



IRAQ INVASION

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Annan urges EU leaders to back UN

AFP, Athens

United Nations chief Kofi Annan said Wednesday EU leaders were united in defending a "multilateral approach" to resolving world crises as attention turns to Iraq's reconstruction.

"What is important is that here the European leaders are strongly behind the UN -- they support the multilateral approach," Annan told reporters when asked about EU divisions in the run-up to the war against Saddam Hussein.

"In this interdependent world international cooperation is the only way to resolve the issues that confront all of us," he added after a meeting with Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson, who said the UN should be put in "the driving seat" of post-war Iraq's reconstruction.

The UN secretary-general, speaking on the margins of an EU enlargement ceremony in Athens, also urged the international community to turn its attention back to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

"We need to press ahead with the road map to settle this long-lasting conflict once and for all," he said, referring to a proposal by the United States, Russia, the EU and UN to create a Palestinian state by 2005 alongside a secure Israel.

Rebuilding efforts by troops begin

AFP, Baghdad

A week after toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein, US forces in Iraq have announced their first steps towards organising the effort to rebuild the shattered country.

US Marines here have officially established a civil-military operations center (CMOC) aimed at "drafting a roadmap of success for Iraqi citizens," according to a statement released late Tuesday.

The statement by the US Central Command said the CMOC would direct operations in four major areas: electricity, law enforcement, water and sanitation, and medical care.

"US Marines are working diligently to minimise the unrest within the city of Baghdad by helping to restore water and electricity and providing humanitarian aid, medical treatment and other basic needs," the statement said.

But a "message to the citizens of Baghdad" distributed in English and handwritten Arabic also imposed a de

facto curfew, advising, but not ordering, Iraqis to stay off the streets between evening and morning prayers.

"To avoid placing Coalition Forces in a position where we must make a distinction between you and terrorist or criminal elements during a time of limited visibility, please do not leave your homes during this time."

The Centcom statement said the Marines met with key power industry leaders along with 50 plant managers and engineers to plan the restoration of the city's infrastructure.

Baghdad has been without power since April 4 but Marine officials said they hoped to restore electricity to parts of the capital by Friday after bringing essential staff back to work.

Marines also delivered 15,000 gallons of diesel fuel for generators servicing water treatment plants in east Baghdad to increase the flow of water, Centcom said.

The statement said Marines were currently conducting joint patrols

with Iraqi uniformed police around the city. Local police officers have also begun unarmed patrols in Baghdad and other municipalities.

Centcom made it clear they were screening would-be Iraqi law enforcement officers carefully for ties to Saddam's administration.

"In response to questions of concerned citizens, residents have been advised that officers are being trained and evaluated to ensure that they are capable choices for policing and that they have no ties as regime loyalists."

US troops were also working to get Baghdad's 33 hospitals back in operation after most were closed because of combat damage, looters or fears of vandalism, the statement said.

It said six key Iraqi medical officials had formed a committee to coordinate medical efforts in east Baghdad. US officials said Tuesday that 14 hospitals were functioning, including Baghdad's main complex, Medical City.



A convoy of UNICEF trucks carrying water supplies waits in the Iranian border city of Khoramshahr en route to deliver its humanitarian cargo to Iraq April 15. UNICEF spokesman Geoffrey Keele said the situation was improving in southern Iraq, although he voiced concern for the town of Zubair which, he said, had only two weeks of chlorine left for water treatment.



A delegate tries to make a final point during the reading of the declaration at the end of the US-sponsored meeting on post-war Iraq on Tuesday at Tallil Air Base, north of Nasiriyah in the southern Iraqi desert. Iraq's opposition adopted a statement stating a future Iraqi government must be democratic and based on the rule of law, and that no leader should be imposed from outside on Iraq.

Who gets the reconstruction deals? The 'victors' of course

REUTERS, Washington

Rebuilding Iraq's roads, oil fields, ports, power grids and communications networks could cost \$20 billion a year -- and the lion's share of the spoils is likely to go to a handful of well-connected US companies.

Companies not already familiar with arcane US defence procurement policies and most foreign companies are likely to be excluded from billions of dollars of government contracts, according to US military officials and defense analysts.

But they say that stems from complicated contracting rules, and the small number of companies specialized to do the work -- and is not a reflection of corruption or influence-brokering.

Nonetheless, US lawmakers have already protested against the US government's decision to award no-bid contracts to several companies, as well as the closed-door nature of the process.

