



# IRAQ INVASION

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## US downscapes Gulf military presence

AFP, Washington

The United States began to downscale its military presence in the Gulf Saturday as President George W. Bush welcomed the demise of Saddam Hussein's regime of fear.

The US aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln and its battle group of naval escorts have left the Gulf as part of a progressive US naval withdrawal from the region, US Vice Admiral Timothy Keating said from Bahrain.

"Air targets are decreasing as the campaign reaches a certain phase of completion. It is likely that we will be able to pull some assets, and not just naval assets, air force, marines and army assets out of the theatre," Keating said.

While the aircraft carrier Nimitz moved in from the Gulf of Oman, its sister ships the Kitty Hawk, Constellation, and Theodore Roosevelt and their respective battle groups may

also leave the region shortly in a gradual scaling down of forces, he added. The US military deployed five of its aircraft carriers for the war against Iraq, three in the Gulf and two in the Mediterranean.

They and their accompanying naval escorts have launched more than 800 Tomahawk cruise missiles and provided the base for more than 7,000 sorties by US and British warplanes during the conflict.

Amid scheduled antiwar protests, US President George W. Bush welcomed the downfall of the Iraqi leader.

"As Saddam's regime of fear is brought to an end, the people of Iraq are revealing the true hopes they have always held," Bush said in his weekly radio address to the nation.

"As people throughout Iraq celebrate the arrival of freedom, America celebrates with them. We know that freedom is the gift of God to all mankind, and we rejoice when others can share

it," he said.

Bush's comments came as Jessica Lynch, the 19-year-old US private dramatically rescued from Iraqi captivity last week, was flown home to the United States from the US airbase at Ramstein, Germany.

She and some 50 other wounded US troops on board a C-17 military transport aircraft were due later to arrive at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington.

The US media honed in meanwhile on reports that US intelligence has intercepted communications between former Iraqi leaders indicating Saddam was killed during an US air strike on a Baghdad building.

"They were telling each other they think he's dead," an official told the Washington Post, speaking on condition of anonymity. "We don't know if they really know or not, or if they are trying to fool us."

A senior intelligence official told The New York Times that in light of the new information, US authorities were "leaning more towards the idea that he is dead."

But in the absence of hard proof, the official cited refused to confirm Saddam's death. Those participating in the intercepted communications were not members of Saddam's inner circle, they said.

"No conclusions have been reached," a US official told AFP.

A B-1 bomber dropped four 2,000-pound (900 kilogram) 'bunker-buster' bombs Monday on a building in Baghdad where Saddam and his sons were thought to have been meeting with senior aides.

Meanwhile, US authorities have located, and are now repatriating, some 1.2 billion dollars in illegal Iraqi assets since the US-led war began on March 20, The Washington Post also reported.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi children plays on a trailer carrying abandoned missiles in central Baghdad April 12. Hundreds of Iraqis volunteered Saturday to help restore order in Baghdad after three days of heavy looting with rampaging mobs running wild, in response to an urgent US appeal to help restore order and services to the capital, shattered and lawless after three weeks of heavy bombing and the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi police officers give themselves up to US troops in Baghdad on April 12 to offer their services to restore and maintain order in the capital plagued by looting and lawlessness since the collapse of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's regime. Hundreds more turned up in response to a US appeal to help.

## Iraq invasion shows Bush the gambler

AFP, Washington

The US-led war on Iraq has shown US President George W. Bush to be a goal-driven risk-taker who after just three weeks of fighting has been rewarded with the downfall of Saddam Hussein.

From the diplomatic battle with numerous countries opposed to the Iraq war, to the daring military plan that also faced many objections, Bush has played hard to achieve his objectives.

"Evidently there's some scepticism here in Europe about whether or not I mean what I say. Saddam Hussein clearly knows I mean what I say," Bush told a joint press conference Tuesday with his staunchest ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Since the war started on March 20, Bush, who at 56 has never been in combat, made it a point to put the military in charge of the war, unlike former president Lyndon Johnson, who micromanaged the early part of the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

While he was kept abreast of the military operations in Iraq, Bush kept a low public profile, only appearing at US military bases or meeting veterans and the families of US troops killed in Iraq.

