

Dempsey to become Central Command chief

AP, Washington

One of the Army's most Iraq-savvy generals is taking charge, at least temporarily, of arguably the most important command in the US military, with responsibility for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In a ceremony Friday at MacDill Air Force Base, Fla., Lt. Gen. Martin Dempsey is to assume command of US Central Command from Navy Adm. William J. Fallon, who announced unexpectedly on March 11 that he was quitting.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who has denied that Fallon was out of step on Iran, and Navy Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, are scheduled to attend the ceremony.

Dempsey, whose field experience in the early stages of his 34-year Army career was largely in Europe, has been deputy commander at Central Command since August 2007. He will serve as the acting commander until Bush chooses a permanent replacement and gets that person confirmed by the Senate.

Arab leaders gather for low-turnout summit

Almost half of key leaders boycotting it, FMs agree to relaunch ME peace plan

AFF, Damascus

Almost half of Arab leaders are boycotting a weekend summit hosted by Syria, an Arab League official said on Friday, as US allies snub Damascus over the political crisis in Lebanon.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will host the leaders of Algeria, Comoros, Kuwait, Libya, Mauritania, the Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, the official told AFP.

With US allies Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan sending only low-level delegations, only 12 leaders from the 22-member body will attend the two-day summit, which opens on Saturday.

The leaders of Iraq, Morocco and Oman will also be absent, while Lebanon is boycotting the event.

As leaders began gathering in Damascus on Friday, Assad greeted the first arrival Comoran President Ahmed Abdallah Sambi, followed by Iraqi Vice President Adel Abdel Mahdi, an AFP correspondent said.

Damascus airport has been closed to all commercial flights until Sunday for the leaders' arrivals.

On Thursday, Syria's press hailed the summit a success due to the absence of US influence, a reference to the boycott by the heads of state from several regional US-friendly heavyweights.

"It's enough for the Arab summit in Damascus that the American crisis for over a year due to political feuding between the majority, backed by the West and most Arab states, and the Hezbollah-led opposition, backed by Syria and Iran.

The ruling party mouthpiece Al-Bath said the summit had managed to avoid external influence.

"The Damascus summit has succeeded in overcoming all sorts of pressures, starting from the statements of US officials and their desire not to hold the summit, or their desire for non-participation," Al-Bath wrote.

The United States last week called on its Arab allies in the region to think carefully about attending the summit, accusing Syria of blocking the election of a president in Lebanon.

Lebanon has been without a president since the end of November.

It has been mired in a political crisis for over a year due to political feuding between the majority, backed by the West and most Arab states, and the Hezbollah-led opposition, backed by Syria and Iran.

Earlier Arab foreign ministers on Thursday agreed to relaunch the Arab peace initiative in its current

form, despite earlier suggestions by the Syrian minister that the initiative could be rethought.

"We agreed on maintaining the Arab League initiative and there is no intention on the ministers' part to amend it," Mohammed Sobeh, Arab League assistant secretary general for Palestinian affairs, told reporters.

"It was also agreed that the initiative will be relaunch to the international community in order to stress Arab concern for finding a solution to the Arab Israeli conflict," Sobeh said.

At the opening of the ministers meeting in Damascus earlier on Thursday, Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Muallim hinted at the possibility of reconsidering the initiative if Israel did not prove its intention to establish peace in the Middle East.



Syrian Vice President Faruk al-Shara (R) receives Iraqi Vice President Adel Abdul-Mehdi (L) at Damascus airport yesterday. Almost half of Arab leaders are boycotting a weekend summit hosted by Syria as US allies snub Damascus over the political crisis in Lebanon.

BA struggles to ease chaos at new Heathrow terminal

AFP, London

British Airways cancelled more flights Friday from Heathrow airport's expensive new terminal the day after a disastrous launch, but warned of more disruption as the airline's boss said sorry to passengers.

Twenty percent of flights were cut as BA admitted it was still experiencing difficulties with the multi-billion-pound Terminal Five, which opened to the public Thursday, and said problems are likely to extend into Saturday.

More than 30 departing flights were cancelled Friday after 34 were grounded 24 hours earlier when the supposedly state-of-the-art baggage handling system had to be shut down.

"Yesterday was definitely not British Airways' finest hour," said the airline's chief executive Willie Walsh, adding: "We disappointed many people and I apologise sincerely."

BA, which has sole use of the terminal, blamed the problems on "a combination of factors", including delays at the staff car park and computer glitches which plagued the baggage sorting system.



An Iraqi man walks past a burnt Iraqi army tank on a street in the southern city of Basra yesterday. Crossings on Iranian border have been closed to prevent Iranian weapons from flowing into the hands of Shia militants battling Iraqi troops in the southern port city of Basra, the British military says.

