

SAUDI FM WARNS US

Iraq is rapidly heading towards disintegration

AFP, Washington

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal has been warning top US government officials that Iraq is rapidly heading towards disintegration and there is a risk of a regional war, the New York Times reported yesterday.

Prince Saud said he was so worried he is warning "everyone who will listen" in the Bush administration, the Times reported.

"There is no dynamic now pulling the nation together," Prince Saud told reporters at the Saudi embassy in Washington. "All the dynamics are pulling the country apart."

Prince Saud blamed much of Iraq's ills on US decisions such as designating "every Sunni as a Baathist criminal," he told the Times.

While the prince did not refer to the Bush administration directly, he was referring to an order issued by US consul Paul Bremer soon after the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein.

Bremer banned all members of Saddam's largely Sunni Arab Baath Party from holding government jobs.

Prince Saud said that top US officials counter his view with the administration line that things will improve once voters approve Iraq's new constitution in October, and national elections are held in December. But in the meantime there will be increased violence.

"What I am trying to do is say that unless something is done to bring Iraqis together, elections alone won't do it. A constitution alone won't do it," Prince Saud told the Times.

Iraq's potential division into a Kurdish state in the north, a Sunni state in the centre and a Shiite state in the south would "bring other countries in the region into the conflict."

Turkey has long threatened to forcefully prevent Iraq's Kurds from declaring independence. And Saudi Arabia is concerned over the regional influence of the theocratic government of Shiite Iran.

Iran already enjoys strong sympathy in Iraq's Shiite-majority government, and would potentially increase its influence over a Shiite state in southern Iraq.

"This is a very dangerous situation," he told the Times, "a very threatening situation."

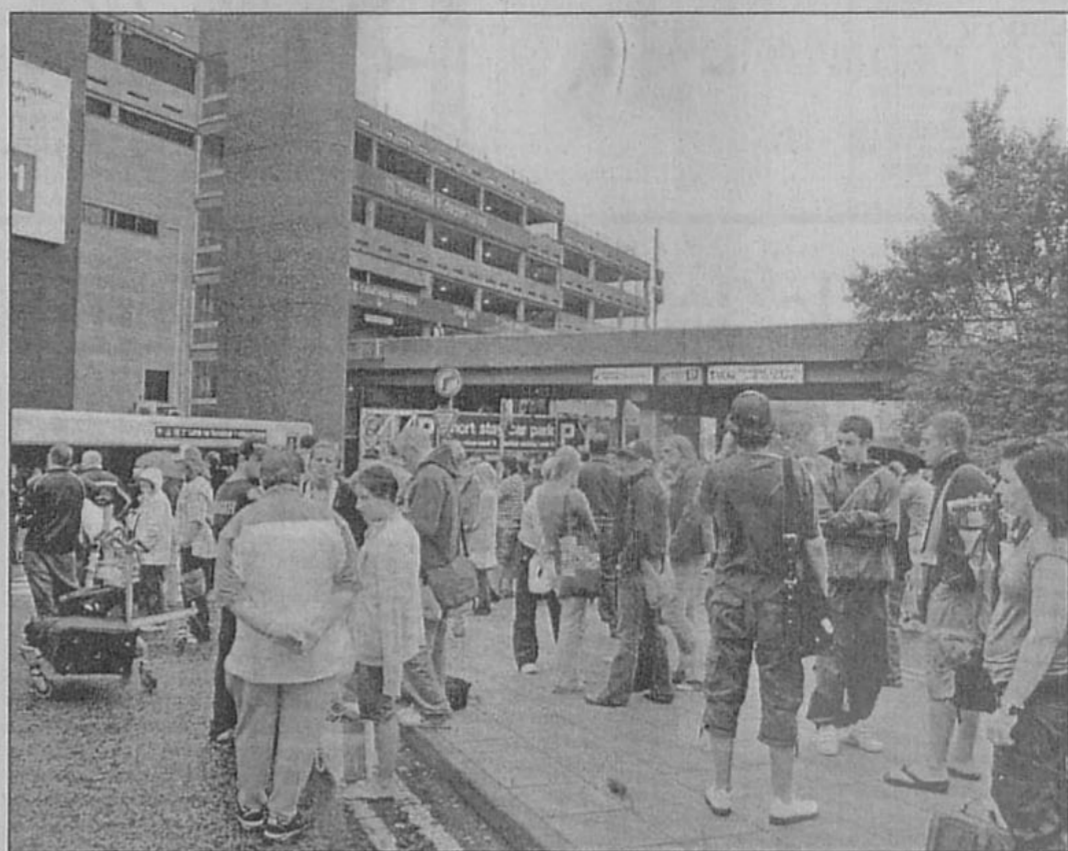
Meanwhile, President George W. Bush on Thursday rejected a growing chorus of calls for a swift US withdrawal from Iraq as he warned

