

US, Iraqi powerbrokers move to map out future

AFP, Baghdad

Two key powerbrokers began making their mark Sunday on post-war Iraq as Paul Bremer, the top US civilian official, began touring the Gulf a day after a top Shiite Muslim leader returned home in triumph from 23 years of exile.

Bremer, a 61-year-old career diplomat and counterterrorism expert arrived in Doha to outline his mission to supervise the rebuilding and democratization of war-torn Iraq.

Tapped Tuesday by US President George W. Bush for the post, Bremer was accompanied by General Richard Myers, chairman of the US military's Joint Chiefs of Staff, and was to meet retired general Jay Garner, the US civil administrator in Iraq.

US Army General Tommy Franks will retain control over military forces in Iraq, but Bremer will outrank Garner and Bush special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, US embassy officials in Qatar said Saturday.

Garner will focus on restoring basic services and reviving crucial Iraqi ministries, while Khalilzad will pursue efforts to build an Iraqi Interim Authority in cooperation with free Iraqi leaders, they said.

Bremer will report directly to US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

The US official will be dealing with Iraqi leaders of all stripes, including Ayatollah Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim, the 66-year-old head of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI), who made a high-profile return on Saturday.

Iraq's top Shiite leader offered a vision of democracy faithful to Islam but tolerant of the country's diversity, after crossing the border from Iran and entering the main southern city of Basra.

Hakim urged tens of thousands of supporters who turned out to welcome him to "stand together against imperialism" -- a swipe at US and British military forces in Iraq.

He downplayed comparisons with Iran's hardline revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and tried to allay fears he may seek to install a Tehran-style theocracy.

"We want a democratic government, representing the Iraqi nation, the Iraqi people, the Muslims, Christians and all the minorities," Hakim said, surrounded by plainclothed bodyguards from SAIRI's armed Badr Brigade.

Shiite Muslims comprise around 60 percent of the Iraqi population, which also includes Kurds, Sunni Muslim Arabs, Christians and others.

Hakim addressed coalition leaders when he said: "We are Muslims. We want the Iraqi people to govern themselves."

Despite its rhetoric, the SAIRI has taken a pragmatic decision to participate in US-sponsored efforts to forge a new administration, sitting on the seven-member council of former opposition groups who are spearheading the process.

A SAIRI official said Hakim would not seek a direct political role for himself.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Colin Powell, travelling in Israel, warned that Iraq's oil storage facilities could soon be full unless sales resume.

"We are running into a time crunch with respect to the oil" in Iraq, Powell told reporters. "The fields are not in as bad shape as we thought, and production is ramping up quickly."

In northeastern Iraq, the armed Iranian opposition group People's Mujahadeen, a US-listed terrorist organisation, was to begin submitting heavy weapons and thousands of fighters to US control Sunday, US officers said.

The disarmament deal was struck Saturday between Mujahadeen leaders and US 4th Infantry Division commander General Ray Odierno at a guerrilla base in northeastern Iraq.



Armored military vehicles belonging to the People's Mujahadeen (MEK) sport white flags as they sit at a camp in northern Iraq on Saturday. US military authorities reached a disarmament deal with the Iraq-based Iranian armed opposition (MEK) in which the group would place all of their heavy weapons and thousands of guerilla fighters under control of US coalition forces.



Girls wearing masks to ward off Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) purchase flowers for Mother's Day in Hong Kong on Sunday. Hong Kong health officials said on Saturday that they have adjusted their treatment of SARS as they revealed that 10 percent of patients thought to have recovered from the virus could suffer lasting damage to their lungs.

Storms in US appear to be winding down

AFP, Washington

Relief was in sight from an unusually powerful string of storms that battered the United States this week, claiming at least 42 lives and injuring hundreds, forecasters said early Sunday.

"Gusty northwesterly winds will usher in colder, drier air across the entire Midwest bringing an end to the violent weather that has occurred over the past week," said meteorologist James Wilson of The Weather Channel.

But forecasters warned of dangerous storms including "powerful thunderstorms with tornadoes, large hail and high winds," in Illinois and Wisconsin.

US, Iran hold direct talks in Geneva

REUTERS, Jerusalem

US and Iranian officials met face to face in Geneva "very recently" to talk about Iran's neighbors Iraq and Afghanistan, where the United States has a military presence, a US official said on Saturday.

