

Higher BSP rates to cut economic output—NEDA

B 1

Espino lifts SLR over Purefoods

A 10

Crisis at Museo Iloilo

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Fighting heavy in Iraqi port

UMM QASR—A heavy firefight broke out between US Marines and Iraqi forces dug in at the southern Iraqi town of Umm Qasr on Sunday, one day after US officials said they had won control of the strategic port.

Reuters correspondent Adrian Croft said the Marines opened up with heavy bursts of machinegun fire in an area where US forces had set up a headquarters in the town, which is Iraq's only deep-water port.

A US commander at the scene, quoting a captured Iraqi officer, said dozens of Republican Guard were holding out in the sandy residential area for port workers that is laced with electricity pylons, cranes, and low sandy-colored buildings.

"There's a serious firefight going on here now," Croft said. "There are at least two Iraqi positions about one km south of the new port."

The Marines called in two M-1 Abrams tanks, which fired at least four times on a building from which gunfire had been directed at their forces.

One direct hit inflicted heavy damage on the three-story building in a compound where the Iraqi flag was still flying.

The tanks also used heavy machineguns to rake several buildings and a line of trees where

Iraqi forces were believed to be dug in.

Captain Rick Crevier, commander of Fox Company of the 2nd Battalion 1st US Marine Regiment, said a captured Iraqi officer had told them that 120 Republican guards were dug in.

Crevier also said tanks were being directed to another area. "We've got [Iraqi] dug-in troops in that vicinity," he added.

Live television showed American troops lying on their bellies about 300 meters from the building under attack. Black smoke billowed from the target area and one tank could be seen advancing slowly toward the building.

Earlier, Arabic television al Jazeera's correspondent in Umm Qasr said, Iraqis appeared to be staging "a counter attack" in the port city.

The battle came one day after American military officials reported seizing control of Umm Qasr, despite pockets of resistance in residential areas of the town.

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An Iraqi woman, seeking help for family members wounded by shrapnel when an explosion rocked their house, cries out to British soldiers manning a checkpoint near the southern Iraqi town of Safwan. In the central Iraqi city of Najaf, a US Army engineer has his machine gun on the ready.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS HELGEN AND KAI PFAFFENBACH/REUTERS

British plane shot down by Patriot missile

AS-SALIYHAH, Qatar—A Royal Air Force plane listed as missing after an operation in the Gulf late Saturday-early Sunday was hit by a US Patriot missile, a US military official said here Sunday.

"I can confirm that the British plane was hit by a Patriot," an official with the US Central Command said here. "The crew is missing."

The official, who asked not to be named, provided no further details.

A ministry of defense official in London earlier said the plane had gone missing after an operational mission and "might have been engaged by a US-operated Patriot missile battery near the Kuwaiti border."

He said it was not yet possible to say what sort of plane was involved or how many crew it contained as no families had been contacted.

He also declined to say what mission the aircraft had been carrying out when it went missing.

On Saturday six British servicemen and an American were killed when two Royal Navy Sea King helicopters collided over the Gulf in what was described as a "tragic accident."

That incident followed another helicopter crash in Kuwait the day before in which eight British Royal Marines and four US airmen were killed.

CONTINUED ON A2



Lakas exec courting Roco

MAILA AGER, CORRESPONDENT

THE ruling party Lakas-NUCD is trying to convince former education secretary Raul Roco to be its presidential candidate in next year's election.

A reliable source told THE MANILA TIMES yesterday back-channel negotiations between Roco's camp and a ranking Lakas official started last week.

The source said, Lakas has laid down some conditions for Roco once he decides to accept. But the source said he is still hesitant because he, himself has some demands that the party has to meet first.

"It's not that we don't like you [Roco] to become our presidential bet, but don't let us wait too long," the source said,

quoting the Lakas stalwart.

The message was sent to Roco, who was quoted as saying Lakas should study his conditions first.

The source did not specify the conditions raised by both sides to avoid the talks from being disrupted.

