

PHOTO: AFP
Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki delivers a speech on the 5th death anniversary of slain Shia leader Mohammed Bakr al-Hakim, whose picture hangs in the background, in Baghdad yesterday. Iraqi PM said Saturday that the country's security forces have managed to save Baghdad from a "siege by terrorists" backed by foreign nations.

Baghdad saved from 'terrorist siege'

Says Iraqi PM

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said on Saturday that the country's security forces have managed to save Baghdad from a "siege by terrorists" backed by foreign nations.

"When we took over Baghdad it was under siege, with all roads leading to neighbouring provinces controlled by terrorists. They had surrounded Baghdad from all sides, backed by the bad intentions of other countries," Maliki told a gathering of top Iraqi and US officials including Washington's envoy to Baghdad Ryan Crocker.

"We wanted these nations to support and assist us in stabilising the country but they were thinking of finishing Baghdad," he said, without naming the countries.

"But Baghdad continues to stand," the Shia prime minister said in a speech marking the fifth anniversary of the killing of prominent Shia leader Mohammed Bakr al-Hakim in a 2003 car bombing in the holy city of Najaf.

"Yes, there are still al-Qaeda

militants left but they are being chased. We are hunting them. But we have been able to lift the siege of Baghdad."

Baghdad was the epicentre of violence in Iraq when sectarian bloodshed broke out in early 2006.

Daily car bombing, suicide attacks, and militia shoot-outs ripped through the Iraqi capital leaving tens of thousands of people dead, until mid-2007 when violence started to ebb following a US military "surge".

The US military claims most of the insurgent attacks in Baghdad and other regions of Iraq have been carried out by al-Qaeda fighters, many of whom are foreigners entering the country from Syria.

It also accuses Iranian-linked groups of arming, funding and training Shia groups to wage attacks against Sunni Arabs and foreign forces operating in the violence-racked country.

Meanwhile gunmen on a motorcycle assassinated an official of Iraq's biggest Shia party Friday in the southern city of Basra, police said.

Iran offers talks without nuclear freeze

Army chief warns of shutting Gulf oil lane

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday offered to negotiate on its nuclear drive but without a freeze on uranium enrichment, in its first comments since responding to an international package aimed at ending the standoff.

Its military chiefs, meanwhile, warned that the Islamic republic would close the Strait of Hormuz, which is vital for oil exports and use "blitzkrieg tactics" in the Gulf waterway if it came under attack.

"Iran will not go back on its rights on the nuclear issue," government spokesman Gholamhossein Elham said.

"The will of the Iranian people is firm and will continue to follow the principles defined by the supreme guide (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei)," the spokesman said at a weekly news conference.

"Iran insists on negotiations (with world powers) while respecting its rights and avoiding any loss of international rights," he said, referring to Tehran's refusal to give up on nuclear enrichment.

Iran on Friday delivered its response to a package drawn up by six world powers offering Iran technology and negotiations if it suspends uranium enrichment, which the West fears could be used

to make atomic weapons.

Elham said his country was prepared to hold talks "especially with the 5+1 Group" of the UN Security Council members plus Germany "on the common points in the Iranian package and the offer of the world powers."

Iran's top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili has said his country submitted a "constructive and creative" response with "a focus on common ground," but he did not elaborate on the contents.

Iran has also put forward its own more all-embracing offer aimed at solving world problems, including the nuclear issue, and has said

there is common ground between the two packages.

There has been considerable speculation in recent days that Tehran was softening its tone on the nuclear standoff, although the international community has made negotiations conditional on enrichment suspension.

Diplomatic sources said EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana has not ruled out pre-negotiations during which world powers would refrain from new sanctions provided Iran did not start operating any more centrifuges to enrich uranium.

Shootings kill 7 in restive Thai south

AFP, Yala

Seven people have been killed in four separate shooting incidents in Thailand's troubled southern states, police said Saturday.

In a drive-by shooting early Saturday, witnesses said at least five militants in a pick-up truck opened fire on a tea shop in Yala province's Raman district, killing four villagers and wounding four others.

Nearby, in the Bannang Sata district of Yala, a 56-year-old Thai Buddhist man was shot dead and beheaded before his body was set on fire Friday, while his 28-year-old son was seriously wounded.

A 41-year-old Thai Muslim man was shot dead in his pick-up truck in a drive-by shooting in the same area shortly afterwards.

In the neighbouring province of Pattani, a 56-year-old retired teacher was shot dead Friday evening in the Meung district after leaving a mosque.

Five killed in Yemen blast

AFP, Sanaa

At least five people were killed yesterday in an explosion in central Saada, a town in northwest Yemen at the heart of a Shia revolt, a witness said.

The witness, asking not to be named, said the blast near Saada's post office also left a number of people wounded. Rescue services evacuated the casualties as security forces sealed off the site.

Yemen's Saada province in mountains on the border with Saudi Arabia has been the heartland of an uprising launched by Zaidi Shia rebels in 2004 in which thousands of people have died.

The two sides signed a Qatari-brokered peace deal in June last year but there has been repeated wrangling about its implementation.

The insurgents are known as Huthis after their late commander, Hussein Badr Eddin al-Huthi, who was killed by the army in September 2004. He was succeeded as field commander by his brother Abdul Malak.

Hidden camera footage exposes Mugabe 'vote-rigging'

AFP, London

Secret footage filmed by a Zimbabwean prison guard shows how a supporter of President Robert Mugabe rigged votes in his favour, British newspaper The Guardian said.

