

US lawmakers slam Bush's post-war Iraq management

Bremer dissolves Iraqi army

AFP, REUTERS, Washington/ Baghdad

US lawmakers expressed displeasure Thursday with the way the George W. Bush administration has managed post-war Iraq, saying that the goal of stabilising and democratising the country has been put at risk by inadequate US planning.

At a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chairman Richard Lugar said he was "concerned that the administration's initial stabilisation and reconstruction efforts have been inadequate."

"The planning for peace was much less developed than the planning for war," the Indiana Republican said.

Democratic Senator Chris Dodd adopted an even harsher tone. The Bush administration, Dodd said

"can't tell us how long they believe we will need to remain, what other countries will do to assist us in these efforts ... and most importantly, what it is likely to end up costing the American people."

Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz conceded that the US government has gotten off to a slow start in rebuilding the country in the weeks since the conclusion of the war.

"We knew that certain systems and services we take for granted here would not exist in a formerly totalitarian regime. And we also knew that we could not fully understand the scope of Iraq's needs until we were in the country and on the ground," he said.

Wolfowitz echoed assertions made by other Bush administration officials that the situation in Iraq is less chaotic than portrayed in media accounts, and that prob-

lems stem from the abuses of the Saddam Hussein regime.

"The task before us is more about construction than reconstruction -- the building of a society that was allowed to rot from within for decades by one of the world's worst tyrants," Wolfowitz said.

But he added that critics condemning the military's performance are using "a standard of unachievable perfection."

"There is no plan that could have achieved all the extraordinary speed of this one, and at the same time been able to flood the country with military policemen."

"I think we made the right choices -- choices that saved both American and Iraqi lives and prevented damage to the environment and to the resources of the Iraqi people."

General Peter Pace, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff,

testified that while nation-building is a major US objective in Iraq, security remains the number-one goal, even three weeks after Bush declared major combat operations there over.

"Security is the military coalition's highest priority," Pace said.

Reuters adds: The US civil administrator for Iraq on Friday ordered the dissolution of the Iraqi armed forces and several security bodies, sacking 400,000 staff who had formed the backbone of Saddam Hussein's iron-clad rule.

Paul Bremer also dissolved the defence and information ministries and military and security courts, an administration statement said.

"These actions are part of a robust campaign to show the Iraqi people that the Saddam regime is gone, and will never return," the statement said.



PHOTO: AFP

An Aceh boy runs away from gunfire as Indonesian police and troops pursue GAM rebels (Free Aceh Movement) at the village of Cot Batte, in Bireun, in Aceh province on Friday.

Fears of food shortage in Aceh

58 rebels killed in crackdown

THE JAKARTA POST/ ANN, Jakarta

As schools throughout Aceh continue to burn, trucks distributing food are now being torched in what may be a campaign to create food shortages in the war-torn province.

As the death toll increases as the battle rages between government troops and Free Aceh Movement (GAM) separatists, food supplies from the neighbouring province of North Sumatra have all but ceased.

Even the distribution of food from the provincial capital of Banda Aceh to regencies throughout the province has stopped as transportation grinds to a virtual halt due to the worsening security conditions.

Despite the heavy troop deployment, truck drivers, who are used to delivering food supplies to Aceh and its regencies, said Thursday that they were too scared to enter Aceh after receiving threats from unidentified people.

"We are afraid to take our trucks to Aceh because of the worrying security, especially after the burning of several trucks along the Medan-Banda Aceh route," truck driver Buyung was quoted by Antara as saying.

Traders in Banda Aceh said the limited supply had prompted food prices to skyrocket, with commodities such as eggs and cooking oil increasing in price by as much as 30 percent.

Meanwhile, clashes between government troops and rebels continued unabated on Thursday, the fourth day of a massive military campaign aimed at "crushing" GAM, which has been fighting for independence for the resource-rich province since 1976.

Aceh military commander Maj. Gen. Endang Suwarya said intense fighting with GAM rebels was taking place in East Aceh, West Aceh and Aceh Besar regencies, in which five GAM members were killed.

Endang claimed that the TNI had so far arrested 21 GAM suspects and killed about 58 others. He said 11 military personnel had been injured in the operations.

Endang said those arrested had told authorities they were responsible for the burning of 287 school buildings, mainly in the Pidie and Bireun regencies, in the past few days.

Asked to comment on reports that 10 civilians, including a 12-year old boy were executed in North Aceh on Wednesday, TNI spokesman Lt. Col. Yani Basuki, speaking in Lhokseumawe, said the incidents may have happened as GAM members were hiding among civilians.

In a bid to prevent GAM members from escaping to neighbouring countries such as Malaysia and Singapore, the Navy has sent 12 warships to guard sea borders around the province.

WHO lifts SARS travel alerts for Hong Kong, Guangdong

REUTERS, Geneva

The World Health Organisation (WHO) on Friday withdrew its warning against travel to Hong Kong and the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, saying the SARS outbreaks there were under control.

