

Powell's UN briefing fails to budge world opinion

AFP, Sydney

US Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation Wednesday to the UN Security Council apparently failed to budge world opinion on Iraq, with most countries reaffirming their earlier positions.

In testimony before the Security Council, Powell said Iraq had failed the disarmament tests laid down in Council resolutions and had failed to seize the one last chance it had been given to avoid war.

The four other veto-bearing members of the Security Council stood by their earlier statements, with Britain supporting the US position, France opposing it and Russia and China urging for UN inspectors to be given more time.

Britain, the staunchest US supporter, said February 14 would be the crunch moment in the Iraq crisis.

"This council will have further reports from the inspectors on Friday week. If non-cooperation continues, this council must meet its responsibilities," British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told the UN Security Council in New York.

France, one of the most vociferous opponents to US policy on Iraq, reaffirmed its opposition to early military action, but did not rule it out altogether if it was approved by the Security Council.

French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said Paris' position remained the same.

"There is no change in the French position, no change at all," Raffarin told

AFP on arrival in the southern Indian city of Bangalore at the start of a three-day official visit to India.

"We want the inspectors to work well in Iraq. We do not want war. We believe there are other ways of destroying weapons than war. War is only the last resort. We are committed to absolutely every process to prevent war."

China and Russia called for the UN weapons inspectors in Iraq to continue their work.

Powell's presentation "indicates that the activities of the international inspectors in Iraq must be continued," said Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan called on the United States to hand over the intelligence used in the briefing to the inspectors.

While British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Powell's presentation had served to "lay bare the deceit" of Saddam's regime, Britain's press was roughly split on the new evidence.

Right-leaning broadsheets The Daily Telegraph and The Times together with the mass-circulation tabloid The Sun said Powell's speech had firmed up the case against Iraq.

Meanwhile Australia, one of the staunchest supporters of military action, said Powell's presentation amounted to "cast iron" evidence that Saddam was misleading inspectors.

"The material that Secretary of State Powell has released shows a deeply disturbing pattern of deceit by Saddam Hussein's regime," Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said here.



PHOTO: AFP

Military trucks leave Kuwait City on Thursday loaded with equipment sent to US troops deployed on the northern Kuwaiti desert near the border with Iraq. US troop numbers in Kuwait have swollen to more than 50,000 as the emirate declared 60 percent of its northern territory will be off limits in anticipation that it will be the main staging post for any US-led war on Iraq.

Al-Qaeda still a viable threat to US: FBI

REUTERS, Washington

The FBI will warn that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network still poses a viable threat, with the potential for another attack against the United States, federal law enforcement officials said on Wednesday.

"They have been disrupted. But they still exist, and they are still out there. The potential for another terrorist attack remains of great concern," an official said of the warning contained in the FBI's "National Threat Assessment" report that will soon be given to the US Congress.

The officials said it was an analytical report, based on information developed after the Sept. 11, 2001, hijacked plane attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon that killed about 3,000 people. Washington blames bin Laden and al-Qaeda for the attacks and launched a military operation in Afghanistan as part of a declared "war on terrorism."

Pentagon writing rules for use of non-lethal agents in Iraq war

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon is writing rules of engagement to allow US forces to use non-lethal riot control agents to minimize civilian casualties if they go to war in Iraq, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Wednesday.

But Rumsfeld said treaty restrictions and other laws that bar the use of riot control agents in warfare without a presidential waiver have made the process "very complex."

"We are doing our best to live within the straitjacket that has been imposed on us on this subject," he said at a hearing of the House Armed Services Committee.

US military planners fear that US forces may have to contend with massive movements of panicked civilians if Iraq uses of chemical or biological weapons, or hostile crowds if an invading force meets popular resistance.

UK anti-terrorist police arrest 7 during raids

AFP, London

British anti-terrorist police arrested seven people Thursday during a series of early-morning raids in London, the Scottish cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, and Manchester in northwest England, police said.

Six men and one woman were detained under the Terrorism Act 2000, officers said.

