

Bush ratchets up rhetoric against Saddam

US vows to take on Iraq with or without UN

AP, Washington

A sombre President Bush readied the nation for war against Saddam Hussein, hurling some of his harshest invectives yet at the Iraqi leader and promising to rid Iraq of this "cancer" after any military campaign.

In a prime-time news conference, Bush went directly to the American people to make his case for confronting Saddam, and to reluctant members of the UN Security Council who were meeting Friday to discuss the next step to take against Iraq.

But the president also issued multiple warnings to Saddam himself. "Should we have to go in, our mission is very clear: disarmament," Bush said. "In order to disarm, it will mean regime change. I'm confident that we'll be able to achieve that objective in a way that minimises the loss of life."

Bush never has minced words when it comes to Saddam. But he stepped up the rhetoric during Thursday's nearly hour-long question-and-answer session, calling the Iraqi leader "this cancer inside Iraq."

He also referred to "Saddam and his group of killers" and described the Iraqi regime as "totalitarianism."

With about a quarter-million US forces now deployed in the region around Iraq, and more on the way, Bush said he hoped "as a result of the

pressure that we have placed and others have placed" on Saddam that he might leave Iraq on his own.

"I hear a lot of talk from different nations around where Saddam Hussein might be exiled," Bush said. "That would be fine with me."

If not, Bush left no doubt that the ultimate goal of a US-led war would be the ouster of the Iraqi dictator.

"The risk of doing nothing, the risk of hoping that Saddam Hussein changes his mind and becomes a gentle soul, the risk that somehow that inaction will make the world safer, is a risk I'm not willing to take for the American people," the president said.

AFP adds: President George W. Bush vowed late Thursday that the United States will disarm Iraq by force, if necessary, even without UN approval or backing from traditional allies like France and Germany.

Warning that diplomacy has reached its "last phase," Bush said the UN Security Council must bring "finality" to the confrontation with Iraq by voting within days on a new resolution as paving the way for a US-led war on Iraq.

"It's time for people to show their cards, let the world know where they stand when it comes to Saddam," he told what was just the second prime-time news conference of his presidency. "We're days away from resolving this issue."

US-Russian disarmament treaty ratified

AFP, Washington

The US Senate Thursday ratified the strategic disarmament treaty signed with Russia last year.

The treaty, providing for a two-thirds reduction of both countries' long-range nuclear warheads, was ratified by a 95-0 vote in the 100-member Senate.

The first major disarmament pact between the two nuclear giants in nearly 10 years, the treaty will reduce their strategic nuclear arsenals from around 6,000 warheads each today to between 1,700 and 2,200 by 2012.

Signed in Moscow last May by presidents Vladimir Putin and George W. Bush, the pact was hailed as the dawning of a new era of US-Russian relations, and because "new global challenges and threats require the building of a qualitatively new foundation for strategic relations."



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan's home-made nuclear capable Hatf-IV missiles approach towards the ceremony venue in Islamabad in which country's army took formal possession of these missiles known as a Shaheen on Thursday. The Shaheen, a medium-range ballistic missile developed by Pakistan's National Engineering and Scientific Commission, was inducted into the army in a formal ceremony presided over by President Pervez Musharraf at the National Defence Complex. Musharraf, also the country's army chief, accepted the missile on the army's behalf. He said that while Pakistan seeks peace it would not compromise its "minimum defence needs".



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians burn a banner depicting Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon during a demonstration in support of the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, in the West Bank town of Bethlehem on Thursday. Dozens of Palestinian marched during a demonstration in the centre of Bethlehem in support of their leader Yasser Arafat and Saddam Hussein and against a US-led war on Iraq.

Israeli forces establish Gaza 'security zone'

Arafat proposes PLO number 2 as new PM

REUTERS, Gaza

Israeli forces seized a band of territory in the northern Gaza Strip on Friday in what a senior officer said was an open-ended stay to thwart Palestinian rocket attacks on southern Israel.

The creation of what Israeli Army Radio called a security zone came on the heels of a raid on a Gaza refugee camp on Thursday in which 11 Palestinians were killed, bloodshed that followed a suicide bombing that killed 15 people in Israel.

Amid the violence, Palestinian President Yasser Arafat asked Mahmoud Abbas -- who has kept a back-channel open to Israeli leaders during the past 29 months of fighting -- to be prime minister, a post international peace mediators wanted created. Palestinian security sources said at least a dozen Israeli tanks and other armoured vehicles backed by helicopter gunships pushed some 2 km deeper into the Gaza Strip from the northern Erez border crossing.

The force rolled up to the edge of Jabalya refugee camp, where

Thursday's fighting took place, and the town of Beit Hanoun, establishing new observation points and roadblocks.

