



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi protester throws stones at US troops during a demonstration outside the US administration offices in Baghdad on Wednesday. One former Iraqi soldier was killed in the first such shooting in the capital since it fell to US-led forces over two months ago. The crowd of up to 300 former soldiers was demonstrating at the former presidential palace in the center of Baghdad, today coalition headquarters, and started throwing stones at US troops, who opened fire.

US 'rousing' anti-govt protests in Iran

REUTERS, Tehran

Hundreds of Iranians demanding more freedom demonstrated for the eighth consecutive night early on Wednesday and scores of protesters were arrested and some injured in rallies in seven cities.

The United States backs the protests as a cry for freedom from a people whose government US officials accuse of being part of an "axis of evil" for allegedly developing nuclear arms, backing terrorism and trying to destabilise post-war Iraq.

Protesters in Tehran, wary of possible beatings from hardline Islamic vigilantes which marked previous nights, kept to their cars and sounded their horns in traffic jams around the city's university -- the focus of the unrest.

The official IRNA news agency

reported protests in six other cities in which scores were arrested and several injured. But numbers taking part in the demonstrations -- among the largest and most violent for four years -- appeared to be dwindling.

Iran's government and most parliamentary deputies accused the United States of blatant interference in Iran's internal affairs. Hardline clerics say they have detected a US-inspired plot to destabilise Iran.

But demonstrators said they were not on the streets for the sake of Washington.

IRNA said at least 90 people had been arrested in the past two days in the northwestern city of Tabriz where riot police surrounded the university there.

Analysts predict that with most student leaders in jail or having fled the country after campus protests in

1999 and 2002, the unrest was likely to fizzle out.

While Khatami has remained silent on the protests, his younger brother, deputy parliamentary speaker Mohammad Reza Khatami, said Iran should not use Washington as a scapegoat for the unrest.

"America or any other power does not have the ability to disturb order in our society," he told the Iran newspaper. "There is discontent in Iranian society and we have turned a blind eye to it," he added.

Uniformed police once more guarded Tehran University keeping hardline militiamen and the students inside apart and preventing any repeat of Friday night's clashes in which the Islamic militants fired shots and beat protesters with clubs and chains.

'Mecca militants are al-Qaeda members'

AFP, Riyadh

Seventeen suspected terrorists killed or arrested in the Muslim holy city of Mecca during the week are members of Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network, the Saudi interior minister said on Wednesday.

"The criminals of Khaldiya district in Mecca are members of Al-Qaeda," Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz told Al-Yaum newspaper.

During the raids which started Saturday night, five militants were killed and 12 others were arrested, including seven Saudis, three from Chad, one Egyptian and one unidentified, the interior ministry said late on Tuesday.

Prince Nayef said five of those held were wounded during a shootout with police.

One of those killed was a Saudi and a second from Chad, while the identities of the remaining three

have not been established, a statement added.

Police seized 72 locally-made bombs of various sizes, in addition to 12 automatic rifles with 50 magazines, six guns, ammunition, communication devices, chemicals to manufacture bombs, masks, 40 cleavers, several booby-trapped copies of the Koran and acids.

Two security men were also killed and five other officers and four citizens wounded in the shootout.

The interior ministry said earlier the group was preparing an "imminent" attack and that the apartment where they were living was "booby-trapped and ready to blow up."

Those arrested in Mecca "are under interrogation to establish their links to the cell of 19," suspected terrorists uncovered by the Saudi authorities just a few days before the May 12 suicide bombings in Riyadh, Prince Nayef said.

Iraq 'too dangerous to rebuild' : UK minister

BBC ONLINE

British and American troops have to get a grip on Baghdad because lawlessness is hampering attempts to rebuild Iraq, the UK's international development secretary has warned.

Baroness Amos is so concerned about the dangerous security situation in the Iraqi capital she has postponed a trip there.

The cabinet minister told the Financial Times the coalition had failed to anticipate the extent of problems in the aftermath of Saddam Hussein.

With hindsight there was "no doubt we would all say there were things we did not get right with respect to the planning and administration", she told the paper.

