

Mortar attack on US base kills 1 Iraqi, wounds 12

REUTERS, Baghdad

A mortar round hit a US military base overnight in the Iraqi town of Samarra in the restive territory north of Baghdad, killing one Iraqi and wounding 12, the US military said.

A spokesman said the US civil-military operations centre was hit by an 82mm mortar round during the night. It was the latest in a wave of ambushes and attacks targeting US troops in the area.

He said troops from the US 4th Infantry Division heard three explosions during the night and contacted Iraqi police, who found the casualties.

"Soldiers were unable to respond or find the perpetrators," the spokesman said.

The Pentagon said on Wednesday that 16 US soldiers had been killed by hostile action in Iraq since the start of May. A further 36 have been killed in accidents.

The attacks have been concentrated in Baghdad and two nearby areas -- to the west around Falluja and Ramadi, and to the north around Balad, Baquba and Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's home town. Samarra lies around 75 miles north of Baghdad, between the tense towns of Balad and Tikrit.



PHOTO: AFP

A supporter of Iranian main exiled opposition group sets himself on fire during a demonstration in front of French counter-intelligence services (DST) near the Bir-Hakeim bridge on Wednesday in Paris, protesting against the arrest of Maryam Rajjavi with 159 other supporters of the People's Mujahadeen in a massive crackdown on June 17. Two women set themselves on fire earlier on Wednesday during the protest.

Finland's PM resigns over use of leaked document

AFP, Helsinki

Finland's Prime Minister Anneli Jaaetteenmaeki submitted her government's resignation on Wednesday amid allegations that she lied to parliament about her use of leaked secret government documents in the March election, government officials said.

President Tarja Halonen accepted the resignation late Wednesday, but asked Jaaetteenmaeki and her team to stay on until a new administration was formed.

"The president has accepted Jaaetteenmaeki and the government's resignation and has asked it to stay on as a caretaker government until a new prime minister can be found," Maria Romantschuk, spokeswoman for the president, told AFP.

"It will continue until a new prime minister is found, which hopefully is next week," she added.

Jaaetteenmaeki's government, inaugurated on April 17 and the first to be led by a woman, lasted only 63 days.

This made it one of the briefest in Finnish history, with only two administrations during the Second World War having been shorter.

Government officials told AFP that Jaaetteenmaeki informed the president by telephone of her decision earlier in the day before travelling to Halonen's summer residence in Turku, southwestern Finland, and formally tendered her resignation Wednesday evening.

Hamas considers truce ahead of Powell's trip

PFLP rejects ceasefire call

AFP, Gaza City

The militant Islamic group Hamas said Thursday it was mulling over proposals for a ceasefire with Israel amid reports of progress toward a truce on the eve of a visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Senior Hamas official Ismail Abu Shanab made his remarks a day after the headline movement held what it called a "very positive" meeting with the new Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas.

Powell was to confer Friday with Abbas in the West Bank town of Jericho after the American's meetings with the Israeli leadership, Palestinian information minister Nabil Amr said.

Shanab said Hamas, which has been responsible for most of the suicide bombings and other anti-Israeli violence, had made no decision on calls for a ceasefire in the 32-month-old Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation.

"We will continue to discuss this issue and will take a decision as soon as possible, in the next few days," he told AFP.

Abbas has had little success so far in bringing Palestinian militants on board a ceasefire with the Israelis. A secular group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, reiterated Thursday its call for armed resistance.

But Abbas appears to be making progress in reconciling with the radicals who were enraged by his statements at a June 4 Middle East summit in Jordan where he pledged to halt their armed struggle he equated with terrorism.

Hamas spokesman Mahmud al-Zahar described the meeting Abbas had with his group Wednesday as "very positive." Mohammed al-Hindi, senior official of the smaller Islamic Jihad, said they also had "good" talks afterward with Abbas.

Despite the dialogue, Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing on Thursday that killed a shopkeeper in northern Israel.

Shanab said Hamas was keeping an open mind on Abbas' proposal for a Palestinian national leadership with representatives of all 13 factions. He said the movement was awaiting more details, but "we will consider the idea".

With Abbas due to pursue his talks with the factions on Thursday, information minister Amr described the dialogue so far as "very positive" and "fruitful".

Powell said Thursday during a brief visit to Bangladesh that he was also receiving upbeat news from the region as he prepared to put his weight behind efforts to implement an international "roadmap" for peace.

"The reports that I have from my staff within the past few hours suggest that some progress is being made with respect to security arrangements as well as continuing discussions with Hamas and other organizations with prime minister Abbas," he said.

Amr said the Palestinians were counting on Powell and the Bush administration to step up the pressure on Israel to live up to its commitments in the roadmap aimed at establishing a Palestinian state by 2005.

