

Democrats raise prospect of Bush's impeachment

AFP, Washington

A top US congressional Democrat has raised the possibility of George W Bush's impeachment in a bid to force the president to accept a compromise that would place conditions on continued US military involvement in Iraq.

Representative John Murtha, who chairs the House's Subcommittee on Defence and is close to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, made the comment Sunday in response to repeated threats by the president to veto legislation that calls for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq by the end of next March.

"There's three ways or four ways to influence a president," Murtha said on CBS's "Face the Nation" programme. "One is popular opinion, the election, third is impeachment and fourth is the purse."

Asked specifically if Democrats, who now control the US Congress, were seriously contemplating the impeachment option, the congressman responded: "What I'm saying, there's four ways to influence a president ... And one of them's impeachment."

Some of the fiercest critics of President Bush have long charged he has illegally manipulated intelligence to accuse the Iraqi government of late president Saddam Hussein of secretly stockpiling weapons of mass destruction, thereby creating a pretext for the March 2003 invasion of Iraq.

No weapons of mass destruction have been found in Iraq since the invasion but the White House has strongly denied the intelligence manipulation charge.

The impeachment threat is being dangled as the White House and congressional Democrats face

a new showdown over Iraq policy in coming weeks.

A 124-billion-dollar war funding bill passed by the House of Representatives Wednesday and the Senate on Thursday established a non-binding target of completing a US combat troop pullout from Iraq by March 31.

The measure is expected to land on the president's desk on Tuesday, the fourth anniversary of his now much ridiculed "Mission Accomplished" speech, in which he, standing on the deck of an aircraft carrier off the coast of California, declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq.

As promised, Bush will wield his veto pen, and Democrats acknowledge they lack the votes to override his decision.

But they have made it clear that while the withdrawal deadline will

most likely be dropped, they still would like to come up with a bill that would place limits and conditions on future US operations in Iraq.

One of the proposals, according to Murtha, calls for making the continued US military presence in Iraq contingent on the Iraqi government meeting specific political benchmarks designed to stem violence.

They include showing progress in reaching power-sharing arrangement that would bolster the role of Sunnis in the Iraqi government, an agreement to equitable distribution of oil wealth, and a crackdown on militias.

Murtha also suggested limiting the life of a revised war-funding bill from one year to just two months to allow for an earlier congressional review of the situation.



Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer (C) holds the hands of his counterparts from Afghanistan Hamid Karzai (R) and Pakistan Pervez Musharraf as they pose for a photo before their meeting at the Cankaya Palace in Ankara on Sunday. PHOTO: AFP



Iraqi Shias shout anti-US slogans during a demonstration in Baghdad's al-Kadhimiyah district yesterday. Thousands of Iraqi Shias rallied Monday in the district near the Shrine of Shia Imam Musa al-Kadhim (background) to protest against a joint US and Iraqi military operation conducted Sunday near the bureau of firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in the district. PHOTO: AFP

Nato launches offensive against Taliban

136 Taliban fighters killed in 3 days

AP, Sangin Valley

Hundreds of British troops swept into the lush poppy fields of southern Afghanistan yesterday, drawing hostile fire at the start of a Nato operation to expel the Taliban from a valley stronghold.

More than 3,000 Nato and Afghan troops are participating in the operation, the latest effort to bring Helmand province under the control of President Hamid Karzai.

A long column of armoured vehi-

cles brought several hundred British soldiers to the Sangin Valley, near the town of Gereshk and Afghanistan's strategic ring road that links the cities of Kandahar and Herat.

The British soldiers came under attack from mortar rounds and machine-gun fire after they fanned out to patrol on foot.

An Associated Press reporter travelling with the troops heard officers ordering British artillery units to respond. Three Apache helicopters flew overhead but

didn't immediately open fire. There were no reports of casualties.

In western Afghanistan, US-led coalition and Afghan forces battled with Taliban insurgents over three days, leaving at least 136 suspected militants dead, a coalition statement said Monday.

The clashes in Herat province were the deadliest reported in Afghanistan since January and provoked angry protests by hundreds of villagers Monday, chanting "Death to America!"

