

Russia pushes for peace, Blix warns Baghdad

US seeks NATO support

REUTERS, Baghdad

Russia flexed its diplomatic muscle on Thursday, starting a peace mission in Baghdad to avert a US-led war against Iraq after UN experts hunted for banned weapons deep inside President Saddam Hussein's main palace.

The peace initiative begins as chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix made clear he would tell Iraqi officials they needed to submit new evidence on any weapons of mass destruction or face possible war.

"We have to seize any chance to achieve and find a diplomatic and peaceful solution," said Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Soltanov, whose country has kept closer ties than many with Iraq and is one of the UN Security Council's five veto-wielding members. He landed in Baghdad on Wednesday.

Russia opposes military action against Iraq without a new UN mandate, but the United States and Britain have reserved the right to wage their own war if the United Nations fails to force Baghdad to surrender any weapons of mass destruction.

It was unclear whether Saddam was at his palace office when inspectors drove into the compound. The UN team complained of having to wait for keys to safes during their visit.

Moscow launched its mission a day after President Bush warned Saddam his patience was running out, and Canada joined anxious states in Europe and the Middle East in demanding that UN approval be a condition for any war.

Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy, will go to Iraq on Sunday and Monday for the first time since inspections resumed on November 27 and ahead of a key report they will deliver to the Security Council on January 27.

"They have provided prompt access, been very cooperative in terms of logistics. But they need to do a good deal more to provide evidence if we are to avoid any worse development," Blix told reporters as he left UN headquarters for Europe.

Asked if the visit to Baghdad was a last chance for Iraq to comply with council demands, Blix said: "I don't think we should ever talk about last chances in this world."

"There's still time for the Iraqis to get themselves out of a very dangerous situation," he said.

As financial markets and many governments around the world remained jittery, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on Wednesday Washington had not reached the point of no return toward war despite pouring warplanes, ships and tens of thousands of troops into the oil-rich Gulf region.

But the White House kept up pressure on Iraq by announcing that Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair would meet at Camp David near Washington on January 31, four days after arms inspectors deliver a key

report to the United Nations on Iraqi compliance.

In Brussels, NATO officials said the United States formally asked its NATO allies for indirect military assistance in case of war, including the deployment of missiles to protect NATO member Turkey, which has a long border with Iraq.

Russia's mission and growing anxiety in many capitals across the world over war with Iraq without hard evidence of weapons of mass destruction, posed a problem for Bush and Blair on building broad support for their tough line.

UN inspectors have not announced clear evidence but US officials have signaled that any sign of Baghdad failing to cooperate could be enough for Washington to pull the trigger.

US Republican Congressman Douglas Bereuter, president of NATO's parliamentary assembly and a member of Congress's intelligence select committee, did not rule out seeking UN backing for any war.

"(The US) would very much find it advantageous to have a supportive resolution, perhaps even a second one, from the UN in terms of a broader coalition and greater support of the people in countries of the international community," he said.

AFP adds: The United States on Wednesday asked NATO for support in a war against Iraq, and warned Baghdad that it's recruitment of civilian human shields for use in a war violated international law.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said the request to NATO included use of AWACs radar surveillance aircraft, force protection and the stationing of Patriot missile defense batteries in Turkey, a NATO member on Iraq's northern flank.

There was no immediate response from NATO headquarters in Brussels where an official said the 19 alliance ambassadors had a general discussion of the proposal, describing it as being in early stages.

Alliance member Hungary is already training 3,000 Iraqi exiles it says could serve in a US-led military-civilian administration in Iraq after a war which could topple Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from power.

The formal NATO proposals represent a further step towards military intervention by US President George W. Bush, who on Tuesday warned that time was "running out" for Saddam to avoid war.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair further toughened the tone on Wednesday, urging the international community to keep up pressure on Iraq over allegations that it is harbouring weapons of mass destruction.

"The single most dangerous thing we could now do at the moment, which in my view would increase the chance of conflict, would be to send out any signal of weakness," Blair told parliament.

He was speaking as 750 elite Royal Marines set off to join a growing Royal Navy task force that sailed last Saturday in readiness for any conflict in Iraq.



An anti-war activist dressed as the Statue of Liberty and carrying a toy gun protest outside the US embassy in Manila on Thursday. The demonstrators denounced the US war campaign against Iraq.

Taking to streets for peace

AFP, Washington

Hundreds of thousands of activists from around the United States are to descend on the capital city this weekend to voice their opposition to threatened military action against Iraq.

The demonstration, highlighted by a rally at the Capitol and march to a nearby military installation on Saturday, will be supported by parallel demonstrations in San Francisco and 18 countries, including Egypt, Mexico, Spain, Argentina, and Britain.

