

# Diplomats leave Baghdad as US-led war looms

## UK pushes France to back new UN resolution

AFP, Baghdad

Foreign diplomats in Iraq are leaving the country as the United States and Britain on Monday started a final diplomatic push to rally support for a possible war.

The Polish diplomat who acts as Washington's sole representative in Iraq, Krzysztof Bernacki, will leave Wednesday "for long consultations in his country," the Polish embassy said.

Other diplomatic sources in Baghdad said the representatives for Yugoslavia and Spain had already gone, citing the same reason.

The departures came as Washington and London exerted pressure on reluctant UN allies to support a new UN resolution that

would underpin a military assault on Iraq.

Faced with the growing threat, Iraq has said it is prepared to meet the demands of UN weapons inspectors, who have been trying to secure Baghdad's agreement on overflights by US spy planes and private interviews with Iraqi scientists.

Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix is due to go to Baghdad at the weekend for talks after Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations, Mohamed Al-Douri, said Iraq now had "no objection" to the use of U2 surveillance aircraft.

Hosam Mohammed Amin, who is in charge of Iraqi liaison with the inspectors, said: "We shall do our best to make his visit successful."

But US President George W. Bush has warned that Iraq had "weeks, not months" to prove to UN inspectors it had no weapons of mass destructions, and insisted that he was ready to order a war and invasion if it did not do so.

His closest ally, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, was believed to have underscored that message in a long telephone conversation Monday with President Jacques Chirac of France, a veto-wielding member of the UN Security Council that has thus far opposed Bush's stance.

British newspapers reported that Blair was confident that he would ultimately sway Chirac, despite French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin telling the Indian newspa-

per The Hindu that "we have every intention of retaining our autonomy" over its position on Iraq.

Blair and Chirac are to meet face-to-face for a summit in Le Touquet, northern France, on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, British Prime Minister Tony Blair will make his case for a new UN resolution authorizing war against Iraq to a reluctant French President Jacques Chirac at an Anglo-French summit Tuesday.

British officials said Blair would argue that US Secretary of State Colin Powell will present inescapable evidence to the UN Security Council on Wednesday that Iraq is deceiving UN weapons inspectors in violation of the November resolution calling on Iraq to disarm.

## India quizzes US plane crew after forced landing

AFP, Mumbai

Airport authorities in Bombay were Tuesday interrogating the 11 crew members of a US plane that was forced to land after straying into Indian airspace without clearance, an official said.

The Boeing 757 registered in the name of Comco Corporation of the United States was forced to land in the western Indian city of Bombay late Monday as it did not have the mandatory air defence certificate, the official said.

The plane was en route to Male, the capital of the Maldives, from Karachi in Pakistan when it entered Indian airspace.

"Initially the crew was told not to enter Indian airspace. However they did and we had to advise them to land at the city airport," Bombay airport director Sudhir Kumar said.



A Boeing 757 registered in the name of Comco Corporation of the US sits on the tarmac of the international airport in Mumbai in the early hours of Tuesday after it was forced to land for straying into Indian airspace. The plane was en route from Karachi, Pakistan to Male, the capital of the Maldives, on a survey mission as the owners are planning to start a Karachi-Male air service.

PHOTO: AFP



Sri Lankan army mascot, baby elephant Kandula, takes part in the national day parade in the capital Colombo on Tuesday while President Chandrika Kumaratunga (C, background) takes the salute. Kumaratunga asked her cabinet to unveil its peace plan with Tamil Tiger rebels ahead of another round of negotiations scheduled for February 7 in Berlin.

## Chandrika asks govt to unveil its peace plan

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga Tuesday asked her government to unveil its plans for a final peace deal with Tiger rebels as Tamil regions boycotted the country's independence day celebrations.

Unsigned posters in the island's Tamil-dominated Vavuniya region, 256 kilometers (160 miles) north of here, protested the celebrations saying minority Tamils did not enjoy freedom.

A cultural show organised at a local Tamil school was also cancelled, officials said, adding that they suspected members of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) may have been behind the boycott.

However, there was no official word from the LTTE on the country's celebrations marking the 55th anniversary of independence from Britain. The Tigers are currently engaged in peace talks with the government.

Kumaratunga, who is bitterly opposed to her cohabitation administration's handling of the

Norwegian-backed peace process, said it was time Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe revealed his plans to the nation.

"All the stakeholders in government and parliament, as much as all our peoples, must be kept informed of the policy framework the government wishes to employ to achieve peace."

"In short, the vision and action plan must even now be clearly formulated and presented to the country," Kumaratunga said in an address to the nation.

She asked the prime minister, an arch political rival, to launch a "deep study of the causes for the setbacks and failures encountered in the past year."

Kumaratunga stressed that core political issues underlying the decades-old Tamil separatist conflict must be addressed to achieve a lasting peace in a country where more than 60,000 people have been killed in fighting since 1972.

This year's celebrations marking the anniversary of independence from Britain were held without the fear of rebel attacks.