US 'fully prepared' to move forward on Indian N-deal

PTI, Washington

The US has said it was "fully prepared" to move forward on the civilian nuclear agreement with India once New Delhi takes a decision on domestic political issues related to it.

"... They had a discussion about where we stand. We made it clear that we are fully prepared once the Indian Government has taken certain steps to submit the agreement to the Congress so that they can be passed," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said

when asked about the talks between US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Minister of External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee earlier this week.

Mukherjee wrapped up his two-day visit on Tuesday during which he held talks with President George W Bush and Rice. The minister said the government was trying to build consensus on the deal as there were reservations from the Left and the BJP.

Though US lawmakers had been pressing on a July timeline, the White House said after the parleys that the deal had not reached a "now or never" stage.

"The Indian Government has some decisions to make and with respect to the agreement and its own domestic politics and those are decisions only the Indian Government can take and solely for them," McCormack said.

He said the US was "still committed to doing what we can to move the agreement forward, but again the Indian Government is going to have to make some decisions for itself." The spokesman also said that Afghanistan did not come up in the discussions between Rice and Mukherjee.

Israeli minister reveals new attempts to revive talks with Syria

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel is seeking to revive peace talks with Syria which have been stalled for eight years, a senior Israeli minister said on Friday.

"There are attempts (to revive the peace talks) and I welcome them... both in recent days and days before that," Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer told public radio.

"The Israeli government's attempts to create dialogue are constant," he said, adding that "this prime minister and the previous prime minister... are doing every effort to bring Syria to sit at the negotiating table.

The Labour cabinet minister also said that the Jewish state knows it will have to give up the Golan Heights -- occupied in the 1967 Six Day War and later annexed -- in any

peace deal with its northern neighbour.

"We know very well that we are going to the negotiating table... to sign a peace agreement, and we know exactly its price."

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Wednesday hinted that Israel and Syria might be holding secret peace talks.

"I am prepared to make peace with Syria. I hope the Syrians are prepared to make peace with Israel. I hope the circumstances will allow us to sit together, but that doesn't mean that when we sit together you have to see us."

The last round of negotiations between the two neighbours, technically at war since 1948, broke down in 2000 over disagreements over the strategic Golan Heights plateau, which Israel annexed in 1981.

Climate change now a UN human rights issue

AFP, Geneva

Climate change is now officially a human rights issue, as the UN Human Rights Council on Friday passed a resolution on the subject, recognising that the world's poor are particularly vulnerable.

The council also gave the green light for a study into the impact of climate change on human rights, describing climate change as a "global problem... that requires a global solution".

The resolution, submitted by the Maldives and passed without a

vote, also noted that the poor tend to have limited resources to cope with the impact of global warming.

The Maldives representative noted that debate on the subject had so far tended to focus on physical effects, while the "phenomenon on human beings" had been largely overlooked.

"It is time to highlight the human face of climate change," he said.

Supporting the resolution, Sri Lanka's representative called it "timely" and said because of climate change, even "the right to life is under threat".

NEWS ANALYSIS

Baghdad's highway of death takes on new life

AFP, Baghdad

Sales in Baghdad of peaked caps boasting "I survived Route Irish" have slumped as reaching the capital's international airport is no longer the perilous dash it used to be.

Not only is the term losing its relevance, says police Colonel Hamoud Lafta al-Asadi, the 12-km stretch of highway, termed "Route Irish" by the US military, is now among the safest in Iraq.

And, promises the tall, wiry policeman with a neatly clipped moustache, it is set to become even safer.

"We are turning it into an impregnable security corridor. No one will be able to penetrate it to be able to plant roadside bombs," Colonel Asadi told AFP, while inspecting one of the endless checkpoints set up along the four-lane highway.

In February, he said, only one roadside bomb was discovered along the route, which is also known as the "rhino run" because Rhino Runner armoured buses are often used to ferry passengers to and from the airport.

The US military said, without elaborating, that during February "there were a low number of drive-by shootings on Route Irish."

The statistics are a far cry from November 2004, when violence along the highway peaked. That month, US military statistics show, insurgents launched 52 attacks, including by car bombs, rocket-propelled grenades and small arms fire.

The highway is heavily used by US forces, contractors and diplomats, with most traffic going to or

from the airport or the large American base that surrounds it. Both are prime targets for insurgents.

Colonel Ahmed Hatam Hamid, commander of the police First Motorised Battalion, says the turn-around came when his unit was assigned to patrol the highway in late 2004.

"We started out with 150 men and our numbers have since increased to 425," said the round-faced colonel, sitting at his desk in a dilapidated roadside building, midway between the highly secured Green Zone and the airport, that now serves as battalion headquarters.