Every weekend, Bush withdraws to the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland, outside the US capital.

But enticing the United States into a war the majority of the international community and a large part of the US public disapproved of, represented a major risk for Bush.

The last-minute defection of Turkey, which prevented US forces from opening a front in northern Iraq, and the failure to secure United Nations, did not discourage Bush.

Giving no ground to win over sceptics, Bush chose instead to reward all who were willing to support him in forming a coalition of some 50 countries, which paled by comparison to the coalition his father, former president George Bush, assembled to expel Iraq from Kuwait in 1991.

With a reputation for demanding

absolute loyalty from his aides, George W. Bush does not seem disposed to forgive those who opposed him.

He snubbed French President Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, and his formerly warm relations with Mexican President Vicente Fox have cooled considerably. Instead, British Prime Minister Tony Blair can do no wrong.

When criticism was strongest against a US strategy that was encountering stiff resistance from the Iraqis a week into the war, Bush seemed to wince under the strain.

At a press conference with Blair in Camp David on March 27, Bush was curt and impatient.

With victory close at hand, the US president kept his reactions low keyed. When television cameras zeroed in on a statue of Saddam Hussein being torn down by a crowd of Iraqis in Baghdad with the help of a US armoured tank recovery vehicle, Bush, according to his spokesman, merely said: "They got it down!"

## War jolts Washington's traditional alliances

AFP, Washington

The Iraq war has fundamentally transformed Washington's traditional alliances around the world and could have a lasting impact on those relationships.

Launched by US-led forces three weeks ago without United Nations approval, the war triggered sharp divisions both within the UN Security Council and NATO, two key institutions to which the United States belong.

It also created a deep split within the European Union, a key political and trade partner of Washington.

Several of Washington's Arab allies, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are also deeply concerned about US plans to turn Iraq into a democratic model that could be used as a magnet to reshape the entire Middle East.

President George W. Bush's administration has also used the conflict to test the "coalition of the willing" concept to manage international crises.

Free from the constraints of traditional international institutions, such as US-led ad hoc coalitions could be used again to pursue Washington's policy goals.

The war also tested the concepts of "preemptive war" and "regime change" in response to perceived threats to US

national security, in a major break with traditional strategic and international norms.

In doing so, Washington sparked deep unease among long-standing allies such as France and Germany but also with Russia despite a spectacular rapprochement between Washington and Moscow in recent years.

This crisis could lead Washington to strengthen its ties with former communist east European states which back the US views on Iraq, unlike "Old Europe", the derisive term used by Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to describe France and Germany.

William Kristol, an influential neo-conservative columnist, argues that the time has come to take a hard look at Washington's alliances.

"At the end of the day, our priority has to be dealing with these dangers, not placating allies who are more concerned with the exercise of American power than the threats we face," he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Tuesday.

But Peter Galbraith, an international affairs expert at the National War College here, also stressed the need for Washington to ease international tensions and cooperate with traditional institutions such as the UN.

## 'Russia provided Saddam with intelligence'

AFP, London

Russia provided Saddam Hussein's regime with wide-ranging intelligence in the run-up to the war against Iraq, the Sunday Telegraph reported, citing what it said were secret files found in Baghdad.

The documents showed that Moscow provided Baghdad with lists of assassins available for "hits" in the West, details of arms deals with neighbouring countries, and intelligence on private conversations between British Prime Minister Tony Blair and other Western leaders, the Telegraph said.

Iraq and Russia also signed agreements to share intelligence, help each other to "obtain" visas for agents, and to exchange information on the activities of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, the British newspaper reported.

The documents, which revealed the extent of links between Russia and Saddam, were obtained from the heavily bombed headquarters of the Iraqi intelligence service in Baghdad on Saturday, the right-of-centre British weekly said.

The files, in Arabic, were mostly intelligence reports from anonymous agents and from the Iraqi embassy in Moscow.

The Telegraph said that in one report

dated March 5, 2002, an Iraqi intelligence official explained that a Russian colleague had passed him details of a private conversation between Blair and Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi at a meeting in Rome.

