

US seizes Iraq's 'Mrs Anthrax'

AFP, Baghdad

The United States has announced the capture of a top female biological weapons scientist from Saddam Hussein's regime and named a list of Iraqis who could form the core of an interim government.

Huda Salih Mahdi Ammash, dubbed 'Mrs Anthrax', ranked 53 on the US list of the 55 most wanted Iraqis.

She was the only woman on the list, and was portrayed as the five of hearts on the playing cards of wanted Iraqis produced by the US Defense Department. It described her as a 'weapons of mass destruction scientist'.

The United States made it clear it considered the detention of the 49-year-old scientist as a major catch, as it struggles to uncover the biological and chemical weapons on whose existence it justified military action against deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

'This (capture) would be very important to the coalition in their ability to get additional information about the scope of the BW (biological warfare) programme,' a US official said.

Red Cross urges US to step up security in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A top humanitarian agency urged US and British forces on Tuesday to do more to restore security in Iraq as the five opposition leaders tapped by Washington to form the core of a new government were due to meet.

The appeal by the International Red Cross came as US forces indicated that ensuring security was taking priority over the hunt for Saddam Hussein's alleged illegal stockpile of weapons of mass destruction, the official reason the United States and Britain used to justify their invasion.

Officials in Washington said no decision had yet been taken on whether to allow UN nuclear inspectors to verify reports that radioactive material may have been pilfered from Iraqi sites.

US Attorney General John Ashcroft pledged to hunt down the organised gangs he said were behind the widespread looting of Iraqi museums and libraries after the fall of the regime, as law enforcement authorities met in France to step up efforts to recover the artefacts.

In a blunt warning before a meeting with the US civilian administrator for Iraq Jay Garner, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) chief Jakob Kellenberger said more needs to be done to provide security.

Kellenberger said that under international law the 'occupying powers' had clear duties and responsibilities to 'impose public law and order, to secure the well being of the population and protect essential infrastructures such as hospitals,' he told reporters at

an ICRC press conference.

'I have the strong feeling that more has to be done for security,' he said.

His comments follow a warning Saturday the top UN official in Iraq that conditions were still ripe for a humanitarian disaster as too many people were going without food, water and power, nearly a month after the fall of Saddam's regime.

Coalition forces appear to be hearing the appeals, saying ensuring security is their top priority.

'The NBC (nuclear, biological, chemical) operations are being looked at as more important than (in other wars) but they're not the main priority, which is establishing security,' said Captain Bobbie Jackson, chemicals officer for the division's 2nd Brigade.

'Once all the pockets of resis-

tance are cleared up I think the search will intensify.'

Coalition forces have apparently failed to secure several Iraqi nuclear research and storage sites, with The Washington Post reporting at the weekend that extensive plundering made it impossible for US experts to determine if nuclear material had been stolen.

The sites had contained some materials that could be used to build a 'dirty bomb' -- using conventional explosives to scatter radioactive waste.

The UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has asked Washington to send a team to investigate reports that looting had taken place at a nuclear site south of Baghdad.



Jim Levingston (R) helps remove rubble from cars buried in Pierce City, Missouri on Monday after severe weather and a tornado hit the area. Tornadoes tore through the central United States this weekend killing at least 39 people, injuring dozens more and virtually wiping some towns off the map, emergency officials said.

Tornadoes wipe some towns off US map

AFP, Pierce City

Tornadoes tore through the mid-western and southern United States killing at least 39 people, injuring dozens more and virtually wiping some towns off the map, emergency officials said Monday.

Dozens of tornadoes whipped Missouri, Kansas, Tennessee and Arkansas states Sunday, destroying homes and buildings, and tearing up trees, power lines and anything else in their paths.

Authorities reported 14 dead in Tennessee, 18 in Missouri and seven in Kansas, as search and rescue teams combed through the debris left by the deadly twisters.

President George W. Bush, speaking in Little Rock, Arkansas, promised speedy assistance where needed. 'Nature is awfully tough at

times,' he said in a speech.

