

BRIEFLY

Iraqi troops desert war:

"Large numbers" of Iraqi troops are deserting their posts in the Kuwait military theatre and heading home to Iraq, US Defence Secretary Dick Cheney in Washington said Saturday, reports AP.

Interviewed on CNN television, Mr. Cheney said there were signs that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein faced growing dissent within his own military due to the beating the country has taken at the hands of Allied forces.

"Given the enormous damage that has been done to the Iraqi military, one would think there's an incentive for some of the senior commanders there to want to replace Saddam Hussein," he said.

Probe into bombing underway:

British military authorities said late Saturday an investigation was underway into the bombing of bridges in the western Iraqi town of Fallujah, reports AFP.

Iraqi sources earlier said 130 civilians were killed Thursday when a Royal Air Force tornado fighter missed a bridge it had targeted, one of two spanning the Euphrates river at Fallujah.

The Ministry of Defence in London confirmed a British military spokesman's denial, earlier in Riyadh, of Iraqi claims that a British Tornado was shot down during the bridge attack.

Kuwaiti traders being tortured:

Trade Unionists in Iraq-occupied Kuwait are being hunted down, tortured and killed by Iraqi "death squads," the International Federation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) said in Brussels Sunday, reports AFP.

Quoting a letter from the Kuwaiti Trade Union Federation, the ICFTU said in a statement that the Iraqis had launched search and destroy "missions by death squads against the Kuwaiti labour movement."

"I am appalled by the vicious attacks on Kuwaiti Trade Unions," said ICFTU General Secretary John Vanderveken.

40 P.C. of Iraq's armour lost:

The Iraqi army may have lost up to 40 per cent of its armour and artillery, taking it close to a level where it may not be able to fight, military sources said Saturday reports Reuters.

The Allies have continued preparations for a long-awaited ground assault by moving mine sweepers further into the northern Gulf and by launching a series of exploratory probes against Iraqi lines, the sources in London said.

They said, four weeks of Allied bombing had destroyed 30 per cent of Iraq's tanks and armoured troop-carriers and a slightly higher number of artillery pieces in Kuwait and southern Iraq.

US bombing continues:

Allied guns and warplanes unleashed a sustained five-minute barrage of bombs and shells along the Saudi-Kuwait border early Saturday, reports AFP.

Bombs and shells exploded every second in a deafening cacophony that lighted the night sky and shook the earth.

US marines entrenched south of the border saw the bombardment as an Allied answer to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's heavily conditioned offer Friday to pull out of Kuwait.

The US-led multinational alliance rejected the Iraqi bid as a reshuffle of old offers, with still more unacceptable conditions tacked on.

Black rains fall over Iran:

Black rains caused by blazing oil installations in Iraq fell over western Iran on Sunday, the Iranian News Agency reported, reports Reuters.

The agency in Nicosia said the rain, which polluted "environmental, water and agricultural resources" in Iranian border areas was caused by smoke from burning installations in eastern Iraq.

Iran has reported several falls of black rains since the US led Allied launched Operation Desert Storm to expel Iraqi troops from Kuwait a month ago.

Allies set date for ground offensive

The French Foreign Minister Mr. Ronald Duma said, a date has been set for the ground offensive, according to BBC monitored in Dhaka.

Speaking in an interview on French Radio he said, the French government knew the date but he refused to be more specific.

AFP adds from Kennnebunkport, Maine: The United States and its coalition partners have no intention of altering their timetable for prosecution of the Gulf war despite the latest diplomatic efforts in the Soviet Union, US officials said Saturday.

President George Bush Saturday underscored Moscow's "constructive role" in its ongoing talks with Baghdad, and its "very solid support" of the coalition which, he said, was still united in its resolve to drive Iraq out of Kuwait.

Mr. Bush, who is spending the weekend at his sea-side residence here, said he had received "very fresh" assur-

ances from Moscow on this point.

"The United Nations' position is solid and there's no giving on that at all," Mr. Bush told reporters who strolled with him on the beach.

A US official said Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who is to meet Monday in Moscow with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, had sent a message Thursday to Mr. Bush and other coalition leaders.

In that message, according to the New York Times, the Soviet leader asked the coalition not to start a ground offensive in the Gulf until before he meets with Mr. Aziz.

The official, who requested anonymity, did not confirm the newspaper's account, but stressed instead that the United States has "said all along that the ground war will start on our schedule," indicating that the allies had no intention of engaging the Iraqis in a ground war before Monday.

Saddam was nearly killed in bombing 9 days ago

LONDON, Feb 18: Saddam was nearly killed nine days ago in an Allied bombing raid and the Americans have set up an elaborate system to track the Iraqi President, the Sunday Times reported, says AFP.

