

International

Iraq closer to unconditional pullout : Primakov

5 lakh Iraqi troops, entrenched in Kuwait, on the move

IN SOUTHWESTERN SAUDI ARABIA, Feb 20 : Iraqi convoys keep moving south toward the frontline despite Allied pounding of Iraqi ground forces, US military officers said Tuesday, reports AP.

With Allied forces poised for a possible ground offensive, Air Force Col. Tom Lennon said long-range F-111F fighter-bombers are knocking out Iraqi tanks, artillery, ammunition storage areas and airfields in Iraq and occupied Kuwait.

He said the 48th Tactical Fighter Wing, which he commands, has destroyed more than 200 hardened aircraft shelters. He said this was higher than the official Air Force figure because of differences in interpreting photographic evidence.

"I think he's hurting. I think he's hurting very badly," said Lennon.

But he predicted Allied forces can still expect to encounter significant resistance in a ground campaign against Saddam Hussein's forces.

"I think there's a battle up there because the Republican Guard is still in existence. There are patriots in Iraq just as there are patriots in every country," Lennon said.

Lennon said his F-111 pilot, Capt. Brad Robert, said he had

been doing battlefield preparation sorties.

"In the last week, it has intensified. We've been sending more and more aircraft specifically against the Republican Guard," he said.

Another F-111 pilot, Lt. Dave Bristol, said: "We've been taking out tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery pieces, in some cases multiple rocket launchers — anything that could change the fate of the ground war right now."

"That's what everybody's looking at right now — the ground war — and that's what we're doing. We're taking out the things that are going to fight the (allied) army," he added.

Preparing to leave on a mission Tuesday evening, Bristol said, "There's plenty of work available for us and every night we go out, we take out quite a few."

However, another F-111 pilot, Capt. Steve Luxon, said it is already getting considerably more difficult to find targets than it was when the war started.

"The targets are getting less and less as we go up there," Luxon said. "It was really easy the first few nights and now you have to hunt around a lot... we think we've

done a real good job on their tanks."

Reuter adds from Moscow : Soviet Gulf envoy Yevgeny Primakov said in an interview broadcast on Tuesday evening that Iraq was closer than ever to withdrawing its troops from Kuwait without conditions.

Primakov said he had gained this impression during talks on Monday between President Mikhail Gorbachev and Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, during which the Soviet leader proposed a last-ditch

peace plan to avoid a land war in the Gulf.

"I think Iraq is closer to withdrawing its troops unconditionally from Kuwait than ever before," Primakov told Soviet television.

The interview had clearly been recorded before US President George Bush said on Tuesday that the Soviet peace plan did not go far enough.

"Now I can say with greater reason that I am in an optimistic mood, but it is not blind

optimism. It is a sort of limited optimism," he said.

Aziz left Tehran for Baghdad on Tuesday after briefing Iranian leaders on the Gorbachev Plan. Soviet Foreign Minister Alexander Bessmertnykh said the Iraqi Minister "must return to Moscow in the shortest possible time."

Israeli officials have vowed eventual retaliation for the missile attacks but have held off so far in a bid to avoid further alienating Arab countries in the US-led coalition.

Lankan mothers wants govt to find missing sons

COLOMBO, Feb 20 : Nearly 2,000 Sri Lankan women gathered in Colombo Tuesday to demand that the government find their missing sons and husbands victims of the island's political turmoil, reports Reuter.

The women of the Mothers Front are pressing for an independent commission to investigate the disappearance of thousands of people since 1987.

The Mothers Front was formed as a spontaneous response to the killing and disappearances which are the order of the day, opposition leader and former Prime Minister Bandaranaike told the meeting.

Allied troops await order for ground war

NICOSIA, Feb 20 : Half a million US and Allied troops awaited the order to go into battle with Iraq's army in Kuwait, with one slim hope for peace resting on a journey to Moscow by Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, reports Reuter.

President George Bush underlined the fragility of peace hopes by saying an 11th hour Soviet peace plan did not go far enough.

Saudi Arabian King Fahd and other leaders of the Alliance fighting since January 17 to drive Iraq from the Emirate stressed the need for an unconditional withdrawal.

"No settlement can be accepted finally unless Iraq withdraws fully and unconditionally to Iraqi territory, leaves Kuwait and bears responsibility for the losses, damage, plundering and usurpation in it," King Fahd said, adding that Riyadh would also make demands on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein for damages.

But the Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations, Yuri Vorontsov, said Moscow expected Aziz to arrive from Baghdad on Wednesday and said a ceasefire or pause in the relentless month-old air assault on Iraqi troops and other strategic targets would them to regroup.

