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Kurdish forces nab Iraqi vice president

Following U.S. approval, native soldiers captured the 20th most-wanted former Iraqi official, Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan

By Alex Rodriguez
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

SULAYMANIYAH, Iraq — Kurdish forces captured Saddam Hussein's vice president during a predawn raid Tuesday in the northern city of Mosul, turning over to the U.S. military a notoriously ruthless henchman known as "Saddam's knuckles."

Soldiers with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan found Taha Yassin Ramadan, disguised in Arab peasant clothes, in a two-story home owned by his family. He was No. 20 on the U.S. list of the 55 most-wanted members of Saddam's regime.

The PUK was one of two Kurdish organizations that fought alongside U.S. troops in northern Iraq during the war.

The PUK and the other group, the Kurdish Democratic Party, share local governance of the swath of northern Iraq regarded as Kurdish territory.

PUK authorities at the organization's headquarters in Sulaymaniyah said they staked out Ramadan's movements the last two weeks. He traveled between farmhouses owned by his family in the Mosul area. Informants with links to Ramadan's bodyguards gave PUK leaders strong leads that led to his capture, said Sadi Pire, the PUK's representative in Mosul.

Ramadan, 65, was at a house in Mosul with one of his wives, a brother-in-law and several bodyguards, PUK officials said. No shots were fired during the raid, Pire said.

The U.S. military did not take part in the raid but had been informed ahead of time and signaled its approval, Pire said.

President Bush said he was "really pleased that we've captured the vice

president. Slowly but surely we'll find who we need to find."

Ramadan was briefly interrogated by PUK forces before being handed over to the U.S. 101st Airborne Division. U.S. military officials in Sulaymaniyah refused to comment on Ramadan's capture.

A PUK official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Ramadan provided "good information" about the whereabouts of other key Saddam regime figures sought by the U.S. "Now we have a good chance to find more people," the official said.

It was in Mosul that Saddam's two oldest sons, Odai and Qusai, were killed by U.S. troops last month during an hours-long gunfight at the villa the sons were using as a hideout.

A former bank clerk, Ramadan became close with Saddam after joining the Baath Party in the mid-1950s. In the 1980s, Ramadan became deputy prime minister and was regarded as

Saddam's right-hand man. Saddam named him vice president after Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Fearing by Iraqis as a figure almost as ruthless as Saddam, Ramadan has been singled out by Iraqi opposition groups as one of the regime members who should face trial for war crimes. In 1970, he oversaw a court that ordered the executions of 44 officers accused of plotting a coup.

"He was a despicable character," said Barham Saleh, the PUK's prime minister, during an interview at his home in Sulaymaniyah. "He was a senior lieutenant to Saddam Hussein and he was involved in Hussein's dirty violence directed at the Iraqi people."

With Ramadan's capture, 38 people on the U.S. list of most-wanted regime members have been seized or killed.

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Blackout prompts energy legislation push

Lawmakers have focused their attention on regulations to help prevent a blackout like last week's that left millions without power

By James Kuhnenn
and Seth Borenstein
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — The power blackout that cascaded from Ohio to New York City last week is giving momentum to stalled energy legislation that would beef up federal authority over the nation's electrical power grid.

To get that, however, President Bush may have to give up his insistence on drilling for oil in the Arctic.

Bush on Tuesday called on Congress to act quickly and the chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee promised to deliver a comprehensive bill by the end of September.

Some House Democrats have pressed for streamlined, electricity-only legislation since the outages Thursday that left millions of Americans and Canadians powerless. But the Bush administration wants law-

makers to work out differences on broader energy legislation that have lingered in Congress for two years.

Bush's call to approve drilling for oil in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has been the biggest obstacle to passage of an energy bill because of staunch environmental opposition and threatened filibusters in the Senate by Democrats.

The House and Senate have passed differing energy bills that lobbyists and industry observers had thought could take months to reconcile. But last week's power outage focused attention on the little noticed and less understood electricity provisions in the bill — proposals that the electrical industry and federal regulators believe could help avoid future blackouts.

"Now is the time for the Congress to move and get something done," Bush said Thursday, speaking to reporters at a gas station in Crawford, Texas.

Rep. Billy Tauzin, R-La., the chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said he would convene hearings Sept. 3 and 4 to investigate the outages and said he

pledged to Bush that Congress would complete an energy bill soon.

"I assured him that we will have a comprehensive energy bill ready for final congressional action by the end of September," Tauzin said in a statement.

Bush and Tauzin said the key electricity provisions would require that electric companies comply with a set of standards that assure reliable and secure power transmission. Under current law, such compliance is voluntary.

"What that means is that companies transmitting energy will have to have strong reliability measures in place, otherwise there will be consequences for them," Bush said.

Tauzin also promised to make it easier to install transmission lines over the objections of environmentalists or property owners. That proposal is likely to be contentious because of the influence of property rights advocates in the Senate.

Many senators also want to delay a proposed regulation by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission to set up regional transmission organizations to administer a national pricing

system. The House is silent on the proposal but senators from states with low electrical costs want to delay the plan for two years.

The House and Senate conference that will work out differences between the bills also will face other contentious energy proposals, including an effort by Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., the chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, to provide tax incentives for new nuclear power plants.

Some Democrats and industry watchers preferred a more targeted response to the power outage, suggesting that Congress would have an easier time working out differences with a narrowly tailored electricity bill.

Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham on Tuesday said the electricity provisions still would be difficult to work out. "Anybody who's followed it closely knows how challenging compromise legislation on just electricity alone is," he said.

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