

US troops block families fleeing Fallujah fighting

AFP, Fallujah

Hundreds of people fleeing their homes in the Iraqi town of Fallujah were blocked yesterday on the highway by US forces besieging the Sunni bastion where they have been facing fierce resistance by insurgents.

Cars and pickups packed with men, women and children filled the highway leading out of the town, west of Baghdad, an AFP correspondent said.

But the convoy was forced to stop a few kilometres (miles) out of town as US forces blocked the highway, he said.

"We have been here for hours because the Americans are blocking the highway, and we are afraid that they would shoot," said Fallujah resident Ahmed Mohsen.

"We cannot either go back because fighting continues in Fallujah. We are still hearing bomb-

ing and shooting," he told AFP.

The residents started to flee their besieged homes early on Friday, the sixth day of fighting between US forces and Sunni Muslim insurgents.

Those who could packed into vehicles while many others went on foot, through backstreets and along paths that cut through fields, carrying small bags, food and medicines.

Most were seen heading toward the nearby village of Naimiyah, south of Fallujah.

US marines said Thursday they were offering women and children passes out of Fallujah for their own safety.

"Some marines tried to give safe passage passes to one family so that they can leave the city but the family said if they took the passes, the foreign fighters will kill them," said Lieutenant Andrew Terrell.

Insurgents in residential areas of Fallujah were also warning inhabit-

ants against cooperating with the marines in any way, he said.

Earlier on Friday, fighting rocked four eastern neighbourhoods of Fallujah - Golan, Nazzal, Zubat and Askari. Bodies were left to rot in the streets as people covered indoors, afraid to retrieve the corpses.

Later on Friday, the intensity of fighting eased significantly, amid conflicting reports over whether a suspension of the US offensive was in place.

On Thursday, the US marines tried to enter the neighbourhoods of Zubat and Nazzal but insurgents pounded them with anti-tank rockets and Kalashnikov and mortar fire, forcing them to retreat.

Food supplies were running short in the town and on Thursday residents were invited to go to hospitals and mosques where Sunni clerics handed out meagre rations after a food convoy managed to enter the town.

Clinton testifies before Sept 11 panel

AFP, Washington

Former US President Bill Clinton testified in private session Thursday before the September 11 commission investigating the devastating 2001 attacks on the United States.

The former Democratic president testified privately to the panel in Washington after it earlier heard public testimony from Condoleezza Rice, President George W. Bush's national security adviser.

"The commission found the former president forthcoming and responsive to its questions," the panel said in a short statement, which gave no details of what Clinton said.

It added that Clinton had provided "excellent cooperation" to its inquiries, and that he gave testimony and answered members' questions for three hours.

Clinton left office in January 2001.

POWELL SAYS Iraq govt may have limited sovereignty

REUTERS, Washington

Secretary of State Colin Powell said on Thursday the new interim Iraqi government may have to accept some limits on its sovereignty after the United States hands over authority on July 1.

Powell said Washington intended to work out agreements for US troops now fighting against Shia and Sunni rebels to remain in the country after the handover and for Iraq's armed forces to remain under US command.

Who will take over sovereignty is unclear, but Powell said the leading option was to expand the US-picked 25-member Iraqi Governing Council.

He also predicted the new authority will continue to face the kind of attacks now bedeviling the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority that has ruled Iraq since the US-led invasion toppled

Saddam Hussein a year ago.

Heavy fighting has erupted over the last several days, with US-led forces locked in open urban warfare in the central Sunni town of Falluja, the Shia shrine city of Kerbala and Abu Ghraib on Baghdad's western outskirts, witnesses said.

Forty-one American and allied soldiers and Marines and hundreds of Iraqis have been killed in this week's new two-front fighting, which has marked the bloodiest and most chaotic period of the US occupation.

Fourteen foreigners were reported kidnapped around the country, although seven were later freed unharmed.

The United States last year agreed to hand over sovereignty Iraq by July 1, but its plan to select an interim government through caucuses collapsed, partly because of objections from leading Iraqi Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.



