



Iraqi women shout slogans during an anti-US protest following the Friday prayers outside the Abdul Kader al-Gilani mosque in Baghdad. Coalition forces blitzed the Iraqi capital with a renewed fury yesterday.

A democratic Iraq unlikely, says Major

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Former British Prime Minister John Major, who sent British troops to the 1991 Gulf War, said yesterday the imposition of a Western-style democracy in Iraq would be nearly impossible.

His comments contrasted with those of US President George W Bush, who has said that imposing a pluralistic democracy is part of the aims of the current US-led war against Iraq.

"I have never seen Iraq as a democracy of the Western sort," Major said in a speech at a business conference in Hong Kong.

"It is going to be very difficult to install a government. The thought of a grand coalition between Sunnis, Shias and Kurds is so improbable as to be dismissed as absurd almost from the outset," Major said.

President Saddam Hussein, from Iraq's Sunni minority, has been in conflict with the Kurds for much of his rule and has violently suppressed uprisings among the Shia.

Warplanes and cruise missiles pounded Baghdad yesterday as US and British leaders told their people the war in Iraq could be a long fight.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who succeeded Major's Conservative Party in a landslide

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Blair under fire for failing to convince Bush

AFP, London

Lacking the necessary influence, British Prime Minister Tony Blair failed during talks in Washington to convince President George W Bush of the need for a leading UN role in post-war Iraq, Britain's press said yesterday.

"The question remains: what did Mr Blair achieve by going to America?" The Independent asked in its editorial.

"If he went to resolve the differences of opinion between him and George Bush about aspects of the post-conflict settlement... he failed," the paper concluded.

Blair met Bush Thursday for talks on a post-war Iraq at the presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland.

Blair is seeking more UN involvement in reconstructing Iraq than Washington may be ready to allow. The British leader is pushing for a UN resolution giving the international body the lead role in running post-war Iraq and supplying humanitarian aid.

But the Bush administration, distrustful of a politically divided and bureaucratically slow United

Nations, reportedly wants Iraq ruled under the direct control of its military, even if it sees a role for the UN in distributing humanitarian aid.

In London, The Guardian -- a left-of-centre daily -- said Blair and Bush "skirted round" the issue of who would run a post-war Iraq to reporters "seemingly because there is no agreement."

Meanwhile Alex Brummer, a political commentator for the right-wing Daily Mail, wrote: "Blair clearly hopes that he has the clout to divert this American government to a multilateral approach to the civilian administration of the peace. I detect that his chances of success are limited."

The Financial Times said Blair's lack of influence over Bush was also highlighted by his failure to get the president to announce a firm date for the publication of a "roadmap" towards peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

"Neither objective can be said to be secure and the limits of Mr Blair's influence over the US are apparent," the business daily said.



Hundreds of anti-war demonstrators under the banner of the Islami Oikya Jote shout slogans against the US-led invasion of Iraq after Juma prayers at the Baitul Mukarram Mosque in Dhaka yesterday.



(From left) An Iraqi woman cries during the Friday prayers at a mosque in Baghdad; an Iraqi Kurdish bulldozer destroys a mural of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the centre of the garrison town of Qarah Anjir, 20km east of the Iraqi government-controlled city of Kirkuk, yesterday; and Iraqi armour destroyed in the battle for Basra.

US-UK rift over rebuilding Umm Qasr

AFP, London

Sharp differences have emerged between the United States and Britain on who should rebuild the Iraqi port of Umm Qasr after the war, with the Americans giving the nod to a US company and the British insisting on returning it to Iraqi control, the British press reported yesterday.

The US Agency for International Development has already awarded a contract valued at 4.8 million dollars (4.5 million euros) to rebuild the nation's only deep water port to Stevedoring Services of America, one of eight contracts for rebuilding valued altogether at some 900 million dollars.

The way the contracts are being awarded has been severely criticised, as non-US firms have been almost completely excluded from the tenders process. Several of the US firms involved also have close ties to high-ranking officials in the US government, among them Halliburton, which used to be run by Vice President Dick Cheney.

Brian Burridge, chief commander of the British troops said Thursday "the best outcome is that we find the people who ran it (Umm Qasr) before," the Guardian reported.

The paper yesterday also quoted an anonymous British army officer saying Britain's goal was not to impose a "pax Britannica".

"We don't want to conquer a second Mesopotamia. The ultimate goal is to hand everything over to the Iraqi people," he said.

The Independent meanwhile wrote that Britain "sees this as the first big test of the proclaimed Allied intention to ensure that Iraqi resources are used for the benefit of the Iraqi people."

Some companies here have been angered over the contract process, the paper reported, saying that the British company P and O had submitted a bid but was rejected. Several of the firms were concerned that American companies appeared to be receiving preferential treatment.

Bank warehouse gutted in Tejgaon

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A huge quantity of chemicals, oil, motor parts, air-conditioners, mobile sets and other materials were gutted in a fire inside an Islami Bank warehouse at Tejgaon in the city yesterday.

Locals believe the fire might have originated from an electric short circuit at the warehouse-1 of the bank, near the gate of the Film Development Corporation (FDC).

"Everybody was out for prayers when the fire broke out," Yunus, one of the employees of the warehouse, said.

The warehouse was closed as it was a holiday and all the six employees went out for prayers.

Returning to the warehouse, they found smoke and called the fire brigade. "We noticed the fire at 1:30pm," Yunus added.

