



Iraqi Muslim Shiites demonstrate in Baghdad on Monday in front of a US tank outside the Palestine Hotel, where US forces have set up an office, in demand for a national conference to chart Iraq's future.

## ElBaradei calls for arms inspectors' return to Iraq

AFP, Washington

The UN's chief nuclear monitor Mohamed ElBaradei said Sunday that UN inspectors should return to Iraq to establish whether any banned weapons are in the country.

"We have the independence and impartiality that creates that credibility," he told CNN.

"We are the ones who have the most field experience," he said. "Why should we reinvent the wheel?"

ElBaradei, who heads the International Atomic Energy Agency, said he had not received any direct response about whether his team and UN inspectors hunting for banned chemical and biological weapons would be allowed back into Iraq.

The United States has opposed the return of UN disarmament inspectors, saying that its own forces and those of its allies in Iraq have replaced the world body's experts in the search for weapons of mass destruction.

"That's understandable during the hostilities, but once there is a secure environment... I don't see any reason why we shouldn't go back as soon as is practical," ElBaradei said of the US reluctance to allow UN inspectors to return.

"Now that the regime is gone, I see no reason why we should not be able to complete the job."

The US military announced Sunday that it had taken Iraqi general Hossam Mohammad Amin, formerly the head of the National Monitoring Directorate, into custody. Another key figure in the weapons program, former presidential scientific adviser Amer al-Saadi, has surrendered to US forces.

# Blair warns against multipolar world

## UN should have political role in Iraq

AP, London

French President Jacques Chirac's vision of a multipolar world risks deepening divisions between Europe and the United States, Prime Minister Tony Blair said in an interview published Monday.

In the interview with the Financial Times, Blair also said he remained convinced that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and that the war was justified.

Blair, whose ties with Chirac have been strained by France's opposition to the war, said the French president's vision of a European Union that could rival the United States risked destabilising the international community.

Chirac has called for a multipolar world in which a strong European Union would act as a counterweight to "unilateral" US foreign policy.

"Some want a so-called multipolar world where you have different centres of power, and I believe will quickly develop into rival centres of power," Blair said. "And others believe, and this is my notion, that we need one polar power which encompasses a strategic partnership between Europe and America."

Blair gambled his political future by backing Washington's tough stance on Iraq, and last month suffered the biggest revolt since his party came to power in 1997 when 138

Labour lawmakers voted against him on the issue.

But he said going to war had been "the right thing to do."

Asked whether he was still certain that Saddam had possessed weapons of mass destruction, Blair replied: "Yes I am, and I don't think it in the least surprising that it is going to take some time before we assemble the evidence."

Reuters adds: Europe and the United States should work as "one polar power" to tackle the world's problems rather than bickering as they did over Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in an interview published on Monday.

Speaking to the Financial Times newspaper, Blair said the best way to stop Washington acting unilaterally was to join forces with it rather than opposing it.

"I don't want to see a situation develop again in which either Europe or America sees a huge strategic interest at stake and we are not helping each other," Blair said in what the paper described as a warning to French President Jacques Chirac.

"Some want a so-called multipolar world where you have different centres of power, and I believe will quickly develop into rival centres of power."

"And others believe, and this is my notion, that we need one polar power which encompasses a strategic

partnership between Europe and America."

"Those people who fear 'unilateralism' -- so called and in inverted commas -- in America should realise that the quickest way to get that is to set up a rival polar power to America."

France led bitter opposition to the war in Iraq while Britain was easily Washington's closest and most important ally in the toppling of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Blair strove to reconcile the differing views in the United States and Europe but ultimately failed in his bid to get a second resolution from the United Nations Security Council sanctioning the use of force in Iraq.

While Blair insisted on the need to stand side-by-side with the United States, he also stressed the importance of Europe to Britain -- traditionally more sceptical about the drive toward European unity than many of its neighbours.

"To absolve yourself from the main strategic alliance on your doorstep -- which is Europe -- would be an act of self-mutilation as a country," he said.

Blair told the paper it was important any new government in Baghdad had international legitimacy and said he was still convinced there were banned weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, even though none have surfaced since the US-led invasion

force took control of the country.

"I don't think it in the least surprising that it is going to take some time before we assemble the evidence."

