

US will start ending Fallujah siege today

AP, Fallujah

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

northern city of Beiji.

US troops at the main checkpoint in and out of Fallujah opened fire on a car, killing several Iraqis but there were differing accounts of the circumstances of the attacks.

Marine Capt. James Edge said a car screeched into the razorwire near the main Marine checkpoint into Fallujah and gunmen inside opened fire with assault rifles on the Americans. US troops returned fire with a Humvee-mounted heavy machine gun, killing at least three men in the car, Edge said. A fourth person was wounded but it was not clear if he was in the car or a bystander, Edge said.

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

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.

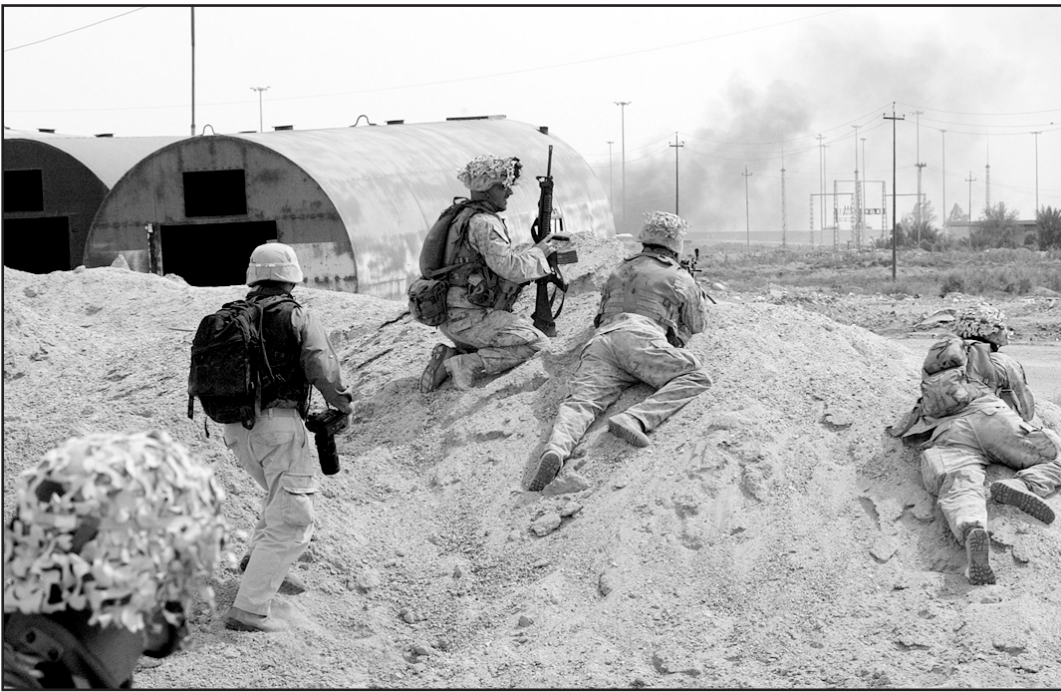


PHOTO: AFP

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 scholar 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 deputy 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.

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

AFP, Washington

More US troops have been killed in action in Iraq in April 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 categorised as either "killed in action" or "non hostile."

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

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 handover 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.

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.

Annan threw his support behind UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, who said Tuesday that the ongoing bloodshed could have dramatic long-term consequences and was a threat to efforts to forge a new caretaker government in the coming weeks.

"The more the occupation is seen as taking steps that harm the civilians and the population, the greater the ranks of the resistance grows," Annan told a press conference here.

"Violent military action by an occupying power against the inhabitants of an occupied country will only

make matters worse," he said.

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.

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.

Indian Elections

HUNG PARLIAMENT FORECAST

Indian parties scramble to strike alliance

AFP, New Delhi

India's major parties are scrambling to broker alliances with powerful regional factions amid predictions that marathon elections will produce a hung parliament, press reports and analysts said yesterday.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee set the speculation rolling when at a political rally in his constituency Lucknow this week he urged Muslim voters to support a powerful regional rival, the Samajwadi Party.

Poll pundits were surprised at the statement as the Samajwadi Party has a history of hostility towards Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but many agreed it was a smart attempt by the premier to rope in a potential ally in the key state of Uttar Pradesh.

