



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi woman congratulates an Iraqi fighter near a wrecked US Abrams tank south of Baghdad yesterday. The tank was destroyed in a fierce battle with US troops on Saturday.

Burnt US tanks on Baghdad streets, Basra push peaks

STAR DESK

Invading tanks tried to roll into Baghdad, but what remained yesterday are shells of blown-up US tanks on the capital's main roads after they were chased off.

As warplanes flew over the city's sky and dropped bombs, victorious Baghdadis clambered atop the war machines lying impotent and waved Kalashnikovs. They showed "V" signs and chanted slogans in support of their leader Saddam Hussein.

Iraq said four US soldiers were killed in the attack on the probing tanks and urged citizens to remain calm and hold

fire unless told to.

The US took a rather face saving stance saying its tanks tried to test how the Iraqis respond to invasion by entering the capital from the south and then swinging out from the east. They said they have taken a new air strategy that would support its ground forces into Baghdad.

US forces have taken control of highways leading northwest and west out of Baghdad as they try to encircle the capital, military sources said.

The US army's Third Infantry Division reached the Tigris river north of the capital, while the Marines continued

their push towards the capital from the east.

Baghdad streets were crawling with black-clad Fedayeen militia and teenagers with guns, AP reported.

The ferocity of the first engagement on Baghdad ground was also evident by the scene of at least 30 Iraqi tanks now in skeleton after being blown off. Army trucks and other vehicles also littered the wayside.

Republican Guard hunkered down for urban warfare and dug fresh trenches and fortified old ones. Some took over houses close to the city's southern approaches.

The city, in all, was ready to take on any invading forces.

AP said Iraqi tanks, armoured personnel carriers and field artillery were deployed in the capital, facing the western, southern and northern entrances that US forces were believed most likely to use.

"I am not afraid to die," said 16-year-old Thamer Mekki, an eighth-grader in blue jeans who says he learned how to shoot a gun at 14.

"I am doing this for my country," said Mekki, standing guard in the upscale Mansour district.

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Donors cut off health pipeline

Fallout of failure to implement reforms

NAIMUL HAQ

Donors last week suspended a US\$123 million fund for the health sector.

The decision was made as the government failed to "implement" the reforms and adopt agreed on policies prior to inception of the current five-year health and population sector programme (HPSP).

The donors formally conveyed to the government on March 30 that the decision to suspend the fund was taken "particularly in view of the government's recent decision to reverse unification of health services without prior consultation with the International Development Agency (IDA) and its co-financiers".

The country director of the World Bank, Frederick T Temple, informed

Economic Relations Division (ERD) Secretary Anisul Huq Chowdhury of the decision late last week. Finance and health ministers, health secretary, the head of DFID and envoys of the Netherlands, Sweden and European Commission were also informed of the decision.

Earlier, representatives of the donors met with Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman at the National Economic Council auditorium on March 12 and conveyed their decision to suspend the funds for the health sector.

This is the first time that the government has suffered such a major setback like the donors officially suspending funds for a vital sector. The government did not immediately comment on

how it planned to cover up the shortfall of \$123 million, which would have been disbursed for salaries of family planning fieldworkers, in-service training, procurement of some major hospital equipment and other apparatus.

The government has been implementing health projects since 1972 with support from the donors, but this is the first time external financing in the sector has been suspended.

The letter said that "agreed institutional reforms and policy development mandated under the programme have not progressed as intended. The most important organisational reform the unification of the health and family planning wings has not been completed and the process is to be reversed, the secretariat and directorates are yet

to be restructured."

It also said that the "organisation and the staffing required for improving financial management remains incomplete. Hospital autonomy and decentralisation of management to district and upazila levels has not been authorised and a pro-poor agenda has not been prepared or adopted."

It further said that "there has been no action to institutionalise stakeholders' participation in the programme development." It also added that the "regulatory framework for the provision of private health services has not been prepared yet."

The donors, however, said that the partial suspension would be withdrawn if "a satisfactory action

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Armed bus heads for Baghdad at dead of night

STAR DESK

It is fast becoming a common phenomenon as Arabs outside Iraq increasingly answering the call for the defence of a brother Arab state to join in what is increasingly being seen as the last-ditch fight for the heart and soul of Baghdad.

