

THE WAR IN IRAQ

Report: Leader of al-Qaida in Iraq injured



Left: An Iraqi soldier checks a driver's identity at a vehicle checkpoint in Baghdad, Iraq, on Thursday. U.S. and Iraqi forces launched a security operation throughout



Right: Iraqis gather to inspect a car destroyed in a car-bomb explosion that killed three in Baghdad's Shiite enclave of Sadr City, Iraq.

GIs sweep Baghdad; explosions rock region

By BRIAN MURPHY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq

U.S. and Iraqi forces pushed deeper Thursday into Sunni militant strongholds in Baghdad — where cars rigged with explosives greeted their advance — while British-led teams in southern Iraq used shipping containers to block suspected weapon smuggling routes from Iran.

Early today, Brig. Gen. Abdul-Karim Khalaf, considered an Iraqi Interior Ministry spokesman, said the leader of al-Qaida in Iraq, Abu Ayub al-Masri, was wounded and an aide was killed in a clash late Thursday with Iraqi forces north of Baghdad. However, the deputy interior minister said he had no information about such a clash, and two U.S. officials could not confirm the



AL-MASRI

OTHER DEVELOPMENTS

Whereabouts of Shiite cleric

Another round of conflicting reports deepened the mystery of radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's whereabouts. Sami al-Askari, a top adviser to Iraq's prime minister, said al-Sadr traveled to Iran a few days ago, but he gave no details on how long the cleric would stay. Al-Askari denied that al-Sadr left Iraq in fear of arrest under the security crackdown in Baghdad.

Two border points closed

In southern Iraq, British and Iraqi security forces closed two border points with Iran at Sheeb and Shalamcha.

report. The series of car-bomb blasts, which killed at least seven civilians, touched all corners of Baghdad. But it did little to disrupt a security sweep seeking to weaken militia groups' ability to fight U.S.-allied forces, and each other, as Iraq slips further into factional bloodshed.

The attacks, however, pointed to the critical struggle to gain the upper hand on Baghdad's streets. The Pentagon hopes its current campaign

of arrests and arms seizures will convince average Iraqis that militiamen are losing ground.

Most of the latest resistance has come from Sunni factions, which perceive their Saddam Hussein-era influence slipping away as the majority Shiites extend their political muscle and bolster ties to powerful Iran.

In Baghdad's Dora neighborhood, a longtime Sunni militant hotbed, two parked cars wired with explosives were triggered as a joint U.S.-Iraqi patrol rolled past. The convoy was unharmed, but the blast killed at least four civilians and wounded 15.

Control of the Dora district, a once upscale neighborhood favored by Saddam's regime, is important as a gateway between Baghdad and the Shiite-dominated south.

Two other car bomb blasts came as security forces moved through the capital, killing at least three civilians.

Outside Baghdad, troops also faced Sunni ambushes. In Buhruz, about 30 miles northeast of the capital, Sunni gunmen and soldiers from the 1st

Squadron, 12th Cavalry Regiment engaged in a 20-minute firefight.

U.S. Bradley fighting vehicles fired 25mm rounds into homes shielding the gunmen, said an Associated Press reporter traveling with the unit. No U.S. casualties were reported. Separately, however, a U.S. Marine was killed in combat in Iraq's western Anbar province, a Sunni militant stronghold.

Khalaf said the clash that injured al-Masri occurred near Balad, a major U.S. base about 50 miles north of the capital, and identified the dead aide as Abu Abdullah al-Majemaai.

Al-Masri took over the leadership of al-Qaida in Iraq after its charismatic leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, claimed the U.S.-led sweeps have "started to attack" mostly Sunni areas.

Around the capital, U.S. and Iraqi soldiers set up dozens of roadway checkpoints and conducted top-to-bottom searches of all vehicles.

Fiery Democrat moves to forefront of war debate

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON

Rep. John Murtha is quickly emerging as one of President Bush's most formidable foes in the Iraq war debate.

Many Democrats, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, match Murtha's fiery opposition to Bush's policies. But the Marine combat veteran's prowess on military matters, strong relationships with Republicans and, most importantly, control of the Pentagon's spending bills has put him at the forefront of the war



MURTHA

debate. The Pennsylvania Democrat is leading the charge among members of his party to end the war by limiting funding.

That fight, which will probably be waged next month, is expected to overshadow this week's battle over a nonbinding resolution opposing Bush's troop buildup.

Part kindly Irish Catholic grandfather and part political pit bull with two Purple Hearts in his pocket, Murtha seems the Democrats' best chance of using the budget to curtail the war without appearing to be leaving troops in the lurch.

