

US takes aim at Baathists, backs away from Iraqi govt formation deadline

AFP, Baghdad

The US-led administration in Iraq banned senior members of Saddam Hussein's Baath party from returning to government posts but after talks with Iraqi leaders appeared to back away from a looming deadline to form new democratic institutions to take its place.

The new US boss here, Paul Bremer, who has repeatedly pledged to wipe out the remains of Saddam's regime since taking up his post less than a week ago, on Friday formally banned all top Baath members from all public sector jobs.

The decree came amid growing fear among Iraqis that the regime could claw its way back to power as government ministries re-open and the US-led coalition tries to speed

up the return of normal day-to-day life.

An official from the US Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) said the move could affect between 15,000 and 30,000 senior Baath members, although relatively few are believed to be seeking their old jobs back.

Bremer's written decree said Baath leaders were banned from "positions of authority and responsibility in Iraqi society" so that "representative government in Iraq is not threatened."

The ban was to apply to state institutions like universities and hospitals, state-run firms and civil servants.

Washington has been left in a quandary by the all-embracing grip the Baath party held on public life in Saddam's Iraq -- under the ousted regime it was all but impos-

sible to hold a major post without pledging party loyalty.

The US administration has been criticised for working with known former Baathists as it tries to get Iraq back on its feet, but it has also been slammed for the time it is taking to restore order and reopen government ministries.

After talks with a seven-member council of Iraqi politicians late Friday, Bremer said he had their blessing for his new tough policy on senior Baathists.

"We agreed on the importance of the process of de-Baathification," Bremer told reporters.

In his first press conference Thursday, the US administrator said he would issue new detailed procedures for screening out Baath leaders in the coming days.

Previously US officials had

admitted that background checks on returning Iraqi officials could take weeks.

The top British envoy in Iraq, John Sawers, said the ban on Baath leaders was only the "first step of the de-Baathification process".

"It is not the last word," he said after the talks with Iraqi leaders.

In recent days, both US and British officials have blamed die-hard Baathists for the wave of lawlessness and looting that has terrorised Baghdad since Saddam's ouster and has been the main gripe of ordinary Iraqis against the US-led occupation.

"What we are doing is addressing the most urgent issues first. The most urgent issue is that of security, and along with that the question of ensuring that the Baath party cannot return in any shape or form," said Sawers.



Former South African President Nelson Mandela (L) walks past the coffin of his life time friend and South African anti-apartheid hero Walter Sisulu on Saturday during a state funeral ceremony at Soweto stadium.

S Africans pay last respect to anti-apartheid hero Sisulu

AFP, Soweto

The sound of revolutionary songs filled the air at a dusty soccer stadium south of Johannesburg Saturday as thousands gathered to pay their last respects to anti-apartheid giant Walter Sisulu.

Police estimated that at least 10,000 people had gathered at the Orlando Stadium in the Soweto township to bury Sisulu, who died aged 90 last week.

Most of those gathered, some dressed in African National Congress (ANC) t-shirts bearing a picture of Sisulu, and others in their Sunday best, said they came to celebrate Sisulu's life and not to mourn him.

"There is just excitement, not a feeling of sorrow. He was a great man, a soft-spoken man," said Miriam Vilakazi, 64, a widow whose son, Prins, joined the ANC structures after riots here in 1976.

"Everybody in the township is talking about this funeral," she told AFP.

Others like Sister Mali, 43, has been braving the crisp winter cold since 3:00 am (0100 GMT) Saturday.



French rescue services workers evacuate one of the passengers wounded in a bus accident in Lyon, center France on Saturday. Twenty-eight German tourists were killed and dozens of people were hurt when a coach they were travelling in veered off the road and crashed near Lyon.

Trio seek major changes in US-backed Iraq resolution

AP, United Nations

Russia, China and France made clear Friday they want major changes in a US-backed resolution to lift sanctions against Iraq, but Germany indicated it was likely to support the proposal.

With President Bush's administration pushing for a vote next week, Security Council members finished a paragraph-by-paragraph review of the nine-page revised draft resolution late Friday. Many called for a stronger UN role in post-war Iraq and greater transparency by the occupying powers, the United States and Britain, diplomats said.

In key capitals, there were also intensified high-level contacts ahead of what could be a final round of negotiations next week.