Others have raised pointed questions about whether companies like Halliburton Co., the company once headed by Vice President Dick Cheney that has already won a no-bid deal to put out Iraqi oil well fires, are getting special treatment.

Several other companies, like privately-held Bechtel Group Inc. and Fluor Corp., are vying for a \$600 million contract from the US Agency for International Development to do

extensive rebuilding of Iraqi infrastructure.

"To the victor go the spoils," said Richard Aboulafia with Virginia-based Teal Group. "It's going to be a protected hunting ground for the relatively small number of US companies that have the critical mass and capabilities necessary to do these jobs -- and that's a very small list indeed."

The controversy has put the limelight on a specialized military procurement process that tends to favour big defence industry insiders, while leaving smaller businesses, foreign companies and sector newcomers in the dust, analysts agree.

"Victory should not turn into an undeserved financial bonanza for companies that have cultivated close ties with the Bush administration," a New York Times editorial said Monday.

The decision to give Halliburton an interim contract valued at up to \$7 billion looked "like naked favoritism," it said.

The US Army Corps of Engineers fought back on Monday, saying the value of the contract would be "significantly" lower, given that all but one of the Iraqi oil fires were already out and damage had been less severe than feared.

But lawmakers said that, even if the contract amounted to just 10 percent of the ceiling, that still represented a huge

sum -- and one that should have been competitively bid.

The General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, has begun a thorough review of the issue, vowing that no company will be excluded from closer scrutiny.

Former Secretary of State George Schultz, a proponent of the US war in Iraq and member of the Bechtel board, denied using his political connections to help win work for Bechtel and said he was not active in the company's daily management.

He said recent articles critical of the reconstruction contracts reflected, "the sort of suspicious atmosphere that seems to pervade a lot of the people in Washington," a key reason he moved to California when he retired 15 years ago.

Loren Thompson, director of the Virginia-based Lexington Institute, said criticism of the US government's handling of the reconstruction contracts was "utterly baseless" and revealed naivete about US government procurement.

"It is the most thoroughly regulated, closely scrutinized government procurement system in the world," Thompson said, although he acknowledged the system tended to favor the biggest companies with a history of earlier government contracts. "You can't just give someone a contract. You'd go to jail."

US offers polite language, but firm commands

AFP, Baghdad

"Please stay at home at night. Please be careful when approaching our troops. Please pull over when our trucks pass through."

US forces insist they are liberators not occupiers. But if a "message to the citizens of Baghdad" distributed here this week is peppered with "pleases," it makes no bones about exactly who is in control of Iraq.

The text, drafted by US Marines in typed English and handwritten Arabic, asks Baghdad's five million residents to stay off the streets between evening prayers and the call to morning prayers.

It says the streets of the capital are threatened at night by "terrorist forces" linked to the ousted regime of Saddam Hussein, as well as criminals.

"To avoid placing Coalition Forces in a position where we must make a distinction between you and terrorist or criminal elements during a time of limited visibility, please do not leave your homes during this time," the US request.

"During all hours, please approach Coalition military positions with extreme caution. Make it as clear as possible to the forces manning those positions that you are not a threat. Avoid carrying anything that could be per-

ceived as a weapon."

The text printed by the First Marines Division on Monday is clear about who has the right of way anywhere on Iraqi roads.

"If you are driving and you observe a convoy of coalition military vehicles approaching, please pull over to the right of the road until the convoy passes. Please do not block military convoys or position your vehicle in between the vehicles of a military convoy."

The message puts out a call for firemen, policemen, doctors and employees in other key sectors to register with the Marines' operations center, and urges Baghdadis to report any security threats.

"With your help, we can rid Iraq of both the remnants of the regime and of foreign terrorist elements," it says.

The text stresses that US forces "are guests in your country and will strive to maintain your trust." It pledges to seek local advice and assistance in building a "free and prosperous" Iraq.

"With the exception of the precautions listed above, please continue about your normal daily activity as we work together to restore public services," the message says.

But the message does not say: "Have a nice day."

Oil ministry - the only secure building in the ravaged capital !

AFP, Baghdad

Since US forces rolled into central Baghdad a week ago, one of the sole public buildings untouched by looters has been Iraq's massive oil ministry, which is under round-the-clock surveillance by troops. The imposing tile-coloured building in the Al-Mustarisya quarter is guarded by around 50 US tanks which block every entrance, while sharpshooters are positioned on the roof and in the windows.

The curious onlooker is clearly unwelcome. Any motorist who drifts within a few meters (yards) of the main entrance is told to leave immediately.

