

20 more US troops implicated in abuse

American troops kill 2 during brawl at Abu Ghraib prison

REUTERS, BBC, Washington

A new US Army report clears top US military brass in Iraq of abuse of detainees at Abu Ghraib prison but implicates 20 or more intelligence troops in the scandal, defence officials said on Wednesday.

The investigation report, expected to be sent to Congress next week, recommends discipline against the military intelligence troops ranging from administrative reduction in rank and loss of pay to further investigation that could lead to military trials, one of the officials told Reuters.

The officials, who asked not to be identified, gave no further details, but said most of the troops implicated in the intelligence probe, launched by Army Maj. Gen. George Fay in April, were from the US 205th Military Intelligence Brigade that was assigned to Abu Ghraib when the abuses occurred.

"I think it will find that military police weren't the only ones doing anything wrong," said one defence

official of the Abu Ghraib abuse and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners which sparked fury in the Arab world and international condemnation.

Seven US military police reservists from the 372nd Military Police Company were earlier accused of humiliating and in some cases beating and photographing Iraqi detainees at the infamous prison near Baghdad, once used as a torture chamber by former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Some of those military police guards allege that they were simply acting under orders from military intelligence to "soften up" detainees for interrogation.

BBC Online adds: Two Iraqi prisoners have been killed by US troops during a disturbance at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad, the US military says.

The trouble began when guards saw a large group of detainees attacking a fellow inmate, a statement said.



PHOTO: AFP

A US tank crushes a parked car during clashes with militiamen loyal to radical Shia Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr in Najaf's al-Jadida al-Talat area, 200m south of the shrine of Imam Ali (RA) yesterday. US forces are engaged in intensive battle with militiamen as they move in on the shrine.

PM'S PARTY REBUFFS COALITION BID

Sharon vows to press on with his Gaza plan

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon vowed yesterday to press ahead with his Gaza pullout plan despite a humiliating rebuff from his own party of his bid to forge a coalition with the pro-withdrawal Labour Party.

Sharon's rebellious right-wing Likud handed him a resounding defeat on Wednesday night when it voted to bar him from negotiating a "unity" government with the center-left Labour opposition led by Shimon Peres, Israel's leading dove.

Despite a weakened hand, Sharon signaled his intention to keep up efforts to reshape his coalition in order to restore the parliamentary majority needed to carry out his US-backed plan to "disengage" from conflict with the Palestinians.

Sources close to Sharon said he would do everything possible to avoid having to

call early elections but indicated that such a move could not be ruled out if pro-settler hard-liners in his own party continued trying to stymie his efforts.

Sharon has defied his party before, but one aide said it would be "politically unfeasible" for him to push ahead with coalition talks with Labour without first trying to reach a deal with smaller ultra-religious parties he has also been courting.

"The prime minister is continuing with the disengagement and the diplomatic process," Sharon's office said in a statement that could assuage Washington's concerns about the future of his Gaza plan. "He will find a solution to the problem. He will try to build a stable coalition government."

Likud's Central Committee voted 58 percent against allying with Labour, which favors trading occupied land for peace with Palestinians. Sharon had

appeared intent on bringing in Labour to ensure the backing to put withdrawals into motion next year.

Polls show most Israelis favor evacuating Jewish settlers from Gaza, regarding the coastal strip as a bloody liability. Likud rebels argue that abandoning any land Israel captured in the 1967 Middle East war would "reward Palestinian terrorism."

Sharon's blueprint calls for removing 8,000 Jewish settlers from Gaza, where they live in 21 fortified enclaves among 1.3 million Palestinians, and closing four of the 120 West Bank settlements by the end of 2005.

But Sharon has made clear that Israel also intends to cement its hold on larger settlements in the West Bank, where most of the 240,000 settler population live -- a strategy that Palestinians say is aimed at denying them a viable state.

In a speech before the secret ballot,

Sharon said he was acting for the good of Israel and not his political survival.

