

US admin talks to Baghdad officials to restore services

Rumsfeld heads to region for talks

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's new US administrators on Sunday met Baghdad officials to try to restore essential services to the battered city...

Barbara Bodine, America's coordinator for central Iraq, met two men who were deputy mayors under Saddam Hussein...

As America wrestled with the thorny task of repairing war-devastated Iraq and improving its relationship with the resentful population...

In Baghdad, Bodine's aide Keith Schollum told reporters: "This is our first opportunity to start talking to city officials, these are the people who make the city work."

"It is things like asking where the vehicles are, what vehicles we can get or the military can provide," he said.

They also discussed restoring water, sewage and waste collection services to the capital, severely damaged by three weeks of relentless US bombing.

The continuing privations in Baghdad have increased Iraqi resentment of the Americans. On Saturday furious residents also blamed US troops for an arms dump explosion that killed at least 12 people and sparked fresh anti-American protests.

Zubaidi, the self-declared "mayor" of Baghdad, was again sidelined on Sunday after being repeatedly told by US officials they do not recognise his authority.

In other Iraqi cities the rise of self-proclaimed leaders and Islamic clerics have posed a major challenge to American control.

Sunday's meeting in Baghdad came a day before a number of broader Iraqi political groupings are to meet US officials in the capital to discuss a new national government.

Jay Garner, the retired US general supervising the rebuilding of Iraq, held initial talks with Iraqi groups to discuss the country's political future two weeks ago near the southern city of Nassiriya.

Garner, who says the process of forming a government will begin by next weekend, has called for a "mosaic" of the different ethnic, religious and political groups in Iraq.

Thousands of Iraqis have taken to the streets since US troops conquered Baghdad 18 days ago, demanding the Americans leave the country to be run by its people.

The Pentagon's Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA), led by Garner, is charged with overseeing the rebuilding of Iraq and installing a civil administration to prepare for an interim government.

Rumsfeld was due to reach the region later on Sunday for a trip which will also include Afghanistan. He will thank regional leaders for their support in the war and discuss future US military deployment in the oil-rich area.

A defence official would not say whether Iraq or any other specific countries were on the itinerary, citing security concerns.

Rumsfeld's flight east was delayed after his plane was held up by a mechanical fault during a stopover in Ireland.

Rumsfeld has denied that Washington is planning to establish long-term military bases in postwar Iraq.

But he said he planned to discuss possible changes in America's regional military presence with leaders in the Gulf.



One and a half-year-old Zainab Thamer and other victims lay wounded in beds in a ward at the Zaafaraniyah hospital in southern Baghdad suburb on Saturday following an explosion. Fourteen people were killed and more than 50 wounded when a rocket or missile from a nearby arms dump manned by the US army exploded flattening a family home in the Zaafaraniyah neighbourhood.

Polls open in Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

Yemenis went to the polls Sunday for the third parliamentary elections since reunification in 1990 amid fears of violence in the impoverished republic regarded by Washington as a haven of Islamic militancy.

Polling stations opened at 8:00 am (0500 GMT) and were due to close at 8:00 pm (1700 GMT).

On the eve of the vote, President Ali Abdullah Saleh warned against any repetition of the violence that has marred previous polls.

"I hope Sunday's elections pass off safely and peacefully," he told a rare press conference at the converted warehouse headquarters of the Supreme Commission for Election and Referendum (SCER).

EU peace camp seeks to boost defence ties

AFP, Brussels

Europe's four leading anti-war countries meet in Brussels Tuesday to discuss boosting military cooperation, an aim they say was again highlighted by the Iraq war.

For the heads of government at the mini-summit of France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg, the conflict only underlined the need for more autonomy from the United States in defence matters.

But the gathering, the brainchild of Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, has drawn less than enthusiastic comment from other EU leaders - notably key European military power Britain.

"The idea of a European defence based on Belgium and without England -- I wonder if that's particularly serious," British Minister for Europe Denis MacShane said last month.

On Tuesday Verhofstadt will meet with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, French President Jacques Chirac and Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker.

The four agree that the deep divisions opened up in Europe by the Iraq war underline the need for the EU to put flesh on the bones of its common foreign and security policy (CFSP).

But a notable absentee will be the EU's High Representative for CFSP, Javier Solana. He called the meeting "interesting," but will be otherwise engaged.

"We will see what the results will be. In any case, if there are results, they will afterwards be discussed among 15, or 25," he said, referring to the number of current and future EU members.

The meeting has fuelled talk of a two-speed EU, at a time when the bloc is struggling to build just the opposite, a Union increasingly united in areas other than purely economic and monetary affairs.

As well as Britain, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands have also made clear their reservations, and were instrumental in ensuring that neither Solana nor the EU's current Greek presidency attend.

US developing superfast missile

AFP, Washington

US scientists are trying to develop a new superfast missile that would be able to strike distant targets with lightning speed, all but denying future enemies of Washington a chance to escape, according to people familiar with the project.

