

## Terror response was insufficient: Rice

REUTERS, Washington

National security adviser Condoleezza Rice has told the commission on the September 11 attacks the Bush administration and several previous presidents have failed to respond adequately to terrorist threats, but there has been no "silver bullet" to avert the attacks.

In her 20-minute opening statement on Thursday to the commission investigating the hijacked airliner attacks of September 11, 2001, Rice said: "The terrorists were at war with us, but we were not yet at war with them. For more than 20 years, the terrorist threat gathered, and America's response across several administrations of both

parties was insufficient.

"Tragically, for all the language of war spoken before September 11, this country simply was not on a war footing."

Rice's testimony under oath, shown live on network television, could hardly have come at a more dramatic moment, in the midst of a bitter presidential campaign and during some of the heaviest and most widespread fighting in Iraq since US forces occupied the country a year ago.

Critics of the administration have charged that US President George W. Bush placed more emphasis on Iraq than on the threat from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

## US seeks int'l force to protect UN in Iraq

AFP, Washington

The United States is asking more than a dozen countries to contribute to a multinational force to protect the United Nations, should it decide to return to Iraq, The Washington Post said yesterday.

The force, some 1,500 strong at least, would provide security for UN staff if they help in organizing elections, once the US-led occupation ends on June 30, US State Department and European officials told the daily.

The countries approached by the United States through its embassies in the respective capitals include

France, India, Pakistan and other nations that were reluctant to join the US-led coalition that overthrew Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein last year, the officials said.

However, they added, the list does not include any Arab nation or neighbor of Iraq, such as Turkey.

The United States is currently preparing a draft resolution for the UN Security Council to win UN support for the current US-led military coalition in Iraq, which has run into difficulties since last week in both the southern Shia and northern Sunni regions of the country.

Washington is hoping to convince the United Nations to return to

Iraq after it decided to withdraw its presence following two devastating attacks against its compounds there in August and October of last year.

The multinational force destined to protect a new UN operation in Iraq would number at least 1,500 troops, but would depend on the size of the UN staff, which could vary from 150 to 500, US officials told the daily.

"Potentially there could be a lot more places that forces would have to go. This is an innovative process. None of us has done this before," said a senior State Department official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

## 'US facing serious problem in Iraq'

AFP, Washington

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Wednesday that US troops are facing a "serious problem" in Iraq as they seek to quell armed uprisings across the country against the US-led coalition.

The defense chief said US troops due to leave Iraq are remaining in the volatile country to stamp out a spate of uprisings and attacks against American forces.

Rumsfeld stressed that apart from the holy city of Najaf, where radical Shia Muslim leader Moqtada Sadr has reportedly taken refuge, Iraq was still under the control of US and coalition forces.

"You have a small number of

terrorists, a small number of militias, coupled with some demonstrations and some lawlessness. And it's a serious problem," Rumsfeld said.

At least 20 US soldiers were killed in different parts of Iraq on Wednesday as fighting raged in Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mahmudiya. Fallujah was the worst hot spot as the US bombed a mosque and five Marines were wounded in several hours of gun and rocket fire.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staffs, General Richard Myers, asserted that the pitched battles did not represent a popular uprising by the Iraqi people, but a small number of insurgents who want to derail Iraq's reconstruction.

## Sunni, Shias unite to bring supplies to Fallujah

AFP, Baghdad

Thousands of Sunni and Shia Muslims backed by cars full of food and medical supplies headed on foot yesterday toward the town of Fallujah, which has been besieged by US forces.

The protesters answered a call by Muslim groups for a peaceful march to carry supplies to residents of the Sunni town where dozens of Iraqis have been killed since US marines launched an offensive Sunday to wipe out insurgents.

"Our families in Fallujah, remember that our dead go to heaven and theirs to hell," read a banner held by the marchers who had gathered

early Thursday at the Um al-Qora mosque in west Baghdad where people donated food, drinks and medicine, an AFP photographer said.

"No Sunnis, no Shias, yes for Islamic unity. We are Sunni and Shia brothers and will never sell our country," they chanted.

The marchers carried Iraqi flags as well as portraits of Sunni Palestinian Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the head of the Hamas movement killed last month by Israel, and Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr, whose forces were fighting the US-led coalition.

