

Countdown begins for sovereignty transfer

Two US soldiers, 4 Iraqis killed in military operation

AFP, Baghdad

The countdown to sovereignty in Iraq began in earnest yesterday with a UN team due to arrive in Baghdad imminently to advise on who should lead the violence-wracked country from July.

In deadly correlation, calculated attacks aimed at derailing Iraq's transition to democracy also gathered pace with the death of two more US soldiers and the wounding of an Iraqi working for Timemagazine.

In addition, four Iraqis, including a two-year-old child, were killed in a US military operation on a village in central Iraq, witnesses said.

Insurgents were hunting "symbolic targets" such as Iraqi interpreters, police and civil defence forces seen as collaborating with the US-led coalition, a senior military official said.

"We would expect, as the country gets closer and closer to independence and sovereignty, these

kind of attacks on soft targets will continue," said US Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt.

Much work remains to be done before the US-led transfer of power to an interim Iraqi government, admitted American overseer in Iraq Paul Bremer on Wednesday, as he laid out a series of goals to be achieved before his departure on June 30, including the creation this week of a new defence ministry.

At the top of the list of priorities is agreeing on what body will take over sovereignty in three months, and also the creation of a system to hold direct parliamentary elections as soon as possible -- tasks that the United Nations has been asked to help address.

A technical team from the world body is due to arrive in Baghdad this week to work with the US-picked Governing Council and the coalition from Saturday. A second delegation headed by UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi is scheduled to arrive a few days later, said council member Muwaffaq al-Rubaie.

"We have started the dialogue

led by the Governing Council and the Coalition Provisional Authority with the help of the United Nations," he told a group of reporters on Wednesday.

While warmly received by Iraqi interim leaders, Brahimi and his group may receive a frosty welcome from Iraq's most influential cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has deeply criticised a temporary constitution that maps out the country's future until a fully democratic government is created.

The basic law, signed earlier this month by the council, provides a bill of rights and a democratically elected parliament.

But it prompted criticism from many Iraqis, including Sistani, who say it is an illegitimate document drawn up by an unelected body under pressure from the United States, and it will unfairly bind a future elected parliament.

US not to cut its nukes to Moscow Treaty levels

AFP, Washington

The United States will not cut its nuclear arsenal to levels designated by an arms accord it concluded two years ago with Russia because it must hedge against an uncertain future, a top administration official announced.

The Moscow Treaty signed with great fanfare by Presidents George W. Bush of the United States and Vladimir Putin of Russia in May 2002 calls on both sides to reduce their strategic nuclear warheads to between 1,700 and 2,200 by 2012.

But it refers to "operationally deployed" weapons, essentially offering both governments a loophole that allows them to move an unlimited number of warheads into storage and keep them indefinitely under lock and key.

While US officials have often praised this option, Wednesday's remarks by Undersecretary of Energy Linton Brooks before the Senate Subcommittee on Strategic Forces represented the first official indication the Bush administration had actually decided to exercise it.

'Invasion undermined war on terror'

AFP, Washington

A former top White House security chief on Wednesday accused President George W. Bush of undermining the war on terrorism by invading Iraq and not giving the al-Qaeda threat enough importance before the September 11 attacks.

In stunning testimony to the official inquiry into the 2001 terror strikes, Richard Clarke, whose new book has angered the Bush administration, apologised to relatives of the September 11 victims saying that the US government had failed them.

Clarke said Iraq was "the reason I am strident in criticism of the president of the United States."

"By invading Iraq, the president of the United States has greatly undermined the war on terrorism," he said, silencing the room.

Clarke, who quit his White House post last year, reaffirmed accusations that Bush had underestimated the threat from Osama bin Laden's group.

"I believe the Bush administration in its first eight months considered terrorism an important issue, but not an urgent issue," Clarke told the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.

The former counter-terrorism czar sought the forgiveness of relatives of the 3,000 September 11 dead. He said public meetings of the

commission were "finally a forum where I can apologise to the loved ones of the victims of 9/11."

"To them who are here in the room, to those who are watching on television, your government failed you. Those entrusted with protecting you failed you. And I failed you."

"We tried hard, but that doesn't matter because we failed. And for that failure, I would ask ... for your understanding and for your forgiveness."

In his book "Against All Enemies" which was published on Monday, Clarke accuses the Bush administration of ignoring the mounting threat from al-Qaeda in the months before September 11.

The administration has strongly denied the allegations and countered that Clarke was launching a political attack to influence this year's presidential election.

The White House on Wednesday took the rare step of releasing an off-the-record briefing by Clarke in which he indicated Bush was taking a tough line on al-Qaeda.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other top officials have insisted at the commission hearings that even killing bin Laden before September 11 would not have stopped the attacks on New York and Washington with hijacked airliners.

Hamas leaders go into hiding in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

The top leaders of the radical Hamas movement went into hiding yesterday as the three-day mourning period for their assassinated spiritual leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin came to a close.

The newly appointed chief for the occupied territories Abdelaziz Rantissi, and political leaders Mahmud al-Zahar and Ismail Haniya, had been receiving the condolences of tens of thousands of Palestinians in a tent at a Gaza City soccer stadium in accordance with the Islamic tradition.

But on Thursday they had again gone to ground to avoid the same fate of Yassin, who was killed in an Israeli helicopter strike in Gaza on Monday. None of them could be contacted.

Israel decided to target the Hamas leadership after a twin suicide blast 10 days ago in the Israeli port of Ashdod that killed 10 people as well as the two bombers.

Hamas sources said a procession of students was later expected to march to the house of Yassin to pay a last tribute to the group's founder.

Meanwhile, shops and schools re-opened their doors at the end of the three-day mourning period.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is offering to pull out of six West Bank settlements in a bid to win US backing for his plan to leave the Gaza Strip, ahead of the return of three top American officials to the region, reports said yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

British Prime Minister Tony Blair (L) gestures as he walks with Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi during talks on the outskirts of Tripoli yesterday. Blair arrived for landmark talks with Gaddafi amid warming ties between Tripoli and the West, as their countries prepared to sign a gas contract.