

US-led forces fight rebels near Syria border

11 Iraqis, 2 GIs killed in attacks

AFP, AP, Bagdad

US and Iraqi forces battled insurgents yesterday in a town near the border with Syria as part of a military sweep aimed at preventing foreign fighters from entering the country.

The goal of Operation Steel Curtain, launched early Saturday, "is to restore security along the Iraqi-Syrian border and destroy the al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorist network operating throughout (the town of) Husaybah," the military said.

US officials have long held that foreign al-Qaeda fighters enter Iraq through the border with Syria via the Euphrates valley.

As they entered Husaybah, US and Iraqi forces have encountered "sporadic resistance -- mostly small arms fire and improvised explosive devices

-- from al-Qaeda in Iraq-led insurgents throughout the city," the military said late Saturday.

At least nine air strikes were called on positions described as "enemy strong points," and a separate strike was carried out against a suspected car bomb.

There were no reports of military or civilian casualties, the military said.

However there is an undetermined number of insurgent casualties, said the military, which is keeping a tight lid on information from the region.

The operation, involving 1,000 Iraqi army soldiers as well as 2,500 Marines, sailors and soldiers, is one of the biggest joint military operations in the vast restive Sunni Arab province of Al-Anbar.

The Iraqi and US forces are also housing and feeding some 400 town

residents, the military said.

US officials are especially proud of Iraqi scouts, people they described as "specially recruited soldiers from the Al Qaim region," who are embedded with the front-line units that help "identify insurgent strong points and areas known to contain these home-made bombs."

Steel Curtain follows two earlier operations also along the Euphrates valley in Al-Anbar. But this operation is different because it is also designed to set up a joint US-Iraqi permanent presence along the border.

The US forces have been unable to leave garrisons in towns they have cleared of insurgents until recently, when enough trained and equipped Iraqi forces were available, US officials said earlier.

An earlier operation in the area,



PHOTO: AFP
People gather near burned cars late Saturday in the Third Arrondissement of Paris, the tenth consecutive night of unrest in the Paris suburbs and other French cities following the October 27 death by electrocution of two youths who were chased by police.

France crippled by dearth of violence tackling ideas

AFP, Paris

The French government of President Jacques Chirac has been crippled by a dearth of ideas for tackling the worst outbreak of urban violence to hit the country since May 1968.

For 10 nights gangs of mainly Arab youths have roamed the poor outskirts of Paris, setting fire to hundreds of vehicles, destroying warehouses and public buildings, and engaging with police in exchanges of stones, tear-gas and even live bullets.

Far from the conflagration subsiding -- as previous outbreaks of rioting have done -- the violence has in the last days taken on a dangerous turn, spreading from its original flashpoint in the eastern suburb of Choisy-sous-Bois and sparking copycat attacks in other towns.

Though Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has spoken hopefully of the level of violence diminishing, privately senior police officials are pessimistic about the immediate future and see no reason why the wave of unrest should not continue to expand. "There are perhaps fewer clashes with

police now because the rioters know we are under orders to make arrests," said one senior officer on condition of anonymity.

"But instead they are turning to big targets like parking lots and symbols of the republic like schools and police stations. The police are finding it hard to cope because our numbers are just not enough. And what we all fear is some blunder like another death. That would really tip the balance," he said.

For more than 15 years violence among disaffected members of France's north African minority has been a regular -- if little reported -- phenomenon. This year alone some 28,000 cars have been burned in small-scale outbreaks, even before the last week's flare-up.

Both approaches were put into effect. Sarkozy bluntly denounced the "rabble" behind the disturbances and sent in riot police to reestablish law and order, while Villepin promised a new social initiative for the deprived "banlieues" by the end of the month.

Sarkozy said on Thursday said there was "nothing spontaneous" about the unrest, and on Friday a leading police official said that Islamic radicals had "seized the opportunity to stir up hate and provoke incidents and fires."

"They have been training and manipulating the youth," said Bruno Beschizza who heads the Synergie police trade union.

The government's powerlessness in the face of this mounting challenge was on cruel display during the week, as it wavered between the hardline "zero tolerance" policies favoured by Sarkozy and the instinct shared by Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin for a more conciliatory line.