With exit polls from the first rounds of voting in the five-phased poll ending May 10 showing no party being able to muster a big enough majority to form a government on its own, analysts say both the BJP and

its rival-in-chief, the Congress, will have to woo smaller parties.

With Uttar Pradesh boasting 80 parliamentary constituencies, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and its regional rival the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) are likely to play the role of kingmakers in the federal parliament, analysts say.

The BSP, which has a powerful voter base among poor lower caste voters in northern India, was once a part of Vajpayee's coalition government but parted ways last year after a row.

With the Congress of Sonia Gandhi also out to woo both Samajwadi and Bahujan Samaj, the two parties have so far failed to show their hand.

However, SP leader Mulayam Singh Yadav, who is also chief minister of Uttar Pradesh state, has indicated he is softening towards the BJP, press reports said Thursday.

Gandhi, the reports said, has meanwhile been trying to win over

BSP leader Mayawati, who like many Indians uses only one name, but the overtures have so far been rebuffed.

Joining the fray, meanwhile, has been the chief minister of eastern Bihar state Laloo Prasad Yadav, leader of the regional Rashtriya Janata Dal, who Thursday openly urged the BSP to support a Congress Party-led federal government.

BJP general secretary Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi said earlier this week the ruling party was open to new allies but would not desperately seek partners to cobble together a majority.

The Congress Party appeared to be an unlikely winner ahead of the national polls which started on April 20, but strategic alliances with regional parties had turned its fortunes around sharply, analysts say.

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 Rajapakse flew to the area in a military helicopter and promised compensation and an impartial inquiry into the shooting by police to quell 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.

Although some 107 Muslim teens were killed yesterday in a spate of clashes in Yala, Pattani and Songkhla, their surviving cohorts might seek revenge rather than learn a lesson, Chumpol said.

The clashes with security forces are suspected to have been organised by a separatist group known as Sarigat, a splinter of the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN). Sarigat leaders have recruited Muslim teens in the three southernmost provinces and arranged for combat training in remote jungle areas near the border with Malaysia.

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.

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 Thai's killing Thais.



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.



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.

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

subdelegates of the six countries, including Akitaka Saiki, deputy director of the Foreign Ministry's Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau; Joseph DeTrani, US special envoy for peace on the Korean Peninsula; Cui Tiankai, chief of the Chinese Foreign Ministry's Asian Affairs Bureau; and Li Gun, deputy director general of the North Korean US Affairs Bureau.

Ahead of the third round of six-way talks scheduled for June, the preparatory working group is expected to discuss specific North Korean facilities that should be frozen or abolished and also the "reward" that Pyongyang has been seeking in return for abandoning its nuclear arms development programme.

The government hopes to hold vice-ministerial and bureau-chief level meetings with North Korea before and after the bilateral meeting.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda said at a regular news conference Wednesday that Japan and North Korea already have an agreement to hold bilateral talks as early as possible.

US warns of terror threats in Israel

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday warned US citizens to avoid all travel to Israel and the Palestinian territories and renewed appeals for Americans to leave the Gaza Strip immediately, citing terrorist threats stemming from Israel's killing of two militant Palestinian leaders.

The State Department updated an existing March 23 travel warning for Israel, the West Bank and Gaza issued the day Israel assassinated Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin to include threats to avenge the April 17 killing of his successor, Abdelaziz Rantissi.

"In the aftermath of the killings of two Hamas leaders by Israel in less than a month, statements have been made by some Hamas elements and other terrorist groups threatening revenge against US interests, which could include kidnappings," it said in a statement.

"The Department of State warns US citizens to depart Gaza immediately and to defer travel to Israel, the West Bank and Gaza due to current safety and security concerns," it said.

Sharon warns Likud against rejecting his pullout plan

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon warned the grassroots of his right-wing Likud party against rejecting his plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip in an internal referendum to be held Sunday.

"You cannot be for me and against my plan. Whoever believes in me must vote for my plan," Sharon told public and military radio without however threatening to resign if his "disengagement" plan was rejected.

"Such a rejection would be the biggest victory possible for Yasser Arafat and Hamas," Sharon added, referring to the Palestinian leader and the radical Palestinian movement.

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.

A poll published by the daily Yediot Aharonot showed 47 percent of Likud members were opposed to the plan

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.