Baghdad residents have complained that US troops should do more to protect against the looters, most of them Shiite Muslims repressed by Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated regime who live in the vast slum known as Saddam City on the northern outskirts.

But while museums, banks, hotels and libraries have been ransacked, the oil ministry remains secure.

The symbolism is loaded, considering how vehemently the United States and Britain denied war opponents' accusations that the campaign to oust Saddam was driven by oil lust.

"They came from the other side of the world. Do you believe they're going to do much for me? They've just come for the oil," fumed Salam Mohammad Hassan, a doctor who lives near the ministry.

Residents noted that the irrigation ministry, just next-door, was torched.

US forces, who say they cannot prevent looting across the capital of five million, respond that they are not trying to seize Iraq's oil resources but preserve them.

"Anyone who says we're protecting this ministry to steal Iraqi oil doesn't know what's really going on in this country," US Captain Scott McDonald told AFP at the ministry gates.

The United States, he said, is only safeguarding Iraq's potential which would otherwise be considered game for looters.

"Oil belongs to the Iraqi people; it's their property. It must be protected because it'll go, indirectly, to build schools and hospitals," he said.

McDonald said a few looters had managed to sneak into the ministry-cum-fortress after US troops entered Baghdad. A few offices were robbed but nearly all files and archives remain

intact, he said. Coalition forces also say they control all of Iraq's oilfields.

Amnesty International has criticised the attention on controlling oilfields, which it said must have taken "much planning and resources."

"However, there is scarce evidence of similar levels of planning and allocation of resources for securing public and other institutions essential for the survival and well-being of the population," the London-based rights group said.

Iraq has the world's largest oil resources after Saudi Arabia, with 112 billion barrels of proven reserves.

Before the start of the war, Iraq was producing about 2.5 million barrels a day, of which just under two million were exported under UN supervision through the "oil-for-food" program.

In front of the oil ministry, a young Iraqi sat down in hopes of selling cigarettes.

"Before, lots of people would stop here to buy from me, that's why I've kept coming. But there hasn't been anyone for a few days."

Upon saying that, he was kicked out unceremoniously by a soldier.

Blair 'must distance himself from Bush': Cook warns again

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Tony Blair must distance himself from US President George Bush if Britain is to be a major European power, former Cabinet minister Robin Cook has warned.

He said the prime minister's relationship with Mr Bush had left Britain "the odd one out", with France and Germany now the dominant forces in Europe.

Mr Cook, who resigned his position as Leader of the Commons over the war with Iraq, told the New Statesman that Mr Blair's closeness to the US President was a "strategic error".

Mr Cook had warned that he would not remain quiet while on the back benches.

At the end of March he was criticised by ministers for telling a Sunday newspaper that he wanted British troops home from the Gulf before more were killed.

In the New Statesman article Mr Cook writes that the prime minister's close relationship with Mr Bush has undermined Britain's standing in

Europe. He says: "Labour's objective on taking office in 1997 was to make Britain a partner of equal importance in a triangle with Germany and France."

"After the divisions over Iraq, Europe is back to a Franco-German axis, with Britain once again the odd one out."

Mr Cook, who was on the Labour front benches for 17 years, said the prime minister is wrong to have tried to establish the same warm friendship with George Bush as he enjoyed with Bill Clinton.

Mr Blair must now decide whether it is more important for Britain to be close to the Bush administration or Europe, Mr Cook argues.

"The fundamental foreign policy dilemma for Britain is not Iraq, it is not even Europe, it is what kind of relationship we can maintain with the US while it is under neo-conservative management," he writes.

"Tony Blair has pursued a strategy of restoring Britain as the closest, most reliable ally of the US ... The strategic error was to attempt to roll forward the relationship with Clinton to his succes-

sor." He continued: "If the Prime Minister wants to restore Britain's status as a major European player he must now accept that moving closer to Europe requires, by definition, putting more distance between Britain and Bush."

Mr Cook's comments were made as the prime minister prepared for an EU summit in Athens on Wednesday, which UN Secretary General Kofi Annan will also attend.

It was being held after Mr Blair and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder presented a united front on the future of Iraq, following talks in Hanover on Tuesday.

It was the first time that they faced the press together since damaging splits emerged over Iraq. The German chancellor stressed the friendship between the UK and Germany and said: "It is time now to concentrate on the problems arising out of the new situation and to resolve those problems."

Mr Blair said the UK and Germany agreed on the need for the UN to have a role in the future of Iraq.

