

Afghanistan on centre stage at Nato summit

Bush rejects early troop withdrawal from Iraq



US President George W Bush wells up as he finishes a speech at the University of Latvia in Riga yesterday. PICTURE RIGHT: A Latvian soldier stands guard on a armoured vehicle at the entrance to the closed zone during the Nato Summit in Riga, Latvia, yesterday. — Reuters/AFP

By Ibrahim bin Saif al Hamdani OMAN DAILY OBSERVER 29/11/06

RIGA — US President George W Bush yesterday ruled out an early withdrawal of US troops from Iraq “before the mission is complete”, amid growing pressure for him to bring the forces home. “One thing I won't do, I am not going to pull the troops off the battlefield before the mission is complete,” he said in a speech given on his arrival in the Latvian capital for a Nato summit. “We will continue to be flexible and we will make the changes necessary to succeed,” Bush told an audience at Riga's university.

In an effort to be seen as getting to grips with the spiraling violence in Iraq, Bush was due to travel today to Jordan for a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki. “We will discuss the situation on the ground in his country,” Bush said. In a speech in Tallinn earlier yesterday, Bush also fended off the civil war label, saying the recent upsurge of violence was part of a spiral of sectarian unrest that began nine months ago. “We have been in this phase for a while,” Bush said. “The bombing that took place recently was a part of a pattern that has been going on for about nine months,” the US leader said.

“No question it's tough. There's a lot of sectarian violence taking place, happening in my opinion because of these attacks by Al Qaeda, causing people to seek reprisals, and we will work with the Maliki government to defeat these elements,” Bush said. Asked at a news conference in Estonia what the difference was between the current bloodshed in Iraq and civil war, Bush said the latest bombings were part of a nine-month-old pattern of attacks by Al Qaeda militants aimed at fomenting sectarian violence by provoking retaliation. “We've been in this phase for a while,” Bush said. “There's a lot of sectarian violence taking place — fomented in my opinion because of these attacks by Al Qaeda causing people to seek reprisal.”

Meanwhile, insurgents killed up to 17 people in Iraq yesterday, including two in a triple car bomb attack at a Baghdad hospital, security sources said. Three car bombs exploded outside west Baghdad's Yarmuk hospital killing a total of at least two people and wounding dozens of civilians waiting to collect bodies of relatives from the morgue. Iraqis had gathered for the grim daily task of picking up the bodies of relatives at the overflowing mortuary for burial when a car bomb exploded, security and medical officials said. As police and emergency personnel gathered, a second car exploded killing a police officer, in an insurgent tactic used to maximise casualties.

“One policeman was killed and 32 other people wounded, including women,” said interior ministry spokesman Brigadier General Abdel Karim Khalaf. A medical source at Yarmuk hospital said a civilian had also been killed in the blast, while defence and security sources estimated the death toll at four. To the south of Baghdad in the town of Mahmudiyah, insurgents attacked a water treatment plant and killed five employees, police said, adding that it was not immediately known whether the insurgents had poisoned the water or not. To the northeast of Baghdad, an equally violent region, at least seven people were killed in Baquba.

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