

25-member Iraqi governing council named

US forces kill 4 suspected Saddam loyalists

AP, Baghdad

A 25-member governing council of prominent Iraqis from diverse political and religious backgrounds was named at an inaugural meeting Sunday, a crucial first step on the nation's path to democracy.

The panel will have real political muscle - with the power to name ministers and approve the 2004 budget - but final control of Iraq still rests with US administrator L. Paul Bremer.

Security was tight at the Baghdad convention center, near where the council meeting was taking place. Fighter jets flew over the city early Sunday, and helicopters circled the area. Bomb-sniffing dogs were on hand at the convention center, and scores of heavily armed US soldiers kept watch.

Coalition officials handed out a

list of the 25 council members, and a news conference was expected later in the day.

The panel was selected after more than two months of consultations that culminated in intense negotiations this week. Bremer was expected to have seen its quick establishment as critical to the success of the American mission in Iraq. People have clamored for say in the running of their country, and several US delays and backtracking fueled a common perception that the Americans were here to colonize, rather than liberate, the country.

Television pictures showed council members chatting genially around an oval table, covered with green baize, each with a nametag and microphone in front of them.

The council has 13 Shiites, 5 Kurds, 5 Sunnis, 1 Christian and 1 Turkoman - a woman. The move is

an attempt to reflect the country's diverse demographics. Shiites make up about 60 percent of Iraq's 24 million people, but they have never ruled the country. On the panel are Iraqi National Congress leader Ahmed Chalabi, Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim, a leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution, Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, leaders of the two main Kurdish groups, and former foreign minister Adnan Pachachi.

The group, however, is dominated by lesser known Iraqis, many of whom remained in their country during Saddam's 23-year dictatorship. A Turkoman woman and an Assyrian Christian are on the list, as well as a human rights activist and a member of Iraq's Communist Party. Two women were among the panelists.

"The launch of the Governing Council will mean that Iraqis play a

more central role in running their country," Bremer said in a speech on Iraqi television Saturday.

Another report says, American forces killed four suspected pro-Saddam insurgents and arrested more than 50 people as they launched a fourth major offensive in central Iraq, an operation meant to blunt expected attacks on US soldiers, military officials said.

The Army's 4th Infantry Division launched operation "Ivy Serpent" Saturday night with a series of raids on suspected pro-Saddam holdouts, sweeping illegal weapons markets in the Baquba and Balad on the Tigris River north of the capital and setting up checkpoints.

"We're going offensive to disrupt potential attacks against us by Baathists and former Fedayeen elements," said Colonel David Hogg, a commander of the 4th Infantry's 2nd Brigade.

25 killed as bus falls into river in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

At least 25 people were killed and 19 seriously injured on Sunday when a bus collided with a mini bus on a hilly road in Jammu and Kashmir and plunged into a flooded river, police said.

The bus was on its way from Pul Doda to Kishtwar, 110 km away, when the accident occurred near Prem Nagar, about 200 km from here in the mountainous district of Doda.

The collision took place at a sharp curve, and bus rolled down the hill into the Chenab river that has swollen because of monsoon rains.

Authorities said they had recovered 25 bodies while the injured had been shifted to a hospital in Doda town, about 30 km from the accident site.

People living in the area rushed to the scene and tried to rescue passengers trapped in the bus. Police said rescuers were finding it difficult to reach the partially submerged vehicle because of the strong currents in the river.

"We have no idea how many passengers were in the bus," Doda Deputy Commissioner Mehboob Iqbal told IANS over telephone.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villager Bharat Boro walks through raging floodwaters as he carries his daughter on his shoulders to higher ground at Chungarbori, some 70 km from Guwahati on Sunday. More than three million people have been displaced and 25 killed in floods in India's northeastern state of Assam, as federal troops continue to evacuate affected villagers.



PHOTO: AFP

Leader of the 15-member Indian student delegation team, Lalita Ram Das, speaks during a ceremony launching a 10-minute documentary film "Bus," about bringing peace to the South Asian rivals, which was a joint venture by Indian and Pakistani students in Karachi on Saturday. The 15-member delegation of Indian youths headed home on Sunday after a 10-day visit, leaving new friends behind and high hopes for peace between the two countries.

Belgium to scrap law that irked US

REUTERS, Brussels

Belgium said Saturday it has decided to scrap a controversial war crimes law which has seen cases launched against President Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt said his new government, sworn in Saturday, has decided as one of its first acts to scrap the law which has angered the United States.

He told a news conference the move was aimed at preventing abuses of the law, which has also seen a case launched against British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

"I think we have definitely solved this question," Verhofstadt said, hours after his government had been sworn in by King Albert II.

The 1993 law gave Belgian courts the power to try war crimes cases no matter where they were committed.

In future, the right to launch cases would be restricted to Belgians or people resident in the country. All cases apart from those involving Belgians would be dropped, he said.

