

More Iraqi prisoners freed

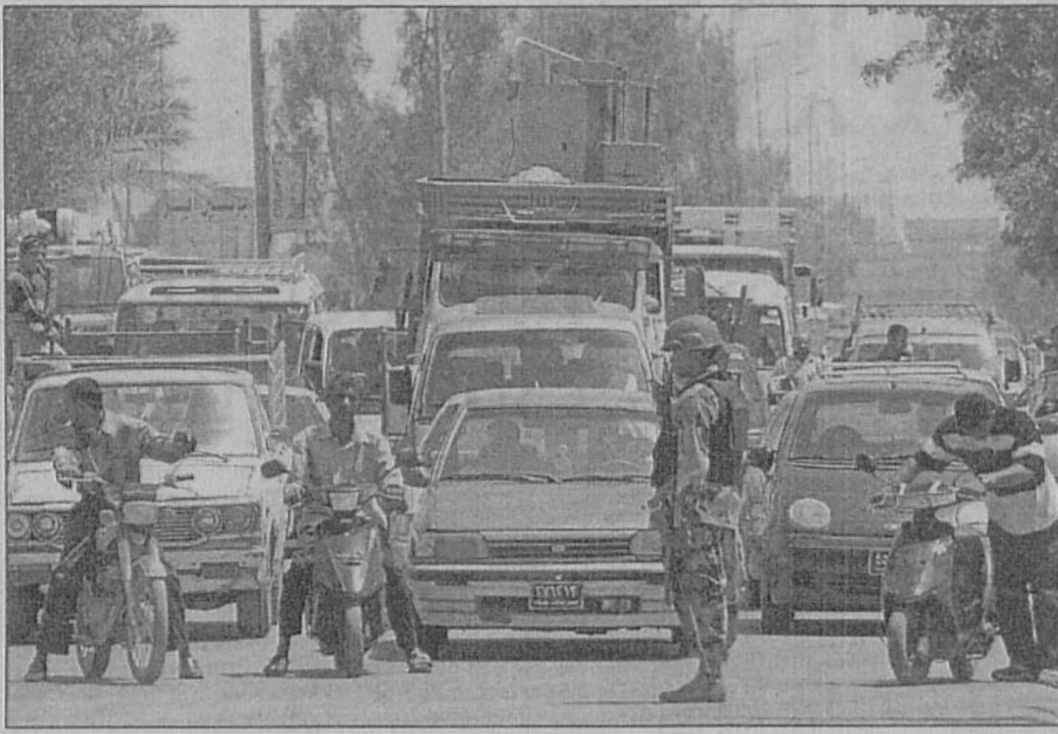
REUTERS, Baghdad

About 200 Iraqi prisoners were released on Thursday under a national reconciliation plan announced by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki last week to free a total of 2,500 inmates, witnesses said.

A Reuters reporter saw the detainees being released from the US-run Abu Ghraib prison west of Baghdad. Many of those in US and Iraqi jails are believed held on suspicion of involvement in the Sunni Arab insurgency.

US officials said a total of 430 would be freed on Thursday and Friday, adding to the release of roughly 750 prisoners since last week. Iraqi officials have said all 2,500 detainees will be freed by the end of this month.

Maliki's Shi'ite-led government hopes the move will help draw members of the disgruntled minority Sunni community into the US-backed political process in a bid to defuse a raging insurgency.



An Iraqi soldier controls traffic in central Baghdad yesterday. The Iraqi government said the reign of terror of Al-Qaeda in Iraq was nearing its end, as a massive security crackdown in Baghdad entered its second day. More than 50,000 Iraqi and US forces descended on the streets of Baghdad Wednesday as part of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's new security plan for the city which has seen dozens of people killed each day in bombings and shootings.

Top policy adviser leaving White House

REUTERS, Washington

One of President George W. Bush's top policy advisers and former chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson, is stepping down to pursue other opportunities, a White House spokesman said on Wednesday.

Gerson was Bush's chief speechwriter during the president's first term and was promoted to policy and strategic adviser in 2005. He had been crafting major speeches for Bush since joining the former Texas governor's presidential campaign in 1999.

Gerson, listed as one of the 25 most influential Evangelical Christians in America by Time magazine last year, is credited with helping Bush give voice to his "compassionate conservative" philosophy, a central theme of his presidential campaigns.

Bush rejects calls for pullout from Iraq

AP, Washington

President Bush, just back from Iraq, dismissed calls for a US withdrawal as election-year politics and refused to give a timetable or benchmark for success that would allow troops to come home.

"It's bad policy," Bush said in a Rose Garden news conference Wednesday, about six hours after he returned from Iraq. "I know it may sound good politically. It will endanger our country to pull out of Iraq before we accomplish the mission."

The news conference was arranged to capitalize on Bush's stealthy 5 1/2-hour trip to Baghdad Tuesday. The visit marked his first

meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and the president said he was impressed with the new leader's plans and character. "I sense something different happening in Iraq," Bush said.

He defended the decision not to tell the prime minister that the US president was in his country until five minutes before they met and denied that it was because of any concern about al-Maliki's inner circle.

"I'm a high-value target for some," Bush said. "I think if there was ample notification that I was coming, perhaps it would have given somebody a chance to plan, and we just didn't want to take that risk."