But the minister said things had

improved since Paul Bremer took over as administrator from retired US general Jay Garner. Meanwhile US forces are continuing to attempt to tackle pockets of resistance and track down illegal weapons stockpiles.

In the latest incident an American soldier was killed by a sniper's bullet while on patrol in Iraq, the US military said on Tuesday. Baroness Amos told the paper: "The safety and security situation, which we really need to get right to enable us to really go for the reconstruction effort, is slightly hampering things."

The peer was appointed to the post last month after her predecessor Clare Short resigned over a draft UN resolution being discussed at the Security Council because she was unhappy that it did not give the

UN its promised central role in rebuilding Iraq.

On Tuesday Ms Short blamed poor planning for the looting and violence in Baghdad as she gave evidence at a Commons inquiry into whether the threat posed by Saddam Hussein was exaggerated.

She told the Foreign Affairs Select Committee the US administration "was not properly prepared for its duties". Both she and fellow ex-minister Robin Cook, who also quit the Cabinet over Iraq, told the committee that government claims about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's regime in the build-up to war had been exaggerated.

N Korea vows to bolster nuclear deterrent force

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea vowed on Wednesday to strengthen its "nuclear deterrent force," dismissing the United States' call for multilateral talks as a tactic to isolate Pyongyang.

"We will step up the strengthening of our nuclear deterrent force as a justified self-defence measure to counter the threat increasing daily from the US strategy to isolate and stifle North Korea," Pyongyang's Foreign Ministry said in a statement issued through the official KCNA news agency.

The Korean-language statement, published by South Korea's Yonhap news agency, said: "We have come to expect nothing from the so-called 'multilateral talks' the United States is aiming for."

"The multilateral talks the United States is calling for clearly is not

something to resolve the nuclear issue peacefully, but rather nothing more than a disguise for US moves to isolate and stifle us," it said.

Comments by the North Korean Foreign Ministry are judged by analysts to be more authoritative than the blustery state media threats Pyongyang issues nearly every day, which are generally dismissed as rhetoric.

The North's ruling party mouthpiece, the Rodong Sinmun daily, said on Wednesday: "The Iraqi war proved that disarmament leads to a war. Therefore, it is quite clear that the DPRK (North Korea) can never accept the US demand that it scrap its nuclear weapons program first."

Wednesday's foreign ministry statement came as US Secretary of State Colin Powell said the crisis over North Korea's nuclear ambitions was of the utmost importance.

2 Iran women set themselves on fire at Paris demo

AFP, Paris

A second woman set herself on fire in Paris on Wednesday to protest at a major French crackdown on the leading Iranian armed opposition group, the People's Mujahedeen, police said.

Police said the woman, described as in her 30s, had suffered "light burns". A protestor at the scene -- near the offices of the French domestic intelligence service (DST) -- however earlier said she had been "seriously burned".

Police said when she set herself alight, she was outside the perimeter of demonstrators who were staging a protest near the DST offices here, closely watched by French police.

Earlier, an Iranian woman in her 40s -- identified as Marzieh Babakhani -- was taken to hospital and listed in serious condition with severe burns to the face and chest after spraying herself with petrol and igniting it, firefighters said. Other Iranians here said she was a political refugee living in Paris.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean riot police stand by outside the headquarters of Chohung Bank in downtown Seoul on Wednesday, as Bank employees stage a strike. Around 7,000 Chohung Bank employees went on strike to foil a government plan to sell the state-owned bank, with several hundred occupying the company headquarters and thousands of others staging a sit-in in the parking lot.

US troops using 'excess force' in Iraq: HRW

AP, Washington

US soldiers used excessive force when they shot and killed 20 protesters and wounded almost 90 others in Fallujah on April 2, an investigation by the Human Rights Watch has revealed.

The group, Human Rights Watch, said it found no concrete evidence to support US assertions that troops returned precision fire on gunmen in the crowd who shot first.

Human Rights Watch investigators who examined the sites of the shootings said they did not find conclusive evidence of bullet damage on buildings used as a base by US troops. Despite detailed claims of shooting, there was little to suggest US troops had been fired upon, according to the report, issued Tuesday.

By contrast, buildings facing the US positions were pocked with more than 100 bullet holes. The damage was "wider and more sustained than would have been caused by 'precision fire'.