"While we are eager to have the matter wrapped up as quickly as possible, we feel very strongly that a ceasefire or a pause of some kind would in fact be very dangerous from the standpoint of US and Allied forces," he told the House of Representatives defence appropriations subcommittee.

But the Bush Administration later put a more positive gloss on the Soviet initiative.

Officials said Secretary of State James Baker had sent Moscow a detailed US response.

Asked if that meant Washington proposing changes, a senior US official replied, "that could be going on."

White House spokesman Martin Fitzwater said the Kremlin initiatives was still in progress.

"We've said from the beginning that if President Gorbachev can be helpful in getting Saddam Hussein to pull out of Kuwait, so much the better," he added.

"Essentially, it [the Soviet Plan] could be helpful," he said.

Vorontsov said Gorbachev's Peace Plan, details of which have not been released, consisted of "specific actions" that conformed to UN Security Council resolutions.

3 PPP deputies picked up on terrorism charges

KARACHI, Feb 20 : Pakistan's leading opposition leader Benazir Bhutto charged Tuesday that her party officials were tortured in jails as police arrested three more deputies on terrorism charges, reports AFP.

In a pre-dawn raid police arrested three deputies of southern Sindh's provincial assembly, lifting the number of her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) members jailed since last week to 10, party sources said.

Officials said the deputies were detained on charges of complicity in acts of terrorism in the ethnically troubled southern province.

The cases had been "fabricated" to "prevent us from exercising the right to represent

people in the assemblies," the former premier said, adding that it was also a bid to deny party participation in the senate elections scheduled this month. Senators are elected by provincial MPs.

Mrs Bhutto told reporters many of her activists were "tortured" by police seeking to extricate confessions and "to implicate my family and the party in false cases."

She demanded an enquiry by the superior court into the allegations of police torture and urged the Chief Election Commissioner to investigate the "arrests and kidnapping" of her party deputies before the elections.

The PPP activists and parliamentarians are also being helped for their alleged involvement in the August 22 firing

Who's Who in Iraqi Command

From A Correspondent

BAGHDAD, Feb 20 : In Iraq there is no pretence of separating party from government. The entire power structure is controlled by the Baath Party and in many ways the system resembles that of the former East European communist regimes. However, there are differences.

For example, the domination of the supreme leader, Saddam Hussein, in this case, is much greater. The bureaucracy is generally kept out of the party's control but more than two-thirds of its members are believed to be Baathists.

In the armed forces it is considered a crime to become a member of any political organisation other than the Baath Party.

The party's hold at the grassroots levels is maintained through its large membership — at least a million and half. If the average size of an Iraqi family is taken to be five it means that half the population is directly affiliated to the party. The party itself runs on a very tight cellular system.

The supreme decision-making body is the seven-member Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) headed by Saddam Hussein. In a way it is modelled after the communist politburo, but unlike the systems in China and the Soviet Union, rarely does an RCC member gather the courage to even question Saddam.

Most of his aides tend to be in the same age group as him — 50 to 55 years — and came up with him through the party structure and the various revolutions. He also happens to hold both the post of President and that of prime minister. It is believed that power is controlled by the troika of Saddam, his Vice-President Izzat Ibrahim and first deputy Prime Minister Taha Yasin Ramadan.

So controlled is the Iraqi system that even biographical details on the key leaders are rarely published.

A list of the key power people in Baghdad:

• **IZZAT IBRAHIM**, 55, Vice-Chairman of the RCC and Vice-President. He is an old party cadre who specialised in agrarian policies. A law graduate from Baghdad University, he is said to control the