The meeting took place with the help of the United Nations but only the US and Iranian officials were present, he said. Iran and United States have met previously in the context of multilateral talks with Afghanistan's neighbors and Russia.

The official, who asked not to be named, said the aim of the contacts was to discuss specific issues, not to establish diplomatic relations or initiate the open-agenda dialogue which former US President Bill Clinton sought with Iran.

Iranian rebels set to surrender arms to US forces in Iraq

AFP, Near Muqadadiyah

The Iraq-based armed Iranian opposition, a US-listed terrorist organisation, was expected to begin submitting heavy weapons and thousands of fighters to US control in Iraq on Sunday, US officers said.

The disarmament deal was struck Saturday after two days of talks between leaders of the People's Mujahadeen and US 4th Infantry Division commander General Ray Odierno at a guerrilla base in northeastern Iraq.

Odierno said the group's cooperation with US forces and its commitment to democracy in Iran meant its status as a "terrorist

organisation" in Washington should be reviewed.

"I would say that any organisation that has given up their equipment to the coalition clearly is cooperating with us, and I believe that should lead to a review of whether they are still a terrorist organisation or not," he said.

Under the agreement, the Mujahadeen's 4,000 to 5,000 fighters -- many of whom were educated in the United States and Europe -- will gather at one of their base camps in northeastern Iraq.

Their equipment, enough for a mechanised division, will be collected at another camp and both camps will be guarded by coalition forces.

Odierno, speaking to AFP after negotiating the deal near the Iranian border on Saturday, said the weapons would not be available to the guerrillas "unless we agree to allow them to have access".

"It is not a surrender. It is an agreement to disarm and consolidate," Odierno said.

"It's clear to me that they are passionate about their beliefs and they believe in a democratic Iran. I probably didn't quite understand that when I began this process."

The Mujahadeen has been using Iraqi soil as a base to attack the Islamic regime in Iran for more than a decade. Iran has also labelled it a terrorist organisation.

US troops face sporadic hostile fire in Iraq

AFP, Kuwait City

US troops shot dead one looter and wounded two others as coalition forces continued to come under sporadic fire while moving to restore security in Iraq in recent days, US Central Command said Saturday.

Soldiers from the Third Infantry Division opened fire on the looters in Baghdad Friday afternoon after they "demonstrated hostile intent" while attempting to steal ammunition from an arms cache, Centcom said.

There were no US casualties, according to the statement released from a US rear base at Camp Doha in Kuwait.

Powell calls on Palestinians to disarm militants

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Secretary of State Colin Powell, on a Middle East mission to promote a US-backed peace plan, called on the Palestinians on Sunday to move quickly to disarm militant groups behind attacks on Israelis.

"We welcome the positive steps, political steps already taken by Palestinian officials toward reform and toward peace, but we must also see rapid, decisive action by the Palestinians to disarm and dismantle the terrorist infrastructure," Powell told a news conference after meeting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

"Without such action, our best efforts will fail," he said.

AP adds: The new Palestinian prime minister understands that terror against Israel must stop for peacemaking to go forward, Secretary of State Colin Powell said Sunday. Israelis told Powell they want to see terror groups dismantled.

Referring to Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, on whom the Bush administration is pinning its peace hopes, Powell said "I think he understands that terror must be brought to an end."

Israeli officials told Powell, on

his first trip to the region in more than a year, that they expected Abbas to dismantle Hamas and other militant groups.

"We expect the Palestinians to root out the terror, not just a ceasefire," Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz said after meeting with Powell before his summit with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. "A ceasefire would allow the terror groups to reorganize and rearm."

Powell was to meet Abbas, known also as Abu Mazen, after his meeting with Sharon. He said he would discuss how the international community could help the Palestinians impose order.

Syria's no to restricting Palestinian groups

AFP, Washington

Syria and the United States did not reach any agreement on closing the Damascus offices of Palestinian groups earlier this month, Syrian President Bashar Assad said in an interview published here.

"We talked about all these issues but no final decision was made. We are still talking," Assad told Newsweek Magazine in its May 19 issue, which hits newsstands Monday.

In May 3 talks in Damascus, Powell linked future US-Syrian relations to shutting down Damascus offices of groups Washington lists as terrorist organisations.

