

# Thousands march in Iraq for early polls

## UN to meet Iraqis as Annan mulls return

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

Tens of thousands of demonstrators marched through Basra Thursday in support of a call by Iraq's most revered Shiite cleric for direct elections to be held within months to select a sovereign Iraqi government.

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has objected to US plans for a transitional Iraqi assembly to be selected by regional caucuses rather than an election. The assembly will select an interim government that is due to take over sovereignty by end-June.

The demonstration in mainly Shiite Basra was the latest sign that many of Iraq's majority Shi'ites are backing Sistani's call, complicating Washington's efforts to win widespread support for its plans for the handover of power.

A bomb was found on a street in Basra close to where the protesters were gathering, and British troops sealed off the area while they prepared to destroy it in a controlled explosion, witnesses said.

US officials and most of Iraq's US-appointed Governing Council say the country cannot hold elections until 2005. They have been trying to persuade Sistani to soften his stance.

Paul Bremer, Iraq's US governor, has said he respects Sistani, but that there is not enough time to

hold elections before the handover of sovereignty. US officials say they are reviewing the plan to hold regional caucuses to try to make the process as open and transparent as possible.

The United States and Governing Council are pushing for the United Nations to play a role in the political transition by overseeing the regional caucuses.

Abdel Aziz Hakim, a Shiite Muslim on the Governing Council, wrote to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan late last year asking the UN to study the possibility of early elections or to find a compromise between various positions on how to choose an assembly.

AFP adds: The UN Security Council said Wednesday it will meet next week with Iraqi leaders and Secretary General Kofi Annan during a flurry of diplomacy aimed at mapping out Iraq's future.

With the United States pressing for a UN return to Iraq that could bolster its plans for a transition to Iraqi self-rule on June 30, the council will meet Annan and members of the handpicked Iraqi Governing Council on Monday.

Annan will also meet separately with the Iraqi delegation as he seeks to determine what role the United Nations could play in Iraq and whether it would be safe to send his staff back to the country.

The announcement came just a

day after Annan took his first tentative step toward resuming major UN operations there with plans to send a four-man team to Baghdad to assess security in the next two weeks.

"We will have a discussion on the future of Iraq and the present situation," said Ambassador Heraldo Munoz of Chile, the current Security Council president.

Ambassador John Negroponte of the United States, which says it wants the world body to play a "vital" role but has provided little in the way of concrete details, welcomed the developments.

He said the US-led coalition would help the UN scouting team and said Monday's meeting with the governing council, led by current president Adnan Pachachi, was a "step forward" in getting the United Nations back in Iraq.

"By having the dialogue at such a high level, I think that augurs well for the prospects of moving this issue forward," he told reporters.

"It's a sign that the United Nations is taking a hard look at some of the practicalities of re-engaging in Iraq."

Annan pulled non-Iraqi UN staff out of the country after a series of deadly attacks on aid agencies, including a truck bombing that killed his top envoy and 21 others at the UN's Baghdad headquarters in August.

# US Cong launches probe into Islamic charities

AFP, Washington

A leading US congressional oversight panel has launched an investigation into 25 Islamic charities operating in the United States in order to learn more not only about their spending but also their sources of financing.

The Senate Finance Committee said Wednesday it had asked the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to provide all tax forms filed by these groups -- as well as any audit materials the US tax agency may have on them, drawing a strong protest from a leading Islamic organization.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations said the investigative net has been cast so wide that it seemed to target all American Muslims as terrorism suspects.

"Its indiscriminate scope smacks of a McCarthyite witch hunt and creates the impression that the presumption of innocence no longer applies to Muslims," the council said in a statement.

But in a joint letter sent to the IRS, Republican Committee Chairman Charles Grassley and ranking Democrat Max Baucus said Congress was interested in these groups because the US government had identified "the crucial role that charities and foundations play in terror financing."

The senators also made clear they wanted to know the charities' contributors as much as their beneficiaries.

"While much attention has been paid to where their money ends up, the source of their funds is equally important," they said.

The list includes groups like the Holy Land and Global Relief Foundations whose assets have already been frozen by the US government because of their suspected terrorist connections.

The US government has already publicly designated 320 individuals and entities as terrorists or terrorist supporters and frozen more than 136.8 million dollars of suspected terror-related money around the world, according to the Treasury Department.

But the Senate roster also mentions the Islamic Society of North America, an umbrella organization which is home to a variety of religious and cultural groups operating across the United States and Canada.

The spotlight will also be trained on the Islamic American Relief Agency, which, according to its own statements, is trying to set up an orphanage in Baghdad for more than 3,000 Iraqi children.

