

Coalition forces raid home, offices of Iraqi National Congress member

An investigation conducted by Iraqi authorities led to the raid against Ahmad Chalabi, U.S. officials say

By Deborah Horan and Liz Sly
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

BAGHDAD, Iraq — U.S. soldiers and Iraqi police raided the home and offices of America's longtime ally Ahmad Chalabi on Thursday, signaling a dramatic rift between the U.S. administration and the man once touted by the Pentagon as a future leader of Iraq.

The force, including uniformed and plainclothes Americans who identified themselves as members of the FBI and CIA, surrounded Chalabi's house in the upscale Mansour district of Baghdad at about 9:30 a.m. and seized computers and documents, witnesses said. Two other buildings associated with Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress were also searched.

The raid came two days after the Pentagon announced that it was cutting off Chalabi's monthly stipend of \$340,000.

"I am America's best friend in Iraq," Chalabi said at a news conference at his palatial, pagoda-style office. "If the (coalition) finds it necessary to direct an armed attack against my home, you can see the state of relations between the (coalition) and the Iraqi people."

U.S. officials disclaimed responsibility for the raid, saying it had been

initiated and planned by Iraqi authorities after weeks of investigations. Dan Senor, a spokesman for L. Paul Bremer, the chief U.S. administrator in Iraq, said Bremer only learned the raid had taken place after the fact.

Although U.S. troops were involved,

"This was political. (The coalition is) trying to put pressure on him, to portray him as a bad guy."

Haidar Musawi
Chalabi aide

"It was an Iraqi-led investigation, it was an Iraqi-led raid," Senor said.

But Chalabi aide Haidar Musawi ridiculed the idea that U.S. authorities had not ordered the raid. "This was political," he said at Chalabi's office. "They're trying to put pressure on him, to portray him as a bad guy."

A senior coalition official speaking on condition of anonymity at a news conference said an Iraqi judge had issued warrants for the arrest of "up to 15 people" on charges of kidnapping, fraud and "associated matters." Chalabi was not among them, said the official, who refused to elaborate on the charges.

Some of the warrants were served during the raids, the official said. A number of the warrants were not

served because the people named in them were not present. The official said he did not know how many warrants had not been served.

But Judge Hussain al-Moathin, the Iraqi magistrate charged with investigating Chalabi and his INC, named eight men — whom he called "insurgents and a small number of thugs" — wanted on charges of "kidnapping and ... killing" and "taking over some government facilities."

He did not directly tie the eight wanted men to Chalabi, who said he was in bed asleep when police burst into his bedroom and put a gun to his head.

Chalabi said he was sure he was being targeted because of his increasingly vocal criticisms of the way the U.S. is running Iraq. "I am now calling for policies to liberate the Iraqi people, to get full sovereignty now, and I am pushing the gate in a way they don't like," he said.

Musawi said the raiding forces were apparently looking for several senior members of the INC, including the group's intelligence chief, who had been tipped off weeks ago that he was being sought.

Credited with supplying much of the intelligence concerning Iraq's weapons of mass destruction in the period leading up to the war, Chalabi has long been a divisive figure.

Convicted in absentia in Jordan on banking fraud charges, he never served a sentence, but he also never completely shook his reputation as a crook.

In Washington, where he lobbied to persuade the U.S. to oust Saddam Hussein, he was beloved and revered by rival Iraqi exile groups and U.S. policymakers touting competing plans for regime change in Iraq.

"He has been a very polarizing and controversial figure," said Phebe Marr, an author and expert on Iraq in Washington. "The people who like him like him a lot. The people who don't like him dislike him intensely."

Meanwhile, a U.S. policy reversal set Chalabi and the Americans on a collision course.

Bremer announced weeks ago that top Baathists from Hussein's former regime would be allowed to hold posts in government and in Iraq's security services.

U.S. military commanders welcomed high-ranking members of Iraq's former army into the New Iraqi Army, while Chalabi fumed.

In recent weeks, Chalabi has improved relations with key Shiite parties and political figures in southern Iraq, moves that some analysts said signaled he had begun angling for elections.

His legal woes may undermine any political aspirations, some analysts said. But others predicted Chalabi might weather the storm.

"He's not easy to knock out," Marr said. "I'd never count him out for good."

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Cuban government may raise prices on goods sold in dollars

Economic experts question the plan, seen by many as a reaction to new policies governing Cuban-Americans

By Gary Marx
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

HAVANA — Cuban officials are proposing to raise prices by 10 to 30 percent on most goods sold in dollars in what they have described as a response to measures recently announced by President Bush to pressure the island's communist government.

The price increases, which have not been announced but are outlined in a copy of a government document circulating in Havana, are likely to be unpopular among Cuba's 11 million residents, who often rely on the dollar stores to purchase food staples and other items in scarce supply for Cuban pesos.

"Politically, they are going to make a lot of people unhappy," said Philip Peters, a former U.S. State Department official and Cuba expert.

Cuban officials abruptly suspended sales in the dollar stores early last week after the Bush administration announced a reduction in the

amount of money Cubans living in the United States can legally send to relatives on the island. Bush also is sharply curtailing the number of visits Cuban-Americans can legally make to the island and the amount of money they can spend during those trips.

The White House said those measures and others were designed to cut the amount of hard currency going to the Cuban government and speed a peaceful transition to democracy.

But some experts questioned the efficacy of the moves while Cuban officials denounced them as draconian and said they would hurt Cuban families and set the stage for a possible U.S. military attack.

Peters said he did not understand how increasing prices at dollar stores would help the Cuban government or its cash-strapped people weather the impact of the new measures.

"The economics are backwards," he said. "If they wanted to bring an infusion of cash, they should drop prices. They are going to drive their revenue down. There will be less demand."

One diplomat in Havana suggested the government may have leaked the document in advance of an

announcement to gauge public reaction and said officials might eliminate or modify some of the proposed price increases.

The price of goods such as cereal, pasta, dairy products, meat, cooking oil and other staples will increase 10 percent, according to the document. Shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste and other personal hygiene items also will rise 10 percent, along with construction materials.

But the price of electronic equipment, toys and bicycles will go up 15 percent, imported cigarettes will go up 20 percent and imported alcoholic beverages 25 percent.

The diplomat said Cuban officials may be trying to reduce the sale of consumer goods to dampen the growing amount of conspicuous consumption, which runs counter to the ideals of the revolution.

By pinning blame for the price increases on Bush, Cuban President Fidel Castro and other officials also are seeking to rally nationalist support and deflect criticism away from the government for the economic measures, experts said.

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