"Saddam is now keeping very low profile. He has said he is not going to travel in a convoy again," an Iraqi opposition leader told the paper.

According to the weekly, two F-16 Allied warplanes bombed a convoy of 50 cars and trucks returning from a trip to the front line 100 miles (160 kilometres) north of Basra.

The pilots were not aware that Saddam Hussein was in the convoy, but later learned from Iraqi opposition groups that he was in one of the vehicles which escaped damage.

Some of his bodyguards were killed or injured in the attack, the paper said.

It quoted Pentagon sources as saying that American electronic-warfare aircraft were now flying round the clock over Baghdad in an effort of pinpoint the Iraqi leader.

The missions are intended to pick up conversations between Saddam Hussein and his military commanders, so he can be targeted in an operation dubbed "the Yamamoto option," after Admiral Yamamoto, a Japanese officer shot down in a transport plane over the Pacific in world war II.

AP adds from Nicosia: Saddam Hussein has proved willing to do almost anything to

keep his government in power, from ordering poison gas used on his own people to granting huge concessions to a former enemy, Iran.

His offer to withdraw from Kuwait, linked though it is to conditions the allies will not accept, may be the first phase

of his latest survival strategy, analysts say.

"He now knows that continuing the war is meaningless," said Tasheem Beshir, an Egyptian political expert and former ambassador. "He needs to stop the war, but he will try to cover up any sense of defeat—he's a good poker player."

Not long ago, Saddam was vowing that Kuwait would remain part of Iraq for eternity. As of Friday, that vow was no longer operable.

Andrew Duncan, an analyst with the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London, said he had no doubt that Sad-

dam could complete this about-face and withdraw from Kuwait without jeopardizing his hold on power in Iraq.

"He's quite capable of making major concessions, and there's no reason this shouldn't be the start of one," Duncan said in a telephone interview.

"He will have enhanced his position with over half the Arab world, and he's not going to lose support because he saves the lives of thousands of his soldiers," Duncan added. "It would be viewed as a realistic and magnanimous gesture."

A Jordanian Political Science Professor, Kamel Abu Jaber, already was prepared to credit Saddam with magnanimity.

Saddam "showed he cares about the Iraqi people, by trying to alleviate their suffering," Abu Jaber said. "The lives of his people are worth more to him than to those bombing Iraq."

In Washington, US President George Bush bluntly stated his preference for an outcome that ousted Saddam. He urged Iraq's military and its people "to take matters into their own hands, to force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside."

But influential US senator Sam Nunn suggested Saddam was hinting at further concessions.

"This could be the opening bid in Saddam's move toward diplomacy," Nunn said. "In the Arab world you always have to

be prepared for bargaining and this may be the opening gambit."

Saddam has been Iraq's effective ruler since 1968 and its President since 1979. In that period, he has survived at least a half-dozen assassination attempts, and kept his hold over the public with a mix of harsh repression and social reforms.

When Kurdish rebels posed a severe challenge to his regime in 1988, he ordered a counter offensive in which an estimated 4,000 villagers were killed by the army's chemical weapons. He launched a war with Iran that lasted from 1980 to 1988, yet last year—following the invasion of Kuwait—granted to Iran many of the demands it had made for a final peace.

"Saddam is a lousy strategist," said Beshir, speaking by telephone from Cairo. "He miscalculated with Iran and he miscalculated with Kuwait, but I would leave it up to the Iraqi people to decide how to deal with a defeated Saddam Hussein."

It Iraq did withdraw soon, it would still possess one of the world's largest military forces, even after the severe pounding inflicted by the allies' month-long air offensive. Thousands of tanks and hundreds of thousands of hardy troops would remain.

"His political position is pretty unassailable," Duncan said. "He's the only person in Iraq who makes decisions, and there doesn't appear to be any contenders for the succession."

Saddam's attempts to link Gulf war to the Palestinian cause might keep his new-found popularity alive among the Arab masses and make him a regional political power even with an economy in disarray.

