

Powell views mass graves in Iraq, vows 'never again'

By George Gedda
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HALABJA, Iraq — Standing near rows of white grave markers, Secretary of State Colin Powell on Monday honored 5,000 Iraqi Kurds who died in a chemical weapons attack and pledged such brutality was gone along with Saddam Hussein.

With relatives of victims standing before him, Powell said: "I can't tell you that Saddam Hussein was a murderous tyrant — you know that. What I can tell you is that what happened here in 1988 is never going to happen again."

Powell added that Saddam is "running and hiding. He's going to be running until we catch him or he dies."

After Powell dedicated a memorial and museum to commemorate the victims, women wearing black thrust bouquets of flowers toward him. Many in the audience wept, holding pictures of family members killed in Halabja.

The massacre on March 15, 1988, in this northeastern Iraqi city, seven miles from the Iranian border, has been cited repeatedly by President Bush as evidence of Saddam's brutality. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld visited the site of another mass grave this month, in Mahaweel, where lie bodies of an estimated 3,100 Shiite Muslims, killed as Saddam's forces smashed a rebellion after the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Despite the public high-level attention, human rights activists contend that for all the focus on the atrocities, the American response to the mass graves has been slow, disorganized and inadequate. In particular, crucial evidence for any possible criminal trials already has been destroyed.

"It's rather shocking, in fact, the investment ... of very, very little into this area — not only of the mass graves but everything the mass graves represent," said Joe Stork of Human Rights Watch.

Saddam's government killed an estimated 300,000 Iraqis, said Sandy Hodgkinson, the top human rights official in the U.S.-led civilian administration. As many as 500 mass graves are spread across Iraq, and coalition

authorities have received formal reports of 151 sites, Hodgkinson said.

Much of the evidence has been destroyed, in part because of the anguished digging of relatives looking for bodies of family members at Mahaweel and other sites, human rights groups and coalition officials agree.

Most of the known mass grave sites have not been secured by coalition forces, either because of a lack of guards or out of respect for relatives' wishes, Hodgkinson said. The coalition is working to train guards for some sites, to begin issuing guidelines for forensic examinations and to train Iraqis in correct forensic work, she said.

Critics say it's far too late after the fall of Baghdad.

"I haven't seen evidence of the level of resources and commitment and personnel that would be required to help the Iraqis do this properly," said Susannah Sirkin of Physicians for Human Rights.

Forensic teams from human rights groups or coalition countries have not been able to visit, either, Hodgkinson said, because security remains uncertain.

International tribunals handle prosecutions for atrocities in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. But here, the United States has insisted any trials be conducted by a new Iraqi legal system still being developed. Many human rights groups agree that Iraqis should lead the legal process, but international participation is crucial.

U.S. criticized about mass graves

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SOURCES: Associated Press AP

NEWS IN BRIEF

Economic forecast looking brighter

WASHINGTON (AP) — Even though U.S. companies are reluctant to hire workers, the economy over the second half of this year is expected to grow at the fastest pace since 1999.

That surprisingly upbeat prospect means that the Federal Reserve will see no need to cut interest rates at Tuesday's meeting, private economists believe.

In recent weeks, analysts have kept revising upward their economic forecasts, given a series of favorable government reports. Many analysts now believe the overall economy will expand at rates well above 4 percent in both the July-September period and the final three months of the year.

"We are seeing very clear evidence of a strong pickup in activity this quarter," said Lyle Gramley, a former Fed governor and now senior economic adviser at Schwab Washington Research Group, a financial services firm.

Parents charged in death of little girl

BROWNSVILLE, Texas (AP) — The parents of a 21-month-old girl who died in a hot truck were charged in connection with the death Monday and could face up to 20 years behind bars.

The parents of Destiny Castillo — 24-year-old Luis Ernesto Castillo and 22-year-old Sor Juana Garcia — told police they were out partying Saturday night and forgot the girl was in the back seat of their truck when they returned home at 6:45 a.m. Sunday.

They realized the child wasn't in the house when they woke up later Sunday. They found her dead in the truck.

"As soon as they woke up they both realized what happened," Brownsville Police Sgt. Jimmie Manrique said.

Both were charged Monday with one count each of abandoning-endangering a child with intent to return. They were at being held at the Cameron County Jail on \$35,000 bond.

Federal Court stalls California election

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — A federal appeals court threw California's tumultuous recall campaign into complete turmoil Monday, postponing the Oct. 7 election because several counties planned to use the punch-card ballots that made such a mess in Florida three years ago.

The decision by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is certain to be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, putting the justices in a position to influence yet another monumental election.

The three-judge panel did not set a new date for the recall election, but backed a suggestion from the American Civil Liberties Union that the balloting be held during the March 2 presidential primary.

"It is virtually undisputed that ... punch-card voting systems are significantly more prone to errors that result in a voter's ballot not being counted than the other voting systems used in California," judges wrote.

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