intelligence organisations. He is believed to be seriously ill — some

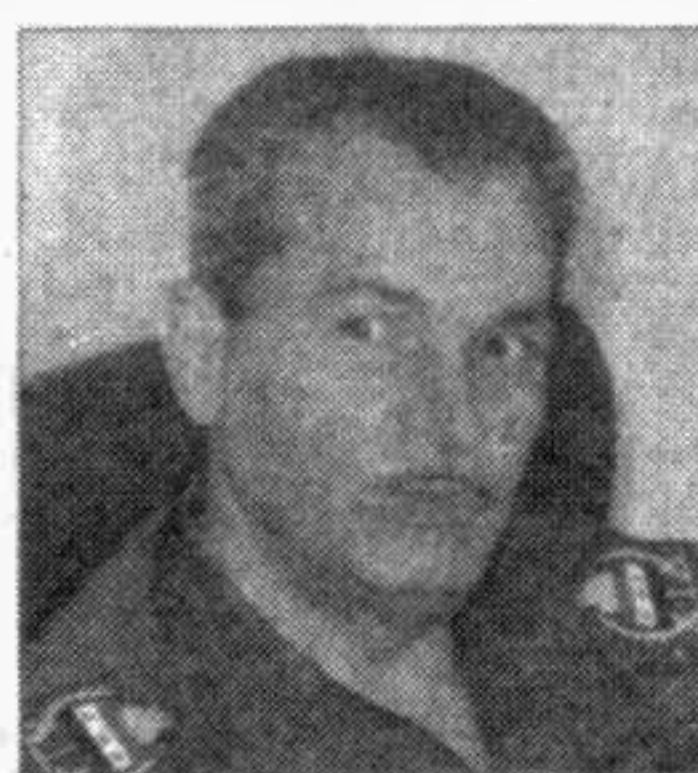


The Supreme Commander



"If the Americans attack it will be the most suicidal thing"

IZZAT IBRAHIM
Vice-Chairman, RCC



"Muslims all over the world must fight American infidels"

TAHA YASIN RAMADHAN
First Deputy Prime Minister

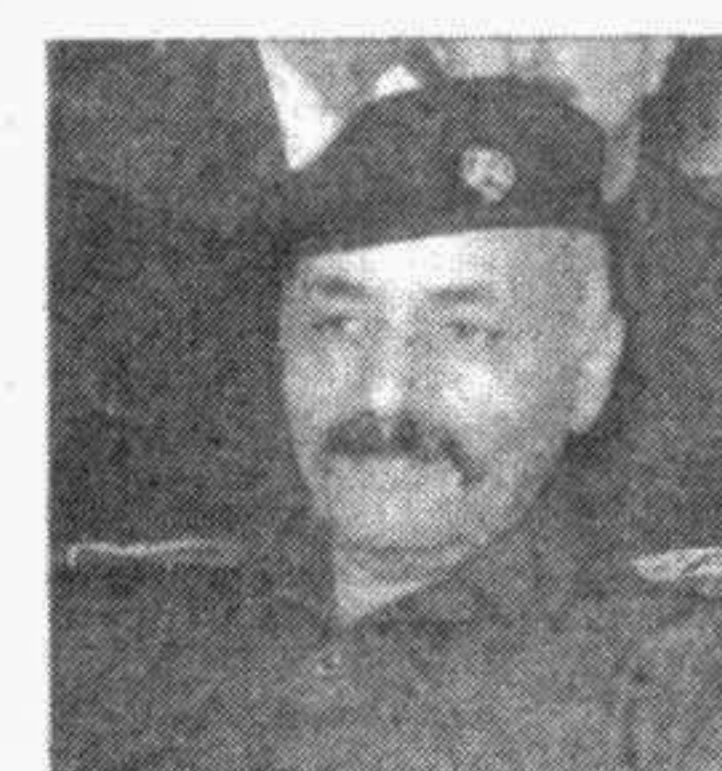
"In case of war be sure that our very first target will be Israel"

TARIQ AZIZ
Foreign Minister



"It is a conspiracy of the US to make two Muslim nations fight"

SADI MEHDI SALEH
Speaker, National Assembly



War death toll pegged at 20,000

NICOSIA, Feb 20 : A senior Iraqi official says more than 20,000 Iraqis were killed and 60,000 wounded in the first four weeks of the Gulf War, an Iranian newspaper reported Tuesday, says AP.

The state-run Tehran daily Jomhuri Eslami said Iraq's deputy prime minister, Saadoun Hammadi, reported those figures to Iran's first deputy foreign minister, Ali Mohammed Beshrati, during talks last week.

Saddam not yet in danger of being overthrown: US

WASHINGTON, Feb 20 : Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein does not yet appear in danger of being overthrown by his people, a senior Bush administration official said on Tuesday.

The official, who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity, said there were many signs that Iraqis blamed Saddam for leading them into a disastrous war and wanted an end to it.

"But when you take the very pervasive security structure he has through out the country plus his own personal praetorian guard, I think it's going to take more than we've seen already to have that guard or that security structure and therefore the Iraqi people turn on him," the official said.

President George Bush last Friday for the first time openly called on Iraqis to end the war by removing Saddam from power. It has become clear in recent days that he would like to achieve Saddam's removal to ease post-war reconstruction and peace efforts.

promise an end to the fighting. Some Iraq scholars have also argued in recent days that Saddam's grip on power might be slackening as his military machine is dismantled by the US-led coalition.

