

## Saddam offers self as sacrifice, calls on Iraqis to unite

Baghdad prepares for rapid execution

AFP, Baghdad

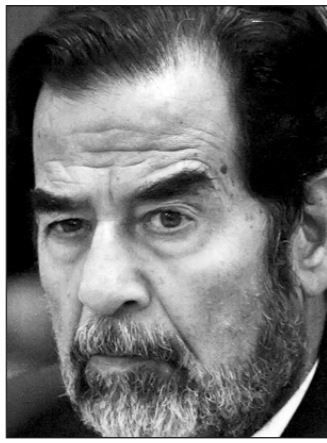
Ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein said in a letter released yesterday that he would go to the gallows as a "sacrifice" and called on his former Iraqi subjects to unite against their enemies.

Saddam, in a letter written to the Iraqi people from his cell before his appeal against a death sentence failed, said: "I sacrifice myself. If God wills it, he will place me among the true men and martyrs."

Defence counsel Khalil Dulaimi told AFP in Jordan that Saddam had written the letter in November when he was first sentenced to death and that it had been released to the public after the news that his appeal had failed.

"Its release was delayed by the length of the procedures imposed by the Americans," Dulaimi said, by way of explanation.

On Tuesday, a panel of appeals court judges confirmed Saddam's



conviction for crimes against humanity and ordered that he be hanged within 30 days.

In what might therefore be his final message, Saddam blamed his old enemies the United States and Iran for the bloodshed engulfing Iraq, which is in the grip of a sectarian war between Sunni and

Shiite factions.

"The enemies of your country, the invaders and the Persians have found your unity a barrier between you and those who are now ruling you. Therefore, they drove their hated wedge among you," he declared.

"O faithful people, I bid you farewell as my soul goes to God the compassionate," he wrote. "Long live Iraq. Long Live Iraq. Long live Palestine. Long live jihad and the mujahideen. God is great."

Iraq prepared yesterday for the rapid execution of Saddam Hussein, with the US-backed government eager to bring his chapter in the country's bloody history to an end.

Justice Minister Hashem al-Shibli said the sentence for crimes against humanity -- upheld by an Iraqi appeal court on Tuesday -- would be sent to the presidency for approval while the prison service prepares to hang him.

The process will get underway

rapidly, he said, but the formality of executing the ousted dictator could be delayed by the onset of the four-day Eid al-Azha holiday, which is due to start at the end of the week.

"There will be no amnesty in this case. Once we get the decree, we shall prepare to take action," Shibli told AFP, adding however: "You know there'll be the Eid. It could take some time because of the holiday."

"The decree passed by the court of appeal shall be passed to the presidency and a presidential decree shall be sent to the General Prisons Directorate for the purpose of implementing the death sentence," he said.

Saddam and two officials of his regime were convicted of crimes against humanity on November 5, after a court heard they ordered the deaths of 148 Shiite men from the village of Dujail in an act of collective punishment.



Rescue workers in front of a collapsed furniture shop in Pingtung, southern Taiwan, yesterday. A major earthquake measuring magnitude 7.1 rocked Taiwan Tuesday, killing two people and disrupting internet network in the Asian region. PHOTO: AFP

## Pro-govt Somali troops seize Islamist town

AFP, Jowhar

Ethiopian-backed Somali government troops yesterday ousted Islamist forces from a key southern town and rolled closer to the capital Mogadishu as a second week of heavy fighting began, both sides said.

Hours after the UN Security Council failed to agree on insisting foreign troops leave the Horn of Africa, the pro-government forces seized Jowhar, about 90 kilometres north of Mogadishu and were headed south as the Islamists reportedly fled.

"We have lost the town, but we are keeping on fighting. We are still making a military retreat and they are suffering more than we do," Islamist commander Sheikh Yonis Haji Idris told AFP.

Government commander Hassan Abdulahi Jiis also confirmed the fall of Jowhar.

"We have pushed the terrorists and their backing forces back to the capital, they are losing control day by day, and Jowhar has fallen into the hands of the government forces," Jiis said.

## Hajj rituals start amid steps to avert any tragedy

AFP, Makkah

Around two million Muslims will today begin the annual hajj pilgrimage to Makkah amid increased safety measures aimed at preventing stampedes which each year claim scores of lives.

