

# Iraqi troops force way into besieged town

## 3 GIs killed in attacks, 19 bodies recovered

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi troops, backed by US soldiers, battled their way yesterday amid fierce resistance into a town where Sunni extremists abducted dozens of people and threatened to kill them unless all Shias left town.

Earlier three US soldiers were killed by mortar fire at a US base in the city of Ramadi overnight, the US military said yesterday.

Seven servicemen were also wounded in the attack, three of them seriously, the military said in a statement. The attackers were believed to have fled into a nearby mosque. But when Iraqi security forces searched it, they found no insurgents.

Conflicting accounts existed among government officials over whether hostages had been freed from Al-Madain, where the crisis had sparked fears of wider sectarian strife between Iraq's Shia majority and embittered Sunnis.

Meanwhile, 19 corpses were also found south of Baghdad in the latest discovery of executed bodies in the troubled region around Madain popu-

lated by a mixture of Shias, Saddam Hussein loyalists and hardcore Islamists.

Members of parliament meeting yesterday expressed outrage over the Madain hostage drama and called for a military strike against the belt of towns south of the capital.

"By the end of this week, we will be conducting a military offensive starting from Jurf Al-Nadaf through al-Wida and al-Madain," National Security Advisor Qassem al-Daoud told parliament, naming a string of towns on the capital's outskirts.

After a day of tense standoff, Iraqi forces, backed by US troops, went into battle Sunday morning.

"Police forces, backed by coalition forces, entered the town at 9:00 am (05H00 GMT) and encountered severe resistance from the terrorists", a defence ministry official told AFP.

Government forces recaptured half of the town and freed 10 to 15 families held hostage by the gunmen, he said Sunday morning, adding that the clashes were continuing.

However this was contradicted by Daoud, who denied in parliament that

the ongoing rescue operation, involving one US and four Iraqi battalions, had found any hostages.

Officials have suggested the number of hostages in town could be as high as 80.

The take-over by gunmen on Saturday of Madain, a town built on the ruins of the ancient city of Ctesiphon, was the most blatant attempt to date to purge a community of a rival ethnic or religious faction in the two years since Saddam's regime fell.

Raising tension further, the gunmen blew up an empty Shia mosque in the town on Saturday.

"These are terrorist activities aiming at stirring civil war," Daoud told parliament.

He described Sunni insurgents as turning the string of pastoral communities below the capital into a "terrorism centre".

Meanwhile, hospital said 19 unidentified bodies have been found over the past few days in the Aziziyah region, south of Baghdad, some of them in the Tigris river.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (C) arrive at Hyderabad House for an official meeting in New Delhi Sunday. Musharraf and Singh began talks on disputed Kashmir, with hopes high for progress after both leaders urged a resolution of their outstanding differences.

# India offers new talks to settle dam row

## Delhi releases 156 Pak fishermen

AFP, New Delhi

India said yesterday it was open to a new round of talks to try and resolve differences with Pakistan over the construction of a hydroelectric dam in the disputed state of Kashmir.

Pakistan asked the World Bank to intervene in a simmering dispute over the Baghilar Dam which India is building in Indian Kashmir after talks over the project between the two countries collapsed in January last year.

Islamabad says the dam violates a 1960 water-sharing treaty, which bars India from interfering with the flow of the three rivers feeding Pakistan -- the Indus, the Chenab and the Jhelum -- but which allows it to generate electricity from them.

The treaty, brokered by the World Bank, is one of the South Asian foes' most enduring agreements and has survived two wars between them.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran said Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had told visiting Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf that New Delhi wanted more discussions on the dam project to assure Islamabad that water supplies would not be cut.

"Prime Minister Singh sought to allay Islamabad's apprehensions on

the issue and unequivocally stated India's commitment to abide by the parameters laid down by the 1960 treaty in letter and spirit," Saran told reporters.

"There is a readiness to engage in further technical discussions on this issue to try and resolve it. We are prepared to do that. The Pakistan President was thankful for the assurances," he added.

