

## US launches offensive in western Iraq

500 more prisoners freed from Abu Ghraib

REUTERS, Baghdad

Around 1,000 US troops, backed by helicopters, attacked towns in the far west of Iraq yesterday, in the latest effort to track down al-Qaeda militants believed to be hiding out near the Syrian border.

The offensive comes two weeks before a referendum on a new constitution, when US commanders expect a surge in violence across the country similar to that experienced in the first post-Saddam Hussein elections in January.

A regiment of marines, soldiers and sailors launched Operation Iron Fist in the early hours against what the US military called a "known terrorist sanctuary" in the town of Sadea, near Qaim, 12km from Syria.

It is at least the third large-scale offensive US forces have conducted in

the area in the past four months. Previous operations appear to have failed, as insurgents have quickly returned to reoccupy the towns and resume guerrilla activities.

"Operation Iron Fist began in the early morning hours with the objectives of rooting out al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorists operating within the area and disrupting insurgent support systems," Marine Captain Jeffrey Pool said in a statement.

"For the past several months, terrorists within Sadea have escalated their intimidation and murder campaign against the local populace and city government officials," he said.

The assault follows a major attack on the northern town of Tal Afar, also considered an insurgent stronghold, last month.

Iraqis will vote in a referendum on a new draft constitution on October 15,

despite the threat of attack and amid a general escalation in violence across the country, much of it claimed by al-Qaeda in Iraq, a group headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Qaim and Sadea are both in Anbar province, a rebellious Sunni Arab region stretching from Baghdad to the borders with Jordan and Syria and a base of the 2-year-old insurgency.

Sunni Arab politicians strongly oppose several elements in the draft constitution, which was largely drawn up by the Shia and Kurdish parties that dominate the government.

At Abu Ghraib, outside Baghdad, US authorities released a further 500 detainees from the notorious prison as a goodwill gesture to coincide with the holy month of Ramadan, which begins this week. Another 500 were released late last week.

## Maoists kill 5 in Chhattisgarh, thousands flee homes

REUTERS, Raipur

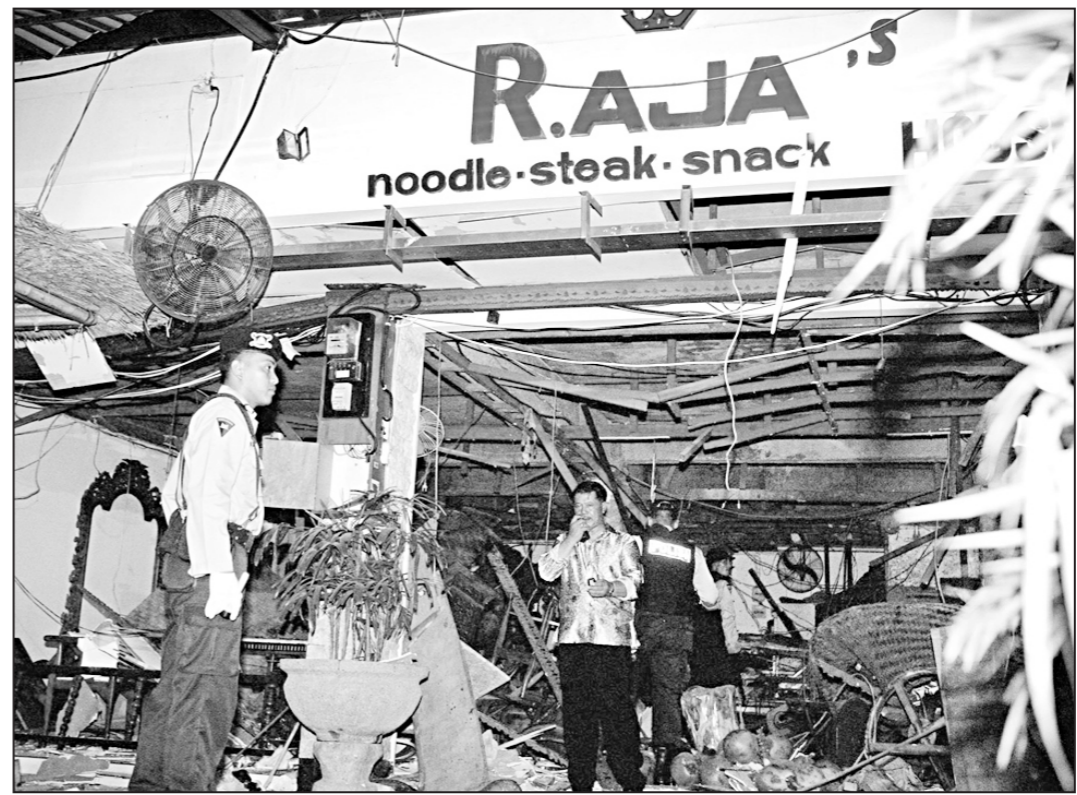
Maoist guerrillas shot dead five people in Chhattisgarh in fresh rebel violence that has forced thousands of tribespeople to flee their homes, police said yesterday.

