

Bush may send 40,000 more troops to Iraq

AFP, Washington

President George W Bush could send up to 40,000 more US troops to Iraq when he unveils his revised Iraq policy, US media said yesterday, cautioning that a final figure has not been determined.

Various news reports agree there will be an increase of US forces in Iraq, giving estimates of between 9,000 and 40,000 extra troops.

The move could be controversial as the Iraq war is increasingly unpopular with the US public amid a mounting death toll that now stands at around 3,000 US troops.

It is also likely to be opposed by the US Congress, now in the hands of opposition Democrats.

The reports however caution that the numbers may vary, and that no final decision has been made.

There are currently 132,000 US troops in Iraq as well as 17,000 members of the US-led coalition from 25 other countries, the Pentagon said Thursday.

CNN television said Bush is looking at sending 20,000-40,000 additional troops and that the announcement could come early next week.

A "targeted increase in troop strength" is "an active subject of discussion," an unnamed senior administration official told CNN, adding that Bush was "significantly along in the process."

NBC News also reported a likely temporary troop increase, citing military officials that believe it will involve some 20,000 new US soldiers and marines.

CBS News, citing US military sources, said Bush is preparing to send some 9,000 soldiers and marines into Iraq, with another 11,000 on alert in Kuwait and the United States.

Two army brigades of about 7,500 troops would go to Baghdad, while some 1,500 marines would be sent to the volatile Sunni western province of Al-Anbar, according to CBS.

Another army brigade would be on standby in Kuwait, and two more army brigades on standby in the United States, CBS reported.

The McClatchy Newspaper chain reported that Bush is considering sending three to four US combat brigades, or between 15,000 and 20,000 US troops.

"Instead of a surge, it is a bump," an unnamed State Department

official told McClatchy.

In his Iraq policy speech Bush is also expected to ask Congress for money to provide more jobs for Iraqis, and to announce another plan to help bridge Iraq's bitter Shiite-Sunni divide, according to McClatchy.

White House spokesman Tony Snow said Wednesday that the president has not made a final decision.

"The policy is not done. He is still talking to people. He's going to be engaging in consultations," said Snow amid speculation about the speech's central focus. "You know what the theme is? Victory. Winning."

Bush wrote that he will be addressing the nation on a new Iraq strategy "in the days ahead" in an opinion column in the Wall Street Journal on Wednesday.

The president has previously said he is considering "all options," including a temporary increase of US troops in Iraq.

Most Democrats, some prominent Republicans, and the top US military commander in Baghdad, General George Casey, have warned against a prolonged expansion in the US military presence.

FBI report shows mistreatment of Guantanamo detainees

AFP, Washington

A Guantanamo official squatted over a Koran in front of a chained detainee and another bearded detainee's head was wrapped in heavy packing tape as he prayed, a newly released FBI document on mistreatment at the war-on-terror prison reports.

The incidents were among more than 30 cited by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in an internal 2004 poll on possible abuse witnessed at the US Navy prison facility at Guantanamo, Cuba.

Alleged abuse at the prison, used to hold hundreds of people captured in the US war on terror launched in 2001, included beatings, keeping detainees in extremely hot or cold rooms, menacing them with dogs, and sexual harassment by female guards, according to FBI agents who had witnessed or learned of the incidents while at Guantanamo, according to the report.

The report released Tuesday was based on a poll of nearly 500 FBI agents who had worked at Guantanamo.

Twenty-six of them recounted abuse or possible abuse at the hands of other US officials that the FBI agents had knowledge of, some of it witnessed first-hand.



PHOTO: AFP

Six-year-old Anggi Setyo Nugroho (C) is taken off a ship at the port in Surabaya on Wednesday after being rescued with other survivors of a ferry accident by the Indonesian Navy in the Java Sea.

Boy survives ferry disaster as other survivors found far from wreck

AFP, Jakarta

A seven-year-old boy spent days clinging to an oil rig platform before being rescued while other survivors of an Indonesian ferry disaster were swept hundred of kilometres in seas before being picked up.