Tony Murphy, spokesman for organizers "Act Now to Stop War and End Racism," or ANSWER, said the coalition wants to show broad-based objection to a war.

"We believe that the vast majority of people in the United States don't want a war, they want money spent on education and human needs and not weapons of mass destruction," he said.

Republicans lose first battle in new Congress

AFP, Washington

US Republican Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist debuted in his new role by beating a retreat late Wednesday as he accepted a Democratic proposal on committee seat distribution, rather than face a politically costly standoff.

The climbdown was sealed by the late-night, unanimous adoption of Senate resolutions giving Republicans just a one-seat majority in all 20 Senate committees, and 51 percent of all funds for running them -- Democrats get 49 percent, according to congressional officials.

Tom Cruise wins \$10 m lawsuit over 'gay' claims

AFP, Los Angeles

Heart-throb Hollywood superstar Tom Cruise has won a 10 million dollar court award against a former gay porn star who claimed he had been the actor's lover, the star's lawyers said Wednesday.

Cruise -- then married to Nicole Kidman -- sued Chad Slater, a former "erotic wrestler" known professionally as Kyle Bradford, for 100 million dollars in damages in 2001 after Slater made the claim to a French magazine.

But the "Top Gun" star later requested 10 million dollar judgment after Slater defaulted on the suit last year, effectively throwing in the legal towel and threatening to file for bankruptcy should Cruise pursue the case.

ASEAN states form anti-terror body

AFP, Manila

The Philippines, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand on Thursday agreed to form a joint committee that will boost multilateral cooperation against terrorism and other transnational crimes.

The decision to create the committee came at the end of a three-day security conference in Manila that was aimed at fine-tuning multilateral responses to terrorism hosted by the Philippines' National Security Adviser Rolito Golez.

The committee will provide "policy guidance" in the implementation of projects and establish a framework for cooperation in exchanging information and setting up communication procedures in the fight against terrorism.

Arthritis vaccine in the offing

AFP, Brisbane

Australian scientists announced a breakthrough Thursday in efforts to develop a vaccine for the crippling disease rheumatoid arthritis.

Researchers at the University of Queensland in eastern Australia said they identified how to reverse a process in which a body's autoimmune system attacks its own tissues, causing arthritis.

"This is really the first time we have been able to specifically target the appropriate molecule in order to get the immune system to turn off after it has already started," scientist Ranjeny Thomas said.

The findings were announced at a news conference in Brisbane and published in the American medical journal "Immunity."

Thomas, deputy director of the university's Center for Immunology and Cancer Research at Brisbane's Princess Alexandra Hospital, said testing had so far been confined to laboratory mice and human trials were about two years away.

UK terror raids spark row on asylum seekers

REUTERS, Manchester

Britain's immigration policy was under fire on Thursday after it emerged at least one man arrested in a terror raid in which a police officer was murdered was a failed asylum seeker.

Police were questioning three north African suspects after Manchester officer Stephen Oake was stabbed to death on Tuesday in an anti-terrorism operation which was linked to the discovery in London last week of the deadly poison ricin.

Newspapers said one of the three men was believed to be a key figure in an Algerian network suspected of being behind the manufacture of ricin in London. Police declined to comment on the reports.

But as outrage grew over the killing of father-of-three Oake, the spotlight turned to the background of the suspects.

Home Secretary (Interior Minister) David Blunkett confirmed one of the men arrested during the raid was on the run from authorities after being refused asylum.

"A Bloody Disgrace," read a front-page headline in the mass-selling Sun tabloid, which blamed Britain's "soft" asylum laws for the murder.

Iraqi Kurds prepare for war against Saddam

AFP, Suleimaniya

Iraqi Kurdish militia, including hundreds of women, are intensifying their training amid the growing prospect of a new war against the forces of President Saddam Hussein.

"Yes!" exclaimed their commander Mustafa Said Qader when asked if he was impatient for the start of the expected US-led offensive against Saddam's regime, which Washington accuses of concealing weapons of mass destruction.

Qader, who says he was held for 15 months and tortured in an Iraqi jail a dozen years ago, would like nothing better than to kill the man he calls the "dictator" with his bare hands, though he would accept a due process followed by a hanging.

However, like all the other political and military chiefs of Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Qader has no idea what role US President George W. Bush has in mind for Saddam's domestic opponents.

"Will the Americans decide to attack alone or in partnership with the Iraqi opposition?" he asked, while rejecting any repetition of the Afghan scenario, where US forces helped the Northern Alliance rebels to overthrow the Taliban.

Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which shares control over autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan with the PUK, was quoted by the Lebanese press as saying Monday that his forces would play no part in an upcoming war.

Talabani was less clear, saying in Tehran last week that "the Americans have not asked us to cooperate militarily against Saddam Hussein; we have our own plans."

