

Basra readies itself for UK troop pullout

Eight bodies found in Iraqi makeshift prison

AFP, Basra/ Baghdad

After four and a half inconclusive years of fighting, British forces are to pull out from their last base in the oil port of Basra and trust their Iraqi comrades to take their place.

When the 500 troops evacuate Saddam Hussein's former palace on the banks of the Shatt al-Arab waterway and withdraw to a desert airbase, they will leave behind a city in the grip of a brutal turf war between rival militia.

Nevertheless, Iraqi forces and war-weary local civilians are hopeful that the redeployment, which will leave just 5,000 British troops in the country to train and support Iraqi forces, will herald a new start for Basra.

"I believe the security apparatus will be able to control the situation if they withdraw completely," said Brigadier Ali Ibrahim of an Iraqi army border guards unit. "We want the British to leave so things will improve."

As he spoke, police and army units could be seen on most of downtown Basra's main roads, where shops and markets were open and busy, and hundreds of Shia pilgrims gathered to ride buses to the holy city of Karbala.

For police Lieutenant Colonel Karim al-Zaydi, there is no reason why this sense of calm cannot continue once the British leave town.

"We're expecting the British forces to withdraw any time now," he told AFP at the city's Hakkaniyah

police station. The apparent optimism among Iraqis, however, stands in marked contrast to the pessimism of foreign observers. Many policy experts now speak candidly of a British defeat in southern Iraq, and warn of more chaos ahead.

Meanwhile US troops killed three suspected militants from a helicopter before ground forces found eight bodies in a makeshift prison they had allegedly been running north of Baghdad, the military said yesterday.

The alert was sounded on Saturday by seven Iraqis who managed to escape the prison in Khan Bani Sa'ad near the town of Taji, about 30km from Baghdad, and inform troops patrolling the area, a military statement said.

Cholera outbreak kills 70 in India

AFP, Bhubaneswar

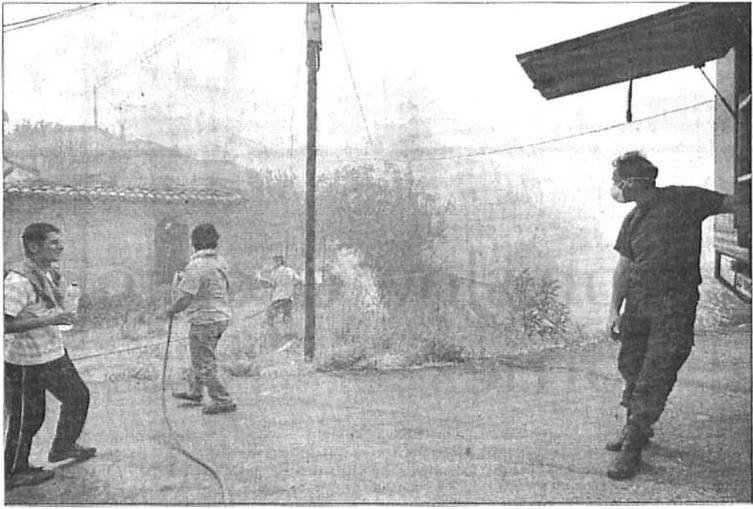
At least 70 people have died and another 1,500 people are suffering from cholera in the eastern Indian state of Orissa, officials said yesterday.

The water-borne disease broke out in the poor districts of Rayagada and Koraput, about 500km southwest of the state capital Bhubaneswar, officials said.

"An outbreak of cholera over the past week has claimed 50 lives and close to 1,000 people are being treated," the chief medical officer in Rayagada district, P Sitaram, told AFP.

Sitaram said the cause of the outbreak was linked to stagnant pools used for drinking water and contaminated meat.

In Koraput, another 20 people have died in the past week and 500 more are ill, district administrator Balakrushna Sahoo said in a phone interview.



Villagers and firemen extinguish burning houses in Smerna village in Zacharo area of Peloponnese, while searching for the missing ones Saturday. Greek Prime Minister Costas Karamanlis declared a nationwide state of emergency Saturday as the worst wildfires in a decade claimed at least 51 lives.

Taliban offer fresh hostage talks

AFP, Ghazni

Afghanistan's Taliban said yesterday they were ready for more direct talks with South Korea over 19 hostages held for six weeks but negotiators would have to bring something new to the table.