Patrolling continues day and night, starting each morning with a foot patrol. This is followed by continuous sweeps through the area by police armed with AK-47s and Austrian Glock pistols, riding aboard Chevrolet Lux 4WD pickups mounted with Russian DSK machine guns.

Iraqi and US troops have also felled the date palms that once lined the road, cleared away refuse, moved guard rails and cut back vegetation to make it difficult to conceal roadside bombs.

Now, according to Colonel Hamid, the aim is to clear the dense neighbourhoods through which the airport highway passes of al-Qaeda fighters.

"We want to give the terrorists no place to hide," said the colonel, the eagle and sword battalion emblem painted in bright colours on the wall behind him adding menace to his words. "They have evil in their hearts. Human lives are cheap for them." The police casualty rate has been high.

For commuters, however, the endless checkpoints and spot checks, including by sniffer dogs, make the trip to the airport arduous. Sometimes it takes two hours or even longer to cover.

Taxi driver Hussein al-Saadi admits the delays are irritating but says that at least it gives him and his passengers a better chance of arriving at the other end alive.

"We need all this security," he said as policemen in light blue camouflage uniforms searched his car and scanned its underbelly with a mirror on the end of a steel rod.

"I have seen too many IEDs (improvised explosive devices)," he said, adding that his most recent experience of the horrors that stalk Baghdad was on February 17 when a female suicide bomber blew herself up as she was confronted by troops at a checkpoint in central Karada neighbourhood.

Back at the palm-treed camp headquarters of the First Motorised Brigade -- under whose command Colonel Hamid and his men fall -- Major Shaker Lafta Abdul Redha admits there is still some way to go before the highway is fully secure.

"It's a game of cat and mouse. Over time both sides are getting wiser -- but the terrorists are getting weaker while we are getting stronger," said the major, who is in overall Iraqi police control of the project to tame the airport highway.

Should he succeed, the bottom is likely to drop right out of the market for the somewhat anachronistic peaked caps that foreign contractors are still seen to be buying as macho souvenirs of their tour in Iraq.

SANDEE South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics Winter 2008 Research Competition Deadline: April 31, 2008. South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics (SANDEE) invites pre-proposals on the inter-linkages among economic development, poverty and environmental change...

Gates orders inventory of US nukes

AP, Washington

Defence Secretary Robert Gates has ordered a full inventory of all nuclear weapons and related materials after the mistaken delivery of ballistic missile fuses to Taiwan, the Pentagon said Thursday.

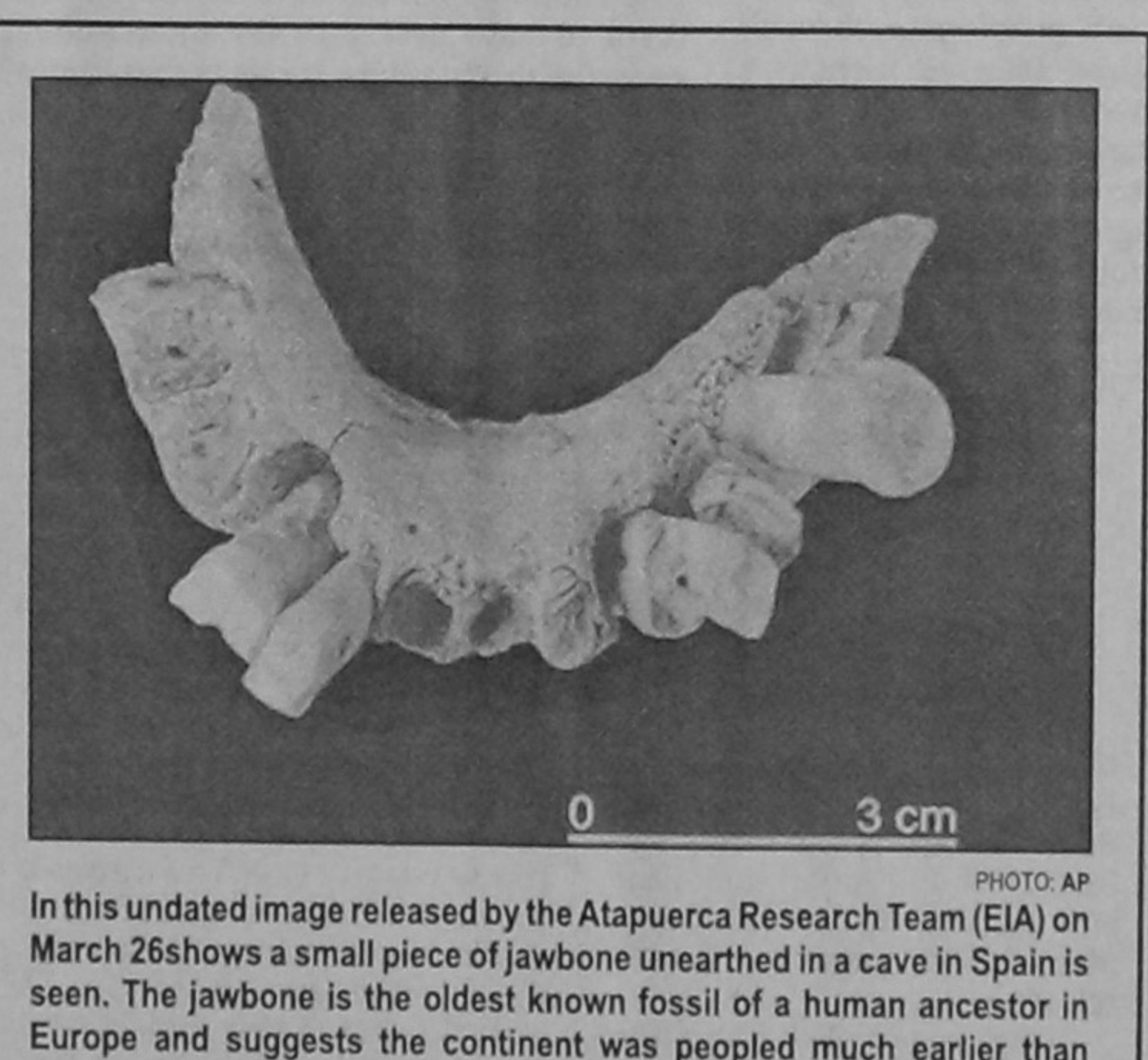
Gates told officials with the Air Force, Navy and Defence Logistics Agency to assess inventory control procedures for the materials and to submit a report within 60 days.

