



US Secretary of State Colin Powell (R) looks at Iraqi Ambassador to the United Nations Mohamed Al-Douri (L) as he delivers his speech to the United Nations Security Council February 14, 2003.

Resistance to US war plan mounts in UN

REUTERS, United Nations

In a setback for the United States, top UN arms officials held out hope that inspections were working, depriving Washington of fodder to rally world support behind an invasion of Iraq.

Russia, France, China, Germany and others, in a dramatic showdown during an unusually free-wheeling Security Council meeting on Friday, told Secretary of State Colin Powell to give peace a chance and allow inspections to continue.

The eagerly awaited report by chief inspector Hans Blix, while critical of Iraq's failure to deliver information in vital areas, lacked the bite of his previous assessments. Consequently, wavering council members from various regions of the world said it was premature to take military action.

The pressure against a war was bound to increase during huge anti-war demonstrations, throughout Europe and beyond. The protests began with tens of thousands of people pouring into the streets of cities in New Zealand and Australia, more than organizers expected.

But Powell, ignoring his prepared text, warned the world it should not be taken in by "tricks that are being played on us. ... We cannot allow this process to be endlessly strung out as Iraq is trying to do right now," Powell said.

Only British Foreign Minister Jack Straw and Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio strongly supported him, with Bulgaria giving cautious backing. Other members, including

Chile and Angola, thought to lean toward Washington, either straddled a middle line or favored continued inspections.

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin took center stage, drawing rare applause from an audience in the staid council gallery, by saying there was no need for war yet.

"In this temple of the United Nations, we are the guardians of an ideal, the guardians of conscience. This onerous responsibility and immense honor we have must lead us to give priority to disarmament through peace," he said.

The immediate impact of the Security Council debate was to slow down introduction of a resolution the United States and especially Britain wanted that would authorize force.

The measure had been expected to be circulated early next week but British officials said they were no longer sure when a document might emerge. Powell said he would have to consult with President Bush "and make a judgment in the not too distant future."

British diplomats are still hopeful that nations will sign on to the use of force if given time. But with US military leaders suggesting that combat operations need to take place by mid-March, successful negotiations may not meet that deadline.

France showed no sign it would relent. But de Villepin said he "did not exclude the possibility that force may have to be used one day if the inspectors' reports concluded that it was impossible to continue with the inspections."

Blix, in his report, criticized Iraq for not providing material and evidence to respond to questions about stocks of anthrax and the deadly nerve gas VX.

He also said some of Iraq's long-range missiles violated U.N. resolutions and noted that Iraq had constructed special chambers for casting Badr-2000 missiles that the inspectors determined to be illegal.

EIbaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said his inspections team had found no evidence of nuclear weapons or related activity.

"It is my hope that the commitments made recently by Baghdad will continue to translate into concrete and sustained action," ElBaradei told the council.

Iraq's U.N. ambassador, Mohammed Aldouri, the last speaker to address the council, denied again that Baghdad possessed any banned weapons and said it had "chosen the path of peace."

In an interview with Reuters, Aldouri also dismissed U.S. reports that Iraq was poised to sabotage its own oil fields and said there had been no movement by Iraqi troops to move explosives toward the Kuwait border, where oil fields produce half of Iraq's crude exports.

In a related development, the State Department expelled a popular Iraqi journalist, Mohammad Hassan Allawi, who covers the United Nations for the official Iraqi News Agency. The notice said he indulged in activities "considered harmful to U.S. national security."

US pushes both sides to end Lankan war

REUTERS, Washington

The United States on Friday said it hoped to provide more aid to Sri Lanka this year but that it would depend on the government and the rebel Tamil Tigers showing the political will to pursue peace.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage praised both sides for respecting a nearly one-year truce, saying this move had restored some confidence among their people.

As he pushed both sides to end a two-decade civil war that has killed 64,000 people, the US official had tough words for each, saying the government must respect human rights and that the Tigers must renounce terrorism.

Armitage said he expected to announce "significant further assistance" to Sri Lanka in June beyond the \$8 million for humanitarian needs and \$1 million for de-mining pledged last year, but suggested it would require movement by both sides.

"The price tag for sustaining such interest will be progress -- a clear demonstration that all parties to the negotiations have the determination to see this through," Armitage said in a speech at a Washington think-tank.

"By June, both the government, all elements of the government, and the (Tamil) Tigers will need to have made some hard choices and compromises that demonstrate the political will to proceed if they want to meet their ambitions for international support," he added.

The conflict pits the Sinhalese-dominated government against the minority Tamils, who have been fighting for a separate state in the north and east of the island but who last year made a major concession by agreeing to discuss a federal system giving them regional autonomy.

Gulf press urges Arabs to lead anti-war campaign

AFP, Dubai

Gulf newspapers urged Arab states yesterday to throw their weight behind world powers opposed to a US war on Iraq, charging that Washington was bent on attacking Baghdad even without UN sanction.