The document said that Blair "referred to the negative things decided by the United States over Baghdad". It added that Blair refused to engage in any military action in Iraq at that time because nothing could be done until after a new government had been set up in Afghanistan.

The Telegraph said it was not known how the Russians obtained such sensitive information, but the revelation that Moscow passed it on to Baghdad was likely to have a "devastating" effect on relations between Britain and Russia.

One paper dated November 27, 2000 from an Iraqi agent reportedly said that the Russians had passed him a detailed list of assassins.

In another document, dated March 12, 2002, the Russians apparently warned Baghdad that if it refused to comply with the United Nations then that would give the United States "a cause to destroy any nuclear weapons".

Correspondence, dated January 27, 2000, informed Baghdad that in 1999 Syria bought rockets from Russia in two

separate batches.

Meanwhile, the Mail on Sunday tabloid reported that "Russian sources" had said that Saddam had been smuggled out of Baghdad in a convoy to Syria led by the Russian ambassador and bombed unsuccessfully by the US last Sunday.

Quoting "senior military sources", the right-wing British tabloid also reported that Moscow envoys held a series of meetings with Saddam before war broke out on March 20 in which the Iraqi president tried to arrange safe passage for himself, his family and for secret files out of Iraq.

Meanwhile, Russia's intelligence agency rejected a British newspaper report Sunday that Moscow had provided Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime with wide-ranging assistance in the run-up to the war on his country.

"We refuse to comment on such unsubstantiated and groundless reports," the foreign intelligence agency's chief spokesman, Boris Labusov, told Interfax news agency.

Britain's Sunday Telegraph paper said Moscow had provided Baghdad with "lists of assassins available for 'hits' in the West", citing what it said were secret files found in Baghdad on Saturday.

## Iraqis dig for prisoners after hearing sounds from below

AFP, Basra

Civilians were digging with their bare hands Saturday through the rubble of Basra's main prison after claiming to have heard the sound of inmates trapped underground for more than a week.

British army Royal Engineers were besieged by more than a 100 people as they went to the scene in two tanks but had to tell the crowd they did not have the necessary equipment to begin an immediate search.

Some Iraqis could be seen with bloodied hands after digging through the bombed out wreckage while others tapped on a metal pipe in a bid to make contact with anyone below.

"They are prisoners, we heard the sound 'knock, knock, knock,'" said Khalid Ahmed.

"We must dig a hole. They are underground. They are without food, water for 10 days -- they are going to die. These are people, not animals."

One officer with the Royal Engineers said it was impossible for the British to offer immediate help.

"There are too many people. We need to get the proper equipment," he yelled to the crowd through an interpreter.

A sergeant said that people had told him they had heard banging from underground although it was impossible to verify the claims.

"We do not know if it's all just a rumour," he said.

"People have digging with their hands, cutting their hands and they tried to lower someone through a hole feet first."

"We can try to look where the entrances are and see if there's been much damage."

One onlooker, Jassen Hamed, said that he believed Kuwaitis taken prisoner after the Iraqi invasion of its southern neighbour in 1990 were in the underground cells.

"My brother was here in prison two years ago. He said there were 200 Kuwaitis here," he said, gesturing handcuffs.

Around 600 Kuwaitis are still missing in the aftermath of the occupation, and the emirate's government has made

information on their fate one of its top priorities for relations with the post-Saddam Hussein regime in Baghdad.

Student Hisham Zaki said he believed Islamic fundamentalists who had fallen foul of Saddam's secular Baath party were also being held in the prison.

Others insisted that they had heard women's voices from below.

By nightfall the crowds had dispersed along with the British troops who took control of Iraq's second city a week earlier this week.

The area around the prison which adjoined the city's court house and main police station was dotted with bomb craters as a result of the bid by coalition troops to wrest control from militias loyal to the Iraqi leader.

The buildings were ransacked by locals in the aftermath of the downfall of the ruling party in Basra, and the ground was littered with documents.

Locals said that the prison had been largely empty before the start of the war on March 20. Saddam granted a mass amnesty for prisoners last October as conflict became increasingly likely.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Pakistani cricketer Imran Khan takes part in the national anti-war demonstration taking place in central London on April 12.



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