

US, UK acted as 'vigilantes' in Iraq invasion

Says top British judge

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

One of Britain's most authoritative judicial figures last night delivered a blistering attack on the invasion of Iraq, describing it as a serious violation of international law, and accusing Britain and the US of acting like a "world vigilante".

Lord Bingham, in his first major speech since retiring as the senior law lord, rejected the then attorney general's defence of the 2003 invasion as fundamentally flawed.

Contradicting head-on Lord Goldsmith's advice that the invasion was lawful, Bingham stated: "It was not plain that Iraq had failed to comply in a manner justifying resort to force and there were no strong factual grounds or hard evidence to show that it had." Adding his weight to the body of international legal opinion opposed to the invasion, Bingham said that to argue, as the British government had done, that Britain and the US could unilaterally decide that Iraq

had broken UN resolutions "passes belief".

Governments were bound by international law as much as by their domestic laws, he said. "The current ministerial code," he added "binding on British ministers, requires them as an overarching duty to 'comply with the law, including international law and treaty obligations'."

The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats continue to press for an independent inquiry into the circumstances around the invasion. The government says an inquiry would be harmful while British troops are in Iraq. Ministers say most of the remaining 4,000 will leave by mid-2009.

Addressing the British Institute of International and Comparative Law last night, Bingham said: "If I am right that the invasion of Iraq by the US, the UK, and some other states was unauthorised by the security council there was, of course, a serious violation of international law and the rule of law."

"For the effect of acting unilaterally was to undermine the foundation on which the post-1945 consensus had been constructed: the prohibition of force (save in self-defence, or perhaps, to avert an impending humanitarian catastrophe) unless formally authorised by the nations of the world empowered to make collective decisions in the security council..."

The moment a state treated the rules of international law as binding on others but not on itself, the compact on which the law rested was broken, Bingham argued. Quoting a comment made by a leading academic lawyer, he added: "It is, as has been said, 'the difference between the role of world policeman and world vigilante'."

Bingham said he had very recently provided an advance copy of his speech to Goldsmith and to Jack Straw, foreign secretary at the time of the invasion of Iraq. He told his audience he should make it plain they challenged his conclusions.



Police patrol for intruders in the ruins of the Oakridge Mobile Home Park, where 480 homes were destroyed by wildfire as residents are escorted in by bus to see their devastated neighbourhood on Monday in Sylmar, California. Residents are not yet allowed to go into the ruins as authorities continue to search for bodies.



File picture of the Saudi-owned super tanker Sirius Star, pictured off the coast of Rotterdam, the Netherlands on Oct. 19, 2008. Pirates have seized control of the Sirius Star off the east coast of Africa and are taking it towards a Somali port, the US Navy said on Monday.

Somali pirates hijack Saudi supertanker

AP, Dubai

In a dramatic escalation of high seas crime, Somali pirates hijacked a Saudi supertanker loaded with crude hundreds of miles off the coast of East Africa, defeating the security web of warships trying to protect vital shipping lanes.

The takeover demonstrates the bandits' heightened ambitions and capabilities: Never before have they seized such a giant ship so far out to sea. Maritime experts warned the broad daylight attack, reported by the US Navy on Monday, was an alarming sign of the difficulty of patrolling a vast stretch of ocean key to oil and other cargo traffic.

The MV Sirius Star, a brand new tanker with a 25-member crew, was seized at about 10 am Saturday more than 450 nautical miles southeast of Mombasa, Kenya, the Navy said. The area lies far south of the zone where warships have increased their patrols this year in the Gulf of Aden, one of the busiest channels in the world, leading to and from the Suez Canal, and the scene of most past attacks.

The massive supertanker would seem to present a daunting target for the pirates, who usually operate in small speedboats. At 1,080 feet, it is the length of an aircraft carrier and can carry about 2 million barrels of oil.

But experts said its crew may have felt a false sense of security so far from shore, even though pirates have repeatedly demonstrated their skill in taking down big prizes.

Israeli tanks rumble into Gaza

UN resumes food distribution

AP, AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian residents in the Gaza Strip say Israeli tanks have moved into the area for the first time in a week. Militants say they fired rockets and mortars at the tanks.

The violence is chipping away at a tenuous truce.

Residents and Gaza security officials say the tanks have rumbled about a quarter mile into the tiny seaside strip. They say the tanks levelled lands along the border east of Rafah.

The Israeli military had no immediate comment. The army typically razes lands militants use to fire rockets and mortars at Israel.

The army says militants have fired more than 140 rockets and mortars at Israel since the truce began unravelling. At least 17 militants have been killed over the past two weeks and Israel has kept supplies from reaching Gaza.

Meanwhile, food distribution to half the

Gaza Strip's 1.5 million population was to resume on Tuesday but the United Nations fears supplies will soon run out unless Israel eases its crippling blockade.

"Distribution will go on of the very small amount we brought in on Monday," said UN Works and Relief Agency (UNRWA) spokesman Chris Gunness.

"The supplies will last days, not weeks," he told AFP.

Israel responded to a recent surge in rocket and mortar attacks by completely sealing off Gaza on November 5, preventing delivery of the basic supplies that had been allowed in under a blockade imposed after Hamas seized control of the Palestinian territory in June 2007.