The highly-classified program, whose origins go back to the early 1980s, has taken on added importance in the wake of two daring, albeit inconclusive, recent attempts by the US military to kill Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

On March 20 and April 7, US forces used cruise missiles and bunker-busting bombs against two locations in Baghdad where intelligence indicated Saddam was meeting with his top associates.

US troops flex muscle to disarm Kurds

REUTERS, Mosul

US troops backed by helicopter gunships began disarming Kurdish guerrillas in the troubled northern Iraqi city of Mosul on Saturday.

US forces identified three roadblocks in the city manned by "peshmerga" fighters loyal to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and moved in hundreds of soldiers to take them over.

The guerrillas refused at first to yield to the Americans but finally backed down.

In one incident, dozens of peshmerga were seen moving toward

one roadblock to reinforce their fellow fighters. But they turned away when a Kiowa attack helicopter swooped down low over them and more US troops and firepower approached.

One Army captain told a peshmerga commander that if he did not tell his men to pull back "you will see more firepower than you would dare dream about."

In negotiations with army officers which followed, both sides agreed a deal under which some 20 weapons were seized from peshmerga vehicles trying to flee the area. But the KDP was allowed to keep guns it uses to protect its party compound.

Thousands of US troops moved into

the centre of Mosul this week and they have made clear they intend to disarm the peshmerga or push them out of town as they try to set up a city government and calm tensions between the Kurds and majority Sunni Muslims. "Our intention is to disarm them. I do not want confrontation. I'd rather we negotiate and they give up their weapons," said Lieutenant Colonel Chris Holden of the Army's 101st Airborne Division.

"However, we are not going to back down. We want the peshmerga to leave and we will continue raising the bar on their compliance until they have left the city."



Iraqis gather in the Zaafaraniyah suburb, after an explosion rocked the southern district of Baghdad when an ammunition depot kept by US forces exploded on Saturday. Fourteen people were killed and more than 50 wounded when a rocket or missile from a nearby arms dump flattened a family home south of Baghdad.

Blood, wreckage at site of another Iraqi tragedy

AFP, Baghdad

On Al-Mualmin Street, bloodied clothes and torn schoolbooks bore witness Saturday to another gruesome round of innocent deaths in Baghdad.

"Why? Why?" cried a woman in front of the rubble in southern Baghdad's desperately poor Zaafaraniyah neighbourhood, where a missile flattened two houses and killed six members of the Saber al-Racabi family.

Behind her, what had been their home for years was nothing more than a pile of broken concrete. An intricately embroidered pillow lay in the wreckage.

The US military said an Iraqi opened fire on a cache of Iraqi weapons being guarded by US troops nearby. The shooting set off explosions that sent missiles raining down on the neighbourhood.

At least one changed the lives of the family forever. Another three family members, two of them children, were feared dead under the mess.

A massive crater of brown putrid water filled the street where the missile exploded. Dozens of people were wounded, some of whom spoke of the surprise when tragedy struck.

"I was making my breakfast and I got a terrible shock and then everything turned black. When I woke up I was in the hospital," said one family member, Suad Saber.

Witnesses described the grisly scene of blood-spattered bodies being pulled from the site. They said they saw four missiles turn in the sky before crashing down.

"I saw three dead women with my own eyes. One of my friends was killed. They pulled him out of the building covered with blood," said a distraught Ahmed Khalil, 18.

Some people threw rocks at the soldiers who arrived, forcing them to retreat as they tried to take some of the wounded to hospital.

They later stood in a silent vigil as a US army bulldozer cleared some of the rubble to look for victims buried underneath.

Four of the bodies arrived a few hours later from the local hospital in wooden coffins. They were laid out in the cramped house next door.

Hundreds of people nearly trampled each other rushing in and out to mourn. The men cursed America and tearful women clad in traditional black abaya

robes wailed and beat their breasts over the coffins.

Then they loaded the bodies into a white truck and set off to bury them in the southern holy city of Najaf.

Along a highway about a kilometre (half a mile) away, the missiles were ignited at a munitions depot where US forces had collected weapons built up by the former regime of Saddam Hussein.

Residents complained the troops had been conducting controlled explosions to destroy the weapons, but US army officers insist they were not carrying out any such operations on Saturday morning.

A scorched patch smouldering of grey rubble about the length of a football pitch is all that is left of the depot.

By dusk, the site, across from a technology college, was still smoking and every five minutes ammunition exploded with dull thuds or whining pops.

At the hospital, surgeon Shaker Mahmoud Nasser, said: "I have six bodies but I was told that there are between 11 and 14 dead" and that some 30 people were wounded.

London blows hot and cold in ties with Paris

AFP, London

Britain has been working hard to heal the bitter divisions with France and Germany caused by the Iraq war, while at the same time occasionally aiming a sharp verbal blow at its European partners.

An ambiguous approach? Possibly, but one which can be explained by Prime Minister Tony Blair's need to play to a domestic audience with an eye on the next British elections, according to observers.

"There is a will to mend bridges, but there is still on both sides of the Channel a huge amount of resentment and hostility because both sides felt the other let it down," according to Julie Smith, a specialist in European relations for the Royal Institute of International Affairs in London.

