

## Iraq's defeat makes Iran rethink ties with US

AFP, Tehran

The presence in neighbouring Iraq of US forces is making Iran think twice over its opposition to resuming ties with the United States, reviled as the "Great Satan" and considered an arch foe of the Islamic state.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Saturday that Washington is in contact with Tehran over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and developments in Iraq, but the question of reestablishing diplomatic relations is not on the agenda.

"We have ways of communicating with the Iranians and we use them on a regular basis, and very recently," Powell told reporters accompanying him to Israel on the first leg of a tour to the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

"We have not pursued a dialogue with Iran as openly as we have with Syria (but) we do have channels that we are using," he said.

Powell indicated that among the issues being discussed were the situation in Iraq, where Washington fears Tehran may be exerting a destabilizing influence.

The United States was "com-

municating to them (the Iranian leaders) that they ought to review their policies in light of changes in the strategic situation" since US forces ousted the Iraqi regime last month.

Particular emphasis was placed on alerting Tehran to the consequences of seeking nuclear weapons, Powell said, since Washington believes Iran harbours a secret weapons programme.

He did not say how the two countries stayed in contact, but the US tabloid USA Today said Monday that Iran's Islamic government is holding secret talks with US diplomats in Geneva.

They had met three times this year, most recently on May 3, and were due to meet again this week, the paper said, citing US and Iranian diplomats.

An Iranian diplomat told USA Today that both sides are circling around the idea of re-establishing ties.

"The debate is taking place both in Iran and the United States," the unnamed diplomat was quoted as saying. "We are ready to discuss re-establishing relations on the basis of mutual respect."

"Iran wants to expand its relations with all countries, even with

the United States," Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi was quoted as saying Thursday by the official IRNA news agency.

But Kharazi's spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi jumped in the following day, to say Kharazi had been misquoted by some media.

Asefi said that while Iran wanted good relations with all countries, based on mutual respect and equality, both the reformist and conservative camps were doubtful whether Washington was ready for ties on such a basis.

A cautious debate over relations with the United States had begun before Bush's administration mounted its lightning campaign to oust Saddam Hussein's regime.

Kharazi admitted last week that Iranians are split on the matter.

The two nations severed their ties in 1980 following the release of US embassy staff held hostage for 11 months by radical students in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

On Wednesday, reformist Iranian MPs made a bold appeal to the country's powerful and entrenched conservative camp to give way to reforms and normalise relations with the outside world, or risk the same fate as Saddam.

## Lithuania votes yes to EU membership

AFP, Vilnius

More than 90 percent of voters in the Baltic state of Lithuania said Yes to joining the European Union in a weekend referendum, opting to join the Western bloc just 13 years after breaking away from the Soviet Union.

Official results issued early on Monday after votes at 97.35 percent of all the 2,040 voting stations were counted showed that 90.97 percent of voters said Yes and 9.03 percent No to EU membership.

As the overwhelming endorsement for Lithuania's EU membership plans emerged, President Rolandas Paksas thanked his countrymen and said the Baltic state had entered "a new stage of its history."

"Hello Europeans!" he said as he emerged from his office to host a concert in anticipation of victory.

"I want to thank you all for passing a maturity exam," he said.

"Lithuania now starts a new stage of its history in a European family."

Prime Minister Algirdas Brazauskas and Parliamentary Speaker Arturas Paulauskas also sliced a big referendum cake with a large EU flag and smaller Lithuanian flag stuck in it.



A Palestinian woman cries on Sunday in front of her demolished house in the southern Gaza Strip city of Khan Yunis after it was destroyed during an Israeli army operation on Saturday night. Israel slapped blockade on Palestinians which was eased ahead of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's meeting with US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Over 200 members of Saddam Hussein's defunct army take to the streets of Baghdad to demand the payment of back salaries and call for a new role in a post-war society on Monday. The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force General Richard Myers, said on Sunday Iraq's new military will be smaller than it was under Saddam, but still large enough to defend the country from outside threats.

## Ex-Iraqi soldiers demand back pay, future role

AFP, Baghdad

More than 200 members of Saddam Hussein's defunct army took to the streets of Baghdad on Monday demanding their back pay as well as a role in post-war Iraq.

The troops who once pledged their blood to defend Saddam's regime marched from the national theatre to central Fardus Square, where the former strongman's statue was pulled down on April 9 to mark the end of his reign.

"Coalition forces and tribal chiefs asked us to surrender and we did," said Hassan al-Jubeiri, a 47-year-old officer who said he is now peddling cigarettes in the street after three decades of military service.

"What am I supposed to do now?"

General Richard Myers, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Saturday that Iraq's military would be smaller than it was under Saddam but large enough to defend the country from outside threats.