The raids were part of an operation by Lothian and Borders police in southern Scotland, assisted by Greater Manchester police and the anti-terrorist squad of London's Metropolitan police.

Those arrested in England would be taken to Scotland and questioned at a secure location, police added.

Lothian and Borders police said two men were arrested in the Scottish capital Edinburgh, a man and woman were arrested in Glasgow, one man was arrested in the Manchester area, and two men were arrested in London.

Concern in Asia on Iraq deepens

AFP, Sydney

Fears over Iraq's alleged weapons program deepened among US allies in Asia Thursday but the presentation of new evidence against Saddam Hussein's regime failed to convince key governments that inspections were a dead duck.

Australia, Japan and New Zealand said the presentation to the UN Security Council Wednesday by US Secretary of State Colin Powell offered clear evidence Iraq was misleading UN weapons inspectors.

But China, Asia's only permanent Security Council member, and Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-populated nation, both insisted the speech showed the need for the inspections to be given more time.

China's Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan, speaking immediately after

Powell at the United Nations, said Washington must hand over its evidence to the inspectors.

He praised the work of UN inspection teams and observers from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over the past two months.

"It is their view that now they are not in a position to draw conclusions, and they have suggested continuing the inspections," said Tang.

"We should respect their views of the two agencies and support the continuation of their work."

Beijing has consistently advocated more time for inspections in Iraq, and argued that the Security Council should be the final arbiter of their effectiveness.

Indonesia said that there was still a "limited time" to find a peaceful solution through the Security

Council as it also called for inspections to continue.

Powell's speech "reaffirms our view that the UN weapons inspection team needs to continue its work in Iraq since the information disclosed by Powell has to be followed up by UNMOVIC," said foreign ministry spokesman Marty Natalegawa.

But Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said Powell's evidence amounted to "cast iron" proof against Iraq, a stance echoed in Tokyo by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and senior Japanese officials.

"The material that Secretary of State Powell has released shows a deeply disturbing pattern of deceit by Saddam Hussein's regime," Downer said.



PHOTO: AFP

Spanish left-wing political party United Left (IU) deputies hold placards reading 'War, No' during the speech by Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar on the Iraq crisis at a plenary session of the Spanish Parliament in Madrid on Wednesday.

5 killed in Thai train collision

AFP, Bangkok

Five people were killed and 45 injured after a freight train collided head-on with an express passenger train in central Thailand, railway police said Thursday.

The freight train travelling from northeastern Udon Thani to the eastern seaport of Lam Chabang smashed into the express train which was carrying some 300 passengers from the capital Bangkok to northeastern Nong Khai province.

Four of 14 cars of the express train crashed off track and caught fire, police said.

The crash occurred shortly before midnight Wednesday in Lop Buri province, 153 kilometers (95 miles) north of Bangkok.

Authorities said three of the 45 injured were in a serious condition but were expected to survive.

N Korea reactivates N-facilities

Pyongyang warns US of pre-emptive attack

AP, Seoul

North Korea said Wednesday it has reactivated its nuclear facilities, an announcement that raised questions whether it was trying to take advantage of Washington's preoccupation with Iraq to ratchet up pressure in its own standoff with the United States.

In Washington, the State Department said that if the announcement was true, "this would be a very serious development." It demanded the North "reverse this action ... North Korea must visibly, verifiably and irreversibly dismantle its nuclear weapons program."

A North Korean spokesman announced the reactivation, deepening the crisis over Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions, just before Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke at the UN Security Council,

presenting the US case against Iraq.

The North said the reactivated facilities would "for the present stage" be used only to produce electricity - but the United States says the facilities can produce nuclear weapons within months.

Even as it presses toward war with Iraq over alleged hidden weapons of mass destruction, the United States has insisted it wants a peaceful solution in its standoff with North Korea.

President Bush "keeps all of his options open" but still believes the standoff can be resolved diplomatically, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said in an appearance on ABC's "Nightline."

North Korea on Thursday warned the United States not to take military action against it.

