

Saddam fit and well after operation

REUTERS, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein underwent a hernia operation at a US-run hospital inside Baghdad's Green Zone two weeks ago and has made a full recovery, a US military official said Wednesday.

The former Iraqi president, who was captured by US forces on Dec. 13 last year, had previously received treatment for hernia problems and had suffered discomfort in recent weeks.

"They eradicated the problem and dealt with it. There were no complications and no concerns," said the military official, who asked not to be identified.

"The treatment definitely alleviated the problem. He felt a lot better afterwards," he said. Saddam returned to his cell shortly after the operation, which lasted a little over an hour.

The operation took place at Ibn Sina hospital, once used by well-connected Iraqis under the former regime.

Iraqis plead for more international help

AFP, Tokyo

Iraq pleaded with the international community Wednesday to play a bigger part in rebuilding the war-shattered nation at a donors conference to assess how to spend billions of dollars in aid.

Interim Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh told representatives of some 55 countries and organisations that donors should waive the debt from the rule of Saddam Hussein and that the United Nations should play a more active role in Iraq.

"We need more UN support and we need it now. Please don't let the Iraqi people down," Saleh told the opening of the two-day conference in Tokyo.

"Development and stability of Iraq cannot be driven forward through the barrels of guns. Assistance and aid in the short term is the key to destroying the causes

of terrorism," he said.

The donors' conference is the fourth since the fall of Saddam and the first since the interim government took over from US-led forces in June.

The meeting is not intended to raise more pledges of aid but to look at how to disburse money that has been committed.

The interim government has said it will propose to the donors a wish list of commitments to 324 projects costing a total 43.5 billion dollars, including 53 related to infrastructure.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told the conference that Iraq needed to step up its police force to improve public safety.

Host Japan announced it would devote 40 million dollars of the five billion dollars it has already pledged to support Iraq's legislative elections due in January.

Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura said the money was being offered in the hope "that the elections take place successfully and on schedule."

The United States and the interim government are sticking to the January schedule for the historic election, although US officials have acknowledged the vote could be violent due to the ongoing insurgency.

But the deputy prime minister insisted that Iraq had already met other political deadlines including the June transfer of power.

"We are determined to prove the doubters wrong again and hold elections next year as planned. Our political process is on track despite the odds," Saleh told the conference.



PHOTO: AFP
Israeli soldiers arrest Imad Qawasmeh, a top military leader of the radical Palestinian Hamas movement, in the divided West Bank town of Hebron yesterday. Qawasmeh, 32, who has been held responsible by Israel for masterminding a double suicide bombing in the town of Beer Sheva in August, was arrested in Hebron.

Israel arrests senior Hamas commander in West Bank

AFP, Hebron

The Israeli army Wednesday arrested a top military leader of the radical Palestinian group Hamas, accused of masterminding a string of deadly anti-Israeli attacks, Palestinian witnesses and Israeli radio said.

Imad Qawasmeh, 32, who has been held responsible by Israel for masterminding a double suicide bombing in the town of Beersheva in August, was arrested in the main southern West Bank town of Hebron, the sources said.

An army spokesman confirmed that "a senior wanted Hamas official" had been arrested in Hebron, without revealing his identity.

Witnesses said troops surrounded and partially destroyed the house in which Qawasmeh had been hiding in Hebron, summoning him through a hailspeaker to turn himself in.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani man reads a newspaper carrying a picture showing Pakistani tribal leader Abdullah Mahsud (L) giving an interview to a US-based radio and tribesmen gathered to discuss the latest situation on the Chinese hostages, in Islamabad, yesterday. An al-Qaeda-linked Pakistani tribesman, Mahsud, has rejected an appeal by tribal elders to free two Chinese hostages whom he has threatened to kill, mediators said yesterday. Mahsud, the one-legged ex-Guantanamo Bay prisoner who has threatened to kill two Chinese hostages, is a Taliban fighter who hates the US for its "occupation" of Afghanistan and Iraq, residents and security officials said.

Babies found in Iraqi mass grave

BBC NEWS ONLINE

A mass grave being excavated in a north Iraqi village has yielded evidence that Iraqi forces executed women and children under Saddam Hussein.

US-led investigators have located nine trenches in Hatra containing hundreds of bodies believed to be Kurds killed during the repression of the 1980s.

The skeletons of unborn babies and toddlers clutching toys are being unearthed, the investigators said. They are seeking evidence to try Saddam Hussein for crimes against humanity.