Face-to-face talks between the Taliban and a South Korean delegation ended in failure nearly two weeks ago after authorities refused to bow to the rebels' demands, especially the release of some of their jailed fighters.

But Zabihullah Mujahed, one of the Taliban's main spokesmen, told AFP the Islamic militant group was ready to resume negotiations if the Koreans and Afghan authorities "come up with something new."

"Our gates for face-to-face talks are open. But they shouldn't repeat what was said in the previous talks," he told AFP by telephone.



Palestinian and Israeli Arab children gather inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, Islam's third holiest site, in the annexed east Jerusalem during a ceremony marking International Children's Day on Saturday.

Iraq body count running at double pace

AP, Baghdad

This year's US troop buildup has succeeded in bringing violence in Baghdad down from peak levels, but the death toll from sectarian attacks around the country is running nearly double the pace from a year ago.

Some of the recent bloodshed appears the result of militant fighters drifting into parts of northern Iraq, where they have fled after US-led offensives. Baghdad, however, still accounts for slightly more than half of all war-related killings the same percentage as a year ago, according to figures compiled by The Associated Press.

The tallies and trends offer a sobering snapshot after an additional 30,000 US troops began campaigns in February to regain control of the Baghdad area. It also highlights one of the major themes expected in next month's Iraq progress report to Congress: some military headway, but extremist factions are far from broken.

In street-level terms, it means life for average Iraqis appears to be even

more perilous and unpredictable.

The AP tracking includes Iraqi civilians, government officials, police and security forces killed in attacks such as gunfights and bombings, which are frequently blamed on Sunni suicide strikes. It also includes execution-style killings largely the work of Shia death squads.

The figures are considered a minimum based on AP reporting. The actual numbers are likely higher, as many killings go unreported or uncounted. Insurgent deaths are not a part of the Iraq count.

The findings include: Iraq is suffering about double the number of war-related deaths throughout the country compared with last year, an average daily toll of 33 in 2006, and 62 so far this year.

Nearly 1,000 more people have been killed in violence across Iraq in the first eight months of this year than in all of 2006. So far this year, about 14,800 people have died in war-related attacks and sectarian murders. AP reporting accounted for 13,811 deaths in 2006. The United Nations and other sources placed the 2006 toll far higher.

Fires engulf S Greece

State of emergency declared, death toll rises to 51

AFP, Athens

Forest fires that have killed at least 51 people raged unabated on the Peloponnese peninsula of southern Greece Sunday, in an inferno that officials called an unprecedented disaster.

"We are dealing with a national catastrophe, without precedent," said firefighters' spokesman Nikolaos Diamantis, as the country remained under a state of emergency and in national mourning.

The death toll climbed Sunday to 51, the Greek health ministry said, putting it among the world's deadliest forest fires in the past 150 years.

"The situation is still very critical," a spokesman for firemen at the frontline of the violent blazes told AFP.

The fires that have swept across the Peloponnese since Friday continued to threaten the region of Kalamata to the south and Pyrgos to the west, and other blazes were raging around the country.

The flames were within five kilometres (three miles) of the

ancient Greece archeological site of Olympia, site of the ancient Olympic Games. Authorities there have evacuated several nearby villages and mobilised some 50 soldiers and volunteers to patrol the site to prevent the worst from happening.

"For the moment, the site is not under direct threat," said Maria Chrystopoulou, an official in the town where the site is located.

Fires have also broken out on Euboea, the second-largest Greek island, north of Athens, where several seaside resorts have been evacuated.

In all some 40 villages have been evacuated in the Peloponnese and on Euboea, the firefighters' spokesman said, adding that "we are ready to organise new evacuations at any time."

Those fleeing the flames have sought refuge on the country's beaches where the authorities are providing tents for temporary shelter, and financial aid and new lodgings have been promised.

More than 1,000 firemen backed by 425 soldiers and 16 water-

dropping aircraft are waging the battle against the fires, which have swept through thousands of hectares (acres) destroying homes and ravaging crops and olive groves. No official figures were yet available.

"It's chaos. Generations of work have gone up in smoke," said Vassilis Viglas, 65, who had returned to the now devastated village of Artemida for the summer.

Firefighters however were hopeful Sunday of getting some control now that the strong winds which had fanned the flames have subsided somewhat, and aircraft support has arrived from other European countries, officials said.

