



Fire destroys a gas station in Baghdad on Thursday following an explosion which witnesses said was caused by people shooting into the air celebrating the resumption of electricity. At least seven people were killed and several others badly burned in the incident.

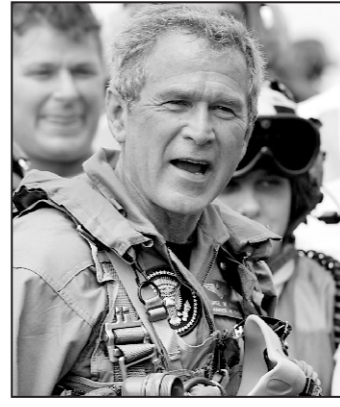
7 burnt to death in Baghdad inferno

AFP, Baghdad

At least seven people were burnt to death at a petrol station in an impoverished Baghdad neighbourhood Thursday and around 20 badly hurt when a spark turned the site into a raging inferno. Rescue workers and US soldiers said more bodies remained inside the blaze, which was still burning hours after it was set off in mid-afternoon, trapping helpless people who had been queuing to buy petrol. There appeared to be no act of crime or terror that set off the blaze but the cause was not immediately clear. Local firemen were overwhelmed by the size of the blaze and residents risked their lives to try to rescue those inside, drenching themselves in water before racing into the roaring flames.

War is over in Iraq: Bush Declaration met by caution in Asia

REUTERS, Aboard USS Abraham Lincoln/Falluja



President Bush told delighted sailors and pilots on the deck of an aircraft carrier that major combat operations in Iraq were over and the United States and its allies had prevailed over Saddam Hussein. Speaking aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln, just hours after seven US soldiers were wounded in a fresh outbreak of violence in Iraq, an ebullient Bush said the six-week war to topple Saddam was "one victory in a war on terror." "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended," Bush said on Thursday. "In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed. And now our coalition is engaged in securing and reconstructing that country." In the city of Falluja west of Baghdad, angry Iraqis attacked a US base on Thursday in apparent retaliation for the killing of 15

confidence in Iraq after a relatively easy military victory achieved with what he called "one of the swiftest advances of heavy arms in history." Bush told the American people in his televised speech that the United States still had important objectives in Iraq. "We have difficult work to do. ... The transition from dictatorship to democracy will take time, but it is worth every effort. Our coalition will stay until our work is done," the president said. Washington went to war against Iraq on March 20 because of its alleged weapons of mass destruction. So far it has found none, but Bush said the hunt would continue. "We have begun the search for hidden chemical and biological weapons and already know of hundreds of sites that will be investigated," he said. Bush also has sought to tie the deposed Saddam government to the al-Qaeda group blamed for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, despite a lack of definitive proof. AP adds: With a potentially long and dangerous occupation ahead, President Bush's dramatic announcement that major combat in Iraq had ended was met on Friday with caution abroad, not cheers. From New Zealand to Tokyo, concerns were voiced that while the fighting may be mostly over the future of Iraq remains uncertain, Western alliances remain shaken and Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction have not been found. Some South Koreans expressed hope that Washington's successes on the battlefield in Iraq may serve as a lesson to their unpredictable and often belligerent neighbor to the north, which is also on Bush's short list of global troublemakers.

Dozens of sailors in war on Iraq granted US citizenship

AFP, San Diego

Forty-three US sailors from the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln were declared US citizens Thursday, in the largest naturalization ceremony since the US-led war on Iraq began, military sources said. The sailors from 16 countries including Colombia, Mexico, El Salvador, Ecuador and Cuba were flown to the ceremony here from the aircraft carrier while US President George W. Bush, from the vessel, prepared to announce the end of the Iraq war. "I believe that if you're serving the country, you need to be a citizen of the country," said Roosevelt Ulloa, 22, an Ecuadorian-born marine. "The United States gave me a lot of opportunity. I feel more a citizen of the US even though I didn't grow up here," Ulloa said, adding that he

'Columbia was doomed once it began re-entry'

AFP, Washington

had wanted to be a US citizen since his arrival here at the age of 14. "More than four dozen Navy personnel who have served the United States overseas will now, without caveat, call this country home," said Lauren Mack of the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services. Following the ceremony in this southern California port city, the sailors were flown back to the carrier -- which is due to sail into San Diego early Friday after a tour in the Gulf since last July. Its mission is one of the longest since the Vietnam war. Legal residents in the United States -- those holding a green card -- must stay here for at least five years before they can apply for citizenship, a process that often takes several more years. The five-year period is reduced to three for those already married to a US citizen.

