

IRAQ INVASION ANNIVERSARY

## US blasted for creating terrorism 'quagmire'

AFP, Sydney

Asian newspapers yesterday took the United States to task on the third anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, with one commentator saying it had created the ideal environment for terrorism to fester.

"Three years into the Iraq war, and with no end in sight, it looks as if the United States, in creating a quagmire for itself in the Middle East, has also created the ideal environment in which the terrorism bacillus can fester, and then infect the whole world," said the Sydney Morning Herald.

President George W. Bush planned to head to Cleveland, Ohio, Monday as part of his public relations campaign to defend his Iraq

strategy as opinion polls showed approval of the war at a new low.

Bush said Sunday he had been informed by US ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad "of the progress the Iraqis are making toward forming a unity government" three months after national elections were held.

But with a mounting death toll from bombs and assassinations and the failure to agree on forming a new Iraqi government, a top member of Bush's own Republican Party said US policy needs "some new thinking".

"It's important that we stop this talk about we're not going to leave until we achieve victory," said Republican Senator Chuck Hagel. "We need some new thinking here."

Thousands of demonstrators in Asia and across the world denounced the US-led war on Sunday.

Hong Kong's South China Morning Post Monday said little apart from freedom of expression had been achieved three years after the invasion.

The Manila Times warned that US policymakers must take "a long hard look at Washington's role as Iraq's shepherd."

"Sooner rather than later, Iraq must be given a free hand to chart its destiny," an editorial said.

In Japan, which had deployed troops in Iraq, small demonstrations demanding a pullout were held over the weekend. However, the country's top spokesman said Tokyo's

support for the war remains unchanged.

The Yomiuri Shimbun, Japan's top-selling daily, called on the United States to remain engaged in the world despite the turmoil in Iraq.

"Although US President Bush dismissed isolationism and protectionism in his State of the Union address, there are signs that the US Congress is being tempted by these doctrines," the Yomiuri said.

The conservative daily cited the stiff opposition in Congress to an Dubai-based company's attempted takeover of six US ports.



Protesters in special costume march in Portland, Oregon to mark the third anniversary of the war in Iraq. Thousands took to the streets in cities across the US Sunday and called for an end to the war and withdrawal of American troops from Iraq.

## Iranian police kill 10 'bandits' near Afghan border

AFP, Tehran

Iranian police have killed 10 bandits who entered the country via the northeastern frontier with Afghanistan, the official IRNA news agency reported, following a deadly ambush in another border area last week.

"On Saturday evening, some armed bandits and agents who were trying to enter the country and create insecurity were spotted by... border troops," a police commander, Eskandar Momeni, was quoted as saying in the report late Sunday.

Momeni said the raiders were killed and that weapons, drugs and a satellite telephone seized.

The incident followed an ambush by Afghan bandits close to another border area on Thursday in which at least 22 people were killed and another 12 reported missing.



Tropical cyclone Larry crossed the Australian coast near Cowley Beach, south of Cairns yesterday. Picture shows destruction the cyclone caused to the Innisfail High School.

## Powerful cyclone pounds Australia

AFP, Brisbane

The most powerful cyclone to hit Australia in decades smashed into the country's northeast coast yesterday, leaving hundreds homeless and causing hundreds of millions of dollars in damage.

Packing winds up to 290 kilometres (180 miles) an hour, Tropical Cyclone Larry tore roofs off houses, uprooted trees, caused power blackouts and terrified residents who had battened down to prepare for the worst.

"It's just like a bomb has gone off, like something went through and just bombed it," said Amanda Fitzpatrick, owner of a motel outside Innisfail, a farming town in Queensland state in the direct path of the storm.

"It was so terrifying, we were all crying," she told ABC radio.

No deaths were immediately reported from the highest-level Category Five storm, which authorities said was losing steam as it made its way inland after hitting the northeast coast at 8:00 am (2200

GMT Sunday).

But the Great Barrier Reef, which lies off the coast, was probably badly damaged by the storm, a scientist for the UN's World Heritage-listed Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority told AFP.

Prime Minister John Howard said the government and the military would do everything possible to help victims, adding he was "very confident" there would not be chaos like that in New Orleans last year after Hurricane Katrina.

"If any military assets are needed, they will be readily available," Howard told reporters.

Innisfail bore the brunt of the destruction, with authorities reporting many houses destroyed and hundreds of millions of dollars worth of crops -- such as sugar cane, bananas and pawpaws -- wiped out.

"I'd say every second building is damaged -- some completely," State Emergency Service official Alan Green told the Australian Associated Press news agency.