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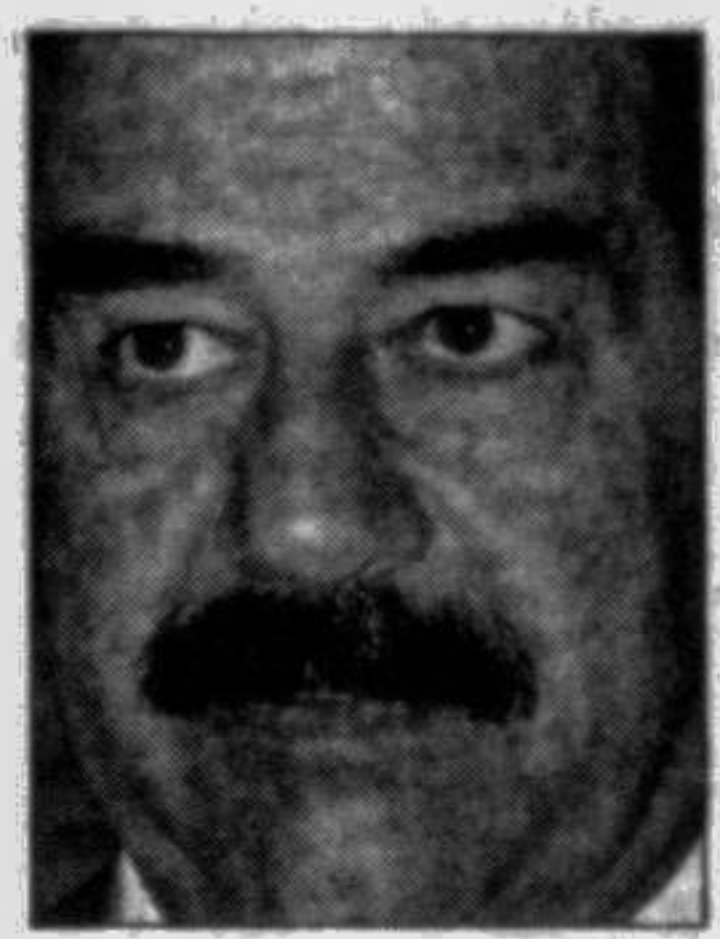
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Burmese heroin makes its way to troops in Gulf

MOREH, India, Feb 18: There is evidence that drug smugglers are seeking Burmese heroin to sell to American troops in the Gulf, a senior Indian customs official said, reports Reuters.

Ramesh Bhattacharji said in an interview with Reuters on Friday two smugglers arrested near this Indo-Burmese border two recently confessed they planned to smuggle one kg(2.2 pounds) of heroin to Dubai.

He quoted the arrested men as saying the drugs would have been sold to Arab contacts offering higher than usual prices.

Bhattacharji said that one informer had told him another smuggler was in Moreh offering four times the usual price for heroin made in Burma and usually smuggled to the West through India and Bangladesh.

The informer quoted the smuggler as saying the would get high prices in teh Gulf from Arabs intending to sell it

to American soldiers, Bhat-tacharji said.

Although much of the heroin manufactured in Burma was smuggled out through Thailand, India and Bangladesh were becoming increasingly popular routes, he said.

Bhattacharji said he estimated soem 25kg (55 pounds) entered India through Moreh each day. Little of it was intercepted, he said.

Pork, prostitutes being allowed in S Arabia: Pak Minister

ISLAMABAD, Feb 18: Pakistani Cabinet Minister has criticised Saudi Arabia for allowing "alcohol, pork and prostitutes" in the holy land for the coalition Troops fighting Iraq, reports Kyodo.

Abdus Sattar Khan Niazi, Minister for Local Government and Rural Development, said at a function Saturday. "There was a time when the house of Saudis was selective even in respect of import of certain religious books but now alcohol, pork and prostitutes are coming to the same land and with funds provided by Saudi Arabia."

The remarks prompted a statement from the Saudi Embassy denying the allegations and saying that Christians were allowed to eat pork and allied were importing it for their own house.

Niazi said Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's offer to withdraw Iraqi troops from Kuwait must be taken seriously and allied forces must announce an immediate ceasefire.

Major refuses to meet Dalai Lama

LONDON, Feb 18: Prime Minister John Major has refused to meet the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, scheduled to visit Britain next month, reports AP.

A multi-party committee of lawmakers which invited the Dalai Lama to visit Britain from March 17 to 22 had requested a meeting with Major.

But in a letter February 13 to Lord Ennals, the committee's chairman, Major said such a meeting "would not be right."

I don't pay attention to insults: Perez Iraq grilling the first Gulf peace-maker

NICOSIA, Feb 18: Iraq is turning its fury on the man who brought peace to Baghdad after eight years of the first Gulf war United Nations Secretary-General Javier Perez De Cuellar, reports Reuters.

In Iraq's parlance, UN President George Bush is a "War criminal" Saudi Arabian king Fahd and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak are "US Zionist agents" betraying Arabs and Muslim for plotting to destroy Iraq.

But the focus of personal attacks by various Iraqi officials has shifted to the 72-year-old UN Secretary-General, terming him a US agent, and even stronger, a "dirty criminal and plotter."

The terms contrast dramatically with statements of praise and respect showered on the veteran Peruvian diplomat when he brokered an end to the 1980-88 Iraq war that killed or wounded nearly a million people from both sides.

