



Anti-war demonstrators dressed as US President George W. Bush (R), Vice President Dick Cheney (C) and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice participate in a "Liars Anonymous" show during an anti-war demonstration in San Francisco Saturday. Thousands took to the streets to mark the third anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq across the world yesterday.

Talabani backs US-Iran talks on Iraq

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad/ New York

President Jalal Talabani supports a call by a Shia leader for Iran and the United States to hold talks to resolve their differences over Iraq and ways of stabilizing it, his office said on Sunday. The Iraqi president said the issue of talks was raised on a visit he made to Tehran a few months ago, a statement from his office said, summarising talks he held on Saturday with British Defence Secretary John Reid. "We received primary approval from Iran when I visited a few months

ago," the statement quoted Talabani as saying. "We confirmed at that time the necessity of opening such a dialogue and the Iranian side accepted on two conditions. The first was the talks would be secret and the second was that all disputes between Iran and the United States would be discussed." Iraqi Shia leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim urged Iran last week to hold talks with the United States over Iraq. Meanwhile, top foreign ministry officials of the five veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council and

Germany are to meet in New York today to plot long-term strategy on how to tackle the Iranian nuclear crisis. Participants at the meeting, to be held at Britain's UN mission, will be US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak and foreign ministry political directors John Sawers of Britain, Stanislas de Laboulaye of France, Zhang Yan of China and Michael Schaefer of Germany, officials said.

US troops convert Saddam's torture chamber into their own

AFP, New York

An elite US Special Operations forces unit has converted one of Saddam Hussein's former military bases near Baghdad into a top-secret detention centre and used one of the former Iraqi leader's torture chambers as its own interrogation cell, The New York Times reported late Saturday. The newspaper said the chamber was named the Black Room. In June 2004, Defence Undersecretary Stephen Cambone ordered his deputy, Lieutenant General William Boykin, to look into allegations of detainee abuse at Camp Nama, according to the report. The windowless, garage-size Black Room was used by some soldiers to beat prisoners with rifle butts, yell and spit in their faces and, in a nearby area, use detainees for target practice in a game of jailer paintball, The Times said. Their intention was to extract information to help hunt down Iraq's most-wanted terrorist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the paper pointed out, citing unnamed Defence Department personnel, who served with the unit or were briefed on its operations.

3 YEARS AFTER US INVASION

Insecurity, lack of basic services haunt Iraqis

AFP, Baghdad

Three years after an invasion turned their lives upside down, Iraqis describe a daily reality of pervasive insecurity, lack of basic services and the shadowy foreign powers they say are behind the rising blood-letting. The destruction of a revered Shia shrine in Samarra three weeks ago and the sectarian killings that followed have irrevocably coloured how Iraqis in the mixed areas around the capital assess the three years since a US-led coalition rolled into their country. "It was a great thing to be saved from Saddam, but we need better

living conditions now," said Riad Hamid, a Shia working at a bakery in northern Baghdad's historic Shia neighbourhood of Kadhimiyah. "The only thing we got from the invasion was the division of Iraq into Sunnis, Shias and Kurds," he said in this densely populated neighbourhood dominated by the golden-domed shrine to Shia Imam Mussa al-Kadhim. Just across the twisting muddy breadth of the Tigris River lies Kadhimiyah's twin neighbourhood of Adhamiyah, a Sunni area, with its own historic mosque, Abu Hanifa, celebrating the founder of one of the historic Sunni schools of law. In a bakery there workers take

the same lozenge shaped loaves of bread and slide them with a long-handled shovel deep into a white tiled oven. Owner Hussein Issa has been sleeping in his bakery the past few nights because every day he finishes work after the new 8 pm curfew in Baghdad laid down to minimize the nighttime killing spree. "I used to go back to my home elsewhere in Baghdad every day, but now, for the past week, I haven't seen my own house," he said. Issa's bakery is on Ashreen Street, known for its bakeries serving up special cookies and cakes for festive occasions and weddings that

used to attract customers from all over the city. Few now come, just as people from Adhamiyah no longer flock across the narrow bridge to the famous markets of Kadhimiyah. A bridge that has long been closed adds half an hour's travel between what should be close neighbours. Issa also relates problems with getting flour, which used to come from the Jamila district to the east, near the predominantly Shia suburb of Sadr City. Drivers refused to go after a number of grocers picking up supplies there were found dead last week.

French cops subdue riots over jobs law

AP, Paris

Police loosed water cannons and tear gas on rioting students and activists rampaged through a McDonald's and attacked store fronts in the capital Saturday as demonstrations against a plan to relax job protections spread in a widening arc across France. The protests, which drew 500,000 people in some 160 cities across the country, were the biggest show yet of escalating anger that is testing the strength of the conservative government before elections next year. At the close of a march in Paris that drew a crowd of tens of thousands, seven officers and 17 protesters were injured during two melees, at the Place de la Nation in eastern Paris and the Sorbonne University. Police said they arrested 156 people in the French capital.

Allawi sees Iraq mired in 'unfortunate civil war'

AFP, London

Iraq is in the grip of a civil war and Europe and the United States will not be spared its consequences, Iraq's former interim prime minister Iyad Allawi said yesterday. "It is unfortunate that we are in civil war," Allawi told BBC television on the eve of the third anniversary of the US and British invasion that overthrew Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. "We are losing each day an average 50 to 60 people throughout the country, if not more," he said. "If this is not civil war, then God knows what civil war is."

Allawi's comments were made as

12 Iraqis were killed on Sunday in insurgent attacks, including a drive-by shooting, and a US raid north of Baghdad, security sources said. His views meanwhile contrasted with those of British Defence Secretary John Reid, who on Saturday had insisted that civil war in Iraq was neither imminent nor probable despite increased violence between factions. "There is no civil war, it isn't imminent, it isn't likely, although there has been an increase in sectarian violence," Reid told Sky News television from Iraq, where he had Friday met with his Iraqi counterpart Saadun al-Dulaimi.

'Gaza on the brink of humanitarian crisis'

AFP, Gaza City/ Brussels

The Gaza Strip is dangerously short of basic foodstuffs and is facing a looming humanitarian crisis as a result of the continued closure of the main trade crossing with Israel, the United Nations warned yesterday. John Ging, the Gaza director of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), said his organisation had now run out of food supplies to distribute to the most impoverished families because the central Karni border crossing

remains closed. "Every day is taking us closer to a humanitarian crisis," Ging told reporters. "Flour and wheat are not the only products in short supply. There is a shortage of sugar, oil and many of the other basic commodities. "If the borders remain closed then everything will begin to become a crisis in itself." Israel has closed the Karni crossing for much of the year, citing security concerns. Negotiations about opening an alternative cross-

ing have so far stalled. Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas said at a press conference that talks on resolving the dispute would be held later in the day at the US embassy in Tel Aviv. Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian, European Union and US officials would all attend the meeting, he said. "There is a growing crisis which will be discussed today. We should find solutions, serious solutions, to ensure the continuous opening of the passages," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi children sit inside a small room that was turned into their house at the premises of the destroyed Iraqi Air Force Club yesterday. Three years after the US-led war against Iraq that started on March 20, 2003, scores of displaced people are still living among the ruins of the club that was one of the luxurious leisure of the elite of former dictator Saddam Hussein's regime.