

## IRAQI PRISONER ABUSE SCANDAL

# Desperate bid by US to regain trust

AFP, Dubai

US President George W. Bush's planned address to Arab TV viewers yesterday was seen as a desperate attempt to pacify the Iraqis and regain their trust that United States had lost ever since the revelation of abuses on Iraqi prisoners at Abu Gharib prison by US troops surfaced. The interview on Dubai-based Al-Arabiya television was due to be aired late Wednesday following a similar interview with the channel by US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, it said.

The television did not give any details about the content of the interview with Bush, but said the channel had requested the interview "since a long time."

The Washington Times said, "This is an opportunity for the president to speak directly to the people in Arab nations and let them know that the images that we all have seen are shameful and unacceptable," quoting White House spokesman Scott McClellan as saying in its Wednesday edition.

The United States is facing international anger after graphic photographs of abuse of Iraqi

detainees by US troops were released by CBS News and other media.

The US military has opened criminal investigations into the deaths of 25 prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan, including two homicides, since December 2002, senior army officials said.

Two Iraqi prisoners were murdered by Americans and 23 other deaths are being investigated in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States revealed on Tuesday as the Bush administration tried to contain growing outrage over the abuse of Iraqi detainees.

Six US soldiers have been reprimanded and six others face criminal charges in connection with abuses at the Abu Gharib prison outside Baghdad, but Iraqi prisoners have complained of inhumane treatment by U.S. troops at other centers as well. The allegations first surfaced on Jan. 13 but were only made public last week.

The new US commander overseeing military-run prisons in Iraq, Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, said there are an estimated 8,000 detainees, about half of them at Abu Gharib. The two other main prisons are at

the southern port city of Umm Qasr and at the Baghdad International Airport. The Washington Post reported on its Web site.

Miller said the US military runs 11 other detention facilities in Iraq where prisoners can be held for up to 14 days before a decision is made to release them or transfer them to one of the three main prisons, the newspaper said.

Shocking excerpts from a report on the abuse completed on March 3 by Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba were likely to further stoke fury at home and abroad.

"Between October and December 2003, at the Abu Gharib Confinement Facility (BCCF), numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees," the report said.

"This systemic and illegal abuse of detainees was intentionally perpetrated by several members of the military police guard force (372nd Military Police Company, 320th Military Police Battalion, 800th MP Brigade), in Tier (section) 1-A of the Abu Gharib Prison (BCCF)."

Taguba said several detainees

had credibly described acts of abuse, including:

- \* Breaking chemical lights and pouring the phosphoric liquid on detainees
- \* Beating detainees with a broom handle and a chair
- \* Sodomying a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broom stick
- \* Arranging naked male detainees in a pile and then jumping on them
- \* Forcing detainees to remove their clothing and keeping them naked for several days at a time
- \* Forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate themselves while being photographed and videotaped.

On Capitol Hill, angry Republicans and Democrats denounced the abuses. The Senate Intelligence Committee scheduled a closed hearing for Wednesday.

"The prisoner abuse is so disgusting, so degrading, that I think humanity has been hurt broadly," said Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a Tennessee Republican.



Iraqis protest at the entrance of the Abu Gharib prison yesterday demanding the release of prisoners and the departure of US troops from their country. Hundreds of Iraqis gathered outside the US-run jail, west of Baghdad, in an angry demonstration against the mistreatment of prisoners.

## ATHENS MAYOR SAYS Blasts will not affect security at Olympics

AFP, Paris

Athens mayor Dora Bakoyannis, in Paris to boost the Greek capital's image ahead of the Summer Olympics, said Wednesday that three blasts near an Athens police station would not affect security for the games.

"These are isolated incidents. It can happen in any capital," she told AFP.

"It has nothing to do with the Olympic Games. These are small groups who want to provoke, but this has nothing to do with international terrorism."

Three homemade devices exploded next to a police station in Athens early Wednesday just 100 days before the Greek capital hosts the 2004 Olympic Games.

Police said the devices caused no injuries but they further raised security fears amid heightened international tensions due to the US-led war in Iraq.

Bakoyannis launched an international tour in Paris to promote her city ahead of the Olympic Games, amid criticism that the Greek capital is not prepared to host the event.

She was to leave the French capital later yesterday for Rome, with stops in London and the United States to follow.

## Indian Election



Indian Prime Minister and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate Atal Behari Vajpayee (3-L) arrives at a polling station in Lucknow, yesterday to cast his vote. Balloting in the penultimate round of the five-stage election took place at some 108,600 polling stations.

# Who will be the king-makers?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

With prospects of a hung Parliament looming large, will the "Third Front" of Indian politics emerge either as king-makers or the king?

