



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters opposed to military action against Iraq chant slogans during an anti-war demonstration on Saturday in downtown Los Angeles. The United States, which has threatened to topple Iraqi President Saddam Hussein on the grounds that he is still pursuing weapons of mass destruction, signed orders to deploy another 35,000 troops over the coming weeks, pushing US force levels in the region to more than 120,000.

Iraq demands world action to stop US attack

Allies urge Bush to give UN inspectors time

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's official media called on the international community on Sunday to be more active in rejecting US war threats, saying UN arms inspectors had found no evidence of weapons of mass destruction.

"It's right that voices are raised throughout the world to denounce aggressive US intentions and demand the lifting of the embargo imposed on the Iraqi people but that is not enough," said Ath-Thawra, mouthpiece of the ruling Baath party in Baghdad.

"There must be effective measures to rein in the aggressor and lift the embargo" slapped on Iraq for invading Kuwait in 1990, the paper added.

"Iraq has the right to demand a lifting of the embargo. We intend, under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, the builder of modern Iraq, to claim our rights and thwart any attack."

Al-Iraq, another official paper, urged the international community

to demand the UN Security Council "make the US hysteria stop and recognise Iraq's right to see the embargo lifted."

UN arms experts, in Iraq for more than six weeks, have visited 250 suspect sites "without finding anything, proving the invalidity of US allegations," it said.

"The international community must prove that the Security Council is a real guarantor of world security and not an instrument in the hands of the White House."

Babel, the influential daily run by Saddam Hussein's elder son, Uday, blasted statements by US and British officials that Washington and London could still attack Iraq even if the inspectors found no 'smoking gun'.

"These officials realise better that anyone the unconvincing and incredible character of their relations," it said.

AP adds: With UN inspectors having found no evidence of banned weapons, US allies are urging Washington to give the experts time

to find proof that Saddam Hussein is hiding banned weapons before deciding to go to war.

Much of the pressure is coming from Britain, where Prime Minister Tony Blair faces growing opposition within his own Labor Party to rushing into armed conflict without hard evidence against the Iraqis.

Blair told his Cabinet on Thursday that the Jan. 27 report that UN inspectors will submit to the UN Security Council is not a deadline and the teams should be given "space and time" to complete their mission.

"That statement would make it virtually impossible, I believe, for this country to go to war if America so decided come hell or high water," British Parliament member Glenda Jackson said.

The Jan. 27 report had been seen as critical in determining whether President Bush will order US troops to attack Iraq to rid the country of alleged weapons of mass destruction, which the United States insists Saddam is hiding in defiance

of UN resolutions.

The United States already has ordered thousands of troops, attack aircraft and ships to the Persian Gulf. On Friday, US officials announced that nearly 35,000 American troops, including two large Marine units, are getting orders to ship out for the Gulf in the largest single deployment order since the Pentagon began its buildup last month.

However, prospects of imminent conflict appeared to recede when chief UN inspector Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the UN nuclear control agency, told the Security Council on Thursday that they had found "no smoking gun" in nearly two months of inspections.

Blix and ElBaradei said their teams need more time and more intelligence from UN members to help in a search that already has taken inspectors to more than 300 sites.

2 Russian warships to head for Gulf

AFP, Vladivostok

Two ships of Russia's Pacific Fleet are preparing to leave for a long-term mission that will take them to the Gulf, naval officers in the Far Eastern port of Vladivostok said Sunday on condition of anonymity.

The anti-submarine ships Admiral Panteleyev and Marshal Shaposhnikov are to leave for the Gulf, escorted by a tanker, in the first few days of February, the officers said.

Official naval spokesmen refused to confirm the reports, although active preparations for a departure by both ships were visible from the quayside.

The officers said the ship's mission would last at least six months, the longest such mission by Pacific Fleet vessels in the past 10 years.

US movie star leads anti-war rally

AFP, Los Angeles

US movie star Martin Sheen on Saturday led thousands of people in a rowdy protest march in Los Angeles against President George W. Bush's plans for a possible war with Iraq.

Sheen, who plays a fictional US president on the hit television show "The West Wing," called for Americans to fight for a peaceful approach to the Washington's crisis centring on Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

"A lot of people have been silenced for a long time but that is ending," he said. "We are telling the world that we are patriotic Americans but we do not support going to war with Iraq."

"From this time forth, may all our thoughts and deeds be a non-violent response to violence," he

told the cheering crowd in a presidential tone.

Police sources said that up to 6,000 demonstrators took part in a protest march and rally held in front of government buildings in the west coast city's downtown area, chanting "no blood for oil" and "stop Bush now."

Sheen, a veteran anti-nuclear campaigner who was the main speaker at the rally, has been one of the most vociferous opponents in Hollywood to Washington's policy toward Iraq.

Sheen pushed the wheelchair of celebrated Vietnam War veteran Ron Kovic, who suffered severe war wounds and whose story was featured in the movie "Born on the Fourth of July."