A senior Lakas member, Rep. Rodolfo Albano of Isabela City, did not welcome the idea of Roco joining the party and more so, the endorsement of his candidacy.

"He [Roco] keeps on saying that he doesn't need us. He is slamming his door on Lakas. And now he will join us? We will not be comfortable with him in the party," Albano said in a phone interview.

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Mideast OFWs a phone call away

JOWIE F. CORPUZ AND NIEL VILLEGAS MUGAS, CORRESPONDENTS

THE Departments of Foreign Affairs and Labor and Employment have opened a 24-hour action center for Filipinos who wish to get information about their relatives in the Middle East.

The workers' relatives can call up the DFA-DOLE action center through telephone numbers: 831-8874, 834-3333 and 834-4997.

Through the action center, the relatives of the Filipino workers can obtain fresh updates regarding the activities of the Middle East Preparedness Team led by special ambassador Roy Cimatu.

The action center also provides pertinent information from both departments.

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Diesel price reduced today

MARICEL E. BURGONIO SENIOR REPORTER

OIL companies will roll back their diesel price by 40 centavos a liter today following the drop in the prices of crude in the international market.

The big oil firms, Petron Corp., Pilipinas Shell Petroleum Corp., and Caltex Philippines, Inc., as well as the new oil players reduced diesel prices a day after Malacañang predicted the rollback.

Diesel in gas stations sold at an average of P15.98 last week.

The prices of oil in the world market collapsed further as the Iraqi campaign progressed and it appeared oil fields were secure.

Earlier this month, the oil companies raised their fuel prices by an average of 70 centavos.

In a phone interview, Roberto Kanapi, Pilipinas Shell spokesman, said Shell's inventory was bought when the price of crude was \$32 a barrel. Oil companies are selling oil products this March from their inventory in February.

"A price rollback is not yet due as we are keeping our inventory of higher-priced products. However, for competitive purposes, we will roll back the price of diesel by 40 centavos a liter effective 6 a.m.," Kanapi said.

Petron, the country's largest oil company, said it could be the first in a series of possible price rollbacks, given the recent

decline in international oil prices.

"This rollback in our diesel prices was implemented to give the public the early benefit of the recent decline in crude prices," Virginia A. Ruivivar, Petron corporate communications manager, said.

"We hope that the decline is permanent and that oil prices will be stable at a low range in the coming months," she said.

The bellwether Dubai crude has slipped to as low as \$22 a barrel since the start of the US-led war on Iraq.

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has announced it was ready to pump more oil into the market in case a shortage looms.

As of March 20, Dubai crude averaged \$28.86 a barrel, down from the February average of \$30.02 a barrel.

Lawrence V. Luang, Unioil Petroleum vice president for Corporate Affairs, said that Means of Platt's Singapore (MOPS), the price benchmark for finished products, sold at \$41 a barrel in February due to high war premium. In March, MOPS retreated by \$6 a barrel.

Fernando Martinez, Eastern Petroleum Corp. president, said they would maintain its price for diesel since they would continue to give discounts to transport groups who take advantage of the program. Eastern was the first oil company to offer a 60-centavo-a-liter discount by putting up filling stations in jeepney terminals in Makati, Old Pantranco and Mandaluyong.

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Cerilo Macaraeg talks to her daughter Socorro, a nurse working in Kuwait, as his wife, Nelly, waits for her turn at the DFA-DOLE action center.

PHOTO BY ROGER RANADA

Do you think Saddam Hussein is still alive?

Send us your text messages. Let your choice be heard!
Vote using your cellphone. We'll publish your feedback.

Key in: **TIMES**<space>**POLL**<space> then **A** for YES **B** for NO

Key in: **TIMES**<space>**FB**<space> then **Your name** then **Your message**

And send to: **2299** for Smart and Touch Mobile subscribers, **2333** for Globe subscribers only **211** for Smart subscribers only

This poll will run from Monday to Saturday. Updates will be posted daily. Final tally will be published on March 30, 2003, in **The Sunday Times**

*Post-paid users will be charged P2 per text, pre-paid P2.50.

