

## Operation goes on in Iraq to net insurgents: Bremer

### Iraqi delegation meets Putin

AFP, Washington

Coalition forces in Iraq are continuing to round up insurgents in Iraq, adding to the hundreds of militants already detained using intelligence gleaned from the capture of Saddam Hussein, Paul Bremer said yesterday.

"We've been arresting quite a number of his cronies and colleagues, including one last night," Bremer, the US civil administrator for Iraq, said in an interview with NBC television.

"We're getting some very useful opportunities in the last week or 10 days now to try to wrap up these leaders of the groups that are attacking our soldiers over there."

On Sunday General Richard Myers, head of the US Joint Chiefs

of Staff, said hundreds of people -- including leaders of the insurgency against US-led forces -- have been detained in Iraq following the detention last weekend of the deposed Iraqi president.

Myers told CNN television that some of the information had come from the briefcase seized when US forces found Saddam hiding in a hole under a farmhouse near his hometown of Tikrit.

"With the capture of Saddam Hussein, we learned a little bit more about how they're organized and some of the individuals involved," said the general, who has just returned from a visit to Iraq.

"And what you see now is forces taking advantage of that intelligence and going out and rounding up people. We've got over 200 detainees so

far."

Myers told Fox News television "we think they're some of the leadership of this insurgency, absolutely, some of the cell leaders."

While the information has proved valuable to US intelligence, the deposed Iraqi president has not provided it willfully.

"He has not been particularly cooperative," Bremer told NBC on Monday, "but we have been able to exploit some of the information, the materials that we have uncovered in the course of the last week in this battle to see down these insurgents."

"I think we will find in the months ahead that that's going to be quite useful to us."

Meanwhile, leaders of the US-

installed Iraq leadership met Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday for talks on Baghdad's hefty debt to Moscow and the fate of multi-billion-dollar Russian oil contracts.

"Russian companies are ready to actively work in Iraq," Putin told the most senior delegation from Baghdad to visit Russia since the US-led war in Iraq, which Moscow fiercely opposed.

"According to preliminary information, the level of investment in Iraq by Russian companies can reach four billion dollars in the very near future," Putin said.

The delegation from the Iraqi Governing Council is led by current head Abdul Aziz, al-Hakim and includes Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani.

## Ex-Baathists in Iraq pay ultimate price

REUTERS, Najaf

Gunmen in the holy Shiite city of Najaf are wreaking deadly revenge on those who served Saddam Hussein.

Hit-men on motorcycles have been assassinating ex-members of the ousted dictator's Baath Party in Mafia-style killings.

In the latest attack to rattle anyone who ever worked for the Baath, a teacher walking to school with her two young sons was sprayed with AK-47 rifle fire.

"I am the victim of the new Iraq. My son was chanting verses from the Koran on the way to school. Suddenly they shot at us," said Dhamya Abbas from her hospital bed.

"I left the Baath Party five years ago. But they have been threatening me and following me. I was wearing a full veil when they shot me. I want to take my sons and leave Iraq."

She has yet to learn that her nine-year-old son took two bullets to the forehead and died hugging her in the attack.



PHOTO: AFP

California national guardsmen Joel Dirks of San Francisco patrols near the Golden Gate Bridge Sunday in San Francisco. The US raised its national threat level from "elevated" to "high", saying the threat of an end of year holiday attack by Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network was as great as before the September 11, 2001 strikes.

## Bhutan claims huge weapons seizure in anti-rebel drive

AFP, Guwahati

Bhutan reported yesterday a major seizure of weapons belonging to anti-Indian rebels and said a drive to eject the guerrillas from the kingdom was continuing "full blast".

The Bhutanese army is seeking to flush out some 3,000 anti-Indian militants in a major offensive, attacking a slew of rebel camps in jungles in the south of the nation locked between India and China.

The Indian army, which had long demanded the crackdown by the tiny Himalayan country, has reported the deaths of at least 128 rebels and eight Bhutanese since the operation began December 15 and says around 100 rebels are in its custody.

