

US forces enter Mosul in hunt for Saddam

UN mulls 'serious reduction' in Iraq operations

AFP, Arbil

US forces backed by helicopters entered the al-Arabi neighborhood in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul Sunday, residents told AFP, adding that deposed president Saddam Hussein could be hiding out in the area.

US forces, acting on information that Saddam may be hiding in the district, are deployed en force there and helicopters are hovering overhead, the residents told AFP's correspondent in this Kurdish city southeast of Mosul.

"There is a heavy presence of US troops, acting on information that Saddam may be hiding in the al-Arabi neighborhood," one resident said.

US forces killed Saddam's sons Uday and Qusay in a raid on a villa in Mosul on July 22.

Earlier report says the United Nations may further scale down its already reduced operations in Iraq in the wake of an attack in the holy city of Najaf that killed 83 people, it said Saturday.

"We are considering a serious reduction in the number of UN staff because we have missions to accomplish here and the difficulties we face do not permit us to do that properly," said UN spokeswoman in Iraq, Veronique Taveau.

But she would not say how many staff might be pulled out and insisted that no decision had yet been made.

The world body evacuated many of its staff after an August 19 truck bombing outside its Baghdad headquarters that killed 22 people, including its special envoy to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and wounded more than 100.

The United Nations now has about 400 Iraqis and some 150 expatriates remaining, according to Taveau.

Any further reductions would come from its offices in Baghdad, in the cities of Mosul and Arbil in the north, Basra in the south and Hilla in central Iraq.

On Friday, a bomb attack outside one of Shiite Islam's holiest shrines in Najaf killed 83 people, including a top Muslim cleric.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Saturday Moscow would not oppose the establishment of an international force in Iraq under US command so long as it was authorised by the United Nations Security Council.



Shiite Muslims grieve over the assassination of Ayatollah Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim (in photo at centre) during his funeral ceremony at Kazemiya Mosque in Baghdad yesterday. Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI) was killed in a twin car bombing August 29 outside the Mausoleum of Imam Ali in Najaf, 180 km south of Baghdad, after Friday prayers along with 82 others.

300,000 Iraqis join Shiite leader's funeral march

AP, Baghdad

More than 300,000 Muslims began a two-day, 110-mile march to the holy city of Najaf on Sunday to mourn a cherished Shiite leader who was assassinated in a car bombing that killed at least 85 people.

The faithful beat their chests and called for vengeance as they slowly followed a flatbed truck carrying a symbolic coffin for Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim, a moderate cleric and Saddam Hussein opponent. Authorities said they could only find al-Hakim's hand, watch, wedding band and pen.

"Our revenge will be severe on the killers," read one of the many banners carried by mourners.

Red and white roses were laid on the coffin and a large portrait of al-Hakim was placed in front of it.

The Iraqi police handling the investigation into Friday's bombing say they have arrested 19 men - many of them foreigners and all with admitted links to al-Qaeda - in connection with the blast.

However, many Shiites blame the cleric's death on Saddam Hussein loyalists and the US-led coalition, which they say has failed to provide adequate security in the country since the dictator's fall.

"Saddam and Bush will not humiliate us," read another banner.

The procession began at the al-Kadhimiyyah Shrine, one of Baghdad's most sacred Shiite sites, and was expected to grow as it weaved its way southward.

The marchers were to stop at holy sites in Karbala before arriving at the blast site, Najaf's Imam Ali Shrine, for the funeral on Tuesday.

Police detained two Iraqis and two Saudis shortly after the Friday attack, and they provided information leading to the arrest of 15 other suspects, said a senior police official in Najaf, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Two Kuwaitis and six Palestinians with Jordanian passports were among the suspects, the official said. The remainder were Iraqis and Saudis, the official said, without giving a breakdown.

Initial information shows the foreigners entered Iraq from neighboring Kuwait, Syria and Jordan, the official said, adding that they belong to the Wahhabi sect of Sunni Islam.

"They are all connected to al-Qaeda," the official said.

Wahhabism is the strict, fundamentalist branch of Sunni Islam from which al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden draws spiritual direction. Based in Saudi Arabia, its followers show little tolerance for non-Wahhabi Sunnis and Shiites.

