

US will start ending Fallujah siege today

AP, Fallujah

northern city of Beiji.

All Marine forces will end the siege of Fallujah, pulling back to allow a newly created, all-Iraqi security force to move into the city starting today under a new agreement, a Marine commander said.

The new force, known as the Fallujah Protective Army, will be made up of up to 1,100 Iraqi soldiers led by a former general from the military of Saddam Hussein, Lt. Col. Brennan Byrne said.

In violence throughout Iraq, a US soldier was killed in a roadside bombing north of Baghdad, and a foreign civilian was shot to death in an attack on his car in the southern city of Basra. Three members of an Iraqi family were killed when a rocket hit a residential building in the

trying to flee the city. It was not clear if the accounts referred to separate incidents.

In the south, a US base in the Shia holy city of Najaf came under mortar fire Thursday in an attack that caused no casualties but showed increasing boldness from Shia militiamen in the city. Militiamen also attacked a US convoy passing through part of the city overnight, prompting an exchange that killed an Iraqi woman and wounded six people, hospital officials said.

The Fallujah violence, aired live on television screens with images of explosions and burning buildings, increased pressure on the United States to prevent a revival of the heavy bloodshed in Fallujah during the first two weeks of April.

An AP reporter, however, saw US soldiers opened fire on a pickup truck at the checkpoint, killing a seven-member family that was

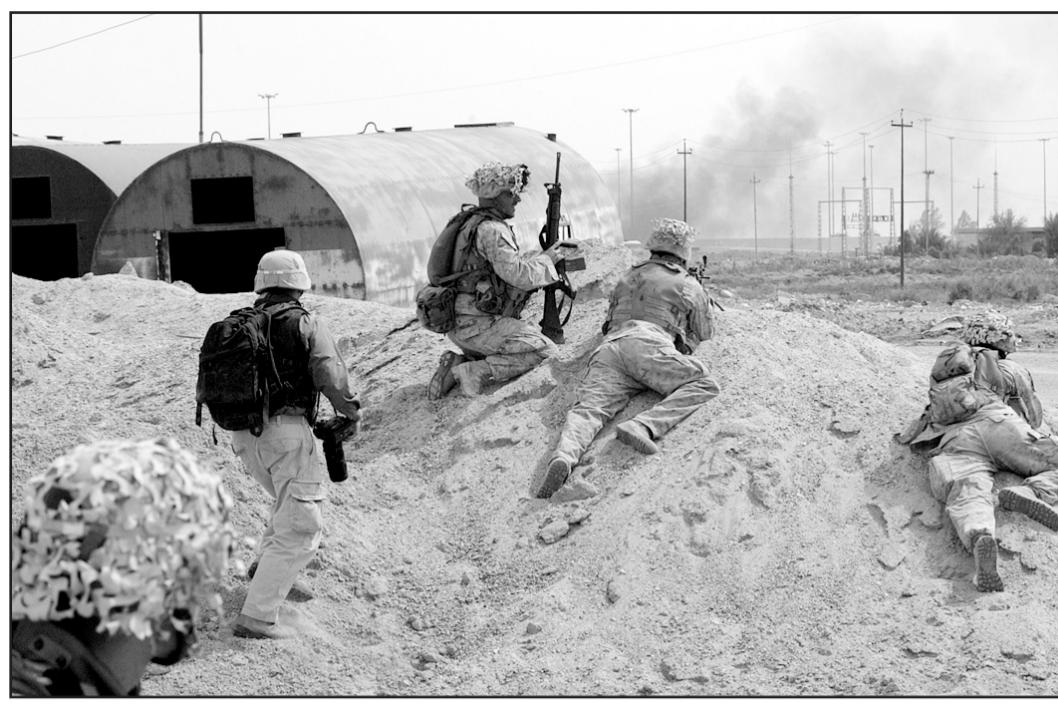


PHOTO: AFP
US Marines from the First Battalion, 5th Marines, Bravo Company, take position as the smoke of a car which forced its way at a military checkpoint at the entrance of Fallujah burns in the background after being shot at by US troops yesterday. US forces carried out renewed airstrikes against insurgents in Fallujah overnight, a spokesman for the US Marines besieging the flashpoint Iraqi city said.