The army said in a statement the operation "was part of an attempt to... prevent the launching of Qassam rockets toward Israeli communities near the northern Gaza Strip."

Three of the makeshift rockets slammed into the southern Israeli town of Sderot on Thursday, hours after the crushing raid on Jabalya, a militant stronghold.

AFP adds: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has proposed the Palestine Liberation Organisation second-in-command, Mahmud Abbas, a noted pragmatist and veteran of the peace process, become his first prime minister, a senior official told AFP late Thursday.

Arafat "proposed during a meeting of the (PLO) executive committee to name Abu Mazen to the prime minister's post," said the official who requested he not be named.

US, Pakistan intensify hunt for Laden

Osama seems alive, not in Pakistan: Musharraf

AP, Islamabad

Pakistani and American forces intensified the search for Osama bin Laden along a southwestern stretch of the border with Afghanistan and carried out raids this week based on information from a newly captured al-Qaeda deputy, Pakistani intelligence and military officials said Thursday.

Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, thought to be the No. 3 figure in the terror network, told interrogators he met bin Laden just weeks ago in a rendezvous set up through a network of phone calls and intermediaries, an intelligence official said.

At least two raids have been carried out in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan region based on information from Mohammed since his capture last weekend, another Pakistani intelligence official said, also speaking on condition of anonymity. There were no major arrests from the raids, the official said.

Telephone numbers taken from Mohammed's mobile phone are being tracked. The phone contained numbers inside and outside Pakistan, said a government official.

"The people he contacted in Pakistan have naturally been put under surveillance and we suspect

the American agencies are doing the same," the official said.

Reuters adds: President Pervez Musharraf said Osama bin Laden seemed to be alive but was unlikely to be in Pakistan, where suspected September 11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was arrested at the weekend.

The arrest raised hopes that interrogators could get leads on the location of the world's most-wanted man, who has evaded US forces since surviving a massive US bombing campaign against al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan in late 2001.

US plans tests of new-age N-arms

AFP, Washington

The United States may soon begin preliminary tests of a new generation of nuclear weapons, following the adoption of a security posture that broadens the range of possible future targets, a top government official said.

The announcement comes as the administration of President George W. Bush, caught between the rapidly escalating crises with Iraq and North Korea, is refusing to rule out use of force in either of them.

Everet Beckner, deputy head of the National Nuclear Security Administration, told Congress on Thursday, the administration counted to spend \$ 21 million in fiscal 2004 developing these futuristic weapons, including nuclear bunker-busting bombs.

These bombs, capable of penetrating deep underground and eviscerating enemy command and control centres, ammunition dumps and secret leadership hideouts, are seen by some military experts as useful tools in fighting the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

Testifying before the House Strategic Forces Subcommittee, Beckner said the administration

was certain to continue theoretical and design work on one or more of such new-age weapons.

"These activities might proceed beyond the 'paper' stage and include a combination of component and subassembly tests and simulations to introduce an appropriate level of rigor to challenge our designers," he went on to say.

He added the research "might also culminate in an integral flight or laboratory test, or a subsequent decision to proceed with further development activities."

The program is centred on the so-called Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator that, in Beckner's words, "would enhance the nation's ability to hold hard and deeply buried targets at risk."

Scientists are currently looking at the possibility of converting into bunker-busters two existing warheads - the B61 and the B83, according to defence officials.

The researchers' main task is to find a way of hardening these bombs' shells to allow them to survive penetration through layers of rock and concrete before detonating close to their targets, the officials said.

10 soldiers die in avalanches in Kashmir

REUTERS, Jammu

At least 10 Indian soldiers have died in multiple avalanches on the military cease-fire line in Kashmir and many more are missing, a senior defence official said on Friday.

He said a small earthquake in the Himalayan mountain ranges had triggered the avalanches, burying troops lined up along the Line of Control dividing Indian and Pakistani Kashmir.

Indian army intercepts suggested that Pakistani troops were hit just as badly on their side of the Line, he added.

The defence official in Jammu, winter capital of India's Jammu and Kashmir state, said at least 19 Indian soldiers were missing after a string of avalanches over the past two days in the Kargil district in the north of the state.

"Many avalanches have taken place in the area in the past two days and some of our men are still untraceable," he said.

An army spokesman said dozens of soldiers had been rescued after being trapped under the snow and rescue operations were continuing in the area.

"Because of the late winter, the water content in the snow is comparatively high and the earthquake has triggered multiple avalanches," the defence official said, adding that the earthquake had happened on March 2 or 3.

Pak army inducts new nuclear-capable missile

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan said its army took delivery of a new medium-range nuclear-capable ballistic missile on Thursday as part of a minimum but credible deterrence policy against what it called belligerence in the region.