World heaps praise, aid on China over SARS

AFP, Beijing

Foreign governments have heaped praise and donations on China as it struggles with SARS, rather than criticized its government for the initial cover-up of the epidemic.

While this reflects relief that Beijing has now apparently decided to come clean on a problem with global implications, it also shows a long-standing reluctance to be too harsh on China, analysts said.

"We have been very indulgent towards China," said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, director of the Hong Kong-based French Center for Research on Contemporary China.

World leaders from Cuba's Fidel Castro to US President George W. Bush have expressed their support of China's effort to curb SARS, while making no mention of its foot-dragging, which only stopped late last month.

While foreign dignitaries such as the World Health Organization's next chief Jong-Wook Lee have welcomed Chinese transparency on the matter, assistance has started flooding in.

More than 75 million dollars has been donated by domestic and overseas firms, individuals, and foreign governments to help China fight Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

This includes 10 million euro (11.4 million dollars) from the German government, while the British government has promised five million dollars.

The praise and the money might seem slightly odd, given the likelihood that many of the 500 people who have died worldwide from

SARS would be alive today if China had reacted faster to the spread of the virus.

"Continued criticism would not be constructive or productive from the international community's point of view," said Andrew Thompson, a China expert at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Being hard on China over SARS will not accomplish anything."

Even so, some observers have contrasted the world's inhibitions about criticizing China with the tough response from Europe and the United States after the 1986 disaster at the Soviet nuclear plant in Chernobyl.

That difference was noted by China's most prominent dissident, the now exiled Wei Jingsheng, in a recent opinion piece.

"That pressure was, in large part, what made Chernobyl a turning point that led to Soviet collapse," he said in the piece, published in the International Herald Tribune.

"By contrast, Western leaders today need Beijing's support in their own internal dispute over Iraq and in dealing with North Korea."

What has also changed in the 17 years since Chernobyl is the geopolitical context, according to observers.

The Soviet Union, a superpower with influence throughout the world, has dissolved, and the Chinese dragon that some say has emerged in its stead is still far too weak to fit into the shoes left vacant by Moscow.

US offers Iraqis rewards for finding WMDs

AP, Baghdad

American authorities have promised rewards to Iraqis for information leading to discovery of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons programs, the US-run Information Radio said Saturday.

The reward announcement comes as the US military teams have so far been unable to find solid evidence of Iraqi projects for weapons on mass destruction. The suspected presence of such weapons was the prime reason cited by the Bush administration for launching the war against Iraq.

Besides the unspecified reward, potential informants were offered anonymity and guarantees of safety in exchange for useful information "regarding any site that manufactured or held weapons of mass destruction."

"The reward you may get can improve your living standard," it said.

The lengthy spot on the Arabic-language radio was part of a growing US government campaign to find Iraqi sources potentially knowledgeable about prohibited arms programs. American officials have indicated they would increasingly depend on hoped-for Iraqi informants to trace any weapons-making programs.

From November to March, UN weapons teams conducted more than 700 surprise inspections at hundreds of Iraqi sites, and did not report finding any weapons-making programs. A US military unit of experts in unconventional arms that followed invading US

troops into Iraq in March, has surveyed 75 of 90 high-priority sites, and thus far also has not reported conclusive evidence of such programs.