Arab governments, whose foreign ministers meet in Cairo Sunday as a prelude to an emergency summit on Iraq, "shoulder the heavy responsibility of speaking out clearly against war and backing influential countries" opposed to the use of force, wrote Qatar's Al-Raya.

Arabs states should seize "the last chance to join efforts" exerted by France, Germany and Russia to ward off a new conflict in the Gulf, the daily said.

Another Qatari daily, Al-Watan, said the reports delivered to the UN Security Council Friday by disarmament chiefs Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei provided a boost to the "peace coalition".

Blix, who heads the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission, and ElBaradei, director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, told the council they had no evidence Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

"Of what use would an Arab summit be if it were held after Iraq is attacked?" wondered Dubai-based Al-Bayan, adding that the United States was determined to attack.

Akhbar Al-Arab of Abu Dhabi said US war talk was designed to "intimidate not just the Iraqis but the entire international community such that it will bow to American dictates."

In Saudi Arabia, where newspapers usually reflect official thinking, Al-Watan deplored the fact that the Arabs were lagging behind such world powers as France in seeking to avert a military showdown.

"It is the Arabs who should have made (peace) proposals to France ... not the other way round," the paper said, adding that it was "not permissible that an issue that will affect the Arabs' future be left to others."

The English-language Arab News said there was nothing in the chief inspectors' reports to justify a US-led attack on Iraq.

"Their reports immeasurably strengthen the position of France, Germany, Russia and China that arms inspectors must be given more time -- all the time needed," the daily said.

WAVES AGAINST WAR



American nationals join Malaysians during an anti-war demonstration in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Hundreds of people including foreigners from Australia and the US held a protest in front of the US embassy to denounce a possible US-led war against Iraq.

PHOTO:AFP



Muslims hold placards denouncing US President George W. Bush as around 600 peace supporters marched on the US Consulate in Central business district in Hong Kong. Millions of people were expected to demonstrate around the world against war in Iraq after the US said it would wait only "weeks" before deciding if it would act against Baghdad.

PHOTO:AFP

Rebels warn India's ruling party on communal politics

AFP, Guwahati

An influential tribal separatist group in India's northeastern state of Nagaland yesterday warned the country's ruling Hindu nationalist party against playing communal politics in the run up to state assembly polls.

"We would like to make it very clear that the Nagas would not tolerate any political party trying to rake up religious issues during electioneering in Nagaland," K. Mulaton, publicity chief of the S.S. Khapleng faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), told AFP by telephone.

"The BJP and its frontal organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Council) should particularly refrain from vitiating the peaceful communal fabric during campaigning."

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee belongs to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which heads India's 24-party federal coalition.

The party, which suffered a string of defeats in assembly elections in the past two years, staged a stunning comeback in western Gujarat state in December riding a Hindu nationalist wave, after the state had witnessed widespread communal riots.

The victory sparked fears that the BJP would use communal politics in other state elections.

The NSCN warning comes at a time when the BJP is making desperate attempts to make political inroads in the Christian dominated northeast during the upcoming polls.

Nagaland and Meghalaya -- both predominantly Christian -- are among four Indian states that go to the polls on February 26.

More than 90 percent of Nagaland's 1.9 million population and an estimated 65 percent of the total 2.3 million people in Meghalaya are Christian.

The BJP's political presence in the northeast is virtually non-existent, but the party has begun aggressive political manoeuvring to reverse the trend.

Vajpayee's BJP had come to a pre-poll understanding with the main opposition Nagaland People's Front (NPF).

But within days the NPF pulled out of the alliance, apparently under pressure from tribal councils and the powerful church for allying with a pro-Hindu party.

The BJP, however, maintains it was having "friendly contests" with the NPF in some seats.

The NSCN, fighting for an independent tribal homeland, is split into factions -- one led by guerrilla leader Khapleng and the other headed by Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah.

Both factions are currently observing a ceasefire with the federal government and holding peace talks to end more than 56 years of violent tribal insurgency in the region.

NSCN's Mulaton warned that some regional parties had become "tools at the hands of the BJP... for money and power."

Israeli tank in flames after hitting bomb in Gaza

REUTERS, Gaza

An Israeli army tank ran over a large roadside bomb Saturday and burst into flames near a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip yesterday, Israeli security sources and Palestinian witnesses said.

It was not immediately known how many soldiers were inside the tank and whether there were any casualties. The Israeli army refused immediate comment.

The military wing of Islamic militant group Hamas claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement faxed to Reuters. Hamas has spearheaded a 28-month-old Palestinian militant uprising against Israel for a state in Gaza and the West Bank.

Palestinian witnesses said the tank burst into flames after several explosions in the area near the fortified Jewish settlement of Dugit at the northern end of the desert strip that skirts the Mediterranean Sea.

Colombian rebels kill and seize Americans

REUTERS, Bogota

Gen. Jorge Enrique Mora, Colombia's chief military commander, said the five crew members were alive when the single-engine Cessna landed and that rebels killed two of them "execution-style in an act of cruelty."

