

Arrest warrant issued for leading US lawmaker Tom DeLay

AFP, Washington

A Texas court on Wednesday issued an arrest warrant for top Republican lawmaker Tom DeLay in connection with a campaign finance probe, a move dismissed by his spokesman as "simply routine."

The former US House majority leader has been indicted on a single count of criminal conspiracy in connection with a campaign finance scheme and is scheduled to make his first court appearance Friday. Bond was set at 10,000 dollars.

DeLay's representatives dismissed the warrant.

"This process is standard operating procedure. It's simply routine," spokesman Ben Porritt told AFP.

"Mr DeLay is in good spirits and he's looking forward to his ability to prove his case in court and looking forward to proving this is nothing but a political obsession and a vendetta of (prosecutor) Ronnie Earle."

The indictment is the latest in a widening series of ethical misconduct allegations involving DeLay, widely seen as one of the most effective and ruthless political operators in Washington, and perhaps the most powerful majority leader ever in the Congress' lower chamber.

DeLay has been given the nickname "The Hammer" for his uncompromising approach to achieving his political aims.

Saddam lawyers plan next round of trial

4 GIs, 13 Iraqis killed in violence

AFP, REUTERS, Amman/Baghdad

Lawyers for ousted Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein began drafting a battle plan yesterday for his next court date after the stormy start of a trial many fear will exacerbate the country's sectarian divide.

A defiant Saddam and seven former regime officials all pleaded not guilty Wednesday to charges including murder and torture on the first day of a trial watched across the globe.

"The trial of the 21st Century -- Saddam and his era in the dock," thundered the headline of Iraq's Al-Mashiraq newspaper.

Saddam Hussein won a 40-day reprieve to hone his defence after pleading not guilty to crimes against humanity on the first day of a televised trial that gripped the nation.

Saddam's lawyer, Khalil al-Dulaymi, said the defence needed another three months to prepare.

"It is necessary to have international lawyers for such a sensitive and huge case ... because the case is much bigger than Iraqi lawyers' capability," he told Al Jazeera television.

At least one international legal watchdog welcomed the adjournment to November 28 by Judge Rizgar Mohammed Amin as a sign of fairness to a defence that complained it had insufficient time to prepare for a case

centring on the killing of 148 Shia Muslim men after a failed assassination attempt in 1982.

Saddam appeared with seven former cohorts for the killing of more than 140 Shias from the village of Dujail in 1982 after an attempt on his life there. The accused face execution if convicted.

It is the first time an Arab leader has gone on trial for crimes against his own people.

Violence flared the day after the hearing, with 13 Iraqis killed in various attacks, including a suicide car bombing targeting a US patrol. Four US troops died the day before.

The soldiers were killed Wednesday evening and the injured soldier was being treated at a military hospital, the statement read, adding no further detail.

Iraqi officials announced the capture of Saddam's nephew Yasser Sabawi for allegedly funding violence, and the US military said a senior lieutenant to al-Qaeda frontman Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi had been killed during raids on Saturday.

US spokesman General Rick Lynch told media a total that 376 foreigners had been detained this year in Iraq, including 78 from Egypt, 66 from Syria, 41 from Sudan and 32 from Saudi Arabia.

Two British nationals had been detained, while countries that had one included Denmark, France, Ireland, Israel, Macedonia and the United States, "based on interrogations and documents they carried," Lynch said.

Meanwhile Saddam's Iraqi lawyer Khaled al-Dulaimi was to visit Amman to consult with his Jordan-based defence team and prepare for the resumption of the trial on November 28, Jordanian lawyer Issam Ghazzawi said.

He denounced the "illegal" trial and suggested that technical difficulties with a televised broadcast were intentional.

Arab newspapers questioned the legitimacy of the "occupier" court and voiced fears it could widen splits in Iraq between majority Shias and Kurds and Sunni Arabs who were in power under Saddam.

"There are fears that this trial will become an instrument of revenge and not of justice," wrote Lebanon's top-selling An-Nahar newspaper.

Noting that "the legitimacy of the Iraqi court is subject to controversy in the legal community and among human rights organizations," the newspaper said the trial could "exacerbate tensions between Sunnis and Shias and strengthen the insurgents."



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi woman looks at a newspaper carrying pictures of ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein at the court in Baghdad yesterday. The paper's headline reads: "The trial of the 21st century...Saddam and his regime in the cage."

Press freedoms slip back in West

AFP, Paris

Press freedom is being eroded in parts of the Western world, failing to advance in Iraq, but making progress in states emerging from repression, the watchdog Reporters Without Borders (RSF) reported yesterday.

Its 2005 annual press freedom index again puts North Korea at the bottom of the list in 167th position, while Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland share top spot.

The top 10 countries are all European. New Zealand (12), Trinidad and Tobago (12), Benin (25) and South Korea (34) are the highest-ranked countries in other continents.

The Paris-based watchdog reports that Middle Eastern countries (Iran 164, Iraq 157, Saudi Arabia 154, Syria 145) are among states where journalists have the toughest time and where government repression or armed groups prevent the media from operating freely.

"The situation in Iraq deteriorated further during the year as the safety of journalists became more precarious," RSF said.

"At least 24 journalists and media assistants have been killed so far this year, making it the mostly deadly conflict for the media since World War II. A total of 72 media workers have been killed since the fighting began in March 2003."

