

Iraqis fire grenades at US Army patrols

AP, Ramadi

Insurgents fired rocket propelled grenades at US Army patrols in two western Iraqi towns - the latest in an escalating series of attacks that included an ambush involving a 12-year-old girl, the military said Monday.

No one was injured in the grenade attacks in Khadiyah and Habaniyah, according to the overnight intelligence report distributed to Army commanders.

Military officials said they had no information about reports that an airstrike on a three-vehicle convoy fleeing Iraq near the Syrian border last Wednesday killed top officials in the government of former president Saddam Hussein, perhaps including Saddam or his sons.

The Washington Post quoted defense officials as saying that DNA tests were being conducted on the victims, and the Pentagon was closely following the results of the strike by a Special Operations forces AC-130 gunship.

But they added that so far there was no evidence that either Saddam or one of his sons, Uday and Qusay, was hit. They are the top three on the US list of most-wanted officials in Iraq, and coalition officials say the lack of evidence about their fate is fueling resistance to the occupation within Iraq.

On Sunday, Iraq made its first foray back into the international oil market since the war, with the loading of one million barrels of crude onto a Turkish tanker at the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan.

But sabotage and looting of the 600-mile pipeline from the northern Iraqi town of Kirkuk to Ceyhan delayed the flow of freshly pumped oil - the key to reconstructing an economy devastated by sanctions and war. Pumping was supposed to have begun Sunday.

Information Radio, operated by the U.S.-led coalition, broadcast an appeal Monday for Iraqis to help police the pipeline and report the location of looted equipment. It said Iraq was losing \$50 million a week needed for the nation's reconstruction due to delays caused by sabotage and theft.

In Ramadi, a patrol of two tanks and four Humvees came under small arms fire on Sunday, and the patrol saw a young girl running away with an AK-47 assault rifle, said Capt. Burris Wollsieffer, of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. The bullets landed harmlessly in the dirt around the vehicles, he said on Monday.

The troops followed the girl home and found the rifle wrapped in a red dress propped in a corner. Three men in the household were taken for interrogation, but the troops allowed the girl to remain at home when they learned her age. They also seized \$1,500 in cash and \$1,000 in Iraqi dinars, the officer said.

None of the troops saw who fired the weapon, although they found no other suspects in the area other than the young girl.

"It's just weird. It's totally unconventional," said Wollsieffer, when asked about the rising number of ambushes on his forces in Ramadi, a town where resistance to the occupation has been high. "It's guerrilla warfare."

Two senior army officers met Monday with a prominent Islamic cleric, Abdullah al-Annay who preaches in two Ramadi mosques, to ask him to tone down his anti-American sermons, said the captain.

"If he keeps this kind of speech going, they are just going to attack us more and more," said Wollsieffer, whose regiment has lost 10 men - more than half the 18 men reported killed from hostile action - since May 1 when major combat was declared over.

The 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment held a moving memorial service Sunday for Staff Sgt. William T. Latham, who died four days earlier in a Washington hospital from shrapnel wounds suffered during a May 19 raid at a suspected arms market.



PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli soldier peeks from inside a tank overlooking Gaza's northern town of Beit Hanun (background) near the Erez crossing that separates Israel from the Palestinian Gaza Strip on Monday. Four Palestinians were killed late Sunday in the Gaza Strip in what Palestinian sources said was an Israeli attack and Israeli military sources described as a "work accident" in the premature blast of an explosive device.

US to unveil plans for new Iraqi army

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's US-led administration lays out plans on Monday to create a new Iraqi army and pay off disgruntled members of Saddam Hussein's dissolved armed forces.

Anger among unpaid soldiers boiled into violence last week when US troops shot dead two protesters in a crowd that was stoning a military convoy as it drove into the administration's headquarters in Saddam's former palace compound in Baghdad.

US administrator Paul Bremer disbanded the armed forces, security agencies and ministries of defense and information last month, laying off an estimated 400,000 people, as part of a drive to rid Iraq of Saddam's Baath party legacy.

