

US troops search for Saddam in Baghdad

Interim govt says a strong no to Turkish troops

AFP, Baghdad

US troops backed by armoured vehicles late Tuesday sealed off a Baghdad neighbourhood, saying they were searching for former regime leaders after what police said was a tip-off Saddam Hussein was in the area.

"We're conducting an operation against former regime loyalists and possible blackist members," US Major John Frisbee told AFP.

"We have reports that some of these people have been spotted," he said, adding: "We will try to catch them."

He said the troops were also searching buildings in the area that

may serve as safe houses for supporters of Saddam, who has been in hiding since US troops toppled him on April 9.

An Iraqi policeman, who asked not to be named, said one person claimed to have seen the fugitive ex-leader in a car in the area.

An employee at the Cedar Hotel, within the area sealed off with barbed wire and several dozen armoured military vehicles, said US troops asked him whether he had seen Saddam.

A Turkish guest at the hotel, Gulin Pasturk, said a US soldier had told her Tuesday evening "Saddam was seen here 10 minutes ago."

US forces searched the hotel, but declined to say whether they were looking for Saddam.

A large area of Baghdad's Karada neighbourhood was sealed off with residents and guests, among them several foreign correspondents, prevented from entering or leaving the area where at least 100 soldiers were deployed.

Meanwhile, Iraq's interim government spoke out bluntly Wednesday against the deployment of Turkish troops here, highlighting a growing rift between the country's budding leadership and the US-led coalition.

Iraqis worried the dispatch of

soldiers from neighboring Turkey would pose another obstacle in the country's drive for sovereignty six months after US forces toppled Saddam Hussein.

"Sending these troops would delay our regaining sovereignty," said council member Nasseer Chaderchi.

The spectre of Turkish troops on Iraqi soil drew attention to the Governing Council's weak position in relation to the Americans who have pushed for the idea, ignoring the historic tensions between Iraq and Turkey.



PHOTO: AFP

US soldiers search the al-Arz Hotel (Cedar Hotel) on Tuesday in Baghdad, where the office of Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency is located. US troops cordoned off the general neighbourhood conducting search operations, though it remained unclear as to who or what they were looking for.

Japan asks Yangon to free Suu Kyi

PTI, Bali

Japan, Myanmar's largest donor, has asked Yangon to immediately release pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and restore democracy in that country.

This message was conveyed during a five-minute conversation Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had with his Myanmarese counterpart Ge. Khin Nyut on the sidelines of the ongoing ASEAN Summit in Bali on Tuesday.

"I urge you to erase the concern of the international community. I would like you to create an environment in which Japan can happily work with Myanmar," Japanese Prime Minister's spokesman Jiro Kkuyama was quoted as saying by English language daily The Jakarta Post.

Kkuyama said Tokyo has cut all development assistance after the Myanmar Junta re-arrested Suu Kyi on May 30 and would not resume the assistance till democracy was restored in that country.

Taliban FM freed after talks with US

REUTERS, Spin Boldak

The most senior Taliban leader held by US-forces in Afghanistan has been freed after helping to broker talks between US officials and Taliban fighters.

A senior foreign ministry official in southern Afghanistan told Reuters that Muttawakil had been freed from the US military headquarters at Bagram after helping to arrange talks between US forces and the Taliban in the southern city of Kandahar.

A close friend of Muttawakil said he had been released four days ago.

"Now he is living with his family in Kandahar," he said. "I myself have spoken to him by telephone."

Muttawakil, considered a moderate member of the radical Islamic movement, surrendered to Kandahar authorities in February 2002 and was handed over to US forces.

The foreign ministry official, who did not want to be named, said Muttawakil had played "a very important role" in arranging talks between US forces and the Taliban near the airport in Kandahar a few days ago, but declined to give more details.



