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Major battles over, U.S. declares



Tikrit falls; all key cities in Iraq taken

By Jonathan S. Landay, Sara Oikon and Martin Merzer
KNIGHT RIDDER NEWS SERVICE

TIKRIT, Iraq — The Pentagon declared the end of significant fighting in Iraq yesterday as Marines stormed the heart of Tikrit and captured the last stronghold of Saddam Hussein. "The major combat operations are over," Maj. Gen. Stanley McChrystal said after more than 3,000 Marines fought their way to the center of Hussein's ancestral hometown.

In Washington, the Bush administration's attention was shifting to postwar concerns.

The White House and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld turned up the pressure on Syria, demanding that it stop harboring Iraqi fugitives and renounce terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

U.S. officials also anticipated today's meeting in Nasiriyah, where they hoped to begin forging an interim government for post-Hussein Iraq by welding together rival ethnic, religious and exile factions.

In Tikrit, Marines seized a presidential palace and rolled their armored vehicles along the city's broad boulevards. They watched white flags flutter from taxicabs, concrete homes and mud huts. They accepted roses from a few grateful residents — and stayed alert for suicide attacks by the remnants of pro-Hussein militias.

Tikrit was the last important center of Hussein's regime, and it had fallen — much like Basra, Nasiriyah, Najaf, Karbala, Kut, Kirkuk, Irbil, Mosul and Baghdad.

"There is nothing beyond Tikrit," said Marine Lt. Col. Doug Hardison. "That is it. It's now just a function of when to call the win."

Iraqi forces once again evaporated and large concentrations of Iraqi troops no longer existed anywhere, McChrystal and others said, though they cautioned that small-scale battles remained likely.

Cpl. Jeffrey Pittard of the 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, Weapons Company, stood guard over an intersection in Tikrit yesterday. A statue of Saddam Hussein on horseback loomed behind the Marine. The city, which fell to coalition forces, is Hussein's ancestral hometown. *Earnie Grafton / Union-Tribune*

U.S. warns Syria of sanctions

Chemical-weapons tests alleged; military action not ruled out

By Anne E. Kornblut
THE BOSTON GLOBE

WASHINGTON — Turning up pressure on Syria to hand over Iraqi officials who may have fled there recently, Bush administration officials said they are considering tough sanctions against Damascus if it fails to comply, and they refused to rule out military action.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Syria has tested chemical weapons in the past year.

With Iraq under coalition control, Secretary of State Colin Powell said other countries in the region should reassess their commitment to terrorism, and consider whether they want to be a constructive part of reshaping the Middle East.

Dozens of senior Iraqi leaders have vanished and at least one member of Saddam Hussein's inner circle was captured on his way to Syria, which does not require visas from citizens of Arab nations.

Among Iraqis who have taken refuge in Syria in recent weeks and months are weapons scientists who fled Iraq to avoid questioning by U.N. inspectors and capture by U.S. forces, a U.S. intelligence official said.

With their confrontation of Syria, White House officials walked a delicate strategic line. They refused to rule out military action, a move apparently designed to pressure Syria to cooperate, but also risked further aggravating relations with countries in the region opposed to the war in Iraq.

At the same time, some analysts said the administration is seeking to achieve a longer-term goal — persuading Syria to back away from supporting Hamas and Hezbollah, two groups that the Israeli government maintains are a threat to its security.

Syria is allowing some members

Syria profile

Head of state: President Bashar Assad (since 2000)

Political parties: Baath Party dominates; other parties have little influence

GDP per capita: \$3,200 (2001 est.)

Population: 17.2 million

Ethnic groups: Arab 90.3%, Kurds, Armenians, other 9.7%

Religions: Sunni Muslim 74%, Alawite, Druze, other Muslim groups 16%, Christian 10%

SOURCE: CIA World Factbook 2002 KNIGHT RIDDER/TRIBUNE

SEE Syria, A5

SEE Hussein, A5



With the end of the war's large-scale combat operations, the San Diego-based aircraft carrier Constellation and its support group may be ordered to return home soon. *Justin Sullivan / Getty Images*

Constellation prepares to sail home, into history

Carrier battle group could get orders today

By Jeff McDonald
STAFF WRITER

Word that thousands of San Diego-based sailors will be ordered home from the Persian Gulf — perhaps as soon as today — is shooting across the military community faster than an F/A-18 Hornet fighter.

Members of the aircraft carrier

Constellation's crew and its five support ships are telling wives and husbands that they expect to be ordered home, concluding a deployment that began long before the start of the war with Iraq.

The strike group — it left with more than 8,000 sailors and Marines — could reach San Diego late next month.

If so, it would be the first major unit to return from the war and would mark the end more than 40 years of service for the battle-tested Constellation.

News of the return began circulating after a Pentagon spokesman said yesterday that all five U.S. carrier groups are not needed in the region.

"In fact, today was the last day that aircraft from all five carrier battle groups will fly missions into Iraq," said Maj. Gen. Stanley McChrystal. "A couple of them will be departing the region over the next few days."

McChrystal's statement came two days after Vice Adm. Timothy Keating, the 5th Fleet commander,

said the air campaign against Iraq was winding down and that military planners were preparing to send some planes home.

The Associated Press reported yesterday that the carrier Kitty Hawk would leave the Persian Gulf this week and return to its berth at Yokosuka, Japan. The Constellation would return to San Diego shortly after that, the AP said.

The carrier Nimitz, which left San Diego on March 3, is expected

SEE Carrier, A4

Competition grows intense in college admissions game

More qualified students being rejected as applications soar

By Eleanor Yang and Sherry Parmet
STAFF WRITERS

Nolan Giblin had every reason to believe he would have his pick of colleges.

Nolan's résumé boasted a 4.1 grade point average, a schedule jammed with advanced classes, two years on the varsity football team and volunteer service for Habitat for Humanity.

But one by one, the rejection letters arrived: UCLA, UC Santa Barbara, UC Davis and then

Cal Poly San Luis Obispo — nearly every school he applied to.

After receiving the last rejection, Nolan started laughing.

"This has got to be a world record," the La Costa Canyon High School senior told his mom.

Nolan's experience is representative of many as colleges mail rejection letters this month.

Getting into top colleges is more elusive than ever as record numbers of applicants are vying for admission. Students whose résumés would have earned them admission to Ivy League

SEE College, A6



Torrey Pines senior Jessica Fishman, who worked with junior Max Ostrove last week, said her 3.9 GPA wasn't enough to get her accepted to UCLA and other schools. *Don Kohlbauer / Union-Tribune*

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