

Bremer stands by June deadline for power transfer

AFP, Baghdad

US civilian administrator of Iraq Paul Bremer on Thursday reconfirmed a June 30/July 1 deadline for the transfer of political power to an Iraqi authority.

Bremer told journalists both the US-led coalition and the Iraqi interim Governing Council were determined to respect the agreement they signed in November on the transfer of power.

He also said the coalition will cooperate with a UN team due to arrive soon in Iraq to assess the feasibility of early elections demanded by the country's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani.

Bremer's comment came in response to a question on a report that the United States might be willing to put off the deadline if the United Nations recommends a delay to ensure the viability of the process.



PHOTO: AFP
Moroccan defendant Abdelghani Mzoudi arrives for his trial in a courtroom at the Hamburg, northern Germany, Higher Regional Court yesterday. Mzoudi, who allegedly aided the Sept. 11 hijackers but was freed on evidence suggesting he knew nothing of the plot, awaited the verdict in only the second trial anywhere for the attacks on the United States.

'NATO may take over division in Iraq'

AFP, Brussels

NATO could take over command of a Polish-led division of the multinational troops in Iraq later this year, a senior NATO official said Thursday.

But while there is an "emerging consensus" that NATO should play a greater role in Iraq, no decision has yet been taken, and none is expected before the spring or early summer, said the official.

"There is no question that it could happen this year," he said of a decision on NATO deployment in Iraq. Asked if that could mean an actual deployment, he added: "It could certainly take place in 2004."

NATO, which was plunged into an unprecedented crisis shortly before the Iraq war amid divisions between pro- and anti-war camps, already provides logistical support for the Polish division in south-central Iraq.

Blair 'unaware' of WMD threat

AFP, Baghdad

British Prime Minister Tony Blair admitted in a heated parliamentary debate that experts had not found the banned arms he used to justify war on Iraq, but US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld insisted there was no definitive proof the weapons did not exist.

In Iraq, a Yemeni man was arrested on suspicion of plotting the twin suicide bombings in northern Iraq that have now claimed 105 lives, as an Islamist group with alleged links to Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for Sunday's blasts.

In the House of Commons, Blair defended his decision to join Washington in the war on Iraq, a day after he ordered a probe into pre-war intelligence on Iraq's programs to build weapons of mass destruction.

Although he admitted experts had yet to uncover nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, he told

parliament the US-British Iraq Survey Group had uncovered laboratories and other banned material.

"I accept they have not found what I and many others including Dr Kay confidently expected they would -- actual weapons ready for immediate use," Blair said, referring to David Kay, the former head of the survey group.

But Blair added: "What they have found are laboratories, technology, diagrams, documents, teams of scientists told to conceal their work on biological, nuclear and chemical weapons capabilities, that in sum amounts to breaches of UN resolutions many times over."

Blair, the staunchest ally of US President George W. Bush in the Iraq conflict, insisted: "I am not ashamed of taking the decision to go to war."

"I think we did the right thing ... I think this country and its armed forces should be proud of what we

achieved."

Kay said last week that former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein topped 10 months ago by US-led forces, had probably not possessed illegal weapons before the conflict.

The debate in the House of Commons was briefly suspended when a group of anti-war protesters shouted "murderer" and "no more war" at Blair.

Opposition Tory leader Michael Howard demanded that the government publish intelligence on Iraq's weapons capability after allegations that Britain's spy chiefs ignored expert views before the war last year.

The Independent newspaper quoted former secret services official Brian Jones as saying intelligence experts were overruled in the drafting of a controversial pre-war government dossier that said Iraq was capable of launching a chemical attack within 45 minutes.

Militants claim credit for Arbil bombings

AP, Tikrit

An Iraqi militant group claimed responsibility for the suicide bombings in Arbil, and a senior US commander blamed recent attacks on insurgents seeking to sabotage a future independent Iraqi government.

Meanwhile, the United States said it is sticking to its timetable for Iraq self-rule by July 1 even though UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Wednesday the deadline might have to be reconsidered to forge an agreement on a provisional government.

The United States says it is impossible to arrange elections in such a short time because of the ongoing insurgency.

In their latest violence, two suicide bombers blew themselves up at the offices of two Kurdish parties in the northern city of Irbil on Sunday, killing a total of 109 people.

On Wednesday, an Iraqi insurgent group, the "Jaish Ansar al-Sunna," claimed responsibility for the bombings. It said it targeted the "dens of the devils" because of the parties' ties to the United States. The claim could not be independently confirmed.