WHO issued its alerts on April 2 when the disease was spreading rapidly in Hong Kong, which has the highest number of cases and deaths from SARS outside mainland China.

The new disease is believed to have first emerged in Guangdong in November but only reached Hong Kong in March. It was then spread around the world by air travel.

"We are changing the travel advice for Hong Kong and Guangdong, effective Friday, 23 May," WHO director-general Gro Harlem Brundtland said in a statement.

"The outbreaks in Guangdong and in Hong Kong are being contained."

UN seeks official for key role in Iraq

AFP, United Nations

The Security Council on Thursday lifted sanctions on Iraq, opening the way for UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to appoint a special representative to work with the US-led occupying forces on rebuilding the country.

In a 14-0 vote, hailed by US Ambassador John Negroponte as "a momentous event for the people of Iraq," the council scrapped the trade embargo, financial restrictions and other measures including an aviation ban imposed on Iraq after it invaded Kuwait 13 years ago.

At the same time, it asked the US and British forces which toppled Saddam Hussein to help form an Iraqi-led interim administration "until an internationally recognised, representative government is established by the Iraqi people."



PHOTO: AFP

Residents search for survivors after the village was struck by Algeria's worst earthquake in 20 years on Thursday at Boumerdes. The sheer number of shattered buildings in towns near the epicentre was daunting rescuers, as the death toll climbed to 1,092 with 6,782 more left injured.

World leaders send aid, condolences to Algeria

AFP, Paris

World leaders sent condolence messages to Algeria on Thursday along with hundreds of rescuers to join the search for trapped survivors after a devastating earthquake hit the country, killing nearly 1,100 people.

France, the former colonial power in Algeria, was among the first countries to dispatch search and rescue experts to the quake zone in and to the east of Algiers, while offers of help also came from the EU, Germany, Portugal, Spain and the United States.

Besides the 120 civil defence officers dispatched by Paris along

with sniffer dogs and specialist equipment, French-based charity Medecins du Monde, Doctors of the World, said it was sending medical equipment, drugs and two doctors.

French President Jacques Chirac voiced his sympathy and victims of the tremor, which flattened hundreds of buildings and registered up to 6.8 on the Richter scale.

"More than ever France stands beside Algeria and its friends the Algerian people during this cruel blow," Chirac said in his message to Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Another team of rescuers left for Algeria from Germany on Thursday, the German interior ministry said, and more specialists with sniffer dogs and equipment were preparing to leave.

"The great number of deaths, injured and homeless has caused shock in Germany," Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said in a statement. "Our sympathy goes to the victims and their families."

Italy, where an earthquake last October killed 27 children and their teacher in a village primary school, sent the first of three emergency teams to join the rescue effort, to be followed by a field hospital and medical staff.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent has also sent its own rescue team and allocated 200,000 Swiss francs (130,000 euros/154,000 dollars) to fund emergency aid.

The European Commission meanwhile said it plans to launch a joint aid operation, with an envoy from its humanitarian office, ECHO, set to leave for Algeria on Friday.

In a statement from the EU presidency issued in Athens, the European Union said it was "ready to offer all possible assistance in order to alleviate the suffering of the Algerian people."

Sharon to endorse ME peace 'roadmap'

REUTERS, New York

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has tentatively agreed to make a qualified endorsement of President Bush's Middle East peace plan, The New York Times reported on Friday.

Citing unnamed US officials, the newspaper reported that Sharon would endorse the principles, framework and process of the so-called "road map" for peace and the eventual creation of a Palestinian state. But the wording of Sharon's endorsement had been negotiated with US officials to guarantee that Israel's concerns would be addressed, the paper said.

Quoting an unnamed diplomat, the Times reported "Israel would not accept every detail. It doesn't mean Israel won't have comments on certain issues."

The endorsement was hammered out on Tuesday in consultation with Dov Weisglass, Sharon's chief of staff, officials told the Times.

The Bush administration was expected to issue a statement about the "road map" on Friday morning, but further information was not available.

The initiative outlines reciprocal steps by Israel and the Palestinians leading to an independent Palestinian state and a secure Israel by 2005.

US attempts to convince Sharon to sign on to the peace plan have been hindered by a string of Palestinian suicide bombings directed against Israelis.

The Palestinians have already given their endorsement.

AFP adds: Israel on Friday implicitly linked a possible Middle East summit to US guarantees over the international roadmap for peace with the Palestinians.

