

Iraq to get good grade by UN inspectors

Baghdad must allow scientists to speak: US

AP, Vienna

The head of the UN nuclear agency will tell the Security Council on Monday that Saddam Hussein has done a "quite satisfactory" job of cooperating with inspectors in some areas but that they need more time to complete their search.

The White House dismissed the favorable assessment, but a senior US official said the Bush administration was considering agreeing to let the inspections go on longer as a means of reassuring anxious European allies following a rift that broke out this week with France and Germany.

There were also moves in Europe to calm the tensions with Washington. Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said although there was "growing support" in Europe for Germany's position, his country's toughened stance against war "won't destroy the German-American relationship."

"We need to cool off on statements and rationalize," said the European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana.

The United States has threatened Iraq with war, but France, Germany and Russia all urge that the inspectors be given more time to do their job of assessing whether Iraq has weapons of mass destruction or programs to build them.

In his remarks to the Security Council on Monday, UN nuclear chief Mohamed ElBaradei will say his inspectors have gotten generally good cooperation from the Iraqis, spokesman Mark Gwozdecky told The Associated Press.

"Their report card will be a 'B' - quite satisfactory," he said.

However, White House spokesman Sean McCormack said: "It's pass-

fail. Iraq either is in compliance or not. And so far Iraq has failed to pass the test."

Later, seeking to qualify his comments, Gwozdecky said the "B" is only for responding to inspectors' questions and requests for information.

"We're not in the position of issuing grades - that's for the Security Council to do," he said. "We just report the facts, and our goal is the disarmament of Iraq. They're not coming forward to help us. They're not bringing forward original documentation."

On Monday, ElBaradei will argue that the inspectors, who returned to Iraq in November after a four-year break, need at least several more months, Gwozdecky said. ElBaradei will also say that the Iraqis "need to help themselves" by pointing the experts in the right direction.

Reuters adds: The United States on Friday accused Iraq of "willfully defying" the UN over its weapons programs, but faced renewed opposition from Security Council heavyweights France and Russia to any rush to military action against Baghdad.

As the United States builds up its military forces in the Gulf, a senior US official said there was "very convincing evidence" Iraq possessed banned weapons of mass destruction, which it has repeatedly denied.

The White House demanded that Iraq allow UN arms inspectors to interview Iraqi scientists in private about Baghdad's weaponry.

In a sign that a transatlantic dispute between Washington and key European allies was still simmering, French President Jacques Chirac and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, agreed during a telephone conversation that their positions on the Iraq crisis were similar.



PHOTO: AFP
An Iraqi child joins her father in the Friday noon prayer at the Sheikh Abdel Qader al-Dirani mosque in Baghdad. The United States is trying to impose "the logic of war" on the world, Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz charged, vowing Baghdad's readiness to retaliate to any US-led attack.

India on red alert ahead of Republic Day

REUTERS, New Delhi

Thousands of police and paramilitary personnel patrolled the streets of the Indian capital on Saturday on the eve of Republic Day amid fears of militant attacks.

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami will be the guest of honor as India displays its military might on Sunday to mark the 1950 anniversary of the country's birth as a republic, three years after its independence from Britain.

Police say there are intelligence reports of plans by militants fighting Indian rule in Kashmir to stage attacks in the capital during the parade.

Infiltration into Kashmir is on the rise: US

PTI, Washington

After a drop there has been an increase in the number of militants infiltrating Jammu and Kashmir and the United States is working with Pakistan to stop it, the US State Department has said.

Department spokesman Richard Boucher on Friday said, "Infiltration has gone down and come back up somewhat."

He said Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf has given the United States assurances that infiltration will stop and "that is something we work with him on. We do believe infiltration should stop completely."

Special forces surround Veerappan

PTI, Bangalore

Karnataka Special Task Force surrounded forest brigand Veerappan and his gang at the Tamil Nadu-Karnataka border late on Friday and exchanged heavy fire.

The shoot-out broke out in Gopinatham forest area bordering the Tamil Nadu and Karnataka on Friday night, highly placed sources said in Bangalore on Saturday.



PHOTO: AFP
Winners of the various sub-contests of the Sun Silk Femina Miss India 2003 semi-finals (from L to R) Nalini Datta, Anurithi Chikerur, Nupur Mehta, Sharayu Supnekar and Shonal Rawat pose in Bangalore late Friday. These winners along with 10 other contestants will compete for the Miss India 2003 title in the finals to be held at Mumbai later this month.

FBI searches for Iraqi spies in US

AP, Washington

The FBI is questioning as many as 50,000 Iraqis living in the United States in a search for potential terrorist cells, spies or people who might provide information helpful to a US war effort.

Agents have fanned out across the country to interview Iraqis in their homes and where they work, study and worship. A senior government official, describing the program to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity, said the interviews began about six weeks ago and will last several months.