The US space shuttle Columbia could not have been saved once it began its return to Earth, not even by reducing its weight or changing its trajectory, a NASA report released Thursday concluded. The April 22 internal report from the team led by NASA flight director LeRoy Cain examined three options to reduce the shuttle's weight by as much as 16 tonnes, and concluded none would have reduced the extreme heat of re-entry enough to save the doomed spacecraft. The report also noted the extreme risk of shedding unnecessary equipment, such as scientific experiments, and said it would only be justified by "significant and convincing data" proving the shuttle would not survive re-entry. Columbia broke up February 1, killing all seven astronauts on board, just 16 minutes prior to its scheduled touchdown.

War crimes charges filed in Switzerland against Bush, Blair

AFP, Bern

A private group called "Solidarity with Victims of the War Against Iraq" has filed war crimes charges in Switzerland against US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the public prosecutor's office said Thursday. In a submission, the Geneva-based group said it represented Iraqi nationals whose family members had been victims of acts of war during the invasion carried out by US and British troops. But the prosecutor's department said Bush and Blair would be immune from prosecution while in office, even if they entered Swiss territory. In Belgium Wednesday, an attorney said charges would be filed against General Tommy Franks, commanding coalition forces in Iraq. He said the charges would be laid on behalf of 19 Iraqis who, he said, had been victims of war crimes during the action, launched on March 20 to topple Saddam Hussein from power. In March, seven Iraqi families filed charges in Belgium against Bush's father, former US president George Bush, for alleged offences during the 1991 Gulf war. The charges were also directed at Secretary of State Colin Powell, then chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, Vice-President Dick Cheney, defense secretary in the administration of Bush senior, and general Norman Schwarzkopf, who commanded the US-led operation "Desert Storm" in 1991. The Swiss public prosecutor's office said it would require further clarification from the "Solidarity with Victims of the War Against Iraq" which had filed charges against Bush and Blair.



US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Ryan Crocker (2nd L), US Presidential Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad (3D L) and US backed Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi (4th-L) meet with Iraqi ex-opposition leaders and other US officials in Baghdad on Thursday. Leaders of five former opposition groups and the two main Kurdish factions met to thrash out how to set up an interim government within a self-imposed one-month deadline.



Rescue teams carry 11-year-old student Enez Guncer who is one of the survivors of the strong earthquake that struck the southeastern city of Bingol, Turkey on Friday. A devastating earthquake measuring 6.4 on the Richter scale struck the predominantly Kurdish province of Bingol in southeast Turkey early on Thursday killing at least 105 people and injuring hundreds more. The highest death toll was reported at a dormitory housing some 200 schoolboys were trapped under the rubble when the building collapsed.

May Day violence mars celebrations in Europe

REUTERS, Berlin

German police battled with left-wing anarchists setting cars on fire in Berlin and Swiss police fired rubber pellets at rock-throwing demonstrators as violence marred May Day rallies in parts of Europe on Thursday. Demonstrations around the world were largely peaceful, however, with hundreds of thousands of workers marking the day and protesting over labor and political issues. Some leftists used it to condemn the US-led war on Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In Beijing, the SARS crisis dampened the normal huge May Day celebrations as millions of workers stayed at home to avoid catching the flu-like disease that has killed 159 in China. About 150 members of the once-banned Iraqi Communist Party gathered outside a Baghdad hotel to mark the occasion. Under Saddam, any May Day gathering was state-controlled. In Havana millions of Cubans took to the streets in May Day activities called to defend the nation from what President Fidel Castro said was the threat of attack by the United States. Western diplomats said the idea of a US threat seemed to be a cover to stifle discontent with a struggling economy but that Castro did have some reason to worry about Washington. Police were out in force in Berlin, deploying 7,500 officers on the streets to try to prevent a repeat of the clashes in the early hours of Thursday when 27 police were hurt. Shortly after 8 p.m. a group of left-wing anarchists tipped over several cars and set them ablaze.