The CPI(M)-led Left Front and some regional outfits like Mulayam Singh Yadav-led Samajwadi Party, National Conference headed by Omar Abdullah, Indian National Lok Dal spearheaded by Haryana Chief Minister Om Prakash Chautala are toying with the idea of a non-BJP and non-Congress government.

Analysts say this is more of a political strategy than serious thinking because the Left parties, which is the biggest component of the Third Front with highest number of parliamentary seats, are direct rivals of Congress in West Bengal and Kerala where any talk of propounding a Congress-led government at the Centre would be politically unwise.

The same is the case with National Conference, main opposition in Jammu and Kashmir, Indian National Lok Dal in Haryana and Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh for whom Congress is one of their main political opponents in their

respective states.

In fact, the Left parties, particularly CPI(M) which is the main opposition in Congress-ruled southern state of Kerala, are peeved at nonagenarian Marxist leader Jyoti Basu's reported statement that his party would back a Congress-led government at the Centre.

Quickly seizing Basu's remark, Kerala Chief Minister and senior Congress leader A K Antony said CPI(M) should withdraw from contest against Congress in all the 20 seats in the state to facilitate a Congress-led government at the Centre to keep out BJP.

The top CPI(M) leadership has been at pains to suggest that Basu did not support a Congress-led government. But there seems to be something more than meets the eye, say analysts.

In 1996, the CPI(M) had decided against joining a Third Front dispensation under the banner of United Front government depriving what many consider a golden opportunity for Basu to become the Prime Minister. Later, Basu himself had termed his party's decision not to join the United Front government has a "historic blunder."

The decision at that time had

been viewed as a triumph of hardliners in the party.

Eight years down the line, is the CPI(M) now positioning itself to rectify a little the "historic blunder and participate for the first time in an Indian government if not lead it?"

The party's central committee meets here a couple of days after the results of parliamentary elections are announced on May 13 when it may deliberate on the issue of its maiden participation in the federal government, depending on the nature of electoral verdict, say CPI(M) sources.

The CPI(M) has certainly moved away from its theory of "equidistance" from Congress and BJP and also discarded its ideological plank of not joining the federal government in a capitalist set-up, analysts say.

The change in the party's program and tactical line was brought in its plenium held in Kerala in 1999 when CPI(M) amended its line to justify joining the federal government.

But this in itself does not ensure that the party will take part in a federal set-up. Much will depend on the numerical strength of a non-BJP coalition and its contour, they say.

# Sharon strives to keep pullout plan alive

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was struggling yesterday to defuse the political crisis prompted by Likud's rejection of his controversial "disengagement" plan, which received the untimely support of the "quartet" of Middle East peace sponsors.

Meanwhile, violence carried on in the Gaza Strip, where the latest Israeli incursion left a Palestinian dead and several wounded, including an AFP photographer, Palestinian medical sources said.

Sharon was testing the waters with a scaled down proposal for dismantling three isolated settlements in the Gaza Strip, instead of all 21, and two in the West Bank instead of four.

He met Tuesday with a string of Israeli officials to ponder his options after his own party crushingly defeated his plan during an internal referendum on Sunday, prompting wild speculation on the country's political future.

Sharon insisted he would press on with the plan, be it a watered down version, but he still faced an uphill struggle to garner the necessary support in parliament and in his cabinet, amid threats of a "Likud intifada" if he tried to force his plan

through.

Despite their opposition to Sharon's methods, members of the quartet meeting in New York Tuesday encouraged the premier to implement the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip he promised to Washington.

"The quartet welcomes and encourages such a step, which should provide a rare moment of opportunity in the search for peace in the Middle East," said a statement from quartet members the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia.

"This initiative, which must bring about a full Israeli withdrawal and complete end of occupation in Gaza, can be a step towards achieving the two-state vision," the four powers said in a statement.

The quartet "has finally understood that Israel is for the first time ready to evacuate the settlements and that it is possible to move forward," was the reaction from a senior official in Sharon's office.

But the quartet statement was also seen as a way of breathing new life into the roadmap, which Sharon recently declared dead, and suggested that the Israeli withdrawal should be complete.

## 2 Westerners, interpreter killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Two Westerners working for a British firm and their Afghan interpreter were killed by unidentified attackers in northeastern Afghanistan, an interior ministry spokesman told AFP yesterday.

"Three people working for the British security firm Global Risk were killed by unidentified armed men in the Mandol district," spokesman Litfula Mashal said after the incident in Nuristan province, which borders Pakistan.

"Two of the victims were expatriates, the third was their Afghan interpreter," Mashal said.

"Their bodies were discovered this morning in the village of Mandol by troops from the 28th division in Nuristan," he added.