Several fire fighting units equipped with water, foam and chemicals from different city stations took part in the operation. Fire fighting units managed to control the fire after six hours. Units from Narayanganj were also called in.

Senior fire brigade officials including the director general were present at the spot to supervise fire fighting. A big contingent of police was deployed at the sight.

According to the bank sources,

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Makkah imam's call to halt war immediately

AFP, Riyadh

The imam of Makkah's Grand Mosque, called yesterday for an immediate halt to the war on Iraq as Muslims across Saudi Arabia prayed for Baghdad's victory against the US-British aggressors.

"This war must stop immediately. Its continuity will only fuel hatred and disputes" between nations, said Sheikh Saleh bin Humayed, who passionately prayed to Allah to "save our brothers in Iraq and defeat the aggressors."

Sheikh Saleh, who is also Speaker of the Saudi Shura Council, said that launching the war on "Baghdad was a "grave mistake," and urged Muslims to unite ranks to ward off their enemies.

The imam of the Prophet Mohammed's (SM) mosque in Medina meanwhile prayed for "our weak Muslim brothers in Iraq and for the destruction of the aggressors," and urged a jihad, or holy war.

Many imams at mosques in the capital Riyadh and other cities devoted their sermons at the main Muslim weekly prayers Friday to vent anger on what they see as a war directed against Muslims.

Others have been holding special prayers at night to seek divine assistance for Iraqis.

Iraq shoots down US drone over Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi anti-aircraft gunners yesterday shot down a US drone over a residential neighborhood in Baghdad, witnesses said.

The pilotless reconnaissance plane was seen falling on the rooftop of a small house in the Jihad neighborhood in the southwestern sector of the capital, they told AFP.

An AFP photographer on the scene said the drone destroyed the roof of the house and left the walls partly burnt.

US troops under 'harassment fire'

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF NAJAF, Iraq

As the thud of artillery rounds moved closer and black puffs of smoke rose into the air, Lieutenant Colonel Jack Kammerer did not mince words.

"We need to get the hell out of here?" Kammerer shouted.

His soldiers and three journalists then hopped into two armoured Bradley fighting vehicles, which screeched and jolted their way over a dry rocky escarpment that stretches northwest from the city of Najaf.

When the tank-like Bradleys stopped beyond range of Iraqi fire, this reporter emerged to take

in the view below: a tree-lined lake and a distant road that heads north over the escarpment to Karbala, a gateway to Baghdad.

Troops from the 1st Bridge of the US Army's 3rd Infantry Division have fought to establish control of the ridge since arriving here four days ago.

Kammerer's 3-7 infantry battalion bolstered the army's position on Tuesday when it captured what he believes served as an operations base for militia-men launching mortar and other attacks on the strategic route.

In order to seize the base and neighbouring trench network on the ridge, US forces have not only unleashed the might of the

Bradley's 25 millimeter guns but also heavy artillery fire as well as bombs from F-18 and F-15 warplanes.

The fighting has claimed the lives of around 15 Iraqi militia-men and led to the capture of machine guns, mortars, as well as rocket-propelled grenades, officers said.

But the Iraqis have kept firing back with light mortars and other weapons.

"In the face of superior power, they still kind of hang in there and fight," according to 2nd Lieutenant Gregory Holmes, the battalion's Arabic-speaking intelligence officer.

In the fighting here, one US soldier was wounded slightly by mortar shrapnel, while another explosive round, possibly a mortar, hit the side of a Bradley the same day it was used by journalists.

"It went boom," recalled Captain Wil Neubauer, commander of the battalion's Charlie Company. "The whole Bradley went dark for a minute. We just kept on rolling."

But the captain also doubted the Iraqis could achieve much now that they have lost their operations base -- a collection of

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3 alleged outlaws murdered

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Three alleged activists of outlawed parties and a truck driver were murdered in three incidents in Chuadanga since on Wednesday night and Thursday.

Police said the murders were sequel to intra-party rivalry and previous enmity.

	Sun Rises	Sun Sets
Mar 29		6-12 pm
Mar 30	5-55 am	
Prayer Timings		
Mar 29		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	5-00	5-30
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	4-45	5-15
Maghrib	6-18	6-23
Esha	7-35	8-00
Source: Islamic Foundation		

Hotels brace for business slump

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Hotels and guest houses in the city are bracing for a slump in business as the number of foreign visitors might drop due to the war in Iraq.

Owners of those as well employees apprehend a 'sharp decline in occupancy rate' if the war is prolonged as most of the hotels and guest houses are exclusively for foreigners.

They mentioned that the number of foreign guests, particularly from the US and the UK, are already decreasing in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq. Many of them have cancelled their reservation for accommodation or asked for delaying it.

An official at Golden Inn guest house at Baridhara said about 40 per cent booking has been cancelled due to the war.

Occupancy rate at Citydel

hotel at Gulshan has dropped to 30 per cent from 60 to 70 per cent before the war, hotel sources said.

The manager of Aristocrat Inn hotel in the same area however said occupancy rate is usual at his hotel till now. But he added that they have not received any fresh order for reservation since the war started.

President of Bangladesh Hotel and Guest House Owners Association Sadique Ahsan, who owns De Crystal Garden hotel at Gulshan, said their business is yet to be affected by the war and that it is too early to predict the impact right now. If the war is prolonged, it would affect their business badly, he added.

He mentioned that there are about 60 hotels and guest houses in the city having a total of 1200 rooms and their usual occupancy rate is between 60 and 80 per cent.