Iraqis stand inside the destroyed office of radical Shia leader Moqtada Sadr yesterday in the central Iraqi city of Kut. US-led coalition troops have regained control of Kut following fierce fighting early morning with Shia Muslim militiamen.



Unidentified Nepalese female protesters shout anti-king slogans as they are arrested by riot police in front of Narayanhiti Royal Palace in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepalese riot police rounded up pro-democracy protesters who threatened to storm the royal palace, in a showdown over King Gyanendra's dismissal of the elected government in 2002.

Nepal nabs protesters in showdown at palace

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese riot police yesterday rounded up pro-democracy protesters who threatened to storm the royal palace, in a showdown over King Gyanendra's dismissal of the elected government in 2002.

Demonstrators affiliated with opposition parties were taken away in waiting trucks as soon as they neared the tightly guarded perimeter of Narayanhiti Palace in central Kathmandu.

An AFP reporter estimated some 500 demonstrators gave themselves up peacefully as police detained them, even as more protesters poured into the Ratna Park near the palace.

But the five-party opposition alliance vowed to press on and try later Friday to break into the palace, which was guarded by hundreds of armed troops and barbed-wire roadblocks.

"We will break down the barricades (surrounding the palace) no

matter what," chief protest organiser Krishna Gopal Shrestha told AFP.

The royalist government Thursday banned protests indefinitely in the capital, warning that rallies could be infiltrated by Maoist rebels who are seen as a more formidable threat than the opposition parties.

The home ministry warned of "stringent action" against anyone who tried to arrange a gathering of more than five people in the city, save for wedding parties.

Opposition leaders met Friday and decided to carry on with the illegal demonstration as part of their struggle to "restore the people's sovereign rights."

"We have decided to go against the government's prohibition order," Madhav Kumar Nepal, the opposition alliance's consensus prime ministerial candidate, told AFP after the meeting.

ANNIVERSARY OF SADDAM'S FALL US occupation sinks deeper in turmoil

AFP, Washington

One year after the fall of Baghdad, President George W. Bush's campaign in Iraq is an increasingly painful and divisive issue for Americans.

Opinion polls indicate a majority of the US public opposes his handling of the occupation. Democratic politicians openly talk of a new Vietnam. The families of the 130,000-plus US troops in Iraq are more boldly questioning the absence of their loved ones.

One year after Saddam Hussein was defeated, Bush is now fighting Sunni and Shiite Muslim insurgents. He has said he is determined to beat the "terrorists and thugs" and press ahead with the June 30 change to a civilian Iraqi government.

But even countries in the US-led coalition are wondering what the US leader will do to produce the stability needed for a successful transition, according to diplomats.

Iraq has produced a lot of bad news in recent weeks as Bush becomes more deeply involved in the campaign for the November 2 presidential election.

The US military death toll has gone past 630, violence has

erupted in city after city across the country and images of four US security contractors mutilated in Fallujah last week shocked the nation.

Just 40 percent of Americans approve of the way Bush is handling Iraq, according to a Pew Research poll released this week. It was his lowest rating ever and down from 59 percent in January.

A year ago most polls showed more than 70 percent of Americans supporting Bush in Iraq.

A Pew poll taken just before Saddam's regime was brought down, showed 60 percent of Americans said they would support the war even if it lasted more than a year.

Normally, war is a time of unity for Americans. And the growing public disquiet has emboldened Democrats.

Senator Ted Kennedy shocked many Republicans this week when he said Iraq had become "George Bush's Vietnam". Such references to the United States biggest military disaster are still hard for many to accept.

Republicans accused Kennedy of playing an presidential election card. But Democratic contender John Kerry, a Vietnam veteran,

followed it up, calling the occupation "one of the greatest failures of diplomacy and failures of judgment that I have seen in all the time that I've been in public life."

Kerry has however been careful with each attack to emphasise his support for US troops.

People who voted for Bush in the 2000 election are also turning against him now.

Connie Cominsky calls herself a "normal" 52-year-old housewife who voted Republican last time. Her brother has had one tour in Afghanistan and is now in Iraq. A nephew is also there. Cominsky said she is "scared" by the e-mails she receives.