Amid mounting pressure from the international community, Israel last week allowed some industrial fuel to be delivered to Gaza's sole power plant and on Monday it let in 33 truckloads of humanitarian and other basic supplies.

20 killed in Philippine clashes with rebels

AFP, Cotabato

Around 20 people were killed in a series of clashes between Muslim separatist guerrillas and government forces in the troubled southern Philippines, officials said yesterday.

In the latest incident, a gun battle erupted when an army patrol encountered Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) fighters near Mamasapano town on Mindanao island on Tuesday, local army commander Colonel Marlou Salazar said.

The separatist fighters fled, leaving behind a heavy machinegun, a rocket launcher, a mortar and several rifles, he said.

Judging from the abandoned weapons and

bloodstains at the scene, Salazar estimated that about 10 guerrillas had been killed, although any bodies had been dragged away by their comrades.

In another incident near the same town late Sunday, three soldiers and eight rebels were killed when guerrillas attacked an army base.

"The rebels attacked the army base while they (the troops) were eating," town mayor Akmad Tato Ampatuan told reporters, adding that the two sides exchanged mortar fire overnight.

Running gun battles that followed left eight rebels dead, said local army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Julieto Ando. Ampatuan said three soldiers were also killed in the gun battles.

Taliban threaten France with attacks in video

AFP, Dubai

A Taliban military leader threatened to carry out attacks in Paris unless French troops are pulled out of Afghanistan, in a video broadcast Monday on Al-Arabiya television.

The video, which the Dubai-based TV station did not say how it obtained or when it was filmed, also claimed responsibility for an operation in August in which 10 French soldiers were killed.

The video shows a Taliban military leader, identified as Faruq, saying in comments dubbed into Arabic that the French can await their response in Paris if French troops are not withdrawn from Afghanistan.

Obama vows to boost ties with allies

AFP, Valencia

US president-elect Barack Obama vowed to strengthen Washington's ties with its allies in a message read out Tuesday at a Nato Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Spain.

"I intend to work closely with the incoming Nato Parliamentary Assembly president, US Congressman John Tanner, on strengthening relationships with our allies and addressing global challenges together," the message said.

"The Nato Parliamentary Assembly provides a valuable forum for informed debate and consensus building among our allies. It must continue its vital role in guiding the direction of the alliance during its next decade and beyond," he added.

The message was read by the current president of the Nato Parliamentary Assembly, former Portuguese sports minister Jose Lello, on the last day of the body's annual gathering in the Mediterranean port of Valencia.

Speaking to reporters on Friday on the eve start of the gathering, Lello said that Obama's election as US president on November 4 would likely lead to an increase of troops in Afghanistan where some 70,000 Nato-led and US soldiers are currently stationed.

Obama pledged during the campaign to begin a phased pullout from Iraq while beefing up the military presence in Afghanistan.



US President-elect Barack Obama meets with former Republican presidential candidate Arizona Senator John McCain at Obama's transition offices in Chicago on Monday. They met for the first time since the election was held 13 days ago.



Pakistani villagers alight from a boat after crossing the Chenab River near Shahbazpur village, some 170km from Islamabad on Monday. Pakistani Minister of Water and Power Raja Pervaiz Ashraf said that Pakistan will seek compensation from India over shortage of water at Head Marala after its neighbour constructed the Baglihar Dam on river Chenab.

Iraqi cleric repeats concerns on pact

AP, Baghdad

Iraq's top Shia cleric said yesterday that the US-Iraq security pact would only be viable if the country's main political groups backed it and it restored the country's full sovereignty.

The comment by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani came as the 275-seat parliament prepared for a Nov. 24 vote on the pact, which would allow US troops to stay in Iraq for three more years. If passed by the legislature, it would then require ratification by the president and his two deputies.

Al-Sistani has not publicly taken a clear position on the pact, but he has indicated that it could only work if it is passed by a comfortable majority in parliament.

His latest comments came in a statement issued by his office in the holy city of Najaf, south of Baghdad. It said they were made in response to a question by a follower on what it termed "claims in the media" that the cleric supported the pact. Al-Sistani does not speak to journalists or give media interviews, communicating his views through edicts or in answers to questions sent to him by followers.

The Iraqi Cabinet has overwhelmingly approved the pact,

meaning prospects of it passing in parliament are good since Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's coalition partners dominate the legislature.

A senior official close to al-Sistani has said that the cleric, who can bury the agreement if he publicly speaks against it, told two al-Maliki emissaries Saturday that while not ideal, the document seemed to be the best possible option.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to publicise what took place in the meeting, said al-Sistani made clear to the two that it would be "unbecoming" for him to speak publicly in favour of the agreement because of his religious status.

Al-Sistani wields enormous influence among Iraq's majority Shias and his nod to the agreement removed a potential hurdle in the way of the pact, which provides for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009 and the entire country by Jan. 1, 2012.

The statement said al-Sistani wanted the agreement to secure the "restoration of full sovereignty and the realisation of Iraq's stability and security." It also quoted him as saying that he wanted it to "win the support of all Iraqis and their main political groups."

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