PHOTO: AFP

Militant workers dressed in skull masks and halloween costumes, picket the US embassy yesterday to protest the visit of US President George Bush in Manila on October 18. The leftists burned pictures of Bush whom they dubbed the "world's number one terrorist"

Thousands of Iraqi Shiites mount anti-US protest

AFP, Baghdad

Thousands of Shiite Muslim militiamen and demonstrators gathered by a Baghdad mosque under the gaze of US troops yesterday to protest the arrest of two clerics.

The militiamen, belonging to incendiary young cleric Moqtada Sadr's Mehdi Army, marched in military formation as US troops hovered on the perimeter of the Ali al-Bayaa mosque in western Baghdad.

More than 4,000 Iraqis demonstrated in the al-Bayaa neighborhood the previous day, accusing the Americans of arresting Shiite clerics Moayad Kazraj and Jaleel al-Shumari, who are considered followers of Sadr, a vehement foe of the US presence in Iraq.

"Today we hold banners, tomorrow we pick up our guns," the crowd shouted on Tuesday, as they demonstrated in front of US forces by the mosque.

US fails to locate anti-aircraft missiles in Iraq: Report

PTI, New York

The United States military has been unable to locate a large number of shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles that were part of the arsenal of Saddam Hussein, compounding the security risks for airports and airlines in Iraq and around the world, officials said.

The lack of accounting for the missiles, which officials say there could be hundreds of, is the primary reason the occupation authorities have not yet reopened the Baghdad International Airport to commercial traffic, the New York Times reported yesterday quoting officials.

The terminal has been rebuilt and the runways repaired, and Australian soldiers are running the air traffic control system. But portable missiles were fired at incoming planes several times in recent weeks, one senior official told the Times.

The missiles missed their targets widely, suggesting that the people

who fired them had not been trained well. Most of those incidents have not been reported to the public.

American military officers, the paper said, do not know exactly how many of the missiles are unaccounted for, because they do not have precise estimates of how many Iraq once possessed.

The US is pressing the search for the missiles, offering a reward of \$500 for each one. The Pentagon has been surprised how many of the weapons, mostly Russian-designed SA-7's, Iraqis have turned in; another coalition official was quoted as saying.

In all, 317 shoulder-fired missiles have been handed over to the military since May 1, according to unclassified army figures. The military has paid more than \$100,000 in rewards, the figures show.

US troops have also found several hundred shoulder-fired missiles, many in weapons dumps the locations of which remain

secret, another allied official was quoted as saying.

But the Times said occupation officials remain concerned, because there is a vibrant international black market for the missiles in which a SA-7 can fetch as much as \$5,000 far more than the US army is offering.

The missiles are easy to smuggle and Iraq's borders are highly porous at the moment.

American officials have discovered that Hussein's overall conventional military arsenal was much larger than pre-war estimates. The CIA has estimated that the weapons dumps found so far in Iraq hold 600,000 tons of all kinds of ammunition and weapons.

The missiles believed to be available on the world black market include highly sophisticated American-made Stingers, nearly one thousand of which were given by the CIA to the Islamic guerrillas who fought the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980's.

Indo-Pak troops trade fire across LoC

AFP, Jammu

Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged heavy mortar fire along their disputed border in the troubled Himalayan region of Kashmir, Indian police said yesterday.

Shelling by Pakistani troops began Tuesday and continued early Wednesday, a police source said, adding the area targeted was the border district of Poonch, 240 km west of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu.

"Some shells from the Pakistani side landed close to a makeshift shelter near Poonch hospital where relatives of the sick are housed," the source said.

The shells damaged a wall of the hospital, which houses about 600 patients, but there were no casualties, he said.

Indian troops retaliated to the Pakistani shelling, he added.

Culprit behind CIA leak may not be found, says Bush

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush cast doubt Tuesday on whether a probe would discover which senior administration official identified a covert CIA agent, as a deadline passed for handing over documents to investigators.

The leak is the first major scandal to hit the White House, but Bush told reporters: "I don't know whether we are going to find out the senior administration official."

"This is a large administration and there are a lot of senior administration officials, and I don't have any idea," he said after a cabinet meeting at the White House.