The World Bank announced in February this year that it would appoint a "neutral expert" to arbitrate in the row after it was approached by Pakistan.

India says it is building the dam to provide badly needed power to the part of Kashmir it administers.

Meanwhile, India yesterday released 156 Pakistan fishermen jailed in the western state of Gujarat as a humanitarian gesture during a visit by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf.

The fishermen, arrested during the past year for illegally fishing in Indian territorial waters of the Arabian Sea, are being taken to the only land-border crossing between the two countries at Wagah in India's Punjab state, police said.

They are expected to cross into Pakistan Monday, said Manoj Shashidhar, superintendent of police in the Gujarat city of Jamnagar.

# Trip down memory lane!

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf brought in their personal touches in seeking to establish a chemistry between them and move forward the peace process between the two countries.

At a dinner Singh hosted in honour of Musharraf at the state-owned Ashoka Hotel here on Saturday, the Indian prime minister recalled the recent visit of the Pakistan president's mother Begum Zarin, brother Javed and son Bilal to India.

"I believe your son was quite a hit with young people here! My wife and I went down memory lane with your mother and brother, talking about common friends and shared experiences," Singh said.

"We were impressed by the wisdom and wit of your most affectionate mother. She was so utterly charming that my wife said to her 'I envy your daughter-in-law. She is so lucky to have a mother-in-law like you!'", the Indian Prime Minister said in his speech at the dinner.

# Norway in new peace drive in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Norwegian special envoy Erik Solheim arrived here yesterday for a fresh attempt to revive Sri Lanka's deadlocked peace talks with Tamil Tiger rebels, an official said, as violence escalated in the island's troubled east.

Solheim headed to the north-western town of Puttalam shortly after his arrival for talks with Muslim refugees, a Norwegian embassy official said. He would travel to the troubled eastern province on Tuesday.

The embassy said Solheim would also focus on a proposed "joint mechanism" between the Colombo government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on handling tsunami relief aid.

Violence has escalated in the

island's east in the past week, with a senior government official being gunned down by suspected Tiger rebels Friday night in the latest incident.

The government issued a statement Sunday condemning the killing and adding that the state would step up security for all its employees.

Scandinavians monitoring a truce between the government and the Tigers have cautioned that the stepped up violence in the eastern province would undermine the ceasefire that has been in place since February 23, 2002.

In other violence Friday, at least five members of a rival faction were gunned down by Tiger rebels, the defence ministry said.

# Cardinals gather for Conclave to elect pope

REUTERS, Vatican City

Roman Catholic cardinals started to move into sequestered lodgings Sunday ahead of a momentous conclave to elect the successor to Pope John Paul II.

The 115 eligible cardinals will enter the secretive conclave in the Sistine Chapel Monday with no clear favourite to take over the reins of the 1.1 billion-member Church.

Some of the red-hatted "princes of the church" held public Masses around a rainswept Rome Sunday, refusing to speculate on the vote and underlining the spiritual nature of their quest.

"People think that we are going to vote like in an election. But this is something completely different. We are going to listen to the Lord and listen to the Holy Spirit," said Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga of Honduras.

# Nepali king, Maoists pledge to win support

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra and Maoist supremo Prachanda have both predicted they would win popular support and govern the Himalayan nation as they face off after almost a decade of war, according to interviews with Time magazine published yesterday.

The interview with Gyanendra at the Narayanhiti Palace and Prachanda via email comes more than two months after the king sacked a four-party coalition government and assumed absolute power to crush a rebellion by the Maoists that has killed more than 11,000 people since 1996.

In a proclamation issued February 1, Gyanendra said that his

government, with the backing of the military with himself as supreme commander, wanted three years to restore stability in the country.

In the interview, sections of which were published Sunday, he said his government was interested in "winning the hearts and minds of the people" as part of a strategy to prevail over the Maoists who control three-quarters of the countryside outside the capital.