PHOTO: AFP
Colombia's Red Cross rescuers work on the site of an accident involving a school bus and a bulldozer which killed 23 children and injured 34 others Wednesday in Bogota. The bulldozer was doing road work on a small hill, when it began to slip downhill, crashing into the school bus, Bogota's health department said.

School bus crash kills 23 in Colombia

AP, Bogota

A construction crew's backhoe tumbled down a hillside onto a school bus on the highway below in Colombia, killing 21 children and two adults and injuring 36 others, officials said.

The 45-ton earth mover was being driven along a section of road higher up the hill when it rolled off a ledge and plunged about 70 feet before crushing the bus on the highway below, said Claudia Cubillos, a spokeswoman for the Bogota Health Ministry, which oversees rescue efforts.

The bus was taking students from the Agustiniano school back to their homes in the capital's middle-class Suba district during the Wednesday afternoon rush hour.

UK wary of sending more troops to Iraq

AFP, London

British military chiefs are strongly resisting any moves to send more of the country's troops to Iraq, or to take over areas now patrolled by Spain's departing contingent, a report said yesterday.

Army commanders first wanted a clearer indication about troops' legal status in Iraq after the country's sovereignty is handed back to its people on June 30, the Guardian newspaper said.

There has been speculation that Britain will send reinforcements to fill the gaps left by Spanish forces, although Prime Minister Tony Blair said on Tuesday that there were "sufficient troops to do the job" at the moment.

An anonymous "government source" was quoted by the Guardian as saying that the military was nonetheless wary.

"The senior British military are strongly opposed to taking over the Spanish areas of command or sending further troops," the source said.

It remained possible that more troops would be dispatched, they added.

"Many things have been discussed further down the chain of command, including an extra 2,000 troops."

Britain currently has 7,900 soldiers occupying southern Iraq, while Spain's departing force is just over 1,400 strong.

NLD leaders hold meeting with Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

Top members of Myanmar's opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) Thursday met with their detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi at her home for the second time to discuss next month's constitutional convention.

All nine members of the NLD's decision-making Central Executive Committee were present, including vice-chairman Tin Oo who was brought from house arrest to attend the talks, an AFP reporter on the scene saw.

The NLD officials also met with Suu Kyi Wednesday, but said afterwards that no definite decision had been reached on whether to attend the military government's March 17 convention aimed at drafting a constitution.

have died so far this month, all but a handful of them in combat.

At least 105 have been classified as killed in action and six as unrelated to combat, a defense official said.

Since the war began, 721 US service members have lost their lives, 520 of them in combat.

Meanwhile, French President Jacques Chirac said yesterday he was doubtful whether the UN Security Council will agree on a resolution confirming the handing over of sovereignty from the US authorities to a new Iraqi government.

"Europe I am sure will approve the propositions of the UN special envoy (Lakhdar Brahimi) on the formation of an interim government in Iraq," Chirac said at a news conference.

Pentagon figures, however, show that at least 124 service members

More US troops killed in April than in 'major combat' in Iraq

AFP, Washington

More US troops have been killed in action in Iraq than during the six weeks of "major combat" after US-led invasion, casualty figures showed Wednesday.

When President George W. Bush declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq on May 1, 2003, the US death toll stood at 109.

Combat deaths reported by military spokesmen in Baghdad during April climbed to at least 114 on Wednesday.

The Pentagon's official tally has not caught up yet because at least 13 deaths of service members reported in April have not been officially categorized as either "killed in action" or "non-hostile."

Pentagon figures, however, show that at least 124 service members

US raids making Iraq worse: Annan

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan Wednesday said US raids on insurgents are worsening the situation in Iraq, where the security situation will have a crucial impact on the UN's work.