"Allahu Akbar," or "God is greatest" sounded from the Um al-Qora mosque

as people made the donations.

Sheikh Ahmad Abdel Ghafur al-Samarai, the mosque imam and a member of the Committee of Religious Clerics, told AFP that "Baghdad residents decided to send initially 90 cars with food and medicines to Fallujah families."

"The Iraqi Red Crescent got a permission from the coalition, following negotiations over one day and one night to bring these supplies into the city," he said.

"We want to express solidarity with our brothers who are being bombed by warplanes and tanks. People donated these things, and women even sold their jewelry," he said.

## US forces face dogged resistance in battle to crush Shia, Sunni rebels

AFP, Baghdad

US forces approached the anniversary of Saddam Hussein's ouster facing dogged resistance yesterday from Sunni and Shia rebels as hundreds of thousands of pilgrims gathered for a major Shia festival in central Iraq.

The Americans were locked in the fiercest fighting in Iraq since they rolled into the heart of Baghdad on April 9 of last year, toppling a large statue of Saddam to symbolically bring the curtain down on his brutal rule.

In the latest violence, a US military convoy was attacked Thursday west of Baghdad and armed insurgents were seen dancing around two burning vehicles. No casualties figures were immediately available.

A year after Saddam's regime was toppled, US-led coalition forces were embroiled in nasty urban warfare with Sunni insurgents in their stronghold of Fallujah west of Baghdad.

They were also trying to crush militiamen loyal to firebrand Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr in central and southern Iraq less than three months before the scheduled return of Iraqi sovereignty.

In Fallujah, US marines pressed their four-day-old "Operation Vigilant Resolve" a day after bombing a mosque they said housed dozens of insurgents.

But Thursday, Iraqis equipped with sniper rifles returned to the building, an AFP correspondent on the scene reported.

Bullets whizzed inside a marine base early Thursday as a US helicopter fired off a rocket, he added.

Insurgents lobbed mortars in Fallujah, with its crumbling cement houses and minarets dotting the landscape.

Amid the thunderous explosions, mosques' loudspeakers played messages from clerics calling for an end to the destruction. Other loudspeakers were said to be calling for holy war against the Americans.

Meanwhile thousands of Sunni and Shia Muslims backed by cars full of food and medical supplies set off on foot from Baghdad Thursday toward besieged Fallujah, 50 kilometers (30 miles) to the west.

The protesters answered a call by Muslim groups for a peaceful march to carry supplies to Fallujah where dozens of Iraqis have been killed since US marines launched their offensive on Sunday.



## Monica Ali wins newcomer of the year at British Book Awards

BBC ONLINE

David Beckham has won a special prize at the British Book Awards for his book My Side, the fastest-selling biography or autobiography of all time.

Lynne Truss's best-selling grammar guide Eats, Shoots and Leaves picked up the book of the year award, while Alexander McCall Smith was named best author.

Monica Ali won newcomer of the year for her debut Brick Lane.

Monica Ali's award was presented by model Jordan, wearing a pink dress, who said her favourite books were true crimes.

The awards, also known as The Nibbies, will be shown on Channel 4 today, hosted by television presenter Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan.

## Israel, Palestinians get ready for possible Gaza pullout

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to unilaterally disengage from the Palestinians was taking shape yesterday as both sides prepared for an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and its aftermath.

Sharon was trying to rope in backing from other countries ahead of his talks next week in Washington with US President George W. Bush.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair telephoned Sharon on Wednesday and "expressed his support for the disengagement plan and his appreciation of the step Israel is taking," the Israeli premier's office said.

Blair also promised "to recruit support for the plan among the international community," the statement said.

France and Britain had previously said the unilateral dismantling of Gaza settlements was positive but only as a first step towards a negotiated solution, and are reportedly considering sending a peace force after the withdrawal.

Meanwhile, Palestinian foreign minister Nabil Shaath predicted Thursday that the radical Islamist movement Hamas would call a ceasefire once Israel implements its pledge to pull out.

"Our hope is that once there is a withdrawal from Gaza there will be a real ceasefire," Shaath told Israeli public radio.

Hamas "will be fully committed" to respecting such a ceasefire while the Palestinian security forces "will punish violators without going to total war".