"The rebels killed five people and dumped their bodies in the forest. The bodies were found today," Inspector-General of Police M.W. Ansari said.

He said the rebels had unleashed a wave of violence against tribesmen in the remote Bastar region, targeting mostly their former comrades and police informers.

"The rebels have kidnapped three villagers. Around 3,000 villagers have fled their homes fearing the Maoists," he said.

The rise in rebel violence comes within a month of a strike on a police vehicle that killed 23 security personnel and a civilian, prompting the state government to ban the Maoists.



Indonesian security personnel survey the scene at a bomb-damaged restaurant in Kuta in Bali yesterday. At least 23 people were killed when a series of blasts ripped through the Indonesian resort island of Bali, a French embassy official, who had visited two hospitals on the island, said.

## Int'l jurists urge Nepali king to declare truce

AFP, Kathmandu

The International Commission of Jurists yesterday urged Nepal's King Gyanendra and Maoist rebels to declare "an indefinite ceasefire" to pave the way for peace.

The Maoists declared a three-month unilateral truce early last month in hopes of urging political parties to talk on forming a united opposition against Gyanendra, who seized power in February.

The government has not reciprocated with any similar announcement.

"If the two sides really desire peace, they now should not only both declare an indefinite ceasefire but also commit themselves to a human rights code of conduct," commission General Secretary Nicholas Howen said in Kathmandu.

He was speaking at the end of a four-day fact-finding mission to the Himalayan nation, where Gyanendra sacked the government and grabbed power in a move he said was necessary to end the nine-year Maoist revolt.

The Maoists campaign to install a communist republic in the kingdom has killed 12,000 people.



Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (L) shakes hands with Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar (R) while Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom (C) looks on during the inaugural ceremony of the World Islamic Economic Forum in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. The Pakistani premier spelled out a "roadmap" to economic progress for Muslim countries, including overcoming crippling conflicts and promoting better governance.

## RELIGIOUS RIGHTS US postpones sanctions on Saudi Arabia

REUTERS, Washington

The United States has postponed punishing Saudi Arabia, its close ally and key oil supplier, for restricting religious freedom -- the first time Washington has waived punishing a blacklisted country under a 1998 law targeting violators of religious rights.

US officials said on Friday the Bush administration had decided to delay imposing sanctions on Saudi Arabia for six months.

The decision reflects the delicate balance the United States has sought to strike with Arab allies such as Saudi Arabia as it promotes expanding freedoms at the risk of irking governments needed to support its oil and terrorism policies.

In a rare official rebuke a year ago, Washington designated Saudi Arabia as one of only eight countries worldwide that could be sanctioned. The

blacklisting in an annual report said religious freedom did not exist in the kingdom.

With this year's report due out next month, the Bush administration needed to decide on sanctioning Saudi Arabia and chose to give the kingdom a further six months to negotiate how it might improve its record.

"We have not seen strong progress in the area of legal protection for religious freedom," State Department spokesman Kurtis Cooper said. "(But) we welcome Saudi recognition of the need to make improvements and create a more tolerant society."

With high oil prices affecting the US economy and dragging on President George W. Bush's popularity, Democrats have charged he has largely ignored Saudi Arabia's rights record for fear of causing any backlash from the oil supplier.

## Army on stand by in tense Meghalaya

PTI, Shillong

The situation in Tura and Williamsnagar, where altogether nine persons were killed in firing by police and CRPF on Friday, continued to be tense with curfew being clamped in the two district towns.

There was no fresh report of violence from the area but personnel of BSF and CRPF were patrolling the streets and the army was asked to stand by. However, people preferred to remain indoors, official sources said.