of escalating violence there ahead of an October constitutional referendum.

"Some Americans want us to withdraw our troops so that we can escape the violence," he said in remarks after getting a briefing at the Pentagon. "I recognise their good intentions, but their position is wrong."

Bush's comments came as he faced recent polls showing a collapse in popular support for the war and his handling of it, and as anti-war protesters planned a major demonstration for Saturday in Washington.

"Withdrawing our troops would make the world more dangerous and make America less safe. To leave Iraq now would be to repeat the costly mistakes of the past that led to the attacks of September 11th, 2001," he said.



People wait outside terminal 1 of Manchester airport yesterday following terror alert there. Terrorism jitters returned to Britain as sections of Manchester airport were evacuated and the bomb squad called in after police nabbed a man "acting suspiciously" on the tarmac.

London bomb suspect charged with murder attempt

REUTERS, London

A man extradited from Italy was charged on Thursday with possessing explosives and attempted murder as part of the botched attacks by four would-be bombers on the London transport system on July 21.

Ethiopian-born Briton Hussein Osman, also known as Hamdi Issac, was flown back from Italy with British police officers to a Royal Air Force base at Northolt in west London after failing to have his extradition blocked.

London's Metropolitan Police said he had been charged with conspiracy to murder and attempted murder as well as conspiracy to cause an explosion and possession of explosives.

"He will appear at Bow Street Magistrates Court sitting at Belmarsh" on Friday, police said in a statement.

The July 21 attacks killed one but brought chaos to the capital, mimicking attacks exactly two weeks earlier by four British Muslim suicide bombers who killed 52 people on three underground trains and a bus.



Evacuees with special medical needs load their luggage on buses at George R. Brown Convention Centre before hurricane Rita in Houston, Texas Thursday. Over one million people clogged highways and piled into buses in a traffic snarling exodus as Hurricane Rita ripped towards oil industry citadel Houston and threatened a dangerous glancing blow for storm-ravaged New Orleans.

Rita may cause tens of billions in damage

AP, Washington

Hurricane Rita has the potential to flood an area almost twice the size of New Orleans when it reaches shore early today, causing tens of billions of dollars in damage to the Houston metropolitan area and plunging yet another major Gulf Coast metropolis into disarray.

A study performed last year by the engineering firm Dodson & Associates found that a Category 5 storm could inundate 369 square miles of Harris County, which contains Houston and some of its suburbs. The study estimated the total cost of a worst-case storm at \$80 billion, with 75 percent due to flooding and the rest from wind damage.

"You're looking at the southeast quadrant of the city of Houston, from downtown to Galveston Bay, being underwater," said Chris Johnson, president of Dodson & Associates.

That area is home to about 700,000 people, 15 percent of the metro population. It includes the Johnson Space Centre, which sits about 20 miles southeast of downtown Houston in a low-lying area threatened by bayous. NASA evacuated the space centre Wednesday, shift-

ing ground control over the International Space Station to a Russian space agency facility outside Moscow.

