

US gives \$4m to Iraqi rebels

Marie Colvin

FIVE days of negotiations in London last week ended with an American undertaking to give Iraqi opponents of Saddam Hussein \$4m under an agreement that will see them resume operations inside Iraq for the first time in six years.

In one of the most controversial parts of the agreement, the Americans committed themselves to fund the opening of an Iraqi National Congress (INC) office in Tehran. The INC, a broad coalition of Iraqi opposition groups that has been rejuvenated in the past year with help from Washington, hopes to use Iran as a base for infiltrating southern Iraq. It will also operate inside Kurdistan to the north.

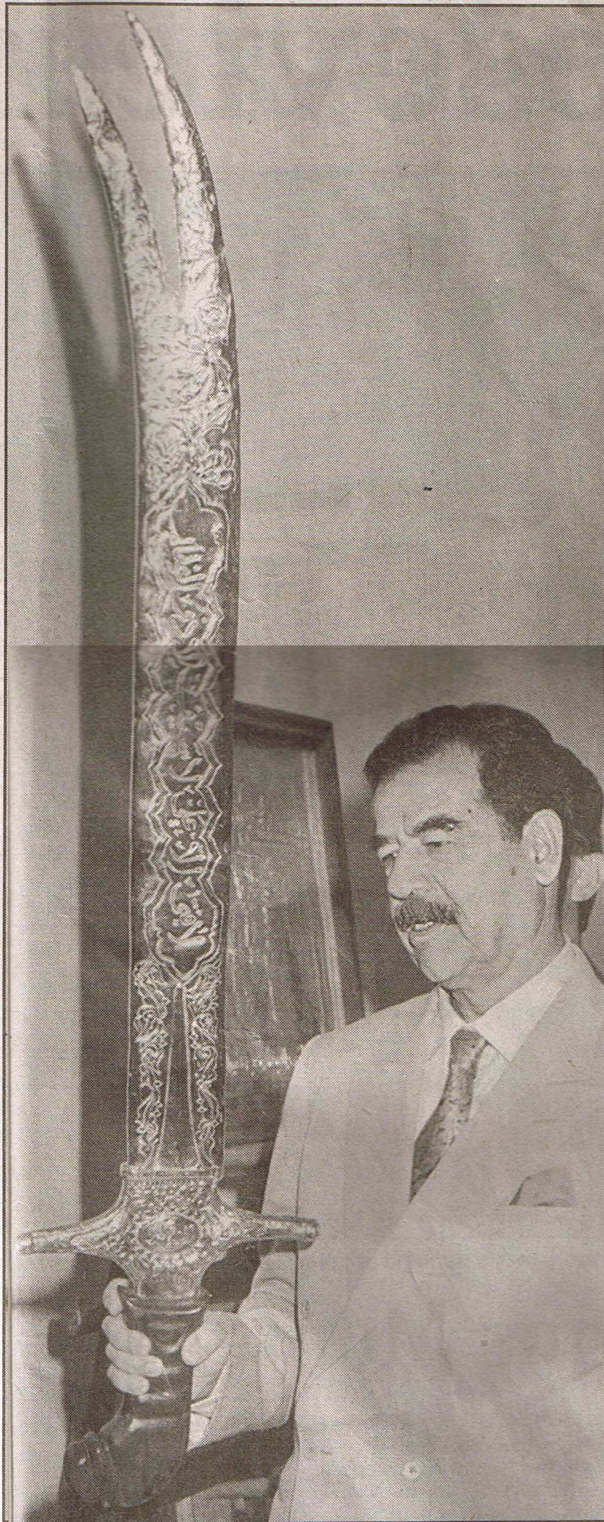
Iraqi sources said the American move had been largely due to the efforts of Vice-President Al Gore. Iraq has become an issue in the American presidential campaign following criticism of US policy by George W Bush, Gore's rival in the race for the White House. Washington's policy of isolating Iraq has been undermined as Arab states have renewed relations with Baghdad. Russia, France, India and even Iceland sent planes despite an air embargo imposed after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990.

The INC will use part of the American money to set up a satellite television station, probably based in London, and a radio service that will give Iraqis an alternative to media controlled by Saddam and his family.

It will establish offices in Washington and Kurdistan as well as Tehran. A group of 174 INC nominees will receive military training from American forces.

In what Saddam will see as a direct challenge, INC sources said they intended to mount operations in Iraq aimed at building support for democracy, helping internal opposition and providing humanitarian relief.

Opposition sources say this could attract disillusioned Iraqi officers and troops who want to defect but have had no way of crossing international borders.



Acting big: Saddam poses while his country starves

leader's fingerprint. "It is so that when God looks down on this mosque he will see Saddam too," said Soler.

"He believes he is a god and everyone near him must believe this too."

Because of Saddam's considerable ego, said Soler, Baghdad contains a huge repository of film footage of the leader at various stages of his career.

Eventually Soler was hounded out of Iraq after displaying a knack for giving his escorts the slip. On one occasion he had driven around Baghdad secretly filming a new palace with a pocket camera.

Another time he interviewed Saddam's chief interior designer behind locked doors so that his escorts could not hear what was said.

Soler knew he was in trouble when his minders invited him to a hospital. "I saw a nurse coming towards me with a syringe, saying 'We're going to do a blood test,'" he said.

"I started to freak out. I said 'Nobody touch me.'" The officials told Soler that if he did not submit to a blood test he would have to leave the country.

He decided to flee. After the showing of his film he is unlikely to be welcomed back.