## EU to bolster sanctions after Belarus polls

AFP, Brussels

The European Union is set to bolster sanctions against Belarus after its authoritarian president won re-election in polls marred by "climate of intimidation", EU officials said yesterday.

One EU commissioner condemned the former Soviet republic as "the last dictatorship in Europe" after long-time head of state Alexander Lukashenko secured more than 80 percent of the votes in Sunday's election.

While EU ministers held back on more substantial comment until election monitors gave their assessment in Minsk, EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner made it clear that more sanctions were almost certain.

"From what we have seen so far, my view is some action is now very likely," she told reporters, noting that EU leaders have repeatedly warned they are ready to tighten sanctions if they were not satisfied with the ballot.

## Hundreds march in Nepal urging king to give up power

AP, REUTERS, Katmandu

About 1,000 pro-democracy activists marched in the Nepalese capital yesterday demanding King Gyanendra free political detainees and give up powers he seized last year.

"Respect human rights, restore democracy," the crowd of teachers, students, lawyers and rights activists chanted as they marched through the streets of Katmandu.

They were stopped by the police from entering the city centre, where protest rallies are banned by the royal government. There were no scuffles. The protesters squatted on the road and kept chanting slogans.

"Because the rule of law has ended, that leaves us no choice but to take to the streets," said Krishna Khanal, a university professor and leading pro-democracy activist.

"We are here because our rights have been violated and we need to protect them," said Kapil Shrestha,

a human rights activist.

There have been scores of protests since King Gyanendra seized power last year and formed a royal administration. He has been under pressure both at home and internationally to restore democracy.

The king said he took power because previous governments had failed to curb a growing communist insurgency and clean up corruption.

Meanwhile, packed buses and trucks loaded with supplies rolled across restive Nepal yesterday after Maoist rebels called off a road blockade that had interrupted commerce and transport across the Himalayan nation for six days.

But even as the Maoists ended their siege of Kathmandu and other towns after an appeal from the country's seven main political parties, they endorsed a new series of protests planned for early next month.

## EU won't go soft on Hamas

### List of new Palestinian cabinet handed over to Abbas

AFP, REUTERS, Brussels/ Gaza City

The European Union warned Hamas yesterday that it stood at a crossroads after the militant group, which figures on the EU's terror list, named a new Palestinian cabinet dominated by its members.

The Islamic militant group Hamas unveiled its full cabinet list yesterday, as expected putting loyal members in charge of all key ministries including the foreign affairs, interior and finance posts.

Prime Minister-designate Ismail Haniyeh gave the names to the President Mahmoud Abbas late on

Sunday after Hamas failed to persuade rival factions to join, a sign of the success Israel and the United States have had in isolating the group.

The EU is by far the biggest aid donor to the poverty-stricken Palestinian territories and has made future help conditional on the Palestinian cabinet agreeing to recognise Israel, forswear violence and accept previously-reached accords.

"Hamas is at a crossroads now. Hamas will have to decide which road to take, how to take the responsibility that is coming upon

it now," said Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, whose country holds the EU presidency.

"Our message has been clear and consistent. It will be clear and consistent also in this situation," Plassnik said as she arrived for a meeting of the 25-member bloc's foreign ministers.

But Hamas, whose senior members have been appointed to key portfolios, has shown little sign that it will agree to any, let alone all, of those conditions, which are also supported by the United States.

## Thai talks fall apart amid fears for polls

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's party and his leading rivals failed to agree Monday on holding talks between the embattled premier and his opponents, amid rising concern whether snap polls can go ahead.

The three-hour meeting was the first time that representatives of Thaksin's party, the main opposition parties, and the organisers of mass street protests against him have held any sort of negotiations.

Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party proposed that a neutral mediator moderate talks behind closed doors to end the political crisis but insisted that the premier's rivals accept the results of April 2 snap elections, officials said.

"We can't accept the government's condition that we have to accept the result of the coming election," said Suriyasai Katsasila, a spokesman for the People's Alliance for Democracy, which has organised the protests aiming to oust Thaksin for alleged corruption and abuse of power.

The three main opposition parties are boycotting the election, and hundreds of candidates from small parties have been disqualified for failing to meet minimum requirements.

"Joint discussions, with the conditions set by the government, would be meaningless and the Thai people would not get anything from it," Suriyasai said.

The opposition and the protest organisers wanted Thaksin to agree to a televised debate on Friday to settle their differences, but the premier has insisted that all talks take place behind closed doors.

"We think that the debate set for March 24 would not benefit the new election so the government decided not to join the debate," government spokesman Surapong Suebwonglee said.

The meeting came amid rising concerns over the snap polls less than two weeks away. The lack of candidates means the election could fail to produce a new parliament.