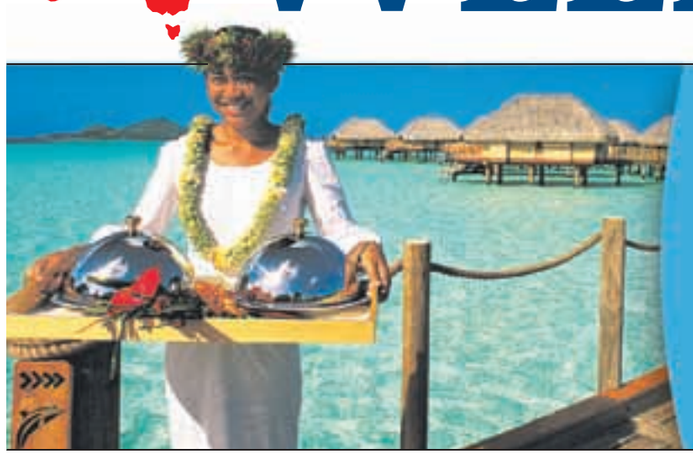
PUB:AUS11-FEB-2006 AUS11-FEB-2006 ED: AF AF 2/1295
PROOF OK CORRECTION SIGNATURE: ED AD
1 1 CMYK2 5 6 7 8 15 25 50 75 98 dmax

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

FEBRUARY 11-12 2006 KEEPING THE NATION INFORMED $2.20 INCLUDES GST FREIGHT EXTRA ($2.50 TAS)



WIN A LUXURY HOLIDAY
24 holidays at the world's finest hotels over the next four weeks
DETAILS PAGE 56

Today's destination: Bora Bora Pearl Beach Resort & Spa, French Polynesia

MAGAZINE
First wives club
All six first ladies

Faulty gear puts troops at risk

Cameron Stewart
Michael McKinnon

THE safety of Australian troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the elite SAS force, has been compromised by defective body armour, combat jackets and helmets, according to damning Defence Department documents.

The faults include combat jackets that glow in the dark, giving enemies an easy target, and body armour that cracks easily.

The helmets issued to soldiers have harnesses that are ''worn, rusted and damaged'' and are shaped in a way that makes it ''impossible to sight a live clay-more (landmine) in the prone position'' while wearing them.

The documents reveal that the safety of SAS members — on deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan — has been compromised by body armour that does not match the grey colour of their wetsuits for underwater operations.

In one case, a protective vest called Ultima issued to soldiers was so faulty its use was ''suspended immediately'' for troops at home. But those in the field were forced to wear the vest until a replacement became available.

''The operational use of the armour is to be suspended as soon as practicable,'' the reports say.

The Defence documents were obtained by *The Weekend Australian* under Freedom of Information laws following a successful challenge in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

They contain a comprehensive log of defects, reported by troops at home and overseas, in combat armour, combat jackets, helmets, combat packs and boots.

The reports reveal that faulty equipment is a more serious and widespread problem than has been admitted by the Government, at times jeopardising the operations and safety of troops.

A Defence spokesman yesterday defended the performance of

the Defence Materiel Organisation, the agency that buys combat gear, saying it had followed ''strict government procurement guidelines''.

''Army is committed to continual development and improvement of combat clothing and personal equipment,'' he said.

The documents warn that the new combat jackets issued to troops not only failed to offer camouflage protection but were ''highly visible''. ''It appears as a bright glowing beacon when observed through night-fighting equipment,'' the reports say.

They reveal that no combat jackets fit women. ''Females are forced to wear a jacket several sizes too big to accommodate hips. This leads to sleeves completely covering hands.''

The jackets were highly flammable and collected such an amount of ''dirt, sticks and prickles'' in the field that they would be ''unsuitable for operations overseas, due to the likelihood of AQIS (Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service) requiring complete removal of all plant matter''.

The documents say the combat body armour used by troops in Iraq was faulty, with the plastic clips used to fasten the vest to the torso ''continually fracturing and breaking''. And the ballistic body plates designed to stop small arms fire were subject to cracking at the front and the back.

The reports warn that the helmets used by the SAS were poorly designed because, during night assaults with aerial fire, soldiers were forced to use tape to attach strobe lights to the helmets to aid target identification.