Shaath, who is expected to visit Washington later this month for talks with senior US officials, said the United States and World Bank are ready to pump "massive economic aid" into Gaza in the wake of an Israeli withdrawal.

He reiterated the Palestinian Authority's line that any pull-out should be coordinated with the Palestinians and not prejudice any final status agreement.

Hamas and the other main Palestinian armed factions called a ceasefire last summer but it broke down after a mere seven weeks following a suicide attack in Jerusalem and the subsequent assassination of a senior Hamas figure.

Shaath also confirmed that "discussions were taking place" about the possible integration of Hamas into the Palestinian Authority.



Iraqis sitting on a truck loaded with medical and food supplies bound for the flashpoint town of Fallujah, celebrate while passing a burning US convoy attacked earlier yesterday in Abu Gharib, on the outskirts of Fallujah.

## Ecuadoran prisoners hold hundreds hostage

AFP, Quito

Inmates at several Ecuadoran jails held hundreds of people hostage for a second straight day Wednesday in a revolt over living conditions.

Most of the 340 hostages were relatives and friends who had been visiting prisoners in jail. Among them were five journalists.

"We're tired of the government misleading us," said Mercedes Torres, a Colombian national and a leader of the protest.

In Quito, 600 prisoners at one prison refused to heed guards' attempts to restore order, holding around 150 people, many of them children, plus five prison staff. Protests also continued at the Garcia Moreno jail, the main one in the capital.

Some 200 armed police officers with shields were seen at the Garcia Moreno prison and at the Inca jail for women north of the capital.

At the women's jail at Guayaquil, 275km southwest of Quito, inmates tied a guard and two police to trees next to domestic gas tanks, threatening to blow them up if their demands were not met.

The prisoners want an end to overcrowding and the release of prisoners who have been held in jail for more than a year without trial.

Five people have been injured in the revolt.



Mutined inmates burn furniture and shout slogans at Garcia Moneno prison on Wednesday in Quito. Inmates at several Ecuadoran jails held hundreds of hostages for a second straight day Wednesday in a revolt over living conditions. Some 200 armed police officers with shields were seen at the Garcia Moreno prison in Quito and the Inca jail for women north of the capital.

## Kerry says US in a 'mess' in Iraq

AFP, Washington

Democratic presidential contender John Kerry on Wednesday called the US occupation of Iraq a "mess" and said it was time for President George W. Bush to acknowledge his difficulties to the world.

The Massachusetts senator, who is running even with the Republican Bush in opinion polls for the November 2 election, slammed the US administration's handling of Iraq where US forces have been confronted by mounting insurgent violence.

"They're doing it in such a frankly inept way," he told CNN.

Kerry called for the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority to hand over responsibility for reconstruction and establishing a new government to "a legitimate international entity." He added that "people don't want to go to work for Paul Bremer" the US civilian administrator in Baghdad.

"I'm not the president and I didn't create this mess, so I don't want to acknowledge a mistake that I haven't made," Kerry said.

"But let me tell you something, the president needs to step up and acknowledge that there are difficulties and that the world needs to be involved, and they need to reverse their policy."

Kerry said Bush had blundered by excluding countries that opposed the Iraq war from the huge rebuilding contracts. "That's a terrible

message to send to countries.

"They need to go to the world and say we're not going to have an American authority that is creating this new government, we're going to have an international authority that will help develop the new government."

He added that if the administration "insists on doing this through our provisional government authority, if we insist on being totally in control the way we are today, we're going to have an impossible time legitimately bringing people to the table."

Iraq is now the cause of mounting divisions in the US Congress, which voted overwhelmingly in October 2002 to authorize Bush to invade.

Senator Ted Kennedy, a leading Democrat and ally of Kerry, caused Republican outrage Monday when he said Iraq had become "Bush's Vietnam".

Senator Robert Byrd, a Democrat and one of the most outspoken opponents of the 2002 resolution, spoke against increasing the number of US troops in Iraq during a floor debate Wednesday.

"Increasing the US troop presence in Iraq will only suck us deeper and deeper into the maelstrom -- into the quicksand of violence that has become the hallmark of that unfortunate, miserable country," Byrd said.