

Video shows explosives went missing after war

Russia summons US diplomat

REUTERS, Washington

ABC News on Thursday showed video appearing to confirm that explosives that went missing in Iraq did not disappear until after the United States had taken control of the facility where they were stored.

The disappearance of the hundreds of tons of explosives from the Al Qaqaa storage facility near Baghdad has become a hotly contested issue in the US presidential campaign.

Democratic challenger Sen. John Kerry has charged that President Bush's administration blundered by failing to safeguard the powerful conventional explosives.

Bush countered that Kerry was making wild accusations without knowing the facts. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Thursday advanced the administration's argument that the explosives may have been gone by the time US forces got there.

Without mentioning Kerry by

name, Rumsfeld told a radio interviewer, "People who use hair-trigger judgment to come to conclusions about things that are fast-moving frequently make mistakes that are awkward and embarrassing."

Meanwhile, Russia summoned a US diplomat to protest at a Pentagon claim that Russian soldiers spirited away hundreds of tons of explosives from a site in Iraq just before the US invasion, Interfax news agency said yesterday.

The missing cache of explosives has become a political hot potato in the US election race, with Democratic challenger John Kerry accusing the administration of President Bush of failing to secure the site.

In a Washington Times story this week, Pentagon official John Shaw pointed the finger at Russian special forces, saying they had moved many of Iraq's weapons into Syria in the weeks before the March 2003 invasion.

Thai PM on defensive

Twin bombs rock southern Thailand sparking off fear

AFP, Bangkok

Two bombs rocked southern Thailand yesterday, wounding at least 20 people, as Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra vowed there would be no cover-up over the deaths of 87 Muslims in the volatile region.

Yesterday's coordinated bombings followed a blast late Thursday that left two people dead and another 20 wounded and came as a separatist group warned of new attacks to avenge scores of protesters who died after being arrested on Monday.

Thailand's Muslim-majority south is in the grip of a violent separatist insurgency that re-emerged early this year and has since left at least 418 people dead, with Thaksin's administration coming under fire for its handling of the problem.

"In my national TV address (later Friday), there won't be anything covered up," said Thaksin, pledging to bring to justice anyone found guilty of using excessive force in the

predominantly Buddhist country's south.

"They will be prosecuted objectively if found guilty. I want to reaffirm that my government is sincere and understanding in this situation," he said.

Six people were shot dead at the chaotic demonstration in Narathiwat province and another 78 were crushed to death or suffocated after they were arrested and crammed onto military transport trucks.

Three others were found drowned in a river near the protest site, the foreign ministry said.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has called on Thailand "to conduct a swift and independent investigation into each death, to refrain from excessive use of force and from the use of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment."

Thaksin has launched an inquiry by government officials and said its work would be completed soon, reaffirming during a meeting Friday with Islamic leaders that there had been no campaign of violence

against Muslims.

Thaksin's Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai said he had called his counterparts in Indonesia and other Muslim nations "and they understood and were satisfied" with his explanation of the incident.

But Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, appeared to toughen its line Friday, urging Thailand to bring to justice officers responsible for the detainee deaths.

In Kuala Lumpur, thousands of Malaysians staged angry protests Friday and called on Thaksin to resign.

Thaksin had initially defended the action of his officers, blaming fasting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and drug use among protesters for Monday's high death toll.

Most of the dead suffocated when 1,300 people were arrested and then stuffed into vehicles, after police and troops used water cannon, gunfire and tear gas to disperse the demonstrators calling for the release of six officials.

