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Kerry blames Bush for increasing gas prices

The presidential candidate says Bush broke his 2000 promise to keep prices low

By Frank James
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

PORTLAND, Ore. — Though Sen. John Kerry planned to focus his appearance Tuesday on the issue of high gasoline prices, a question from the audience provoked a sharp comment on the Bush administration's Iraq policy.

"It is an unbelievable statement about the failure of the diplomacy of this president and this administration" that Europe and the Arab countries have sat on their hands, even though they are more threatened by

the prospect of Iraq as a failed state than the U.S., Kerry said.

"That tells you everything about the arrogance and ineptness of this administration that needs to be changed," said Kerry, the Massachusetts senator who is the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee.

For many weeks, Kerry has been reluctant to forcefully attack the Bush administration at every turn for its actions in Iraq.

The approach has been largely one of allowing the bad news from Iraq — the continued violence and the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison — to serve as its criticism of the Republican administration.

On the way to Portland aboard his new campaign plane, for instance, reporters asked Kerry if he had watched the president's speech. Kerry said he had watched half of it.

Asked to comment on the president's proposal to raze the notorious prison, Kerry demurred, throwing up his hands and saying he would have a response later. The campaign said Kerry will outline his ideas on national security, including Iraq, later this week.

Kerry has instead tried to keep the emphasis on domestic issues such as health care and education.

His event Tuesday at the Portland school bus depot fit the pattern. It was billed as a chance for Kerry to critique the Bush administration for not doing enough to control rising gas prices.

The Kerry campaign views the gas price issue as a major Bush administration vulnerability, since it feeds into a widely held perception of a White House too cozy with the oil industry. Both the president and Vice President Dick Cheney were employed in the energy industry, and the president's family has a long-time relationship with the Saudi royal family.

"George Bush and his friends talk about the death tax," Kerry told the bus depot audience, referring to long-standing Republican opposition to the estate tax.

"What about ... the Saudi-George Bush gasoline tax that we're now paying because OPEC wasn't pressured to lower the prices by producing more?" Kerry asked, referring to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. "They could've produced more before now. And America is paying an enormous penalty because of that and all of our economy gets hurt because of that."

As he has done recently, Kerry accused the president of breaking a promise from the 2000 campaign in which Bush said he would jawbone the Saudis, the world's largest oil producers, to lower prices during times of high oil costs. Kerry said he, by contrast, would use his powers of persuasion with the Saudis to force prices down.

Kerry also used the event to push for energy independence. He has called for \$10 billion in incentives to

encourage the auto industry to make fuel efficient advanced technology vehicles. He also has said he would offer consumers tax credits of up to \$4,000 to make purchasing such vehicles more attractive.

The Bush campaign parried Kerry's criticism by accusing Kerry of hypocrisy.

"John Kerry's campaign attacks on gas prices ignore the reality of Kerry's long record of supporting higher gas prices and blocking the president's comprehensive energy plan," said a statement by Steve Schmidt, a Bush campaign spokesman.

Kerry aides said Tuesday that the campaign would decide soon whether the senator would delay his acceptance of the presidential nomination past the Democratic National Convention in July.

Last week, the campaign disclosed that it was considering such a delay so that it wouldn't have to stretch its \$75 million in public financing five weeks longer than the Bush-Cheney campaign.

That notion has been criticized by Republicans and some Democrats. Critics have said it amounted to playing games with the nomination and could hurt coverage of the convention or potential revenues in Boston, the site of the convention.

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STUDENT TRAVEL & BEYOND

Bush's plans for sovereignty fail to meet Iraqi expectations

Iraq officials question the amount of control afforded the country's government after the June 30 handover

By Liz Sly and Deborah Horan
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Iraqis expressed skepticism Tuesday about the viability of President Bush's plan for transferring sovereignty to a new Iraqi government, saying its promises fell short of their expectations.

"It's not the full sovereignty we've been promised on more than one occasion," said Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a member of Iraq's U.S.-appointed Governing Council, who has been mentioned as a possible candidate for the presidency of the interim government due to take over responsibility June 30.

"Full sovereignty means everything in Iraq will be administered by Iraqis including the military, security and the economy," said Jaafari, who heads the Islamic Dawa Party.

In a speech Monday night, Bush outlined his blueprint for a new, free and independent Iraq, promising that the government to take over responsibility from the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority will enjoy "full sovereignty."

Following up on his address, Bush spoke by phone Tuesday morning with French President Jacques Chirac, a critic of U.S. policy in Iraq.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said Bush and Chirac came to

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Ibrahim al-Jaafari
Member, Iraq's Governing Council

"broad agreement" on a draft resolution presented to the U.N. Security Council that lays out a framework for the transfer of sovereignty to an interim administration June 30. That would be followed by democratic elections for a national assembly or legislature by January 2005.

The national assembly will be responsible for drafting a new constitution and appointing a transitional government that will rule until fresh elections are held under the new constitution.

McClellan said the administration would draft a letter to the U.N. Security Council that will spell out in detail the coalition's "relationship" with the interim government, although it was unclear when the letter would be made public.

It also is not clear how much authority the Iraqi government will have over the U.S. forces expected to remain in Iraq, how long troops will stay and who will be in the new government.

"We found it less than our expectations," the president of Iraq's Governing Council, Ghazi Mashal Ajil al-Yawer said after a meeting of council

members to discuss the U.N. resolution.

On the streets of Baghdad, Iraqis said they doubted any Iraqi government could be truly independent until U.S. forces leave.

"They will never bring democracy and they will never achieve safety," said Hashem Ritha, a building contractor. "There will always be fighting if they are here."

It also seems unlikely that the U.N.'s special envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, will be able to meet Bush's target of producing a list of candidates for the interim administration in the next few days.

"Mr. Brahimi has said it would be a good thing if we were finished by the end of the month," U.N. spokesman Ahmad Fawzi said. "That could mean the last few days of this month or early next month."

In addition to greater U.N. involvement, the U.S. is calling for NATO to assume a major role in the country's reconstruction.

But Germany's ambassador to the U.S. said in Chicago on Tuesday that sending NATO troops to support the U.S. military would be a mistake for the alliance because "if NATO came in, it would be seen as strictly an instrument in the hands of the hated occupier, the United States."

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