Bush said he wanted to see a reduction in the deadly violence in Iraq but would not say how much it must drop before troops can begin to withdraw. He offered other ways of measuring progress in Iraq: an increase in oil production or more electricity delivered to cool sweltering homes or growing numbers of Iraqi military units able to handle the fight.

But again, he did not offer any specific targets to measure when Iraqis will be able to govern themselves. Instead, he declared that the government must be able to succeed and that leaving too early would "make the world a more dangerous place."

Abbas and Hamas try to ease fears of civil war

Protesters storm Palestinian parliament in Ramallah

REUTERS, Gaza

Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh agreed in principle on Wednesday to integrate a Hamas militia into the security forces, in a move intended to end clashes that have fanned fears of civil war.

But aides close to President Mahmoud Abbas said obstacles that might scupper the deal had not yet been resolved, including demands that Hamas's security men be dispersed within the existing security force rather than remain a separate entity.

Fighting between Hamas and Abbas's Fatah faction has killed around 20 people in the past four weeks, and a Western aid boycott has pushed the Hamas-led government to the brink of financial collapse.

To get around the restrictions, Foreign Minister Mahmoud al-Zahar brought suitcases stuffed with \$20 million in cash into Gaza through its border with Egypt, Palestinian officials said.

Banks, fearing US sanctions, have refused to transfer the government's funds, forcing Hamas to resort to the move.

"We will not allow the political differences to turn into fighting in the streets," Haniyeh told reporters after meeting Abbas for more than two hours in Gaza.

But tensions remained high

after protesters stormed the Palestinian parliament in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

In Gaza, a Hamas gunman was killed and a security chief loyal to Abbas was wounded in a skirmish.

Under the emerging agreement, Haniyeh said the 3,000-member Hamas force would "begin their integration into the police so they can be part of the security institution."

But Hamas officials are demanding their security men serve in a new division rather than be dispersed, as Abbas demands, through the ranks of the security forces, which are dominated by Fatah loyalists.

"There has been no agreement yet on whether this force can serve as a separate force within the security forces or whether its members will be distributed among the various security branches," a senior Palestinian official said.

He added that the Hamas security force might be removed from the streets while they underwent training as a temporary measure that could ease the hostility between the factions.

Rivalry has been heightened by a referendum that Abbas has called for July 26 on a proposal for a Palestinian state side-by-side with Israel.

Hamas does not recognize Israel and has labeled the referendum a coup attempt.

In the Ramallah protest,

Palestinians pushed their way into parliament to demand overdue wages from the Hamas-led government.

Interrupting a parliamentary session, some protesters climbed onto lawmakers' desks and threw paper and water bottles. Several Hamas legislators left as the crowd grew angry.

"It is true employees are hungry. They have gone 100 days without salaries. But this is total chaos," said Fatah lawmaker Jamal Abul Rub.

About 1,000 government workers protested outside parliament, which came under gunfire from Fatah militants on Monday. "The Israelis are better than you," one shouted at a legislator.

In the Gaza Strip, security sources said a Hamas gunman was shot dead after he and other masked militants ambushed a car carrying Refat Kullab, head of the Palestinian Preventive Security Service in the southern town of Khan Yunis.

Hamas officials said Preventive Security members in Kullab's car fired first. Security sources said Kullab was wounded in both legs and was in a moderate to serious condition.

Gunmen later burned down Kullab's house. The Abbas-allied Preventive Security blamed Hamas members for the blaze.

US arrests 2,000 in criminal immigrant sweep

REUTERS, Houston

US customs officials arrested more than 2,000 illegal immigrants, gang members and other fugitives in a nationwide sweep, the head of the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency said on Wednesday.

The sweep, code named "Operation Return to Sender," has yielded arrests in 34 states since May 26 and comes as the US Congress is debating several immigration measures, including proposals that would tighten border security and create a temporary worker program.

About half of the 2,179 people arrested in the operation had criminal records, and 367 were members or associates of violent street gangs, including the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, Julie Myers, the assistant secretary of the Department of Homeland Security for ICE told a press conference.

"America's welcome does not extend to immigrants who come here to commit crimes," Myers said.

Others arrested included 146 who had convictions for sexual offenses involving minors, and 640 were fugitive aliens who had been issued final orders of removal by an immigration judge and had not complied.

About 829 of those arrested on immigration violations have been deported to their home countries.

US marine sorry for Iraq deaths song

BBC NEWS ONLINE

A US marine has apologised after a video spread on the internet of him singing a song about the killing of Iraqi civilians.

Cpl Joshua Belile, 23, said the song had been written as a joke and was never intended to cause offence.

The Marine Corps has described the song as "inappropriate" and is investigating the incident.

Cpl Belile denied the song had any connection with the deaths of Iraqi civilians at Haditha last year. "It's a song that I made up and it was nothing more than something supposed to be funny, based off a catchy line of a movie," he said.

The chorus of the song, called Hadji Girl, reprises a popular line from the popular puppet movie Team America, a satire based on the US war on terror.



The Indonesian capital Jakarta is blanketed with smoke yesterday. Vehicular emissions account for 70 percent of air pollution in the city, while the remaining 30 percent is from industrial emissions. Jakarta is home to around 4.7 million vehicles - consisting of 1.3 million passenger cars, 403,000 commercial vehicles, 315,000 buses and 2.6 million motorcycles.

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