Pierce City, a town of just 1,382 in southwestern Missouri -- one of the areas that bore the brunt of what meteorologists called a 'perfect storm' -- was almost entirely leveled, according to witnesses.

Linda Hinds was lying on her bed when the twister swept through town, burying her alive in the rubble of her home.

'I heard the worst noise by my bedroom window and I tried to get up but something knocked me back down, and after that I couldn't move.'

Rescue workers heard her cries and came to her aid, digging through parts of two walls and a downed tree to reach her. The 55-year-old walked away with just a bump on her head.

It's a dog's life for lions of Saddam's son

AFP, Baghdad

The Bible says lions would lay down with lambs, but in the aftermath of the Iraq war several cubs that belonged to Saddam Hussein's eldest son Uday are settling for the company of dogs.

Wildlife officials giving a tour of Baghdad's devastated zoo Monday said they had rescued several lions kept as pets by Uday at a nearby presidential palace and stumbled on a most unusual situation.

'We heard a report there were animals at Uday Hussein's section of the palace and I saw two dogs inside the enclosure,' said Lawrence Anthony of South Africa's Thula Thula game reserve.

'We observed the relationship between the dogs and young lions and they were nuzzling each other,' said Anthony, who arrived in Iraq almost three weeks ago to help nurse the zoo's remaining animals back to health.

'The female dog was mothering the young lions. I just couldn't

believe it. They should have eaten the dogs, especially with the hunger they went through,' he said.

Uday apparently raised his lions and dogs together so they could better protect his palace. A popular rumour here is that he liked to enter nightclubs with one of his lions on a leash.

For now, the zoo in the city's sprawling Zawra park has decided to keep one of the female dogs with two of the three-month-old lions because when they were separated 'they missed each other,' Anthony said.

'It's an amazing dog. If you go into the cages, she will protect the lions,' he said, gesturing to a white dog sniffing around the cage with the big cats.

The Baghdad public zoo was turned into a battleground during the US capture of the capital last month. It was then badly looted by Iraqi mobs who stole almost all of the surviving animals and birds.

The zoo had also been affected by UN sanctions and was short of proper food, vaccines and medicine even before the US-led war on Iraq started on March 20.

Zoo officials said there were now barely more than a dozen animals left, including 10 lions, two cheetahs, a pair of bears and a porcupine. US soldiers shot four lions after US bombs sliced an opening in their outdoor enclosure.



An animal keeper plays with a dog and lion cubs living in the same cage at the Baghdad Zoo on Monday. Wildlife officials giving a tour of Baghdad's devastated zoo said they had rescued several lions kept as pets by Uday at the nearby presidential palace and stumbled on a most unusual situation.

Colombian rebels kill 10 hostages as rescue effort fails

REUTERS, Bogota

Colombian Marxist rebels killed a provincial governor, a former defence minister and eight soldiers held hostage when the army botched a rescue attempt on Monday, the government and survivors said.

A rebel commander gave the order to kill Antioquia Province Gov. Guillermo Gaviria, former Defense Minister Gilberto Echeverri and the eight others as helicopter-borne troops charged into jungle-clad mountains northwest of the city of Medellin in a daylight attack, officials said.

The dead were among 80 prisoners, including soldiers, congressmen, a former presidential candidate and three U.S. civilian Defense Department contractors, whom the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia wanted to exchange for jailed rebels.

Only three captives held in the jungle camp, all of them soldiers, survived the rescue attempt. The remaining approximately 70 hostages proposed for a prisoner swap by the rebel army known by the Spanish initials FARC are believed to be held in other parts of Colombia's inaccessible jungles.

The FARC said their captives were killed in cross-fire.

'During the confrontation between FARC guerrillas and the

fascist army, Gov. Guillermo Gaviria and Gilberto Echeverri, along with other prisoners, were killed,' the FARC said in an e-mailed communique.

But the government said the guerrillas fled and no shots were fired as 75 troops descended by ropes from helicopters to advance through mountainous jungle in an operation planned over days after an intelligence tip-off.