## Friends, neighbours pay tribute to astronauts

AFP, Houston

Friends, neighbours and total strangers paid an emotional farewell to the seven Columbia astronauts, praying, crying and laying wreaths, balloons and poems at the gate of the Johnson Space Center in Houston.

"I told him I love him" Kimberley, 7, said as she left a card for Rick Husband the commander of the ill-fated space shuttle mission and her soccer coach.

Under her arm, she held a picture of the soccer team, on which Husband's son Matthew also plays.

"He was a very friendly person, he was very good with children," said Araseli Rangel, a school-teacher in the Clearlakes neighborhood where Husband lived.

"We came here to pay our respects, to remember him," said Rangel.

An official memorial service at the space center itself was to be held on Tuesday, with President George W. Bush scheduled to attend.

But hundreds of people already paid their last respects to the astro-

nauts on Monday, laying wreaths and bouquets, flags and rocket-shaped balloons at an improvised shrine, outside the NASA complex.

A simple, but moving tribute from a local resident to the mission's payload commander read: "Michael Anderson, we don't know you as the astronaut, but as Kaycee's Daddy. Our thoughts are with your family."

Brian Horner, 39, said he knew Anderson and Husband "from church and for being neighbors." They were "gentle, humble men," said Horner who came to the gates of the space center with his two young daughters to reflect on Saturday's tragedy, when Columbia disintegrated upon reentry into the atmosphere, sending wreckage and human remains raining over east Texas.

"They believed in what they were doing in space, but they had an even stronger faith in God," said Horner.

He recalled how Anderson recently took a visiting German student on a five hour tour of the space center. "He took the time to show a total stranger around," he said.

Many of those who came to

mourn were friends, neighbors or fellow NASA employees. "It's like one big family, so the tragedy really hit close to home," said Horner.

But total strangers also showed up to pay their respects. Among them Naureen Shahzad, from Lahore, Pakistan, who moved to Clearlakes three months ago.

"My heart goes out to them," she said, tears running down her cheeks. She said she was particularly moved by the death of Kalpana Chawla, an Indian-born US scientist.

"I have a lot of admiration for her, it is such a great thing she was doing for women, for her country. She was such a brave person," said Shahzad.

The messages pinned to the fence surrounding the space center included several from the local Pakistani community, while one of the numerous wreaths was left by the crew of the Israeli navy ship Keshet.

Among the seven crew members aboard the Columbia, was Ilan Ramon, the first Israeli astronaut.

## Palestinian police stop militants from firing rockets at Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

For the first time in many months, Palestinian security forces are taking steps to prevent militant groups firing rockets into Israel, the Israeli daily Haaretz reported Tuesday.

Quoting Israeli intelligence sources, the daily said in the past two weeks, a Palestinian Qassam rocket cell was arrested in the Gaza Strip, and the activity of several other cells "disrupted" through the deployment of police in areas where the rockets have been fired.

"There have also been reports of a number of occasions when Palestinian security officials helped reveal hidden bombs," Haaretz said.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) fears that increasing Israeli military raids into the Gaza Strip aimed at rocket and mortar production facilities in the middle of Palestinian towns and cities "will eventually

smash what remains of the PA's government in the Gaza Strip, and further damage the status of the Palestinian security apparatus in the Strip," according to Haaretz.

The militant Palestinian group Hamas's Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades manufacture the eponymous rocket, which has been upgraded several times since the beginning of the uprising and now has an estimated range of up to 12 kilometers (eight miles).

The rockets have been fired mainly on Sderot, which is the nearest Israeli town to the Gaza Strip, and occasionally towards other targets such as the coastal town of Ashkelon, but they are inaccurate and have not caused any deaths so far.

Sderot mayor Eli Moyal says that between 200 and 300 of them have been launched at his town since April 2001.

## Musharraf in Moscow to boost ties

AFP, Moscow

President Pervez Musharraf was due in Moscow on Tuesday for a landmark three-day visit aimed in part at trying to shift Russia away from its decades-long alliance with India.

Musharraf, the first Pakistani president to visit Russia in 33 years, was effusive in his praise for Russian President Vladimir Putin, whom he meets in the Kremlin on Wednesday, in an interview published in Moscow's authoritative Izvestia daily.

"With Putin, Russia has gained a truly great leader," said Musharraf, whose last meeting with the Kremlin chief came at a central Asian summit last summer amid Moscow's efforts to cool down tensions between Pakistan and India.

"Your president knows perfectly well what he is doing, and we understand each other completely," the Pakistani leader said in the interview published on the eve of his arrival.

Musharraf added that he would like to discuss with Putin "why relations (between the two countries) are not as close as I would like them to be."

## 'INS rules not aimed at Pakistanis alone'

AFP, Islamabad

The United States ambassador to Pakistan has written to the head of the ruling political party to assure him that new registration rules in the US are not aimed at Pakistanis, according to a letter made public Tuesday.

Ambassador Nancy Powell's letter was in response to one from Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) president Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain to US President George W. Bush.

"I assure you that this in no way reflects a negative perception on the part of the US government towards Pakistani citizens," Powell wrote in her letter, dated January 27.