''This affects operational performance and safety,'' they say.

Soldiers on home duties complained that the older army helmets were ''severely dented'' and trapped the heat, potentially causing overheating.

There were serious problems with field combat packs, blamed for ''causing multiple back injuries'' and for being too small for operations in East Timor.

Soldiers reported that poorly designed combat boots led to large blisters, with one soldier saying: ''It takes a good deal of my blood to soak into the leather to make them more comfortable.''

Opposition defence spokesman Robert McClelland said last night the Government must explain why troops were so ill-equipped.

''The Howard Government's defence spending priorities have become outrageously skewed when they are willing to have a billion-dollar open chequebook for Iraq while our dedicated serving men and women are equipped with badly designed clothing and faulty gear.''

$200K degrees prescribed for doctor shortage

Samantha Maiden
Political correspondent

JOHN Howard has secured the support of state premiers to tackle the doctor shortage by allowing universities to enrol up to 1000 more students in medical degrees costing up to $200,000.

The Council of Australian Governments agreed yesterday that a quarter of medical school places could be filled by students paying full fees — up from the current 10 per cent cap — rather than under the HECS scheme.

Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, who campaigned for an extra 325 medical students a year to beat his state's hospitals crisis, said the decision could mean an extra 60 doctors a year graduating from Queensland University.

The Prime Minister said the increase in full-fee places would not be at the expense of HECS-funded students. ''It's an add-on,'' he said.

But the commonwealth-states deal clashes with Kim Beazley's policy of scrapping full-fee degrees for domestic medical students, after the Labor premiers accepted it was a solution to the doctor shortage.

Sources at the meeting said only South Australian Premier Mike Rann had argued seriously against the proposal, warning the changes would be attacked as ''degrees for the rich''.

But Mr Beattie took ''full responsibility'' for lifting the fees quota. ''I'm not a member of the federal Labor Party, and I know there will be some angst from people who do not share my view, but I just say to them, when it comes to life and death I've got to come up with life-and-death solutions,'' he said. However, deputy federal Labor leader Jenny Macklin and Opposition education spokeswoman Julia Gillard condemned the plan.

''Medicine degrees cost an outrageous $216,000 at University of NSW, $148,000 at University of Queensland and $205,000 at University of Melbourne,'' Ms Macklin said.

''Of all the full-fee medical degrees available in Australia's public universities, none costs less than $100,000.''

Ms Gillard agreed. Because the new places were not ''bonded'' to force doctors to work in the bush, she said, there was no guarantee the dramatic expansion in full-fee degrees would tackle the doctor shortage.

''It's ridiculous to expect someone with a $200,000 debt is going to work on an average GP's salary in the country,'' she said.

Last year there were 9,239 undergraduate medical students nationwide. Doctors warned that it would take six to 12 years for the expanded medical intake to produce more working GPs.

Vice-chancellors welcomed a related COAG measure to lift the amount full-fee-paying medical students could borrow from $50,000 to $80,000, but warned this was still not enough to cover the cost of a medical degree.

''Students should decide on the level of debt they wish to enter into, and should be able to complete their degrees without needing to pay any fees up-front,'' said Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee spokesman John Mullarvey.

More reports — Page 4
Editorial — Page 18

PM's bash draws cash

THE anniversary of John Howard's decade in power is estimated to be worth about half a million in fundraising dollars to the Coalition.

On March 3, some of the nation's most powerful business identities will pay $10,000 a table to toast the Prime Minister's 10 years in office at a dinner in Melbourne, one of three planned.

Among the celebrated group will be Telstra boss Sol Trujillo, who has battled the Government ever since his appointment in June last year.

The functions are also believed to involve Mr Howard's heir apparent, Treasurer and deputy Liberal leader Peter Costello, who will feature prominently, attending dinners in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne.

Full report — Page 2

Kisses for man who may be next to die

'Never repay evil with evil': Mick Gatto, right, exchanges kisses with a mourner at the funeral mass for Mario Condello in Melbourne yesterday Picture: Morris Shannon

Stuart Rintoul

AT the end of the funeral, Mick Gatto stands in the churchyard. Men in dark suits come and kiss him on the cheek, and he kisses them. He looks at the golden coffin of his friend, Mario Condello, which he has helped to carry from the church, and if he is wondering whether he will be the next to be gunned down, he does not show it.