"Without an American letter of guarantee, it would be impossible to get the Israeli government and public opinion to accept the roadmap," a senior Israeli official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

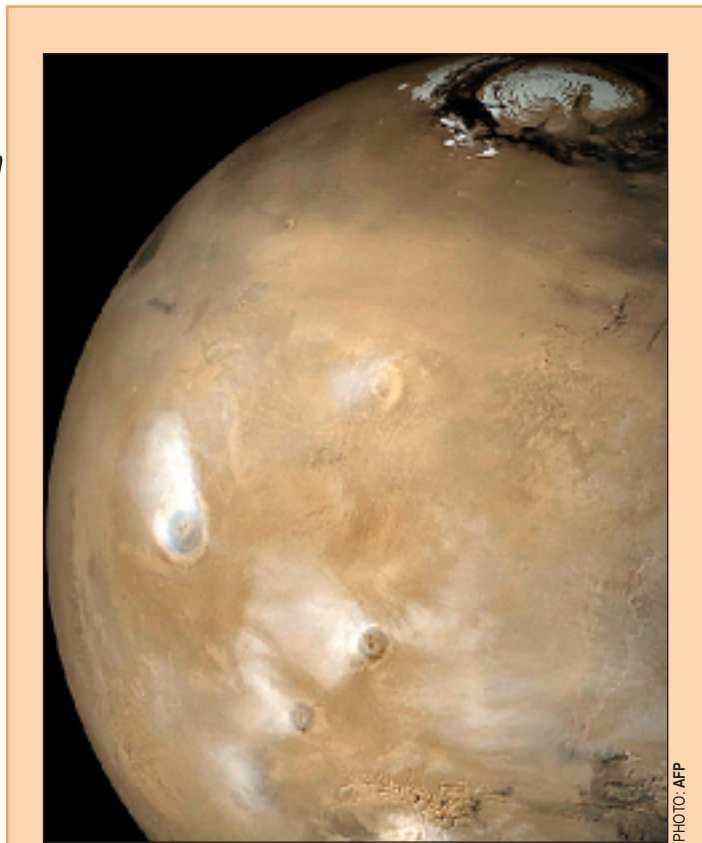


PHOTO: AFP

Image obtained on May 22 from NASA shows a dust storm raging in Syria Planum, south of the Labyrinthus Noctis troughs (at lower centre) in this Mars Global Surveyor (MGS) Mars Orbiter Camera (MOC) composite obtained on Thursday. In this view taken during the recent southern winter, water ice clouds are present over each of the five largest Tharsis volcanoes, Olympus Mons (right centre), Alba Patera (upper centre), Ascraeus Mons (near centre), Pavonis Mons (toward lower left), and Arsia Mons (lower left). The summertime north polar residual water ice cap can be seen at the top of this picture.

Indo-Russian war games to boost regional military presence

AFP, Mumbai

Exercises being conducted this week between the Indian and Russian navies in the Indian Ocean are designed to send a signal to China in the face of its rising influence in the region, a senior naval officer said.

Warships from the two countries have been engaged since Thursday in exercises such as gunnery, air defence, anti-submarine and communication and seamanship evolution off India's west coast near Bombay, the country's financial hub.

The four Russian warships taking part in the three-day drill are to head to the southern port of Visakhapatnam for further exercises with India's eastern naval fleet in June.

"The Russians are here after 10 years. They are looking for strategic futures and would like to boost their military presence in the Indian Ocean as the break-up of the Soviet Union is now behind them," Rear Admiral Vijay Shankar

said Thursday aboard the Indian warship INS Mysore, one of those taking part in the exercise.

The last major exercise between the two navies was conducted in 1993.

"The joint exercise is also a way to explore new ways to rebuild trade between the two friendly countries. For any successful trade the waterways have to be protected and we have to make our presence felt in the sea," Shankar said.

During a visit to Moscow earlier this month, Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha raised key areas of concern between the two countries such as weak physical and financial infrastructure which, he said, could be addressed only through better transport links and faster clearance of goods.

Last December, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a joint declaration to strengthen economic, scientific and technological cooperation.

Earth's snapshot from Mars

AP, Los Angeles

NASA on Thursday released what it billed as the first portrait of Earth as seen from Mars.

The colonised photograph shows Earth from 86 million miles away as a small blue dot orbited by its even smaller moon.

The keen-eyed can make out clouds over the central and eastern United States and northern South America, as well as portions of Central America and the Gulf of Mexico, in a specially processed blowup of the image.

NASA's Mars Global Surveyor spacecraft took the picture while orbiting the Red Planet on May 8.

"This image gives us a new perspective ... one in which we can see our own planet as one among many," said Michael

Malin, whose San Diego company built and operates the camera. Jupiter can also be seen in the picture.

NASA said the portrait was unprecedented - but not for lack of trying.

The agency's Pathfinder spacecraft tried several times to photograph Earth after reaching Mars in 1997 but was thwarted by cloudy skies.

Images of Earth from space have been among the most compelling images produced by NASA missions.

Apollo 8 began orbiting the moon on Dec. 24, 1968, becoming the first manned mission to do so. During a live Christmas Eve television broadcast, the three-man crew took turns reading from the book of Genesis and showing images of the Earth as it rose above the moon.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian warship Marshal Shaposhnikov (R) passes by the Indian warship INS Mysore during joint exercises in the Indian Ocean on Thursday. The Russian navy is engaged in a series of naval exercises with the Indian navy consisting of gunnery, air defence, anti-submarine and communication and seamanship evolution exercises.