He also spoke up against a "military occupation" of Iraq and said it was not part of US planning.

Both Barzani and Talabani are agreed that they will not accept any attempt by Turkey to take advantage of the situation by entering Iraq from the north alongside US forces.

"No one has asked anything of us," agreed PUK official Adnan al-Mufti, who predicted hostilities would begin at the end of February.

Asked about the reported presence of US Central Intelligence Agency operatives in Iraqi Kurdistan, he replied: "The Americans come and go all the time. I don't know whether they belong to the CIA, but we have good relations with them."

Even though Saddam's troops may be too busy defending their key cities, including the northern base of Kirkuk on the fringes of Kurdistan,

the Kurds fear reprisal attacks from them, including with chemical weapons as has happened in the past.

"We are prepared for every eventuality," Qader said. "We have already paid a heavy price, but if we must pay more for a democratic Iraq, we will do it. That is why we have been training harder than ever."

Qader said the PUK can mobilise 20,000-25,000 guerrillas, known as peshmergas, and the KDP almost as many. With reservists, the numbers might double.

But he admitted they have hardly any weapons apart from their Kalashnikov assault rifles and a few rocket-launchers.

Among them is Lieutenant Sirwa Ismael, 28, and her battalion of 500 women soldiers, who says she has a "personal" score to settle with Saddam.

"His men destroyed my village", she said, declining to give details, as she drilled her troops in the Suleimaniya training camp.

A founder member of the women's peshmergas when they were formed in November 1996, she has seen combat against other Kurdish groups, including the Ansar al-Islam, allegedly linked to Al-Qaeda.



The Army march into the premises in the Crumpsall area of Manchester on Wednesday where Detective Constable Stephen Oake was murdered late Tuesday. Oake, a father-of-three from Poynton in Cheshire, who served with the forces' Special Branch, died at North Manchester General Hospital after receiving emergency treatment at the scene.

Bush wades into volatile legal battle over race

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush Wednesday branded a university's reliance on race in admissions policy divisive, unfair and unconstitutional as he weighed in on a politically explosive lawsuit.

Bush said his administration would file a brief Thursday with the US Supreme Court siding with three white students who have charged they unfairly lost spots at the University of Michigan to minority students.

The president -- who has been courting minority voters ahead of his 2004 reelection bid -- took pains to divorce his objections to the specific policy from his broad support for the quest to assemble a diverse student body.

"Racial prejudice is a reality in America," said Bush. "Yet as we work to address the wrong of racial prejudice, we must not use means to create another wrong, and thus perpetuate our divisions."

The US leader said the University of Michigan's system, which allocates different numbers of points to students based on race and aims for a racially diverse incoming student body, amounts to an illegal quota.

"Quota systems that use race to include or exclude people from higher education and the opportuni-

ties it offers are divisive, unfair and impossible to square with the Constitution," he said.

The plaintiffs in the case have assailed the school's policy of giving "under-represented minorities" a 20-point bonus on a 150-point scale use to rate would-be students in its undergraduate program.

Students who achieve a perfect score on the most prevalent national standardized test, the SAT, receive only 12 points, said Bush.

The school also works to admit a target "critical mass" of minority students into its law program.

"The motivation for such an admissions policy may be very good, but its result is discrimination and that discrimination is wrong," he said at a special public appearance announced just minutes before it took place.

The decision, just days before the holiday honoring civil rights icon Martin Luther King, Jr. comes hot on the heels of the political firestorm that cost Republican Senator Trent Lott his job as the chamber's majority leader over comments seen as endorsing racial segregation.

In a sign that opposition Democrats will not let the move go unchallenged, Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle said Bush's position would be a watershed moment that would send an unmistakable signal to minority voters.

US, UN at odds over arms inspection's timetables

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council was set Thursday to hold what was expected to be a tough debate on a US move to keep Iraq arms inspections on a tight timetable under threat of war.

That debate was to follow a US request Wednesday for NATO support against Iraq, tough talk and more muscle from close US ally Britain, and a US warning to Iraq not to use civilians as human shields in wartime.

It also comes on the heels of a tense confrontation in Baghdad between weapons inspectors who entered a presidential palace, and Iraqi officials who called the move "sensitive" and a "provocation."

The UN debate will turn on what council president and French ambassador Jean-Marc de la Sabliere called "the articulation between Resolutions 1284 and 1441."

The two resolutions lay out different, but not conflicting, timetables for the inspections, which began November 27.

The methods were summed up by diplomats as "carrots and sticks" to get Iraq to comply with council demands that it scrap its nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and long-range missiles.

Washington favors 1441, the

biggest stick the council has so far brandished in the face of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, a US official said.

