

'Come & help us in Iraq,' US soldiers urge world

Bush turns to UN for stabilising Baghdad

REUTERS, Tikrit

American soldiers struggling to keep a lid on violence in Iraq and concerned by near-daily fatalities yearn to see more troops from other nations share the work of occupation in Iraq.

"It's getting crazy out there, and we can't be everywhere at the same time," said Tikrit-based Sergeant Michael Evans, referring to Iraq's recent string of bomb blasts and guerrilla attacks on the US-led force in Iraq.

"It's time the rest of the world gave us a little reinforcement. We're paying for too much of this. I think we should scale down and let others come in."

Around 150,000 American troops are stationed in Iraq, supported by 21,000 from other nations, 11,000 of them British.

As the human and financial costs

mount, Washington is anxious for UN involvement to get more non-American soldiers in and perhaps allow some of its troops home.

President Bush on Tuesday directed Secretary of State Colin Powell to open talks at the UN Security Council on a resolution aimed at building a wider, multinational force.

"I think we would have lost less people if the UN had been with us earlier," Sergeant Rob Summerfield, from Ohio, said on Wednesday at the US military base in Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's home town north of Baghdad.

Sixty-seven US and 11 British soldiers have been killed in attacks since Bush declared major combat over on May 1.

"I think a lot of people want to come over here and help us but they can't," Summerfield added. "For political reasons, their country is not

sending them."

Wary of serving under a US-led occupation, nations such as India, Pakistan and Turkey have said there has to be a stronger UN mandate first. One formula being discussed is a UN multinational force under US command.

"We understand that is needed to make things more legitimate in the view of the outside world," said Lieutenant Israel Guzman, from Texas. "But the world must understand we cannot only take US troops to do this. Fighting terrorism and nation-building is an international responsibility."

The 26,000-strong 4th Infantry Division, based at one of Saddam's former palaces on the banks of the river Tigris in Tikrit, knows only too well the perils of occupation.

Their patrols come under daily attack from Iraqi guerrillas in a zone traditionally supportive of Saddam

and now a focus of anti-American resistance.

Rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) and mortars often come fizzing into the base, including several overnight on Wednesday.

Soldiers based here shunned suggestions they would not want to relinquish any control and work alongside non-Americans.

"We were here the first time, side-by-side with the French," said Evans, also from Texas, recalling the 1991 Gulf War. "They were great to work with, and as funny as hell. Some of their tactics were like 'wow, I would never have done it that way' but we learned from each other."

The Americans' favorites to work with are the British, and not just because of language and cultural affinities. "They're aggressive, they come to fight, they're well-equipped," said Guzman.



PHOTO: AFP

US Marines attend a multi-national transfer of authority ceremony yesterday at the Camp Babylon Amphetheatre in Hilla, 100 km south of Baghdad. Poland took control of a large chunk of Iraq becoming the third country after the United States and Britain to accept official responsibility as an occupying force. Poland will have control over a region between Baghdad and Basra as commander of a 9,000-man force including elements from Bulgaria, Spain, Ukraine and other countries.

First post-Saddam Iraqi cabinet sworn in

AFP, Baghdad

The ministers who will form an interim government until elections are held in Iraq were sworn in yesterday at a Baghdad ceremony amid tight US security following three deadly car bombs in as many weeks.

"I swear by almighty Allah to do my utmost to serve and protect Iraq, its people, land and sovereignty, and Allah is my witness," said each minister in turn, placing a hand on a copy of the Koran, the Muslim holy book.

The sole woman, Public Works Minister Nisrin Mustafa al-Barwari, led the way in taking her oath of office.

The new cabinet, unveiled Monday, is divided up among the country's various communities, with 13 ministries going to Shiite Muslims, five to Sunni Muslims, five to Kurds, one to the Turkmen and one to the Christians.

The Christian cabinet member held a copy of the Bible as he was sworn in.

Eight members of the cabinet were unable to attend the ceremony for "technical reasons" and were due to be sworn in later. Two ministers

were introduced as having only just returned to Iraq from abroad in time for the swearing-in.

Paul Bremer, the US civilian administrator for Iraq, attended the event in Baghdad's international convention centre, now used as one of the US-led coalition's main administrative buildings.

