

US-led forces may hand over Saddam to Iraqis

PTI, United Nations

Ousted Iraqi President Saddam Hussain, now being detained by the United States at an undisclosed location in the country, may soon find himself in the custody of the Iraqi authorities, diplomats said.

The US-led coalition is likely to hand over the charge of prisons to Iraqis as a part of transfer of sovereignty especially in the wake of a scandal involving torture of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers even though the draft resolution, presented by Washington and London to the Security Council, does not explicitly mention that, they said.

Some members of the Security Council, during informal consultations on the draft resolution, had demanded that handing over of the prisons should be made a part of the resolution especially in view of Abu Ghraib scandal.

Western diplomats said they would like to hand over the control of prisons as early as possible and that would include the transfer of custody of Saddam Hussain and his top officials.

Iraq has established a war crime tribunal headed by Salem Chalabi, which is expected to try Hussain and other high officials now under detention.



Tens of thousands of anti-war demonstrators protest in central Rome Friday against US President George W. Bush's Italy visit. Bush met Pope John Paul II and held talks with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Bush senses 'spirit of unity' on Iraq

US hopes new resolution would get UNSC nod soon

REUTERS, Rome

President Bush said yesterday he sensed a "spirit of unity" in the international community to help Iraq's new government and expressed optimism that a UN Security Council resolution would be approved soon.

At a joint news conference, Bush thanked Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, one of his closest allies in Europe, for helping draft a new resolution.

"I sense a spirit of unity in terms of working with the new Iraqi government," Bush said. Of the resolution, he said: "I'm confident we will get one soon."

Honoring the 20 Italian soldiers killed in Iraq, Bush said: "Their service will help make...the world more secure as a free and democratic Iraq arises in the heart of the Middle East."

Italy has some 2,700 troops in Iraq, the third largest foreign contingent there after the US and British forces.

Bush and Berlusconi swapped

praise at the press conference, which concluded the US president's 36-hour visit to the Italian capital.

The trip took place against a backdrop of anti-war street protests and violence in Iraq where another US soldier was killed in a roadside bomb blast Saturday.

Thousands of protesters opposed to the US-led occupation of Iraq marched in Rome Friday. There were skirmishes with police, and some bottles and flares were thrown, but it was not the mayhem many had feared. Berlusconi called it a "flop."

However, the possibility of more protests awaited Bush in Paris.

There, Bush was to hold talks and have a working dinner with Chirac, who thwarted Bush's attempt for a UN Security Council resolution last year authorising war against Iraq.

Chirac wants a new UN resolution to have a fixed timetable for withdrawing US-led troops from Iraq.

The United States and Britain Friday proposed giving Iraq's new leaders the right to send home foreign troops, a concession Baghdad's foreign minister said would speed up adoption of a resolution on Iraq's future.

Sunday, Bush goes to Normandy to mark the 60th anniversary of the D-Day invasion. White House aides said that Bush's speech would commemorate World War II sacrifice and that Iraq was not expected to be mentioned.

Bush and his aides are optimistic the UN Security Council can soon agree a resolution endorsing Iraq's new interim government and establishing a multinational force to provide security as the country tries to arrange elections in January.

No date has been set for adoption. US and British officials believe only minor adjustments will be needed to win council support.

However, France, Russia and China have insisted on changes, particularly on Iraq's authority over the multinational force.

US, UK offer Iraq right to send foreign troops home

AFP, United Nations

The United States and Britain Friday offered Iraq's interim government the right to send home US-led troops under a new UN resolution they want to get approved in the coming days.

The two war allies fine-tuned several proposals in their draft to ease some concerns of fellow Security Council members, as well as Iraq, ahead of high-level talks this weekend on the June 30 transfer of power in Baghdad.

The new resolution will endorse the handover to the interim government unveiled in Baghdad on Tuesday.

In the previous version, only the next Iraqi government due to be elected by the end of January would have had the authority to ask the forces to leave.

But the apparent concession seemed to bear little real import after Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said Thursday that US-led troops would have to remain for "some time" to prevent a slide into chaos and civil war.

