

UN arms inspectors give mixed verdict on Iraq

UN demands more cooperation from Baghdad, US keeps up war preparation

REUTERS, AP, United Nations/Baghdad

UN inspectors on Thursday gave a mixed interim report on Iraq's arms programs, providing ammunition both to those backing US preparations for a possible conflict and for the anti-war camp.

Chief weapons inspector Hans Blix said his teams had so far found no "smoking gun" but added Iraq had failed to answer many questions about its armaments. Baghdad said it would do so.

Washington appeared unimpressed with Blix's double-edged comments. "The problem with guns that are hidden is you can't see their smoke," a White House spokesman told reporters. "We know for a fact that there are weapons there." Blix's remarks, made to reporters as he prepared to brief members of the UN Security Council, were interpreted by the markets as making war more likely, and oil prices quickly rose.

In the nearly seven weeks since inspections resumed in Iraq, he said, "we have been covering the country in ever-wider sweeps, and we haven't found any smoking guns."

But Blix, head of chemical, biological and ballistic arms inspections, said he was dissatisfied with the 12,000-page document Iraq submitted in December after the UN Security Council demanded it give a full account of

its arms programs.

"We think that the declaration failed to answer a great many questions," Blix said.

He said it was up to Iraq to show it did not have banned weapons, not for his staff to prove it did. "Iraq cannot just maintain that it must be deemed to be without proscribed items as long as there is no evidence to the contrary," he said.

AP adds: Weapons inspectors have delivered a tough message to Iraq: Opening doors and submitting old declarations isn't enough to satisfy the United Nations, and Baghdad must prove that its arms programs have been destroyed.

Chief inspector Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, who is in charge of nuclear inspections, told the UN Security Council on Thursday they have found no "smoking gun" since UN inspections resumed on Nov. 27 - but that doesn't mean there isn't one.

The top inspectors plan to fly to Baghdad on Jan. 19-20 to tell senior officials they must provide "credible evidence" about Iraq's nuclear, chemical, biological and missile programs; beef up the list of scientists Iraq handed over in late December; and answer a host of questions on outstanding issues ranging from anthrax production to missing high explosives.



Visiting activists hold up placards as they protest outside the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad on Thursday. The activists are protesting the ongoing threat of war by the US against Iraq.

Australia readying troops for Iraq war

AFP, Sydney

Prime Minister John Howard announced Friday that Australian forces could be deployed to the Middle East within weeks in preparation for a possible war with Iraq.

Howard, who has refused for months to publicly back the military option in Iraq, said the government had given the green light for an Australian contingent led by special forces troops to head to the region.

But he also appealed for UN inspectors to be given more time to complete their hunt for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before a decision is taken on possible military action against Baghdad.

Howard broke off his New Year's holiday Friday to chair a special meeting on Iraq of his National Security Committee, a top-level panel of senior cabinet ministers, military brass and intelligence officials.



PHOTO: AFP

A South Korean couple takes a sunset walk along a barbed wire fence marking the demarcation line of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between South and North Korea on Friday. North Korea announced its immediate withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) but said it may reverse its decision if the United States agreed to resume oil supplies. Some 37,000 US soldiers lost their life during the Korean War.

World powers condemn DPRK's NPT dumping

AFP, Seoul

The world community roundly condemned Friday North Korea's decision to pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as South Korea warned peace on the Korean peninsula was under threat.

France, which holds the rotating presidency of the United Nations Security Council, said the move underscored the need for more urgent international action to de-escalate a boiling nuclear issue.

"It is a serious decision, heavy with consequences that has to be dealt with by the United Nations Security Council. This major development underscores the necessity and the urgency of international mobilisation," Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said in Shanghai.

North Korea announced its "withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its total freedom from the binding force of the safeguards accord with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)."

It stressed however that it had no intention of developing nuclear weapons.

The NPT took effect in 1970 and has been ratified by 188 countries. It seeks to limit the possession of nuclear weapons to the United States, Russia, China, France and Britain.

While the United States made no immediate comment, China, North Korea's closest ally, said it was "concerned" at the consequences.

But it did not demand North Korea reverse its stance.

"We are concerned about the North Korean announcement of withdrawing from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the possible consequences that could arise from this," foreign ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue said.

"The nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is of important significance to the prevention of the proliferation of nuclear weapons and to the improvement of international peace and safety."

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi called the move "extremely regrettable" and said he "will ask North Korea to reverse its decision" as he prepared to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow.

