

Two US soldiers die in helicopter collision

3 killed in US raid while 9 Iraqi cops killed in attack

AFP, Reuters, Baghdad

Three people were killed in US air raids on the Iraqi rebel bastion of Fallujah and two US soldiers were killed and two injured when a pair of helicopters collided over southwest Baghdad.

Earlier Saturday, five Baghdad churches were hit by bomb blasts, and the US military said four more American troops and a translator were killed in attacks elsewhere in Iraq.

A spokesman in the capital in Fallujah west of Baghdad said, "We have received three dead."

The latest US raids targeted the districts of Jolan and Askari. Fallujah has been sealed off by US

and Iraqi troops since Thursday.

The US army in a statement confirmed a raid "against an armed al-Zarqawi terrorist checkpoint in the Jolan district of the city of Fallujah" around 10:45 pm (1940 GMT), referring to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Iraq's most-wanted man.

Elsewhere, a statement attributed to Zarqawi's group claimed it had beheaded 11 members of the Iraqi police and national guard.

Desperate to crush the rebellion ahead of nationwide elections planned for January, more than 1,000 US and Iraqi troops surrounded the city of Fallujah for a second straight day in the hunt for Zarqawi.

In Karbala nine Iraqi policemen were killed when their minibus came under attack in the rebel area of Latifiyah south of Baghdad on Saturday, police said.

Funerals were held for the nine on Sunday in their hometown, the holy Shia city of Karbala, a police official said.

The army said the cause of the helicopter collision was under investigation and that the names of the victims were being withheld pending notification of family.



Female supporters of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Nawaz) of deposed and exiled premier Nawaz Sharif chant anti-government slogans as they hold placards during a protest rally in Lahore yesterday to denounce a law allowing President Pervez Musharraf to remain as army chief. Pakistan's parliament approved a law prolonging Musharraf's dual role as president and army chief on October 14.

US ELECTION 2004

Bush, Kerry step up war of words in Ohio, Florida

Reuters, Washington

President Bush questioned Sen. John Kerry's fitness to lead and the Democrat said Bush had ignored the middle class as they took their close presidential race on Saturday to two crucial states.

With polls showing a virtually deadlocked contest just 17 days before the Nov. 2 election, Bush toured Florida where he called Kerry a political opportunist unfit to lead amid "great threats" to America.

He said Kerry's vote a year ago against a request for \$87 billion to fund the Iraq war was at odds with his earlier vote to authorize the use of force.

"His contradictions call into question his credibility and his ability to lead our nation," said Bush, accompanied by his brother, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, on a bus tour of the state that sent him to the White House in 2000 after a recount battle ultimately decided by the US Supreme Court.

Bush also criticized comments by Kerry in the Des Moines Register that there was "great potential" for a military draft if Bush were re-elected -- even though Bush said in a televised debate with Kerry this week there would not be one.

"We will not have a draft," Bush told a rally in Daytona Beach, Florida. "No matter what my oppo-

nent tries to tell people and scare them, we will have an all-volunteer army. The only person talking about a draft is my opponent."

Kerry was in Ohio, another electoral battleground, where he ripped Bush's economic record. The Massachusetts senator has paid 20 visits this year to the closely contested state that went narrowly for Bush in 2000 but has lost 173,000 manufacturing jobs during his presidency.

"Mr. President, the millions of Americans who have lost jobs on your watch are not 'myths,' they are middle-class families -- and for four years, you've turned your back on them," Kerry told a town hall meeting.

Lanka to resume peace talks next month

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's stalled peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels will resume early next month, ending an 18-month deadlock in the Norwegian-backed process, a state-run newspaper reported yesterday.

A top official from President Chandrika Kumaratunga's office visited the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi Saturday amid signs the peace process was being reactivated, the Sunday Observer said.

"There are positive signs that the government - LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) peace talks would recommence in early November," the paper said.

The report came a day after Tiger rebels freed two paramilitary policemen they had been holding since August.

Military officials said the Tigers released the two men in the northeastern district of Trincomalee

Saturday, a day after a Sri Lankan court granted bail to 10 Tiger rebels who had been in remand custody for illegally carrying weapons.

There was no immediate reaction to the press report from the guerrillas who have insisted that a resumption of the negotiations which were suspended in April last year must be based on their proposal for self-rule.

However, government spokesman Mangala Samaraweera said last week that a set of fresh proposals had already been finalised to restart negotiations with the Tigers.

Samaraweera told reporters: "The proposals will be given to the Tigers when they are ready to look at them."

He said the cabinet was "baffled" at the Tiger's reluctance to re-open talks with the new government which came to power in April after the president sacked the previous administration for allegedly conceding too much to the rebels.