This is a gangster's funeral. Heavy-set Italian men with sharp suits and a threatening air kneel for prayer, but have to be reminded by their priests that strength does not come from the barrel of a gun, and that revenge is for God.

''You must not bear hatred for anyone in your heart,'' Father Peter Norden says in his homily. ''You must not exact vengeance, nor must you bear a grudge. Never repay evil with evil. Never try to get revenge. Resist evil and conquer it with good.''

Condello, 53, a disbarred lawyer and ''funeral director'' who had been charged with incitement to murder gangster Carl Williams and others, was shot dead in the garage of his luxury home in the Melbourne suburb of East Brighton on Monday night — the 28th victim of the city's bloody gangland wars, which began in January 1998.

But at the requiem mass at St Ignatius Catholic church in the inner suburb of Richmond yesterday, attended by about 600 mourners, including ''Carlton Crew'' associates Gatto and Brian ''Mickey'' Finn, Condello

Grief: The coffin leaves church

was remembered as a husband, father, brother and friend. And the tears fell.

Gatto, who police believe is now a prime target for execution, said Condello was a loving, compassionate family man who had spoon-fed and washed his mother Marina on her deathbed, and rubbed ice on her lips to soothe her. ''To say farewell today to my dear friend Mario is something I find impossible to deal with,'' Gatto said.

''To know this noble gentleman was to love him.''

Gatto said Condello and his wife, Vanda, had ''shared many challenges over the past two years, but they always strived to live another day''.

''I say goodbye to Mario Condello, a man among men whom I'll miss more than words can say. To his family, I'll always be there for you like a true friend.'' This was received with thunderous applause.

Condello's daughter, Vanessa, remembered a father who could be charming, arrogant, rude and sometimes downright scary, who said his rosary every day and prayed for forgiveness for any hurt he had brought to his family.

Over the past 18 months, she said, Condello had experienced an ''amazing renaissance''. He had been touched by God and had overcome the demons that had plagued him.

She lamented that he would not be there to see his twin sons, Guerino and Rosario, grow up, or to see her graduate from medical school, to disapprove of her boyfriends or the length of her skirt, or to grow old with his wife.

The funeral ends, the bells toll, and the men in dark suits walk off down the road together, their arms draped around one other.

Condello was interred at the Carlton mausoleum at the Melbourne General Cemetery.

More reports — Page 8

How US stopped Hambali

INSIDE STORY

Natalie O'Brien
Patrick Walters

IT should have been no surprise that the Southeast Asian terror group Jemaah Islamiah and its operations chief Hambali were named by US President George W. Bush as the figures behind a 2002 plot to fly a plane into California's tallest building.

JI and Hambali, mastermind of the Bali bombing, were not only intimately connected with al-Qa'ida's chief strategist Khalid Sheik Mohammed in the plan to destroy the US Bank Tower in Los Angeles, they had been in cahoots for years, planning to blow up US airliners and fly them into skyscrapers.

As far back as 1995, Mohammed and Hambali put together a terror blueprint that has become known as Operation Bojinka. It was a three-pronged plan to assassinate Pope John Paul II during a visit to Manila, blow up 11 US planes and fly a Cessna packed with explosives into the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

But for the second wave of attacks on the US, planned for 2002, they had decided to avoid operatives with Arab backgrounds. Instead, Hambali recruited a Malaysian militant named Zaini Zakaria to head the cell responsible for flying a plane into the LA skyscraper,

Continued — Page 12

Inside

18 Editorial 39 Wealth
19 Inquirer 40 Classified
31 Editor 50 Weather
33 Business 51 Sport

www.theaustralian.com.au
ISSN 1038-8761
SECOND EDITION NO 12,870
This paper participates in recycling

OF COURSE, YOU COULD ALWAYS SETTLE FOR SOMETHING THAT'S NOT UNIQUE.

SYDNEY 02 9360 1155 | MELBOURNE 03 9270 7000 | BRISBANE 07 3252 8222
PERTH 08 9242 4546 | ADELAIDE 08 8338 7755 | AUCKLAND +64 9 526 6940
WWW.MASERATI.COM.AU

MASERATI