Friday's revised draft also nodded to other questions raised by council opponents, including

Russian pressure over the UN inspectors who monitored Iraqi weapons programmes under Saddam Hussein.

The new text says that the council would in future consider the mandate of the inspectors, who have not returned to Iraq since the war that drove Saddam from power last year.

On Thursday, Zebari seemed to short-circuit much of the council opposition to the earlier draft, saying it was "quite adequate" on the question of Iraqi sovereignty after the end of the US occupation.

China, France, Germany and Russia had all called for various changes to the text, including strengthened language making clear that Iraq would have full sovereignty after the occupation formally ends June 30.

British ambassador Emyr Jones Parry called Zebari's remarks a "ringing endorsement" and said he expected a vote soon, although no date has yet been set.

"We are making good progress," deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said in Washington. "I think we are moving toward a consensus."

Rumsfeld urges Asians to join war on terror

AP, Singapore

Seeking support from Asian nations, Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld says the war on terrorism is a battle against brewing ideological extremism that must not be appeased.

"It must be confronted on many fronts by all civil societies," he said in a speech to an Asian security conference, dubbed the Shangri-La Dialogue, that included defence ministers, military officers, lawmakers and private security experts from about 20 countries.

In his speech to the security conference, Rumsfeld called the US military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq examples of progress in the global war on terrorism. He spoke only briefly about Iraq, saying success there would be "a victory for the secu-

urity of the civilized world."

The Iraq issue arose during a question-and-answer session with Rumsfeld's audience, and he asserted that there is no acceptable alternative to continuing on the current path to a democratic Iraq.

He cited five unacceptable alternatives: civil war, anarchy, ethnic cleansing, a splintering of the nation into ethnic enclaves and the rise of a "junior version" of the deposed Saddam Hussein.

"As soon as we can, we want to pass off the security responsibilities to the Iraqis," but not before they are ready, he added.

Speaking of the broader US-led war against terrorism, Rumsfeld said, "Despite considerable progress, the reality is that today we remain closer to the beginning of this struggle than to its end."

He cautioned that despite some successes in capturing al-Qaeda figures in Asia and foiling some plots, the terrorists will strike again.

"Let there be no doubt, there is more to come."

Rumsfeld mentioned no specifics on US plans to reduce troop levels in South Korea. "Though the way we organize may evolve and change, the United States is a Pacific nation, and we will most certainly maintain our security presence with modernised deterrent capabilities here in this region," he said.

Before delivering his speech, Rumsfeld met with his Australian counterpart, Robert Hill, and told reporters afterward that Washington appreciates Australia's support in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Blair fools himself if he believes Iraq had WMD: David Kay

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair is fooling himself if he thinks weapons of mass destruction will still be found in Iraq, David Kay, the former head of the US-British Iraq Survey Group (ISG), said yesterday.

"Anyone out there holding -- as I gather Prime Minister Blair has recently said -- the prospect that the ISG is going to unmask actual weapons of mass destruction are really delusional," former chief weapons hunter Kay told BBC radio.

"There was a programme there. There was an intention of Saddam Hussein at some point to reconstitute it... but there are not actual stockpiles of newly produced weapons of mass destruction," he said.

The issue of weapons of mass

destruction (WMD) has dogged Blair since he told the British parliament in April 2002 that there was "no doubt at all that the development of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein poses a severe threat, not just to the region but to the wider world."

Blair used that alleged threat as a justification for the US-led war in Iraq in March 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein.

In his interview, Kay repeated his assertion that the WMD evoked by both Blair and US President George W. Bush in the build-up to war did not exist.

"We simply got it wrong. There were actually no weapons of mass destruction. Iraq was a dangerous country. Saddam was an evil man and we are better off without him and all of that. But we were wrong in our estimation," he said.



Activists and supporters belonging to Pakistani opposition party Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) shout anti-government slogans during a demonstration in Islamabad yesterday. Over five hundred activists and supporters of the MMA took part in the demonstration to protest the alleged government step of changing the Quranic verses about Jihad (holy war) in school text books.

'2,000 Iranians sign up as suicide bombers for Iraq, Israel'

AFP, Tehran

Some 2,000 Iranians, one as young as seven, have signed up with a shadowy Islamist group to carry out suicide bombings in Iraq and Israel, a Tehran daily reported yesterday.