The norms of international immunity would also be respected. Any cases that were launched would take into account Belgium's agreements with NATO allies and other European Union members.

The law got Belgium into all kinds of trouble.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has said Washington would be reluctant to send US officials to Brussels for meetings at NATO headquarters and that it was opposed to any further spending on a new alliance headquarters.

Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel, who angered Washington with his staunch opposition to the war in Iraq, was also caught by the law as he was accused by an opposition party of illegally authorizing arms shipments to strife-torn Nepal.

Europe delays peace by aiding Arafat: Sharon

Tel Aviv threatens steps

REUTERS, Oslo

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was quoted Sunday as accusing European countries of delaying peace in the Middle East by siding too much with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

Sharon, who will meet British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Monday and fly to Norway Wednesday for talks with Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, told the Norwegian daily Aftenposten that European nations should isolate Arafat.

"Europe is maintaining contact with Yasser Arafat, meeting him, ringing him, and in this way is delaying a solution to the problems here in the Middle East,"

Sharon said.

"I think there should be a joint effort to remove him from all posts," he added, accusing Arafat of trying to prevent Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, a moderate and a reformer, from working for peace.

Israeli diplomatic sources said Saturday that Israel could deport Arafat if it judges he is holding up Abbas' bid to implement a U.S.-backed "road map" to Palestinian statehood in the West Bank and Gaza Strip by 2005.

Washington has sidelined Arafat, accusing him of fostering violence. Arafat denies the charge. Sharon said that Arafat, although elected, had "adopted the strategy of terror."

Sharon did not single out European nations for criticism and said that he viewed Norway as a "friend and a supporter." Bondevik, a centrist Christian Democrat, is a priest who once said he was a "friend of Israel."

A former Labor government in Norway hosted secret talks between Israelis and Palestinians in 1993 that led to the now-collapsed Oslo peace accords.

Meanwhile, Israel could deport or arrest Palestinian President Yasser Arafat if he holds up his prime minister's efforts to implement a US-backed "road map" to Middle East peace, Israeli diplomatic sources said Saturday.

'N Korea completes fuel rod reprocessing'

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

North Korea has already informed the United States that it recently completed the reprocessing of its 8,000 spent fuel rods to extract plutonium for nuclear weapons, a South Korean news agency reported on Saturday.

Quoting former lawmaker Chang Sung-min, Yonhap News Agency said that during informal talks between the North and the United States in New York July 8, Pyongyang officials confirmed that the communist country had completed the reprocessing of the spent nuclear fuel rods on June 30.

Yonhap also said Jang, who is in the United States, told the agency, quoting a high-level US official.

The South Korean Foreign Ministry said it cannot confirm "matters related to intelligence."

Chang said the North's representatives told the US that Pyongyang has "no choice but to use the reprocessed material" as nuclear deterrents.

If Chang's claims are verified, it would mark the first time for the Stalinist country to officially inform the United States that it has completed the reprocessing of the nuclear rods to extract plutonium and revealed an intention to use the material for nuclear weapons.

The North also stated during the talks that it would recognize the "New York channel" as the only official route to dialogue between the North and the United States, Chang added.

Those believed to have attended the meeting included North Korean representative to the United Nations Park Gil-yon, deputy representative Han Song-

ryol, US Department of State envoy to Pyongyang Jack Pritchard and Deputy Korean Official Director David Straub.

Another report in Japan said US intelligence authorities have confirmed that North Korea has reprocessed spent nuclear fuel rods, a move that could enable it to develop atomic weapons.

Japan's Kyodo news agency said in a report Saturday, quoting a US intelligence source, that the White House received fresh intelligence on Thursday indicating the fuel rods had been reprocessed at North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility north of the capital city Pyongyang.

The source said the United States has detected krypton 85, a reprocessing byproduct, in air samples from Yongbyon's vicinity.

Blair experiencing 'mid-term blues'

AFP, London

Weakened by a series of rebellions within his own Labour party and facing a free fall in the polls amid increasing public opposition to the war in Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair appears to be experiencing politics' traditional "mid-term blues."

Two years into his second term in office, Blair is faced with "one of the most turbulent periods of his premiership," the left-of-centre broadsheet, The Guardian, said Friday.

With no weapons of mass destruction having yet been unearthed in Iraq three months after the end of the conflict and with the British government accused of embellishing its case for war, Blair has seen his popularity among voters plummet in recent weeks.

Only 47 percent of Britons now

believe London was right to have waged war alongside the United States, compared with 64 percent in April -- in the immediate aftermath of the Iraq conflict -- and 58 percent in May, according to a survey in The Times newspaper, published earlier this week.

Other recent polls found that two-thirds of Britons no longer trust Blair while just over a third declared themselves satisfied with his performance as prime minister.

The situation is a far cry from two years ago, just after Blair was re-elected as prime minister, when his popularity rating reached Churchillian proportions with close to 90 percent support.