Saudi king asks clerics to fight extremism

REUTERS, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's King Fahd has ordered Muslim clerics to combat extremist ideologies that he said have duped some Saudi youth into joining terrorist cells that aim to harm the kingdom and Islam.

Saudi Arabia, birthplace of Islam and of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, is trying to quash militants at home and improve its image abroad after the September 11 attacks on US cities two years ago and suicide bombings in Riyadh in May.

"Ignorance has penetrated some of the nation's youth and tempted terrorist networks to use them for aims which only serve the nation's enemies and harm Islam and Muslims and open the door for accusations against Islam of violence and terrorism," King Fahd said in a speech carried by newspapers Sunday.



Britons now say Diana was murdered

AFP, London

More than a quarter of Britons believe Princess Diana was murdered, according to a poll published Sunday on the sixth anniversary of her death in a Paris car crash.

Asked if they believed Diana had been murdered, 27 percent of respondents to an NOP survey replied 'yes', 51 percent said 'no' while the rest were unsure.

Meanwhile, 49 percent said they believed there had been a "cover up" into the circumstances of her death, while 34 percent disagreed.

The poll, published in the Sunday Express, comes two days after a regional government official announced there would be a coroner's inquest in Britain into the death of Diana's lover Dodi Fayed, who died alongside the princess in the car crash on August 31, 1997.

Asked if there should be an inquiry into the deaths of Dodi and Diana similar to the ongoing inquiry into the presumed suicide of weapons expert David Kelly, 47 percent said 'yes' with 45 percent opposing such a move.

Dodi's father, Egyptian-born tycoon Mohammed Al Fayed, has long campaigned for a public inquiry, claiming the crash was the result of foul play.

Dodi and Diana were in the back seat of a limousine - pursued by photographers on motorbikes - when it crashed inside a road tunnel in the French capital. Only Diana's bodyguard survived.

French judges concluded that the crash was due to the fact that the driver had been drinking and the car was travelling too fast.



Indian personnel of the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) stand guard at a barricade as a car approaches on the road leading to the Presidential Palace and government offices in New Delhi yesterday. Indian security forces are on a heightened state of alert after intercepting an arms laden fruit lorry and killing two alleged militants in an encounter in the capital August 30.

Red alert in India after killing of 2 JeM militants in Delhi 2 other rebels caught in UP

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police were on high alert yesterday against possible rebel attacks after killing two militants who were allegedly plotting a new attack less than a week after the Mumbai car bombings.

More than 40,000 police were deployed in Mumbai and thousands of others formed self-protection militias as the city began a festival to the elephant-headed god Ganesha, six days after the bombings which left 52 dead.

In New Delhi, police Saturday shot dead two men they said were planning to attack a crowded place with a consignment of arms, including at least 10 hand grenades, seized three hours earlier during a search of a fruit truck.

A senior police official said the operation was carried out on "specific information" but warned that more Islamic militants were likely at large in the capital of 14 million people.

Police said they learned of plans for an attack in New Delhi after fruiting the passengers of the fruit truck, which was registered in insurgency-wracked Indian Kashmir, and set up a police roadblock in a largely Muslim area of the city, Nizamuddin.

Police declined to comment on a report in the Hindustan Times newspaper that the plot was uncovered when a businessman overheard a telephone conversation saying 11 men had entered New Delhi ready "to do something bigger than Monday's blasts in Mumbai."

Police alleged at least one of the slain men was a Pakistani and that they belonged to Jaish-e-Mohammad, one of the most extreme groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir.

Five people have been arrested in connection with the Mumbai attacks and many more questioned as police look for the mastermind, said Kripashankar Singh, home minister of Maharashtra province of which Mumbai is the capital.

PTI adds: Delhi Police personnel on Sunday arrested two Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists from Bulandshahr district of Uttar Pradesh.

The arrested persons are brothers of one JeM terrorist Habibullah shot dead by police in an encounter in the national capital on Saturday night, they said.

US jets bomb Taliban positions

AP, QALAT

US fighter jets and helicopters pounded suspected Taliban positions before dawn Sunday in a fresh assault in the rugged mountain peaks of Zabul province, an Afghan intelligence official said.

The latest round of bombing in the southern province went on for three hours overnight ending shortly before dawn Sunday, said Khalil Hotak, the province's intelligence chief.