"Without something to show for the invasion of Kuwait, Saddam will have to answer through questions at home," said Laurie Mylorie of Harvard University.

"If he does not come out of Kuwait no worse than he went into it, his situation will be even worse, although the regime is exceedingly repressive, Saddam has already faced 11 coup or assassination attempts since assuming power," she said.

But the senior official said Saddam had "built redundancy" into his security apparatus, meaning that even substantial defections would still leave him well-protected.

He said there were two schools of thought in the Bush administration as to why Saddam had put forward his proposal of a conditional withdrawal from Kuwait last Friday. One view held that Saddam now realised his forces had been so weakened by a month of aerial bombing that he no

longer was confident of inflicting high casualties on the United States in a ground war.

But another school of thought argued that Saddam was trying to take advantage of what he saw as a shift in world opinion against the war after the bombing of an air raid shelter in Baghdad last week that killed hundreds of civilians.

"So he may have felt, may be he could throw out a very small bone and it would be picked up on by an eager world and an eager diplomatic community as being more than it really was," the official said.

AP adds from Jerusalem: Israeli officials warned Tuesday that an Iraqi surrender that left President Saddam Hussein in power would eliminate the possibility of peace in the region.

"We and all the nations in the area will be exposed to a terrible danger" if Saddam remains in power, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir warned in an Italian state television interview.

The comments came as the United States reviewed and ultimately rejected a Soviet peace proposal.

Moshe Raviv, Deputy Direc-

tor-General of the Foreign Ministry, told a news conference that the Iraqi leader was the "root of all evil".

"Saddam Hussein and stability are just not compatible," Raviv said. "Saddam Hussein and peace are mutually exclusive."

He estimated that despite the pounding Iraq has been taking for its refusal to relinquish Kuwait, about 60 per cent of Iraqi ground forces and two-thirds of its air force remain intact "posing serious dangers for the future."

Raviv's boss, Foreign Ministry Director-General Reuven Merhav, told army radio that Israel would benefit from attacks on Iraq by the US-led forces in the Gulf.

"Every day that passes, every bridge that is destroyed there and every tank that explodes means less strategic threat to Israel," Merhav said.

Merhav and Raviv are the top civil servants in the Foreign Ministry.

Saddam has threatened repeatedly to attack the Jewish state with chemical weapons. Some 35 Iraqi Scud missiles have been launched at Israel since the start of the Gulf War, including one on Tuesday,

Off the Record

Snow in Sahara!

ALGIERS : Snow has fallen in Algeria's Sahara desert for the first time in more than 30 years, Algerian television reported on Monday night, says Reuter.

It showed expanses of snow-covered sand and dramatic contrasts of snowy rocks rising behind dunes and palm oases in the region of Bechar, 965 km (600 miles) southwest of Algiers.

Heavy snow has covered mountains of northern Algeria during the coldest winter in several years.

Smooth as Thai silk

BANGKOK : Police have arrested 11 employees of the Thai airline Thai Airways International (Thai) suspected of using their family privileges to send Thai women abroad as prostitutes, a senior police officer said.

The women were sent to Germany and Japan, Colonel Anan Uphanont, Chief of Crime Suppression, told Reuter.

The men were usually paid by syndicates between 5,000 and 7,000 baht (200 and 280 dollars) for each woman.

The men are accused of using the names of their wives and children in applying for visas for the women. Thai endorses visa applications for its staff's families.

They were also able to get free or reduced air fares.

The employees, who worked in the airline's head office or as ground staff, were charged with falsifying documents and violating anti-prostitution laws.

It was the second criminal case implicating Thai employees in recent months.

Two cargo handlers at Bangkok Airport were arrested in December trying to load 42 Kg (92 pounds) of heroin on to a plane. They told police they were working for a Thai official who had masterminded several other drug scams.

Grains of Guinness stolen

NEW DELHI : An Indian painter said thieves on Tuesday stole six grains from his collection of rice on which he had inscribed portraits to earn an entry last year in to the Guinness Book of World Records, police here said, reports AFP.

Painter Dipak Sayal said thieves made away with his briefcase containing the rice on which he had painted portraits of many Indian statesmen. The collection was recently put on display in a tourism carnival near New Delhi.

However, Mr. Sayal told the police that the thieves had missed his best piece of work, a single grain on which he had penned 813 characters.

Mr. Sayal's briefcase was taken from his parked car in the city, police said, adding that a search was on for the thieves as well as the six grains of rice.