A Bhutanese official said troops recovered up to 550 AK-47 assault rifles, 120 pistols and several light

machine guns along with explosives, ammunition and satellite telephones from camps in the Samdrup Jhonkhar district.

"The haul of weapons, ammunition and explosives is very significant and is definitely a big loss for the militants," the official, who asked not to be named, told AFP by telephone from the capital of the Buddhist kingdom, Thimphu.

"The raids are continuing full blast," he added.

The militants, however, denied the Bhutanese claims.

"We've lost only a limited number of fighters as well as weapons. We still have control over our bases in Bhutan," Arabinba Rajkhowa, chairman of United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), told AFP by telephone.

## Saddam survived on chocolate

AFP, Washington

Deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein eluded US forces by secretly moving between 20 or 30 safehouses in his stronghold region and survived much of the time on chocolate bars and canned fruit, the New York Times reported Sunday.

The newspaper, quoting American military officials, said the former Iraqi strongman relied on a word-of-mouth system of couriers to carry instructions back to a cluster of Baathist cells that allowed him to direct the insurgent movement against forces of the US-led coalition.

All the while, the daily reported, Saddam was sheltered by a tightknit network of family who brought him news from across Iraq.

US military officials said that to avoid detection, Saddam traveled on foot, by small boat along the Tigris River, and along back roads in taxis and the back of pickup trucks, often at night, rarely with more than two or three loyal followers.

## Jailed Saddam says he is still the Iraqi people's choice

AFP, Washington

Former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, in US custody for a week, was shaken but claimed to be the Iraqi's chosen leader and used a lot of profanity, a handful of people who met him said Sunday.

Ahmed Chalabi, a member of Iraq's governing council, told CNN that Saddam was everything from banal to evil.

"The group wanted to see him directly," Chalabi told the television network, but said he did not pose any questions to the deposed dictator during the half-hour meeting.

"I didn't find much point in talking to him."

"It was clear that he had learned nothing and forgotten nothing," he said.

"The most important sentiment

that I had was that this man is so banal, that he is responsible for the murder of millions of Iraqis and others," he said.

"And he was sitting there -- he was consumed by evil."

Chalabi was one of four members of Iraq's governing council to meet with the deposed Iraqi leader immediately after his capture one week ago after months on the run.

They found Saddam, formerly surrounded by opulence, huddled on the floor in pajamas and a ski parka, they told CBS News.

The network reported that Saddam's cell walls are decorated with the faces of 38 of his former officials who had been killed or captured. There are pictures of his two dead sons, Uday and Qusai. And one picture is of US President George W. Bush.

## Bid to save ME peace process Egyptian FM holds talks with Sharon

AFP, Jerusalem

Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher was meeting with top Israeli officials as part of efforts to salvage the peace process after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon warned he may disengage.

Maher held around an hour of talks with Sharon at his offices in Jerusalem before heading for a meeting with his counterpart Silvan Shalom in his first visit to Israel for more than two years.

Sharon said he welcomed the presence of Maher in brief comments at the start of their meeting.

Egypt, along with Jordan, is one of only two Arab countries to have diplomatic ties with Israel but relations have been strained since the start of the Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 when Egypt withdrew its ambassador.

A thaw in relations however has been detected in recent weeks with Shalom recently meeting Egyptian

President Hosni Mubarak in Geneva while Cairo has also been taking a leading role in so far unsuccessful attempts to broker a new ceasefire by Palestinian militants.

Egypt's role as a mediator comes as Israel considers abandoning the bilateral peace process.

Sharon said in a speech last week that he would implement his own "disengagement plan" if the Palestinians did not meet their commitments under the roadmap peace blueprint within a few months.

Palestinian premier Ahmed Qorei has criticised the "threats" by Sharon but vowed that an agreement is still possible.

Meanwhile the Israeli defence establishment was left reeling Monday after a group of soldiers from the army's top commando unit said they would refuse to take part in missions in the Palestinian territories.

Deputy defence minister Zeev Boim said that the reservists should be court-martialled and stripped of their uniforms.