Also subject to flooding are Texas City and other centres of chemical production and petroleum refining. As they did before Hurricane Katrina, environmentalists worry that Rita could cause the release of toxic pollutants at one or more of the 87 chemical plants, oil refineries or petroleum storage facilities along the Texas coast.

"Dozens of chemical plants and petroleum facilities lie in Hurricane Rita's path, many of which may not be adequately prepared to prevent toxic releases," said Tom Natan, research director of the National Environmental Trust.

In Galveston, Texas, where the deadliest hurricane in US history killed up to 8,000 people in 1900, flooding is a virtual inevitability.

"Galveston is going to suffer," city manager Steven LeBlanc said at a news conference Thursday.

The city is protected by a 16-foot seawall specifically designed to block incoming storm surges. But some forecasters said Rita could pound the barrier with waves twice that high.

Bush vows not to repeat Katrina mistakes

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush said Thursday that authorities were "preparing for the worst" of Hurricane Rita, as he tried to head off the kind of criticisms that dogged his response to Hurricane Katrina.

The embattled leader, facing the worst poll numbers of his presidency, was to travel to his adoptive home state of Texas on Friday to get a first-hand look at last-minute efforts to prepare for Rita's onslaught.

"Officials at every level of government are preparing for the worst," Bush said after a briefing at the Pentagon, surrounded by his national security team.

The president drew widespread criticism for Washington's response after Katrina struck the US Gulf Coast on August 29 and left a trail of devastation across an area roughly the size of Britain.

Many critics said his administration reacted too slowly and with too little to one of the worst natural disasters in US history, even as Americans saw television images of their compatriots pleading for food and water.

Some said Bush, who cut two days from his month-long Texas vacation in response to Katrina, should have returned to Washington earlier and been quicker to call on the US military for help.

Americans' attitudes changed after storm

AP, Washington

A 64-year-old Alabamian frets about frayed race relations. A Utah software programmer ponders the slow government response to Hurricane Katrina and decides he'll turn to his church first in a disaster created by nature or terrorists.

A woman scraping by on disability pay in northern Virginia puts her house on the market because of surging post-storm gas and food prices. Cheaper to live in Pennsylvania, she figures.

As the Gulf Coast braces for another monster storm, a new Associated Press-Ipsos poll shows Katrina prompted a rethinking of some signature issues in American life: changing the way we view race and our safety, how we spend our money, even where we live. The poll shows that issues swirling around Katrina trump other national concerns.

Asked to rank eight topics that should be priorities for President Bush and Congress, respondents placed the economy, gas prices and Iraq high. But when Katrina recovery was added to the list, it swamped everything else.

Like bands of the storm itself,

Katrina's reach in American life is vast: 1 in 3 Americans believes the slow response will harm race relations. Two-thirds say surging gas prices will cause hardship for their families. Half say the same of higher food prices.

In Las Cruces, N.M., Ariana Darley relies on carpools to get to parenting classes, or to make doctor's appointments with her 1-year-old son, Jesse. Before, she chipped in \$5 for gas. Now, she pays \$10 to \$15.

"I didn't think it would affect me," she says by telephone, with Jesse crying in the background. "But it costs a lot of money now. I have to go places, and now it adds up."

After a crisis with indisputable elements of race and class searing images of mostly poor, mostly black New Orleans residents huddled on rooftops or waiting in lines for buses, some Americans worry about strains in the nation's social fabric.

Women were especially concerned. One of them is Sue Hubbard of Hueytown, Ala., 64 years old. She does not believe race played a deliberate part in who got out of New Orleans, but she is deeply worried about tensions inflamed by those who do.

Afghan officials look into vote rigging complaints

Ballot boxes sealed, 10 killed in fire

AFP, Kandahar

Election officials said yesterday they had quarantined several boxes of votes cast in Afghanistan's landmark parliamentary polls last weekend to investigate complaints of rigging.