Japanese officials said the

government maintained unofficial contacts with North Korea via their embassy in Beijing but declined to say whether Tokyo had contacted Pyongyang since its announcement.

In Seoul, the government hastily convened an emergency National Security Council meeting and warned peace on the Korean peninsula was threatened.

"The government gravely warns of the danger of this measure and urges North Korea to reverse its NPT withdrawal announcement immediately and solve the issue through dialogue," foreign ministry spokesman Seok Tong-Youn said.

"North Korea's declaration to pull out of NPT seriously threatens peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and also runs against the international community's non-proliferation efforts."

South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung had earlier expressed his dismay, as had his successor, president-elect Roh Moo-Hyun.

South Korea has been attempting to take the lead role in efforts to resolve the nuclear standoff between the United States and North Korea after Pyongyang reactivated a mothballed nuclear reactor last month.

Giant statue of Hindu god Krishna falls in India

AP, New Delhi

A giant statue of the Hindu god Krishna that took six years to build toppled onto its back this week, killing three people, Indian villagers who had raised the money for the construction said Friday.

"This was a bad omen," said Shivram Sharma, the priest at a small temple near where the 108-foot statue collapsed Monday in the village of Narsinghpur, on the outskirts of the Indian capital.

Two laborers doing the final polishing of the cement statue were crushed along with one passer-by, said Harlal, a member of the temple committee who uses one name.

Other villagers also said three died, although local police officer Ram Kisan confirmed one death. A dozen people were injured, but all were out of the hospital by Friday.

The village and people from the surrounding district had raised \$417,000 to build the statue. It now lies on its back, with a tangle of iron and cement tumbling out of its feet.

Sharma said he was praying in the temple Monday morning when he "suddenly heard a big sound." He felt a tremor, and came out to see the statue. "It toppled in no time," he said.

Kashmir now firmly on int'l agenda: US

Indian missile test adds to 'charged atmosphere'

PTI, Washington

The US has said "Kashmir is now firmly on the international agenda" while asserting that both India and Pakistan have "reaffirmed their desire for a peaceful political solution to their conflict."

This was stated by Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca, according to a just released summary of a recent panel discussion at the Congressionally-funded United States Institute for Peace.

"Throughout South Asia, the search for prosperity and democracy is too often overshadowed by the specter of war," Rocca said.

Former Deputy Secretary of State Stroble Talbott listed five "benchmark issues" of past dialogue between the US and both India and Pakistan.

They were -- Getting the two countries to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty; Breathing new life into the Fissile Material Cut off Treaty; Engaging both countries on export controls on dangerous technology and nuclear know-how; Encouraging strategic restraint to bring the danger of fall-out under control; and promoting

continued India-Pakistan dialogue, to diffuse the conflict.

Talbott said it is "sobering" to see how little progress has been made on these benchmark issues, with the exception of export controls and India-Pakistan dialogue.

On other countries in South Asia, Rocca said there is hope for a cessation of hostilities in Sri Lanka but she is less optimistic about events in Nepal.

She said the Administration hopes to play a productive role in assisting these nations to settle their differences "not as a mediator nor as a mediator, but as somebody whose good offices can help bring people to the table."

Meanwhile, the United States has said that the test firing of Agni-I has added to the "charged atmosphere" with Pakistan and urged both the nations to begin a dialogue on confidence building measures.

"We think tests like this contribute to a charged atmosphere, make it harder to prevent a costly and destabilising nuclear arms race," US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said here Thursday commenting on India's test-launch of short range ballistic missile Agni.

S Korea for eventual US troop pullout

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korean president-elect Roh Moo Hyun has suggested that the 37,000 US troops still in the country half a century after the 1950-53 Korean War could be gone within a decade, making Seoul responsible for its own defense.

The heir to current President Kim Dae-jung tapped anti-American sentiment as he swept to victory in December on a manifesto that backed his mentor's "sunshine policy" of engaging reclusive communist North Korea.

"Although we don't know if it might take 10, 20 or 30 years, someone has to consider an independent defense," Roh told the Seoul International Forum in remarks carried by the JoongAng Ilbo newspaper.

South Korea, which faces North Korea's one-million-strong army across the world's most heavily fortified border, was not unprepared, Roh said.

"Senior military officials have to prepare a plan for a special emer-

gency situation (on the Korean peninsula) when the US army moves away," he was quoted as saying.

But Kim, speaking to a group of women's leaders Friday, said his country "must recognize with certainty the absolute necessity of US forces based in South Korea."