The UN Security Council demanded October 31 that Syria cooperate fully with Mehlis's inquiry into the Beirut bombing that killed Hariri and 22 others or face "further action."

UN experts to go to Guantanamo only if allowed to see prisoners

AFP, Elseneur

UN human rights experts will not travel to the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba next month unless they are allowed to talk freely with prisoners and guards, the UN's special rapporteur on torture said Saturday.

After a year and half, the US government finally agreed to the visit but has restricted it to one day and has yet to authorise meetings with prisoners, Manfred Nowak told AFP on the sidelines of a seminar on torture.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said private interviews with detainees is for him out of question," Nowak said.

"For us it's definitely a pre-condition and I sincerely hope that he will change his opinion and give permission because it's the only way to conduct an objective fact-finding," he said.

HARIRI KILLING

'UN investigator wants to interview Syrians'

REUTERS, Beirut

The chief UN investigator examining the killing of a former Lebanese prime minister has requested interviews with six senior Syrian intelligence officers, a paper reported on Sunday quoting Lebanese sources.

Delteil Mehlis made the requests to the Syrian government via the United Nations to question the officers, who include Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's brother-in-law Assef Shawkat, the pan-Arab daily newspaper al-Hayat said.

It said that Mehlis wanted the interviews to take place in Lebanon, not in Syria.

Mehlis, the German prosecutor trying to identify the killers of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, has complained that Syrian security figures interviewed in Damascus last month appeared to give only prepared responses.

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Azerbaijan votes amid fears

REUTERS, Baku

Azerbaijan was voting yesterday in a parliamentary election expected to give the ruling party a big majority, with Western governments hungry for the country's oil hoping vote fraud and violence did not wreck the ballot.

Opposition parties promised rallies this week in protest against what they predicted would be widespread election fraud, although analysts say there is unlikely to be a repeat of the popular revolts that followed disputed polls in fellow ex-Soviet states Ukraine and Georgia.

The threat of violence hung over the election, with the interior minister saying the opposition might try to provoke the police and warning any illegal protests would be stamped out.

The campaign was successful. Equal conditions were created for all candidates and that gives me hope the election will be democratic and transparent," President Ilham Aliyev said as he voted at a polling station in Baku's School No. 6.



PHOTO: AFP
Azeri people vote at a polling station in a staunchly Islamic district of Nardaran, some 20 km from Baku, during the parliamentary election yesterday. The former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan went to the polls yesterday to elect its 125-seat parliament, the Milli Mejlis, for a five-year mandate. The election is seen in the West as a key test of democracy for the oil-rich ex-Soviet republic, where corruption is rampant, more than 40 percent of people live in poverty, and no election has met international standards.

US under pressure to break Korean nuclear stalemate

AFP, Washington

The United States is under pressure to give some concessions upfront for North Korea to fulfil a pledge to abandon its nuclear weapons program, as multilateral talks enter a crucial phase this week.

At the last round of the talks, North Korea pledged to abandon its nuclear weapons arsenal in return for wide-ranging benefits, in the first-ever accord signed by the United States, China, the two Koreas, Russia and Japan since six-way negotiations began in August 2003.

But a key question has cropped up ahead of the fifth round of talks in Beijing, set to begin Wednesday: Who should make the first move under the so-called "commitment for commitment, action for action" principle they agreed upon?

"I think the next round is unlikely to yield significant progress, because the two sides are very far apart on what each of them should do at the begin-

ning," said Selig Harrison, director of the Asia program at the Washington-based Centre for International Policy.

The United States wants North Korea to set the ball rolling by launching the process of dismantling its nuclear weapons program.

North Korea, on the other hand, expects substantial benefit upfront from the United States before beginning any effort to surrender what is literally its only negotiating weapon.

Harrison believes Pyongyang wants the United States to "take some steps" leading to normalized relations, such as North Korea's removal from the US list of states accused of sponsoring terrorism.

The hardline communist state does not currently have diplomatic relations with the United States.

Removal from the terrorism list is crucial for the impoverished North Korea to join the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank and seek developmental aid.