"We want to focus like a laser on 1441," he said of the resolution adopted November 8 which gave Iraq seven days to agree to inspections and one month to make a complete and up-to-date declaration of its weapons of mass destruction.

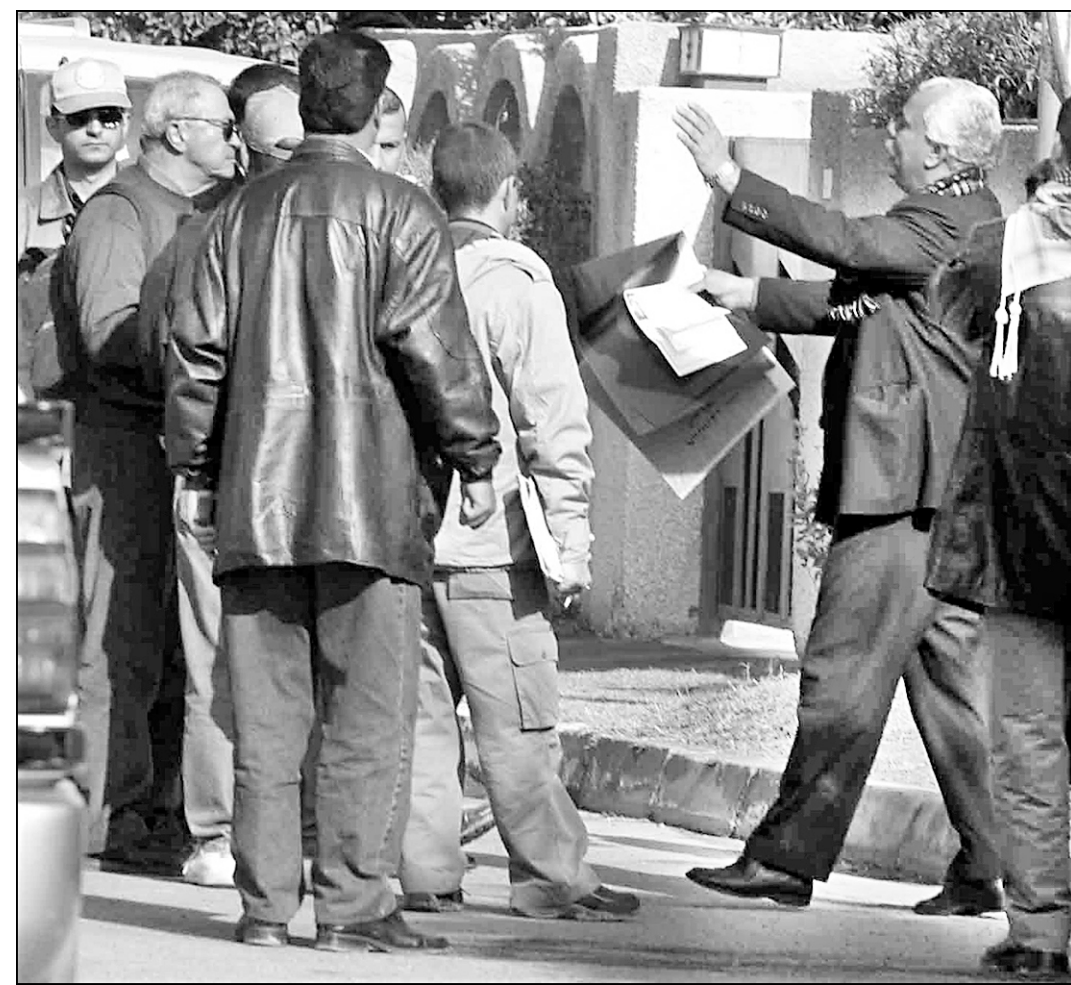
It warned Iraq it faced "serious consequences" -- possibly military action -- if it lied or failed to cooperate with the inspectors.

While Resolution 1441 requires only one update from chief weapons inspector Hans Blix and International Atomic Energy Agency head Mohammed ElBaradei, Resolution 1284 sets out a more detailed timetable.

As a start, Blix and ElBaradei must draw up a programme, 60 days after they start work, defining the "key remaining disarmament tasks" and what Iraq must do to complete them.

After that, the two are required to submit repeated 120-day reports to the council.

Blix told the council last week that, although inspections began in November his team had not yet started work, in the sense that some laboratory equipment and vehicles had yet to be delivered.



Dr. Faleh Hasan Hamza (L), head of the al-Razi Iraqi military complex factory, gestures to UNSCOM inspectors as he holds X-rays belonging to his wife in the al-Ghazali neighborhood of Baghdad on Thursday. Hamza was complaining to UN inspectors who entered his house that his wife is sick and that they were invading his privacy.