Fifteen people were rescued from lifeboats after drifting some 300km in strong winds and high waves from their ferry which sank Friday night in a storm in the Java Sea.

Armansyah Putra was among 13 others also picked up Wednesday, all clinging to a Conoco Phillips rig after the ferry sank en route from Kumai on Borneo island to Semarang in Central Java.

Apart from a blistered and sunburnt back, Armansyah Putra looked little the worse for his ordeal, after reportedly drinking or eating nothing but a few sips of sea water, saying he survived with the help of others.

"When the ship was sinking, they asked us all to remain calm,"

he told MetroTV on Thursday from his bed in Soetrasno Hospital in Central Java.

"I tried to grab on to a float but I could not... the ferry was swaying."

"I did not know anything. In the end I was saved by people around me."

Doctors said he was well on the way to recovery.

His mother, Bekti Riwiyati, said she had given up hope of ever seeing her two missing sons again as they slipped from her grasp as the ferry went down.

Riwiyati was among the first people rescued on Saturday but her youngest son, three-and-a-half-year-old Agil Widodo, has still not been found.

She said she was hopeful one of her sons might be alive after her husband, Askuri, received information that a child had been found and was waiting to be evacuated to Surabaya, MetroTV reported.

The family said they would return to their home in Kendal in Central Java and move on with their lives.

Indonesia seeks missing plane with foreign help

REUTERS, Makassar

Aircraft from Singapore yesterday joined Indonesia's search for a plane that disappeared in bad weather with 102 people aboard four days ago, while navy vessels combed rough seas.

First Air Marshal Eddy Suyanto, commander of the air base in Makassar, said a new report had been received that an emergency signal had been picked up south of Manado, the lost plane's scheduled destination in North Sulawesi province, three days ago.

Until now, military and civilian aircraft have been mainly scouring the jungles and rugged mountains of western Sulawesi, while ships searched the Makassar Strait between the islands of Sulawesi and Borneo.

Heavy rains and strong winds

have hampered the search and the rough terrain has made communication and transport difficult.

Government officials have apologized for erroneously saying on Tuesday that the 17-year-old Boeing 737-400, operated by budget carrier Adam Air, had been found and 12 people survived.

The missing plane was carrying 96 passengers, including three Americans, and six crew. Portland's Oregonian newspaper identified the Americans as wood-products executive Scott Jackson, 54, and daughters Stephanie, 21, and Lindsey, 18.

Two Singaporean Fokker-50s have joined Indonesian military aircraft in the search, while three ships are participating and another is on the way, Suyanto told Reuters earlier in the day.

3,500 Islamists hiding in Somalia

AP, Mogadishu

Remnants of Somalia's Islamic movement still pose a threat in the capital, the interior minister said Thursday, a week after his government and Ethiopian troops chased most of the militiamen from Mogadishu.

"There are 3,500 Islamists hiding in Mogadishu and the surrounding (area) and they are likely to destabilize the security of the city," Interior Minister Hussein Aideed said at a news conference.

Over the past 15 days,

troops of Somalia's transitional government and Ethiopian forces routed the Islamic movement, which had controlled most of southern Somalia. Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi has said he believes major fighting was over. But the Islamic movement has declared it would keep fighting, raising the spectre of an Iraq-style guerrilla war.

Aideed said that there are about 12,000-15,000 Ethiopian troops in Somalia, and when peacekeepers arrive in the country the Ethiopians will

leave. Ethiopia has put the number much lower, at around 4,000, and said it would pull out within weeks. A proposed African peacekeeping force has not yet been organized, though diplomatic efforts are under way to get one on the ground.

Ethiopia has promised to withdraw its troops from Somalia as soon as possible, and many Somalis fear that when they do, there will be a power vacuum and even a return to the anarchy and warlord rule of the past.

Thai junta leader trashes fresh coup rumours

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's junta leader yesterday denied rumours swirling around Bangkok that the army had mobilized its troops in preparation for another coup, amid heightened tensions after recent bombs in the capital.

"Nobody is doing a coup and there is no military mobilization," General Sonthi Boonyaratglin told AFP.