US toll in Iraq crosses 100 mark in April

17 Iraqis die in attacks

AP, Baghdad

Four more US army soldiers and one marine have been killed in fighting in Iraq, the US military said yesterday, reporting casualties from incidents over the weekend.

Four more US soldiers were killed in separate attacks in the capital this weekend, including three in a single roadside bombing, the military said Monday, pushing the death toll past 100 in the 10-week-old security plan.

In violence Monday, at least 17 people were killed in attacks across Iraq on Monday as insurgents continued to target civilians and police in the country's chaotic capital.

In Baghdad, a suicide bomber blew up a vehicle outside a police headquarters in a western district,

killing five people and wounding 12, a security official said.

The Iraqi police have come under heavy fire in recent months as they have struggled to clamp down on the city's daily mayhem as part of a 10-week-old security plan.

Elsewhere in the capital, a former brigadier general in Saddam Hussein's army was shot dead in the volatile Dura neighborhood, and three civilians were killed in two separate roadside bombings.

Another person was killed and nine wounded when three mortar rounds slammed into the northeastern al-Shaab neighbourhood.

The bodies of another three people killed in a gunfight in the capital were brought to Al-Yarmuk hospital in west Baghdad, the hospital said.

Olmert, aides to blame for 'serious failure' of Lebanon war: Inquiry

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Defence Minister Amir Peretz and former army chief Dan Halutz are to blame for the "serious failure" of the Lebanon war, said a government inquiry released on Monday.

"The responsibility is on the prime minister, the defence minister and chief of staff," retired judge Eliahu Winograd said in presenting the interim findings into the handling of last summer's 34-day war.

Decisions and actions by the three "add up to a serious failure in exercising judgment, responsibility and prudence," he said.

The report said that Olmert made decisions hastily and without

proper preparations.

"The prime minister made up his mind hastily, despite the fact that no detailed military plan was submitted to him and without asking for one."

"He made his decisions without systematic consultation with others, especially outside the IDF (Israeli Defence Forces), despite not having experience in external-political and military affairs."

"In addition, he did not adequately consider political and professional reservations presented to him before the fateful decisions of July 12th" when Hezbollah launched the deadly cross-border raid in which it seized two Israeli soldiers, sparking the war.

Pak, Afghan leaders agree to fight terrorism, boost confidence

AP, Ankara

Afghanistan and Pakistan agreed here yesterday to step up coordinated efforts against terrorism and set up a committee to boost confidence-building measures between the two troubled neighbours.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf agreed to "deny sanctuary, training and financing to terrorists and to elements involved in subversive and anti-state activities in each other's countries" in a joint statement after talks mediated by Turkish leaders.

They pledged "to initiate immediate action on specific intelligence exchanges" as part of their commitment, it said.

They welcomed the idea of meeting again in Turkey in either late 2007 or early 2008, Sezer told reporters.

Karzai and Musharraf did not speak to the press and did not take questions.

Blind pilot flies halfway round the world

AFP, Sydney

A blind British adventurer landed in Sydney on Monday completing a record-breaking journey that took him halfway around the world in a microlight aircraft.

Miles Hilton-Barber left London on March 7 and flew more than 21,000-kilometres (13,500-miles) to raise funds to fight blindness in developing countries.

"It's the fulfilment of an amazing dream," the 58-year-old adventurer said after touching down at Sydney's Bankstown airport. "I've been wanting to do this flight for about four years."

Hilton-Barber flies with a sighted co-pilot but relies on speech output from his navigation instruments to steer his course, directing the plane from a wireless keyboard.

"I've wanted to be a pilot since I was a kid. Now I'm totally blind and I've had the privilege of flying more than halfway around the world. The big deal is not me doing this, it's raising funds," he said.

"I'll never see again in this lifetime, but if they can see through this flight it's been more than worthwhile," the adventurer, whose feat makes him the first blind pilot to fly half-way across the world, added.



Blind British aviator Miles Hilton-Barber (R) and his co-pilot Richard Meredith-Hardy (L) share a laugh after arriving in their Pegasus Mainair GT 450 microlight aircraft at Sydney's Bankstown airport yesterday, in a record-breaking journey that took him halfway around the world. PHOTO: AFP