"The stationing of US troops on the Korean peninsula decisively helps prevent an invasion of South Korea," said the 78-year-old leader, who hands power to Roh on February 25.

The remarks come amid a growing chorus of calls from conservative US politicians and from thinktanks that it may be time to call the US troops stationed in South Korea home.

South Korean anti-US military sentiment has simmered for years but has swollen into a nationwide movement since a US armored vehicle crushed two schoolgirls to death during army exercises in June. The soldiers were cleared in a court martial.

Israeli army dynamites Palestinian home

Tel Aviv closes liaison offices in WB

AFP, Nablus

The Israeli army dynamited Friday the house of a Palestinian woman who was killed last February in a suicide attack against a military checkpoint near the West Bank city of Nablus, Palestinian witnesses said.

Troops blew up the house of Darin Abu Aysheh in the village of Beit Wazan after evacuating seven members of her family, the witnesses said.

After her February 27 attack she left a videotape saying she carried out her operation for the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

She was a 21-year-old student from Nablus' Al-Najah University.

The Israeli army has destroyed more than 120 houses in the West Bank since August, when it launched its policy of demolitions. The army says it is a deterrent to

anti-Israeli attacks, while rights groups say it amounts to "collective punishment."

In another pre-dawn operation Friday, Israeli troops arrested three Palestinians suspected of involvement in anti-Israeli attacks, two near the southern city of Hebron and one in the northern Jenin area, the army said.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army closed three Israeli-Palestinian security liaison offices in the northern West Bank, on the grounds they no longer serve any purpose, the two sides said.

The military on Thursday ordered Palestinian police to leave the offices in Tulkarim, Qalqiliya and Nablus and confiscated their arms, Palestinian security sources said.

An army spokesman confirmed the closures saying "the presence of armed Palestinian policemen had become a liability for Israel."



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian girls sit in front of the rubble of a house dynamited by Israeli troops in Beit Wazan village, near the West Bank city of Nablus on Friday. The Israeli army blew up the house of Darin Abu Aysheh who was killed last February in a suicide attack against a military checkpoint near the West Bank city of Nablus. The 21-year-old Palestinian woman, who was a student at Nablus' al-Najah University, had left a videotape saying she carried out her operation for the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

Opposition sees little success of Lankan talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition said Friday the latest round of peace talks between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels had achieved little on the issue of dismantling security zones.

"It is very clear that very little was achieved on the question of military zones," said Sarath Amunugama, spokesman for the opposition People's Alliance (PA) headed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The fourth round of peace talks between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) concluded Thursday in Thailand.

The two sides admitted they were deadlocked on military issues.

The Tigers have refused to take part in a crucial sub-committee appointed by peace negotiators here in November to work towards winding down the protracted war after a row over High Security Zones (HSZ).

The LTTE wants the army to dismantle HSZs, but the army in exchange wants the Tigers to give up their arms.

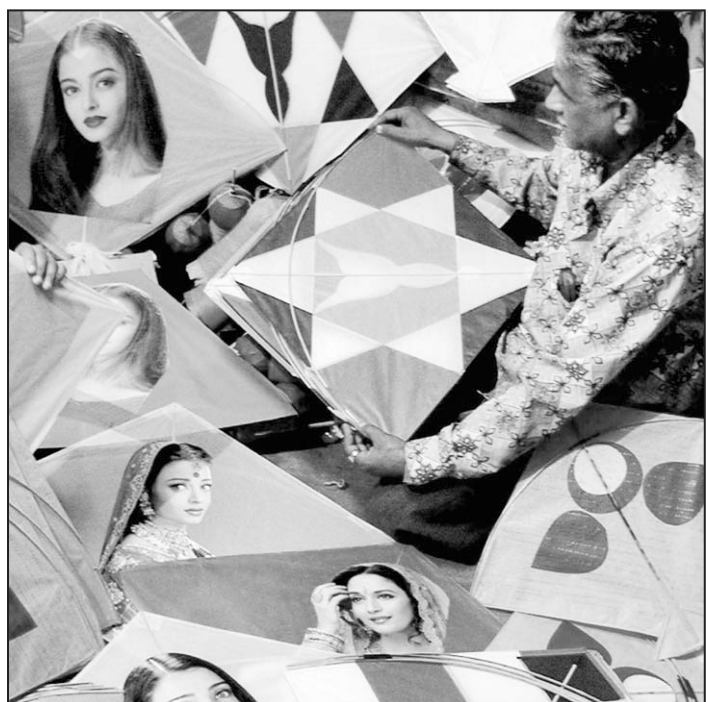


PHOTO: AFP

An Indian kite-maker displays kites sporting portraits of Bollywood film stars at his shop in Indore on Friday. Kite-makers are preparing for the annual Hindu festival of "Makar-Sankranti" during which children fly kites and compete in kite flying competitions.