Britain invaded Iraq alongside the United States, sending some 46,000 military personnel to the Gulf, while France and Germany led the anti-war camp, causing a major rift within the European Union.

In the tense run-up to the war, Paris threatened to use its veto to prevent Britain and the US pushing through a resolution that would have given UN authorisation for the invasion of Iraq.

Iraqi children start hurling stones at US troops

REUTERS, Mosul

The love affair between US troops and Iraqi children is turning sour.

As the invading troops pushed north toward Baghdad in the first weeks of the war, it was always the children in every town that came out first to smile, wave, give the thumbs-up and shout the same greeting: "Good, good, good!"

Happy to see a friendly face, the soldiers waved back and many handed out candies from their field rations.

But this correspondent, who has travelled with US troops since the start of the war, has seen more and more of the encounters ending with some children, usually the older ones in their early teens, hurling stones at the soldiers.

It can be a Catch 22 situation for the troops. If they let the children swarm around them, they expose themselves to possible attack from adults who can use

the cover to get close and throw in a hand grenade.

But if they push them back, it hurts their efforts to win over the civilian population, and can spark the stone throwing.

"It's frustrating. They're like little gnats that you can't get away," said Captain James McGahey, a company commander of the 101st Airborne Division who says almost every one of the patrols he sends out in the northern city of Mosul gets stoned.

"Everybody loves kids but it's impossible to love 300 of them when they all want to touch you, talk to you and grab you, especially when there are a few out there who want to chuck stones."

In one typical incident this weekend, a group of soldiers on foot patrol attracted an ever-increasing posse of children as they moved past a local fire station and on through a rough neighbourhood of Mosul.

building, at least 200 children and a small group of adults were around them, and the stones came raining in from about a dozen of the older kids.

"They were throwing them like they were pitching a baseball," said Sgt. John McLean, who was hit on the helmet, in the back and on the heel.

The troops pulled away and took up a defensive position but even then the children and adults only dispersed when a warning shot was fired over their heads.

"Everyone tries to be as nice as we can with them but it does get difficult. They definitely impede the job we're trying to do because you have to put half your guys on keeping the children away," McLean said.

The problem is not confined to Mosul.

Crowds of 250-300 Iraqi teenagers hurled stones at US Marines patrolling the holy city of Najaf in southern Iraq on Thursday and Friday, officers said.

Japanese PM holds talks with Blair

AFP, London

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi held three hours of talks focused on Iraq and the Middle East late Saturday with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Downing Street said.

Koizumi, on a week-long European tour of Britain, Spain, France, Germany and Greece, met Blair over dinner at Downing Street for talks described as "very warm and friendly" by the British premier's spokesman.

The two leaders discussed "a range of international issues, including Iraq, the Middle East and a number of bilateral issues," the spokesman said, without giving further detail.

Koizumi was expected to hold a press conference on Sunday morning before leaving Britain.

During his European tour, the Japanese prime minister also plans to hold talks with French President Jacques Chirac to discuss how to help with the post-war reconstruction of Iraq.

Power vacuum in Iraqi cities

REUTERS, Baghdad

The rise of self-proclaimed leaders and Islamic clerics in Iraq is providing a major challenge to US efforts to introduce democracy but avert the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamic state.

Self-declared mayors have taken over in Baghdad and Kut, near the border with Iran, despite US hostility and any evidence that democratic elections were held.

In Najaf in the south and Mosul in the north, Shi'ite Muslim clerics are vying for power as US troops look on.

In other towns, villages and cities it is not clear who is in charge in the chaos following the removal of Saddam Hussein and his loyalists from power in the three-week US-led war.

The United States is watching anxiously, wary it will fuel tensions and spark more anti-American protests if it intervenes, but also concerned that Iraq could become a fundamentalist Islamic state subject to Iranian influence it does not.

"We have got to allow a period of time where people who have not been able to say anything publicly are allowed to get on the street and vent a bit of fury," said Tim Cross, a senior member of the US-led team overseeing Iraq's reconstruction.

"Clearly there are dangers. Of course there are and I do not want to see Iraq become a fundamentalist state," he said.

Preventing the creation of a fundamentalist Islamic state may be difficult. Shi'ite Muslims make up 60 percent of Iraq's 26 million population and, although they are divided, should do well in free elections.

Shi'ite clerics have called for harmony with Sunni Muslims, despite years of repression of the Shi'ites under Saddam, a Sunni.

Jay Garner, the retired US general leading an interim administration until an Iraqi government takes charge, is calling for a government that is a "mosaic" of the different ethnic, religious and political groups in Iraq.



Hotel "patisserie" Chizuo Okano sets a large 54 kgs (119 lb.) sugar candy Tutankhamun mask made for the "Food Art Museum" event at Tokyo's Akasaka Prince Hotel on Saturday. Some 100 artistic types of food produced by hotel patissiers will be displayed to attract hotel visitors during Japan's week-long Golden Week holidays.