For nearly a week now, the mountainous region about 40 miles north of Qalat, the provincial capital, has been the scene of intense battles between suspected Taliban rebels, Afghan soldiers and their US allies.

Dozens of Taliban fighters are reported to have been killed and several others arrested so far, although it has been impossible to get independent confirmation on casualty figures.

Tigers preparing own proposals to revive talks

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tigers rebels will respond within a month to an offer from the Sri Lankan government to revive peace talks that have been stalled since April, a pro-rebel website said yesterday.

Tamilnet.com reported that the Tigers had completed substantial work on their counter-proposals to resume Norwegian-brokered peace negotiations aimed at ending a three-decades-long war on the island.

The proposals were drafted at a four-day, closed-door meet in Paris last week of the Tigers and their constitutional and legal experts.

They were being taken to rebel-held Wannai in northern Sri Lanka for the approval of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) leadership.

"The draft proposal will then be handed over to the Norwegian government (which) will submit the LTTE's response to the government of Sri Lanka," the Tamilnet website said.

Only Blair's departure will end Britain's culture of spin: Opposition leader

AFP, London

Only the resignation of British Prime Minister Tony Blair can end the government's much maligned culture of spin, opposition leader Iain Duncan Smith wrote in a newspaper published Sunday.

Analysts believe the resignation Friday of Blair's most powerful aide, his director of communications and strategy Alastair Campbell, is a chance to finally bury the spin culture - a view clearly not shared by Duncan Smith.

"But now he's going, let's not be deceived that his departure... will mean an end to Labour's culture of spin and deceit," the Conservative Party leader wrote in The Independent on Sunday.

"As Campbell goes -- on this I'm absolutely clear -- it's not the resignation of the servant that matters but the departure of his master," he said.

"The real Downing Street director of communications must go: Tony Blair himself."

Campbell, a 46-year-old former tabloid journalist, was loathed by many members of parliament and political writers as an unelected, unaccountable "spin doctor", intensely preoccupied with manag-

ing the image of Blair and his centre-left Labour administration.

Campbell was one of the original members of Blair's inner circle who helped steer the Labour Party to two landslide election victories.

The Independent on Sunday said a new 'department of truth' headed by a top-ranking civil servant would be set up following Campbell's departure.

Blair's office has already announced that former Labour Party spokesman David Hill will succeed Campbell.

The Mail on Sunday, meanwhile, said Blair was to order a clear-out of his closest aides, including chief of staff Jonathan Powell and official spokesman Tom Kelly.

Blair has reportedly told colleagues he wants a new set of senior advisers in order to make a clean break with the damage caused by the scandal over the presumed suicide of weapons expert David Kelly.

The Sunday Mirror said Blair will move swiftly to appoint Campbell as a lord, allowing him a return to politics as a peer sitting in parliament's upper chamber, the House of Lords.

Apartment fire kills 13 in Taiwan

REUTERS, Taipei

Fire swept through an apartment block on the outskirts of Taipei early Sunday killing 13 people and injuring 70, and investigators said they were checking a report it was caused by a woman who set herself on fire. Desperate residents of the seven-story building jumped off balconies to escape the blaze, or climbed down ropes through thick black smoke as illegal building structures and narrow alleyways hampered fire trucks and rescue efforts.

Some fell several floors to the ground.

Residents of the building in Lu Chou in Taipei County said they heard two people quarrelling just before shouts of "Fire! Help!" rang from the building in the early hours.

A spokeswoman for the Taipei County Government said a man told investigators his wife had set herself on fire and that had caused the blaze. Spokeswoman Hsieh Lili said the woman was in hospital and investigators were looking into the report.

Police said earlier the cause of the fire was not known but it had apparently started on the ground floor of the block, where motorcycles were parked.

The Taipei County government said 13 people were killed, including a three-year-old girl. Twenty-two were seriously injured, 48 had minor injuries and 112 were rescued.



Activists of the Imamia Student Organisation (ISO) hold placards as they chant slogans during a demonstration in Lahore to protest against the attacks in the Iraqi town of Najaf on August 30. The demonstration came in response to an event in which a car bomb detonated after Friday prayers on August 29 in the Iraqi town of Najaf killed at least 83 people including Shiite leader Ayatollah Mohammad Baqer al-Hakim and wounded 229 others.