A senior Colombian military officer told Reuters on condition of anonymity that one victim had a bullet wound in the head and the other had a bullet wound in the chest.

The plane, which the Colombian military said was on an "intelligence mission," was carrying four Americans and a Colombian when its engine failed. It came down near the village of Puerto Rico, 250 miles south of Bogota.

The plane incident comes as the FARC steps up its attacks against Uribe's hard-line security policies.

Suspected FARC rebels detonated a massive bomb in the city of Neiva on Friday, killing at least 15 people as police raided a house full of explosives. On Feb. 7, FARC rebels detonated a powerful car bomb in an exclusive Bogota club, killing 35 people in the group's worst urban attack in decades.

"If these reports are accurate, we demand the crew members be released unharmed immediately," he said.

Hit TV show 'The Simpsons' marks 300th episode

AFP, Los Angeles

The hit US television show "The Simpsons," known for its irreverent humour and the subtle political commentary relayed by its yellow protagonists, is celebrating its 300th episode this weekend.

The show, featuring the dysfunctional family of patriarch Homer Simpson and his rowdy brood, is now in its 14th year and is expected to become the longest-running US situation comedy in US history in 2005.

"The 300th anniversary is a real milestone as this is a show which has really worked itself into the fabric of society," a source with the programme's makers Fox television told AFP.

But despite its unusual success on US television, known for ruthlessly axing shows the moment their popularity shows any sign of waning, "The Simpsons" edgy and outspoken humour has made a generation chortle.

"What's most impressive is not the longevity, but the continued high quality," said Steve Johnson, television critic of the Chicago Tribune newspaper of the show which is syndicated across the globe.

"This, simply put, is a series that does not fade, a tribute to creator Matt Groening and the writers, of course, but also to animation which... lets the characters slip easily in and out of surrealism," it said.

The show's animated format and characters -- who include the mischievous Bart, his sisters Lisa and Maggie and their mother Marge -- also allow "The Simpsons" to convey messages that no other shows would dream of tackling.

Former US vice president Dan Quayle was mercilessly ribbed by Groening and his team -- in the guise of Bart -- in 1992 after he notoriously misspelled the word "potato" during a visit to an elementary school.

Other barbs have included cultural and religious ones, political jibes, pokes at industrialists and rampant capitalism, swipes at top sports personalities and more than the occasional attack on the French.

The groundskeeper of Bart and company's Springfield Elementary School, the grumpy Scotsman Willie, coined the unflattering description of the French as "cheese-eating surrender monkeys."

China celebrates Valentine's Day and the Lantern Festival in tandem

AFP, Beijing

China's embrace of St. Valentine's Day was infused with a shot of double happiness this year as the celebration coincided with this weekend's traditional Lunar Lantern Festival.

The dual holiday was a boon to shopping centers around the country as flowers and chocolates were snapped up along with the traditional Lantern Festival delicacy of boiled glutinous rice dumplings filled with sweet stuffings.

Rose sellers were seen lining the posh Jianguomen business district Friday evening charging up to 40 yuan (4.80 dollars) a stem, while shoppers were also lining up at stores around the city to buy the sweet dumplings.

Although the Lantern Festival

falls on Saturday many Chinese hung their lights and ate the dumplings known as "yuan xiao" on the festival eve in order to celebrate the two holidays together.

China has increasingly embraced Valentine's Day, which is known as "Lover's Day" in Chinese, since it opened up to the outside world 20 years ago.

The holiday has also spread deep into China's interior where an enterprising shopping center in remote Nanchang city, Jiangxi province held a marathon kissing contest that began early Friday and garnered national attention.

The winning couple won a pair of diamond rings worth 9,999 yuan (1,200 dollars).

In Beijing, roses and condoms were handed out free at some shopping centers, while in the evening restaurants were packed with couples who were treated to intimate dinners served with the Lantern Festival delicacy.

Meanwhile hundreds of women flocked to the Tongjiao Nunnery in central Beijing yesterday where one of the capital's most traditional temple fairs took place in a swirl of incense and the hum of shaven-headed, chanting nuns.

The Tongjiao nunnery was once the home to the court eunuchs of the Ming Dynasty.

The two holidays do not always coincide so closely, as the Lantern Festival is celebrated in accordance with the Lunar calendar, China's traditional calendar for marking the months and years.



A woman prays during an offering of burning incense at the Tongjiao Temple in Beijing, 15 February 2003, marking the Lantern Festival on the 15th day of the Lunar New Year. Celebrations of the traditional festival, known as "yuan xiao," is marked in accordance with the Lunar calendar. The temple, which dates back to the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and was used as a court for eunuchs, reverted to its original religious use in the mid-1980's after some two decades, when local police and the Public Security Bureau took over the premises during the Cultural Revolution and ordered the nuns to go home.

PHOTO:AFP