"The nation has chosen not to accept terrorism, and (the army) will do whatever is required -- coerce, comprehend, coordinate, cooperate. No law abiding citizen should feel pain. Those who do not abide the law will feel pain," he said according to a transcript of the interview sent via email by Time.

# FMs of China, Japan at loggerheads in talks

AFP, Tokyo/Shenzhen

Japanese and Chinese foreign ministers were at loggerheads at the start of a crisis meeting yesterday, with Tokyo asking for an apology over anti-Japanese protests and Beijing saying the real issue was Japan's wartime past.

Japanese Foreign Minister Nobutaka Machimura, on a one-day visit to Beijing amid the two nations' worst relations in decades, renewed demands that China apologise for the successive waves of protests.

"We extremely deplore the destructive activities against the embassy and other facilities as well as violent action against Japanese nationals for the third week in a row,"

Machimura told his Chinese counterpart Li Zhaoxing, according to footage shown on Japanese public broadcaster NHK.

"We take it as a deeply deplorable situation. We wish the Chinese government would act sincerely and promptly in keeping with international rules," he said.

But Li said only that he wanted a "thorough exchange of views" on the demonstrations.

"The Chinese government has not once done anything that requires an apology to the Japanese government. We will take any action on the basis of the law," Li said, as quoted by Japan's Jiji Press.

"The important issue at present

is that the Japanese government is hurting the feelings of the Chinese people on the Taiwan issue, the human rights issue, and particularly the history issue," Li said in NHK footage.

Chinese demonstrators have taken to the streets for three straight weekends, accusing Japan of whitewashing its atrocities committed during its 1931-1945 occupation of China.

The protests come shortly after Japan and the United States for the first time said they shared common concern about Taiwan, which Beijing considers part of its territory awaiting reunification, by force if necessary.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indonesian Muslim displays a placard during a peaceful anti-Israel protest in Jakarta yesterday. The demonstrators gathered to protest what they called the oppression of the Palestinian people and alleged threats to the Al-Aqsha Mosque compound in Jerusalem, a site considered holy by both Muslims and Jews.

# Indian cardinal in race for papacy

AFP, New Delhi

India's Cardinal Ivan Dias, known to toe the line of the late Pope John Paul II on homosexuality, birth control and the role of missionaries, is among the top contenders in the race to be the next pope.

Ordained a priest on December 8, 1958, in the western Indian city of Mumbai, Dias is said to wield considerable influence in the Vatican, so much so, according to some reports, that some liberal priests fear him.

Shortly after his ordination, he was selected to go to the Ecclesiastical Academy of Rome for studies and was a Vatican diplomat for more than 30 years in various parts of the world before returning to Bombay, the city where he was born, in 1997 as archbishop.

Named Cardinal by John Paul II in February 2001, Dias has some factors going for him to land the job of leading the world's 1.1 billion Catholics, observers say.

Reports say he is a multi-linguist - fluent in as many as 16 languages, mostly European but including Korean.

# 500,000 illegal immigrants in UK

AFP, London

The government has secretly calculated that there are about 500,000 illegal immigrants in Britain even though ministers have said they are not aware of the scope of the problem, a newspaper reported yesterday.

The research was ordered by Prime Minister Tony Blair more than a year ago "as a matter of urgency" after he hosted a summit on immigration, The Sunday Times reported, citing a confidential memo.

The figure includes not only migrants who have illegally entered Britain to find jobs but also failed asylum seekers who should have been deported, the right-leaning newspaper said.

However, in the face of Conservative opposition charges of lax border controls, experts conducting the research were told not to disclose the figures, the newspaper said.

Only last week Home Secretary Charles Clarke told the BBC that he did not know how many illegal immigrants there were in Britain.

In a campaign speech on April 10, Conservative leader Michael Howard accused Blair's government of pursuing policies that encourage illegal and potentially dangerous immigrants to flood into Britain.