"We need guarantees that Israelis will halt their aggression, assassinations and incursions, and withdraw from reoccupied Palestinian areas so the

Palestinians can go forward and have a ceasefire," he said.

Meanwhile, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) on Thursday rejected a call from Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas for a ceasefire with Israel, a senior official of the radical group said.

"The PFLP refuses a ceasefire and will continue resistance," Jamal Majdalawi told journalists after talks between his secular group and Abbas in Gaza City.

The Palestinian prime minister on Wednesday met with officials of the radical Islamic groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, again without reaching agreement on a ceasefire.

But he was expected to hold fresh talks Thursday with the various militant factions, on the eve of a visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell to promote a roadmap for peace between the Palestinians and Jewish state.

Powell is to meet Abbas on Friday in the West Bank town of Jericho, following talks with Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Foreign Minister Sylvan Shalom, according to Palestinian information minister Nabil Amr.

US zeroes in on ousted Iraqi regime leaders

AFP, Baghdad

Buoyed by the capture of Saddam Hussein's closest aide, the US military Thursday pressed on with its hunt for top ousted regime loyalists while Iraq readied to resume oil exports, key to its reconstruction.

With US troops patrolling Baghdad suffering losses this week to snipers and a drive-by shooting, and anger in the capital flaring over the slow return of basic services, US lawmakers have asked if the military is overstretched.

But the US commander of the division operating around Saddam's hometown of Tikrit -- believed to be where most trusted aide Abid Hamid Mahmud was arrested Monday -- insisted attacks on US forces were no great cause for concern.

"I really qualify it as militarily insignificant. They are very small. They are very random. They are very ineffective," Major General Ray Odierno, commander of the US Army's 4th Infantry Division said.

The capture of Abid Hamid came

as a much-needed fillip to US efforts to track down remaining Saddam die-hards, while Washington will be hoping the man who was seen as the president's shadow will be able to shed light on his fate.

"There is a good chance he knows quite a bit," one US defence official told AFP in Washington.

The arrest came amid a series of US raids in the Tikrit area, north of Baghdad. Saddam and Abid Hamid hail from the same village, Aujah, just outside Tikrit itself.

The United States said in April, shortly before the fall of the Iraqi regime, that it intended to put Saddam and his top advisors on trial for war crimes allegedly committed during the repressive reign of the Baath Party.

Odierno also said that a top Saddam bodyguard was captured in a raid on two farmhouses in the area that also netted millions of dollars, jewels and weapons associated with Saddam's special security services.

But he did not identify the body-

guard, saying only that senior Baathists were believed to be among the 15 to 20 people captured at the farm as well as the scores more detained in other raids in the area.

But despite the upbeat military assessment by the American military, US lawmakers on Wednesday expressed alarm at the rising number of troops killed.

"While our military did remarkable work in defeating two terrorist regimes in short order, events in Afghanistan and Iraq make it clear that we have a ways to go," said Duncan Hunter, chairman of the House of Representatives Armed Services Committee.

"The terrorist elements have been defeated, but they haven't been destroyed," he said.

US military officials said Thursday that a mortar attack on an Iraqi centre coordinating rebuilding efforts in the country left one Iraqi dead and 12 others injured.

World must pressure Iran on nukes: Bush

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush on Wednesday warmly endorsed anti-regime protests in Iran and said that the world must warn Tehran it "will not tolerate" the Islamic regime's getting atomic weapons.

"The international community must come together to make it very clear to Iran that we will not tolerate the construction of a nuclear weapon. Iran would be dangerous if they have a nuclear weapon," he said.

His comments came after the UN's nuclear watchdog agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), reported that Tehran had failed to comply with international agreements on reporting nuclear material.

The IAEA has called on Iran to accept more intrusive inspections of suspected nuclear sites, but has thus far been rebuffed.

Bush expressed his strongest support yet for anti-regime protesters in Iran, calling them "courageous souls who speak out for freedom" and stressing: "They need to know America stands squarely by

their side."

"I would urge the Iranian administration to treat them with the utmost of respect," said the US leader, who has branded Iran part of an "axis of evil" with North Korea and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

Bush said he had raised the issue of Iran's nuclear program with leaders of the world's major industrialized nations plus Russia at their summit in France earlier this month.

"We had a good discussion on the subject, with near universal agreement that we all must work together to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon," said the president.

Earlier, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer appeared to rule out for now any direct talks with Iran over its atomic program, despite "deep concerns" that Tehran seeks nuclear weapons.

Asked about the prospects for such contacts, he replied: "The United States has talked, through different parties, with Iran from time to time ... (but) the United States does not have direct diplomatic relations with Iran."



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (L) answers a question seated next to US Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (2nd R) during a bipartisan meeting with members of the US Congress in the Cabinet Room of the White House on Wednesday in Washington, DC. Bush is urging Congress to pass legislation to stimulate the economy.