But amid US concern that the event should be seen as an exclusively Iraqi one, he made no intervention, limiting his role to hosting a reception for the new ministers afterwards.

The new cabinet will report to the Governing Council, an interim leadership appointed by the US-led coalition in July.

The holder of the council's rotating chairmanship -- currently Ahmed Chalabi, head of the Pentagon-backed Iraqi National Congress -- will chair meetings of the cabinet, which has no prime minister.

Each ministry will also continue to be supervised by a coalition advisor.

Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, who served as one of the official witnesses at the swearing-in, rejected suggestions that the cabinet would remain powerless as long as the coalition advisors stayed in place.

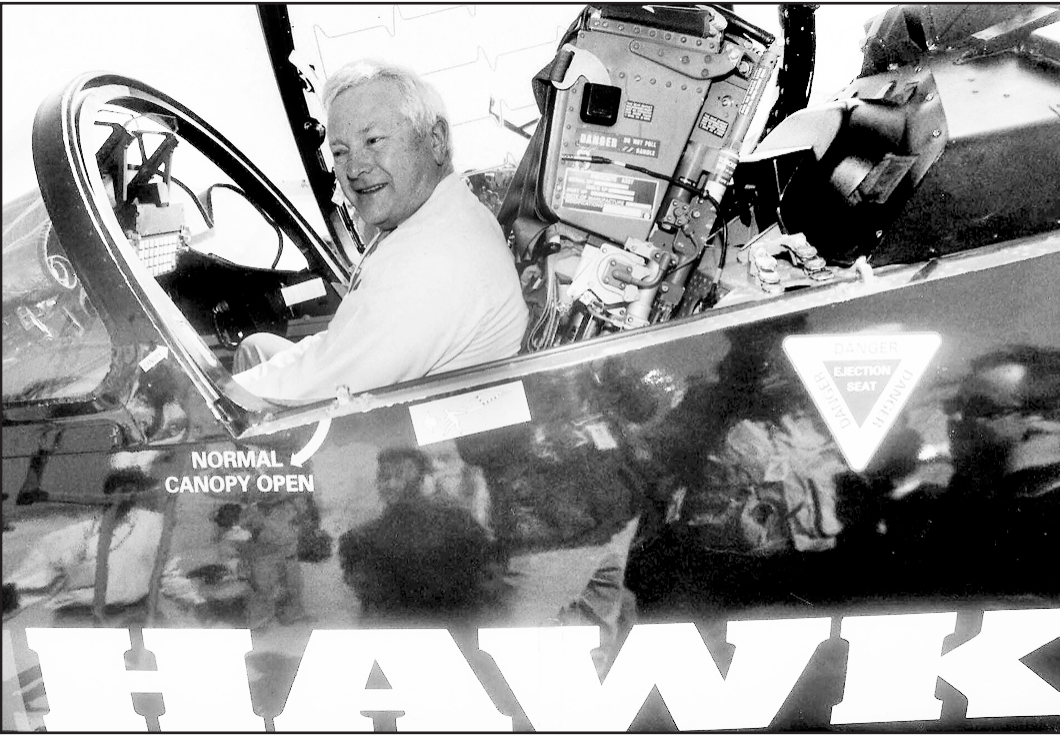


PHOTO: AFP

In this picture taken February 6 Britain's Minister of Defence Procurement William Bach poses inside the cockpit of the British advance jet trainer aircraft "Hawk" at the "Aero India Show 2003" aeronautics exhibition in Bangalore. The Indian cabinet yesterday approved a multi-billion dollar deal to acquire British Aerospace's Hawk Advance Jet Trainers (AJT) for its Air Force.

Indian cabinet clears Hawk jet trainer deal

AFP, New Delhi

India Wednesday cleared a multi-million dollar deal to acquire 66 British Aerospace Hawk Advance Jet Trainers (AJTs) for its accident-prone air force after two decades of vacillation, officials said.

The decision was taken during a two-hour security cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and attended by Defence Minister George Fernandes, Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha and other senior ministers.

"Yes. Hawk has been cleared and we will be giving details of the deal at around 4:00 pm (1030 GMT)," defence spokesman Amitabh Chakravarty said.

A highly-placed ministry source said India would purchase a total of 66 Hawk aircraft, which can double as combat planes.

"The deal is about 66 AJTs and factors such as price and other details would be given out soon," the source told AFP.