Russian Foreign Minister Yuri Fedotov told the Interfax news agency after meeting China's Deputy Foreign Minister Yang Wenchang Friday that both countries "believe that provisions in this draft resolution require serious amendments."

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said Paris also is pushing for changes in the resolution including a larger UN role in Iraq's reconstruction. "We are proposing a number of modifi-

cations, of amendments, that will make it most effective," he said in an interview with France-Inter radio.

Russia and France have called for sanctions to be suspended - not lifted - and for UN weapons inspectors to certify that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction have been eliminated, as called for in the Security Council resolution imposing the punitive measures. The inspection issue is not addressed in the draft resolution.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell fared better on a trip to Germany, where Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said it "makes no sense" to keep punitive sanctions on the backs of the Iraqi people.

Schroeder, interviewed later Friday by ARD television, was asked whether Germany would vote for the draft US resolution on sanctions and replied that Security Council members were "moving closer together."

"I expect that sanctions will be lifted quickly," he said. "In the end, this is about the people of Iraq, who must be helped as soon as possible."

After months of acrimony and official snubs, Schroeder's backing of the UN resolution was the first

sign of cooperation with Washington on Iraq. Many in Germany hoped it was a sign that the frayed ties between Washington and Berlin were on the mend.

France, Russia, China and Germany opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq - and Paris, Moscow and Beijing have serious reservations about the US-backed plan for post-war Iraq. Germany, too, has publicly favoured a stronger role for the United Nations in putting together a new interim government for Iraq.

The revised US draft circulated Thursday did not address two key concerns raised by many council members - the limited role of the United Nations in post-war Iraq and the powerful role of the United States and Britain as occupying powers.

Syria's deputy UN ambassador Fayssal Mekdad said that during the review of the draft resolution, the key demands were for a stronger UN role, more transparency in how the United States and Britain are going to run the country, and more specifics on procedures for the sale of Iraqi oil.

"The co-sponsors promised to take all these remarks and to come back to us," he said.

3 killed in Arab-Kurdish fighting in Kirkuk

AFP, Arbil

At least three people were killed and several injured in shootouts between Arabs and Kurds in the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk that began overnight, witnesses said Saturday.

Gunfights broke out following disputes over the ownership of houses and land, the witnesses came to tell AFP in the Kurdish regional capital of Arbil further north, which is controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Massoud Barzani.

The two sides also fought with knives, said one witness, who added he had seen the bodies of three Kurds killed in the Al-Shuhada neighbourhood of the city.

A KDP delegation headed to Kirkuk to try to restore calm in the key oil-rich city.

US plans to interview visa applicants

AFP, Washington

In an effort to further thwart terrorism, the United States will require nearly all visa applicants to be interviewed in person by diplomats, a move that will complicate an already laborious process, the State Department said Friday.

The move, the exact details of which are still under debate, is intended to tighten the visa issuance process at US embassies and consulates around the world to prevent terrorists from entering the United States, it said.

"We continue to evaluate measures that will improve our ability to screen visa applicants," said Nancy Beck, a department spokeswoman.

"Among those measures being considered is requiring most non-immigrant visa applicants to appear personally before a visa may be issued to an eligible applicant," she said.

Al-Qaeda reorganising, training new recruits

AFP, New York

The al-Qaeda terror network is reorganising, training new members and planning new attacks, The New York Times reported Saturday, citing counterterrorism officials in Washington, Europe and the Middle East.

One senior official told the daily that al-Qaeda now has an estimated 3,000 members -- far fewer than in the 1990s, when some 20,000 people are believed to have trained at al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan.

But there has been a spike in recruitment since the US invaded Iraq in March, the report said. And the network is reorganizing into "smaller, more disciplined units," with new leaders accustomed to operating on the run.

"Definitely, their capability has been eroded," a senior government official was quoted as saying. "But they are still a threat, they are still sophisticated, they are still fighting and they are still trying to strike in the United States," the official said.

Authorities believe al Qaeda has opened new training camps in Sudan and established "a strong foothold" in Kenya and other parts of East Africa.

Pakistan and Chechnya are also

World slams Morocco blasts

AFP, Paris

World governments on Saturday condemned the string of bomb blasts that killed 39 people in Morocco's largest city Casablanca and vowed the attacks would not derail international efforts against terror.

US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz blamed the bombings on "terrorists" who he said wanted to block progress in the Arab world, while Russia said the attacks bore the "signature" of al-Qaeda.

