

Iraqis comb mass grave site

AP, Mahaweel

Villagers pulled body after body from a mass grave in central Iraq yesterday exhuming the remains of up to 3,000 people they suspect were killed during the 1991 Shiite revolt against Saddam Hussein's regime. Uncounted bodies remained unearthed at the site, officials said.

By every indication, the mass grave in a village outside Hillah, 60 miles south of Baghdad, is the largest found in Iraq since US forces overthrew Saddam and his Baath Party government last month.

Hundreds of people from nearby towns and villages watched from behind a barbed-wire barrier as sets of remains were pulled from the field and set aside wrapped in plastic bags, sheets and blankets. Some of the bodies' skulls still had

tufts of long hair, and officials said they probably were women.

Many of the onlookers were weeping, and some chanted: "There is no God but God, and the Baath (Party) is the enemy of God." Several women were holding pictures of their missing men.

Rafed Hussein, a doctor leading the group of local men doing the digging, said a total of 3,000 bodies had either been retrieved or located in the past nine days. About half remain unidentified while the rest have been identified mainly through documents found on the bodies, Hussein said.

Villagers from Mahaweel first organised the dig by bringing in a bulldozer to open up the site.

"We are organising it and we are digging," said Abuzaid Dinar, the village headman. He said his dead father and brother were buried somewhere in the area, where

several separate mass graves were spread out over about a half-mile-square area.

The excavation Wednesday came two days after Iraqis pulled bodies from a newly discovered mass grave near Basra, the country's second-largest city. That site in southern Iraq was believed to contain remains of up to 150 Shiite Muslims killed by Saddam's regime after a rebellion in 1999.

Human rights groups say they believe Iraq is dotted with mass graves, many filled with victims of Saddam's brutal excesses. Villagers said that appeared to be the case with the latest site.

"About 20 percent of them were buried alive, because they had no bullet wounds, but their hands were tied and they were blind-folded," said Ameer Shumri, an official from the governor's office in Hillah.

US to approve shooting of Iraqi looters

REUTERS, New York

The new US administrator for Iraq, L. Paul Bremer, is preparing a series of security-related measures that include permitting soldiers to shoot looters on sight, the New York Times reported yesterday.

Bremer, outlining his approach at a meeting with senior staff members on Tuesday, also said he was eager to hire more police officers and ban Baath Party members from serving above a certain rank in future governments, the Times reported, citing officials present at the meeting.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's cities have faced widespread looting, and a failure to ensure safety and security are among the chief complaints of Iraqis with US forces.

"They are going to start shooting a few looters so that word gets around," The Times quoted an official who attended the meeting with Bremer as saying. "I think you are going to see a change in the rules of engagement within a few days to get the situation under control."

Bomb rips through Yemeni courtroom

AP, San'a

A bomb exploded Wednesday in a Yemeni court, wounding several people in the same place where a suspected al-Qaida militant was condemned to death last week for killing three US missionaries, security officials said.

The explosion ripped through the courtroom in Jibla, 125 miles south of the Yemeni capital of San'a, officials said.

Police said a judge was injured but he was not the one who had sentenced the militant. Witnesses said they saw victims being taken away in ambulances. It was not immediately clear if anybody was killed.

Security officials surrounded the court building Wednesday and cordoned it off. Police said they detained a suspect in the courtroom.

Annan: Attacks in Chechnya and Saudi Arabia wake-up calls

AFP, United Nations

Suicide attacks which killed as many as 144 people in Russia and Saudi Arabia were a wake-up call that terrorism remains a threat, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said Tuesday.

"It is tragic and I am sorry that so many people lost their lives," Annan told reporters when asked about the suicide car bombings in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, and in Znamenskoye, a village in the Russian republic of Chechnya.

"These acts must be totally condemned and I hope this is a wake-up call for everyone that terrorism is not over yet and that we must all remain vigilant."

The attacks were "against all decent tenets of religion, against human rights, indeed against humanity," Annan said through a spokesman.



PHOTO: AFP

Commuters struggle to enter a metro carriage on Wednesday at the Republic station in Paris. Public transport remained disrupted in Paris, one day after hundreds of thousands of French workers joined a massive public sector strike to protest the centre-right government's pension reform plans.

Thousands strike against pension reform in France

AFP, Paris

Public transport remained disrupted in Paris early yesterday, one day after hundreds of thousands of French workers joined a massive public sector strike to protest the centre-right government's pension reform plans.

Tuesday's protest paralysed much of the country in the biggest show of union muscle since 1995.

Public transport ground to a halt, schools and post offices were closed, most domestic and international flights were cancelled.

The interior ministry said about a million people altogether had taken part in accompanying demonstrations throughout the coun-

try.

But residents of the capital hoping for a return to normal on Wednesday morning found metro, bus and suburban rail services again disrupted as many workers continued the walkout.

Regional rail traffic was also affected Wednesday, but was expected to return to normal later in the day. The international Eurostar and Thalys trains were running normally.

Unions proclaimed Tuesday's strikes an overwhelming triumph and urged the government to heed the popular opposition. But Social Affairs Minister Francois Fillon vowed to push ahead with reform and said there was no alternative but to proceed.

"The government will not stop in mid-course. Today there are many people demonstrating but there are many who are not... and it is the role of government to determine the general interest," Fillon told the National Assembly.