"So far 2,000 people have registered," the group's spokesman, Mohammad Samadi, told the reformist newspaper Shargh.

"Twenty-five percent are under 18 years, 55 percent are between 18 and 40, and the rest are 40 to 80," said Samadi, spokesman for the Committee for the Commemoration of Martyrs of the World Islamic Movement.

"The youngest is a seven-year old child who registered along with his family," Samadi added.

The group launched its recruitment drive late last month, taking names and telephone numbers of volunteers after the main weekly Muslim prayers on Fridays.

The action was intended to "show our friends in Iraq and all other Muslims that we are ready to give our lives to defend our honour and Islam's," Samadi said at the time, pointing to US military operations in the Iraqi holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, which are revered by Shias in Iran as well as Iraq.

"Suicide operations are the best way to fight the oppressors and they have already shown their worth in Lebanon and during the war between Iran and Iraq," he said, referring to the neighbours' bloody 1980-88 conflict.



Britain's Prince Charles lays a wreath at the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards Memorial in Cruelly in Normandy yesterday. World leaders and thousands of veterans are gathering in Normandy today to mark the 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings.

D-Day marking ceremonies kicked off

AFP, Sainte-Mere-Eglise

Hundreds of British and American parachutists dropped into north-western France on Saturday to launch poignant commemorations of the D-Day landings on June 6, 1944, which hastened the end of World War II.

At the western end of the coast where the liberation of Europe from Nazi occupation began, grey parachutes blossomed open in lead-grey skies in a spectacular reenactment of the capture by the US 82nd Airborne Division of the village of Sainte-Mere-Eglise.

The aim was to seize the village at 1:00 am. Five hours before 135,000 Allied troops began landing on the 100-kilometre (60-mile) beaches to launch the largest seaborne invasion in history.

Sainte-Mere-Eglise was the first village liberated, but many of the US soldiers who dropped there, carrying heavy guns and other equipment, drowned in deep ditches and flooded land before they could even fire a shot.

At the village of Ranville, members of the British First Parachute Regiment, were to re-enact the legendary operation to capture Pegasus Bridge across the Orne River and secure the eastern flank of the beach landings.

Britain's Prince Charles paid tribute to the 90 paratroopers who flew in darkness aboard three wooden gliders and crash-landed just after midnight on or close to the bridge in a surprise attack which has entered the annals of military history. They were among 380 British gliders which floated into Normandy that night.

GAZA PULLOUT PLAN Minister trying to save Sharon govt

REUTERS, Jerusalem

An Israeli cabinet member trying to save Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government from collapse said yesterday she still hoped to reach a last-minute compromise with dissident ministers over his Gaza pullout plan.

Talks between Immigration Minister Tzipi Livni, a Sharon ally spearheading mediation efforts, and three ministers from their right-wing Likud party opposed to the withdrawal proposal were due to resume later in the day, government officials said.

"I certainly think there's a chance until the (cabinet) vote Sunday," Livni told Israel Radio.

Sharon fired two ministers belonging to the far-right National Union Friday, ensuring at least an 11-10 majority in the cabinet when it votes on the US-backed plan to remove all 21 Jewish settlements in Gaza and four of 120 in the West Bank.

But Likud could split and a key member of his government, the National Religious Party (NRP), might bolt. That would leave Sharon

without a parliamentary majority and possibly facing an early election unless Livni can work out a compromise.

Under her proposal, the cabinet would approve the Gaza plan "in principle" while agreeing to hold off on any settlement evacuation until a second vote was held in six to nine months.

The watered-down language and a deal Livni has been trying to achieve on the level of government funds for building in settlements slated to go could be key to keeping the pro-settler NRP in the coalition, for now, and ending the Likud rebellion.

"The main problem that needs to be resolved for a compromise to be reached is the continuation of construction in settlements due to be evacuated," Livni told YNet, the Web site of Israel's Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper.

A political source said a deal could be reached to fund "essential construction," but Sharon was wary of giving the nod for broad expansion of settlements he plans to uproot.