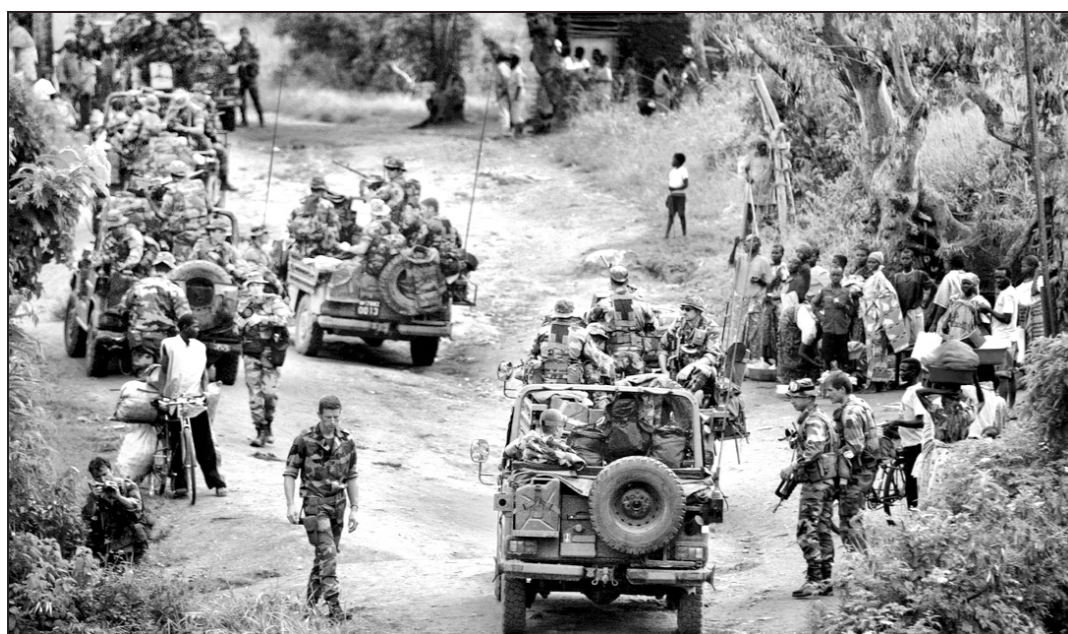


PHOTO: AFP

French special forces patrol to secure Bunia's countryside in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo on Wednesday. Ethnic Hema and Lendu militias have been battling for control of the mineral rich area for weeks. A multinational force, spearheaded by French troops, has begun its deployment in Bunia to put an end to the killings.

US House panel explores Iraqi WMD intelligence

REUTERS, Washington

The US House of Representatives Intelligence Committee on Wednesday questioned analysts about their assessments of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction amid a controversy over whether the Bush administration hyped the threat posed by Baghdad to build a case for war.

Lawmakers at the closed-door hearing focused on the National Intelligence Estimate reports on Iraq's chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs. Witnesses included intelligence analysts who produced those reports.

Panel chairman Porter Goss, a Florida Republican, said the committee asked questions about "how the intelligence picture on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction was assembled over time."

Rep. Jane Harman of California,

the senior Democrat on the panel, said in a statement she had believed the intelligence case presented to Congress before the war was "compelling" and had voted to support military action but now has concerns.

While she did not agree with some suggestions that the intelligence may have been fabricated, Harman said questions were warranted about whether the intelligence agencies' conclusions were based on circumstantial evidence or hard information and whether the threat posed by Iraq was imminent.

President Bush and top administration officials cited the threat from Iraq's banned weapons programs as the main justification for going to war. US forces have not found chemical or biological weapons since ousting Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from power in April and detaining some of his top weapons scientists.

US lawmakers for tighter sanctions on Myanmar

AFP, Washington

US lawmakers on Wednesday called for tighter sanctions on Myanmar's military junta to pressure for the release of opposition leader and Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and her followers.

Two senior US senators called for a downgrade of US diplomatic relations with Myanmar.

"It's another way of conveying the message that we consider this a pariah regime that does not deserve even the respect of having an ambassador here," said Mitch McConnell, a Kentucky Republican who wrote to Secretary of State Colin Powell seeking a cut in Myanmar's diplomatic status.

"Diplomatic relations with Burma (Myanmar) should be downgraded by sending Burma's ambassador in Washington back to Rangoon (Yangon) until such a time that Aung

San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners are freed," he said.

McConnell is one of the sponsors of The Burmese Freedom and Democracy Act, approved by the Senate last week to impose sanctions on Yangon.

California Democrat Dianne Feinstein said McConnell's proposal was necessary because the country's military regime had not responded to dialogue or other forms of engagement.

"My view is that it hasn't worked," she said. "There have been talks but there's been no action."

The two senators made their appeal as Powell urged a meeting of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh to step up pressure for Aung San Suu Kyi's release.