"There are times in the life of a nation when it must make difficult decisions," Sharon said, raising his voice over hard-line hecklers chanting "Yes to Likud, no to Labour."

Sharon argues that taking no action to end years of bloodshed with Palestinians will expose Israel to an internationally imposed solution likely to endanger its security by forcing a wholesale territorial retreat.

But if the former general ignores Likud's message, he may face a split in Israel's largest party or early elections, which could lead to the indefinite shelving of the Gaza withdrawal.

New Iraqi legislature elected by default

Interim parliament to open Sept 1

AFP, Baghdad

A single list of candidates for Iraq's interim legislature was elected by default Wednesday after a rival list was withdrawn for failing to adhere to preset criteria, an official source said.

Ismail Zayer, chief editor of a leading Baghdad daily, announced that he had withdrawn his list of candidates for "procedural reasons", sparking protests from delegates.

The 81 candidates on the first list were voted onto the new council alongside former members of the defunct Governing Council, in a process earlier dogged by accusations the big political parties had hijacked the event.

Fomer Governing Council spokesman Hamid Kifaei told AFP the elected list had been worked on for nearly three months by the main parties already represented in the interim government.

"We only worked on our list for 24 hours, we had no chance," he said.

Presiding judge Ahmed al-Arargji had ordered delegates to alter both lists of candidates because neither contained the correct number of women.

Women had earlier voiced concern they would not get the full 25 seats allocated to them under the interim constitution adopted before the US-led occupation was formally wrapped up due to the influence of Islamist parties.

"Both lists are illegal, because each list should have 22 women. The first has only 20 and the second, six or eight less," Arargji said.

Meanwhile, Iraq's interim parliament will hold its first session on September 1, said new member and conference organiser Fuad Maasum.

"The new Iraqi national assembly is supposed to hold its first session on September 1. The session will be dedicated to enshrining the rules of the parliament, drawing up a schedule for the sessions and the issues it is to discuss," Maasum told a Baghdad news conference.

Kerry, Bush vow help for National Guard

REUTERS, Cincinnati

Democrat John Kerry on Wednesday denounced President Bush's plan to withdraw troops from Europe and Asia as "the wrong signal to send at the wrong time" as the United States battles terror and tries to curb North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

With both candidates campaigning hard for the key veteran vote, Kerry also blasted the president's record on helping war veterans as Bush promised in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, to help retrain National Guard members when they get home from combat.

"I have done my duty as commander in chief to support our troops," Bush said.

Kerry's broadside was delivered before the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention that Bush addressed on Monday, in Ohio, one of the major battlegrounds in the Nov. 2 election.

"Nobody wants to bring troops home more than those of us who have fought in foreign wars," the Massachusetts senator said. "But it needs to be done at the right time and in a sensible way. This is not that time or that way."

"Let's be clear: the president's vaguely stated plan does not strengthen our hand in the war against terror and in no way relieves the strain on our overextended military personnel," added Kerry, a decorated Vietnam War veteran.

The Democratic presidential nominee disagreed with Bush's decision to announce plans to withdraw some 70,000 troops from Europe and Asia as the United States and other countries are trying to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programs and the communist nation "has probably never been more dangerous at any time since the end of the Korean War."



PHOTO: AFP

A pedestrian wades through a flooded street in Gangnung, 230km east of Seoul yesterday. Typhoon Megi ploughed through South Korea leaving five people dead or missing.

El Salvador prison riot kills 31

BBC ONLINE

Fighting between prisoners at a jail in El Salvador has left 31 people dead and around two dozen injured, police say.

The violence at La Esperanza prison began when members of the Mara 18 gang clashed with other convicts, the deputy public security minister said.

The country's prison chief said the situation was "almost under control".

La Esperanza was designed for 800 inmates but holds more than 3,000.

Riots are commonplace in central and south America's overcrowded prisons.

Nearly 70 people died in April in an uprising in neighbouring Honduras.