Candidates in the southern city of Kandahar, the stronghold of the former Taliban regime, alleged some boxes had been stuffed with ballots after polling booths closed, and that some men used women's voting cards to vote twice.

The September 18 election for a new national assembly and provincial councils was the first in Afghanistan after more than 30 years, during most of which the country was at war.

The ballot boxes were sealed until the complaints could be investigated, election official Abdul Qahir

Wasifi told AFP.

"We have a number of boxes in quarantine and later on it will be known if these complaints were true or not," said Wasifi, from the Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB) that organised the poll.

One candidate in Kandahar, Abdul Nasah Himat, said a "massive number of men used the registration cards of women to double vote."

"Some JEMB employees also had numerous registration cards... and cast numerous ballots behind the walls after the closure of the polling station," said Himat, who was standing for a seat in the national assembly.

In some cases ink used to mark voters' fingers to stop them from voting twice had come off easily, he said. A similar complaint marred last year's presidential vote that elected Hamid Karzai.

A candidate for the Kandahar provincial council, Bismillah Afghan, also alleged election officials had "cast multiple votes themselves."

In the town of Spin Boldak near Kandahar thousands of women's votes were cast by male family members and "some boxes were stuffed with ballots after the voting site was officially closed," he told AFP.

Meanwhile, ten suspected militants and an Afghan soldier were killed and a US-led coalition soldier was wounded in a firefight in central Afghanistan, the US military said in a statement yesterday.

Afghan and coalition forces were patrolling Deh Rawood district in Uruzgan province on Thursday when militants opened fire with small arms, heavy machineguns, mortar rounds and rocket-propelled grenades, it said.

7 killed in militants' attacks in Thailand

AFP, Narathiwat

Seven people, including two police officers, have been killed in Thailand's Muslim-majority south, as violence flared in the wake of a deadly hostage-taking two days ago, police said yesterday.

Two police officers were killed when a bomb exploded as they cleared the road for a convoy of teachers going to Ban Kaseanue school early Friday in Sungai Padi, Narathiwat province, police Captain Nethiwat Deekaeo told AFP.

"The roadside bomb went off at 8:30 am, killing two policemen instantly and injuring one officer," Nethiwat said.

Sergeant Somchai Khaissak, 25, and Sergeant Somkid Romthong, 25, died with major injuries to their heads and bodies from what police believe was a remote-control bomb detonated to hit the teachers' escorts.

Teachers and schools, seen by militants as a symbol of Bangkok's

influence, are frequent targets of arson shootings, bombings and mortar attacks. Armed police and soldiers escort teachers to and from class everyday.

Hours later, another remote-control bomb detonated in the same district of Narathiwat, injuring three soldiers, and a smaller bomb exploded and damaged a car outside a mosque in neighbouring Yala province, police said.

Also in Yala, a 65-year-old Buddhist man, Klom Huapet, was shot dead Friday morning while driving his motorcycle home from market in Yupo village, police Major Virat Damkongsaid.

In neighbouring Pattani province, a Buddhist construction worker was shot dead while on his way to work, police Major Chatchai Bumrungrakom said.

Gunmen on a motorcycle shot Prasert Kongchuy, 47, three times in front of the Paklor health office, Chatchai said.



Thai soldiers patrol the streets of Thailand's southern Yala province yesterday. Seven people, including two police officers, have been killed in Thailand's Muslim-majority south, as violence flared in the wake of a deadly hostage-taking two days ago.

Thousands welcome Nepali king's first walkabout

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra called on all Nepalese to join nation-building efforts as thousands turned out to welcome his first public walkabout in the Kathmandu valley since his power grab almost eight months ago, witnesses said.

Tens of thousands of people lined the streets of the ancient capital Lalitpur, on the outskirts of Kathmandu, on Thursday to greet the royal couple.

"Some foreigners are spending a large sum of money to create a chaotic situation in the country," Gyanendra told the Kathmandu Valley Development Council after strolling with Queen Komal through the streets.