It is believed to be the first time investigators working for the Iraqi Special Tribunal (IST) have conducted a full scientific exhumation of a mass grave.

"It is my personal opinion that this is a killing field," Greg Kehoe, an American working with the IST, told reporters in Hatra, south of the city of Mosul.

"Someone used this field on significant occasions over time to take bodies up there, and to take people up there and execute them."

The victims are believed to be

Kurds killed in 1987-88, their bodies bulldozed into the graves after being summarily shot dead. One trench contains only women and children while another contains only men.

The body of one woman was found still clutching a baby. The infant had been shot in the back of the head and the woman in the face.

"The youngest foetus we have was 18 to 20 foetal weeks," said US investigating anthropologist P Willey.

"Tiny bones, femurs - thighbones the size of a matchstick."

Kehoe investigated mass graves in the Balkans for five years but those burials mainly involved men of fighting age and the Iraqi finds were quite different, he said.

"I've been doing grave sites for a long time, but I've never seen anything like this, women and children executed for no apparent reason," he said.

Kehoe said that work to uncover graves around Iraq, where about 300,000 people are thought to have been killed during Saddam Hussein's regime, was slow as experienced European investigators were not taking part.

Gujarat riot witnesses to be recalled

AFP, Ahmedabad

Seven witnesses in a 2002 Gujarat riot case, including a police officer, were Tuesday ordered by India's High Court to be recalled and re-examined.

The order came in response to a petition filed by Medina Bibi, whose daughter Shabana, 16 and niece Suhana, 17, were gang-raped and burnt to death along with five other family members in Panchmahals district during the March 2002 riots.

Bibi's lawyer, Shiraj Mallik, told AFP that the police department should take disciplinary action against the officer who had "turned hostile".

Witnesses in other Gujarat riot cases have also become hostile but the cases are now being reopened after Supreme Court intervention.

More explosives found in Gujarat

PTI, Ahmedabad

More than 800 explosives, mostly rocket shells, have been recovered from scrap in three different places in Gujarat's Kutch district, police said.

"Police have found 837 explosives, mostly rocket shells, from three different places around Anjar and Adipur towns," Kutch District Superintendent of Police Piyush Patel said.

The explosives, which were recovered in the last two days, also included live grenades and mortars.

British woman raped in Mumbai

PTI, Mumbai

A British woman was raped by an unidentified man at a paying guest accommodation in Parel in central Mumbai, police said on Wednesday.

In a complaint lodged with Bhoiwada police, the victim said that she was sedated and subsequently sexually assaulted on Monday night.

The woman, who works in Australia, had arrived in Mumbai on a tourist visa for treatment at Tata Memorial Cancer Hospital, police said.

Since the woman did not know anybody in the town, she was staying as a paying guest in a house where the incident occurred, police said.

Bush, Kerry looking for edge in final debate

AP, Santa Fe

Running even just 20 days before the election, President Bush and Sen. John Kerry were looking for any edge in their third and final debate Wednesday night.

The face-to-face meeting, scheduled for 9 pm EDT at Arizona State University, is limited to economic and domestic policy, but there may be questions that allow Bush to discuss foreign policy, the war in Iraq and his campaign against terrorism all issues the Republican's campaign thinks he does well on.

"There could be times when those issues come up," said Bush campaign spokesman Scott Stanzel.

Kerry adviser Joe Lockhart said the Massachusetts Democrat has been preparing for Bush to try to shift the debate, but that he plans to hold the president accountable for his "record of failure." Lockhart pointed to higher health care costs and gas prices, a swing from surplus to deficit, concern over Social Security reserves and increasing Medicare premiums.

Kerry's campaign is publicly showing a lot of confidence in his performance. Lockhart said Kerry

won the first two debates and that campaign advisers "cannot remember an incumbent who lost three consecutive debates in the mind of the public who then went on to victory."

Despite their public assurances and the fact that Kerry has spent most of the campaign until recent weeks attacking Bush's domestic record, the senator spent two days secluded in a New Mexico hotel trying to master the debate material.

For Bush, Wednesday's debate is a chance to revive in public opinion polls as the clock ticks down to Election Day, Nov. 2. His job-approval rating slumped to 47 percent in a USA Today-CNN-Gallup poll published Tuesday one point above the lowest point in his presidency, reached in May.

As in the first debate, the candidates take questions standing at lecterns. Bob Schieffer of CBS News will moderate.

