

US PANEL REPORT REVEALS Spy agencies 'dead wrong' on WMDs

AP, Washington

In a scathing report, a presidential commission said yesterday that America's spy agencies were "dead wrong" in most of their judgments about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction before the war and that the United States knows "disturbingly little" about the weapons programs and threats posed by many of the nation's most dangerous adversaries.

The commission called for dramatic change to prevent future failures. It outlined more than 70 recommendations, saying that President Bush must give John Negroponte, the new director of national intelligence, broader powers for overseeing the nation's 15 spy agencies.

It also called for sweeping changes at the FBI to combine the bureau's counterterrorism and counterintelligence resources into a new office.

The unclassified version of the report does not go into significant detail on the intelligence commu-

nity's abilities in Iran and North Korea because commissioners did not want to tip the US hand to its leading adversaries. Those details are included in the classified version.

The commission was formed by Bush a year ago to look at why US spy agencies mistakenly concluded that Iraq had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, one of the administration's main justifications for invading in March 2003.

"We conclude that the intelligence community was dead wrong in almost all of its prewar judgments about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction," the commission said in a report to the president. "This was a major intelligence failure."

The main cause, the commission said, was the intelligence community's "inability to collect good information about Iraq's WMD programs, serious errors in analyzing what information it could gather and a failure to make clear just how much of its analysis was based on assumptions rather than good evidence.

Bad weather hampers quake relief effort

Survivors go hungry, death toll lower than thought

AFP, Gunung Sitoli

Bad weather and infrastructure damage hampered relief efforts in quake-hit northwestern Indonesia yesterday, relief agencies said, as survivors in remote areas were reportedly going hungry.

Water supplies were running low in Nias island's main town of Gunung Sitoli, where the UN estimated about 500 people were killed in Monday's quake, and authorities were desperate for equipment to aid the search for anyone trapped under the rubble.

"The island of Nias still badly needs heavy equipment such as backhoes, bulldozers and trucks. Electricity is still not available to all parts of the city," said the island's district chief Binahati Baeha.

Armed forces chief Sutarto said heavy-lifting equipment had been sent to the area but there were problems in getting it ashore.

"At the moment there are already four excavators on board our navy ship but we're still trying to find a way

to bring them onto land," he told reporters.

The power cut had disabled the town's electrical water purification system and the shortage of water was becoming severe, relief officials said.

"Water purification is emerging as a major need," said a coordinator for UN aid operations, Michele Lipner.

A water purification system from Oxfam arrived in Gunung Sitoli Thursday and the town's own system was being repaired, UN Development Programme spokeswoman Imogen Wall said.

Relief agencies had to use helicopters to ferry aid to Nias from mainland Indonesia because the airport landing surface was too badly damaged by the quake to receive large aircraft, she said.

"We have had three helicopters going to Nias," she said from the Aceh provincial capital Banda Aceh. "They've taken basically about 1,500 kilogrammes (3,300 pounds) of communications and medical

equipment."

Helicopters also ferried aid from Medan on Sumatra, she said.

However, attempts by relief agency CARE to deliver aid by boat to the island of Simeulue, where 15 people had been confirmed dead and 12,000 were without shelter, had been scuppered by stormy weather, Wall said.

"We have been quite badly hampered today by bad weather. Two boats have had to turn back from Simeleue because of high seas," she said.

The United States had meanwhile dispatched a 1,000-bed hospital ship which was expected to arrive off Nias in six days, US embassy spokesman Max Kwak said.

The USNS Mercy was deployed to Indonesia in late January to help in the aftermath of the December 26 tsunami disaster, which killed hundreds of thousands of people in the same area as Monday's quake.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian troops evacuate a body found in the ruins of a collapsed building in Gunung Sitoli, on Nias island yesterday after the 8.7 magnitude earthquake hit the area killing at least 624 people. The grim search for survivors continued on Nias yesterday, but hopes of finding anyone alive under the rubble were fading three days after the quake struck leaving hundreds dead.