"Within two weeks we will start inducting soldiers into a New Iraq Army, which in time will secure Iraq's borders," Bremer told a business conference in Jordan on Sunday.

A US official, Walter Slocomb,

was due to give details of the new army and payoffs to soldiers in the old one at a midday (0800 GMT) news conference in Baghdad. Officials have previously spoken of creating an army corps numbering about 40,000.

Former Iraqi soldiers, many of whom put up no serious fight against the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam on April 9, are furious at being sacked, and say promised redundancy payments are inadequate or have failed to materialize.

Belgium to limit scope of war crimes law

BBC ONLINE, Brussels

The Belgian Government plans to reduce the scope of war crimes legislation which has led to charges against US President George Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair among others.

The US Government has indicated it will press for the transfer of Nato headquarters from Brussels unless the 10-year-old legislation is changed.

Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt said late on Sunday he intended to modify the law so that either the defendant or the victim in a war crimes case must be a Belgian national or resident.

Under the existing law, charges can be laid in a Belgian court against foreign nationals for alleged war crimes committed outside Belgian jurisdiction.

Papers were filed last week charging President Bush and Blair with war crimes in Iraq.

Similar action has been taken - though suspended - against the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, over the killing of Palestinians while he commanded Israeli forces in Lebanon in 1982.

An initial agreement to pass the amendment was reached on Saturday by the Liberal and Socialist parties, which are expected to form a ruling coalition following elections in May.

Israel to keep targeting militants: Sharon

AP, Gaza City

Four Palestinians were killed when a bomb they were planting went off in northern Gaza, and Israel's prime minister indicated that Israel will keep targeting militants for death despite international peace efforts.

At first, Palestinian security officials said Israeli tanks fired shells late Sunday at a group of militants from the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, affiliated with the mainstream Fatah, killing three men and wounding four others in the town of Beit Hanoun. Another died later in a hospital, doctors said.

However, loudspeaker trucks later drove through the area saying that the four died while "fulfilling their national duty," a phrase used in the past to announce accidental deaths. Israeli military sources said on condition of anonymity that the militants were on their way to plant a bomb and it went off prematurely.

In Jordan, Secretary of State Colin Powell said Sunday the killing of a Hamas leader by Israeli troops could impede fulfillment of the US-backed "road map" to peace.

Powell said the peace process must continue, despite the shooting Saturday of Abdullah Kawasme, 43, a leader of the Hamas militant group in the West Bank town of Hebron.

Powell met with diplomats from the other three members of the Quartet of Mideast mediators - the European Union, United Nations and Russia - to try to rescue the plan.

After the meeting, the Quartet members, in a strongly worded statement, said they "deplore and condemn the brutal terror attacks against Israeli citizens carried out ... since the road map's presentation," including a suicide bombing in Jerusalem on June 11 that killed 17 and Friday's gunfire attack on a car in the West Bank, killing a dual US-Israeli citizen.

Greek bomb squad checks seized ship

REUTERS, Athens

Greek officials were investigating on Monday whether 680 tons of explosives found on a ship seized off the coast and bound for Tunisia were destined for a terror organization.

Bomb experts started examining the cargo and the Baltic Sky's seven crew were due to be questioned by a public prosecutor later in the day, officials said.

Authorities were checking paperwork to see whether the cargo was registered as explosives or labeled as something else.

"We need to check if the cargo is legal or if it was bound for any terrorism group," a Merchant Marine Ministry official told Reuters.

"The army's bomb squads are checking the explosives found on the ship and the crew members and the captain will go to the public prosecutor later today to testify."



PHOTO: AFP

Fire rages along a damaged gas pipeline close to the town of Hit, around 150 km northwest of Baghdad on Sunday. Residents said that the pipeline was struck by an explosion overnight in what they believe was an attack in an attempt to disrupt oil exports by US.