Residence of ministers in the Garo Hills region were given special protection, they added.

District Magistrates of both East and West Garo Hills districts ordered magisterial enquiry into the incidents.

The sources maintained that the death toll was nine and denied reports in a section of the media that it was 11 or 12.

## Iran to plug oil pipes if referred to UN

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran may respond by holding back on oil sales if its nuclear programme is referred to the United Nations Security Council, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said in an interview published on Saturday.

"But if Iran's case is sent to the Security Council, we will respond by many ways, for example by holding back on oil sales," he told the United Arab Emirates' daily, The Khaleej Times.

"We have been extremely cooperative, we have had more than 1,200 man days of inspections, monitoring cameras are everywhere in our facilities."

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) passed a resolution last Saturday recommending Iran be reported in the future to the Security Council for possible sanctions.

Analysts had predicted Iran could use oil as a lever against countries seeking to send Iran to the Security Council.

Iran said on Thursday it would start

uranium enrichment and stop allowing UN snap inspections of its atomic facilities if it was referred to the Security Council in November.

The country also threatened to use trade to punish countries that have voted to report it to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions.

Tehran says its nuclear programme is purely for generating electricity, but the United States and the European Union suspect Iran of trying to develop nuclear weapons.

Earlier failed Iranian presidential contender Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani on Friday appealed to the Islamic republic's hardline authorities to exercise restraint in a stand-off with the West over the country's nuclear programme.

In a sermon to worshippers at Tehran University, the moderate conservative said the dispute surrounding allegations Iran is seeking nuclear weapons was "very serious" and called on the regime to show "patience and wisdom".

## Civilians asked to leave Pakistani tribal village amid clashes

AFP, REUTERS, Miranshah

Women and children have been asked to leave North Waziristan tribal area's Khatay Killay village near the Afghan border, the military said yesterday, as hundreds of soldiers prepared to assault the remote Pakistani tribal town.

Authorities using loudspeakers urged the civilians to flee as troops tightened their cordon around the village, near the main town of Miranshah, following two days of clashes that have left four soldiers and dozens of militants dead, local officials said.

"We have warned the militants to surrender and hand over their weapons, otherwise we will use full force against them," a military spokesman told AFP.

Pakistani forces attacked al-Qaeda-linked militants in mountains near the Afghan border for a third day yesterday, pounding their hideouts with helicopter gunships, security officials said.

Last month troops raided the largest al-Qaeda hideout in North Waziristan and recovered a huge cache of weapons from a religious school compound owned by a Taliban sympathiser.

## PRESIDENT SAYS Maldives still struggling to recover after tsunami

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The Maldives is struggling to recover from last year's tsunami, after being hit with drastic falls in tourism income and surging oil prices, President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom said yesterday.

Gayoom told the World Islamic Economic Forum that arrival numbers plummeted after last December's tragedy and had "picked up very slowly in the first few months".

"Non-stop promotional work was undertaken, giving us a ray of hope that the industry would recover by high-season this year," he said.

"But the slow recovery of the industry and high oil prices have together combined to create further economic pains in the tsunami recovery phase."

The Maldives, a nation of 1,192 coral islands, is famed for its white beaches, tranquil waters and world-class diving.

The tsunami killed 82 people there and displaced seven percent of the country's population. It also dealt a huge blow to the tourism industry, which has been the main engine of economic growth for the last three decades.

## Thailand to extend emergency rule in restive south: PM

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra yesterday said his government would extend the controversial emergency rule covering the restive southern provinces as the violence had not stopped.

His remarks came as a former prime minister urged the government to apologise for its role in the southern unrest as a way of resolving it.

Thaksin spoke to reporters after meeting top security officials including the army's new chief, who was on Saturday quoted as saying the army would try a divide-and-rule strategy to win an "ideological battle" to end the violence.

Emergency rule, covering Muslim-majority Narathiwat, Pattani and Yala provinces, which came into effect in July and expires on October 20 can be renewed every three months with cabinet approval.

"We will extend emergency rule for sure as the unrest has not subsided," Thaksin said of the decree whose measures include allowing detention without charge for up to 30 days and

## Residents return to New Orleans

AP, New Orleans

As the French Quarter and other neighbourhoods of New Orleans that were spared Katrina's worst officially reopened Friday, residents came back to their homes some to rebuild their lives, others only to pack up and leave.