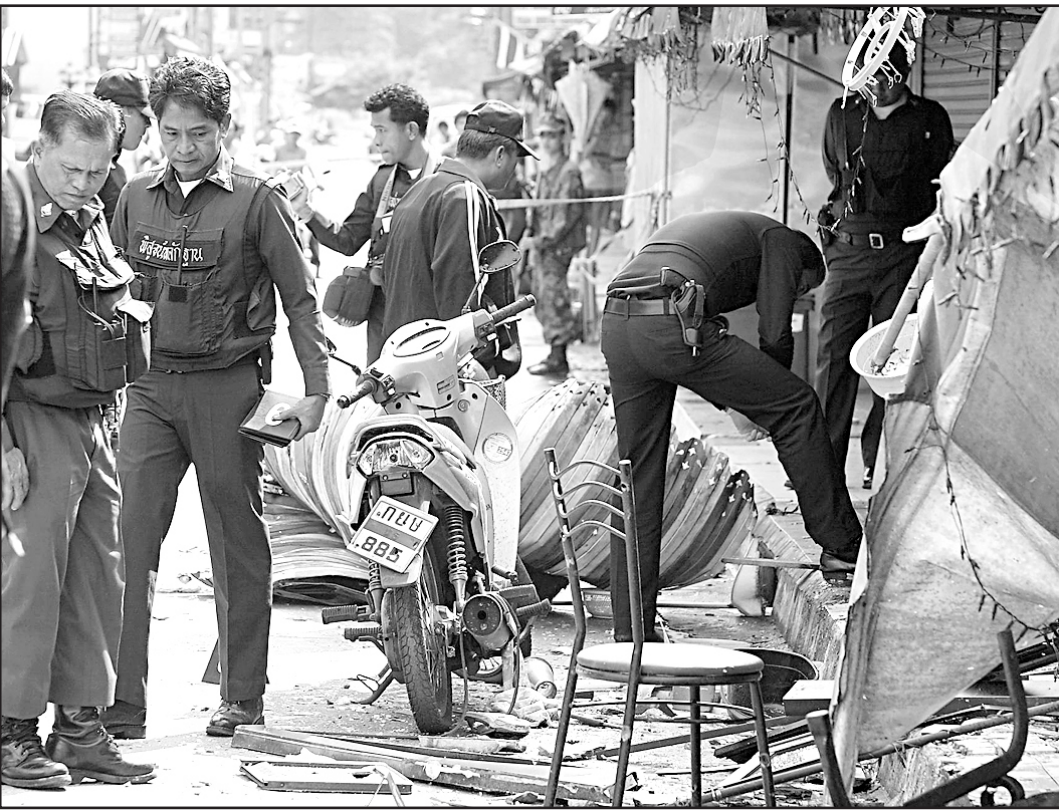


PHOTO: AFP

Thai policemen inspect damages at a bar after a bomb exploded in the town of Sungai-kolok, in Narathiwat province southern Thailand yesterday. A bomb killed one person and injured more than 20 in mainly Muslim southern Thailand on Thursday, as rage grew over the deaths of 85 protesters detained by the army.

Halliburton contracts under investigation by FBI

AP, Washington

The FBI is investigating whether US officials improperly awarded Vice President Dick Cheney's former company lucrative contract work without competition, a probe that was confirmed only days after a top Army contract officer raised the issue of favoritism.

The investigation expands an existing probe of whether Halliburton Co. overcharged for fuel deliveries in Iraq. The probe now includes the no-bid work awarded the company in Iraq, including restoration of the country's oil industry at a cost of \$2.5 billion.

The expanded investigation is converging with statements made last weekend by Bunnatine Greenhouse, the chief contracting officer for the US Army Corps of Engineers. The FBI has requested an interview with Greenhouse, who said her agency unfairly awarded KBR, a Halliburton subsidiary, the Iraq work.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's wife Suha gestures at Allenby Bridge after crossing from Jordan to the West Bank on her way to Ramallah Thursday. It is the first time that Suha Arafat has returned to the West Bank since her husband was put under virtual house arrest by Israel inside his Ramallah headquarters in December 2001.

Arafat supporters bid tearful farewell

Israeli govt split over his return

AFP, Ramallah

Supporters bade a tearful farewell to Yasser Arafat yesterday, as the man who has symbolized the Palestinian struggle for statehood for four decades flew out of the West Bank for possibly the last time.

But his departure was greeted in a decidedly low key manner beyond the walls of his leadership compound with some locals saying that they had not even noticed when he flew out of the West Bank in a Jordanian military helicopter.