US probes if Saddam was in destroyed Iraqi convoy

AFP, Washington

The US Defence Department is investigating whether a recent strike on a three-vehicle convoy fleeing Iraq near the Syrian border killed former top Iraqi officials, including deposed president Saddam Hussein himself and his sons, The Washington Post reported Monday.

The newspaper quoted unnamed defense officials as saying that the AC-130 gunship strike by Special Operations forces had drawn high-level attention in the Pentagon, and DNA tests were being carried out on the victims.

But they added that so far there was no evidence Saddam was hit, and some intelligence officials expressed doubt about whether the strike had targeted him or his sons, Uday and Qusay, the report said.

Democratic presidential hopefuls bash Bush

AFP, Chicago

Several aspiring Democratic presidential hopefuls have criticised the Bush administration's failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

"We knew there weren't any weapons of mass destruction," said Dennis Kucinich, a congressman from Ohio, said Sunday at a political forum here. "Lying to the American people is a weapon of mass destruction, Mr. Bush."

Former Vermont governor, Howard Dean, an opponent of the war, noted that US forces had been in control of Iraq for over 50 days and hadn't turned up any evidence of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons.

"We're finding out that the administration wasn't truthful with us," he told a largely black and Latino audience during a political forum that brought together seven of the nine Democratic presidential hopefuls.

The only woman in the race for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination - Carol Moseley Braun - called the Bush administration's pre-emptive strike on Iraq "a war of choice and not necessity," that "put young American men and women in harm's way for no good reason."

The only other black candidate the field, Reverend Al Sharpton, also weighed in on the subject of Iraq during the forum hosted by the Reverend Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition.

"Bush led us in (to the war) saying there were weapons of mass destruction that we cannot find," Sharpton said, suggesting that former president Bill Clinton "would have been impeached," for allegedly misleading the US public the way that president Bush had done.

The heavy-hitters among the field of seven Democratic White House hopefuls steered clear of the politically tricky question of Iraq, which has come to be seen as a litmus test of patriotism.

Missouri congressman Dick Gephardt, Massachusetts senator John Kerry, and the senator for Connecticut, Joseph Lieberman, chose, instead, to assail the president on his record on the economy, education, health care, tax cuts and affirmative action.

Senator Joe Lieberman came closest in challenging the president on what many pundits see as his strongest suits: national defense, and homeland security.

Tired US troops want to go home from Iraq

AFP, Fallujah

Feeling tired and depressed after being away from home for months, young US soldiers in Iraq say they are not peacekeepers and are ready to go home.

"I think I had enough. It's time for us to go home," said Private First Class Joe Cruz, 18, from the Second Brigade of the Army's Third Infantry Division in Fallujah, 50 kilometers (30 miles) west of Baghdad.

Cruz, a native of Guam, has been away from his family for nearly one year and said not knowing when he would go home depressed him.

"When I get depressed, I just write a letter. I write a lot. Writing a letter relieves my stress," said the shy soldier. In letters, he tells his mother he is doing fine.

He is lying.

"I wake up in the middle of the night just to look around. I am always half-asleep," said Cruz, one of 4,000 US soldiers assigned to keep the peace in this conservative Sunni Muslim city, which has often been a flashpoint since US troops shot dead at least 16 civilians during protests in late April.

Graffiti on one of the walls along the main road of the city reads: "God bless the resistance fighters of the City of Mosques."

Sergeant Robert Meadows, one of six doctors at the brigade's compound, said he treats one soldier a day on average for illnesses related to combat fatigue.

"The biggest problem is sleep. Some people just sleep for hours and hours but still don't have any energy to get up," said the 39-year-old doctor from Brooklyn, New York City.

Meadows has seen soldiers suffering from symptoms of combat stress including depression, agitation and short temper and said a majority of them are men in their early 20s.

"The most common symptom is depression. Not knowing when we're going home is the worst part," he said. He has prescribed antidepressants but said the best treatment is just talking to soldiers.

"I just talk to them and tell them to get some sleep," Meadows said, adding that soldiers can rest for three days under the treatment.