Four Canadair water-bombers and some 60 French firefighters were expected to join the operation Sunday as well as an Italian aircraft, and in total other countries have offered 14 planes and 10 aircraft.

A range of other countries including Germany, Spain, Portugal and Cyprus are sending help, and the United States and Russia have also responded to calls for assistance, Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis said on Sunday.

Iraqi PM hits back at foreign critics

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki yesterday angrily rebuked the US politicians who have called for him to be replaced, and accused France of also pushing for him to be turfed out of office.

Maliki's response came after two US opposition senators, Carl Levin and presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton, urged Iraqi lawmakers to choose someone else to lead Iraq's ruling coalition and seek national reconciliation.

"Hillary Clinton and Carl Levin are democratic people and should respect democracy. They talk about Iraq as if Iraq is their property," Maliki said at a news conference in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone.

"Leaders like Hillary Clinton and Carl Levin have not experienced in their political lives the kind of differences we have in Iraq. When they give their judgment they have no knowledge of what reconciliation means," he said.

Maliki also lashed out at France, following a visit to Iraq last week by Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, which was initially hailed as a success.

Australia unveils new draft citizenship test

AFP, Sydney

Migrants who want to become Australian citizens will have to be able to correctly identify the country's prime minister and national flower, according to a new draft citizenship test released Sunday.

In a 40-page document outlining citizenship application procedures, the government has detailed the country's history, political institutions and what it

terms national values.

These include freedom of speech, religion and association, gender equality, and tolerance and compassion.

To gain Australian citizenship, migrants must respond correctly to 12 out of a possible 20 questions, drawn from a bank of 200.

Candidates could be asked to give the year of European settlement, name the colours on the flag or write down the first line of the national anthem.

Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews said the test aimed to reflect Australia's balance between ethnic diversity and social cohesion.

"This is part of the government's emphasis -- that we continue to get that balance between diversity and integration correct in future, particularly as we now draw people from so many different countries and so many different cultures," he told reporters in Melbourne.

Five killed in Thai Muslim south

AFP, Yala

Five people, including one soldier, were shot dead Sunday, while authorities arrested three suspected militants in Thailand's restive south, police said.

The attacks underlined near-daily violence in the Muslim-majority region where more than 2,500 people have been killed since the insurgency broke out in January 2004.

A 53-year-old Muslim rubber tapper was gunned down Sunday inside his house by suspected rebels in Yala, one of three violence-torn provinces bordering Malaysia, police said.

আর্থ-ফাউন্ডেশন তার মৎস্য ও চিংড়ি চাষ, বন এবং পশুপালনের সম্প্রসারণ লক্ষ্যে বাংলাদেশের বিভিন্ন জেলায় মাছ ও চিংড়ি চাষের সহিত কৃষি ভিত্তিক কর্মকাণ্ডের উদ্দেশ্যে প্রকৃত জমির মালিকদেরকে ২৫ বিঘা থেকে ১০০ বিঘা পর্যন্ত খননকৃত বা আধা খননকৃত পুকুর বা ঘের অথবা সমতল জমি যা ন্যূনতম ১০ বৎসরের জন্য আর্থ-ফাউন্ডেশনের নিকট লাভজনক চুক্তিতে লিজ দেওয়া যাবে।

আগ্রহী জমি ও পুকুর মালিকগণকে বিজ্ঞপ্তি প্রকাশের ৭ দিনের মধ্যে আগ্রহ পত্র জমা দেবার জন্য আহ্বান জানানো হচ্ছে।

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নিম্নে জেলাগুলোর নাম দেওয়া হলো।

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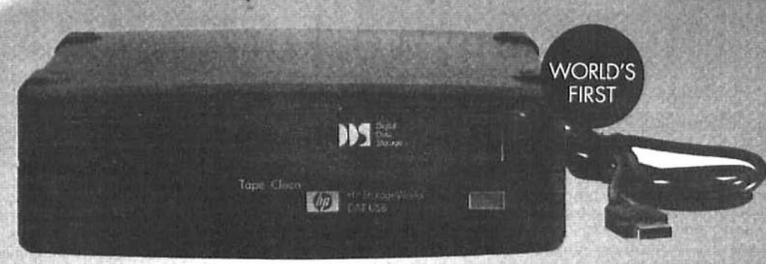
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