Musharraf rules out accidental N-war

PTI, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf has played down fears of an accidental Indo-Pak nuclear war, saying Pakistan's missiles were not nuclear-tipped and were kept geographically apart under the nuclear command he headed with Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali.

"This is not Warsaw Pact vs Nato situation where warheads and missiles were ready for fire with a button in a hand. There is no button in our case. Missiles and warheads are not permitted together. There is a geographical separation between them," Musharraf said in an interview to Pakistan Observer.

"One has to go up the escalation ladder to come to the stage of pressing of the button," Musharraf said, adding that no individual has been authorised to press the button.

There is a National Command and Control Authority responsible for development and deployment of all nuclear and strategic weapons,

jointly headed by him and Jamali.

On reports that Pakistan's nuclear assets could fall into wrong hands, Musharraf said there were custodial controls and command arrangements that had been put in place long before India did. "Let me assure you that there is no question of any breach (of the nuclear command)," the President said.

"Over prospects of escalation of tension due to Pakistan's induction of Ghauri missiles into Army and Indian test-firing of Agni missile, Musharraf refused to accept elements of reciprocity and complementarity in the actions.

The two countries are taking actions according to their own requirements. There is no reciprocity involved, he said.

"As a matter of fact it was India which inducted missiles into their Army first. Pakistan has produced a number of missiles and it was our requirement to induct them into service," he said.

Arsenic spells danger for millions of Nepalis

AFP, Kathmandu

Millions of Nepalis are at risk from diseases caused by drinking water contaminated with the poison arsenic, doctors say.

The problem is affecting the Terai lowlands, home to 47 per cent of Nepal's 22.3 million people.

"People are suffering from skin and other serious diseases due to drinking underground unfiltered water laced with arsenic in the Terai region, adjoining the Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh," said Roshan Man Shrestha, a doctor with the Public Health Concern Centre non-governmental organisation (NGO).

Some 90 per cent of the people living in the region use the underground water pumped to the surface by shallow tubewells.

A survey of Terai's 20 districts from 1997-2001 by the Public Health Services NGO, along with

experts from the UN children's agency, UNICEF and the World Health Organisation (WHO), found the water's arsenic levels failed WHO standards.

"Out of some 200,000 shallow tubewells constructed along the tropical region, tests on about 20,000 tubewells have been conducted," Public Health Concern Centre official Prasant Chaudhary told AFP.

"After the tests, the amount of 0.01 milligrams to 0.05 milligrams of arsenic per litre was detected in the underground water," Chaudhary said.

The permissible limit for arsenic in Nepal, as well as in India, China and Bangladesh is 0.05 milligrams per litre.

But the WHO's limit is 0.01 milligrams.

"If anybody drinks the water containing arsenic for about 10 years, he begins to have a serious

health problem like skin diseases, deafness, blindness or even liver cancer and weakening of the bones," Chaudhary said.

Ram Sharan Duwadi, of the government's Public Health Department, said villagers in the Terai often complained of dizziness and hearing problems which could be attributed to arsenic in the water.

Research on arsenic poisoning first began in Nepal in 1999 following similar cases in the neighbouring Indian states of Bihar, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh as well as in Bangladesh.

More than a dozen arsenic-poisoning investigation units are in operation in Nepal, although the exact number of people affected is not known.

"As such incidents are comparatively recent, most people are ignorant about the matter," said Shrestha.

Koizumi urges Putin to help end Kurils dispute

AFP, Moscow

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi on Friday urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to find a solution to a decades-long territorial dispute that has prevented the two sides from signing a treaty to formally end World War II.

"It is necessary to solve the territorial issue and sign a peace treaty as soon as possible," Koizumi said at the beginning of talks with Putin at the Kremlin.

The two countries are at loggerheads over four southern Kuril islands seized by Soviet troops in 1945 in the closing stages of the war and claimed by Japan.

All previous attempts to settle the dispute have foundered, and a settlement is seen as a precondition for a peace treaty that would enable Russia-Japanese relations, particularly in regard to Japanese investment in the Russian economy, to develop.