The Hajj Commission reported that by the weekend 1,526,603 people had arrived in the kingdom and more were on their way.

Saudis and other Muslims resident in the country, it added, would swell the number of the faithful undertaking the hajj to some two million -- about the same number as last year.

The official SPA news agency said Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, who also heads the Hajj Supreme Committee, had taken charge of security arrangements and was

marshalling security and civil defence forces in the holy city.

Last year's hajj was marred by a deadly stampede which killed 364 people in the arid valley of Mina near Makkah, during a ritual which involves casting stones at pillars representing Satan.

A similar stampede the previous year saw 251 people trampled to death during the stoning ceremony.

Both tragedies occurred at the entrance to the Jamarat bridge, from where pilgrims cast their stones at three pillars that are supposed to symbolise the powers of evil.

Immediately after last year's stampede, religious leaders ordered the bridge, which created a dangerous bottleneck, dismantled and organisers this year are confident a similar tragedy will be averted.

Since many of those making

the pilgrimage are elderly people who have saved up all their lives to be able to make the pilgrimage, hundreds die during the pilgrimage each year of natural causes.

The Hajj Supreme Committee said on Monday 202 pilgrims had died since arriving in the kingdom, generally those suffering from heart problems.

The only other incident was a short-circuit at a hotel housing Yemeni pilgrims in Makkah on Monday which caused a fire that was quickly put out, though some people were taken to hospital suffering from smoke inhalation.

The health ministry said more than 9,600 medical personnel have been mobilised and 21 field hospitals set up at Makkah and Medina, Islam's two holiest places, for this year's pilgrimage.

The hajj will begin today, with the faithful assembling at Mina.

At dawn on Friday, they will begin moving towards Mount Arafat where they will spend the day praying and asking for Almighty's forgiveness at the summit, in a symbolic waiting for the last judgment.

The pilgrims then return to Mina to sacrifice an animal, usually a sheep, for Eid al-Azha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, on Saturday.

They will spend another two days there for the stoning ceremony that symbolises a willingness to renounce evil.

The pilgrimage, which ends on Monday, is one of the five pillars of Islam, and is an obligation for all Muslims at least once during their lives if they can afford to do so.

## Another Abe aide quits

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's embattled Prime Minister Shinzo Abe yesterday suffered the second resignation of a top adviser in as many weeks as a minister quit in a corruption scandal.

Genichiro Sata, the state minister of administrative reform, blamed accounting errors for the allegations that his supporters received government funds for the upkeep of a fictitious office.

"I cannot avoid admitting there was inadequate accounting," Sata told a brief news conference.

"I believe this (scandal) must not stall the parliamentary proceedings. So I have decided to resign from my post today," he said. "I told my decision to the prime minister and he accepted my resignation."

According to media reports, Sata's political support group submitted documents showing it received 80 million yen (670,000 dollars) in funds between 1990 and 2000 to maintain an office that did not exist.

If the allegations are proven, Sata, who remains a member of parliament and has actively supported Abe's bid to become the premier earlier this year, could face criminal charges.

On Thursday, Masaaki Honma, who was handpicked by Abe to lead the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, quit the post after coming under fire for moving in with his mistress at a state-funded residence.

Abe has also faced falling support after he readmitted lawmakers to the ruling party who were ousted by his predecessor, Junichiro Koizumi, for opposing a reform agenda.

Abe, Japan's first premier born after World War II, took office with a conservative agenda including rewriting the US-imposed 1947 pacifist constitution.

"It has been three months since the Abe administration began. It is already shaky," said Mizuho Fukushima, head of the Social Democratic Party.

"Already, I think we are seeing the end of this administration," she said.

## GERALD FORD DIES AT 93

# US president who sought to heal Watergate wounds

AFP, Los Angeles



Gerald Ford

Gerald Ford was thrown into the breach as US president in 1974 and outraged many Americans by pardoning Richard Nixon as part of a campaign to heal national wounds caused by the Watergate scandal.

Ford, who died Tuesday at the age of 93, rose from the Republican Party sidelines to replace then scandal-plagued vice president Spiro Agnew. In August 1974 Ford went on to finish the final two years of Nixon's term in office after the scandal stemming from the break-in at Democratic Party national headquarters at the Watergate complex forced Nixon to resign the presidency in disgrace.