Illinois governor spares all death row inmates

REUTERS, Chicago

Denouncing the death penalty system as broken, the governor of Illinois commuted the sentences of all the state's death row inmates on Saturday, granting clemency to more than 150 people in a dramatic move likely to fuel the national debate about capital punishment.

Gov. George Ryan -- a Republican who leaves office Monday after one term -- reduced the prisoners' sentences to a maximum of life in prison without parole. Three will receive shorter sentences, meaning they could some day be released.

"How many more cases of wrongful convictions have to occur before we can all agree that this system in Illinois is broken?" Ryan told a cheering audience at Northwestern University Law School that included several wrongfully convicted former death row inmates.

Pak PM asks India to be flexible on talks

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali urged India to live up to its claims as the world's largest democracy and be flexible towards its neighbour, local media reported Sunday.

Pakistan is ready for talks with India anytime, Jamali told reporters overnight.

"Dialogue is the most appropriate way to resolve all outstanding issues including the Kashmir dispute," the reports quoted Jamali as saying.

"As India claims to be largest democracy it should display flexibility."

Jamali said India's latest Agni missile test could not intimidate Pakistan, adding the country was fully capable of defending its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

India tested its intermediate range surface-to-surface Agni missile Thursday, a day after Pakistan's premier missile and nuclear development establishment handed over a battery of nuclear-capable intermediate range Ghauri ballistic missiles to the army's strategic force command.

The Indian test rekindled tensions between the nuclear rivals, who came dangerously close to war last year amid a military stand-off on their borders that subsided after intense US-led diplomatic pressure.

"The Agni test did not impress Pakistan and it has brought international condemnation for India. Such tests will not create military imbalance in the region," Jamali said.

Pakistan and India conducted tit for tat nuclear tests in May 1998 and have also tested ballistic missiles for delivery of nuclear warheads.

India to fight terror in all its forms

PTI, Cairo

Cautioning against equating Islam with terrorism, India has said it was determined to fight the menace globally in all its forms.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pramod Mahajan, who is leading a delegation of MPs to Egypt, said Islam was a religion of peace and should never be confused with terrorism which had nothing to do with religion.

However, he said several innocents in India had lost their lives to terrorism and the country would fight the menace globally.

He conveyed this to Chairman of the Shura Council Mustafa Kamal Helmi, who said though terrorism posed a challenge the world over, it was unfair to label it with Islam, according to sources.

The delegation also had meetings

with Minister of State for People's Assembly Kamal Mohammad Shazly and Dr Fathi Sou Rour, Speaker of the Egyptian side expressed awe of the working of Indian democracy and Parliamentary system, the sources said.

Taking a cue from a Parliament museum it visited here, the delegation decided to put up a proposal to the Lok Sabha Speaker to set up such a museum in New Delhi displaying rare Parliament manuscripts.

The museum here displayed the first question in the Egyptian Parliament besides other documents and manuscripts.

Shazly, the official host of the delegation, specifically mentioned India's role in the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) while the Speaker said he was impressed with the way elections were held in India.

Defiant N Korea threatens 'merciless punishment'

US sends envoy to Seoul to defuse 'dangerous game'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea threatened to "mercilessly punish" the United States Sunday if its withdrawal from a key anti-nuclear pact was met with sanctions and called on the Korean people to unite against their common enemy.

After sparking outrage by withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Friday and then threatening to restart missile tests, the North showed no sign of trying to ease tensions over the crisis.

Instead, in a series of editorials in the ruling communist party's Rodong Sinmun newspaper, Pyongyang sought to heap the blame for the current standoff entirely on the United States, which it claimed was planning an invasion.

"If the US and its followers come to challenge the DPRK (North Korea) over its withdrawal from the NPT with another pressure and sanctions, the DPRK will counter them with a stronger self-defensive measure," one editorial warned.

"It is the counteraction of the

Korean army and people to respond to a pressure with a telling blow and to 'chastisement' with merciless punishment."

A second commentary also accused the United States of snubbing North Korea calls for a non-aggression pact in recent weeks, even though Washington has consistently said it has no plans to attack the hardline Stalinist state.

"The US reacted to the DPRK's sincere proposal for concluding a non-aggression treaty between the DPRK and the US and its patient efforts for negotiations with the threat of 'blockade' and 'military punishment,'" it said.

"If the US evades its responsibility and recklessly challenges the DPRK, the army and people of the DPRK will never miss the chance but certainly make them pay for the blood and turn the stronghold of the enemy into a sea of fire."

In a separate appeal to South Koreans, the enigmatic regime's mouthpiece called for a united battle against the United States.

"All political parties, organizations, classes and social strata in the north and the south of Korea

should wage a struggle to frustrate the Yankees' moves to invade the DPRK."

"If a war breaks out, all the Koreans will suffer from the disaster. All the Koreans should be mindful that only anti-US struggle guarantee their life."

"The security of the nation and its independent reunification are unthinkable without the struggle against aggression and war. Clear is that the target of the Korean people's struggle is the US imperialists and their policy to invade the DPRK."