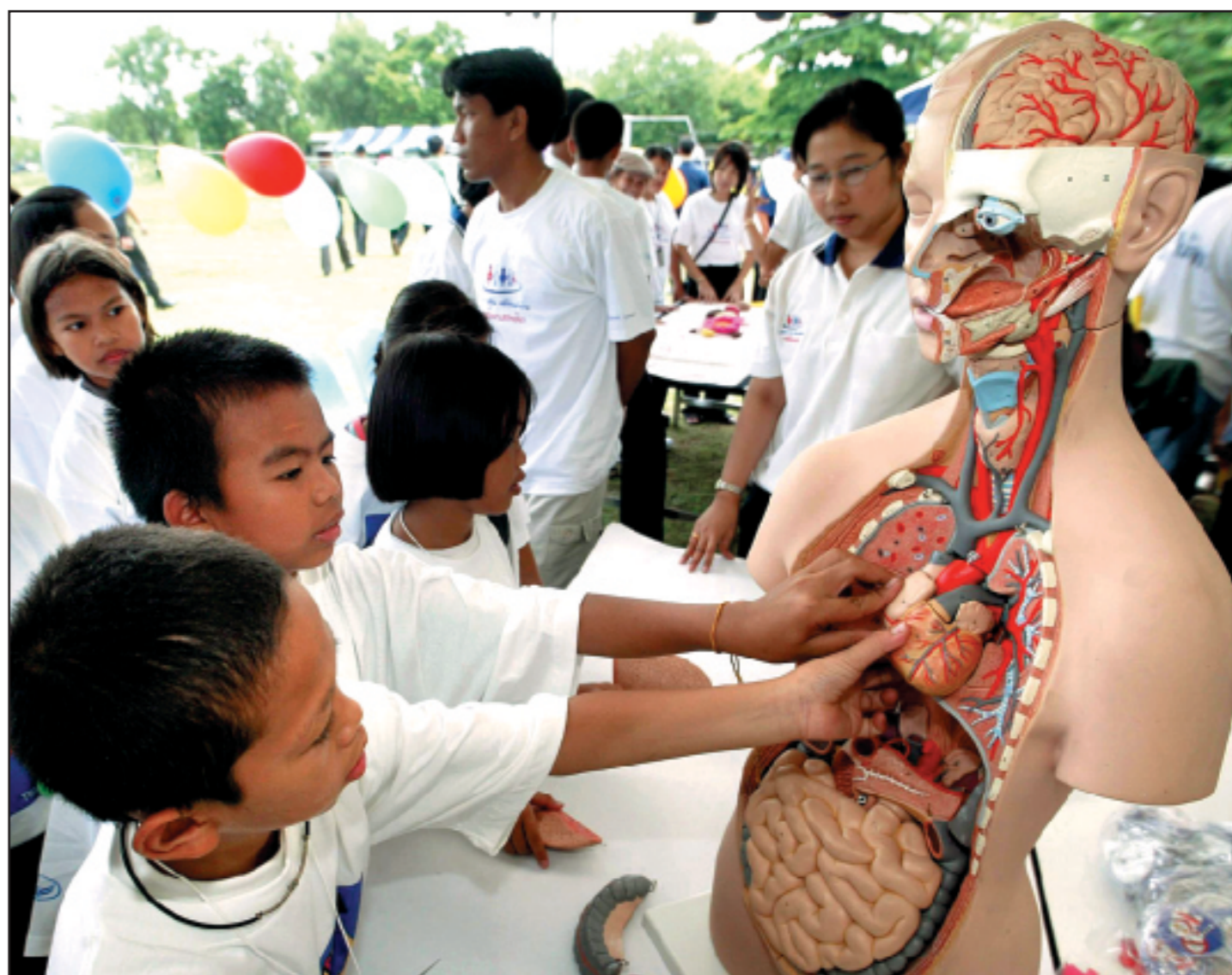
The difficulty in finding any banned weapons now threatens US and British plans to end UN sanctions against Iraq. Russian diplomats have said they need to see conclusive evidence that such programs have been eliminated before approving the lifting of the 13-year sanctions regime, and President Vladimir Putin has even raised the possibility that Saddam Hussein could still be alive and in possession of the deadly weapons.

High-ranking Iraqis in US custody have uniformly denied that their government, ousted last month by the invasion force, had any weapons of mass destruction, US officials say.

The deposed government maintained it destroyed its chemical and biological weapons by the early 1990s. It never succeeded in building a nuclear weapon.

Saturday's radio announcement said the US-British coalition was interested in "locations of components, materials and supplies that had been used in developing, processing, manufacturing and maintaining weapons of mass destruction."

Meanwhile, in the second such find this month, US troops found a trailer they suspect could be a mobile biological weapons laboratory near the northern city of Mosul, a New York Times correspondent with the troops reported.



Thai children look at a model showing how methamphetamine drugs effect the body, during a youth anti-drug project at the authorities' Riot Control and Suppression Sub-Division in Bangkok on Sunday. Thailand is the world's largest consumer of methamphetamines according to the International Narcotics Control Board, which cites official Thai figures that the drug is regularly abused by five percent of the population of 63 million.