"We're moving out of this stinking city," Billy Tassin snarled as he loaded his daughter's belongings into a truck, a day after finding his home fouled with knee-deep mud. "They can finish destroying it and burning it down without us."

Most areas of the city are clear of bacteria-laden floodwaters, but residents and business owners are coming home to the stench of garbage, undrinkable tap water and a broken sewage system.

Roads are littered with downed branches and broken-down cars that were flooded by Hurricane Katrina a month ago. Stretches of the city are pitch-black at night and homeowners are finding mouldy walls and refrigerators

## Residents return to New Orleans

ators oozing foul-smelling liquid. Along St. Charles Avenue, its famous streetcars still idled, Maury Strong and her husband were elated to return home and find they had electricity.

"I came back to air conditioning and CNN, so I'm happy. The fridge is on, the beer is cold," she said. "I've been sobbing back in California for two or three weeks. I thought it was going to be much worse."

Despite the misgivings of state and federal authorities, Mayor Ray Nagin opened the French Quarter and the Uptown section as part of an aggressive plan to get the city back on its feet. Algiers, a neighbourhood across the Mississippi River from the French Quarter, reopened to residents on Monday.

Altogether, the neighbourhoods account for about one-third of New Orleans' half-million inhabitants. Most of the reopened areas have electricity, but only Algiers has drinkable water.

## US millionaire heads 'out of this world'

AP, Baikonur

A Russian rocket roared into space Saturday in a burst of flame from the Central Asian steppes, launching the world's third space tourist, US millionaire scientist Gregory Olsen, and a US-Russian crew on a two-day trip to the international space station.

With a brief gasp from relatives and friends of Olsen, cosmonaut Valery Tokarev and astronaut William McArthur, the Soyuz craft lifted off with an earsplitting roar from the Baikonur cosmodrome just before 10 a.m. and soared north into the bright autumn sky over the steppes of Kazakhstan.

More than 150 people, including Russian and US space dignitaries, tourists and relatives of the three men, watched as the rocket rose into the air. Some gave gasped at the explosive separation of the first booster segment, which sent a puff of white smoke as the rocket turned downrange. Then, as the announcement came that the spacecraft had entered its initial designated orbit nine minutes after launch, the crowd burst into applause. The crew reported that all was well aboard the craft.

## Rice defends use of force for democracy

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Friday defended the use of military force to advance the cause of democracy and liberty as "the only guarantee of true stability and lasting security".

"In a world where evil is still very real, democratic principles must also be backed with power in all its forms: political and economic, cultural and moral, and yes, sometimes military," Rice said in a speech at Princeton University in the northeastern state of New Jersey.

Alluding to countries such as Germany and France that opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq, Rice said: "Any champion of democracy who promotes principles without power can make no real difference in the lives of oppressed people."

Appointed as the top US diplomat by President George W. Bush after his 2004 re-election, Rice sought to justify

US military action as part of an effort to promote democracy in the Middle East and defuse terrorist threats.

"If you believe, as I do and as President Bush does, that the root cause of September 11 was the violent expression of a global extremist ideology, an ideology rooted in the oppression and despair of the modern Middle East, then we must seek to remove the very source of this terror by transforming that total region," she said.

While popular support for the US presence in Iraq is deteriorating and some experts are warning that Iraq could descend into civil war, Rice said that Bush administration's approach would create more stability in the long term.

"Some would argue that this broad approach to the problem is making the world less stable by rocking the boat and wrecking the status quo. But this presumes the existence of a stable status quo that does not threaten

global security. This is not the case." "We must recognise, as we do in every other region of the world, that liberty and democracy are the only guarantees of true stability and lasting security."

Ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, who Rice described as "a monster," simply "could not be a part of anyone's vision for a better Middle East."

"The path to a peaceful Iraq however "is made more difficult by the brutal insurgency" in that country.

"This is not some grassroots coalition of national resistance. These are merciless killers who want to provoke nothing less than a full-scale civil war among Muslims across the entire Middle East. And having done so, they would build an empire of terror and oppression," she said.

Withdrawing soon from Iraq is not an option, she said.



Pam Lair looks for salvageable items at the Katrina devastated home Lair shared with her husband and three sons yesterday in the Lakeview District of New Orleans. The wall was knocked out by the raging water rushing from the 17th Street Canal when the levee broke during Hurricane Katrina.