US Congressman calls on Syria to sever terror links

AFP, Damascus

US Congressman Tom Lantos called on Syria Wednesday to sever its alleged links with terrorism and withdraw its troops from Lebanon, during talks with Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara.

His lobbying comes amid mounting pressure on Damascus which analysts say could presage further sanctions by Washington.

"As a friend of the Syrian people I want to see the leaders of this great nation, the modern incarnation of one of the great civilisations, make the right choice," said Lantos, who is on a tour of Middle Eastern capitals.

"So far the Syrian leaders have resisted those choices."

Lantos, the senior Democrat on the House International Relations Committee, added: "I urged my friend Foreign Minister Shara to get his nation on the right side of the 21st century. I urged him to end Syria's association finally and totally with terrorism and WMD," or weapons of mass destruction.

US President George W. Bush

imposed sanctions on May 11 against Syria, which stands accused by Washington of sponsoring terrorism, seeking to produce weapons of mass destruction, trying to destabilise Iraq and occupying Lebanon.

Lantos was a supporter of the sanctions.

The Democratic Representative for California visited Damascus in April of last year, shortly after the launch of the US-led war against Iraq, and levelled serious criticisms at Damascus.

"There is no change in US policy, but I hope there could be change if Syria takes the appropriate steps, which I outlined privately to President (Bashar) al-Assad during my last visit when I was here in the spring of 2003," he said Wednesday.

"I recognize some small steps that have been taken to close the Syrian-Iraqi borders for the smuggling of terrorists and terrorist weapons," he said, but charged there were still not enough well-trained border guards.

Most Americans see US less respected in the world

AFP, Washington

Two out of three Americans believe the United States is less respected than in the past and nearly half say the country's foreign policy should take into account its allies' interests, according to a poll released Wednesday. The Pew Research Center poll showed that 37 percent of Americans believe US foreign policy should be based on US interests.

Despite their skepticism over the war in Iraq, 60 percent of Americans back the use of pre-emptive war against nations deemed a threat to the United States, the poll showed. In May 2003 -- two months after the start of the Iraq war -- 67 percent supported such a policy.

The survey revealed that 59 percent of Americans believe President George W. Bush is too quick to use military force.

On the Middle East, fewer Americans -- 35 percent -- view US policy as fair. In May 2003, 47 percent said the United States was being fair in its policies.

Forty percent of Americans sympathize with Israel, while only 13 percent do so with the Palestinians.

Kay sees US intelligence system in 'crisis

AFP, Washington

Former arms inspector David Kay on Wednesday offered a bleak assessment of the state of US intelligence, saying that even naming an intelligence czar was not likely to fix the problems unless other significant reforms are undertaken.

Kay, who resigned in January as the head of the Iraq Survey Group tasked with hunting down Baghdad's alleged weapons of mass destruction program, said the US intelligence network was in a full-blown crisis, and pointed to the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and

the flawed intelligence on Iraq's weapons program as evidence.

"The US intelligence community is in a crisis, and this crisis is so grave that it weakens an essential underpinning of both our diplomatic and our national military security capabilities and their ability to support US national interests," Kay said at a hearing of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

"Remedying this crisis cannot be simply achieved by naming a National Intelligence Director. What is necessary is vision, and an unwavering commitment to serving the nation beyond the political and policy interests of any one

particular administration," he said.

He made his remarks at one of nearly two dozen separate congressional hearings to be held in August to review last month's findings by the independent September 11 Commission into intelligence lapses that allowed the attacks to be carried out.

Lawmakers are meeting this month to consider proposals to overhaul the US intelligence system, including the possible creation of a national coordinator of US intelligence.



PHOTO: AFP

Nigerian Police Chief Tafa Balogun (R) accompanied by senior police officers look at decomposed bodies of victims of the Ogwugwu-Akpu shrine littered in the acclaimed evil forest of Umuhu in Okija, northeastern Nigeria Wednesday. Nigeria's police chief Tafa Balogun visited the black magic shrines where his men recovered 83 bodies in raids earlier this month, and vowed to bring killer cultists to justice.