"If the United States launches a surprise attack on our peaceful nuclear facilities, it will spark a full-scale war," said Rodong Simmun, North Korea's main state-run newspaper, in a commentary carried by Radio Pyongyang.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer discounted that Pyongyang was timing the issue with Iraq developments.

"North Korea has a history of doing things like they did in the 90s, outside of the context of Iraq," he said.

The North's announcement came hours after South Korea opened a road across the heavily fortified border for the first time in more than half a century, trying to ease tensions with the isolated communist regime.

Pyongyang wants direct talks

with Washington. Analysts say North Korea, which often accuses the United States of plotting to invade it, fears Washington will turn up pressure on it if a war against Iraq is successful.

Reuters adds: North Korea may strike US forces pre-emptively rather than wait for an American attack after a war with Iraq, a spokesman for the communist state told Britain's Guardian newspaper in Pyongyang.

"The United States says that after Iraq, we are next," the Guardian Web Site quoted Ri Pyong-gap, a North Korean Foreign Ministry deputy director, as saying Wednesday amid rising tensions over a nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula.



NASA's can-do culture may have role in Columbia loss

REUTERS, Washington

NASA's can-do culture -- the conviction that ingenuity and hard work can offset thin budgets and the inherent risk of space flight -- might have been a factor in the shuttle Columbia disaster, space analysts say.

In also appears that the traditional can-do has in recent years been make-do as the US space agency's budget has been stretched by demands of the \$95 billion International Space Station and an ambitious science program.

"The can-do attitude that you can tinker with it and fix it and make it go next time despite having flaws in performance, it becomes an acceptable risk to fly with flaws," said Diane Vaughan of Boston College. "Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

Vaughan, author of a book on the decisions that preceded the 1986 Challenger accident that killed all seven on board, said NASA's level of acceptable risk tended to increase with every successful mission, and she noted that shuttles had flown safely for 17 years since Challenger.

Columbia, the oldest of the shuttles, has had problems with heat-shielding tiles since its first piggy-back flight to Cape Canaveral, when dozens of the tiles fell off. Since then, numerous engineering reports have raised ques-

tions about their safety, but Columbia continued to fly, with periodic upgrades.

The US Aerospace Safety Advisory Panel, a group of independent experts which advises Congress and NASA, reported last year that while safety had not yet been compromised at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the future looked grim without a big cash infusion.

"The current and proposed budgets are not sufficient to improve or even maintain the safety risk level of operating the space shuttle and the International Space Station," the panel said.

But at a hearing on Capitol Hill last April, Frederick Gregory of NASA's office of space flight enterprise disagreed pointedly with the panel's report: "If we want to maintain the same level (of safety), then we have the capability and capacity to do that."

Acceptance of risk was built into the US human space flight program from the beginning, when the original Mercury astronauts were considered to be engaging in such hazardous duty that their lives could not be insured.

These astronauts fought for, and got, an innovation in the early space ships that engineers did not deem necessary -- a window that would be essential if astronauts had to steer the craft manually.



PHOTO: AFP

German supermodel Claudia Schiffer poses with her newborn baby boy Casper as she leaves the Portland maternity hospital in London on Wednesday. Casper, the model's first baby, was delivered on January 30.

2 Palestinians, 2 Israelis killed in ME violence

AFP, Jerusalem

Two armed Palestinians were killed in exchanges of fire with the Israeli army during an attack that killed two Israelis early Thursday just south of the West Bank city of Nablus, Israeli military sources said.

The bodies of the Palestinians were being held by the Israeli army, they said without giving further details.

The attack was claimed by two Palestinian militant groups in a phone call to AFP.

The caller said the radical Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, and the Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades, the armed wing of the secular Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), were responsible for the shooting.

The groups have not mentioned the deaths of the two Palestinians.

The Israelis were gunned down by militants in an ambush near Mount Gerizim on the southern outskirts of Nablus, the caller said, without giving further details.

The latest casualties raised to 2,927 the number of people killed since the start of the 29-month-old Palestinian uprising, including 2,182 Palestinians and 689 Israelis.