'They killed my comrades in cold blood and ran off,' Sergeant Humberto Aranguren, who had been held captive in jungle jails for four years, told President Alvaro Uribe from a hospital bed, in footage broadcast on national television.

Another survivor told how he escaped by playing dead after the mortally wounded Echeverri slumped on top of him.

Gaviria and Echeverri, who served as a defense minister under former President Ernesto Samper, were kidnapped by the FARC in April last year when they led a march of 1,000 activists to call for peace in war-torn Antioquia.

The FARC has expressed impatience and anger with Uribe, who says he will only agree to a prisoner swap if the rebels also free hundreds of ordinary Colombians kidnapped for ransom.



Iraqi girl Yasmine Wa'adi (R), who lost both her legs in a bomb attack on her house in Iraq, is inspected by Malaysian doctor Ganapathi Pillai at a hospital in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday. Yasmine, who was flown to Malaysia from Jordan to receive medical treatment here, will undergo surgery and may be fitted with prosthetic limbs all sponsored by the Chinese Maternity Hospital.

US envoy talks peace plan with Palestinian PM

REUTERS, Ramallah

A senior US envoy told Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas on Monday that President Bush was determined to pursue energetically the creation of a Palestinian state under a new peace plan.

Assistant Secretary of State William Burns's meeting with Abbas -- bypassing Palestinian President Yasser Arafat -- preceded a visit to the region this weekend by Secretary of State Colin Powell, to promote the US-backed peace 'road map.'

'I was able to convey the very strong commitment of President Bush to seize the moment of opportunity before us, to move aggressively and energetically toward the two-state vision which he has outlined using the road map as a starting point and a framework,' Burns told reporters.

The road map, sponsored by the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia, envisages an end to 31 months of Israeli-Palestinian violence and the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005.

But hours after the discussions, gunmen fired on a car carrying three Israelis near an Israeli West Bank settlement, killing one man and wounding another man and a young girl, a

military source said.

Abbas's inauguration last week at the head of a cabinet formed to pursue democratic and security reforms in the Palestinian Authority opened the way for Washington to introduce the long-awaited peace proposal.

Both the United States and Israel reject Arafat as a peace partner, accusing him of fomenting violence in a Palestinian uprising for statehood -- a charge he denies.

In a conciliatory speech on the eve of an annual day of remembrance for 21,541 soldiers killed in Israel's wars, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon lockstepped with the American view that after the war in Iraq 'the opportunity for peace must not be missed.'

'I will not be deterred, if I see this is the moment of truth, to put an end to war and bloodshed and achieve peace for generations,' the ex-general told soldiers on the day preceding Israel's 55th independence day.

He warned, however, that he would not 'compromise Israeli security.' Israel, which has raised 15 reservations over the road map, says a 'battle against terrorism' by Abbas must come first.

Burns, who met Sharon on Sunday, said the Palestinians had to wage 'a decisive fight against terror and violence,' while Israel

had to 'ease the suffering of Palestinians... (and) stop the settlement activity.'

Israeli diplomatic sources said Sharon and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz planned to meet Abbas next week.

Reflecting a new momentum for peace, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak sent independence day greetings to Israel via Moshe Katzav, Israel's ceremonial president, for 'the first time in at least two years,' his spokesman said.

An official from Abbas's Fatah movement told Reuters that Egyptian-sponsored talks in Cairo had been raised with other Palestinian factions to face 'the political challenge' the road map posed to Palestinian unity.

But a spokesman of the Hamas Islamic movement, which rejects the road map, said no talks were anticipated.

Burns's efforts coincided with an Israeli newspaper report that Israel had rejected a peace overture from Syria before the start of the US-led invasion of Iraq in March. Syria wants the Golan Heights Israel seized in the 1967 Middle East war.

The Maariv daily spoke of secret contacts between Israeli businessmen and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's brother.



Construction workers mix cement to repair damaged building in Baghdad on Tuesday. Efforts to restore basic services and refashion a government in Iraq inched forward amid warnings by international groups that the war-battered country was still ripe for a humanitarian disaster.