

Lack of basic services fuels anger of Iraqis against US

AFP, Baghdad

Efforts to refashion a government and restore basic services in Iraq inched forward here, amid warnings that the war-battered country was still ripe for a humanitarian disaster.

Electricity remains largely off-line in Baghdad, fuelling local anger and frustration with the US forces.

US engineers struggling to restore power in the capital were grappling with a bizarre power grid built to light Saddam's palaces rather than the capital at large, said US Captain Travis Morehead.

Many in Baghdad are also without food and water, creating conditions for a possible catastrophe, the UN mission chief there warned.

"We have not yet got over the hump. The conditions for the development of a humanitarian disaster still exist," said Ramiro Lopes da Silva.

"It's (already) a humanitarian disaster in the sense basic services have collapsed or are at the risk of collapsing if we don't put them back into shape rather quickly."

Without electricity, unrefrigerated food rotted and water and sewage treatment plants lay idle, threatening a massive disease outbreak. Robbers and looters roam the streets at night.

Not even US forces are safe: a US soldier patrolling the streets of Baghdad was shot in the head and wounded Sunday by an unidentified Iraqi civilian, the US military announced.

The soldier was taken to a military field hospital and was reported there in stable condition, officials at the US Central Command said.

The assault, which follows two similar attacks in other parts of Iraq, underscores continued resistance to US forces in the country, just days after US President George W. Bush declared an end to major combat operations there.

In the United States, Secretary of State Colin Powell reiterated his call to Damascus to react constructively to the new regional setup following the fall of Saddam in neighbouring Iraq.

"There are consequences lurking in the background," Powell said in an interview with CBS television, the day after his return from a tour of Europe and the Middle East,

including Syria.

Powell's comments kept the pressure on Syria after weeks of US sabre-rattling since the fall of Saddam. US officials have repeatedly accused Damascus of aiding the former Iraqi dictator, of sponsoring terrorism, and of pursuing weapons of mass destruction.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said that "time will tell" if Syria's attitude will now improve. "I think you need to let the dust settle on that," he said on CNN.

Rumsfeld also told US television that Iraqi prisoners could help US forces hunt down the weapons of mass destruction that Washington accused Saddam of hiding and that it used to justify the war.



PHOTO: AFP

Some of 15 Christian villagers taken hostage by separatist Moro rebels embrace their relatives and family members after escaping from their captors on Monday in the jungle of Siocon town in southern Philippines. Hundreds of troops backed by military helicopters combed hinterland areas near a southern Philippine town after a raid by Moro separatist rebels left 27 dead and dozens wounded.

Powell warns Syria of 'consequences'

AFP, Damascus

Any failure by Damascus to use its influence constructively in regards to post-Saddam Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process will result in "consequences", US Secretary of State Colin Powell warned Sunday.

"There are consequences lurking in the background," Powell said in an interview with CBS television, the day after his return from a tour of Europe and the Middle East, including Syria.

Powell reiterated his call to Damascus to react constructively to the new situation in the region following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in neighbouring Iraq.

Powell said that he especially pressed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on closing his country's border with Iraq, and closing the Damascus offices of militant pro-Palestinian organisations that Washington considers terrorist groups.

"What counts now is performance ... we're looking for a new

attitude on the part of Syria. We're looking for changed behaviour," he said in a separate interview on ABC television.

Powell said that Washington had made clear to Assad that "we are committed to moving forward on this road map."

The US congress already had legislation in place which would allow it to slap sanctions on Syria if US officials felt Damascus was being uncooperative, Powell said.

Some US lawmakers were pushing for further scope to react to what might be seen as Syrian intransigence, he added.

While insisting that he had made no promises to the Syrians during his trip, Powell said there were advantages for Damascus if it took a moderate line in regional politics.

"There are new options on the table that might benefit (Syria) ... as we move forward down the road map" for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, he said.

The United States, he said, is "looking for a comprehensive settlement of all issues in the

region, not just between the Israelis and Palestinians, but ultimately a solution that would include Syrian interests and Lebanese interests as well."

He also recognized that the issue of Israelis settling in Palestinian territories would be "one of the most difficult issues to resolve, along with the final status of the city and the right of return."

Powell's comments kept the pressure on Syria after weeks of US sabre-rattling since the end of the war in Iraq. US officials have repeatedly accused Damascus of aiding Saddam, of sponsoring terrorism, and of pursuing weapons of mass destruction.

Speaking on CNN's Late Edition, US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld said that "time will tell" Syria's attitude improves following the fall of Saddam.

"I think you need to let the dust settle on that," he said.

Syria was "making some unwise decisions previously," Rumsfeld said. "What they'll do after this visit remains to be seen."

Israeli parliament holds special session on ME peace roadmap

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's parliament, the Knesset, interrupted its holiday to hold a special session Monday on the international "roadmap" for the Middle East, public radio said, with the peace plan already under strain by ongoing violence in the region.