"We're trying to get the situation under control," said Berlin police spokesman Peter Scharfenberg. He said a considerable number of people had been detained but added it was too early to provide data on those detained or injured. Berlin authorities first tried to prevent an escalation of violence but later fired tear gas and water canon at protesters who began throwing bottles and stones at helmet-clad riot police in the Kreuzberg district. By late evening thousands of people, many clearly drunk, were milling about the district as a tense calm descended on the quarter with periodic outbreaks of violence quickly quelled by police deployed on streets strewn with shards of broken glass. "Nazis Raus! (Get lost Nazis)" demonstrators shouted at police. Berlin has had May Day violence every year since 1987. In Stockholm, hundreds of youths clashed with police on Thursday evening but nobody was seriously injured. Some youths smashed shop windows, at least one jewelry store was looted and two hamburger restaurants were vandalized, police said. In the Swiss financial center Zurich, about 100 masked protesters threw stones and bottles at police, who responded with rubber pellets. Shop windows were wrecked and cars damaged. Some 7,000 people staged a peaceful march earlier to condemn the Iraq war and criticize "fat cat" managers drawing huge pay packets while the global economy struggles. "Yesterday Afghanistan, Today Iraq, Tomorrow...?" read one banner.

UN agencies back in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

UN staffers returned Thursday to their headquarters in Baghdad for the first time since the Iraq war and said they were ready to deal with the battered country's massive humanitarian needs. Carel de Rooy, country representative of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), said he was "very happy to be back in Baghdad," whose infrastructure is still devastated from the three-week air campaign. "It wasn't easy to leave," he said. "There's a lot to be done here. The situation is very complex."

The team, which left Iraq two days before the war started March 20, also included UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq Ramiro Lopes da Silva and the country heads for other major agencies, including Ghulam Popal of the World Health Organization (WHO) and Torben Due of the World Food Program (WFP). They spent the war in Cyprus for security reasons but returned Thursday via Jordan. "We didn't have any problems on the road. We crossed the border in a convoy of eight vehicles without protection. Everything went fine," said Veronique Taveau, spokeswoman for the UN humanitarian coordinator here. "The main objective right now is to see what the situation is like on the ground, to look at difficulties, particularly those with water, and to look at hospitals and other installations," Taveau said. Baghdad has been in chaos since the routing of Saddam Hussein's regime April 9, with power and water just being restored. Nearly every building affiliated with the regime -- along with banks and the national museum -- has been sacked by looters. The UN office was also ransacked.

UNSC may modify US call to end Iraq sanctions

REUTERS, United Nations

Chances are slim the UN Security Council will lift sanctions against Iraq next month despite President Bush's call to end the bans and get the United Nations out of Iraq's oil business. Diplomats said on Thursday a suspension or phase-out of the sanctions was more likely to be approved by June 3, the day the UN Iraq oil-for-food program must be renewed. Or they said the June 3 date would be moved back. The Bush administration has demanded that all sanctions, except for an arms embargo, be lifted to set Iraq's economy free. It would end the oil-for-food program, which gives the United Nations control over oil pricing and other contracts. US-led forces invaded Iraq in March and toppled the government of Saddam Hussein in a war that deeply divided the Security Council. Russia and France have reservations about stopping the embargoes immediately and Britain has not yet signed on to all the US proposals. The oil-for-food program,

which began in 1996, puts Iraq's oil revenues into a UN-administered fund out of which suppliers of food, medicine and other goods Iraq orders are paid, with \$12 billion now in the account. Some 60 percent of Iraqis are totally dependent on the program, designed to ease the impact of sanctions imposed when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. The United States is not expected to produce a draft resolution for a week or so, with administration officials saying differences still persist between the US military, which wants one "omnibus" resolution, and the State Department, which advocates step-by-step measures. At a meeting called by Secretary General Kofi Annan on Thursday, Security Council members said they were waiting for concrete proposals from Washington. U.S. Ambassador John Negroponte told them, "We didn't expect to put forward anything this week but we would hope to do it as soon as possible," one envoy at the session reported. Annan has urged the council to unite, saying on Wednesday, "The overriding objective must be to enable the Iraqi people to take

charge of their own destiny." Britain, which is expected to co-sponsor and lobby council members for the resolution, has substantial reservations about the US proposals that sideline the United Nations politically as well as UN arms inspectors. "They certainly don't like what they have seen," said one administration official. The US proposals, diplomats said, want the Security Council to transfer Iraq's oil wealth to a new Iraqi administration, with World Bank oversight. The measure would ask the council to appoint a UN envoy in an advisory role but exclude UN arms inspectors from verifying that Iraq is clean of weapons of mass destruction. Bush administration officials argue that since the sanctions were imposed to restrain Saddam Hussein's government after he invaded Kuwait, there can be little justification for keeping them in place now that he is gone. But Russian President Vladimir Putin made clear this week he would not end sanctions without UN inspectors verifying that Iraq was free of weapons of mass destruction as Security Council resolutions demand.



A group of policemen make their way past burning cars on Thursday in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin, during traditional riots on May Day in this sector.

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