

9 U.S. soldiers killed in helicopter attack

Authorities also report that ground fire hit an Air Force cargo plane carrying 63 passengers yesterday

By Hannah Allam and Tom Lasseter
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

FALLUJAH, Iraq — Insurgents apparently shot down a U.S. military helicopter Thursday, killing all nine soldiers on board and strewing debris across farmland near the central Iraqi town of Fallujah, southwest of Baghdad.

It was the deadliest attack on American soldiers since Nov. 2, when insurgents downed a Chinook helicopter, killing 16 soldiers, also near Fallujah. It came one day after a mortar attack near the Baghdad airport killed one U.S. soldier and injured 30.

In a separate incident, a U.S. Air

Force C-5 cargo plane carrying 63 passengers and crew was struck by ground fire shortly after it took off from Baghdad International Airport around 6:20 a.m. The plane returned to the airport and landed safely. No one was injured. Mark Voorhis, a spokesman for Air Mobility Command at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., said it was unclear whether the plane had been struck by a missile or some other weapon.

Military officials provided little information on the downing of the helicopter, saying only that nine soldiers had died when a UH-60 Black Hawk went down at about 2:20 p.m. in southern Fallujah. A military spokesman said the helicopter was on a routine mission but didn't say what that mission was or identify the unit to which the helicopter or soldiers were assigned.

Four witnesses in the area reported

seeing rockets fired at the aircraft, and they described how farmers cheered as they watched through binoculars as rescue workers pulled the dead from the helicopter.

"We saw rockets hit the tail of the helicopter and then it broke in two," said Omar Kanoun, 27, who had trudged through potato fields for a clear view of the crash site. "I gave my binoculars to my nephew, and we watched the Americans count the bodies."

The helicopter crash came during what is developing into a particularly violent week.

On Wednesday night, a U.S. soldier was killed and 30 others wounded in a mortar attack on the sleeping quarters of a military base about halfway between Baghdad and Fallujah. A Jordanian field hospital just outside Fallujah was hit Wednesday by a rocket

attack that injured no one, but it left structural damage. Two French contractors were killed Monday night in a drive-by shooting.

While no one was injured in the shooting of the C-5 cargo jet at the Baghdad airport, it was at least the second time insurgents succeeded in hitting an aircraft at the airport.

Meanwhile, a much-touted release of Iraqis detained in U.S. sweeps against suspected insurgents apparently didn't begin Thursday as scheduled.

Dozens of Iraqis waited outside Abu Ghraib prison for at least 100 detainees who were scheduled for release under a coalition gesture to win over the likely supporters of such insurgents. As the hours went by with no word of a release, patience wore thin for the relatives camped outside prison gates.

"It's another lie," said Nouri

Alaboudi, who arrived at dawn for news of a nephew arrested in a weapons raid three months ago. "We've been waiting here all day, and no one has left. I can't see my nephew, I can't find out anything about him. So we're just hoping."

U.S. Iraq administrator L. Paul Bremer had announced the release Wednesday, but on Thursday, a senior coalition spokesman, Dan Senor, confirmed in a roundabout way that no prisoners had been released. Under the program, each detainee will be released to a tribal leader or cleric who will guarantee his behavior.

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Poll: Saddam's capture heightened Bush's support

Two national surveys show President Bush gained popularity with Hispanic voters in the last month

By Elaine De Valle
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

MIAMI — More Hispanics support the war in Iraq and the Bush administration now than before Saddam Hussein was captured, but they still lag behind the general public's approval rating, results from two national surveys show.

A majority of Hispanics — 54 percent — said Bush was doing an "excellent" or "good" job when polled earlier this month by the Pew Hispanic Center.

The same question in a similar survey taken in December shows Bush had the approval of only about 46

percent of Hispanics. In both polls, the approval rating by Hispanics was several percentage points lower than the general population.

The widely publicized capture also shifted the Hispanic community's stance on U.S. troops. Before Saddam was caught, more Latinos said troops should come home immediately, while a majority now say coalition forces should stay in Iraq.

But most Hispanics worry the president doesn't have a clear plan to withdraw from Iraq, and in both polls, 70 percent said the administration should concentrate more on the economy.

The combined results of two polls released Thursday — one done before Saddam's capture Dec. 13, and one conducted last week — identify important changes in Hispanic attitudes toward Iraq, the economy and the presidential election, said

Roberto Suro, director of the Pew Hispanic Center.

"This shows serious inroads into what had previously been a traditionally Democratic constituency," Suro said in a telephone conference call with journalists.

"There is sort of good news and bad news for President Bush," Suro said. "There's a volatility in the Hispanic population in response to events in Iraq and that will be good news for the president as long as events go well. But it could clearly turn the other way."

While only 27 percent of Hispanics said in December that they wanted to see Bush re-elected, 37 percent of the January respondents said they would support his 2004 bid.

Sergio Bendixen — president of the Coral Gables, Fla.-based Bendixen & Associates, a public opinion

research firm that specializes in the Hispanic population and did the fieldwork for both Pew Hispanic surveys — said the results show Latinos can go either way.

"These two polls less than 30 days apart show volatility and tend to reinforce those who strongly feel that the Latino vote is a swing vote in American politics and is going to be a swing vote in the 2004 election," Bendixen said.

Teresa Martinez, who oversees the voter mobilization project of the National Council of La Raza, agreed that Hispanics are emerging as swing voters, but said Latinos tend to be concerned about the same issues as the general public.

"However, when we look at what weaknesses the president has, Latinos focus on the economy," Martinez said. "The signal is loud and clear. Latinos have a positive approval

rating for the president because they like him, he's very likable."

"But they are still looking at how he's doing at issues and policies and are concerned that he is still not doing enough for the economy."

Milian says other factors also may have affected the attitudes of Hispanics toward the president and the war, beginning with the number of Hispanics fighting.

"Hispanics have traditionally been overrepresented in the military, particularly in the enlisted rank," Milian said.

"That unprecedented move to give 15,000 soldiers, by executive order, a special dispensation to expedite citizenship, I think that was important too."

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