This time Baghdad says, Perez De Cuellar done nothing to stop Washington and its Allies attacking Iraq.

Iraq's Parliament Speaker Saeed Mehdi Saleh accused Perez De Cuellar on Friday of "lying, deceit and hypocrisy," saying this made it easier for the anti-Iraq Coalition to attack Iraq.

Iraqi Information Minister Latif Nassif Al-Jassem, a close aide of President Saddam Hussein, described him as "dishonest, incompetent a dirty criminal and plotter."

Shrugging off the personal attacks, Perez De Cuellar said on Friday: "I don't pay



attention at all to their insults."

"I am so honoured (that) during this terrible situation they have time to attack the Secretary-General," he replied ironically when asked by a reporter for comment.

Perez De Cuellar is "a world in sheep's clothing who mixes honey with poison," he said

The UN Security Council imposed economic sanctions on Iraq to end its occupation of Kuwait and then authorised the use of force to expel it from the Emirate.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz sent two highly critical letters to Perez De Cuellar saying he and the countries that voted for resolutions against Iraq "bear responsibility to history and to mankind for the heinous crimes being committed," against the Iraqi people.

During his meeting with Saddam on January 13 four days before the Gulf war broke out Perez De Cuellar said he did not find any flexibility on Iraq's part to leave Kuwait.

But Saleh said he and assumed the "role of American envoy, for getting that he is

UN emergency medical aid for Baghdad

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 18: Trucks carrying 50 tonnes of emergency medical supplies for the treatment of children and mothers arrived safely in Baghdad on Saturday, the United Nations announced, reports Reuters.

Iraqi Health and Red Crescent officials met the convoy at the Iranian border town of Khosravi following requests from the UN groups that Allied force avoid dropping any bombs on its route.

A statement from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), which organised the convoy in conjunction with the World Health Organisation, said a seven-member team from both agencies would spend a week evaluating essential health needs of women, children, the elderly and displaced people.

Tareq Aziz meets Ali Akbar Velayati

TEHERAN, Feb 18: Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz met here Sunday with Iranian counterpart Ali Akbar Velayati on his way to Moscow for talks on the Gulf war with Soviet authorities, the Iranian news agency IRNA reported, says AFP.

Mr. Aziz arrived in IRAN over land from Iraq earlier Sunday and was to fly to Moscow later in the day, accompanied by Deputy Prime Minister Saadoun Hammadi.

Off the Record

They suffer when elephants do it

UNITED NATIONS: Tense and serious discussion among diplomats on Friday during informal Security Council consultations on the Gulf situation had a lighter moment too, reports PTI.

While some of them were discussing changes in the pre and post-cold war scenario and its effect on the world, Indian Ambassador C.R. Gharekhan told them about an old Indian saying -- lower forms of life suffer for no fault of theirs when elephants fight. They also suffer when elephants make love.

"Well, it seems they suffer more when elephants make love," a diplomat remarked amidst laughter.

Secrets of Deng's long life

BEIJING: Playing pool, a happy family and sense of optimism are some of the secrets behind senior leader Deng Xiaoping's long life, say official Chinese publications, reports Reuters.

"Comrade Deng Xiaoping is 86 years old but his health is extremely good. What are the secrets of his longevity," the regional Xinjiang Daily asked of China's most famous recluse in an edition reaching Beijing on Sunday.

Optimism and a love of sport, it replied, listing swimming, bridge, walking, and watching football and basketball. "He also likes to play pool and in fact he's a very good shot and always scores high points", the daily said, quoting an undated edition of Shanghai's old People's News.

Deng, who is officially in retirement, made a rare public appearance last week to attend a lunar New Year party in Shanghai.

Pictures of a hale-looking Deng were published in national newspapers and a spate of articles on his health and achievements appear aimed at reminding China's 1.1 billion people of his behind-the-scenes role.

Deng's extended family had four generations living under one contented roof, Xinjiang Daily said, describing the patriarch's manner as "democratic" and his attitude "gentle".

Sources close to his family say, however, that Deng's decision to use the Army to crush pro-democracy demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989 led to a rift in the Deng clan.

'We're queer, we're here'

LONDON: Saturday Thousands of homosexual men and women marched through London Saturday to protest at government plans to impose, tougher penalties for some sex offences, reports Reuters.

Police said between 5,000 and 6,000 people paraded past the gates leading to Prime Minister John Major's official Downing Street residence. There were no arrests.

Tourists photographed men dressed as nuns kissing each other. "We're queer, we're here and we're not shopping", marchers chanted as they approached Oxford Street, one of the city's main shopping streets.

Legislation before Britain's Parliament would allow harsher sentencing for public indecency between men, soliciting and procuring others to commit homosexual acts.</