The aim of the law is to preserve the country's "pay-as-you-go" pensions system which is rapidly going bankrupt as the population ages. The main provision is the extension of the number of years people will be required to work to qualify for a full pension.

The strike caused a near total shutdown of the metro system in Paris, and commuters walked, cycled or skated to work rather than face the ordeal of a journey by car. Public transport was crippled

in around 80 other towns and cities.

At airports, air traffic controllers, customs officials and Air France staff joined the strike, causing the cancellation of four out of five flights; regional rail services operated a skeleton service and only one in four TGV fast trains was running; ferries to Corsica and across the English Channel remained in port.

Many schools were shut down as teachers -- who have been pursuing their own long-running protest over funding -- joined the strike. Gas, electricity, postal and state broadcasting services were affected, and no national newspapers were on sale.



PHOTO: AFP

A Saudi officer looks on Tuesday at the wreckage of the devastated al-Hamra expatriate housing compound that was hit by a suicide car bombing last night blamed on the al-Qaeda terror network in Riyadh.

Missing European tourists freed in Algeria

AFP, Algiers

Seventeen of up to 32 European tourists who have been missing and feared kidnapped in southern Algeria, some since February, have been freed, diplomats in Algiers confirmed Wednesday.

The 17 freed tourists -- six Germans, 10 Austrians and one Swede -- have been in Algeria's Mediterranean coastal capital since Tuesday, where they are undergoing medical checks, the diplomats said.

They were reported to be in good health.

Earlier yesterday Algerian daily El Watan reported that 17 of the tourists had been freed in a dawn raid by the Algerian army near the

Sahara desert town of Tamanrasset, 1,900 kilometers (1,200 miles) south of Algiers.

Nine of the tourists' kidnappers were killed in the attack, according to El Watan.

The four Swiss tourists who went missing in southern Algeria earlier this year along with a group of other Europeans have not been found, the Swiss foreign ministry said on Wednesday.

"We have not found them, we do not have any more information," foreign ministry spokeswoman Muriel Berset Kohen told AFP.

Austria and Germany earlier announced that they had recovered six Germans and all 10 Austrians who had also disap-

peared, saying that they had been freed.

"We regret that the information was released on some of the people being freed," Kohen said, adding that the news had first emerged from Austria.

"That could eventually endanger the lives of the missing people who have not been found," she added.

The Swiss tourists, along with 16 Germans, 10 Austrians, one Dutch national and a Swede, had disappeared between mid-February and mid-March in the vast wastes of the Sahara desert, prompting fears they had been kidnapped.

Sweden said that it has also found its missing tourist.

Lawsuit filed against US commander in Iraq

AFP, Brussels

A lawsuit accusing the commander of US troops in Iraq, General Tommy Franks, of war crimes was filed in a Belgian court yesterday, lawyers said.

The plaintiffs, mostly Iraqis, filed the suit under Belgium's controversial "universal competence" law, which allows charges to be brought regardless of where the alleged crimes took place.

Their suit relates to about 20 alleged crimes during the Iraq war, including three cases in which US troops are accused of firing on ambulances, according to lawyer Jan Fermon.

Lifting of Iraq sanctions

Powell in bid to sway Moscow

AFP, Moscow

US Secretary of State Colin Powell began a day of sensitive discussions in Moscow yesterday aimed at securing Russia's support for an end to sanctions against Iraq by meeting his Russian counterpart Igor Ivanov.

Powell met Ivanov briefly at the Moscow Institute of International Relations before addressing an audience of students, an event closed to the media, the Russian news agency Interfax reported.

The US top diplomat was scheduled to hold a second round of extended consultations with Ivanov early afternoon, before going to the Kremlin for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Powell, who flew into Moscow late Tuesday after touring the Middle East, was expected to discuss a US draft resolution due to be debated by UN Security Council on Thursday that would see the lifting of sanctions on Iraq.

Moscow remains opposed to the draft UN resolution, insisting that UN inspectors should be allowed back to Baghdad to certify that it has no weapons of mass destruction.

But a senior US official told journalists that the discussions at the United Nations over the resolution have been constructive.

"Everybody is trying to be forthcoming and pragmatic. Nobody is

throwing the gauntlet, everybody is trying to move forward and not to re-light the old battles," said the US official.

Ivanov did not comment directly on the thorny issue, but was quoted by Russian news agencies as saying Wednesday that for Russia and the United States "the future belongs to cooperation."

"Our common interest in the search for answers to global challenges brings us closer together. No one can fight new threats alone," said the Russian foreign minister.

"We are for a constructive and non-confrontational dialogue," he added.

In a conciliatory move timed to coincide with Powell's visit, the Russian lower house of parliament was to debate ratification of a key nuclear arms reduction treaty with the United States on Wednesday.

The US Senate ratified the accord in March and ratification in the Duma was scheduled for March 21, but following the start of the US-led war in Iraq a day earlier, deputies postponed discussion in protest.

"The situation surrounding Iraq did not create the best environment for the consideration of this treaty, but its ratification is in our interests," Russian foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko was quoted as saying by ITAR-TASS.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (L) hugs US Secretary of State Colin Powell in front of Moscow's State Institute for Foreign Relations, where Powell was to deliver a lecture on Wednesday. Powell arrived in Moscow earlier for two days of high-level talks with Russian officials to discuss postwar Iraq and the US-Russian presidential summit later this month in St. Petersburg.