The two parties are the strongest allies of the United States and had fought alongside its troops during the invasion of Iraq last March.

The statement was posted in Arabic on a Web site that frequently carries statements by Islamic militants.

The name of the organisation was included among a dozen insurgent groups that issued a joint statement this week in Ramadi and Fallujah, part of the Sunni Triangle stronghold of Saddam Hussein loyalists warning Iraqis against cooperating with the US-led occupation.

Kurdish and US officials had suspected the attacks were carried out by Ansar al-Islam, an extremist group with alleged ties to al-Qaida.

The attacks killed numerous officials of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Insurgents have in recent weeks widened their operations to include Iraqi civilians in addition to US forces who have lost 368 troops to hostile fire since the invasion. The January toll was five more than in December.

Rumsfeld criticised for omitting Iraq costs

AFP, Washington

Democrats criticised US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld for omitting the cost of US military operations in Iraq from his proposed 401.7 billion dollar 2005 defence budget.

In testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Rumsfeld defended the decision to submit a budget without taking into account the estimated cost of the occupation, saying it was established practice for such costs to be funded with add-ons approved after the fact.

Pentagon officials have said they do not anticipate requesting new funding for Iraq until next year, putting it well past the November 2 presidential election.

"I don't think I'm the only one who's alarmed at the significant costs associated with Afghanistan and Iraq that are not included in this budget, and that these off-book

transactions are potentially dangerous and misleading," said Senator Jack Reed.

Senator Hillary Clinton said waiting until after the election to request funds was "inappropriate."

Democrats also took issue with Rumsfeld for using emergency powers to temporarily increase the size of the army by some 30,000 troops, rather than requesting a formal increase in the army's authorised troop strength in the 2005 budget.

The issue is a sore one because Rumsfeld for months has rejected calls for an increase in the army's size to ease stress on the force, just as he dismissed former army chief of staff General Eric Shinseki's pre-war estimate that pacifying Iraq would take several hundred thousand troops.

At his retirement ceremony last August, Shinseki warned: "Beware the 12 division strategy for a 10 division army."

Sharon faces police interrogation

AP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was questioned by police Thursday in a bribery case that could force his resignation, and critics charged his talk of removing Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip was meant to deflect attention from the scandal.

Sharon accepted a challenge from opponents in his own party on Wednesday and agreed to put his plan before the people in a referendum. Removal of authorized settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as such a referendum, would be firsts in Israel.

Several leading Likud figures have not yet chosen sides in the battle. However, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz, a leader of the hawkish wing of Likud, said he supported a Gaza withdrawal.

"The plan of disengagement from the Palestinians is good and the evacuation of the (Gaza) strip will provide greater security to the residents of Israel than they have now," the Yediot Achronot daily on Thursday quoted Mofaz as saying.

Police arrived at Sharon's official residence in Jerusalem on Thursday, for what media reports said would be a short, final interrogation before the state attorney made a decision on an indictment.

Last month, real estate developer David Appel was indicted on charges of bribing Sharon with \$690,000 in a tourism development deal in Greece. The bulk of the money was allegedly paid to Sharon's son, Gilad, for marketing services.

Under Israeli law, a person can be convicted of accepting a bribe only if criminal intent is proven. This allows for a case in which the recipient of a bribe is not indicted.

Peace efforts took another blow Wednesday when aides to Sharon and Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia failed again to set a date for their first summit.