Compounding Blair's recent troubles, the main opposition Conservative party has overtaken Labour in the polls for the first time in 11 years, enjoying 37 percent voter support, two percentage points more than the government.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranians carry the coffin of Laleh Bijani - one of the Iranian conjoined twins who died at the age of 29 on the operating table in Singapore in a failed attempt to separate them earlier this week - during their funeral on Saturday at their hometown, Lohrasb, some 1000 km south of Tehran. More than 20,000 Iranians turned out to pay their last respects at the funeral of Siamese twins Laleh and Ladan Bijani.

Over 200 killed in Burundi clashes

AFP, Bujumbura

The number of dead in latest fighting between the army and rebels in the war-torn central African country of Burundi passed the 200 mark Saturday, according to official and unofficial sources.

The bodies of 44 rebels were found Saturday in a southern district of Burundi's capital, Bujumbura.

Rebels of the Hutu ethnic group have fought the army, dominated by the rival Tutsi ethnic group, since 1993, in a war that has claimed at least 300,000 lives.

Witnesses said the bodies of two senior commanders of the National Liberation Forces (FNL), Colonel Raphael Barankitse and Major Giovanni Kwizera, were among corpses found in a rural part of Gikoto district.

The FNL is the second largest Hutu rebel group in Burundi, and the only one of four main insurgent groups that refused to sign a truce agreement with the government in December.

Fierce fighting took place in Gikoto on Friday as government forces battled to push back the FNL to positions at least 10 km outside Bujumbura.

The army gave no details of losses in its own ranks but it was thought it had lost between 20 and 30 men and suffered hundreds of wounded, according to military sources on the ground.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President, Pervez Musharraf aims before firing a weapon manufactured by Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF) at a firing range at Wah, some 35 km west of Islamabad on Saturday. Musharraf said the POF is the force behind the armed forces and with 30,000 skilled workers is doing an excellent work for which its engineers, technicians and skilled workers deserve appreciation.

Troops cut hinges on settlement of Kashmir issue: Musharraf

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan will never sideline the Jammu and Kashmir issue, but was ready to cut the number of its troops if the issue was settled and South Asia declared a nuclear free zone, President Pervez Musharraf has said. The Nation reported on Sunday.

In an interview with a German TV channel, the President said, "We have already offered and we are still ready to reduce number of our troops if Kashmir issue is addressed." The interview was aired on Saturday.

He further said: "We want resolution of all disputes. But that does not mean that we will ever sideline the Kashmir dispute. Kashmir has to be resolved... we want resolution of all issues including Jammu and Kashmir dispute."

Once again averting the idea of disarmament, Musharraf said, "Pakistan would continue to maintain conventional and non-conventional military balance in the region. We will never compromise on our honour and dignity... we don't want war, but peaceful resolution of all disputes."

Directly holding India for triggering arms race in the sub-continent, and apparently defending his defence policy, Musharraf said, "We have to deter war... we have to prevent war through a no-

win situation by showing the enemy a no-win situation, not only that but a situation where they may be defeated even in a war or conflict. That is the minimum deterrence I am talking of, and that is the deterrence we have to maintain."

Regarding the strong opposition to constitutional amendments under the Legal Framework Order (LFO), he said, "These amendments have been introduced in accordance with the assent of the Supreme Court, and are not meant to benefit any one but to provide a system of checks and balances."

Stating that in the 1990s there were no checks and balances on power brokers in Pakistan, the President said in that era the country saw a reign of uncertainty, dysfunctional democracy, and politicised corrupt governments.

PTI adds: Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged heavy shelling along Line of Control in Nushera sector in Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir, official sources said here.

Pakistani troops targeted Jhanghar and Bhawani areas of the sector and fired about 80 mortar bombs from across the border during Saturday night, they said.

Indian troops also retaliated and the exchange of shelling between two sides continued till early on Sunday, they said.

Iranian twins buried side by side

REUTERS, Lohrasb

Iranian twins Ladan and Laleh Bijani were buried side by side, but in different graves Saturday as thousands mourned the conjoined sisters whose determination to lead separate lives touched people around the world.

Mourners lined the hillsides and beat their chests as a Muslim cleric read verses from the Koran and the bodies were carried aloft to the graveyard close to their parents' mud-brick home in a remote valley in southern Iran.

Born joined at the head, the sisters died on the operating table in Singapore Tuesday in the final stages of a lengthy and risky attempt to separate them.

"We are content. They came to us before they went for the operation and they got a letter of consent from us. They went into the operations of their own free will," said their father Dadollah Bijani.

Female Red Crescent workers tossed flowers onto the bodies as Laleh and Ladan were laid to rest.

"The deaths of Laleh and Ladan are a very heavy burden on us and it has deeply touched all of us," said their cousin Ghorbanali Behzadi. "Their cheerful spirits and sacrifice is a lesson of resilience for everyone."

Their modest mud-brick home was draped in black banners.