The session was requested both by parties in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's ruling coalition and opposition parties, the radio said late Sunday.

The roadmap, drawn up by the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations, calls for a Palestinian state to be established by 2005.

Its unveiling this week returned the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the world's attention, but renewed violence immediately cast a pall on hopes for achieving a diplomatic breakthrough.

Nonetheless Israel and the Palestinians edged closer to resuming peace talks Sunday, with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon saying he will head negotiations personally and new Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas saying he was ready to meet the

Israeli right-winger.

Dovish Israeli Labour leader Amram Mitzna meanwhile announced he was quitting his ailing leftist party's leadership, Israel media said.

In Ramallah, Abbas said in his first interview since being sworn into office last week he was ready to meet Sharon and crack down on illegal weapons, but insisted that Israel must lift its de facto siege on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Despite the talk about talks violence flared anew, with a 13-year-old Palestinian boy shot dead and six injured in the West Bank city of Nablus when Israeli forces opened fire on stone-throwing youths. Three other people were injured by Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip.

Israeli public radio said that a meeting was imminent between Sharon and Abbas, whom Israel sees as a pragmatic moderate ready to demilitarise the bloody Palestinian Intifada.

Abbas' new security chief, Mohammed Dahlan, has already initiated contacts to enable the two leaders to meet, Palestinian sources said.

Israel rejects Syrian offer to renew talks

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel has rejected a Syrian offer to resume peace negotiations that was made in secret talks between Israeli businessmen and Syrian President Bashar Assad's brother, a source in the Israeli prime minister's office said on Monday.

The proposal was discussed in Jordan before the US-led war on Iraq, the daily newspaper Maariv said, but has only now been publicized. After careful analysis of it, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon questioned Syria's motives, the source said.

"It was decided that treatment of the matter would be delayed until Syria's true local and international situation becomes clear in the fallout of the Iraqi war," said the source.

The report of the failed talks came as US Assistant Secretary of State William Burns was preparing the ground for the most concerted international peace drive in the region since the US-brokered Camp David talks collapsed in mid-2000.

The Syrian offer, conveyed by Mahar Assad, would have involved mutual confidence-building steps alongside a renewal of negotiations, Maariv reported.



PHOTO: AP

Leland Ashford looks at a photo of him and his wife, Janet, who were celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary at a church in Carl Junction, Missouri, when a tornado destroyed their home northeast of Carl Junction Sunday evening.

Tornadoes devastate US states: 29 killed

AP, Pierce City

A series of tornadoes and high winds pummeled the Midwest on Sunday, killing an estimated 29 people in three states as storms left a swath of destruction a quarter-mile wide in some places.

Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius declared seven counties disaster areas, and Missouri Gov. Bob Holden said the process was under way to declare disaster areas in his state.

Missouri officials told the National Guard to be ready to go to storm-damaged areas. Holden said the damage was "the worst I've seen from a tornado in several years."

In Missouri, Lawrence County Sheriff Doug Seneker estimated a dozen people were killed when a tornado careened through the southwest part of the state. Only three deaths were confirmed.

One of the hardest hit areas in the county appeared to be Pierce City, where two people died and about nine people were feared dead inside a destroyed National Guard Armory where they had taken shelter. A Pierce City police officer described the downtown areas as "wiped out," Seneker said.

Searchers accompanied by dogs were digging through the armory debris in hopes of finding the missing victims alive, but the brick-and-wood structure was unstable

and the process was going slowly.

"They're hearing no signs of life, but they are still working to find them," said state Rep. Jack Goodman. He grew up in Pierce City and was in town when the storm hit.

There was not a home or business in the town of nearly 1,400 residents untouched by the tornado. Trees were twisted, power lines were downed, and brick, glass and other debris made it impossible to walk the city streets.

Other fatalities included a Lawrence County person who died in a house in Marionville. Two women were reported dead in nearby Greene and Christian counties, said Dave Brown, an investigator for the Greene County Medical Examiner's Office. One of the women was killed near Battlefield in Christian County and the other in rural Greene County.

Two more people were killed in Camden County, about 70 miles northeast of Lawrence County, the Camden County Sheriff's Department said. In Barton County, one person was killed when a tornado struck west of Liberal, officials there confirmed. Another victim was killed at a trailer park in Monett, just to the south of Pierce City in Barry County.

In Carl Junction, about two miles northwest of Joplin, two people were killed by a twister there, said officer Tiffany Sparks with the

Jasper County Sheriff's Office.

In Kansas, eight people were reported dead. Col. Joy Moser of the state's emergency management office, said four deaths were reported in Girard and Franklin in Crawford County and one person was killed in Wyandotte County in the Kansas City area.