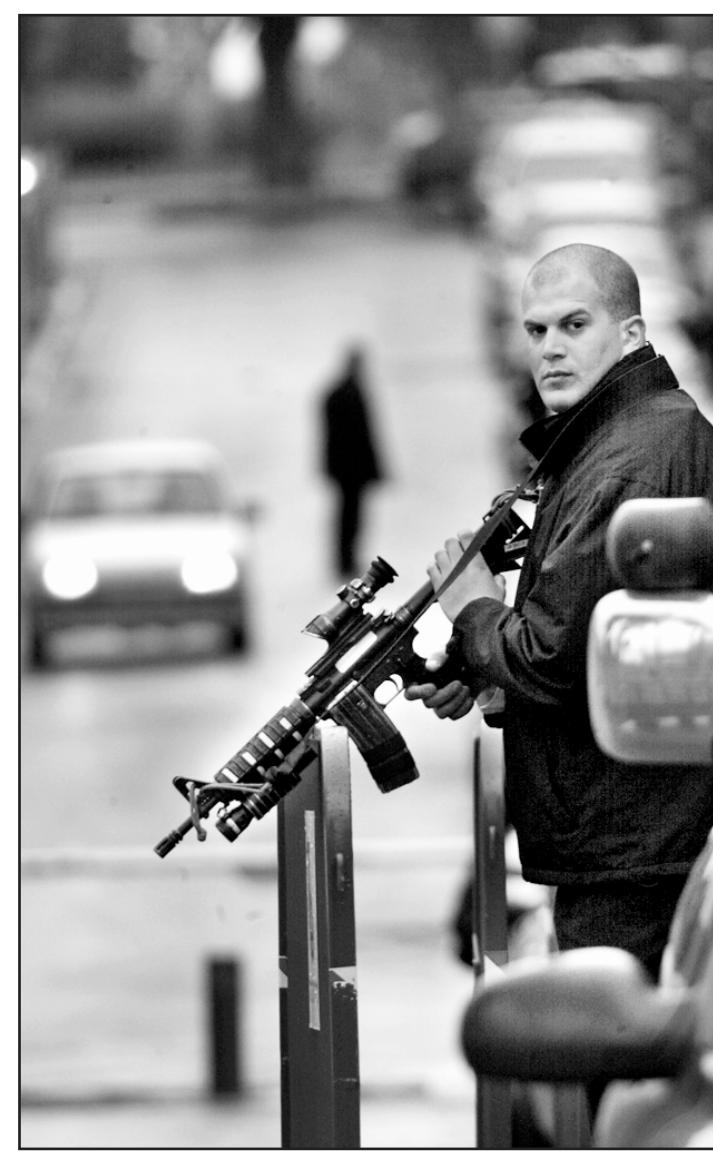


PHOTO: AFP
An Israeli bodyguard is on alert in front of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's residence in Jerusalem yesterday. A team of investigators arrived to question Sharon at his residence about corruption allegations after the indictment of a businessman on charges of attempting to bribe him through his son Gilad, along with deputy prime minister Ehud Olmert, then mayor of Jerusalem, in exchange for their help in securing a major Greek property deal in 1998. Sharon has until now refused to answer specific questions about money given to his son, and recently said he had nothing to do with the scandal.

Iran minister arrives in Beirut to find lost diplomats

AFP, Beirut

Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi arrived in Beirut yesterday to probe the fate of four Iranians who disappeared in Lebanon in 1982 and are alleged to be in Israeli hands.

Kharazi was accompanied by relatives of the four -- three staff of the Iranian embassy in Beirut and a journalist of the state news agency IRNA with diplomatic status.

The four vanished after being detained by a right-wing Christian militia as Lebanon was embroiled in civil war and partly occupied by Israel.

"There are a large number of reports saying that these four Iranians were transferred to Israel," he told journalists.

Ministers vow to improve extradition

AFP, Nusa Dua, Indonesia

Asia-Pacific ministers agreed yesterday to improve extradition arrangements and strengthen national laws to fight the "scourge" of regional terrorism.

They made their recommendations at the end of a two-day counter-terrorism conference attended by ministers or officials from 25 countries, including US Attorney General John Ashcroft.

"States should adopt extradition agreements to ensure that offenders are prosecuted in the most appropriate jurisdictions and to prevent them escaping justice by moving jurisdictions," read one of their 17 recommendations.

Baghdad museum too scared to reopen

AFP, Baghdad

Nearly a year later, experts at Iraq's National Museum still remember the horror when looters plundered thousands of treasures as they struggled to rebuild a world class collection.

Mercilessly ransacked when Saddam Hussein's regime crumbled in April, the museum remains shut, its vast exhibition rooms barren, glass cabinets smashed, antiquities defaced and the floor thick with dust.

But he accuses Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Turkey of continuing to drag their feet in retrieving goods secreted across their borders.

"Are they closing their borders?

Are they checking? We don't know."

But the media frenzy following the April looting and Iraq's immense archaeological heritage have turned the museum into a magnet for donors. So far up to four million dollars have flooded in from across the globe.

All small artefacts, which were evacuated before the US-led inva-



PHOTO: AFP
A general view shows artifacts waiting to be repaired in a room of Iraq's National Museum. Nearly a year after the war, experts at Iraq's National Museum still remember the horror when looters plundered more than 14,000 objects as they struggle to rebuild its facilities and a world class collection.