PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi interim President Ghazi al-Yawar is embraced by Iraq's interim Chief Justice Medhat Mahmud after taking his oath at the swearing-in ceremony of Iraq's new interim government yesterday in Baghdad.

ME welcomes Iraqi power handover

AFP, *Amman*

Iraq's neighbours gave a muted but positive reaction to the handover of power in the war-battered country and to the official end of the US-led occupation.

Among the most enthusiastic was Jordan's King Abdullah II who congratulated Iraq for its recovered sovereignty and pledged Amman's support for the eastern neighbour.

King Abdullah sent separate messages to Iraqi President Ghazi al-Yawar and Prime Minister Iyad Allawi "expressing Jordan's support for Iraq in this important phase", the palace said in a statement.

He also voiced Jordan's support "for all the measures that the Iraqi government will take to guarantee its security and the stability of Iraq" in a congratulatory statement addressed to Yawar.

The return of sovereignty to Iraq "is an important phase in the history of Iraq, which, we are confident, will recover its liberty and independence," the king said.

In the message addressed to Allawi he said that "the unification of the people of Iraq is the guarantee that will foil attempts by those who want to undermine Iraq's stability and its process for democratisation".

US overseer Paul Bremer formally handed power to the new government early Monday, ahead of the June 30 deadline amid widening violence by insurgents.

Iran's government, meanwhile, which was opposed to last year's US-led invasion that toppled president Saddam Hussein, gave a cautious welcome to the handover in Baghdad.

"We have already given our official point of view regarding Iraq. We welcome any move that will give sovereignty back to the majority of the Iraqi people and ends the occupation of our neighbour," the government spokesman said.

"We hope this is a step in this direction and will lead to a government based on the opinion of the Iraqi people," Abdollah Ramazanzadeh told reporters.

Another opponent of the war, Syria, gave no early reaction.

But Kuwait and a fellow Gulf state, the United Arab Emirates, swiftly hailed the restoration of sovereignty to Iraq and voiced hope for a return of stability.

"We are pleased with the transfer of power to the Iraqi people," Kuwaiti Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah told reporters, expressing hope that stability would also return to Iraq.

Bremer quits Iraq soon after power transfer

AFP, *Baghdad*

US ambassador Paul Bremer, who left Iraq with little fanfare and a broad smile after a hurried handover ceremony yesterday, said recently that he could not wait to hand power to an interim government.

Visibly older after 13 months in office, the 62-year-old diplomat hurried onto a military plane about two hours after dissolving the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority and headed home for the United States.

He leaves behind a divided, war-torn country run by an unelected caretaker government in which thousands of people have died in a complex insurgency that rose from the ashes of the US-led invasion in 2003.

More than a year of 18-hour working days have taken their toll on Iraq's former civil administrator, who admitted on Sunday he could not wait to hand over responsibility to prime minister Iyad Allawi and return to his family.

At the same time, Bremer said the job has taught him valuable lessons about Iraq, from basic Arabic to the real impact of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.

But critics argue that Washington should have appointed someone who already possessed such knowledge to run the country as it geared up for sovereignty.

"It has been an exhilarating, difficult year that much I can say for sure," Bremer told AFP during his final official outing on Sunday.

"It has been a very exciting time and I have worked with really incredible people... who came here because they wanted to help rebuild this country," said Bremer, who held various senior posts during a 23-year career at the US State Department before heading a private consultancy firm in 2001.

Iraq occupation offers tough lessons

AFP, *Washington*

The US-led occupation of Iraq, plagued from the start by poor planning, miscalculation and insufficient personnel, leaves behind a bitter lesson that military might alone is not enough to overhaul a country.

Ahead of Monday's surprise transfer of power in Baghdad to an Iraqi leadership, US officials were already trumpeting a new era of freedom for Iraq after Saddam Hussein's downfall. But even the invasion's most ardent supporters acknowledge the occupation did not go quite as planned.

"We have failed to come anywhere near meeting the post-war expectations of Iraqis for security and post-conflict reconstruction," said Larry Diamond, ex-adviser to the occupation authority and now a political scientist in California.

Officials insist they have made good progress in rebuilding post-Saddam Iraq, citing the formation of a new government, the adoption of a provisional constitution and the beginnings of a security force, financial and legal system.

They say the coalition has completed more than 20,000 projects to build or renovate schools, orphanages, medical facilities, roads, power grids and industrial infrastructure.

But by many standards the nearly 15-month occupation has been a litany of failure or partially accomplished goals, plagued by fighting, bombings, murders, abductions and sabotage that are frightening away investors.

Only a fifth of the expected 35,000-strong army has been recruited and more than two-thirds of the 90,000 Iraqi police are untrained, according to Pentagon figures.