'Palestinian PM to quit without more power'

Arafat accuses Israel of killing peace roadmap

REUTERS, AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, locked in a power struggle with Yasser Arafat, will tell parliament today he will quit unless he wins authority to take key peace steps, a Palestinian minister said.

"Abbas will ask for support for his policies or he leaves," Palestinian Information Minister Nabil Amr told Reuters on Wednesday in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

"Abbas will reiterate that the cabinet must be fully empowered, as the Basic Law states, especially in the security and administrative fields," he said.

"He will clearly ask for backing of his policies based on the principle of one authority, respect for the rule of law, and rejection of illegal weapons," Amr said.

The moderate premier will address parliament on Thursday to report on his performance four months after Palestinian President Arafat appointed him under international pressure for an end to almost three years of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Disputes with Arafat have bogged down Abbas's campaign for reforms, including a crackdown on militant factions, crucial to a US-backed "road map" plan for peace with Israel.

Arafat has denied Israeli and US accusations of fomenting militant violence and obstructing the peace plan, but has refused to cede control to Abbas of Palestinian security forces seen as indispensable to reining in militants.

Meanwhile, Yasser Arafat accused Israel of killing a US-backed peace plan with its "military aggression," CNN's Web site quoted the Palestinian president on Wednesday as saying.

"The road map is dead, but only because of Israeli military aggression in recent weeks," Arafat told the US network in the off-camera interview.

He also accused President Bush's administration of not doing enough to keep the peace plan alive because of its preoccupation with rebuilding Iraq and next year's presidential election, according to CNN.

Israel has carried out six helicopter missile attacks against Islamic militants since a Palestinian suicide bomber killed 21 Israelis in an attack on a Jerusalem bus on August 19.

Eleven militants and five bystanders have been killed in the Israeli strikes in the Gaza Strip.

Troops keep up Kashmir vigil as violence explodes

AFP, Srinagar

An Indian security force member was killed yesterday in a clash with Islamic militants in the jungles of Indian Kashmir, while three rebels were gunned down in other parts of the state, police said.

Border guards, meanwhile, went on high alert following waves of militant attacks in the insurgency-ravaged region that have left 40 people dead since Sunday, a police spokesman said.

Police attribute the explosion of violence to revenge attacks by rebels fighting Indian rule in Kashmir after their commander was gunned down by troops on Saturday.

The body count has since risen -- five on Sunday, 16 on Monday and 15 on Tuesday, according to police figures.

Police gave no further details about the three rebels killed early Wednesday but a spokesman added that a Border Security Force guard was injured in an overnight

attack by rebels on their patrol in Srinagar.

The clash between a group of seven militants and the security forces in the Kathua border district, 85 km east of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, continued until mid-afternoon Wednesday, police said.

In the intense gunbattle, a security force official was killed and three others wounded, police said.

By mid-afternoon, after a heavy barrage of gunfire from both sides, the rebels' guns suddenly fell silent and police launched a search operation to determine whether they had been killed or had escaped into the forest.

Operations against the militants began Tuesday afternoon when police noticed seven men in army fatigues near the heavily-forested village of Gatti.

When challenged, the rebels took cover in the forest as authorities rushed in paramilitary and army reinforcements to tighten a police cordon, a police official said.

N Korean parliament backs nuke buildup

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea's parliament said yesterday it would take "relevant measures" to support the communist leadership's decision to reject further talks on the country's nuclear programme and boost its atomic deterrent.

The unusual decision by the Supreme People's Assembly echoed a tough weekend Foreign Ministry statement on last week's six-way talks in Beijing. But it seemed to contradict comments by the official KCNA news agency on Monday that Pyongyang still wanted to resolve the dispute through dialogue.

The parliamentary decision said the Beijing talks -- which brought together China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea and the United States -- proved Washington did not want to co-exist peacefully with the North.

It noted that the North Korean Foreign Ministry, with government backing, had said it saw no further

point in talks and Pyongyang had no choice but to keep and enhance its nuclear deterrent.

"(Parliament) considered as just all the measures taken by the Foreign Ministry upon the authorization of the DPRK government, supported and approved them and decided to take relevant measures," KCNA quoted parliament as saying. It did not elaborate on those measures.