"I don't know how I could have been so wrong about this president," said Cominsky, who is now an activist for the Military Families Speak Out group. "Now I want him to go to the United Nations and beg on his knees for help."

The good news for Bush is that the roller-coaster polls still show a majority believe the Iraq invasion was right, though even that is falling. And they show that the election battle with Kerry is still neck and neck.

LTTE factions lock in fierce fighting: 9 killed

AFP, Colombo

Heavy fighting broke out between rival Tamil Tiger factions yesterday, killing at least nine people, rebels said, in the first clashes in Sri Lanka since the guerrillas and government entered a truce in February 2002.

The main Tamil Tiger group mounted a wave of bombardments against positions of renegade commander V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, who holds sway in Batticaloa, south of the northeastern port of Trincomalee.

The rebels were firing artillery, mortar bombs and automatic assault rifles in a twin-column advance on the renegades, Tiger sources said.

The internecine fighting broke out a week after national elections that were narrowly won by President Chandrika Kumaratunga's Freedom Alliance, which includes hardliners opposed to concessions to the rebels.

The main Tiger group this week

called for a revival of peace talks with the incoming government but warned it would return to fighting if it was not granted self-rule.

More than 60,000 people have died in the rebels' three-decade war for a separate Tamil homeland.

The break-up of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on March 3 and the fighting dimmed prospects of reviving talks stalled since April last year, diplomats said.

Karuna broke away from the LTTE with some 5,000 to 6,000 cadres, or about a third of the Tigers' original fighting force, accusing the rebel leadership of ignoring Tamils in the east of the island.

Rebel sources said formations of the LTTE ended the five-week-long standoff Friday by advancing south across the nearby Verugal river and on towards the Karuna-held town of Vakaraai.

At least eight fighters and an ambulance driver were killed in the clashes, rebel and military sources said.

"There was concentrated firing or mortars for about two hours after midnight (1800 GMT)," said a resident at Muttur, just north of rebel-held territory. "This morning we heard only sporadic firing."

The International Committee of the Red Cross said it was approached by Karuna's men to retrieve the body of an ambulance driver who tried to help evacuate the wounded at Kathiraveli, a sea base for Karuna.

"More than 300 young fighters of the Karuna group who were defending the southern side of the (Verugal) river and the interior surrendered without a fight," the pro-rebel website Tamilnet reported.

Karuna's spokesman, Varadan, told AFP by telephone: "They initiated the attack and we are resisting."

Government forces and police throughout the country were immediately placed on heightened alert fearing that security personnel could be hit by crossfire, officials said.

Solution in sight on temple-mosque row

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Hindu and Muslim leaders are considering a proposal to build a Hindu temple close to the ruins of a razed mosque in northern India and give Muslims a nearby tract of land to try to settle India's most explosive religious row, a source close to the talks said.

Under the formula, the mosque site in the holy Hindu town of Ayodhya would be left untouched pending a court decision on its ownership while a new temple would be constructed on 67 surrounding acres of land.

"In return, Muslims will get land outside this area for a huge Jama Masjid (mosque) and an Islamic university," the source said. "As far as the disputed land where the mosque stood, all sides will give a commitment in writing to the court that they will abide by its verdict."

On Thursday, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led alliance, unveiling its manifesto for national elections due to be held this month, pledged to press for a peaceful resolution of the dispute which has