"You should be aware of this fact and cooperate in restoring peace in the country and in nation building," the king said. He did not identify the "foreigners" he accused of trying to undermine the world's only Hindu kingdom.



A combo of pictures taken yesterday shows (L) Christian Democratic Union (CDU) leader Angela Merkel (R) with the CDU's Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union (CSU) leader Edmund Stoiber and (R) the Greens' party leaders Claudia Roth (R) and Reinhard Buetikofer arriving for press conferences after talks to find a way out of the country's political crisis in Berlin.

Israeli forces gun down 3 suspected militants

REUTERS, Tulkarm

Israeli troops shot dead three suspected Islamic Jihad militants in a raid near the West Bank city of Tulkarm yesterday, Israeli military sources and Palestinian witnesses said.

It was the first deadly army raid since Israel completed its withdrawal of settlers and soldiers from the Gaza Strip on September 12 and pulled soldiers out of four vacated northern West Bank settlements this week.

Military sources said two militants were shot after they opened fire on troops while trying to flee arrest before dawn in the village of Illar outside Tulkarm. A third gunman who escaped was killed nearby in an exchange of fire, they told Reuters.

Palestinian witnesses identified the dead as Jamil Abu Sada, Raed Ajaj and Saed al-Ashkar, all in their 20s.

Israeli security sources said the raid was aimed at capturing mem-

bers of Islamic Jihad wanted for attacks on Israeli soldiers and settlers.

Israeli troops arrested a wanted Islamic Jihad man in a separate raid into the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat denounced the Tulkarm-area raid as an "assassination" operation.

In Gaza, senior Islamic Jihad leader Khaled al-Batsh reiterated warnings of reprisals for any Israeli raid that killed or seized militants. "Israel bears full responsibility for our reactions that will follow," he said.

Palestinian leaders have condemned continued Israeli raids for wanted militants since a February ceasefire deal as counterproductive to efforts to maintain the calm.

Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for two suicide bombings in Israel this year that killed 10 Israelis in all, saying it was avenging some army raids.

Lanka to stop tsunami victims voting from the grave

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Friday announced measures to prevent voters impersonating the tsunami dead as well as special arrangements for those displaced by the calamity to vote in November's presidential elections.

Elections' Commissioner Dayananda Dissanayake said polling cards would be sent out to those believed to have perished in the December 26 Indian Ocean tsunami but these will be specially marked to indicate the voter is dead.

The problem arose because the voter register to be used for the November 17 election had been completed before the tsunami and contained the names of thousands of people who were killed by the thunderous waves.

Iran senses victory in nuclear battle

AFP, Tehran

Iran was yesterday sensing victory in a diplomatic battle over its nuclear programme, but regime officials nevertheless stepped up their bid to avoid even limited criticism from the UN atomic agency.

The European Union, fearful that Iran's atomic fuel work could be diverted to make nuclear weapons, failed to win a consensus among International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) member states for its bid to refer Tehran to the UN Security Council.

Even a softened EU draft resolution, which still finds Iran in non-compliance with nuclear proliferation safeguards, has met with tough opposition from Russia -- leaving Iran feeling justified in its defiant stance.

The retreat of the Europeans over the Security Council is explained by Iran's firm position, the fact that the European demand had no logical basis and the objections of countries like Russia, China

and non-aligned states," national security spokesman Ali Agha Mohammadi told AFP.

The stand-off deepened in August after Iran rejected demands from Britain, France, Germany that it abandon its enrichment programme in exchange for incentives and ended a freeze on enrichment-related work by resuming uranium conversion.

Conversion is the first step in making enriched uranium, which can be fuel for nuclear power reactors or the raw material for atom bombs -- but Iran says its ambitions are strictly peaceful and such work is the right of any signatory of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

In seeking to preserve that "right", Iran's new hardline government has been distancing itself from the West and trying to marginalise Britain, France and Germany -- with whom the previous more moderate regime had been dealing with for two years.