"That they should chose to attack Morocco tells something about their terrible motivation," the US defence strategist told reporters during a brief visit to Macedonia.

"Morocco stands out in the Arab world as a country that is making significant strides towards democracy and I think the terrorists are opposed to progress," Wolfowitz said.

In Germany, Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer blasted the "criminal terrorist attacks."

"The authors and their accomplices should be found and judged before a tribunal," Fischer said in a statement.

"This terrorist act reminds us that the international community must not relax its efforts in the fight against international terrorism," he said.

A series of bomb attacks rocked Morocco's economic capital of Casablanca overnight, killing at least 39 people and injuring dozens more at sites frequented by foreigners, including the Belgian consulate, a Jewish centre and cemetery, an international hotel and a bustling Spanish restaurant.

The Russian foreign ministry said the blasts were the work of an international network that was likely behind recent suicide bombings in Saudi Arabia and Chechnya.

"It is more and more obvious

that the terrorist international, al-Qaeda first and foremost, after its defeat in Afghanistan is seeking to go back on the offensive against the whole civilised world," the statement said.

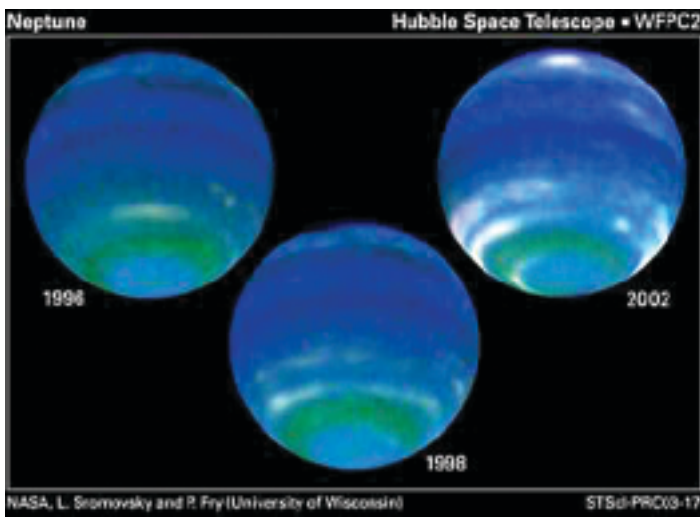
"The signature is the same everywhere," the statement added.

In Belgium, Foreign Minister Louis Michel sent condolences to Morocco, a spokesman for the foreign ministry told AFP, while King Juan Carlos of Spain also expressed sympathy over the "brutal" attacks in a telegram to Morocco's King Mohammed VI.

At the Vatican, Pope John Paul II denounced "the blind violence that hits the innocents."

Italy's Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said that "after the attacks committed in Israel, Chechnya and Saudi Arabia, this is a new series of ferocious and crazy acts that remind the international community to stay engaged in the battle against terrorism."

It's springtime on Neptune



It's springtime on Neptune, which means about 40 years of bright clouds -- something of a surprise to astronomers who were not necessarily expecting the seasons to change on this distant planet. Actually, only the southern hemisphere appears to be experiencing a Neptunian spring, according to observations made with the Hubble Space Telescope. Like Earth, Neptune has a tilted axis, which means when it's spring in the south, it's autumn in the north. This composite image from Hubble reveals changes in Neptune's brightness in the southern hemisphere.

REUTERS, Washington

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These latest observations, reported in the May issue of the planetary science journal Icarus, are something of a surprise since changing seasons on Neptune have not been seen before, according to astronomer Lawrence Sromovsky of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"Neptune has so far not made seasons very visible," Sromovsky said by telephone on Friday. But Hubble observations made from

1996 through 2002 show that bands of high clouds have been getting wider and brighter.

This tallies with ground-based observations that have shown the same trend since 1980, Sromovsky said.

Neptune, the eighth planet from the sun, is known for its weird weather in any case, with ferocious storms and winds gusting to 900 miles an hour. It is 30 times Earth's distance from the sun, which means the sun is about 900 times weaker on Neptune -- and might have been thought to be too weak to create seasonal change.

Some astronomers theorised that the brightening clouds on Neptune were a response to the sun's own cycle -- sunspots and other solar phenomena -- but that ultimately did not correlate with observations, Sromovsky said.

One likely scenario is that however weak the sun's energy is by the time it gets to Neptune, it is strong enough to create changing seasons there.