UN envoy urges EU to launch probe into secret US prisons

AFP, Helsingør

UN Special Rapporteur on Torture Manfred Nowak has urged the EU and the Council of Europe to conduct "high-level" investigations into allegations of secret CIA prisons in Europe.

"I am very much concerned about these allegations of any secret places of detention by the US government and the CIA in any part of the world," Nowak told AFP on the sidelines of a seminar on torture held in Helsingør, Denmark, north of the capital Copenhagen.

"Since these allegations have now been made public by The Washington Post and many others like Human Rights Watch, I think it is now up to the European Union and also to the Council of Europe to ... carry out high-level fact-finding."

The Washington Post reported Wednesday that the US intelligence

'US should repay Iraq for Halliburton overcharges'

REUTERS, Washington

The United States should reimburse Iraq for \$208 million in apparent overcharges paid to a Halliburton Co. subsidiary, an UN watchdog agency said on Saturday.

The International Advisory and Monitoring Board for the Development of Iraq conducted a special audit on Halliburton's Kellogg Brown and Root unit for the procurement and distribution of fuel products and the restoration of Iraq's oil infrastructure.

The monitoring board cited charges of \$208 million, costs that earlier had been questioned by US military auditors.

In a statement made public on its Web site on Saturday, the board said it "recommends that amounts disbursed to contractors that cannot be supported as fair be reimbursed expeditiously."

Halliburton's spokeswoman, Cathy Mann, said the US agency's questioned the quality of the supporting documents for the costs -- not the costs themselves.

Iran allows UN inspectors to visit military complex

Tehran issues fresh challenge

REUTERS, AFP, Tehran

Iran confirmed yesterday it had allowed UN nuclear inspectors to visit a military complex as part of its efforts to counter US accusations that it is secretly developing nuclear arms.

The United States believes Iran may have experimented with high explosives appropriate for atomic weapons at Parchin, 30 km (19 miles) southeast of Tehran.

Iran says it has no interest in such arms, only in civilian nuclear technology to generate electricity.

"We opened the doors of Parchin again to the inspectors. The site had been visited in the past," Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told a weekly news conference.

Asefi denied Iran was conducting any nuclear weapons research there or anywhere else in Iran.

"Our nuclear activities are only for peaceful purposes. Our activities are

based on the International Atomic Energy Agency's regulations," he said.

The IAEA's board of governors passed a tough resolution in September which brought Tehran to the brink of referral to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions.

"Since the resolution was passed, we said that Iran was ready to implement some parts of it," Asefi said.

As well as urging Iran to give better access and cooperation to UN inspectors, the IAEA's September resolution also called on Tehran to halt uranium processing work which it resumed at its Isfahan facility in August.

But Iran has refused to mothball the Isfahan plant and last week informed the IAEA of plans to start processing a fresh batch of uranium at the plant.

Officials said Tehran would be converting a fresh batch of uranium ore -- the precursor step before enrichment -- in a flagrant rejection of calls from Europe and the United States for Tehran to halt all such activities.

Analysts said Iran's improved cooperation with the UN inspectors, noted by IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei last week, was designed to undermine US and EU efforts to send its case to the Security Council at an IAEA board meeting later this month.

"They are doing everything to avoid referral to the council. Iran is not strong enough to withstand sanctions," said Hamid Pirzadeh, a political science professor at Tehran University.

Meanwhile, Iran yesterday again

defied the international community over its nuclear programme, announcing it would soon embark on fresh nuclear fuel work and was seeking investors for uranium enrichment activities.

Citing newly declassified portions of a Defence Intelligence Agency document from February 2002 made available to the Times by Michigan Sen. Carl Levin (news, bio, voting record) of the Armed Services Committee, the paper reported it was likely that the prisoner, Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, was intentionally misleading debriefers about Iraqi support for al-Qaeda's work with illicit weapons.

"It is possible he does not know any further details; it is more likely this individual is intentionally misleading the debriefers," the Times quoted the report as saying. "Ibn al-Shaykh has been undergoing debriefs for several weeks and may be describing scenarios to the debriefers that he knows will retain their interest."