But it is unclear what fate awaits many Iraqi troops. The United

States has ordered the dismantling of Saddam's elite Republican Guard force, which once numbered about 60,000 men.

"Our leadership abandoned and betrayed us. I'm sure they made a deal with the United States because Baghdad fell in a day," said Mahdi Tai, 45, a former Guard. "I twice tried to quit. I didn't like Saddam."

A number of women took part in Monday's demonstration, including Mona Jassem, 25, who said she had been an administrative clerk.

"Where can I look for a job now?" she said. "I'm ready to work, but for whom?"

Myers said the Republican Guard and other units close to Saddam's Baath party would have no place in Iraq's future.

"They're history," he said.

Meanwhile, the new US boss of post-war Iraq, Paul Bremer, arrived in the country on Monday to take the helm of a troubled administration that has seen much of the country descend into lawlessness and chaos.

Bremer, a career diplomat tapped by US President George W. Bush last week to replace retired US general Jay

Garner, touched down in the southern city of Basra to begin his tenure as the de facto ruler of the country.

He arrived from neighbouring Kuwait with General Richard Myers, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Garner.

Myers underscored the US-led coalition's insistence on eradicating all elements of former leader Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and restoring security to the nation, which has veered close to anarchy since Saddam's ouster.

"There is absolutely no chance that Saddam Hussein and his Baathist party or those who are following Saddam Hussein are ever going to come to power again in Iraq," Myers said.

"We are deadly serious about ensuring the stability of Iraq, and the future of Iraq depends on an Iraq that is free of any hint of the former regime."

The US-led administration of Iraq has come under blistering criticism over the speed of the rebuilding process and the chaos that has enveloped the nation since Saddam was toppled in Baghdad on April 9.

## Schroeder, Mahathir back UN role in Iraq

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad called Monday for a United Nations (UN) role in rebuilding war-torn Iraq and backed an independent Palestinian state to restore peace in the Middle East.

Schroeder, the first German chancellor to visit Malaysia since independence, held private talks with Mahathir as he opened a week-long Southeast Asian tour to bolster trade and economic ties.

"Both leaders reaffirm their

commitment to the UN and the need for multipolarity in the world system," Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar told reporters after delegation meetings at the government administrative capital of Putrajaya.

"They agree that without the establishment of a Palestinian state, there can be no lasting or durable peace in the Middle East."

On the reconstruction of Iraq, Syed Hamid said the two leaders expressed hope that it would be carried out collectively with "all nations working together through the UN system".

## UK to further toughen anti-terrorism laws

AFP, London

The British government Monday announced tough new proposals to combat terrorism that would increase the period police can hold terrorist suspects without charge from seven to 14 days.

Also among the proposed amendments to Britain's anti-terrorism laws are maximum prison terms of two years for those convicted of driving licence or passport fraud, crimes which previously carried only fines.

In announcing the proposals, Home Secretary David Blunkett defended the government's decision to further toughen its anti-terrorism laws. The legislation was already strengthened following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, drawing criticism from civil liberties groups.

"To close in on terrorists, the police increasingly need to analyse complex material," he said in a statement.

"In the course of an inquiry, they may need to examine computer hard disks, make multiple inquiries across different countries, or retrieve dangerous substances for forensic analysis. While the seven-day window for the investigation of terrorist suspects is often enough, in exceptional or

complex cases the police may need more time.

But he also acknowledged that "this important power needs appropriate scrutiny, and only a court may grant an extension to the period of detention without charge."

Under the proposals, to be debated in parliament on May 20, police can only ask a court to extend the detention time after the seven-day period has expired.

Concerning the proposed prison terms for identity documents fraud, Blunkett said "passport and driving licence fraud are gateway offences to organised crime and terrorism. Our legislation must keep pace with increasingly sophisticated criminals and complex crimes. The police must have the powers they need to do their job and protect the public."

Under the proposed measures, police would be allowed to arrest anyone they suspect of possessing fake identity documents. Under current legislation, they are released to appear in court at a later date.

"These amendments send out a strong signal that terrorists and criminals cannot use identity fraud as a route to more serious crimes," said Home Office Minister Charles Falconer.

## Powell warns against Islamist govt in Iraq

AFP, Cairo

US Secretary of State Colin Powell warned here Monday that the emergence of an Islamist government in Iraq would "not be in the best interest of the Iraqi people or its neighbors."

"We believe that an Iraqi government should be created that is representative of the Iraqi people and of all the different elements of the Iraqi people," Powell said after talks with Egyptian President

Hosni Mubarak.

"I think it would be unfortunate if a government rose there that is so fundamentalist that it didn't respect the basic things for democracy," Powell told reporters here.