President Pervez Musharraf, who attended a ceremony marking the handover of the Pakistani-produced Hatf-IV missile, said, "Pakistan (does) not have global ambitions but was compelled to go nuclear due to belligerence in its neighbourhood."

"We are not into any arms race with anyone. Minimum credible deterrence remains the cornerstone of our security policy and towards that end we have defined and quantified for ourselves the notion of minimum deterrence,"

he said.

"Beyond that quantified notion, Pakistan will not pursue an open-ended strategic weapons arms race. In my opinion, in the nuclear game, numbers beyond a point lose their significance."

Musharraf said Pakistan's strategic plan provided for a "comfortable" level of security but did not elaborate.

A statement issued by Pakistan's military said the Hatf-IV missile, also known as the Shaheen One, had a range of 750 km and could carry all types of warheads.

The statement did not say how many missiles were handed over to the army's Strategic Force Command, but television footage showed at least three vehicle-mounted missiles being paraded.

Meanwhile, Defence Ministry spokesperson in New Delhi said he

had no comment to make.

Pakistan conducted its first nuclear tests in 1998. Jane's Defence Weekly estimates India has 100 to 150 warheads and Pakistan 25 to 50. Jane's says the Hatf-IV can carry a 1,000 kg warhead.

Defence analysts say the introduction of the missile is designed as a signal to both India and to Pakistanis.

The missile was tested in October last year, during the stand-off with India and just before elections called by Pakistan's military rulers to return the country to civilian rule.

"You have to keep on giving signals to your own people and also to India, because India is also doing so," said former general Talat Masood. "It is meant for both."

US war mongering spreads fear across Asia

AP, Hong Kong

US President George W. Bush's new warning about a possible war in Iraq spread a chill across Asia on Friday, heightening people's fears that an unrelenting conflict is now inevitable.

Some Asian nations reiterated their opposition to a war, as did many of their citizens who worry Bush has already given up on hopes for a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

"It sounds like he's going to press ahead with a war against Iraq no matter what but I'm against any war," said Mark Wong, who works for a Hong Kong computer company. "It will kill many innocent people."

"He's just on a warpath," agreed Eddie Tong, an insurance agent in Singapore.

Hours before a crucial UN Security Council meeting, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan said Beijing remained opposed to military action.

"The majority of countries in the world stand for a political solution, and the opposition to war is prevailing," the official Xinhua News Agency paraphrased Tang as saying to Chinese reporters in New York.

Xinhua did not report any reaction Tang might have had to Bush's White House news conference, but said China also wanted Iraq to cooperate more with UN weapons inspectors.

Tang also reiterated support for a pledge by France, Russia and Germany to block any UN resolution that seeks to authorize force in Iraq spread a chill across Asia on Friday, heightening people's fears that an unrelenting conflict is now inevitable.

Prices fell in most of Asia's stock markets after nervous investors watched the Bush news conference live on television. The prime-time event in the United States occurred as Japanese trading was getting under way on Friday morning Asia time. "With indications that war might even be declared next week... the market is facing downside pressure," said Norihito Fujito, senior investment strategist at Mitsubishi Securities. Tokyo stocks closed at a nearly 20-year low on Friday, with the benchmark 225-issue Nikkei Stock Average down 2.69 percent - its lowest since closing at 8,111.83 points on March 15, 1983. Most smaller markets were also down in the afternoon.

Many Asian nations have allied themselves with the United States in the war on terrorism but are unhappy with what some see as likely action by Washington against Iraq - without support from the UN Security Council.

In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, Foreign Minister Hasan Wirayuda reiterated his government's view that a military strike against Iraq was unnecessary.

"We reject that," Wirayuda said. "Indonesia's position as a member

of the non-aligned movement and the Organization of the Islamic Conference is that we are against war in Iraq." A spokeswoman for Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said Tokyo supports the Security Council's efforts to reach a peaceful resolution. The Japanese government is continuing to watch developments in the situation carefully, said the spokeswoman, Misako Kaji.

Bush stated in his news conference that the United States doesn't "need anybody's permission" to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction. If US troops have to go into Iraq to accomplish that, it will result in toppling Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Bush said.

Singaporean Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had said recently that the United States must act according to international law and the resolutions of the Security Council.

Singapore's government had no immediate comment on Bush's latest remarks. A non-government activist group, Think Center, has been urging the city-state's government to adopt a firm anti-war position.

"However, a mad policeman is very difficult to stop," said Sinappan Samyodurai, the Think Center's president. "No one with the right mind-set wants war."

A Vietnamese man said Bush wants to impose his will on other nations.

US, British jets attack Iraqi mobile radar

REUTERS, Washington

US and British warplanes taking part in patrols over southern Iraq on Friday attacked an Iraqi mobile radar system, the US military said.

