



Tehran Mehrabad airport staff and Emirates airlines crew transfer the coffins of Iranian twins Laleh and Ladan Bijani into an ambulance at the airport upon their arrival from Singapore on Thursday. The bodies of the Iranians, whose bid to lead separate lives after 29 years joined at the head ended in death in a Singapore operating theatre, were sent back to Iran for burial.

Iranian twins to be honoured among martyrs

AFP, Tehran

The bodies of Iranian twins Laleh and Ladan Bijani, whose bid to lead separate lives after 29 years joined at the head ended in their deaths in a Singapore operating theatre, returned to the Iranian capital Thursday.

In a sign of respect for the pair, officials said the twins would be honoured in a ceremony later in the day dedicated to the 300 recently recovered bodies of Iranian troops who died in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

The bodies will then be flown for burial at their place of birth, the poor village of Firouzabad in the southern province of Fars.

At Tehran's Mehrabad airport there were muted but nevertheless emotional scenes as around 100 friends, neighbours and well-wishers gathered to watch the two coffins carried by state officials from an Emirates plane.

Police saluted the coffins, which were covered with dark cloths and bright flowers, before they were put into an ambulance and whisked away to a local morgue and then to a prayer hall.

Iraq still lacks power, water and govt

AFP, Baghdad

Three months to the day after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, US forces Wednesday announced the arrest of two top Baathists, although rebuilding efforts founded with large parts of Baghdad still lacking power and water.

The US boss for Iraq, Paul Bremer, barnstormed the country's Shiite heartland, touting Washington's project of transforming Iraq into a democracy, but skipped meeting community leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a moderate considered receptive to US forces.

Mizban Khadr al-Hadi, a former high-ranking regional Baath Party leader and member of the decision-making Revolution Command Council, turned himself in to US troops in Baghdad on Tuesday, according to the US Central Command.

Former interior minister Mahmud Dhiyab al-Ahmad was captured on the same day at a location in Iraq that the command has not identified.

The Central Command also announced the seizure on Tuesday of between 400 and 500 rocket-propelled grenades -- the resistance's weapons of choice -- in a vehicle travelling west of Baghdad, whose four Iraqi passengers were arrested.

Despite the big name catches, there was no pause in the attacks on US soldiers which seem to have picked up despite a barrage of US military offensives this past month in central Iraq, the hub of support for Saddam.

Gunmen fired rocket-propelled grenades overnight at US positions in the hotspot town of Fallujah, west of the capital.

The US-led coalition, tasked

with rebuilding the infrastructure, schools and hospitals alongside conducting security operations, has downplayed the violence which has claimed the lives of at least 29 US soldiers since May.

Bremer said Tuesday that the attacks were the last desperate acts of a dying regime and did not represent the threat of a coordinated guerrilla force, as many fear.

With an eye on reconstruction, Bremer visited the holy city of Najaf Wednesday but met neither Sistani nor any other figures from the powerful Hawza, the highest Shiite religious body in Iraq, as Washington treads cautiously with the community making up 60 percent of the country.

The civil administrator said US President George W. Bush had a vision of "a unified Iraq" with a "democratically elected government which is representative of all strands of Iraqi society".

Washington fears Shiite ties with their brethren in neighboring Iran's Islamic republic, a long-time nemesis of the United States.

The coalition announced recruitment for the new Iraqi army would begin July 19, with an initial two-month basic training course kicking off August 2 -- the anniversary of Saddam's 1990 invasion of Kuwait -- and churning out the country's first 1,000-strong light mechanised infantry battalion in October.

The coalition aims to have a 12,000-strong army within a year and a 40,000-member force in two years as one of a slew of steps to create a new Iraq, far removed from the memory of Saddam.

Small chance of Iraqi WMD find: UK official

REUTERS, London

Almost four months after the United States and Britain invaded Iraq, a senior British official said on Thursday it would be "extremely difficult" to find banned weapons they said justified war.

The official, who has closely monitored Iraq's military capability, said it was more likely Iraqi scientists or army officers would eventually come forward with evidence to support the US-British charges -- instead of leading them to the weapons themselves.