The evidence suggested soldiers of the Army's 82nd Airborne Division's 2nd Brigade responded to a perceived threat with disproportionate force.

The group called for a full US investigation into the April 28 and April 30 shootings, asking that participants be held accountable for violations of international humanitarian law.

A US Central Command spokesman in Tampa, Florida, said Wednesday that military officials were still considering whether to respond to the New York-based group's report.

Capt. John Morgan, a US military spokesman in Baghdad, said the Army would "take appropriate measures" based on the results of its own investigation, which he said was under way.

Since the April shootings, Fallujah, about 60 km west of Baghdad, has become synonymous with resistance to the US-led occupation of Iraq. Subsequent ambushes troops have killed four US soldiers and

wounded 21.

The conservative Sunni Muslim city of 300,000, which gave key support to Saddam Hussein's regime, has seen three separate US Army occupation forces attempting to quell anti-American attacks with a mixture of combat raids and humanitarian aid. The 82nd Airborne was replaced by the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment after the shootings. When the attacks continued, a large portion of the 3rd Infantry Division was sent in weeks ago to quell the city and the surrounding area along the banks of the Euphrates River.

Human Rights Watch said the original order to police Fallujah with combat troops of the 82nd, a paratroop unit whose soldiers had come straight from battle, was a "recipe for disaster." The troops were unprepared and ill-equipped for the post-conflict job of dealing with hostile civilian crowds. They lacked translators, law enforcement training and non-lethal crowd control tools, the report states.

Interviews by the group's investigators with Iraqi witnesses and US soldiers directly involved in the April 28 incident produced sharply differing accounts.

Although it was dark, soldiers said they returned fire for about 30 seconds with rifles and 7.62 mm machine guns after seeing men shooting from behind a taxi and on rooftops, and from four or five armed men mingling with a crowd of about 200 protesters. Protesters said they were attacked without provocation by US troops who fired automatic weapons for 10 minutes.

The Human Rights Watch report said local resentment was evident the day US forces entered Fallujah, on April 23. Iraqi witnesses of the protests denied that shots had been fired at US troops, but that some had thrown rocks at the soldiers and their vehicles. The report says it is still possible that agents in the crowd fired at US troops, despite the lack of witness accounts and ballistic evidence.



PHOTO: AFP

This image obtained on June 17 courtesy of the European Southern Observatory shows Centaurus A the nearest giant galaxy, at a distance of about 13 million light-years. It is located outside the local group of galaxies to which our own galaxy, the Milky Way, and its satellite galaxies, the Magellanic Clouds, belong.

US to hand over Marine in Japan rape case

REUTERS, Tokyo

United States has agreed to hand over to Japanese authorities a US Marine suspected of raping a 19-year-old girl on the Okinawa island, a US government source said on Wednesday.

The case follows several high-profile criminal incidents involving US military personnel based on the southern island, home to most of the US bases in Japan, and looks set to fuel resentment of the U.S. presence.

Japan had demanded the military hand over Lance Corporal Jose W. Torres, 21, who police allege raped a Japanese woman after punching her in the face on May 25.

Under the Status of Forces Agreement governing the conduct of the US military in Japan, the United States need not hand over suspects until they are charged by Japanese prosecutors, except in the case of "heinous crimes" such as rape and murder.

Since the high-profile rape of a 12-year-old girl by three US servicemen in 1995, Washington has agreed to consider requests in serious cases.

WHO lifts travel alert in Taiwan

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur/Geneva

The World Health Organisation said Tuesday the worst is over in the battle against SARS and lifted its warning against travel to Taiwan, leaving Beijing as the only place with an advisory in force.

But the United Nations agency said health workers and emergency response centres must stay alert for fresh outbreaks of the illness, which kills some 15 percent of victims, and watch out for other new diseases.

The advice against unnecessary trips to Taiwan, issued a month ago as SARS cases surged there, was dropped because the situation on the island "has now improved significantly," WHO said in a statement.

"We must continue to fight against this disease nationally, regionally and globally, until the end," Shigeru Omi, director for the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the Western Pacific Region, told a conference of health officials in Malaysia.