"What we are trying to do is to make sure that we develop leaders to come up and represent all elements of the population," Powell said.

"What we have to do is respect the Islamic faith," he added.

"If you're going to be a funda-

mentalist regime with no democracy elements, with just fundamentalism, this will not be in the best interest of the Iraqi people or its neighbors," he said.

Powell has been on a tour of the region to revive the Arab-Israeli peace process following the US-led war in Iraq in March and April that ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein.

Powell visited Israel and the Palestinian territories at the weekend.

## Tel Aviv tightens Gaza ban despite pledge to Powell

### Israelis, Palestinians held secret security talks

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel reimposed a travel ban on the Gaza Strip on Monday despite its pledge to visiting Secretary of State Colin Powell for humanitarian gestures toward the Palestinians as part of a new peace plan.

After talks with Powell on Sunday, the Israeli government had agreed to release 180 Palestinian detainees and allow 25,000 Palestinian labourers to enter Israel, security sources said.

The moves were apparently in response to Powell's request that Israel and the Palestinians start practical, conciliatory steps even before Israel endorses the "road map" peace plan, which aims for an independent Palestinian state in 2005.

But shortly after the Israeli measures were announced, the army reinstated a ban on Palestinian travel in and out of the Gaza Strip, citing security concerns, effectively freezing a decision on Sunday to allow Gaza

labourers to travel in and out.

It was not immediately clear how long the ban would stay in effect.

Early on Monday, Israeli troops killed two Palestinian militants in southern Gaza when they tried to lay a land mine against advancing tanks, the army and witnesses said.

Israeli political sources said Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would likely meet Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas before the week's end to discuss the plan. They said security talks had secretly resumed between the sides last week.

Israel sealed off the West Bank and Gaza after Palestinians began their uprising for statehood in late 2000. Sharon demands Palestinians end violence and disarm militant groups before peace talks can resume.

The bigger question of whether Israel will accept the peace plan, as Palestinian leaders have, may be clarified only when Sharon visits Washington to see President Bush on May 20, diplomats said.

Right-wing parties dominating Sharon's coalition oppose dismantling Jewish settlements in the territories as well as granting sovereignty to the 3.5 million Palestinians there.

AFP adds: Israeli and Palestinian officials held a secret high-level security meeting at the weekend, Israeli public radio reported Sunday, citing Israeli officials.

Israel was represented at Saturday's meeting, whose location and contents were not given, by General Amos Gilad, coordinator of Israeli activities in the Palestinian territories, the radio reported.

The Palestinian Authority was represented by security minister Mohammad Dahlane, it said.

The meeting came as US Secretary of State Colin Powell toured the region to push for the implementation of the peace "roadmap" that would lead to the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005.

## Powell, Mubarak meet despite Arab doubts over US peace drive

AFP, Cairo

US Secretary of State Colin Powell began talks here Monday with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak despite strong Arab doubts about Washington's new drive to restart Palestinian-Israeli peace talks.

Egypt's state-run Middle East News Agency (MENA) said Powell and Mubarak would tackle the internationally-backed roadmap for Middle East peace as well as the situation in Iraq after Saddam Hussein's overthrow last month.

The talks at Mubarak's palace in northern Cairo took place as the editor in chief of an Egyptian government newspaper, Al-Akbar, said the Arabs had lost confidence in Washington's ability to help deliver a fair settlement.

It reflected Palestinian dismay over the failure to see a commitment for a freeze in Jewish settlements following talks held at the weekend with Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

Egypt, the first Arab country to make peace with Israel, in 1979, has

long sought to bridge the gap between its ally the Palestinians and the Jewish state.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher said before he joined Mubarak and Powell for the meeting that the path ahead was difficult and urged Israel to take the Palestinian lead in accepting the roadmap.

"It is now up to the Israeli side to do the same," Maher told MENA.

Maher urged "Israel to stop its provocative daily actions which victimize the Palestinians, in order to be able to start the application of the roadmap which opens the way to a comprehensive and permanent peace in the region."

The Egyptian minister linked "the Palestinians' respect for a ceasefire and a halt to suicide attacks to Israel's stopping provocative daily actions against the Palestinian people."

Palestinian foreign minister Nabil Shaath said Monday that any deal on the roadmap had been postponed until after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon visits Washington later this month.



PHOTO: AFP

By-standers look at the thick smoke as the main telecommunications building burns on Sunday in central Baghdad. One person covered in soot was escorted by local residents down the fire escape and out of the building, where an enormous blaze was raging. It was not immediately known if any other people were inside. The building was damaged in the war to oust Saddam Hussein and heavily looted after his fall.