Monitors in talks with Tigers to save truce

AFP, *Colombo*

Norwegian-led truce monitors have set off for emergency talks with the Tamil Tigers after their pull-out from meetings reviewing the implementation of a fragile ceasefire, officials said yesterday.

The head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), Trond Furuhovde, flew to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi for discussions with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), government officials said.

Diplomatic sources said the SLMM was deeply concerned with the Tiger withdrawal on the eve of fresh attempts by peace broker Norway to get the stalled negotiations back on track.

Norway's special peace envoy, Erik Solheim, was due in Colombo later Monday to launch a renewed attempt to jumpstart negotiations that have been on hold since April last year, diplomats said.

The LTTE told the SLMM Friday it would no longer attend meetings with security forces to review the ceasefire in a protest over suspected military backing for a renegade regional commander of the LTTE known as Karuna.

The meetings are aimed to iron out problems relating to the implementation of the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire, in place since February 2002.

The government admitted Thursday that elements of the military had supported Karuna despite LTTE warnings.

Nato to train Iraqi army

AFP, *Istanbul*

Nato leaders pledged "full cooperation" to the new Iraqi government and to help train its army to calm the violence-wracked country, after the earlier-than-expected handover of power in Baghdad.

In a declaration hours after the surprise announcement that the US-led coalition had transferred sovereignty to Baghdad two days early, they also condemned the terrorist attacks which continue to hamper reconstruction work.

"We are united in our support for the Iraqi people and offer full cooperation to the new sovereign interim government as it seeks to strengthen internal security and prepare the way to ... elections in 2005," they said.

"We deplore and call for an immediate end to all terrorist attacks in Iraq," it added.

The surprise Baghdad announcement electrified the Istanbul gathering, which opened amid ratchet-tight security for fear of terrorist attacks and to keep out protestors, who clashed with police outside the summit venue.

The two-day summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation also approved a larger-than-expected expansion of its 6,500-strong international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan.

But it was Iraq which dominated the start of proceedings.

US President George W. Bush and Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair, whose war against Saddam Hussein nearly split Nato asunder last year, both welcomed the power handover.

"The important thing is that from now on Iraq controls its own destiny," said Blair, according to a transcript of comments after he met Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari.

A spokeswoman for French President Jacques Chirac, who spearheaded the anti-war group in Nato last year, said he had "taken note" of the early handover but stressed that it is only one step in the political process there.

"We heard about it during President Bush's morning session," said the spokeswoman, Catherine Colonna.

The pledge to help train Iraqi security forces, who will now take responsibility for quelling violent insurgent activities, had been widely expected after diplomats thrashed out a carefully-worded accord over the weekend.

7 killed in ME violence

Hamas carries out first deadly rocket attack in Israel

AFP, *Sderot*

Two Israelis, including a three-year-old boy on his way to nursery school, were killed yesterday when the Palestinian militant movement Hamas carried out its first-ever deadly rocket attack on the Jewish state.

The deaths in the southern town of Sderot brought the toll from a flare-up in Israeli-Palestinian violence to seven -- four of them Palestinians -- in less than 12 hours from five separate incidents.

A third Israeli died in an explosion carried out by Hamas underneath an army observation post in southern Gaza.

The flare-up also punctured optimism among the Israeli leadership that they had managed to bring Palestinian militant groups to heel after one of the longest periods of relative calm in the region since the start of the intifada in September 2000.

Around a dozen other people were wounded when four Qassam rockets, named after the military wing of Hamas, landed in Sderot. The second fatality was a middle-aged male.

Palestinian militants have fired more than 300 Qassam rockets at Sderot and other areas in southern Israel since February 2002, but they had never caused any fatalities.

Meanwhile, Israeli troops staged a raid into the northern West Bank town of Jenin early Monday, before moving into the nearby village of Yamun to search for militants from the radical Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Palestinian security sources and an AFP correspondent said.

One Palestinian gunman was wounded during clashes in Jenin, medics said.

Stolen Tagore medal still in Santiniketan?

PTI, *Kolkata*

Giving a new twist to the Nobel heist mystery, marksheet scam accused former Visva-Bharati vice-chancellor Dilip Sinha has reportedly informed the CID officials during interrogations that the burgled Nobel medal of Rabindranath Tagore is still in Santiniketan.

CID's Additional Director-General RK Mohanty said on Monday that Sinha, now in police custody following his arrest in the marksheet scandal in the central University, had told the sleuths during interrogations that the stolen medallion was still in Visva-Bharati.

"That's all and he has not spoken further," the CID official said.

CBI has been probing the medal heist since March and claimed 'some breakthroughs', with the state CID extending assistance in the current investigations.

RIGHTS GROUP SAYS

All prisoners in Iraq must be freed

AFP, *London*

All prisoners held in Iraq must be released after the handover of sovereignty and any further detentions by the US-led coalition would be illegal, human rights watchdog Amnesty International said yesterday.