At a rally Tuesday in Colorado Springs, Colo., Bush mocked Kerry's credibility and said the debates so far "have highlighted the clear differences between the senator and me on issues ranging from jobs to taxes to health care to the war on terror."

Afghan election boycott ends, vote count soon

REUTERS, Kabul

A top rival to Afghan election frontrunner President Hamid Karzai called off his boycott of the process Wednesday, making it likely that the historic poll's result would be recognized by all despite voting irregularities.

With ballot counting expected to begin later Wednesday, Uzbek general Abdul Rashid Dostum joined the two other main challengers in agreeing to recognize the eventual outcome of the country's first ever direct presidential vote.

"Dostum is of the view that the election is a major achievement for everyone," said spokesman Faizullah Zaki.

"He met yesterday with the candidates and all termed the election a victory, but they all said that there were violations and that

they should be assessed."

A panel appointed by the UN-Afghan Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB) was in Kabul Wednesday to assess complaints among candidates of multiple voting made possible by a mix-up over the ink used to mark voters' thumbs.

On Saturday, 15 of 18 candidates announced they would boycott the vote, casting a pall over a day when millions of Afghan men and women queued outside polling stations across the war-ravaged country in defiance of Taliban threats to launch major attacks.

Since then the rebellion has unraveled. Dostum joins Yunus Qanuni, who is expected to come second behind Karzai, and Mohammad Mohaqiq, another major contender, in backing down.



PHOTO: PTI

Congress MP Rahul Gandhi yesterday mingles with the people of Amethi, his constituency where he is on a three day tour.

Blair rejects opposition allegation

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Wednesday rejected charges from the Conservative opposition that he "misrepresented" intelligence used to make the case for invading Iraq.

"I cannot say I misrepresented (it)," Blair said in reply to a challenge from Conservative leader Michael Howard during question time in parliament.

Howard asked Blair to apologise for "misrepresenting" the intelligence, rather than for actually waging war, a move the Conservative Party supported.

"I indeed apologise for any information given in good faith but

which subsequently turned out to be wrong," Blair said in the House of Commons. "I've already done so."

"What I don't in any way accept is that there was any deception in any way. That is what has been looked into by four different independent inquiries and in each case that allegation has turned out to be wrong," Blair said.

"I will not apologise for removing Saddam Hussein and I will not apologise for the conflict which I believe was right then, is right now, is essential for the wider security of that region and the world," the prime minister said.

On Tuesday, Foreign Minister Jack Straw had also faced

Conservative demands in the Commons for a "full apology" for the way the government made its case for war.

But Straw merely referred MPs to the qualified apology Blair had given his Labour Party conference two weeks earlier.

Straw told MPs that the head of British intelligence service MI6, John Scarlett, had written to lawmakers "formally withdrawing" two pre-war claims about Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction.

These concerned intelligence on Iraq's ability to produce biological agents and to mount an attack using weapons of mass destruction within 45 minutes.

China spurns Taiwan's peace overture

REUTERS, Beijing

China spurned Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's peace overtures Wednesday, accusing him of merely paying lip service to easing tensions between the two arch foes.

Chen called for peace talks with China in his National Day speech Sunday, but asserted that the island was a sovereign nation and not a mere province of China.

"When Chen Shui-bian says he wants to ease tensions, it is false. When he says he wants independence, it is true," Zhang Mingqing, a spokesman for Beijing's policy-making Taiwan Affairs Office, told a news conference.

Communist China has claimed sovereignty over Taiwan since their split at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949 and has threatened to attack the democratic island of 23 million if it formally declares statehood.

Beijing is convinced Chen will push the envelope on independence in his current second and final four-year term.

Chen was pushing for Taiwan to

become a normal, complete country by overhauling the island's constitution, Zhang said, adding that Taipei had sought to join the United Nations from which it was ousted in 1971 and to step up arms purchases.

"These lay bare his lies," Zhang said.

The spokesman accused Chen of "smearing and maliciously attacking the mainland motherland and recklessly worsening cross-Strait relations."

"He has no sincerity," Zhang said when asked when China would agree to contacts with Taiwan to reduce misunderstanding.

Formal independence for the self-ruled island was the "biggest threat to peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region ... and would only bring great disaster."

"Taiwan independence (means) there will be no peace. Splitting (means) there will be no stability," he said, but stopped short of repeating a long-standing threat to use force.