Earlier this week, Gates directed Navy Adm. Kirkland H. Donald to take charge of a full investigation of the delivery mistake in which four cone-shaped electrical fuses used in intercontinental ballistic missile warheads were shipped to the Taiwanese instead of the helicopter batteries they had ordered.

It was the second nuclear-related mistake involving the military that has been revealed in recent months. In August an Air Force B-52 bomber was mistakenly armed with six nuclear-tipped cruise missiles and flown from Minot Air Force Base, N.D., to Barksdale Air Force Base, La. At the time, the pilot and crew were unaware they had nuclear arms aboard.

The electrical fuses were delivered in fall 2006, but the military did not fully realize the gravity of the blunder until last week. The revelation sparked sharp protests from China and forced President Bush to acknowledge the error in a phone call Wednesday with Chinese President Hu Jintao.

While the shipment did not contain nuclear materials, the error is particularly sensitive because China vehemently opposes US arms sales to Taiwan. US officials were quick to say that the incident did not suggest any change in policies toward Taiwan arms sales.



In this updated image released by the Atapuerca Research Team (EIA) on March 26 shows a small piece of jawbone unearthed in a cave in Spain it is seen.

The jawbone is the oldest known fossil of a human ancestor in Europe and suggests the continent was peopled much earlier than previously believed, scientists say.

Human ancestor fossil found in Europe

AP, Madrid

A small piece of jawbone unearthed in a cave in Spain is the oldest known fossil of a human ancestor in Europe and suggests that people lived on the continent much earlier than previously believed, scientists say.

The researchers said the fossil found last year at Atapuerca in northern Spain, along with stone tools and animal bones, is up to 1.3 million years old. That would be 500,000 years older than remains from a 1997 find that prompted the naming of a new species: Homo antecessor, or Pioneer Man, possibly a common ancestor to Neanderthals and modern humans.

The new find appears to be from the same species, researchers said. A team co-led by Eudald Carbonell, director of the Catalan Institute of Human Paleo-Ecology and Social Evolution, reported their find in Thursday's issue of the scientific journal Nature.

The timing of the earliest occupation of Europe by humans that emerged from Africa has been controversial for many years.

Some archeologists believe the process was a stop-and-go one in which species of hominins a group that includes the extinct relatives of modern humans emerged and died out quickly only to be replaced by others, making for a very slow spread across the continent, Carbonell said in an interview.

Resettlement Specialist National Consultant, ADB Bangladesh Resident Mission. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) Bangladesh Resident Mission (BRM) was established to assist ADB Headquarters in processing and implementing projects and programs, country programming, and economic and sector work. It also coordinates ADB's activities with other resident diplomatic and donor missions, NGOs, academic institutions, local think tanks, private sector, and other members of civil society in Bangladesh.