

Iran using Hezbollah in Iraq fight: US

AP, Baghdad

Iran is using the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah as a "proxy" to arm Shia militants in Iraq and Tehran's elite Quds force helped militants carry out a January attack in Karbala in which five Americans were killed, a US general said Monday.

A senior Lebanese Hezbollah operative, Ali Mussa Dakdouk, was captured March 20 in southern Iraq, US military spokesman Brig. Gen Kevin J. Bergner said. Dakdouk served for 24 years in Hezbollah and was "working in Iraq as a surrogate for the Iranian Quds Force," Bergner said.

The general also said that Dakdouk was a liaison between the Iranians and a breakaway Shia group led by Qais al-Kazaali, a former spokesman for cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. Bergner said al-Kazaali's group carried out the January attack against a provincial government building in Karbala and that the Iranians assisted in prepa-

rations. Al-Khazaali and his brother Ali al-Khazaali were captured with Dakdouk.

Dakdouk told US interrogators that the Karbala attackers "could not have conducted this complex operation without the support and direction of the Quds force," Bergner said.

Documents captured with al-Khazaali showed that the Quds Force had developed detailed information on the US position at the government building, "regarding our soldiers' activities, shift changes and defences, and this information was shared with the attackers," Bergner said.

The Karbala attack was one of the boldest and most sophisticated against US forces in four years of fighting in Iraq, and US officials at the time suggested Iran may have had a role in it. In the assault, up to a dozen gunmen posed as an American security team, with US military combat fatigues, allowing them to pass checkpoints into the

government compound, where they launched the attack. One US soldier was killed in the initial assault, and the militants abducted four others who were later found shot to death.

The US military in the past has accused the Quds Force the external arm of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards of arming and financing Iraqi extremists to carry out attacks on US and Iraqi forces. Tehran has denied the US accusations.

Hezbollah spokesmen in Lebanon said they were checking into the claims Dakdouk was a member of the group and would not comment. The group has in the past denied any activities in Iraq. In late 2005, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said his government suspected that Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah might be supplying technology and explosives to Shia Muslim militant groups operating in Iraq, but he provided no proof.

North Korea still a threat: US Gen

AP, Seoul

The top US military commander in South Korea on Monday criticized last week's missile test launches by North Korea, saying the country remains a threat despite its recent moves toward dismantling its nuclear programme.

Gen BB Bell said he welcomed Pyongyang's efforts to live up to a February commitment to shut down its Yongbyon nuclear reactor, part of a programme he called "extremely provocative."

"One of the biggest threats to peace and stability is the potential capability for North Korea to couple its missile technology with its demonstrated nuclear capability," Bell said.

"This is real, it has peninsular, regional and global implications, and we cannot and must not ignore it," added Bell.

North Korea carried out its first atomic test in October, sparking a UN Security Council resolution condemning it and spurring renewed efforts to persuade the country to give up its nuclear programmes.

Iran, Venezuela seal anti-US alliance

AFP, Asaluyeh

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his Venezuelan counterpart Hugo Chavez sealed their anti-American alliance Monday by laying the foundation stone of a joint petrochemical plant.

The two leaders pledged to "stand against all enemies," a reference to the United States, as they inaugurated construction of a 700-million-dollar methanol plant in the Asaluyeh industrial zone on the Gulf coast.

Chavez, on his first trip to Iran, promised to "unite the Persian Gulf and the Caribbean" and even adopted Persian slang for the benefit of reporters assembled for the occasion.

"We as two united countries will build a better world. I thank God that Iran and Venezuela are standing together forever," he said on the last day of a trip, which has already taken him to Russia and Belarus.



PHOTO: AFP

British policemen check the permit papers of a London taxi driver as he approaches Charing Cross railway station in central London yesterday. British police were questioning suspects involved in three failed terror attacks Monday and hunting for others involved in the al-Qaeda-linked attempted car bombings that have put the country on maximum alert.

UK Muslims offer help in bombs probe

AFP, London

British Muslim leaders urged their communities yesterday to help fight extremism after three failed car bombings, amid signs that the new government may be better able to win over their "hearts and minds."

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has argued that cooperation from Britain's estimated 1.6 million Muslims is key to defeating the threat from Islamist militants at home and abroad.

Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, head of the Muslim Parliament of Britain, urged Muslims to support the government and security services, saying "all the evidence suggests" the three failed attacks were carried out by Islamists.

He assured the "government of his support against the forces of anarchy and extremism and called upon the Muslim community to help uproot extremism" in its midst.

The British Muslim Initiative

(BMI), a lobby group, which promotes Muslim participation in public life, echoed the remarks.

"Whoever was responsible for planting the devices clearly intended to cause maximum damage and loss of innocent lives.... We urge all British Muslims to fully cooperate with the authorities to apprehend and bring to justice the perpetrators," the BMI said.

Siddiqui said he hoped it would be easier to cooperate with the Brown government than with that of his predecessor Tony Blair.

"I think there is a distinct difference" between the two governments in reacting to extremist threats, he said.

The responses so far from Gordon Brown and his home secretary (Jaqui Smith) are more measured than we would have expected from Tony Blair," he said without elaborating.

The Guardian newspaper said Brown shunned the "politics of fear"

with his sober responses to the threat, while Blair was more impulsive when he announced "the rules of the game" had changed after the July 2005 bombings on London transport.

Brown's spokesman said Monday that the government has been keeping in touch with Muslim organisations, though not the prime minister himself.

"As we urge vigilance on the public, as we increase the security levels, we also have to ensure that we need to do more to win hearts and minds across all communities.

"We are in constant contact with all of those affected by the London incident."