The new government has blamed groups opposed to a recent putsch for eight bomb blasts on New Year's Eve that killed three and injured dozens, and troops have taken to the streets amid warnings of more violence.

On Thursday night, rumours began to surface that Sonthi was planning to seize total control of the

capital and oust the civilian government that he installed three months ago. However, he strenuously denied the report.

He also denied rumours that a counter-coup against his regime might be in the works.

"There is no reason to do a coup," he stressed.

Military leaders led by Sonthi seized power from premier Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless coup on September 19. The junta later installed a government led by former general Surayud Chulanont.

Although the majority of Thais appeared to support the coup, there had been some grumblings lately that Sonthi was interfering in day-to-day government matters, and the country has been on edge since Sunday's deadly blasts.

Mysterious object crashes thru' roof

AP, Freehold Township

Authorities were trying to identify a mysterious metallic object that crashed through the roof of a house in eastern New Jersey.

Nobody was injured when the golf-ball sized object, weighing nearly as much as a can of soup, struck the home and embedded itself in a wall Tuesday night. Federal officials sent to the scene said it was not from an aircraft.

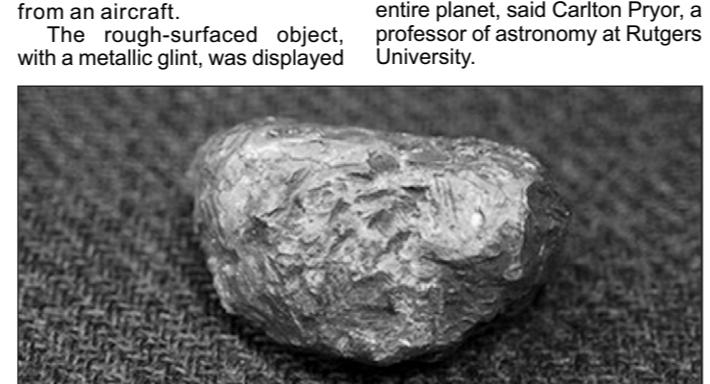
The rough-surfaced object, with a metallic glint, was displayed

Wednesday by police.

"There's some great interest in what we have here," said Lt. Robert Brightman. "It's rather unusual. I haven't seen anything like it in my career."

He said he hoped to have the object identified within 72 hours, but declined to name the other agencies whose help he has enlisted.

Approximately 20 to 50 rock-like objects fall every day over the entire planet, said Carlton Pryor, a professor of astronomy at Rutgers University.



A metal, rock-like object about the size of a golf ball is seen in this undated photograph provided by Det. R. Gelber of Freehold Township Police Department in Freehold Township, New Jersey, US.



Philippines House of Representatives member Risa Hontiveros (L) speaks as protesters (background) hold up placards denouncing Philippine President Gloria Arroyo as a traitor for giving into US demands during a demonstration in Manila yesterday over the recent row over the detention of a US Marine convicted of raping a local woman.

Congressman to be sworn in using Quran

AP, Washington

The first Muslim elected to Congress says he will take his oath of office using a Quran once owned by Thomas Jefferson to make the point that "religious differences are nothing to be afraid of."

Rep-elect Keith Ellison, D-Minnesota, decided to use the centuries-old Quran during his ceremonial swearing-in on Thursday after he learned that it is kept at the Library of Congress. Jefferson, the nation's third president and a collector of books in all topics and languages, sold the book to Congress in 1815 as part of a collection.

"It demonstrates that from the very beginning of our country, we had people who were visionary, who were religiously tolerant, who believed that knowledge and wisdom could be gleaned from any number of sources, including the Quran," Ellison said in a telephone interview Wednesday.

"A visionary like Thomas Jefferson was not afraid of a different belief system," Ellison said. "This just shows that religious tolerance is the bedrock of our country, and religious differences are nothing to be afraid of."

Some critics have argued that only a Bible should be used for the swearing-in. Last month, Rep. Virgil Goode (news, bio, voting record), R-Va., warned that unless immigration is tightened, "many more Muslims" will be elected and follow Ellison's lead. Ellison was born in Detroit and converted to Islam in college.