The US army (United States in Iraq, 137) also violated press freedom, as

it did in 2003 and 2004, RSF said. "Six journalists were jailed in Abu Ghraib prison without explanation and not allowed to receive visits from their lawyers, families or employers. Four journalists were killed by US army gunfire between September 2004 and September 2005."

Iran once again had the region's worst record of press freedom, with seven journalists in prison and four others provisionally free and in danger of being returned to jail at any moment.

"Akbar Ganji is still being held in solitary confinement despite a more than 60-day hunger-strike, an international campaign and several official promises to free him. Cyber-dissident Mojtaba Saminejad has been in jail since October 2004, serving a two-year sentence."

Some Western democracies slipped down the index. The United States (44) fell more than 20 places, mainly because of the imprisonment of New York Times reporter Judith Miller and legal moves undermining the privacy of journalistic sources.

"Canada (21) also dropped several places due to decisions that weakened the privacy of sources and sometimes turned journalists into 'court auxiliaries'. France (30) also slipped, largely because of searches of media offices, interrogations of journalists and introduction of new press offences."



PHOTO: AFP

A frightened Iraqi mother leaves with her daughter after several rockets slammed into their school in central Baghdad yesterday. Three Iraqi guards and a school child were killed in the attack.

Rice refuses to set a timetable for pullout

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sought to reassure sceptical lawmakers on Wednesday the Bush administration had a plan for Iraq but faced strong criticism for not having a strategy to get troops home.

More than 150,000 US troops are fighting a bloody insurgency in Iraq that shows no sign of abating and Rice was asked repeatedly to give benchmarks that will indicate when those embattled troops can leave.

In reply Rice said Wednesday US troops would stay in Iraq until it had a government capable of withstanding the insurgency, but would not say if they would be out in a decade.

But she acknowledged the insurgents may be able to carry out attacks "for quite a long time" and refused to set

a timetable for withdrawing American troops from Iraq 31 months after the US-led invasion.

Rice said under repeated questioning that discussion of the pullout of some 140,000 US troops still in the war-battered country "should be results-based rather than time-based."

"We have to level with the American people," Ohio Republican George Voinovich told Rice in her first testimony to the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee in eight months. "This is another world war," he added.

Waning support for the war in Iraq, in which nearly 2,000 US troops have died, has been one factor pushing down President George W. Bush's popularity and Rice tried to convince lawmakers her administration had the right tools to beat the insurgency.

Iran 'has proof' of UK role in bombings

AFP, Tehran

Iran said yesterday it has proof that Britain was involved in a double bomb attack last week that killed six people and injured more than 100 in the restive southwestern city of Ahvaz.

The British embassy in Tehran immediately rejected the allegations, which came amid mounting tensions between Tehran and London over suspected Iranian meddling in Iraq and the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.

"Information obtained by the concerned organs show that Britain is the main accused in the recent events," Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki told state television.

"The information shows that Britain is seeking to create insecurity in our country by interfering in our internal affairs," he added, warning that the consequences "could be worrying for the British."

Britain said the allegations were baseless.

"We reiterate our total rejection of these accusations as well as our condemnation of these terrorist attacks," a senior British diplomat told AFP.

"We have made it clear to the Iranian authorities that the British government and British forces in Iraq stand ready to assist in preventing attacks of this kind."

The bomb attacks Saturday killed six people and injured more than 100 in Ahvaz, the capital of the oil-rich Khuzestan province, and on Tuesday police said they had defused a large bomb planted under a bridge in the city.

Several Iranian officials, including President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have already said that Britain was a suspect -- but had generally stopped short of claiming they possessed evidence directly implicating Britain.

Wilma roars ahead

Strong storm weakens slightly

AP, Cancun, Mexico

Hurricane Wilma weakened slightly yesterday as it roared toward Mexico's Yucatan peninsula and southern Florida, an "extremely dangerous" storm that already has killed 13 people and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands from Honduras to the Florida Keys.

Wilma briefly grew into a Category 5 storm before weakening to a Category 4 with maximum sustained winds of 145 mph. Forecasters at the National Hurricane Centre in Miami said it was expected to hit the resort of Cancun early Friday.

It would be the second hurricane to hit Cancun and its neighbouring resorts this year, following Hurricane Emily in July.

Tourists were ordered out of the Florida Keys and the island of Isla Mujeres near Cancun on Wednesday, and authorities were poised to move out thousands of others Thursday from low-lying areas in a 600-mile swath covering Cuba, Mexico, Belize,

Honduras, Jamaica, Haiti and the Cayman Islands.

Some of the estimated 70,000 tourists still in Cancun and surrounding areas were taking the warnings more seriously than others, as heavy rain began lashing the city. The Senor Frog's restaurant in Cancun sponsored a "Hurricane Wilma" party, but it was far from full.

Standing knee-deep in the ocean and drinking beer in Playa de Carmen, south of Cancun, Mike Goepfrich of Minneapolis said: "As long as they give me beer in the shelter, and my kids are safe, we'll be fine. We're going to ride it out here."

Nearby, fisherman Rolando Ramirez, 51, was helping others pull their fishing boats from the water in preparation for Wilma's passage.

"People here aren't concerned about anything," Ramirez said. "They don't know that when the hurricane comes, this will all be under water."