The hidden camera images apparently show one of Mugabe's so-called war veterans - with the power to denounce prison workers as opposition supporters - supervising their votes, logging each one against the voter's identification number and watching as they mark the ballots.

"It is believed to be the first footage of actual ballot-rigging," The Guardian said.

Harare prison guard Shepherd Yuda, 36, who filmed the clips, has since fled the country with his pregnant wife and their children.

The 10-minute film is on the British daily's website. It was filmed during the six days before the June 27 presidential election second round run-off.

The Guardian gave Yuda the camera to film the daily life of a prison guard but he found himself recording the overseeing of ballots by supporters of Mugabe's ZANU-PF ruling party.

Tendai Biti, the number two in the main opposition Movement for Democratic Change, is seen in prison having leg irons taken off him before going to court to face treason charges.

MDC leader Morgan Tsvangirai pulled out of the election, saying violence and intimidation against his supporters made a free and fair vote impossible. Though Tsvangirai remained on the ballot paper, Mugabe was the only candidate.

The film said a big meeting was suddenly called at the prison. Top-ranking officials from the prison service arrived to tell the prison officers who to vote for. Attendance was compulsory.

One man addressing the crowd says: "Forward with ZANU-PF! Forward with ZANU-PF! Down with MDC!"

Another then tells the prison workers: "Tsvangirai, even if you vote for him, even if he wins he will never rule this country. Do you understand me? He will never rule."

Then, a few days before the election, Yuda and his colleagues were sent for. They went to their staff offices, where they were told they must cast their votes by postal ballot from the office.



PHOTO: AFP
A Palestinian woman wraps a chain symbolically around her wrists as she stands with a photograph of a relative held in an Israeli prison during a demonstration demanding the release of Palestinian detainees in the occupied West Bank city of Nablus yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP
UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (L) comforts his mother (R) as they pray before the grave of his father while he visits his birth place at Haengchi village in Eumseong, 130km south of Seoul yesterday. Ban received a hero's welcome as he returned to his native South Korea for the first trip since taking up the post.

Phoenix scientists soon will analyse Martian ice

AFP, Washington

Scientists with the US Phoenix lander will make their first analysis of Martian ice fragments in coming days but it could be the last done in one of the probe's small ovens, NASA said on its website Friday.

A team of engineers and scientists were trying to get to the bottom of what caused a short-circuit on the TEGA (Thermal and Evolved-Gas Analyzer) which has four small ovens able to heat samples of Martian soil up to 1,000 degrees Celsius.

"Since there is no way to assess the probability of another short circuit occurring, we are taking the most conservative approach and treating the next sample to TEGA as possibly our last," said the University of Arizona's Peter Smith, Phoenix's principal investigator and top mission scientist.

TEGA is vital to determining whether Martian ice contains organic or carbon-based compounds, which would be essential for life on Mars.

Phoenix officials believe the short-circuit in oven number four was caused by vibrations that jolted the lander for days as scientists moved it to get a grainy soil sample into the lander.

A soil sample picked up by the lander's robotic arm in the trench dubbed "Snow White" should be in Phoenix's "optical microscope on Thursday, and if material remains in the scoop, the rest will be deposited in the Wet Chemistry Laboratory, possibly early on Sunday," NASA said.

Rice 'proud' of Iraq invasion

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said on Friday that she was "proud" of the US decision to invade Iraq and said the Middle East had improved since President George W. Bush took office.

In an interview with Bloomberg television, Rice also cited progress in North Korea and China as evidence that the Bush administration, which has just seven months left in office, had made strides over the past eight years.

"I am proud by the decision of this administration to overthrow Saddam Hussein. I am proud of the liberation of 20 million Iraqis," Rice said in the interview taped earlier in the week.

"Iraq has been very tough. Tougher than any of us had dreamed. We can never replace the people who have been lost. We can never do anything to soothe the pain of the family and friends that they have left behind, but we are seeing a change in Iraq for the better," she said.

The interview aired as the United States marked the Independence Day holiday. The US military has lost 4,113 personnel since the March 2003 invasion, according to inde-

pendent website www.icasualties.org.

"In the post-9/11 environment, you could not let a threat to peace exist. I know that great historical events go through difficult phases and often emerge with the world left for the better."

Rice said Iran had suffered "set-backs" and al-Qaeda was "on its heels," while democracy had made a "breakthrough" with women voting in Kuwait, "democratic forces" emerging in the Palestinian territories and "a democracy at the centre of the Arab world in Iraq."

"We're now beginning to see that perhaps it's not so popular to be a suicide bomber. We're beginning to see that perhaps people are questioning whether Osama bin Laden ought to really be the face of Islam," she said.

Rice also said progress was being made on North Korea's nuclear disarmament, and that the North Koreans were "putting themselves out of the business of making plutonium."

"With all due respect to those who look at this deal and say somehow North Korea has gotten a great deal, I think one can say that this is a really good step for non-proliferation," Rice said.


Twin fires raging along California central coast

AP, Big Sur

Weary firefighters got no Independence Day reprieve from a pair of out-of-control wildfires that roared along California's central coast, chewing through opposite ends of an arid forest in the Los Padres National Forest.

Despite cooler temperatures and light winds, flames from the stubborn fire that forced the evacuation of Big Sur inched closer to historic vacation retreats. Meanwhile, firefighters farther south dealt with winds with speeds up to 40 mph that fanned a wildfire in Santa Barbara County.

About 5,000 homes there were under evacuation orders, while residents in 1,400 homes were warned to pack up and be ready to leave on short notice, said county spokesman Jim McClure.



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