"The USA has announced that it intends to continue to hold, without charge, between 4,000 and 5,000 detainees without clarifying on what legal basis it will do so," the group said.

"Yet if, as the UN resolution (1546) proclaims, occupation effectively ends with the handover, then international humanitarian law requires that all prisoners of war, detainees and internees must be released by the occupying powers," it said in a statement.

The US-led coalition's civil administrator Paul Bremer on Monday handed a document to Iraqi leaders which formally ended -- two days earlier than expected -- the US-led occupation of Iraq and returned sovereignty to Iraqis.

Amnesty said it had received no reply from a June 9 letter it wrote to the US envoy to the United Nations, John Negroponte -- the future ambassador to Iraq -- expressing serious concern that UN resolution 1546 fails to clarify what would happen to the thousands of prisoners held by the occupying powers.

"Any further detentions by the US and other members of the multinational force after the handover would be unlawful," the rights group said.

PHOTO: AFP

Turkish protesters stand behind a barricade in Istanbul yesterday. Protesting the Nato summit, demonstrators hurled molotov cocktails and stones at police and security forces responded with water cannons, tear gas and truncheons. At least 15 people were hurt, including five policemen. Some 2,000 people attempted to force their way through a road block into the so-called "Nato valley" -- a complex of conference halls and hotels enclosed with concrete barriers, where the meeting was being held.

PHOTO: AFP

A security officer (R) makes way for the Chief of Pakistan Muslim League (PML), ruling party, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain (2nd-L) and outgoing Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz (L) after Hussain submitted his nomination paper for the Prime Minister post at the parliament house in Islamabad yesterday.

Pak parties meet ahead of vote for interim PM

AFP, *Islamabad*

Pakistan's secular and Islamic opposition parties may jointly field a jailed opposition leader as a candidate for interim prime minister, a party official said yesterday after the surprise resignation of Zafarullah Jamali.

"We are trying to field one joint candidate for the prime minister's post," Shahid Shamsi, spokesman for Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a six-party alliance of Islamic parties, told AFP.

"It may be Javed Hashmi."

Hashmi, who led a coalition of secular opposition parties, the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy, is serving a 23-year jail sentence for treason.

He was convicted in April over his distribution of a letter he said was from army officers criticising President Pervez Musharraf. The court ruled he had forged the letter and he was convicted of defaming the government and the army and of incitement to mutiny.

Jamali announced his resignation on Saturday after denying months of speculation that he was being pressured to quit by President Pervez Musharraf, the army chief who still wields ultimate power despite restoring the parliament he suspended after his October 1999 coup.

Jamali gave no reason for his abrupt departure, but observers believe he was pressed to quit because he failed to adequately counter Musharraf's tough opponents in parliament.

Handover is political gamble for Bush

LOS ANGELES TIMES, *Washington*

The handover of sovereignty to an interim Iraqi government may offer President Bush his best opportunity before November election to rebuild public confidence in his strategy for Iraq, but it also risks accelerating US disillusionment with the mission there.

With a flurry of recent polls showing most Americans uneasy with events in Iraq, analysts across the political spectrum agree that the changeover could represent a pivotal moment in US attitudes about the war.

Progress in establishing an Iraqi government capable of bearing more of the military burden could help Bush reverse the growing doubts about his management of the conflict and fears that it has reduced rather than enhanced US security.

Conversely, if the new government cannot establish legitimacy and order, pessimism about the mission's prospects and disillusionment over Bush's initial decision to invade Iraq is likely to solidify and even spread, experts say.

"There is risk and there is opportunity for Bush in the hand-over, and it is one of the most important events in an event-driven election," said Andy Kohut, director of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

One key question is how Americans measure success in the weeks ahead. With US officials indicating that they expect American forces to cede more security responsibilities to Iraqis, the number of US casualties could decline. But as the terrorist attacks across Iraq last week show, a reduced US role could mean more violence and Iraqi casualties.

"The administration is gambling on the notion that Americans will be thankful that there are fewer American casualties, even if the place is blowing up," said Ivo Daalder, a former national security aide to President Clinton and coauthor of a recent book on Bush's foreign policy.

For now, the hand-over does not appear to be significantly affecting Sen. John F. Kerry's strategy in the debate over Iraq. Kerry, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, has insisted since last fall that a key to success in Iraq is delegating more authority to the international community in return for more financial and military aid.

But the emergence of the transitional government could complicate Kerry's arguments by reducing the visible role of American officials and encouraging other nations to become more involved in Iraq.

"It makes it trickier for him," said Thomas Donnelly, a resident fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

The transition, though, holds greater risks for Bush, most agree.

The changeover comes as polls show widespread concern over Bush's direction in Iraq. Although a mid-June Pew survey showed an increase in the percentage of Americans who thought events were going well in Iraq, most recent polls have portrayed public gloom over the struggle to stabilize the country.