Ford had been the oldest living US president. He was also the only one never to have been elected to office, having lost his 1976 presidential bid to Democrat Jimmy Carter.

Ford was an amiable and respected Republican representative to Congress from the northern state of Michigan with a reputation for loyalty when Nixon picked him to replace Agnew in 1973. Agnew faced charges of conspiracy, extortion and bribery.

Even then, it was clear Nixon himself could be forced out by the cover-up over the Watergate break-in.

On August 8, 1974, Nixon became the only US president to resign. The following day Ford took the oath as the 38th president, and told Americans that he faced the task of healing "the internal wounds of Watergate".

"Our long national nightmare is over," he said. "Our constitution works. Our great republic is a

government of laws and not of men."

Ford however angered many Americans when he issued the disgraced Nixon "a full, free and absolute pardon" just weeks after taking office, on September 8.

It was a decision that would be debated for years.

As president Ford cut government spending to fight inflation, recession and unemployment stemming from a sharp rise in oil prices.

Assassins twice tried to kill him in 1975.

Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, a follower of cult leader Charles Manson, was arrested for pointing a loaded pistol at Ford while he was in Florida. Although there were four bullets in Fromme's gun, the firing chamber was empty when Secret Service agents pounced on her.

Seventeen days later Sara Jane Moore, a former FBI informant and would-be revolutionary, tried to shoot Ford as he walked from a San Francisco hotel to his waiting limousine. Moore fired once before she was disarmed.

Both attackers are serving life sentences.

Ford was born Leslie Lynch King Jr., in Omaha, Nebraska on July 14, 1913, the son of Leslie and Dorothy King.

His parents divorced and his mother moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan with her son. In 1916, she married paint salesman Gerald Rudolph Ford, who adopted the boy and changed his name.

The future president was the star of his high school American football team and attended the University of Michigan on a football scholarship. He turned down National Football League contracts to study law at Yale University.

Ford served aboard a naval aircraft carrier in World War II and afterwards joined a law firm in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

He was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1948. That same year he married Elizabeth Bloomer. The couple had three sons and one daughter.

He was elected Minority Leader and was the last surviving member of the Warren Commission, set up to investigate the murder of president John F. Kennedy. The Commission found that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, a conclusion that is debated to this day.

Speaking just before his 90th birthday, Ford said: "I hope historians 50 years from now would say that president Ford took over in a very difficult time -- when we had the Watergate scandal, the war in Vietnam, economic problems -- and in a period when there was great distrust of the White House, he restored public confidence."

In August 1999, Ford received the Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian award, for his post-Watergate efforts.

## Manmohan pledges equality for Muslims, low-caste Hindus

AFP, New Delhi

India's prime minister pledged yesterday to help Muslims and low-caste Hindus who face discrimination in getting jobs and finding social acceptance -- and who also represent a major vote bank.

Manmohan Singh cited the findings of a recent report that said Indian Muslims, numbering around 138 million in the country of 1.1 billion, were poorer and had less access to education and jobs than other communities.

"The Muslim community in certain parts of our country have not had an equal share of the fruits of development," Singh said at an international conference on low-caste people and religious minorities.

"It is incumbent upon any democratically elected government to redress such imbalances and eradicate such inequities. Our government is indeed committed to doing so."

The promise came ahead of elections in India's most populous -- and electorally crucial -- state of Uttar Pradesh early next year that has a large group of Muslim and low-caste voters.

Singh's Congress party-led government has launched a slew of programs aimed at the groups, including setting aside university

places, since it assumed power in May 2004.

Singh compared the discrimination against low-caste Hindus by upper caste people to apartheid, calling it a "blot on humanity".

He praised his government for its controversial move this year to more than double the number of places set aside for low caste people in medical, engineering and management colleges to nearly 50 percent.

"This is the most powerful means of overthrowing the one uncivilised aspect of our civilisation," the prime minister said of the move.

Earlier, India set aside 22.5 percent of those places for "scheduled" tribes and low castes such as the Dalits, once known as untouchables.

The government has lifted the quota to 49.5 percent to embrace the "other backward castes", or OBCs, who are one rung up on India's social ladder.

The scheduled tribes and low castes make up around two-thirds of India's one-billion-plus population and wield huge electoral clout, analysts say.

The government's affirmative action plan sparked nationwide protests by thousands of university students, who said the move would lower academic and professional standards.