Reuters adds: With the world gripped by fear of a nuclear-armed North Korea, a US envoy flies into Seoul Sunday to try to calm the crisis that Japan said might end if Pyongyang could be convinced it had nothing to gain.

Communist North Korea, suspected by the United States of making nuclear bombs, Saturday became the first country to pull out of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), triggering alarm in neighboring countries and worldwide condemnation.

Shah Rukh, Aishwarya dazzle the diaspora

IANAS, New Delhi

It was entertainment in true Bollywood style, complete with pulsating music, flashy clothes, hip-swinging dances and sizzling performances by the darlings of millions -- Shah Rukh Khan, Aishwarya Rai and Akshay Kumar.

The star-studded evening was the government's special gift to non-resident Indians (NRIs) and persons of Indian origin (PIOs) who came from 60 countries to attend the three-day Pravasi Bharatiya Divas -- or Indian Diaspora Day -- meet that ended Saturday. Seeing the response of the capacity audience at Indira Gandhi Indoor Auditorium late Friday, the government succeeded in impressing its guests, with people dancing in the aisles, shouting their favourite stars' names hysterically and clapping thunderously.

It was Shah Rukh Khan who stole the show with his wit, charm and energetic dancing to hit songs from some of his movies.



PHOTO: AFP

People gather in front of a snow-carved sculpture depicting a woman playing a flute at the 8th annual Snow Carving competition on Sunday in Harbin, China. Famous for its winter-related activities, tourists and locals alike are drawn to the capital city of north-east China's Heilongjiang Province to see the snow-carving sculptures and ice-lantern festival.



PHOTO: AFP

Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi receives a "Boidee" basket during a traditional tribal welcome on Saturday in Jharia in Madhya Pradesh state. Sonia Gandhi was visiting the area to speak to supporters at two rallies.

'400 cross over to Pakistan for money'

PTI, Jammu

Lured by the financial inducements by Pakistan's Inter Service Intelligence (ISI), over 400 border people, including women and children have crossed over to the Pakistan side along the Line of Control (LoC) in the districts of Rajouri and Poonch in Jammu and Kashmir in last three years, according to police.

"As many as 404 people living along the Line of Control (LoC) in border districts of Rajouri and Poonch ex-filtrated to Pakistan occupied Kashmir (PoK) due to lure of money," police officials said here on Sunday.

The Pak ISI through their over ground workers (OGWS) and militants lured them with financial packages to PoK and Pakistan, where they were used as "human rights tools" to defame security forces and government of India at international fora, the official said.

Peres pushes for pullout from Gaza Strip

REUTERS, Mexico City

Former Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said on Saturday that he and his party would support the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip as a first step toward peace in the territories.

Peres, who also served as prime minister, said the peace process must begin in the contested territories independently of whether violence is still raging.

"The first thing that we would do is to have a peace negotiation on the (sidelines) of fighting terror," Peres told a news conference in Mexico City.

He said the present government did not support peace negotiations until and unless there was a halt in "terrorist" activity.

Peres said, however, that to fight terror the government had to provide hope for its peoples, namely by easing the tensions in the territories.

"And so we think that you have to provide the hope and then to ease

the situation in the territories to the point that we feel that maybe our army should evacuate completely and unilaterally the strip of Gaza right away," Peres said.

Israeli troops in tanks backed by helicopter gunships raided the Palestinian-administered Gaza Strip city of Khan Younis on Saturday and destroyed eight metalworks amid clashes with militants.

Polish-born Peres called for a reform of the Palestinian government to distribute power among the three branches of government and reduce the dominance of President Yasser Arafat.

"I think the time has come for reform," he said. "This is the demand of the Quartet... this is the demand of many Palestinians."

The Quartet, made up of the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia, has been trying to mediate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Minister Ariel Sharon's national unity coalition together with other ministers from his Labor Party, said he could not predict a result in elections later this month but said they would be close.

Meanwhile, two Palestinians were killed and 16 injured during two Israeli military incursions into the Gaza Strip overnight, hospital sources said Sunday.

Ali Zaher Nasser, 45, an unarmed civilian, was killed when an Israeli armoured unit moved into the Palestinian town of Beit Hanoun in the northern Gaza Strip, the source said.

Troops there also dynamited the home of an Islamic Jihad activist who had died in a suicide attack against an Israeli patrol boat in November.

Earlier in the night, Abdel Latif Wadi, 22 was killed when another Israeli unit moved into the village of Khan Yunes from both flanks, Palestinian sources said.



Bee Gees' Gibb dies

REUTERS, Miami

Singer Maurice Gibb of the Bee Gees, one of the disco sounds of the 1970s, has died after undergoing abdominal surgery last week, his family said on Sunday. He was 53.

Gibb, whose high-pitched harmonies with his twin Robin and older brother Barry helped create one of the best-selling musical groups, collapsed on Thursday at his Miami home after suffering intense stomach pain and was rushed to the hospital.