

Fearful, wary Arab regimes refrain from criticising US

Arab press compares assault on Fallujah to Jenin 'massacre'

AFP, Cairo

While support for Sunni and Shia Muslims fighting US troops in Iraq is heating up on the Arab street, Arab regimes are shying away from publicly criticising US military operations in the war-torn country.

Although some analysts put the Arab regimes' low profile down to fear of antagonising Washington, others said officials are worried that Iran might be behind a revolt by militia-men loyal to a radical Iraqi Shia cleric.

Arab satellite televisions have pointed out that most Arab governments have not reacted to a bloody US assault on the Sunni stronghold of Fallujah, west of Baghdad, or to clashes between coalition forces and partisans of Moqtada Sadr in the south.

And for those Arab regimes that did react, their words were far weaker

than those of Russia, which Friday called on the US-led coalition to refrain from "disproportionate" use of force and halt its offensive.

"Arab governments are keen on having good relations with the United States," said Mustafa Kamel al-Said, a lecturer at the faculty of economy and political science at Cairo University.

"Some Arab governments depend on the United States for financial assistance, others are having problems with Washington and want to improve their relationship," he said.

Given that "most Arab regimes are not democratic," Said said that they feel threatened by Washington's "Greater Middle East Initiative," a reform plan to spread democracy and economic liberalisation in the Middle East.

But Waheed Abdul Megeed, from

the Al-Ahram Centre of Strategic Studies, disagreed, pointing out that several Arab countries, including US allies such as Egypt, did oppose the US-led invasion of Iraq one year ago.

"What is happening now in Iraq, he said, delays the hand over of sovereignty to the Iraqis," slated for June 30, under a timetable agreed by the US-led coalition and Iraqi politicians, and endorsed by the United Nations.

Megeed said several Arab regimes consider "Iran to have instigated the movement of Moqtada Sadr" to wrestle control of some southern cities from Bulgarian, Salvadorian, Spanish and Ukranian coalition control.

He said hardliner conservatives who ousted reformists in Iran's controversial February elections "want to drag the US forces in Iraq to a swamp, in order to prevent

Washington from turning against Iran" later on.

Meanwhile, Arab newspapers yesterday compared the US assault on the Iraqi town of Fallujah to Israel's 2002 offensive against the West Bank refugee camp of Jenin, and likened US overseer Paul Bremer to Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz. "In the first week of April 2002, Israeli occupation troops committed a horrible massacre in Jenin. In the first week of April 2004, American occupation soldiers committed a human massacre in Fallujah which is still continuing," said Saudi Arabia's Al-Jazeera daily.

"In both massacres, F-16s and Apaches were used, which caused the death and destruction of man and civilisation," it said.

The same comparison was made by the Emirati daily Al-Khaleej.



PHOTO: AFP

US soldier from the 1st Cavalry Division gestures near a burning US Abrams tank attacked by insurgents on the Baghdad-Fallujah highway yesterday.

Anti-war activists kick off a weekend of protests

AFP, Chicago

Braving chilly temperatures, and the curious stares of passers-by, a small group of activists rallied in Chicago Friday at the beginning of a weekend of national protests against the occupation of Iraq.

About 150 people clustered around a handful of speakers in a federal plaza, as commuters headed for the trains home to the suburbs for the Easter weekend.

Some in the crowd were old hands at this, but Denis Clifford and Naomi Puro just stumbled on the event and paused to listen.

The California couple nodded enthusiastically as Fran Johns, an advertising executive turned anti-war activist, read the Bush administration the riot act.

"We will not sacrifice one more life for this irresponsible war," she said "...this war that has turned our

troops into invaders and occupiers ... this war that has divided our country."

"Last year," she went on "George Bush got dressed up and stood on an aircraft carrier and said mission accomplished. I would like to ask him what mission we've accomplished."

Johns pointed out that more than 600 US soldiers and hundreds more Iraqis have died since President George W. Bush declared the end of "major combat" on May 1, 2003, from the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln off the coast of California.

"Iraq is beginning to look like another Vietnam," she concluded.

The nation's growing unease over the US mission in Iraq, fueled by te rising tide of US casualties from a week of fierce fighting was evident in the remarks of many in the crowd, even those who originally saw some merit in the military campaign.

US to declassify Laden memo

AP, Washington

The Bush administration expects to release early next week an intelligence document titled "Bin Laden Determined to Attack Inside the United States" that the Sept. 11 commission requested.

White House officials were working Friday to declassify the document, a so-called presidential daily brief.

PDBs are a compilation of information from law enforcement and intelligence agencies designed to keep the president updated on threats around the world. They normally are circulated exclusively among a select group of top administration officials.

Members of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States already have seen the Aug. 6, 2001, PDB about bin Laden.

Thousands flee fresh Lankan fighting

AFP, Colombo

More than 11,000 Sri Lankans have fled their homes since the Tamil Tigers launched an offensive on a breakaway rebel, officials said yesterday, as relief workers used a lull in fighting to hand out relief supplies.

At least two civilians were reported killed and many more wounded since the main Tamil Tiger group launched a major offensive Friday to re-take territory held by a renegade regional commander just south of here, officials said.

The main civil administrator in the Batticaloa district, C. Punyamoorthy, estimated the number of people who fled their homes in the troubled areas was in excess of 11,000.