"It's a black day for the Palestinian people, President Arafat's gone," said a member of the Palestinian leader's Force 17 security guard, wiping away his tears.

"We thank (French President Jacques) Chirac and pray for his return in good health," added Mohammed, 33, who has spent the last eight years serving Arafat inside his Ramallah compound, universally known as the Muqataa.

He was among more than 100 security men that gathered in the courtyard of the Muqataa, chanting

and whistling as Arafat boarded the aircraft to Amman, from where he caught a plane for Paris for treatment for a potentially fatal blood disorder.

Wearing a grey hat in place of his trademark black and white keffiyeh headress, the frail 75-year-old leader, accompanied by his wife Suha, was bundled on to the helicopter by his security guards.

"With our soul, with our blood we will support you Abu Ammar," his uniformed guards men intoned in unison, using Arafat's nom de guerre.

Meanwhile, the Israeli government appeared divided yesterday over whether Yasser Arafat should be allowed to return to the West Bank after the veteran Palestinian leader was flown to Paris for life-saving treatment.

Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom and senior defence officials were against allowing Arafat to return to the Palestinian territories after his spell in France, contrary to the prime minister's office, military radio reported.

100,000 excess civilian Iraqi deaths in war

UK pledges to 'seriously' study report

REUTERS, AFP, London

Tens of thousands of Iraqis have been killed in violence since the US-led invasion last year, American public health experts have calculated in a report that estimates there were 100,000 "excess deaths" in 18 months.

The rise in the death rate was mainly due to violence and much of it was caused by US air strikes on towns and cities.

"Making conservative assumptions, we think that about 100,000 excess deaths, or more have happened since the 2003 invasion of Iraq," said Les Roberts of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in a report published online by The Lancet medical journal.

"The use of air power in areas with lots of civilians appears to be killing a lot of women and children,"

Roberts told Reuters.

The report came just days before the US presidential election in which the Iraq war has been a major issue.

Mortality was already high in Iraq before the war because of United Nations sanctions blocking food and medical imports but the researchers described what they found as shocking.

The new figures are based on surveys done by the researchers in Iraq in September 2004. They compared Iraqi deaths during 14.6 months before the invasion in March 2003 and the 17.8 months after it by conducting household surveys in randomly selected neighbourhoods.

Previous estimates based on think tank and media sources put the Iraqi civilian death toll at up to 16,053 and military fatalities as high as 6,370.

By comparison about 849 US

military were killed in combat or attacks and another 258 died in accidents or incidents not related to fighting, according to the Pentagon.

The researchers blamed air strikes for many of the deaths.

"What we have evidence of is the use of air power in populated urban areas and the bad consequences of it," Roberts said.

Gilbert Burnham, who collaborated on the research, said US military action in Iraq was "very bad for Iraqi civilians."

AFP adds: British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Friday his government would study "in a very serious way" a report that around 100,000 civilians in Iraq had died as a result of the March 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

"This is a very high estimate, indeed," Straw told BBC radio.

US ELECTION 2004

Bad news dogs Bush

AP, Yardley

The presidency comes with powerful tools that can help incumbents keep their jobs: A mighty public-relations machine, a bully pulpit, a famous airplane.

Yet President Bush has been powerless to halt a recent tide of bad news, from surging violence and missing weapons in Iraq, to missteps by his own campaign, to a potentially damaging new probe by his own FBI.

The inconvenient news has been magnified in the superheated atmosphere of the final week of Bush's tight race with Democrat John Kerry.

In a Friday speech, Kerry hoped to stoke the latest revelation: News that the FBI has begun investigating whether the Pentagon improperly awarded no-bid military contracts to

Halliburton Co., formerly headed by Vice President Dick Cheney.

His running mate, John Edwards, said, "The special treatment of Halliburton is wrong."

For four straight days, Bush had been dogged by a report that nearly 400 tons of explosives disappeared from Iraq's al-Qaqaa military installation.