"The fact that the Iraqis did not use any (weapons of mass destruction) during the conflict clearly indicates that they decided to do something else with the weapons that we genuinely believe that they had," he told Reuters.

"So they've either hidden, destroyed or dismantled them. And it's going to be extremely difficult to come up with the evidence. Not impossible, but it would be difficult."

"On the other hand, it is much more likely that scientists, mili-

tary officers, over time will come forward to say what was happening in respect of the programs that we believe were being developed in Iraq," added the official, who declined to be identified.

The British Broadcasting Corporation said on Thursday senior figures in London no longer believed banned missiles or chemical weapons would be found in Iraq.

Prime Minister Tony Blair, facing charges his government exaggerated intelligence warnings about the threat posed by former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, insisted this week evidence he had banned "weapons programs" will still emerge.

Some observers detected a tactical retreat in his careful choice of words, but his Downing Street office said it was a formula he had used in the past. Last September, in a bid to win public support for possible war, Blair published a dossier saying Iraq had chemical and biological weapons that could be deployed at 45 minutes notice.

Blair's government is now locked in an acrimonious row with the BBC over accusations

that it "sexed up" the dossier to make the case for war.

In the latest twist, the Ministry of Defence has challenged the BBC to say whether the source for its story was former UN weapons inspector David Kelly -- who the government says played only a limited role in compiling the September dossier.

A parliamentary committee said this week Blair's government did not mislead parliament or doctor evidence to justify the war on Iraq. But the foreign affairs committee said it gave undue prominence to the 45-minute claim and said "the jury is still out" on the quality of intelligence used to make Blair's case.

Opinion polls suggest the British public is no longer convinced of the need for war and members of parliament from all parties are demanding proof of banned weapons in Iraq.

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on Wednesday the United States did not go to war with Iraq because of dramatic new evidence of banned weapons, but because it saw existing information in a new light after the September 11 attacks.

Iran refuses immediate tougher nuclear probes, agrees to more talks

AFP, Tehran

UN atomic energy chief Mohamed ElBaradei failed here Wednesday to secure Iran's authorisation to immediately conduct tougher inspections of its suspect nuclear programme, but the two sides agreed to hold more talks on the issue.

"We have not discussed a timeframe for signing the protocol, but we agreed that a team of experts would come to Iran to discuss with Iran the areas that Iran needs clarification on," ElBaradei told reporters after what he termed a day of "open, direct and constructive" talks.

"I hope that once these issues have been clarified, Iran will be in a position to sign the protocol. But naturally that is a decision for the Iranian government to make."

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was in Iran to press home demands that Iran allow more rigorous nuclear inspections by immediately signing

an additional protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

That would grant his teams the power to make surprise visits to suspect facilities in Iran, which is accused by Washington of using atomic energy development as a cover for a top-secret bid to build a nuclear bomb.

At present, the Islamic republic is only obliged to accept pre-arranged visits to sites it chooses to declare. "Confidence takes time to build," ElBaradei said after talks with President Mohammad Khatami, Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi and Iran's atomic chief Gholam-Reza Aghazadeh.

"I think we need to start with the protocol and clarify all the outstanding issues," he said. "This is in the interests of Iran, because the more confidence we create, the more normalisation there will be between Iran and the rest of world."

Iran fiercely denies it is seeking a nuclear arsenal.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (2nd left) with First Lady Laura Bush watch an all female choir called Thokozak perform before dinner at the US Ambassador to South Africa residence Wednesday in Pretoria. President Bush is making his first visit to the African Continent on a five day-five country tour of Senegal, South Africa, Botswana, Uganda and Nigeria.

Washington now hopes to share burden of Iraq occupation: Rumsfeld

AFP, Washington

Washington hopes to share the cost and responsibility of the ongoing military occupation Iraq with a coalition of countries, NATO members playing a key role, top defense officials said Wednesday.