It said the radar system had been moved into the area and posed a threat to the allied aircraft.

The allies have more than doubled their patrols over the Iraqi "no-fly" zones to at least 500 a day, US defence officials said on Thursday, as a US-led invasion of Iraq appeared close.

US Central Command said in a statement from its headquarters in Florida that the aircraft used precision-guided weapons to strike an Iraqi mobile "target acquisition" radar system 230 miles west of Baghdad.

"The coalition executed today's strike after Iraqi forces moved the highly mobile radar system, which is associated with a surface-to-air

missile system, below the 33rd parallel into the southern no-fly zone where it was a threat to coalition aircraft supporting Operation Southern Watch," said Central Command, which oversees military operations in the region.

They said the radar system allows Iraqi air defence to locate, track and target US and British aircraft. Damage to the radar system was still being assessed.

The last strike was on Thursday, when US-British jets attacked a mobile surface-to-air missile system and an anti-aircraft artillery site in southern Iraq with the stated intention of protecting Kurds in the north and Shi'ite Muslims in the south from the Iraqi military.

The United States and Britain carry out patrols of no-fly zones created after the Gulf War in 1991 in northern and southern Iraq with the stated intention of protecting Kurds in the north and Shi'ite Muslims in the south from the Iraqi military. However, Iraq does not recognise the zones.

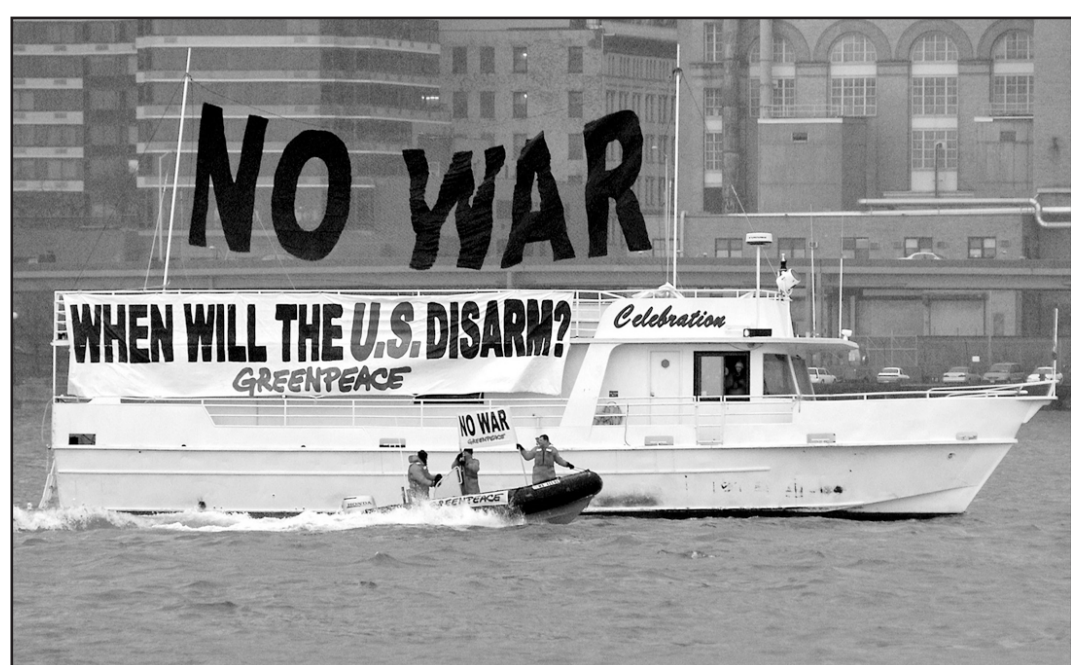


PHOTO: AFP

Greenpeace activists sail past United Nations headquarters in New York in a boat bearing a banner that reads "When Will the US Disarm? No War" on Thursday. The floating banner was part of the international environmental group's call for all nations, including the United States, to disarm themselves of weapons of mass destruction through peaceful means.

Khalid predicts terror attacks on US

PTI, Washington

Arrested al-Qaeda terrorist Khalid Shaikh Mohammed has threatened of a violent terrorist backlash against the American forces, if the US attacked Iraq.

"Only the American infidels will celebrate this", Khalid, reportedly told his Pakistani interrogators on his arrest in Pakistan last Saturday and went on to predict a spate of terrorist attacks on US Forces massing in the Persian Gulf for a likely invasion of Iraq.

The Washington Post quoting Pakistani intelligence officials reported on Friday that Mohammed, considered No 3 in the al-Qaeda network after Osama bin Laden and an Egyptian Aywan Zawahiri, defiantly told his captors that "Let the Iraq war begin -- the US Forces will be targeted inside their bases in the Gulf."