But he added: "I want to know the truth. That's why I've instructed this staff of mine to cooperate fully with the investigators."

The White House had given staff until 2100 GMT Tuesday to hand over documents related to the leaking of the name of Valerie Plame, the wife of Joseph Wilson, a former ambassador who has accused the Bush administration of exaggerating the case for war against Iraq.

Tories mount push for referendum on EU

AFP, Blackpool

Britain's main opposition Conservatives launched a drive Wednesday to force Prime Minister Tony Blair to call a referendum on the proposed European Union constitution, which they deeply oppose.

At their annual conference in Blackpool, northwest England, the Tories -- the most euroskeptic of Britain's political parties -- hope that a referendum would both humiliate Blair and stop the EU constitution dead in its tracks.

"We will fight this damaging constitution with everything we've got," Conservative foreign affairs spokesman Michael Ancram was to tell the conference later Wednesday.

"From a start, the British people have a right to say yes or no in a referendum. Other EU countries are having referendums to decide," he said, according to an advance text of his speech given to journalists.

"Mr. Blair, what is wrong with the British people that we cannot be trusted to decide? We will promote a petition to parliament requiring a referendum... The British people demand a referendum. They must have a referendum."

Referendums are rare in Britain,

and Blair is resisting one on the EU constitution, saying that the hefty document to define who does what in the European Union is only a "tidying up" of existing EU treaties.

But the Conservatives argue that the constitution will spell the end of 1,000 years of British sovereignty, create a European superstate, and shift too much power to unelected officials -- known here as "eurocrats" -- in Brussels.

"We don't want and we don't need a single European state," Ancram said. "Nor do the peoples of the rest of Europe. Over the next few months, we will campaign against the constitution fiercely and unremittently... We will fight it tooth and nail."

Intense negotiations between the 15 current and 10 future EU member states opened last Friday and Saturday at a special EU summit in Rome, and the Italian EU presidency hopes to nail down a consensus by December.

It must subsequently be ratified by all 25 nations, about six of which will be holding referendums.

The Conservatives played the euroskeptic card aggressively during the 2001 general election -- only to lose a second straight time to the pro-EU Blair and his Labour party.

China removes Sikkim as a nation from official Webster

PTI, Bali

China has removed Sikkim as a separate country from its official Webster, India's Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal announced in Bali, Indonesia yesterday.

Beijing took the decision ahead of Prime Minister AB Vajpayee's meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao on the sidelines of the ongoing 9th ASEAN summit.

Describing the meeting between Vajpayee and Wen as highly successful, Sibal said China gave an assurance that it would honour all the commitments it gave during Vajpayee's visit to that country in June this year.

This was Wen's second meeting with Vajpayee in three months after the Indian Prime Minister's landmark visit to China.

China, the foreign secretary said, had earlier listed Sikkim as a separate country on its foreign ministry Webster and "that no longer exists".

Sibal also announced that special political representatives of the two countries -- National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra and senior Chinese Vice Minister in the Foreign Ministry Dai Bingguo -- would meet in New Delhi on October 23 to hold talks on the vexed boundary question.



PHOTO: AFP

Women visiting a science museum in Beijing walk past a space shuttle while hardly noticing the display yesterday. China will soon take the giant leap into the annals of history as it attempts to become only the third nation to send a manned space flight into orbit on Oct 15.

China poised for space odyssey

AP, Beijing

After a decade of preparation, China will launch its first human being into space on October 15 in a 90-minute flight that will orbit the Earth once, a major Chinese Web site reported, quoting a top government rocketry official.

It implied that the flight, the Shenzhou 5, would carry only one human being in its bid to make China the world's third spacefaring nation.

The comments by Xie Guangxuan, director of the government's China Rocket Design Department, were reported by the Web site Sina.com, China's largest.

"China's space technology has been created by China itself. We may have started later than Russia and the United States, but it's amazing how fast we've been able to do this," Xie was quoted as saying.

Sina.com, quoting an interview from a government-controlled newspaper, said Xie was "full of confidence" about the launch.