came up to \$6 billion; Turkey wanted \$92 billion over five years or \$22 billion right away), some three dozen ships were parked in the Mediterranean, waiting to unload the US 4th Infantry. This put both pressure on Turkey and also gave it a bargaining position.

Playing for time and money, Turkey finally opted for the "democratic route" and put the issue before its parliament, which voted it down. Although the political establishment in Washington suggested the military start sailing south for entry through Kuwait, the Pentagon, led by Centcom chief Tommy Franks, is said to have insisted Turkey would ultimately let them through and that the State Department work on it.

It didn't happen. Not only that, but according to one account, President Bush himself at one point told a haggling Turkish delegation, "We'd like you to be with us. But if you decide not to be with us, that's okay. We can do this ourselves."

The US armada is now sailing through the Red Sea on its way to join coalition forces in the south, while the US has landed 1000 paratroopers in the north, bypassing Turkey.

There is also plenty of recrimination over whether, and who, misread the situation and response in Iraq once coalition troops landed there.

Television networks are now beginning to repeatedly replay a sound bite showing vice-president Dick Cheney saying American soldiers will be "welcomed as liberators." Even the most partisan journalists are now reporting that that is not the case, not even in Southern Iraq where it was expected that a long-oppressed Shias would revolt against Baghdad.

Arabs, Muslims report hate crimes in US

AP, Washington

Muslim, Arab and Sikh groups say reports of backlash crimes are trickling in, and they fear an increase if the war in Iraq drags on.

Advocates who track such incidents say they've heard about a dozen potential hate crimes - most involving verbal harassment or property damage to Arabs, Muslims and Sikhs - since the war began last week.

"The longer the war goes on and the higher the number of American casualties there, I think probably you can make a correlation there would be more hate crimes and harassment against Arab-Americans and those perceived to be," said Laila Al-Qatami, a spokeswoman for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

In Burbank, Ill., an explosive

device was thrown into a Muslim family's van, destroying it. Police were investigating whether it was a hate crime.

At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, someone scrawled "Suicide bomb yourselves" in permanent marker on a display board at the Muslim Student Association's offices. In Eugene, Ore., a man was charged with a hate crime after he approached a Sikh woman's car and pointed both index fingers at her, pretending to shoot.

The Sikh Coalition has placed ads in Punjabi-language media urging people to report incidents. After the Sept. 11 attacks, Sikhs were mistakenly associated with Osama bin Laden because they wear turbans and grow beards as signs of their faith.

Baghdad rejects UN oil-for-food plan

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq rejects the resolution adopted by the UN Security Council to renew the "oil-for-food" programme, Information Minister Mohammed Saidal-Sahhaf said Saturday.

"Only Iraq can administer this programme," Sahhaf told a press conference, referring to a measure adopted Friday giving UN Secretary General Kofi Annan control for 45 days over the humanitarian side of the UN programme, which uses Iraq's oil revenues for food and medical supplies.

The UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution Friday allowing resumption of its "oil-for-food" programme for Iraq, follow-

ing a week of intense haggling among its deeply divided members.

The vote came just minutes after the United Nations launched its largest ever emergency appeal, calling for 2.2 billion dollars to provide immediate humanitarian aid to the Iraqi people.

The adopted resolution gives Secretary General Kofi Annan control for 45 days over the humanitarian side of the UN programme that uses Iraq's oil revenues for food and medical supplies.

The unanimity of the vote was welcomed as rubbing some much-needed salve on the bitter schism that emerged within the Security Council in the run up to the invasion of Iraq.

"I think it augurs well for future tasks ahead of us," Annan said after the vote. "We have many challenging questions and I hope we will be able to approach those tasks with the same spirit."

An estimated 60 per cent of the Iraqi population of 22 million depends on the "oil-for-food" programme for daily supplies.

The programme was suspended on March 18 just before the United States launched its war against the Baghdad regime.

Friday's resolution was only adopted after some tough negotiations, with the United States and Britain seeking a longer period for the renewed programme and its automatic renewal.



Second Battalion 101st Airborne Aviation Brigade's MSG Michael Stevens of Woodlawn, TN, watches as five multi-launch series rockets take off from the Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP) ahead of 2nd battalions Apache Longbows on Friday in Southern Iraq.

Blix to quit as head of UN arms inspectors

AFP, United Nations

Hans Blix, the chief UN weapons inspector caught in the centre of the bitter Security Council struggle over Iraq, has decided to step down from the post when his contract runs out in June.

"He was not a volunteer and frankly speaking he hoped to be out of here one year ago," Blix's spokesman Ewen Buchanan said Friday after announcing the news.

"It was a particular phase in this exercise and if there is to be a new phase then somebody else should take it on."

Blix, a 74-year-old Swede, was named to the post in January 2000 and originally scheduled to serve just two years.

His reputation for standing up to pressure was sorely tested as the Iraq crisis unfolded and US officials became exasperated with his

measured reports on Iraqi cooperation with his inspection teams.

The tension increased after Blix reported in February that his inspectors had been unable to confirm US allegations regarding Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction.

His later statement that Iraqi compliance with his demand to begin destroying its Al Samoud 2 missiles represented "real disarmament," lent further weight to those within the Security Council who argued against a military invasion.

Before taking up his post, the former Swedish foreign minister had already gleaned experience of Iraq during his 1981-1997 tenure as head of the UN's Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency.