"These soldiers should be stripped of their uniform and face judgement for their disobedience and rebellion, regardless of the unit in which they serve, whether they be pilots, cooks or mechanics," Boim told public radio.

The 10 soldiers and three officers from the elite Sayeret Matkal unit wrote a letter to the prime minister saying they would no longer participate in a "rule of oppression" and the defence of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"We will no longer corrupt the stamp of humanity in us through carrying out the missions of an occupation army... In the past, we fought for a justified cause (but today) we have reached the boundary of oppressing another people," the letter said.

## 'Israel will dig own grave if it attacks Iranian nuclear sites'

AFP, Tehran

Israel "will dig its own grave" if it attacks Iranian nuclear sites, the head of the Iranian air force General Seyed Reza Pardis told a news agency close to the Islamic regime's hardliners.

"The threats of the Zionist regime hold no value for us," Pardis was quoted as saying by Mehr news agency in reaction to statements by Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz.

"The (Zionist) regime knows that the armed forces of the Islamic republic, in particular our air force, have such high capabilities... that it would be digging its own grave in the region if it launches military attacks against Iran," Pardis said.

"An attack (by Israel) would have serious consequences beyond the imagination of Israeli leaders," he warned.

Jerusalem-based Haaretz newspaper on Sunday quoted Iranian-born Mofaz as telling Israel radio's Persian service last week that Israel

is considering an operation to destroy the nuclear capabilities of Iran, now regarded as the Jewish state's number one enemy following the fall of Saddam Hussein.

If the operation is launched, "the necessary steps will be taken so that Iranian citizens will not be harmed," the daily quoted Mofaz as saying.

"Whether these threats are serious or not, our armed forces are totally prepared to defend sensitive sites and our country's air space," Pardis countered.

Iran's reformist President Mohammad Khatami reacted to Mofaz's threats by saying simply: "They (Israel) will go adrift."

Meir Dagan, head of Israel's Mossad overseas intelligence service, told lawmakers last month that Iran's nuclear programme posed the biggest threat to the existence of the Jewish state since its creation in 1948.



PHOTO: AFP

Rescue workers remove a body from mudslides at the village of Leloan in the southern Leyte province yesterday. Rescuers have recovered 100 more bodies from central Philippines villages buried by mudslides at the weekend, raising the likely toll to more than 200, according to official.

## Philippines ship missing with 75 on board

REUTERS, Manila

A ship carrying 68 passengers and seven crew between islands in the southwestern Philippines has been missing for more than a day after reporting it was in distress, the coast guard said on Monday.

The passenger-cargo ship, M/L Piary, sent a distress call on Sunday morning to the coast guard, saying it was taking in water through a hole after encountering strong winds and rough seas.

The ship was on its way to Palawan island in the southwestern Philippines from Tawi-tawi island near the Malaysian state of Sabah.

The coast guard said in a statement it had dispatched two vessels and one aircraft to search for the missing boat, but that adverse weather was hampering the search.

"The current sea condition is very rough due to strong northeasterly winds prevailing in the area at this time of the year," the coast guard said.

Incessant rains and strong winds last week triggered floods and landslides in central and southern Philippines that killed up to 214 people.

## Al Gore's son caught with marijuana

AFP, Washington

Albert Gore, son of the former US vice president, has been arrested with two friends and what looked like marijuana, police in a Washington suburb said Sunday.

"At approximately 11:30 pm (Saturday) Officer Robert Cassels spotted a dark-colored Cadillac driving on St. Elmo Avenue without its headlights on," Montgomery County, Maryland police said in a statement.

"In spite of the frigid temperature, all of the car's windows, as well as the car's sunroof, were open," the statement said.

Temperatures were below freezing in the area.

"When officer Cassels spoke with the driver, he smelled an odor of marijuana coming from inside the car," the report said.

"When officers searched the car, they found what appeared to be a partial marijuana cigarette."

They also found the younger Al Gore, 21, in the car, along with two friends, Yann Kumin, 21, and Marc Hordon.