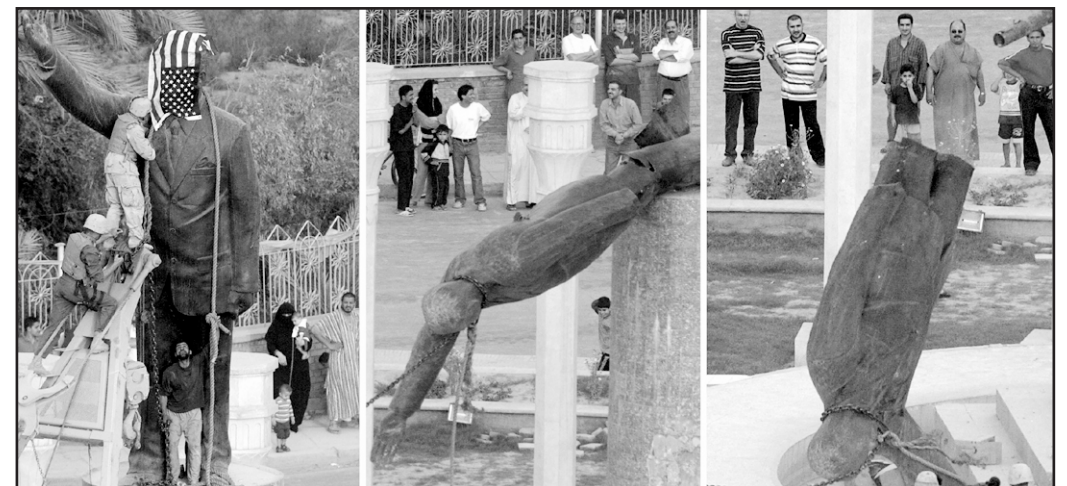
been a lightning rod for Hindu-Muslim tensions in recent years.

The source said they were ready to present the solution in writing to the Supreme Court in mid-March but the BJP decided not to in order to avoid controversy ahead of the phased elections to be held from April 20.

Polis told the BJP-led alliance to win the election on the back of a booming economy and peace moves with nuclear rival Pakistan. "If there'd been any discordant voice, the entire 'feel-good factor' would have been destroyed so it was decided to wait till after the elections," the source said.

The BJP spearheaded a campaign in the late 1980s to build a temple on the site of the 16th-century mosque Hindus believe was constructed atop the birthplace of the revered god-king Ram.

The drive culminated in the mosque's destruction by a frenzied Hindu mob in 1992, sparking nationwide riots in which at least 2,000, mainly Muslims, died.



File Photo: Iraqis watch a statue of former president Saddam Hussein covered for a short time with a US flag (L) and then being brought down in Baghdad's al-Fardous (paradise) square. One year on April 9, 2004, US and coalition forces are now battling insurgent forces, militias, petty crime, kidnappings, smuggling and general lawlessness, while the Iraqi people still live under curfew, lack of water, electricity and other amenities and worry about their day-to-day safety and the high unemployment.



People shout slogans as a female protester holds a banner demanding the release of the kidnapped three Japanese in Iraq in Tokyo yesterday. More than 500 people gathered in front of the official residence of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi demanding the withdrawal of Japanese soldiers serving in Iraq and release of the Japanese hostages.

Sharon calls for party vote over Gaza pullout plan

AP, AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has officially called for a referendum within his Likud Party on his plan to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank, Israeli officials said yesterday.

Sharon's request, lodged with the party Thursday night, means the vote will be held within the next three weeks under the ruling party's bylaws.

Sharon initially said he would not call for the referendum until after he returned from a trip next week to Washington, where he will meet with President Bush in an effort to garner American backing for his plan.

But he decided to speed up the timetable to keep the momentum going from his Washington trip and to make it harder for the opposition within his hard-line party to organize, political sources said.

Sharon has said he will honor the outcome of the referendum. A recent poll showed a slim majority of Likud members supporting his proposal.

Sharon has said he will carry

out his withdrawal plan, which he has yet to fully detail, if peace efforts remain stalled in the coming months.

The Palestinians fear Sharon is giving up Gaza to tighten his hold on much of the West Bank. However, they also said they welcome any withdrawal.

AFP adds: US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Thursday that the United States will not punish Israel for its controversial West Bank security barrier by withholding loan guarantees as it had threatened to do last year.

Powell reiterated US concerns about the route of the barrier where it juts into Palestinian territory but said Israel had a right to construct it for self-defense and that Washington did not plan to deduct any amount of loan guarantees worth billions of dollars for the Jewish state as a result.

"Israel has the right to build a fence to protect itself if it feels that's what it needs to keep the terrorists from getting into Israel," he told a Senate appropriations subcommittee.