South Korean media have said the North's parliament might map out economic reforms and policy for the next five years.

The North's economy is in tatters and piecemeal reforms, such as scrapping rationing and raising prices, have done little to stitch things together.

Parliament did not refer to KCNA's softer line on Monday, but North Korea has a record of issuing confusing signals while negotiating. DPRK stands for the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

AFP, Washington

The United States will not be able to sustain its current occupation force in Iraq without increasing the overall size of the military, ending other overseas commitments or rescinding troop rotation rules, according to a new congressional report slated for release Wednesday.

The Congressional Budget Office warned that if the current policy of keeping army units in a war zone no longer than one year is preserved, the US Army "would be unable to sustain" its present Iraq contingent "beyond about March 2004."

The report was certain to add fuel to the growing debate in Washington over the Bush administration's readiness to handle post-Saddam Iraq, including the costs of occupation.

Senior US officials said Tuesday the United States would seek a new UN Security Council resolution to expand the United Nations mandate in Iraq, making it easier for more countries to participate in the stabilization force.

The enormous expense -- coupled with the estimated four billion dollars a month being spent on the military occupation of Iraq, growing criticism of the operation and a rising death toll among US troops -- has created a new urgency in recruiting more countries to join the stabilization effort.

More than 180,000 US troops are currently deployed in Iraq and neighboring Gulf nations in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, according to congressional officials.

But soldiers hunting down remnants of the Saddam Hussein regime will have to start withdrawing

next spring, and the US Army lacks fresh troops to replace them all, the officials said.

As a result, the Army will be able to keep in Iraq indefinitely only between 38,000 and 64,000 troops, if it relies exclusively on its active duty soldiers and some reserve units, according to the CBO report, advance copies of which circulated on Capitol Hill late Tuesday.

Maintaining such an occupation force would cost the US taxpayer up to 12 billion dollars a year.

To overcome the shortage, the Pentagon could marshal the resources of the Marine Corps, various special operations units and the National Guard and bring the sustainable occupation force to up to 106,000 military personnel.

But that would boost occupation costs to up to 19 billion dollars a year, the report said.

40 feared dead as boat sinks in India

AFP, Patna

At least 40 people were feared dead after a motorboat capsized in a swollen river during a flash flood in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, a government official said Wednesday.

The cramped boat carrying 80 people as well as cattle capsized in the turbulent Koshi river near Jauri village in Bihar's flooded Saharsa district, some 325 km northeast of the state capital Patna Tuesday evening, just after leaving the shore.

"Around 40 people are said to be dead including three women," said Nayeem Akhtar, a local administrative official.

Police did not say what happened to the cattle.

Rescue and recovery operations started quickly but were hindered by the fading light Tuesday evening and the late arrival of emergency divers. They were resumed Wednesday.

Nilamber Yadav, who swam to safety Tuesday, told police that no more than 25 people onboard would have been able to save themselves or lucky enough to have been plucked from the drink.

5 killed in Russian train blasts

AP, AFP, Rostov-On-Don

Two bombs exploded under a commuter train in southern Russia on Wednesday, killing at least five people and wounding 30 others, officials said.

The bombs were planted on the track of the railway line linking Kislavodsk to Mineralnye Vody in the Caucasus region. There were about 50 people in the third car of the six-car train which was directly hit by the blast, Railway Ministry's spokesman Konstantin Pashkov said.

Each bomb contained about 150 grams of explosives and the two blasts killed five people, Russian officials said.

Nikolai Lituyk, a deputy chief of the Emergency Situations Ministry in southern Russia, said up to 30 people were wounded in the explosion which occurred as the train was approaching a station in the town of Podkumok.



PHOTO: AFP

Passengers and driver of a truck are trapped after an accident as Typhoon Dujuan lashes the coastal town of Panyu, in southern China's Guangdong province yesterday. At least 27 people were killed and 116 injured after powerful Typhoon Dujuan struck southern China. Marks on frame are from rain.



PHOTO: AFP

Pro-Arroyo demonstrators chanting "yes to democracy" rally at the People Power Monument outside the military's headquarters in Manila yesterday amid reports of a new destabilisation campaign against Philippine President Gloria Arroyo. Arroyo and top aides warned that remnants of the failed July coup attempt were attempting to bribe military officials into joining a new plot against the Philippines government.