"Many of the roads (in Congress) lead through Murtha," said Darrell West, a political science professor at Brown University. "So Bush has to deal with him."

Murtha retains clout among his Democratic colleagues, especially on defense issues, despite losing a postelection challenge to Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., to become majority leader. Hoyer and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., have tapped Murtha to address caucus meetings on the issue of the war and used him to assure the more liberal members of their base that Democrats will do everything they can to bring troops home.

"Do most people have enormous respect for Mr. Murtha? Oh, yes," Pelosi said.

By mid-March, Murtha, 74, will unveil legislation that he says would set such stringent rules on combat deployments that Bush would have no choice but to begin bringing

troops home. His legislation would dictate how long troops can stay, the equipment they use and whether any money could be spent to expand military operations into Iran.

Murtha says few units could meet the high standards he envisions, meaning Bush's plan to keep some 160,000 troops in Iraq for months on end would be thwarted.

Under his plan, he says, Democrats would be helping troops by making sure they have what they need before being thrown into combat.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said the Senate will hold another test vote Saturday on the Iraq resolution. The Senate has been unable to begin debate on Iraq for two weeks because of partisan bickering over the procedural terms.

Investigators: Billions of dollars wasted on Iraq reconstruction, more yet to come

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON

About \$10 billion has been squandered by the U.S. government on Iraq reconstruction aid because of contractor overcharges and unsupported expenses, and federal investigators warned Thursday that significantly more taxpayer money is at risk.

The three top auditors overseeing work in Iraq told a House committee

their review of \$57 billion in Iraq contracts found that Defense and State department officials condoned or allowed repeated work delays, bloated expenses and payments for shoddy work or work never done.

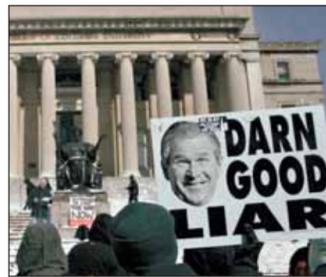
More than one in six dollars charged by U.S. contractors were questionable or unsupported, nearly triple the amount of waste the Government Accountability Office estimated last fall.

"There is no accountability," said David M. Walker, who heads the auditing arm of Congress. "Organizations charged with overseeing contracts are not held accountable. Contractors are not held accountable. The individuals responsible are not held accountable."

"People should be rewarded when they do a good job. But when things don't go right, there have to be consequences," he said.

Also testifying Thursday were Stuart Bowen, the special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, and William H. Reed, director of the Defense Contract Audit Agency.

The appearance before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee came as Congress prepares for a showdown with President Bush next month over his budget request of nearly \$100 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.



AP PHOTO
Protests develop on the campus of Columbia University in New York as students walked out of their classes Thursday hours after President Bush exhorted NATO nations to send extra troops to Afghanistan.

Bush: More NATO troops for Afghan offensive

By JENNIFER LOVEN
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON

Describing a country on the brink, President Bush on Thursday exhorted NATO nations to send additional troops to Afghanistan and allow their soldiers already there to fight in the violent south and under other dangerous circumstances.

"When our commanders on the ground say to our respective countries 'We need additional help,' our NATO countries must provide it," Bush said in a speech at the American Enterprise Institute. "As well, allies must lift restrictions on the forces they do provide so NATO commanders have the flexibility they need to defeat the enemy wherever the enemy may make its stand."

"The alliance was founded on this principle: an attack on one is an attack on all. That principle holds true whether the attack is on the home soil of a NATO nation or on allied forces deployed on a NATO mission abroad," he said.

Troops from Canada, Britain, the Netherlands and the United States have been doing most of the fighting and leaders of those countries have been lobbying the other 22 allied countries to do more.

U.S. commanders anticipate a renewed offensive this spring by Taliban fighters trying to stage a comeback and topple the elected government in Kabul.

Bush is asking Congress to provide \$11.8 billion over the next two years for operations, military and otherwise, in Afghanistan.



BUSH

Abbas approves Hamas-Fatah government

The Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip

The Hamas Cabinet resigned Thursday to make way for a coalition with the rival Fatah of moderate Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who gave his blessing despite what his aides said was a warning from the United States that Washington would shun the new government.

Abbas presided over a brief ceremony in which Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas submitted the resignation of his Cabinet, ending months of stop-and-go power-sharing negotiations.

Abbas then asked Haniyeh, as head of a caretaker government, to form a Hamas-Fatah coalition within five weeks. In his letter of appointment, Abbas said the new government must "respect" international accords, wording that implies acceptance of Israel but falls short of international demands for explicit recognition.

The international demands have put Abbas in a bind. Had he pulled out of the deal with Hamas, he could have been branded a traitor by his people.

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