On Sunday, Hazel Blears, whom Brown appointed as the communities secretary, spoke to a Muslim conference at Ghamgol Sharif Mosque in Birmingham as part of the government's efforts to win the "hearts and minds" of British Muslims.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Border Security Force officials escort repatriated Indian fishermen as they cross the international India-Pakistan Wagah Border in India's northwestern state of Punjab yesterday. Pakistan released 50 Indian fishermen who were caught poaching in its territorial waters.

'al-Qaeda planning spectacular terror attack'

PTI, New York

A secret US law enforcement report, prepared for the Department of Homeland Security, has warned that al-Qaeda is planning a terror "spectacular" this summer.

"This is reminiscent of the warnings and intelligence we were getting in the summer of 2001," the ABC television said on Monday quoting a senior official with access to the document.

US officials, ABC said, have kept the information secret and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff told the network that the United States did not have "have any specific credible evidence that there's an attack focused on the United States at this point."

Earlier, ABC had reported that US law enforcement officials received intelligence two

weeks ago warning of terror attacks in Glasgow and Prague, the Czech Republic, against "airport infrastructure and aircraft."

The warnings apparently never reached officials in Scotland, who said they had received "no advance intelligence" that Glasgow might be a target, ABC said.

Homeland Security Secretary Chertoff declined to comment specifically on the report but told the network that "everything that we get is shared virtually instantaneously with our counterparts in Britain and vice versa."

Unlike the United States, officials in Germany have publicly warned that the country could face a major attack this summer, also comparing the situation to the pre-9/11 summer of 2001, ABC noted.

US is still a 'killing machine', says Castro

AP, Havana

Fidel Castro said Sunday that the US government continues to be a "killing machine" after revelations that nearly 50 years ago it tried to use American mobsters to kill him with poison pills.

"The empire has created a real killing machine made up not only of the CIA and its methods," the Cuban leader wrote in the latest of his nearly daily essays, published Sunday in the Communist Youth newspaper Juventud Rebelde.

President Bush "has constructed powerful and expensive superstructures of intelligence ... that lead to war, injustice, hunger and death everywhere on the planet," Castro wrote.

CIA documents made public last week described the agency's recruitment of a former FBI agent in August 1960 to use mobsters and poison pills to kill Castro. Information about the plot was among hundreds of pages of CIA internal reports, known as "the family jewels."

600 civilians killed in Afghanistan this year Says UN

AFP, Kabul

The United Nations said yesterday it estimated that about 600 Afghan civilians were killed in insurgency-linked violence this year, just over half of them by pro-government forces.

The number of civilian death in May was the highest in months, spokesman Adrian Edwards told reporters.

Last month those killed by national and foreign forces supporting the government appeared to "largely exceed" those killed by rebels, Edwards said, without providing figures.

However for the whole year, information from various sources indicated that "there are about 600 deaths by anti-government and pro-government forces up till now," Edwards told AFP later.

About 52 percent were by pro-government forces and 48 percent by anti-government forces, he said.

Some of this information was based on figures verified by the UN, but in areas where its staff was not able to travel it came from second-hand sources, he said.

"It's important to emphasise that our database is not an absolute measure of civilian casualties," Edwards said.

The foreign forces in Afghanistan have come under fire for civilian casualties in operations against Taliban.

In the most recent case, elders said 45 civilians, including women and children, were killed in air strikes by the Nato force and US-led coalition in the southern province of Helmand late Friday.

If confirmed, this would be the highest number of civilians killed in foreign military action since 2002, a year after the Taliban were removed from power in an operation led by the United States.

Sixty-two Taliban were also killed in the strikes in Helmand's Girishk district, the elders said.

President Hamid Karzai has sent a team to the remote area to investigate.

Just over a week ago he berated the foreign forces for killing civilians by using extreme force and not coordinating their operations with their Afghan counterparts.



PHOTO: AFP

Anti-Bush demonstrators march through Kennebunkport, Maine on Sunday prior to a meeting between US President George W Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin at Bush's family home at Walker's Point, just outside the ocean side town.



PHOTO: AFP

Sunni militiamen working with Iraqi security forces to fight al-Qaeda drive armed on the streets of Baghdad's Abu Ghraib neighbourhood on June 27. The cars roared through west Baghdad, packed with masked gunmen hanging out of windows and brandishing Kalashnikovs.

Top Republican wants orderly Iraq pullout

AFP, Washington

Pressure on the US administration to start pulling out of Iraq deepened Sunday with one of the Senate's most respected Republicans calling for an "orderly" withdrawal of troops in the months ahead.

Richard Lugar, the most senior Republican yet to break ranks with President George W. Bush over the war, said Bush should embrace moderates from both sides in Congress to chart a new strategy focused on diplomacy.

Lugar, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, sent shock waves through Washington last week by arguing that US policy in Iraq "has lost contact" with national security interests in the Middle East and beyond.

Speaking on CBS News, the respected 75-year-old fleshed out his dissenting views by calling for a diplomatic forum to bring together the United States, Iraq and all of its neighbouring countries.

He also recommended that a smaller contingent of US troops

remain to train Iraqi security forces and secure its borders.

"And then, withdrawal of a majority of American troops in a calm, orderly way, over the next few months, so that we refurbish our ability to meet problems elsewhere in the world," the senator said.

From the floor of the Senate on Monday, Lugar shook the White House by arguing that Bush's "surge" of nearly 30,000 troops had "very limited" chances of success given the pressing timeframe and the political climate in Iraq.

The rising death toll for US personnel in Iraq, and anger over Iraqi authorities' failure to use the surge to seize the political initiative, are stoking Republican discontent.

Lugar, while opposing any Democratic-sponsored cut in war funding, said Bush would be unwise to insist on no change of course as national elections loom next year.

Asked how Republicans would respond to Bush digging in his heels, he said: "Well, many will support that, but not very many."