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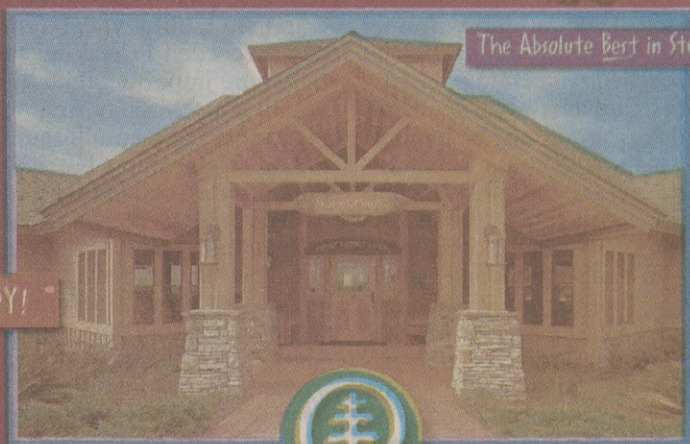


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WASHINGTON, DC — Iraqi Ambassador Rend al-Rahim, center, takes part in the raising of the Iraqi flag Wednesday. The Embassy had been closed since...

Iraqi flag hoisted in Washington to launch new era in relations

By Barry Schweid
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — In a show of independence even from American liberators, two Iraqi diplomats raised the country's traditional Arab red, white and black flag Wednesday over their reopened embassy — rather than a new flag that the U.S. occupying authority had chosen.

There were broad smiles and applause from expatriate Iraqis as the country's incoming ambassador, Rend al-Rahim Francke, and Abdul-Latif Rashid, minister of irrigation and water resources, hoisted the flag under sunny skies only hours after the Iraqi authorities in Baghdad took legal custody of former President Saddam Hussein and 11 of his top lieutenants.

Rather than the symbol of a new Iraq chosen by the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing

Council, with a blue Islamic crescent on a white field, the flag sent fluttering in an early summer breeze is the same historic national flag that flew through the rule of Saddam until he was deposed last year in the U.S.-led war.

Stitched on the flag's white stripe in green is the Koranic verse "Allahu Akbar" (God is Great), which Saddam added after the 1991 Persian Gulf war that forced him to reverse Iraq's annexation of Kuwait.

Technically, full diplomatic relations between the United States and Iraq have not been restored, but that move is considered imminent once Rahim presents her credentials to President Bush.

Before the ceremony, President Bush offered a favorable progress report on Iraq and pledged anew that America is committed to finishing the job there despite a new wave of violence.

Bush threw his arm around former top U.S. occupation official, L. Paul Bremer III — returned to Washington last week after formally handing over power Monday — as two men walked to the president's speech before about 100 Iraqi-Americans.

The president "talked about the progress that we have made just 14 months in Iraq," House spokesman Tom McClellan said. "He also stated our commitment to help Iraqi people complete the process of a free and peaceful Iraq."

Reporters were barred from the event.

Bremer, in a round of television interviews, acknowledged that the interim new government of Iraq faces daunting obstacles in restoring security and stability. He said he thought Prime Minister Iyad Allawi was a "tough guy" who can do the

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Powell visits victims of Darfur crisis

AL-FASHER, Sudan (AP) — Clambering onto donated sacks of grain, Sudanese refugees strained Wednesday for a look at Secretary of State Colin Powell, who came to tour camps and press the government to end ethnic violence and a humanitarian crisis he has called "catastrophic."

Powell's visit came as the United States increased pressure on Sudan with a draft resolution calling on the United Nations to impose an arms embargo and travel ban on the Arab militias that are blamed for attacks in Sudan's western Darfur region.

Powell and U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan met in Khartoum during a rare coordinated visit aimed at making sure the crisis that has forced more than 1 million people to flee their homes and killed 30,000 over the last 16 months is not ignored as Rwandan killings were a decade ago.

Drug prices offset Medicare discounts

WASHINGTON (AP) — Drug makers raised prescription prices nearly triple the rate of inflation the first three months of this year — just before Medicare began a pharmacy discount card program — negating much of the savings the government promised seniors, according to an AARP survey.

Prices rose by 3.4 percent among the top 200 brand-name drugs while inflation in general rose 1.2 percent in the first quarter of 2004, the study said. It says the prices pharmaceutical companies charge drug wholesalers increased more than the average led by Bristol-Myers Squibb's Plavix. The price of the blood thinner increased by 7.9 percent.

The Medicare card program began in June. The Bush administration says the average savings on brand-name drugs is 11 percent.

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