The prime minister also touched on the nuclear stand-off between the West and North Korea following reports by US officials that Pyongyang had admitted having nuclear arms.

"It is not just the US and Britain that regards a nuclear capability in the hands of North Korea as a threat," he said. "I think China and South Korea would say the same."

AFP adds: British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in an interview published Monday that the United Nations should have a political as well as a humanitarian role in Iraq.

Asked about the "vital" role desired by the international community for the UN in Iraq, Blair told the Financial Times: "I think it is to everyone's benefit that the UN does have such a role, so I hope there can be an agreement on that, on the humanitarian, on the reconstruction, but also on the political side too."

The prime minister added: "It is not in our interests -- America and Britain -- to have a government in Iraq that doesn't clearly have international legitimacy."

# OIC urges speedy US pullout from Iraq

## 'No force-feeding of democracy possible'

PTI, Dubai

Stressing that Islamic efforts must unite to defend the interest of Iraq, the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) has demanded that US troops should pull out of Baghdad as early as possible.

"Islamic efforts must unite to defend Iraq's interests and insist on the need for the departure of foreign forces from Iraq as soon as possible," OIC secretary general Abdulwahed Belkheziz told the opening session of a meeting of senior employees of the 57-nation pan-Islamic body at its headquarters in Jeddah, reports here said.

He said OIC member states should have a major input in defending the rights of the Iraqi people.

Referring to the country's oil wealth, he said the "Iraqi people must govern themselves... Iraq's natural resources belong to the Iraqi people alone, who are fully entitled to manage and exploit them according to their interests."

Belkheziz said the United Nations should have the central role in running Iraqi internal and external affairs in the transitional period, as well as a vital role in all arrangements pertaining to the exploitation of its

natural resources.

Meanwhile, Jordanian Foreign Minister Marwan Moasher said Sunday that US officials must be careful to help foster an "inclusive" Iraqi government, warning that there can be no "force-feeding" of democracy in the country.

"There were voices and are still voices in the US calling for a force-feeding type of democracy in the region. That will, indeed, result in radicalisation of the area and probably a theocracy coming in Iraq," the foreign minister said in comments made Sunday on NBC television's "Face the Nation" program.

"What we need to do is an evolutionary, orderly process where we ensure that all sectors of society in Iraq are represented in the Iraqi government."

The main objective of US officials ought to be to ensure that "there is a credible Iraqi government," he said.

"I think there is a strong need for the US to involve the international community in its efforts to rebuild Iraq. I think you need advice from especially those in the region who know the area well," he said.

Moasher said Iraq must be led by an "inclusive government," but

warned the road to self-governance would be slow.

"You cannot expect democracy to happen overnight," he said.

"It is very important to talk about an inclusive government, an inclusive society rather than to exclude anyone."

Moasher also dismissed Ahmad Chalabi as a "divisive character," who has been convicted of embezzlement charges in Jordan and faces prosecution elsewhere.

"Ahmad Chalabi is not just wanted in Jordan. He is involved in financial irregularities in Lebanon. He has caused the collapse of two banks in Lebanon. He is involved in financial irregularities in Switzerland, where another institution, financial institution, collapsed," he said.

"He is wanted for 70 million dollars of embezzlement of regular people's money in Jordan, and he is convicted to 22 years in prison."

Chalabi, heads up the US-backed Iraqi National Congress (INC), an organisation that opposed Saddam Hussein's ousted regime, and is said to be the handpicked choice of the US Pentagon to lead a new Iraqi government.

# US moving air base from KSA to Qatar

AFP, New York

The US military is shifting its major air operations centre in the Middle East from Saudi Arabia to Qatar, the New York Times reported Monday.

Oversight of air missions to Iraq and the Middle East will be transferred this week from Prince Sultan Air Base near Riyadh, Saudi Arabia to Al Udeid Air base in Qatar, the report said.

President George W. Bush and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have not decided whether to make the move permanent, it said.

"Whether we'll stay there or not -- no sure," General Tommy Franks, head of US Central Command, told the paper. "But we do know that since we have it, we want to be able to run some operations out of it," Franks said, referring to a headquarters the Pentagon built at Al Udeid a year ago.