The US military said Wednesday it was still committed to a political settlement in Fallujah even as it pounded the city with a second day of air strikes as a weeks-long siege continued despite a tense ceasefire.

AFP obtained a copy of a letter to Annan from leaders in Fallujah asking for his immediate help.

"We are calling on you to personally (intervene) to stop the ongoing bloodbath," said the leaders, who claimed more than 800 people have been killed by US troops in the city.

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With resistance mounting, US forces are locked in tense stand-offs in the cities of Najaf and Fallujah -- the first a holy site for Iraq's majority Shia Muslims and the second a hotbed of anti-occupation rage.

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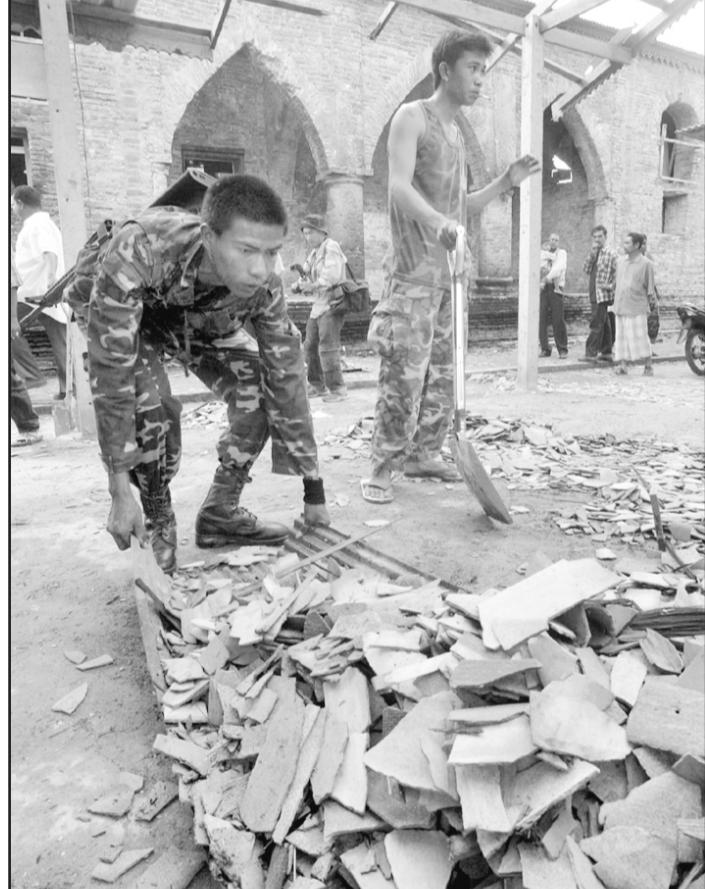


PHOTO: AFP
Thai military clean an ancient mosque in Pattani province, southern Thailand yesterday. The south has been gripped with fear and anger after a devastating day of violence that saw scores of young Muslim rebels killed by security forces.

Lanka imposes curfew as ethnic riots kill 2

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan police clamped indefinite curfews and troops poured into a central tea-growing region yesterday after two people were killed in ethnic violence, officials and residents said.

A curfew was imposed on the picturesque Kandapola region after clashes between the Tamil and Sinhalese communities that left more than 20 shops destroyed, officials said.

They said Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa flew to the area in a military helicopter and promised compensation and an impartial inquiry into the shooting by police to put rioting.

Residents said two Tamil men of recent Indian origin were killed when police opened fire to stop mobs that attacked shops and vehicles late Wednesday in clashes triggered by a traffic accident.

Sinhalese are in a majority in the country, but are smaller in number than the Tamils in Kandapola.

Indigenous Tamils form about 12.6 of Sri Lanka's population, while Tamils of "recent Indian origin" descended from indentured labour imported by British colonial rulers in the late 19th century account for another 5.5 percent.