"They were brought to division headquarters pending repatriation. We still don't know the nationality of the two expatriates and the exact circumstances of their killing."

Remote and mountainous Nuristan is believed to be the hideout of militants loyal to renegade warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, whom Washington has declared a wanted terrorist.

## Pakistan protests border incursion by US troops

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan said yesterday had lodged a protest with the United States over an incursion into its northwestern border territory by US forces operating in Afghanistan.

Military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP the intrusion involved "a few troops" who on Sunday entered some 300 meters into Pakistani territory in the Lwara Mandi area on the border with Afghanistan.

The spokesman said the US troops searched a few shops and a petrol station but turned back as soon as they were informed that they were in Pakistani territory.

"Pakistan has lodged an official protest with the US authorities here," the spokesman said.

Pakistan has demanded an inquiry and has "also asked for its results to be communicated to us." The government had also asked that such incidents should not be repeated, he said.

"The US authorities have regretted and they have said an inquiry is already underway and they said it was an inadvertent crossing."

US authorities said the accidental border crossing had occurred amid an ongoing operation by their forces on the Afghan side of the border as they hunt for Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants.

Thousands of US-led coalition forces have been engaged in a new offensive since March 7 in an operation aimed at flushing out insurgent militant leaders including Osama bin Laden.

# California firefighters battle early season blazes

REUTERS, Los Angeles

A day after California fire officials announced an early start to the wildfire season, firefighters battled six major blazes dotting mountain ranges between Santa Barbara and San Diego.

The fires erupted during a heat wave on Sunday and Monday and have burned about 16,000 acres of mostly mountain scrub, forcing evacuations and threatening thousands of homes.

Last year, hot and dry conditions touched off 14 major wildfires in Southern California's mountain ranges in what forestry officials dubbed "The October Fire Siege of 2003."

Those fires killed 24 people, destroyed 3,710 homes and charred about 750,000 acres.

Fire officials said only a fraction of the dead trees that fueled last year's firestorms had been consumed, leaving plenty of dry tinder for new fires.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (news - web sites) on Tuesday quickly made funds available for more firefighters and equipment for the two largest fires, known as the Eagle and Cerritos fires.

State and local agencies have already dispatched more than 2,700 firefighters to the six new fires, according to the California

Department of Forestry.

On Monday, fire investigators arrested a 44-year-old man on suspicion of causing the Cerritos fire, the largest of the new blazes, which has consumed about 9,000 acres of vegetation and two homes, CDF officials said.

The suspect, Rick Brown, was seen dragging a large piece of steel behind a vehicle on Monday afternoon that sent sparks into dry brush on either side of a mountain road near Corona, about 51 miles east of Los Angeles, officials said.

The Cerritos fire chased about 600 residents from their homes on Monday night. It was 15 percent contained on Tuesday, officials said.

# Berlusconi sets new record

BBC NEWS ONLINE

As AC Milan celebrates winning the Italian league this week, it is a double victory for the team's owner, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

He takes home the trophy for heading the longest-serving Italian government since World War II. On the volatile playing field of Italian politics, he has kept the same administration and fractious coalition allies in power for 1060 days. This beats the previous record set 18 years ago by Socialist Bettino Craxi.

Mr Berlusconi's longevity is partly attributed to reform of Italy's electoral system a decade ago. Majority voting finally introduced stability to a constantly shifting political landscape, dominated by fragile patchworks of small party

coalitions.

Since the foundation of the Italian republic after World War II, there have been 59 changes of government, hence the nickname of Italy's "revolving door politics".

It is also a tribute to the drive and charisma of Silvio Berlusconi - the self-made businessman turned politician who created his Forza Italia party from the ruins of Italy's traditional party system, swept away by corruption scandals in the early 1990s. Since his election in May 2001, he has fought hard to keep on board unruly coalition partners such as the far-right Northern League. The centre-left parties in opposition, meanwhile, have floundered without clear leadership and are still deeply divided on many issues.

So is the Italian government cracking open the Champagne? "No,

there won't be a party," one government official said. "It wouldn't seem right at the moment with the Italian hostage crisis in Iraq, and anyway we've already won three elections, so our days in office are just a number."

Whilst Mr Berlusconi's government is long-lived, so is the controversy surrounding his leadership. His penchant for outspoken comments has often provoked fury on the international stage.

The face of Silvio Berlusconi, tanned and wrinkle-free now smiles down from giant billboards across Italian cities. The upcoming local and European elections will be a test of his popularity. Mr Berlusconi recently said he even sees himself being re-elected to the next legislature.



A picture taken 13 December 2002 shows Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi arriving at the Bella Center in Copenhagen.