Israel dynamites road links to Gaza town

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli forces dynamited four road overpasses Saturday, isolating the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Hanun after rockets were fired on nearby Israeli territory from the area a day earlier, Palestinian and Israeli military sources said.

The action, which the Palestinians said left several nearby houses damaged, followed a vow by Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz Friday to carry out a string of operations to "shake up" the area following the rocket attacks.

The army said the objective of the exercise was to prevent Palestinian militants from making their way from Gaza City to the town and firing more rockets.

Expelled Indian diplomats return home

AP, Islamabad

Four Indian diplomats expelled by Pakistan began their trip home early Saturday, leaving in a convoy for the Wagah border crossing between the rival nations, the Indian Embassy said.

The diplomats were given 48 hours to leave on Thursday, a day after India ordered four Pakistani diplomats to leave New Delhi. Both sides accused the other's officials of behavior unbecoming of a diplomat, a usual reference to spying.

The four Pakistanis have all arrived back in the country, Pakistani officials said.

The Indians left Saturday morning amid tight security, said Rahul Rasgotra, first secretary at the Indian Embassy in Islamabad, the Pakistani capital. The drive to the border usually takes about five hours.

North Korea trusts nothing but non-aggression pact with US

Seoul calls for patience

AFP, Seoul

North Korea said Saturday it would not trust a letter or statement of non-aggression from the United States and warned hostilities between the two countries could only end with a formal treaty.

The United States has indicated it is willing to give a written assurance that it will not initiate military conflict against the Stalinist state in a bid to resolve the four-month North Korean nuclear crisis.

But Washington has refused to consider a non-aggression treaty, which would have to be passed by Congress.

"The DPRK's (North Korea's) stand toward this matter is that neither official statement nor message can assure it of non-aggression and those are not to be trusted at all," the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

KCNA said the United States had previously pulled out of other international agreements and so the only way to assure North Korea that the United States would not attack it was through a treaty passed by the US Congress.

"(US President George W.) Bush's personal letter of assurances or a joint statement cannot be trusted as they may gather dust anytime without being ratified by Congress," the news agency said.

"So, it is quite senseless to expect any peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and any improved relations with the US."

North Korea pulled out of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty this month and is using global fears over its atomic ambitions as the main bargaining chip in its bid to extract the non-aggression treaty from the United States.

Meanwhile, a fresh diplomatic offensive aimed at resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis must be given time to work before the United Nations Security Council takes on the issue, South Korea insisted Saturday.

The UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), announced on Friday it would meet soon to decide whether to refer the matter to the Security Council.

But with a South Korean envoy due in Pyongyang on Monday for a three-day visit during which he is hoping to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il, officials in Seoul called for patience.

"There is no reason for the IAEA to rush the emergency board meeting as we are sending a special envoy to Pyongyang and there are other international efforts (to resolve the crisis)," a senior government official told journalists.

"We have conveyed this government position to the IAEA."

South Korea's envoy, Lim Dong-Won, is the architect of the "sunshine" policy of engagement with Pyongyang and has met Kim four times previously.

South Korean officials announced Lim's visit on Friday as part of a new range of measures aimed at helping to broker a compromise between the North and the United States to end the four-month crisis.

South Korean president-elect Roh Moo-Hyun also said he would seek to meet Kim to discuss the nuclear issue after he takes office on February 25.

And the co-chairman of Roh's Millennium Democratic Party, Chung Dong-Young, said the incoming government had a "bold new plan" to boost North Korea's economy if the nuclear crisis was resolved.

Chung told the World Economic Forum in Switzerland that the new government wanted to boost investment in North Korea's infrastructure, agriculture and energy sectors to eventually create a "Korean peninsula economic community".

Devdas, AR Rahman win MTV Asia Awards

AFP, Singapore

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Devdas on Friday won the inaugural Film Award at the MTV Asia Awards here, while AR Rahman was voted the favourite artist from India.

Canadian singing sensation Avril Lavigne continued her unstoppable rise in the pop music world by winning three categories. The 18-year-old Lavigne won the breakthrough artist beating Norah Jones, daughter of sitar maestro Ravi Shankar, among others.

She was also voted the favourite breakthrough artist by viewers of the US-based music cable channel, which has a large Asian following.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian singer A.R. Rahman is receiving favourite artist (India) award at the MTV Asia award in Singapore on Friday. Ten favorite music artiste awards from Asia were given out at the MTV Asia show.

4 die as 2 jets collide in US

AP, Denver

Two small planes collided and crashed into a residential neighborhood Friday, killing four people in the aircraft and injuring seven on the ground.

There were no survivors on either plane, Denver Manager of Safety Tracy Howard said. Crews were still searching for other possible victims.

A twin-engine plane crashed into yard, narrowly missing a house and garage. Two people died in that plane, Howard said.

Two people aboard the other plane, a single-engine aircraft, were killed when it crashed into a house, fire officials said. "That plane blew up. It disintegrated," police spokeswoman Virginia Lopez said.