"About 4,000 have moved to

school buildings, but others have gone to safer areas to live with their friends or relatives," Punyamoorthy said. "We are making arrangements to provide them with rations for three days."

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said it had begun handing out emergency relief supplies such as plates, cups and other cooking utensils.

"We are getting manpower from the local Red Cross society to help with the distribution," ICRC spokesman Sukumar Rockwood said amid a lull in fighting.

Military sources said only sporadic firing was heard overnight after intense battles Friday afternoon near the coastal town of Vakarai, which appeared to have fallen to the main rebel group.

Bush rejects delay in Iraqi power transfer

'al-Qaeda may strike Shia pilgrims in Karbala'

AFP, Crawford

President George W. Bush yesterday rejected calls to push back Iraq's June 30 transfer of power, insisting this would play into the hands of enemies who are trying to "seize power" and humiliate the United States.

In a combative weekly radio address despite mounting unrest in Iraq, Bush again vowed to confront "every challenge" to US efforts to establish a new government in the country.

"A small faction is attempting to derail Iraqi democracy and seize power," Bush said of the insurrection by Sunni and Shia fighters in cities across the country.

"Some have suggested that we

should respond to the recent attacks by delaying Iraqi sovereignty, declared Bush.

"This is precisely what our enemies want. They want to dictate the course of events in Iraq and to prevent the Iraqi people from having a true voice in their future.

"They want America and our coalition to falter in our commitments before a watching world. In these ambitions, the enemies of freedom will fail. Iraqi sovereignty will arrive on June 30."

US officials have given few details on what the new Iraqi government will look like. This and the heightened violence has led to calls to review the proposed transfer. Even senior Republicans, such as

Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has said there should be a "debate" on the date.

Meanwhile, the alleged mastermind of al-Qaeda operations in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, could strike at Shia pilgrims flocking to the holy city of Karbala for a major festival, the US-led coalition warned yesterday.

"The sorts of events that will be occurring in this country over the next few days with 'Arbaeen' are, could be, a key target for Mr. Zarqawi given his antics and strategy in the past," coalition spokesman Dan Senor told reporters. "I just want to put a spotlight on this."

Koizumi urged to pull troops out of Iraq

AFP, Tokyo

Hundreds of people rallied outside Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's office yesterday, demanding the withdrawal of Japanese troops from Iraq to save the lives of three Japanese kidnapped by insurgents there.

Some of them also protested against the arrival of US Vice President Dick Cheney here later in the day on an Asian tour as Koizumi's refusal to withdraw troops is seen as linked to his strong alliance with Washington.

The militants, who belong to an unknown group "Mujahadeen Brigades," have threatened to kill the captives, two volunteer workers and a photojournalist, if the 550 Japanese troops do not move out of Iraq by 1200 GMT Sunday.

"The lives of people are more important than the Japan-US alliance," the demonstrators shouted in chorus as they were prevented by police from crossing the street to the prime minister's official residence in the centre of Tokyo.

"Cheney, don't come!", "Pull down the star-spangled banner!" some demonstrators cried as Japanese and US national flags adorned downtown streets ahead of Cheney's trip which will also take him to South Korea and China.

The rally brought together various citizens' groups and labour unions as well as opposition politicians and Buddhist monks who have been opposed to this first deployment of Japanese troops since World War II in a country where fighting is under way.



PHOTO: AFP

A civic group member shows a newspaper which carries pictures of the three Japanese hostages in Iraq during a rally demanding withdrawal of Japanese troops from Iraq in front of the Prime Minister's official residence in Tokyo yesterday. A terror-linked group has kidnapped three Japanese nationals in Iraq and threatened to kill them if Japanese troops were not pulled out.

Let Cong rest, NDA reign, says Vajpayee

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, Bhubaneswar

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee launched a blistering attack on the Congress accusing it of having encouraged communalism in the country right from pre-Independence days.

"They charge us of being communal but it is they who had promoted it," he said while addressing a public meeting here Friday.

"But we want to forget the past why Partition happened, why Bangladesh was created," he remarked before warning the Congress against pursuing its charges of communalism against the BJP.

The Prime Minister described the Congress as a party which needs to retire. "It can no longer serve the nation, it is not trusted by the people," he said claiming that the Congress' search for allies vindicates the fact that very few have faith in the party. He went on to list Congress' dubious role in toppling Prime Ministers. "They removed Charan Singh, Chandrasekhar, Deve Gowda, Gujral and even defeated me by one vote that of Giridhar Gamang," he said. He also made a passing remark on the tussle between Gamang and his wife for the Congress ticket.

Megawati's game plan: divide and conquer

THE STRAITS TIMES/ ANN, Jakarta

The palace is plotting. With her political life on the edge as her party teeters on the brink of defeat, President Megawati Sukarnoputri is fighting back with a game plan to keep the top job and destroy her foes in the July presidential election. This involves building a broad alliance led by the Indonesian Democratic Party - Struggle (PDI-P) that will include members of the Golkar, the Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) and Islamic-based parties such as the United Development Party and Crescent Star Party.

The two Islamic parties are represented in Ms Megawati's administration currently.

Dubbed 'demolition strategy' by PDI-P diehards, the main aim is to drive a wedge in both Golkar and NU by roping in key figures of both organisations.