Congressional investigators will also sift through the papers of the Islamic Assembly of North America, an Ann Arbor, Michigan-based group, that boasts running over 700 Islamic libraries in the United States, and the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America, an outfit affiliated with al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Riyadh.



PHOTO: AFP

Nasa administrator Sean O'Keefe (R) applauds US President George W. Bush (L) at Nasa headquarters Wednesday in Washington, DC. Bush called for a US return to the moon as early as 2015, saying a lunar base would be a launch pad for a manned Mars mission and "a human presence across our solar system."

# Bush accused of waging unnecessary war in Iraq

REUTERS, Baghdad

A leading opposition US politician accused President Bush of having forced Americans into an unnecessary conflict in Iraq, where a car bomb killed five people outside a police station.

In other violence two Pakistanis and a Turk in a convoy of US military supplies were killed in a guerrilla attack on Wednesday, and the Pentagon said a growing proportion of "non-hostile" US military deaths in Iraq were due to suicide.

Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy said Bush had capitalised on fear from the September 11

attacks to put a "spin on the truth to justify a war that could well become one of the worst blunders in more than two centuries of American foreign policy."

Bush, seeking re-election in November, ordered US-led forces to invade Iraq last March to topple Saddam Hussein after accusing the Iraqi leader of possessing weapons of mass destruction. Officials said Baghdad had contacts with al-Qaeda.

A US official said a document found with Saddam when he was captured in December warned his supporters to be wary about linking up with foreigners arriving in

Iraq to fight Americans.

"The implication is...he can't entirely trust these guys," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Washington has blamed Saddam supporters and foreign Islamic militants, including al-Qaeda fighters, for attacks on US-led forces in Iraq since Saddam was ousted in April.

No weapons of mass destruction have been found so far. Denmark said initial tests showed mortar bombs found this month did not contain any chemical substances as originally suspected.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (R) meets with Iraqi Shiite leader and Governing Council member, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, in Tehran yesterday. Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, arrived in Iran from Turkey where he held talks on recent developments in war-torn Iraq and Ankara's role in reconstruction.

# US lawyers ask SC for civilian review of Guantanamo trials

AFP, Washington

Military defence lawyers filed a brief with the Supreme Court Wednesday challenging the constitutionality of military trials of war-on-terrorism detainees in Guantanamo without possibility of review by civilian courts.

"The constitution cannot countenance an open-ended presidential power, with no civilian review whatsoever, to trying anyone the president deems subject to a military tribunal, whose rules and judges have been selected by the prosecuting authority itself," the brief said.

In a scathing attack on the government's controversial plans for military trials of detainees at the US naval base in Guantanamo, the brief called the process a "legal black hole, where a simulacrum of Article III justice is dispensed but justice in fact depends on the mercy of the executive."

"Under this monarchical regime, those who fall into the black hole may not contest the jurisdiction, competency or even the constitutionality of the military tribu-

nals," it said.

The so-called "amicus," or friend of the court, brief was filed by five military lawyers assigned to defend detainees at the US Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba designated as eligible for trial before specially constituted military commissions.

The Pentagon had no comment on the substance of the brief.

"We've always said we expect them to be advocating for their clients," said Major Michael Shavers, a Pentagon spokesman.

No charges have yet been filed against any of the more than 660 detainees held at a US Navy base in Guantanamo, Cuba. But President George W. Bush has designated six detainees as eligible for trial by military commission.

The brief was submitted in a case brought by relatives of detainees at Guantanamo who have filed lawsuits challenging their detention.

The military lawyers did not dispute Bush's power to detain enemy combatants in a time of war, however.

# US soldiers' suicide rate is up in Iraq

AP, Washington

US soldiers in Iraq are killing themselves at a high rate despite the work of special teams sent to help troops deal with combat stress, the Pentagon's top doctor said Wednesday.

Meanwhile, about 2,500 soldiers who have returned from the war on terrorism are having to wait for medical care at bases in the United States, said Dr. William Winkenwerder, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs. The problem of troops on "medical extension" is likely to get worse as the Pentagon rotates hundreds of thousands of troops into and out of Iraq this spring, he said.

Both situations illustrate the stresses placed on the troops and the military's health system by the war in Iraq.

# Israel seals off Gaza after suicide attack

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army sealed off the Gaza Strip yesterday following a suicide bombing which killed four Israelis at a border crossing, the military said in a statement.

Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said the measure was a sign of the government's determination to prevent "terrorism" after the suicide bomb attack at a main crossing point between the Gaza Strip and Israel on Wednesday.

"We have never let ourselves halt our struggle against terrorism, and we will carry on in order to prevent attacks like the one carried out on Wednesday," he said on Israeli radio.