Bush aides winced when former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, a frequent Bush campaign partner and surrogate, said the troops in Iraq, not Bush, bore the responsibility for searching for the explosives.

"No matter how you try to blame it on the president, the actual responsibility for it really would be for the troops that were there. Did they search carefully enough didn't they search carefully enough?"

Giuliani said on NBC's "Today" program.

There was more: The UN nuclear agency said US officials were warned about the vulnerability of explosives stored at the installation after another facility was looted.

Minneapolis ABC affiliate KSTP-TV, which had a crew embedded with the 101st Airborne Division during the war, released videotape that it said showed soldiers examining explosives at the massive Al-Qaqaa facility nine days after the fall of Baghdad. The video could possibly undermine Bush's suggestion the explosives were looted before the US-led invasion of Iraq.

The presidency is a mixed blessing for incumbents seeking a second term, said Ken Khachigian, who worked in the Nixon and Reagan White Houses.

Bush, Kerry roll out star-studded parade of supporters

AFP, Madison, Wisconsin

President George W. Bush and Democrat challenger John Kerry are parading personalities from sports and the entertainment world in their quest for voter support in what increasingly appears a photo-finish presidential election next Tuesday.

Bush on Friday will roll out in Columbus, Ohio, baseball pitching ace Curt Schilling, fresh off a thrilling championship run by the Boston Red Sox, and Hollywood star-cum California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The incumbent president is trying to recapture the initiative after being force on his heels by Kerry's offensive over the disappearance of nearly 400 tons of high explosives in Iraq.

Kerry, fronted by rock legend Bruce Springsteen, mustered Thursday the biggest rally of his presidential drive when some 80,000 people turned out to rock with the Democrat and The Boss in Wisconsin, adding high-octane harmonics to the campaign.

As usual, Iraq provided the fodder for a new round of rhetoric Thursday as the Democratic senator from Massachusetts, stumping in the critical state of Ohio, said the Republican's buck-passing refusal to own up to responsibility made him an unfit tenant of the Oval Office.

"The president's shifting explanations and excuses and attacks on me demonstrate once again that this president believes the buck stops everywhere but with the president of the United States," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

French President Jacques Chirac (C), French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin (L) and French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier sign the Treaty and Final Act that establish a Constitution for Europe at the Orazi and Curiazi Hall located at the Capitol Place in Rome yesterday. The constitution, agreed in June after two years of haggling, aims to streamline EU institutions and prevent decision-making gridlock in a bloc which grew from 15 to 25 members this year, with several more waiting in line.

McKinnon laments Musharraf's bid to retain uniform

AFP, New Delhi

Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon yesterday praised Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's moves to strengthen democracy, but lamented his attempt to retain the post of army chief.

"We welcome his roadmap for democracy and certain steps that he has taken to strengthen democratic institutions," McKinnon told reporters.

"The Commonwealth Ministers did have high expectations about the issue of splitting the role of the President and the role of the Chief of Army" in Pakistan, McKinnon noted in New Delhi at the end of a four-nation regional visit including Pakistan. "Therefore, what has been happening there (Pakistan) recently is below expectations. But we don't regard that fact as necessarily negating everything else that has been done," he added.

The Commonwealth secretary general said last week in Islamabad that Pakistan's parliament and judiciary should solve a row over the president's efforts to remain army chief.