The latest is a fiery busload of fighters from Syria, among them a young woman. They were planning to leave in the dead of night in order to evade the American jetfighter and missile attacks on such buses.

The Americans have been caught unawares by this latest twist in the

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Crisis looms as India plans water diversion

\$120 billion project to re-channel Brahmaputra, Ganges, Jamuna waters

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

India plans to unilaterally divert one-third of the Brahmaputra river waters annually to its northern and southern regions, threatening Bangladesh with a serious crisis.

A US\$120 billion project will re-channel 173 billion cubic meters of waters a year to Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka states, said Dr Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad, president of

Bangladesh Economic Association. India will dig 30 canals and build 37 dams under the project also to divert flows of the Ganges and Jamuna rivers, he said at a follow-up discussion on 3rd World Water Forum in the city yesterday.

The diverted water will be used to meet irrigation and household needs in drought-hit Indian states, Dr Ahmad added.

Terming unilateral re-channeling of

such a huge quantity of water by India as 'unacceptable', he said it would make Bangladesh suffer seriously.

Dr Ahmad said water-sharing talks in the South Asia region should include Nepal, a suggestion India refuses to accept. New Delhi is in favour of bilateral negotiations with Dhaka.

Speaking at the meeting, organised by Media Network for Sustainable Development (MNSD),

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Russian envoy's convoy comes under attack

AFP, Moscow

Several Russians were injured yesterday when the convoy evacuating the Russian ambassador to Iraq out of Baghdad came under fire, a foreign ministry spokesman said.

A Jordan-based diplomat, quoting Russian sources, told AFP in Amman that ambassador Vladimir Titorenko was injured in the attack.

"The car convoy with members of the Russian embassy in Iraq, including the ambassador, came under attack leaving Baghdad in the direction of the Syrian border," the Russian ministry spokesman told AFP.

He said officials did not yet know whether the convoy came under attack from Iraqi or US-led coalition forces.

The Russian foreign ministry summoned the US and Iraqi ambassadors to Moscow "urgently and in a

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Friendly fire kills four US troops, 12 Kurdish fighters

AFP, Arbil, Iraq

Four US special forces troops and 12 Kurdish fighters were killed and dozens wounded yesterday when US aircraft mistakenly bombed a joint convoy in northern Iraq.

Hospital sources in Arbil said four Americans were among the dead, while Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) external relations official Hoshiyar Zebari said 12 Kurdish peshmerga fighters were killed and 44 wounded.

Among the seriously wounded was Wajih Barzani, 33, the head of KDP special forces and brother of party leader Massoud Barzani.

Barzani was in intensive care, Zebari said, adding, "We are worried" about him.

"There was (Iraqi) firing and the American special forces asked for close air support, but unfortunately two aircraft bombed the joint forces," Zebari said.

The US Central Command admitted in a statement that "coalition aircraft may have engaged special operations and friendly Kurdish ground forces approximately 30 miles (50 kilometres) southeast of Mosul."

"Coalition aircraft were conducting close air support missions at the time (around 0915 GMT), and were in coordination with ground forces, the statement from the US command at the Prince Sultan Airbase in Saudi Arabia said.

"The circumstances contributing to the incident are under investigation and

unknown at this time."

A BBC correspondent who witnessed the incident at Dibaga, 20 kilometres (12 miles) south of Arbil, said he counted 10 to 12 bodies after the air strike, some of them US special forces personnel.

John Simpson, who also suffered minor injuries in the attack and said his translator was seriously hurt, said a bomb was dropped from a US plane some four metres (yards) from where he was standing.

The convoy of eight or 10 cars was being escorted by US special forces travelling in two trucks, he said.

"The Americans saw this convoy and they bombed it and they hit their

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PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi Republican Guards, left, wave weapons in the south of Baghdad yesterday, as US forces try to launch a final assault on the battered capital to oust Iraqi President Saddam Hussein; a member of the Fedayeen Saddam militia loads a rocket propelled grenade and another flashes the victory sign while heading to the front south of Baghdad.