PHOTO: AFP
A South Korean activist sits wearing cap of a missile-shape during an anti-war rally in downtown Seoul yesterday demanding withdrawal of South Korean troops from Iraq. The South Korean Defence Ministry has decided to recommend keeping its troops in Iraq for one more year until next year, a ministry official said yesterday.

Sharon under pressure for Gaza referendum

Reuters, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon faced growing pressure yesterday for a referendum on his plan for an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied Gaza Strip and political sources said he had not ruled out the idea completely.

Sharon is struggling to keep his ruling coalition together amid far-right opposition to the plan for evacuating Jewish settlers from Gaza and parts of the West Bank in order to "disengage" from conflict with the Palestinians.

Advocates of a referendum say it could ensure political stability and possibly prevent violence, but Sharon spurned an earlier call and his supporters feel it would delay a plan that polls show to have the backing of most Israelis.

A key cabinet member from Sharon's ruling rightist Likud party joined the call for a national vote on Sunday and Israeli media said the proposal was also supported by President Moshe Katsav, whose role is largely ceremonial.

"At this time, in order to prevent a clash or even, God forbid, civil war, we must go to the people, which means a referendum or elections," said Education Minister Limor Livnat. "Of course, I would prefer a referendum."

Sharon was due on Sunday to meet leaders of the Yesha settler council, the hard core of ultranationalists determined to resist a withdrawal from any land captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war and seen by many Jews as a biblical trust.

Livnat suggested a referendum could reconcile Sharon with the settlers, who want a popular vote and have been campaigning vigorously against giving up territory.

Sharon rebuffed a referendum proposal last month by his Likud arch-rival, Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, vowing that the pullback would go ahead next year as planned.

But he has suffered setbacks since.

Jeb Bush ignored felon list advice

AP, Tallahassee

Florida Governor Jeb Bush ignored advice to throw out a flawed felon voter list before it went out to county election offices despite warnings from state officials, according to a published report Saturday.

In a May 4 e-mail obtained by the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, Florida Department of Law Enforcement computer expert Jeff Long told his boss that a Department of State computer expert had told him "that yesterday they recommended to the Gov that they 'pull the plug'" on the voter database.

The e-mail said state election officials "weren't comfortable with the felon matching program they've got," but added, "The Gov rejected their suggestion to pull the plug, so they're 'going live' with this weekend."

Long, who was responsible for giving elections officials his department's felon database, confirmed the contents of the e-mail Friday to the Herald-Tribune. He said he didn't remember the specifics, but that Paul Craft, the Department of State's top computer expert, had told him about the meeting with Bush.

A software program matched data on felons with voter registration rolls to create the list of 48,000 names. Secretary of State Glenda Hood juked the database in July after acknowledging that 2,500 ex-felons on the list had had their voting rights restored.

Most were Democrats, and many were black, Hispanics, who often vote Republican in Florida, were almost entirely absent from the list due to a technical error.

Bush's spokeswoman, Jill Bratina, denied allegations that the governor ignored warnings about the list.

Twins joined at buttocks successfully separated

AFP, Dubai

Doctors in the United Arab Emirates capital of Abu Dhabi successfully separated two-year-old Sudanese twins who were joined at the buttocks in a rare case in medical history, newspapers reported yesterday.

Twins Hassan and Al-Hussein were joined at the buttocks and spinal cord and shared the same penis and anus, Gulf News said.

They were separated in a 16-



PHOTO: AFP
Two-year-old Sudanese twins Hassan and Al-Hussein, who were joined at the buttocks and spinal cord and shared the same penis and anus, are seen at a hospital in Abu Dhabi Saturday, moments before the operation that successfully separated them.

Iraq war has done little to snub terrorism: Annan

Reuters, London

The Iraq war has done little to increase security across the world or halt the activities of international terrorists, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan said yesterday.

Annan said in a British television interview that the international community now had a lot to do to improve security.

"I cannot say the world is safer when you consider the violence around us, when you look around you and see the terrorist attacks around

the world and you see what is going on in Iraq," he told the Dimbleby programme on ITV television.

"We have a lot of work to do as an international community to try and make the world safer."

A transcript of Annan's interview, due to be broadcast later on Sunday, was made available to media.

Annan also dismissed suggestions that France, Russia and China had, before the recent Iraq war, been prepared to ease sanctions on Iraq in return for oil contracts. I don't believe that at all," he said.

Disputing claims made in the final report of the US-led Iraq Survey Group which suggested Saddam Hussein had manipulated the UN's oil-for-food programme in an attempt to win Security Council support for lifting sanctions, Annan said it was "inconceivable" the three countries were influenced.

"I don't think the Russian or the French or the Chinese government would allow itself to be bought because some of his companies are getting relative contracts of the Iraqi authorities. I don't believe that at all," he said.