Private First Class Miguel Balderas, 22, said he sleeps inside the compound most of his off-duty time.

"I'm tired. I sleep most of the time," said Balderas from Santa Maria, California.

His friend, Private First Class James Mierop, 20, from Joliet, Illinois, described the mood as grim.

"I think a lot of people here are at the breaking point," said the baby-faced blond.

"I think everybody's had enough. Everybody is just ready to go home. I'm definitely ready to go home," Mierop said.

Harry Potter makes history in US

AFP, Washington

He may still have to sweat for his degree in witchcraft and wizardry, but his marketing acumen will have any US business tycoon seethe with envy.

Twenty-four hours after a new book about him hit the market, fictional boy magician Harry Potter from Hogwarts school of magic tricks sold an estimated five million copies for his US publisher, Scholastic Children's Books announced Sunday.

With about two-thirds of the novel's initial print-run of 8.5 million copies already snatched up by eager buyers, "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" written by a rags-to-riches British author, J.K. Rowling, and priced at 29.99 dollars a copy, broke all publishing records, gushed Barbara Marcus, president of Scholastic.

"It is extraordinary to publish this magical book which is being read by millions of children and adults across the country at this very moment," she said in a statement.

"Jo Rowling has once again written a novel that will be treasured by many generations to come."

By comparison, it took former US first lady Hillary Rhodam Clinton a week to sell just 600,000 copies of her memoir "Living History," a feat that was touted earlier this month as a publishing sensation.

'Israel plotted several times to kill Arafat'

AP, Jerusalem

Top Israeli security officials on several occasions discussed the possibility of killing Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Israel's military chief has revealed.

Those discussions did not reach any practical planning stage and no preparations were made for an attempt on Arafat's life, the Haaretz newspaper reported Monday.

The remarks by Army Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon marked the first time a senior Israeli official has openly talked of plans to assassinate Arafat.

"Why did we not kill Arafat? The truth is that the discussion whether or not to kill Arafat was debated a number of times in the past," Yaalon told a chamber of commerce meeting in the southern city of Beersheba on Sunday.

Those discussions came up after two bloody periods punctuated by Palestinian suicide bombings, a year ago and again last September, Haaretz reported.

"The subject was debated in terms of costs and benefits," Yaalon said. "It is correct that occasionally we need to reevaluate if our cost and benefit assessments were correct or not."

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has promised President Bush that Arafat would not be harmed.

Arafat has been confined by Israeli military forces to his partially destroyed compound in the West Bank city of Ramallah for the last 18 months. Israeli officials, most notably Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, have called for exiling the Palestinian leader, who Israel has accused of backing militants.

Israel routinely targets Palestinian militants in what the military terms "targeted killings," and has stepped up that policy in recent weeks. Two weeks ago Israel wounded a co-founder of the violent Hamas group, Abdel Aziz Rantisi, in a botched helicopter missile attack on his jeep.

In the continued cycle of violence 3,360 people have been killed since the start of the uprising nearly 33 months ago, including 2,532 Palestinians and 768 Israelis, according to an AFP count.

In the southern Gaza Strip city of Khan Yunis, Israeli troops staged a brief incursion near the Tuffah checkpoint and blew up four Palestinian buildings, Palestinian security sources said.

Military sources said an Israeli soldier was wounded in an exchange of fire during the raid but did not elaborate.

The sources added that a home-made Qassam rocket was fired across the border from the northern Gaza Strip on the Israeli town of Sderot, causing no casualties.

Israeli, Palestinian and US security officials were still discussing a withdrawal from the area, which is often used as a launchpad for militants firing rockets on Israeli targets and has been reoccupied by the army for months.



PHOTO: AFP

This July 2001 NASA handout shows a Hubble Space Telescope image of Mars. On August 27, 2003, Mars and Earth will come within 35 million miles of each other, the closest since 1924 and not to be matched until 2287. That's a long way by Earth standards, but only a short distance on the scale of the solar system. NASA, the European Space Agency and Japan are all sending spacecraft to Mars this year.