

Iraq formally returns to self-rule two days ahead of schedule

Low-key ceremony for handover to interim Iraqi government as US Marine suspected taken hostage

REUTERS, BAGHDAD

The United States handed sovereignty to an interim Iraqi government two days earlier than expected on Monday, aiming to forestall guerrilla attacks with a secretive ceremony formally ending 14 months of occupation. Iraq's outgoing US governor Paul Bremer handed a letter to Iraq leaders sealing the formal transfer of powers before immediately flying out of the country. The low-key ceremony was over before it was announced and came as a surprise to ordinary Iraqis. Its hurried and furtive nature appeared to reflect fears that guerrillas could stage a spectacular attack on the scheduled date of June 30.

At a second ceremony in the afternoon the government was sworn in and Prime Minister Iyad Allawi urged all Iraqis to stand together against foreign militants wreaking havoc in the country. "I call on our people to stand united to expel the foreign terrorists who are killing our children and destroying our country," Allawi said, in comments broadcast around the world. At the earlier ceremony, which formally transferred sovereignty at 10:26 am (06:26 GMT), president Ghazi Yawar hailed "a



Interim Iraqi prime minister Iyad Allawi (middle) being sworn in at a secret ceremony in Baghdad yesterday. / EPAPHOTO

historic day, a happy day, a day that all Iraqis have been looking forward to." US and British officials say the handover is a key step on the path to democracy in Iraq, but one of the government's first actions as a sovereign power is expected to be the imposition of emergency laws, including curfews, to crack down

on guerrillas.

Attacks have been mounted this month aimed at disrupting the handover and several foreign hostages have also been seized over the past week. On Sunday, the Arabic-language channel Al Jazeera broadcast footage of a blindfolded US Marine, whose captors said

they would kill him unless Iraqi prisoners were released. "A Marine assigned to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force has been absent from his unit since June 21," a US statement said. However, "Naval Criminal Investigative Services cannot confirm that corporal Wassef Ali Hassoun has been taken hostage."

Iraq takes centre-stage in Istanbul as NATO seeks to mend rifts

NATO leaders met at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East Monday, keen to mend fences over the Iraq war as the US-led occupation of the country is being wound up.

The transatlantic alliance will hold up an agreement to train Iraqi security forces and to broaden the peacekeeping mission in Afghanistan as proof that it is now working together to tackle security threats far from its own borders.

But the deal on helping Baghdad deal with insurgency falls far short of the boots-on-the-ground role Washington had sought for the 26-nation alliance, which was scotched by French and German resistance. And it only came after wrangling that echoed last year's pre-war row over boosting Iraq neighbor Turkey's defenses.

Indeed, while US officials briefed reporters in glowing terms about the training agreement ahead of the two-day summit in Istanbul, France was distinctly cool. French officials said it would be a job for allies not the alliance as a whole, and there would "no NATO flag" in Iraq. "France will continue to make known its concerns and reservations with respect to a NATO role," French presidential spokeswoman Catherine Colonna told reporters. The communiqué on Iraq, seen by Reuters before its release, was deliberately vague, offering NATO's assistance to Baghdad but then going on to say merely: "We...encourage nations to contribute to the training of the Iraqi armed force."

President Bush arrived Sunday in Turkey's commercial capital to



Anti-NATO protestors clashed with police at the opening of the summit in Istanbul. / AP

demonstrations by some 20,000 people. More protests were planned for Monday, but he and leaders from an alliance which now stret-

ches into Baltic states will be shielded by an unprecedented security curtain drawn around the Bosphorus Straits city. (Reuters)

EUROPEAN COMMISSION Javier Solana picked foreign minister

European Union leaders will officially designate Javier Solana as the bloc's future first foreign minister when they reappoint him as foreign policy high representative on Tuesday. The move means the former Spanish foreign minister and NATO secretary-general will automatically become vice-president of the European Commission and run its large external relations budget and staff once a new EU constitution is ratified.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION Portuguese prime minister for top EU post

Portuguese prime minister Jose Manuel Durao Barroso is to be proposed as the next president of the European Commission at an European Union meeting today. Previously, it had been thought that Durao Barroso's support of the US-led war in Iraq made him unattractive to some European countries. European leaders are expected to confirm the choice at a special summit.

Spain wants EU referendum

A poll by the CIS, a sociological think tank, found that around 65 per cent of Spanish people want to see a referendum on the European Constitution before it is approved. The survey said that 36 per cent consider the EU magna carta to be "convenient but not important". It also found that 60 per cent of those surveyed identified themselves first and foremost as Spanish citizens.

SERBIA

Pro-Western reformer wins

Boris Tadic, a pro-Western reformer, won Serbia's presidential vote last night, defeating a hardline nationalist in an election seen as crucial to the country's possible future European Union membership. Tadic received 53.5 per cent of the vote, with a voter turnout of 48.5 per cent.

NUCLEAR ARMS

UN to hold talks with North Korea

The head of the United Nations (UN) nuclear watchdog said Monday he was ready to go to North Korea immediately to discuss the return of United Nations inspectors expelled from the communist state a year and a half ago. Washington showed greater flexibility than it has in past rounds by offering Pyongyang security guarantees and economic aid in exchange for scrapping its arms programmes.

MEXICO

Huge march against crime wave

At least a quarter of a million Mexicans marched through the capital and other cities on Sunday to protest authorities' failure to control lawlessness in one of the world's most crime-ridden countries. Protesters dressed in white filled Mexico City's main Zocalo Square, which holds more than 100,000 people, and packed surrounding avenues. Many carried banners urging the death penalty for kidnappers, rapists and murderers.