

Today	Saturday	Sunday
High: 64 Low: 50 Precip: 90%	High: 61 Low: 46 Precip: 50%	High: 66 Low: 43 Precip: 10%

IN BRIEF

Blast at Egyptian hotel leads to 30 fatalities

CAIRO, Egypt — Three explosions shook popular resorts on Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, where Israelis were vacationing Thursday night at the close of a Jewish holiday, Egyptian officials and witnesses said.

The first blast, about 10 p.m., shook the Hilton hotel in the Taba resort, only yards from the Israeli border. EHUD YAARI, a reporter for Israel's Channel One TV, quoting Egyptian officials, said 30 people were killed.

Israeli medics said they had transferred 22 wounded people to hospitals, but there were believed to be many more. Witnesses said there were people trapped under the ruins of the western side of the hotel.

Bush defends invasion despite critical report

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Faced with a harshly critical new report, President Bush conceded Thursday that Iraq did not have the stockpiles of banned weapons he had warned of before the invasion last year, but insisted that "we were right to take action" against

Saddam Hussein. "America is safer today with Saddam Hussein in prison," Bush said in a surprise statement to reporters as he prepared to fly to Wisconsin.

240 detainees released from U.S., Iraqi custody

BAGHDAD, Iraq — About 240 detainees were freed Thursday from U.S. and Iraqi custody, another sign of what Iraqi human rights lawyers say is a marked improvement in the handling of prisoners in the past two months. None of those freed was a so-called high-value detainee, said Lt. Col. Barry Johnson, a military spokesman. High-value detainees are processed separately from the 1,700 "security detainees" at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad and Camp Bucca in southern Iraq, he said.

The U.S. military aims to transfer most of the security detainees now held at Abu Ghraib to Camp Bucca, which is being expanded and upgraded to become the primary holding facility by the beginning of the year.

U.S. warns of terrorism threat to schools

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Education Department has advised school leaders nationwide to watch for people spying on their buildings or buses to help detect any possibility of terrorism like the deadly school siege in Russia. The warning follows an analysis by the FBI and the Homeland Security Department of the siege that killed nearly 340 people, many of them students, in the city of Beslan last month.

— The Associated Press

Insurgent rockets rattle hotel housing journalists

Guests escape the Baghdad blasts, but security is still a major concern as bombings and attacks continue

BY ALEXANDRA ZAVIS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Rockets struck a Baghdad hotel housing foreign contractors and journalists late Thursday, drawing return fire and underscoring the precarious security in the heart of the Iraqi capital. Outside Baghdad, roadside bombings killed two more American soldiers.

More scattered explosions reverberated through the heart of the Iraqi capital around midnight, but it wasn't known what caused the blasts or if there were any casualties.

The rocket attacks came as an aide to radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr offered to disarm his Mahdi Army militia in a move that could bring an end to weeks of fighting in Baghdad's Shiite district Sadr City. The government cautiously welcomed the offer and suggested other militant groups also lay down their arms.

Three Katyusha rockets slammed into the Sheraton hotel, the Interior Ministry said, triggering thunderous explosions, shattering windows and setting off small fires. Dazed guests,

including Western journalists, contractors and a bride and groom on their wedding night stumbled to safety through the smoke and debris.

There were no deaths or serious injuries, Iraqi officials said.

The hotels, which have been targeted by rockets and mortars before, stand as symbols of continued U.S. and Western dominance in Iraq despite the formal handover of power to an interim Iraqi government June 28.

Interior Ministry spokesman Col. Adnan Abdul-Rahman said the rockets were fired from the back of a minibus parked near Firdous Square, where jubilant crowds hauled down a statue of Saddam Hussein on April 9, 2003, marking the fall of the capital to American forces.

A fourth rocket blew up inside the vehicle, he said, as security guards responded with ear-shattering volleys of automatic weapons and machine gun fire.

"It was a shattering explosion, a crack and then a massive, massive thud," said John Cookson of Fox News, which maintains an office in the Sheraton. "The whole room shook."

Late Thursday, residents reported strong explosions northwest of the Sunni insurgent stronghold Fallujah.

Earlier, in the capital, a mortar shell exploded in the U.S.-controlled Green Zone across the Tigris River from the hotel compound. There was no report of damage or casualties.

U.S. authorities raised a security alert in the Green Zone after an improvised bomb was found in front of a restaurant there on Tuesday. A U.S. military ordnance detachment safely disarmed the device, U.S. officials said.

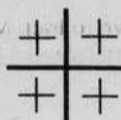
American and Iraqi authorities are trying to curb the growing insurgency in Baghdad and elsewhere in order for national elections to take place by the end of January. Some U.S. military officials have expressed doubt that balloting can be held in all parts of the country.

In an effort to restore order, the government of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi has been talking with representatives from insurgency hotspots, including the radical Shiite stronghold Sadr City in the northeast of the capital.

Associated Press reporters Omar Sinan and Hamza Hendawi contributed to this report

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