The Cherokee County, Kan., sheriff's office confirmed three people were killed when a tornado hit south of Columbus. One death occurred when a mobile home was destroyed; the other two were in a house that was destroyed near Crestline, officials said.

One person also died in Tennessee's Dyer County.

At Kansas City, Mo. International Airport, officials stopped all flights and evacuated the terminals. Passengers were ushered into underground tunnels leading to parking garages. After about 30 minutes, the passengers were allowed to leave and the airport was reopened.

Holden toured Northmoor, a small town in Platte County, Mo., where between 25 and 30 homes were either damaged or destroyed. The town's city hall and police station also were damaged.

"I had to hold on with all my strength," said resident Charles Tholl, who was with his girlfriend and five children when the storm hit. "It was scary. It felt like the house was twirling."



PHOTO: AFP

US soldiers run through a school building in the central Iraqi town of Baquba, about 60 km north-east of Baghdad on Sunday. A quick reaction force came to the building responding to a call of armed men inside. The building was cleared without incidents but no armed men were found in the school or its vicinity.

Iraqis gather in Mosul for post-Saddam election

REUTERS, Mosul

Rival ethnic groups gathered in Iraq's third largest city on Monday to elect an interim council in the country's first vote since Saddam Hussein was ousted by US-led forces last month.

Amid strong US military security, some 250 delegates listened to a speech by the top US military official in the region before parting to choose the 24-member council, which will select a mayor from three independent candidates.

As the delegates left to choose their representatives, several of them announced to the media that they were withdrawing from the election in protest at the division of delegates along ethnic lines.

The 24-member council will consist of seven Arabs, three Kurds, two Assyrian Christians, one Turkmen and one Shebak inside the city and six Arabs, one Yezidi and one Assyrian Christian outside the city, along with two former generals.

Mosul is mainly Arab but a large Kurdish minority as well as Turkmens, Assyrians and other groups. The ethnic mix fueled fears of factional fighting after a wave of looting and violence last month, but military officials are now holding it up as "model city."

US releases 325 more Iraqi prisoners

AFP, Dubai

US Central Command in Qatar announced Sunday it had released 325 more Iraqi prisoners of war, adding that it still held around 3,200 others.

"Another 325 Iraqi soldiers captured during Operation Iraqi Freedom were released after accepting parole," Central Command said in a statement.

"To date, 3,176 have been paroled. Additionally, 3,002 have been released after determining they were noncombatants."

"There are approximately 3,200 enemy prisoners of war being detained by the (US-led) coalition," the statement said.

Earlier Sunday, the International Committee of the Red Cross renewed a call to be granted access to prisoners of war and all those detained by coalition forces.

"The ICRC still does not have access to all the prisoners and detainees in the country," ICRC spokeswoman Nada Doumani said.

"The parties must respect the Geneva Convention on prisoners."

'US to isolate Iran without burning bridges'

AFP, Washington

US policy is to isolate Iran while at the same time staying in touch with Tehran on events in southern Iraq and on al-Qaeda's terror network, Secretary of State Colin Powell said Sunday.

"We believe there are ways to communicate with the people of Iran to convince them that the policies their leaders have been following have been inappropriate," Powell told NBC television.

"Meanwhile, we will continue to isolate Iran as best we can."

He said a military invasion of Iran was not the order of the day.

"We have ways of communicating with Iran on what we think they ought to be doing with respect to going forward to a better relationship with us and the rest of the world."

UN rushes food to Iraq as stocks dwindle

AP, Baghdad

Mohammed Nadir has hardly worked since the war began six weeks ago. His money has run out and other than a 3-pound bag of rice, his family's kitchen cupboard is bare.

"We can hardly survive," said Ahlam Nadir, his wife. "Buying food is not easy."

Most Iraqis, like Nadir, depend on food rations delivered as part of a UN-monitored program for their daily meals. But the last deliveries were before the war, and the World Food Program estimates most families have only enough food to last until the end of the month. The WFP is rushing flour, rice and beans to the country, hoping to head off a disaster.

"We are trying to bring in the food before there is a crisis," said Torben Due, the World Food Program representative for Iraq.

"There is no alternative to bringing in the food now and getting the system up and running."

WFP officials met with old Iraqi Trade Ministry officials Saturday to see how much of the food that was stockpiled in the country was looted and when food distribution could resume.

Iraqis were given a government ration card that entitles them to a monthly supply of rice, beans, tea, sugar and soap. The food was purchased by Saddam Hussein's government as part of the UN-monitored program in place since 1996, which allowed Iraq to sell oil to buy food and other vital supplies for civilians. The program was an attempt to ease the hardship caused by UN trade sanctions imposed after Iraq's 1990 invasion of neighboring Kuwait.

Before the war started in March, a two-month ration was distributed to Iraqi families, but it was short on oil, beans and milk.