"We've got 19 countries on the ground, we've got commitment from another 19," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

At the hearing, which aimed to draw lessons learned from recent US military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, Rumsfeld and recently retired General Tommy Franks who until earlier this week led US Central Command, agreed with various members of the panel that the postwar reconstruction must include a broad array of nations.

"Italy and Spain have both made commitments," said Rumsfeld who said he expected additional deployments of foreign troops beginning in September.

In addition, "We have made a request to France and Germany," the US defence secretary said -- made by Deputy Secretary of State Paul Wolfowitz in January, before

the war began.

"Our goal is to get a large number of international forces from a lot of countries, including those two," he said.

"We have made requests to something like 70, 80 or 90 countries," Rumsfeld said.

Internationalization is increasingly seen as a way of not only defraying the mounting cost of US military operations in Iraq, but stemming the daily attacks US soldiers there have encountered.

"I would hope that internationalization would serve to reduce the threat to US forces in more ways than reducing the quantity of US forces on the ground," said Michigan Senator Carl Levin, the committee's ranking Democrat.

"Up until now we have been the main target ... because we are the ones who brought down Saddam's regime," said Levin, a vocal critic of the military operation in Iraq.

It would be hard for loyalists to depose Iraqi president Saddam Hussein "to sustain attacks on forces wearing NATO or UN patches on their shoulders, because it would be dramatized to the people of Iraq that this is not a US-British operation, but an international effort," Levin said.

Turkey, US in talks to ease tensions

AFP, Ankara

Turkish and US officials were holding closed door talks here Wednesday in a bid to thrash out their differences over Kurdish-held northern Iraq, just days after the arrest of Turkish soldiers in the region sparked an unprecedented crisis between the two NATO allies.

The delegations, comprised of senior generals and diplomats, were meeting at the Turkish army headquarters in Ankara, with a blackout imposed on the media.

The objective of the talks was to establish the circumstances which led to the arrest of 11 Turkish soldiers last week and to find ways to improve coordination in the region in the future, officials said.

Marriage tames criminals

AFP, Paris

Creative genius and crime express themselves early in men but both are turned off almost like a tap if a man gets married and has children, a study says.

Satoshi Kanazawa, a psychologist at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, compiled a database of the biographies of 280 great scientists, noting their age at the time when they made their greatest work.

The data remarkably concur with the brutal observation made by Albert Einstein, who wrote in 1942: "A person who has not made his great contribution to science before the age of 30 will never do so."

"Scientific productivity indeed fades with age," Kanazawa says. "Two-thirds (of all scientists) will have made their most significant contributions before their mid-thirties."

But, regardless of age, the great minds who married virtually kissed goodbye to making any further glorious additions to their CV.

Within five years of making their nuptial vows, nearly a quarter of married scientists had made their last significant contribution to history's Hall of Fame.



PHOTO: AFP

FSB agents look at the body of a FSB expert shortly after an explosion in downtown Moscow early Thursday. The explosive device went off near a restaurant killing the FSB state security service expert who sought to disarm it, police officials said.

Bush promises Botswana cash to fight AIDS

REUTERS, Pretoria

The US military arrested two more Iraqi officials on its "most-wanted" list as President Bush sought to fend off criticism that he misled Americans into the Iraq war.

US forces said they were holding a former interior minister and a Baath Party leader, meaning 21 Iraqis now remain unaccounted for in the US "deck of cards" of the 55 wanted officials, including Saddam Hussein and his two sons.

Bush said the war was right despite the White House acknowledging it had been a mistake to accuse Saddam of trying to buy uranium from Niger for weapons of mass destruction as the administration was building support for invading Iraq.

"I am absolutely confident in the decision I made," said Bush, who ordered the invasion of Iraq over the objections of many foreign governments on the basis of intelligence that Saddam had chemical, biological or nuclear arms programs.

No such arms have been found in the 10 weeks after the war. The Bush administration, like the government of its closest ally, Britain, has come under intensifying scrutiny for the way it showcased intelligence to justify America's first preemptive war.

Congressional committees are evaluating whether Bush's administration may have used faulty or exaggerated intelligence on Iraq's weapons to persuade the public of a need to eliminate the threat from Saddam.