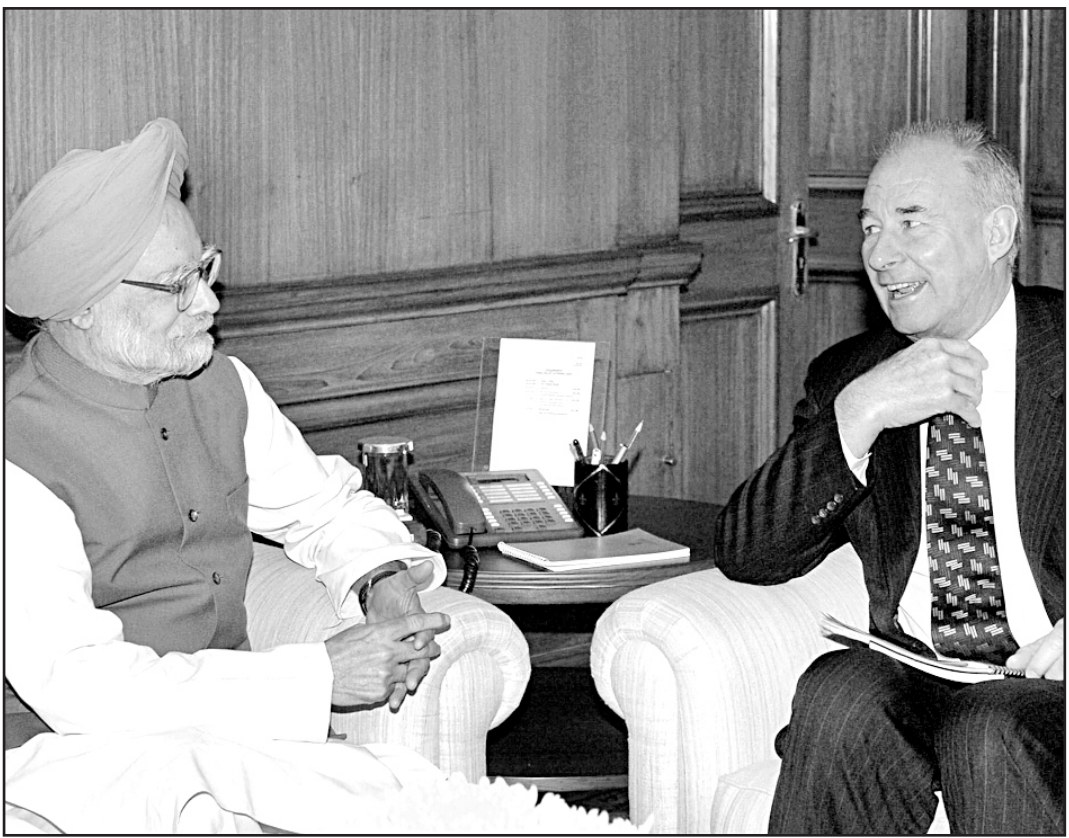


PHOTO: AFP

Commonwealth Secretary General, Don McKinnon (R) adjusts his tie as he speaks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during a meeting at The Prime Minister's office in New Delhi yesterday. McKinnon is in India for a two-day visit, his visit to a number of South Asian countries also comes before an international investment meeting being organised by the Commonwealth Business Council in New Delhi scheduled for March 2005.

US asks India to convey rights concerns to Myanmar general

AFP, Washington

The United States urged India Thursday to convey to Myanmar's military strongman Than Shwe, who is on an official visit to New Delhi, international concerns over human rights abuses in his country.

"We hope that the government of India will convey to Than Shwe during his visit concerns shared by the international community," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

He said the Indian government was aware of the concerns, including failure of Than Shwe's regime to free political prisoners.

Among those detained are democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy (NLD) overwhelmingly won 1990 elections later annulled by the military, which has run the country since a 1962 coup.

The United States has accused the junta of carrying out a brutal attack on Aung San Suu Kyi and her convoy on May 30, 2003, which led to her arrest.

Boucher said Indian authorities should also convey to Than Shwe concerns over the failure of his regime to engage in a meaningful dialogue with other political and ethnic leaders to achieve national reconciliation.

The junta should ensure that the fundamental human rights of the people of Myanmar are respected, he said.

Than Shwe has been holding a so-called national convention to frame the country's constitution but has left out the NLD, whose offices have been shut nationwide.

The general arrived in New Delhi last Sunday with eight cabinet ministers on a six-day visit, the first to India in 24 years by a head of state from the impoverished Southeast Asian nation.

On Wednesday, a US senator said it was appalling that India, the world's largest democracy, was embracing "one of the world's most repressive and illegitimate military juntas."