"The events of September 11 (2001), however, made clear that the United States needs to take immediate steps to substantially improve its border controls."

Hussain wrote to Bush early January protesting the Immigration and Naturalisation Service's new

National Security Entry Exit Registration System (NSEERS) which requires male visitors from more than 20 mainly Muslim countries to submit to stringent registration requirements in the US.

Pakistan's inclusion on the list in December has caused fury and indignation among Pakistanis. Officials in Islamabad believe 50,000 Pakistanis living illegally in the US will be deported under the new laws.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's foreign minister said Tuesday he was expecting changes to controversial new US security arrangements that had prompted fears of a big deportation of Pakistanis living in the United States.

Mian Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri said he had been assured "at the highest level" there would be no mass deportations under the new laws, which require all males over 16 from Pakistan and 24 other countries to register with US authorities.



Tamora Vogt (C) helps her daughter Victoria and son Kevin to place US flags at a makeshift memorial near one of the gates of the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas Tuesday. Thousands of sympathisers have left notes, flowers and balloons in memory of the seven Columbia astronauts who perished when the shuttle disintegrated on February 1.

PHOTO: AFP

## Leaders at first African Union summit discuss Ivory Coast, Iraq

AFP, Lagos

African heads of state and government on Monday discussed the crisis in Ivory Coast and other trouble spots on the continent as well as prospects of war in Iraq during a one-day summit in the Ethiopian capital.

Twenty-eight heads of state, including Moammer Gaddafi of Libya, Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Ousegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, and six prime ministers met at the first full summit of the African Union.

The summit, scheduled to last two days, closed a day early Monday evening, but there was no suggestion that this was due to anything other than delegates finishing their work early.

While no official account of the deliberations was immediately made available - a communicate was expected Tuesday - delegates indicated that the AU would reiterate its support for a French-backed peace plan for the Ivory Coast and for the efforts of the Economic Community of West African States to resolve the crisis.



South African President and African Union chairperson Thabo Mbeki (2nd R) inaugurates the new African Union (AU) headquarters in Addis Ababa on Monday during the opening ceremony of first extraordinary AU summit. Pictured (L to R) Libyan President Moammer Gaddafi, Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Ghanaian President John Kufour and AU Commission Chairman Amara Essy.

PHOTO: AFP

## S Africa to pass NAM baton to Malaysia

THE STAR/ANN, Kuala Lumpur

South Africa will continue to champion the cause of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) after passing the "baton" of the mammoth body to Malaysia, which will host the 13th NAM Summit this month.

South African High Commissioner to Malaysia Dr Abraham Sokhaya Nkomo, who disclosed this, said his country had forged a strong bond with NAM since becoming its member in 1994.

South Africa also shared a very special relationship with Malaysia among countries of the South, he added.

"We are very grateful to Malaysia for the leading role it played in conditioning the Commonwealth and the United Nations to accept that apartheid (rule in South Africa) was a vicious regime, which led to South Africa being expelled (from both organisations).

## Bombers ordered to boost US forces in S Korea

### North slams US plans to enhance firepower

AFP, Washington

Two dozen B-52 and B-1 bombers have been ordered to prepare to deploy to the western Pacific to back up US forces in South Korea as the US military mobilizes for war in the Gulf, a Pentagon official said Monday.

Twelve B-52 bombers and an equal number of B-1 bombers were being prepared to move to Guam, the official said, adding that no decision had yet been taken to send them. The orders involve about 2,000 air force personnel, the official said.

They followed a request by the commander of US forces in the Pacific, Admiral Thomas Fargo, for additional forces to deter North Korea at a time when the United States is engaged in a showdown with Iraq, the official said.

"You always want to send the message: don't underestimate us," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "So he (Fargo)

came in with additional requests for forces which would show Korea that though we are focused on Iraq, don't think this is the moment to do something."

"Some forces have been put on 'prepare to move,' including the bombers and ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance)," the official said.

The official would not say what intelligence, surveillance or reconnaissance forces were tapped.

US defense officials report no unusual military preparations by North Korea, but there is mounting US concern over North Korean moves to revive its nuclear weapons program.

Some US intelligence analysts have concluded that North Korea has begun moving fuel rods at its Yongbyon nuclear reactor complex, sharply raising the risks that Pyongyang is intent on producing nuclear weapons.

"The president thinks that this can be handled through diplomatic

means," said White House spokesman Ari Fleischer, but "we have contingencies all around the world and we always make certain that our contingencies are viable."

Meanwhile, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld met for 45 minutes with a special envoy of South Korea's president-elect Roh Moo-Hyun, who rode a wave of anti-American sentiment to victory in elections last month.

"They talked about the future of the alliance and the need to build a strong relationship in the future, including updating and modernizing the alliance," said Lieutenant Commander Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, of the meeting between Rumsfeld and the envoy, Chyng-Dai-Chul.

The Pentagon has been quietly looking at revamping its force structure in South Korea where the 37,000 US troops have been a magnet for protest, according to Pentagon officials.