UN human rights expert slams impact of Iraq invasion, war on terror

AFP, Geneva

A UN human rights expert warned yesterday that malnutrition rates among young Iraqi children had almost doubled since the US-led invasion of Iraq, in a report that sharply criticised the impact of the global anti-terror drive on hunger.

"The situation of the right to food in Iraq is of serious concern," the UN special rapporteur on the right to food, Jean Ziegler, said in a report to the UN human rights commission.

Citing previous studies reported last year, Ziegler added that "acute malnutrition amongst Iraqi children under the age of five has almost doubled from four percent to 7.7 percent".

Overall efforts to tackle terror groups and the invasion of Iraq had

also drained precious resources away from fighting hunger in poor countries when they should be doing the opposite, the UN expert said.

The wide-ranging report on global food rights also warned that more people could die as aid programmes in crisis areas, notably in Africa, were obliged to cut down food deliveries.

The World Food Programme had cut food rations by about one third in February 2004, bringing them "drastically under" international minimum nutritional standards, according to Ziegler.

"This will bring higher mortality in the camps, because aid is being redirected towards the 'War against Terror'. This is unacceptable," he added.

Scientist warns of another massive quake off Sumatra

AFP, Jakarta

An Indonesian scientist warned Wednesday that an earthquake measuring as high as 9.0 on the Richter scale could hit regions off Sumatra and trigger another tsunami.

"Every earthquake adds seismic pressure in nearby areas," Murti Matoyo of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences was quoted by the state Antara news agency as saying.

"The potential for an earthquake in the west of Sumatra has increased due to the recent quake," he said.

Hundreds were killed when an 8.7-magnitude earthquake struck off the west coast of Sumatra late Monday. Most of the victims were on the islands of Nias and Simeulue.

10 Iraqis killed in bombings

American, 3 Romanians kidnapped

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Two car bombs killed at least 10 Iraqis near Shia shrines yesterday as the community marked a major religious festival and a US citizen and three Romanian journalists were shown being held hostage in the violence-plagued country.

The latest attacks against the long-oppressed Shia majority were carried out as politicians remained locked in efforts to break a deadlock over the formation of a new government two months after Iraq's watershed election.

And amid the violence, more of Iraq's children were going hungry, with figures for malnutrition among the very young having doubled since the 2003 US-led invasion, according to a report to a UN commission.

Abbas orders crackdown after attack on his HQ

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas ordered a crackdown yesterday on Ramallah militants who defied demands that they lay down their arms under peace moves he had agreed with Israel.

Abbas took a tougher line after half a dozen gunmen from his own ruling Fatah faction fired at his Ramallah compound on Wednesday night while he was inside and then went on a rampage in the West Bank city, damaging several restaurants and shops.

US court rejects Schiavo parents' latest appeal

AP, Pinellas Park

Nearly two weeks after Terri Schiavo's feeding tube was disconnected, her parents endured two more legal setbacks in their fight to keep her alive when the US Supreme Court and a federal appeals court refused to intervene.

The rulings Wednesday came as Schiavo, 41, began her 13th day without food and water. The brain-damaged woman was expected to survive one to two weeks after the tube was removed by court order March 18. Her husband, Michael Schiavo, insists he is carrying out her wishes by having the tube pulled.

Prospects for a legal victory have grown increasingly slim for Schiavo's parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, who dispute that their daughter is in a persistent vegetative state, as court-appointed doctors have determined.

N Korea calls for arms reduction talks

AFP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday that six-way talks aimed at ending a standoff over its nuclear program should be transformed into arms reduction negotiations as it has already produced atomic weapons.

"From now on, the six-way talks should become a forum to discuss comprehensive measures to realise denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula in a practical and fair manner," a foreign ministry spokesman said in a statement published by the North's official Korean Central News Agency.