Thai militants likely to mount more attacks

THE NATION/ANN, Bangkok

The situation in the South remains tense and fragile as young Muslims are expected to regroup and launch a new round of attacks, most likely in Narathiwat, the national intelligence chief said Wednesday.

"Security said authorities are concerned that young militants will regroup and cause more disturbances," said Lt-General Chumpol Manmai, head of the National Intelligence Agency.

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Residents said two Tamil men of recent Indian origin were killed when police opened fire to stop mobs that attacked shops and vehicles late Wednesday in clashes triggered by a traffic accident.

Chumpol said the next seven days were crucial for the young militants to mount attacks. He warned that some 150 militants were involved in yesterday's clashes, but many hundreds more remain at large.

US warns of terror threats in Israel

AFP, Washington

Security authorities in the South continue to be on high alert. Army commander-in-chief General Chaisit Shinawatra said the military was closely monitoring the situation at Pattani's Tung Yang Daeng district, where Muslim teens were congregating in unusually large numbers.

Commenting on the worst violence yet in the South, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said the situation was under control.

"The clashes lasted several hours because certain perpetrators stole M-16 rifles and M-79 grenades before fleeing to a deserted mosque. It was a lengthy process to smoke them out," he said, referring to the bloody raid on Krue Se Mosque in Pattani.

Thaksin pledged to observe the rule of law in bringing culprits to justice. "Investigators will try to identify perpetrators and their masterminds. Some perpetrators might have fled to Malaysia but the masterminds are likely to remain in the country," he said.

The government is on the right track in trying to unmask the masterminds, he said, voicing regret that the violence had led to Thais killing Thais.

against 39 percent in favour and 14 percent undecided.

Another poll in the daily *Maariv* showed 45 percent of party members opposed to the plan, 42 percent for and the rest undecided.

Until last week opinion polls had showed a relative majority in the party supporting the prime minister's plan.

Nearly 200,000 Likud members are to vote on the plan Sunday.

Meanwhile, a Palestinian militant from Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades was killed by Israeli army troops during an attack on a Jewish settlement in the West Bank. Palestinian medical sources and the armed group said yesterday.

The man, identified as Thaer Abu Srur, 20, was wounded after opening fire on Israeli soldiers guarding Kadim settlement in the northern West Bank late Wednesday, the group said in a statement.

Two opinion polls published Thursday showed a majority of Likud members opposing the plan which provides for an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and its 21 settlements as well as evacuation of four settlements in the West Bank.

Apoll published by the daily *Yediot Ahronot* showed 47 percent of Likud members were opposed to the plan

6-way nuke talks set for mid-May

THE DAILY YOMIURI/ ANN, Tokyo

The first meeting of a working group on the next round of six-way talks on North Korea's nuclear arms development programme is expected to be held in the middle of next month in Beijing, a government source said Wednesday.

The meeting most likely will be held from May 12 and is expected to last several days, the source said.

The government is trying to arrange bilateral talks with North Korea on its abduction of Japanese before or after the inaugural meeting of the group.

"The six countries are arranging to hold the first meeting of a working group around mid-May," Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi said at the Foreign Affairs Committee session of the House of Representatives on Wednesday.

After North Korean leader Kim Jong Il expressed his willingness to contribute to progress in the six-way talks during summit talks in China last week, Beijing sounded out the six countries about holding the inaugural group meeting in mid-May. All countries, including Pyongyang, agreed on the time frame.

The meeting will be attended by

Sharon warns Likud against rejecting his pullout plan

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PHOTO: AFP
Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (R) shakes hand with his Pakistani counterpart Zafarullah Khan Jamali after both countries signed agreements at the government house in Bangkok yesterday. Jamali who arrived here on a three-day visit, held talks with Thaksin on bilateral and regional issue. Both countries later signed memorandums of understanding (MoU) on scientific and technological cooperation, MoU on combating terrorism.