US officials stressed that the move does not mean an end to military relations with Saudi Arabia.

"We are not leaving Saudi Arabia," a Bush administration official was quoted as saying.

The Pentagon will use its two-year-old air command center at Prince Sultan Air Base to oversee military exercises, and could shift air operations back there in a crisis, the report said.

Another high official of the US Central Command said the move reflected scaled-back capacity needs.

"There's a convenience in the fact we're adjusting the size," Major General Victor Renault was quoted as saying. "You don't need a CAOC (Combat Air Operations Centre) designed to fly 3,000 missions if you're only flying a few hundred."

As Rumsfeld kicked off a Gulf tour Sunday to review military commitments following the Iraq war, Franks said a "re-arrangement" of US forces in the region was likely now that Saddam Hussein has been ousted from Iraq.

"There is an understanding that since the regime in Iraq has gone, since there will no longer be a need for Operation Northern Watch and Southern Watch and so forth in the days and months ahead there will likely be a re-arrangement of the footprint," Franks told a press conference at Abu Dhabi airport.

The Central Command general added, however, that he did not know if the changes would result in a reduction of US forces in the region.

Operation Southern Watch and Northern Watch had enforced flight restrictions on Iraqi aircraft following the 1991 Gulf War.



Tibetans greet their exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, on Monday in Guwahati, the capital of Assam state. The Dalai Lama is stopping in Guwahati on his way to Arunachal Pradesh for a 11-day visit.



Two US Army vehicles are trapped in heavy traffic in Baghdad on Monday. US Central Command said from its war headquarters in Qatar that four US soldiers were injured on Sunday in an ambush in Baghdad after they were engaged with small-arms fire from an assailant who approached them while the vehicles were stopped in traffic jam.

# US to use Saddam's fall to relaunch ME peace

AFP, Washington

The United States will seek this week to take advantage of the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq to relaunch efforts to bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell is to head for the Middle East to revive peace talks that were put to one side during the Iraq war.

The trip to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria has not yet been officially announced. But US officials said Powell is expected to leave Thursday.

As long as the inauguration of the first Palestinian prime minister, Mahmud Abbas, goes ahead Tuesday, there could also be stopovers in Jerusalem and Ramallah on the West Bank.

The voting in of Abbas is also the key to the United States releasing the so-called "road map" for peace it has drawn up with the European Union, Russia and the United Nations.

The plan allows for the stage-by-stage creation of a Palestinian state over three years.

Despite the success of the Iraq campaign, the United States knows that ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the key to bringing stability to the

Middle East.

"In the near future, once Iraqi politics really resume, the ability of any Iraqi politician to be openly pro-US will be restricted if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict burns on and the Bush team is seen as siding only with Ariel Sharon and doing nothing to defuse the situation," wrote Thomas Friedman in a commentary for the New York Times.

President George W. Bush's "post-war agenda must address the issue of Arab-Israeli peacemaking," said the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in a report after the fall of Baghdad.

"After all, Arab leaders will surely come to President Bush and proclaim that he has proved himself in war, now he must... prove himself in peace," added the report, whose authors included Dennis Ross, the Middle East envoy for President Bill Clinton.

Professor Mary-Jane Deeb, a specialist in the Middle East at American University in Washington, said Powell's trip was not a surprise.

"They had promised to take care of Palestine and Israel once the war was over. Now they are keeping their word," she told AFP.

The problem is to know how much Washington will become engaged in

finding a solution.

"The question is not the leadership of Yasser Arafat or Mahmud Abbas," said Deeb, "but the willingness of the Americans and Europe to solve this problem."

The approach of the US president seems similar to that of his father in 1991 when he was the US leader.

After the first Gulf War, the United States and Russia held a conference in Madrid in October 1991, which became the first international forum to bring together representatives of Israel and the Palestinian territories, as well as Arab states such as Syria.

This led to Israel and Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organisation recognising each other, and then the first peace treaty between the two sides in September 1993.

Deeb said that ten years on, the renewed violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories has convinced the two sides that political contacts must be continued.

But this time, Yasser Arafat, who was received at the White House by Clinton, is not in favour with George W. Bush. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, may, however, meet Bush at the White House on May 19 -- the eighth time since he became premier.