Mr. Sayal, a college student from northern Haryana state, has painted portraits of world leaders on rice and vertically-balanced coins, and drawn the world map on egg shells without missing any detail.

His latest attempt is to copy holy Hindu scripts on a single strand of hair.

Rarest fly going extinct

WELLINGTON : The bat-winged cannibal fly, believed to be the world's rarest fly, is in danger of extinction, local media reported, quoting the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, reports Xinhua.

The fly, found only in New Zealand, had only been spotted three times this century. It was first discovered in 1901 at Milford Sound in southern South Island and 10 years later one was seen eating a caddis fly, commonly used for trout fishing. The most recent sighting of the fly was in 1989.

According to the department, that little was known about the life cycle of the fly which was in danger of being wiped out. Larvae of the flies have never been found.

The fly gathers heat from the sun with its large wings and, when strong enough, it preys on other smaller insects and sucks its victim dry of all its bodily fluids.

BRIEFLY

Red Cross drive to raise funds :

The American Red Cross on Tuesday announced to give a drive to raise 30 million dollars to help provide humanitarian services for US troops in the Gulf, reports Reuter.

American Red Cross President Elizabeth Dole in Washington said President George Bush had already contributed 1,000 dollars to the group's largest wartime fund-raising effort since World War Two.

Mitterrand-Bush talks :

French President Francois Mitterrand had "two long telephone conversations" with US President George Bush and British Prime Minister John Major, it was announced in Paris on Wednesday, reports AFP.

French Presidential spokesman Hubert Vedrine did not provide details of the talks.

French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas had said here Tuesday that the Soviet Peace plan for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait requires "an immediate and unequivocal" response from Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

2.16 b. dollars German aid to US:

Germany will hand over 2.16 billion dollars to the United States Wednesday to help pay for the Gulf war, the German Embassy in Washington said, reports Reuter.

This is the first payment on the 5.5 billion dollars Germany has pledged in the first months of this year to the US-led war effort to oust Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

Germany and Japan have been criticised by US lawmakers for not contributing enough to Operation Desert Storm, although they are more dependent on Middle East oil than on the United States.

2 US officials greeted :

Protesters demonstrating against the Gulf war greeted two senior US officials when they visited the southwestern Pakistani town of Quetta on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

The demonstrators chanted anti-American slogans when Parker Borg, Deputy Assistant Secretary of state for International Narcotics, and Ambassador Robert Oakley met Baluchistan province Chief Minister Taj Mohammad Jamali.

Jamali and the American officials discussed Pakistani measures to control narcotic drugs, government sources said.

Fish poisoning in Iran :

Several Iranians have been poisoned by fish affected by oil slicks resulting from Gulf war fighting, the Iranian News Agency IRNA in Nicosia said on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

It did not say how many people fell ill, but reported that people in the southern town of Borazjan near the Gulf port of Busher complained that freshly caught fish smeled of oil.

The Allies and Iraq each blame the other for the most harmful ecological offshoot of the 34-day-old conflict: the spillage of an estimated 11 million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf.

Canada rejects Soviet plan :

Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney on Tuesday rejected the Soviet Union's 11th-hour peace plan aimed at averting a ground war in the Gulf, report Reuter.

Mulroney said Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's peace proposal to Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz on Monday was made in "good faith" but did not go far enough.

"Our examination of it at this point in time is that it does not meet many requirements of the UN Resolution" demanding Iraq leave Kuwait, Mulroney told reporters in Ottawa.

Iraq to be responsible :

Saudi Arabian King Fahd said on Tuesday Iraq should withdraw unconditionally from Kuwait and should be held responsible for damage and losses inflicted during the occupation of the Emirate, reports Reuter.

The King was addressing Islamic Scholars taking part in a Jihad (holy war) meeting in Riyadh in support of Saudi Arabia's stand in the Gulf war.

No settlement can be accepted finally unless Iraq withdraws (from Kuwait) to Iraqi territory without any conditions, and bears responsibility for the consequences of the losses, damage, plundering and usurpation in Kuwait, he said in the speech broadcast by Saudi television monitored from Nicosia.

Shekhar wins reprieve : Indian Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar's minority government won a reprieve on Tuesday when it's principal backer former premier Rajiv Gandhi's Congress party, said it would continue to support it in Parliament, reports Reuter.

Shekhar depends on Congress to give him a numerical majority in the house and speculation had been rife that support might be withdrawn over a decision to allow US military planes to refuel in India.

But Congress party spokesman Vithal Gadil told reporters in New Delhi on Tuesday the party would not allow the government to fall in the budget session of Parliament which begins on Thursday.