

US, France step up diplomacy ahead of UNSC vote on Iraq

REUTERS, Washington/Paris

The United States and France step up opposing diplomatic efforts on Sunday to win over reluctant Security Council members ahead of a key UN vote on war against Iraq.

France is sending Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin on a whistle-stop tour of Guinea, Cameroon and Angola to urge them to reject a US-backed draft resolution setting a March 17 deadline for Iraq to disarm.

If the resolution fails to win the backing of the Security Council, Washington has said it could lead a "coalition of the willing" without UN approval to disarm Iraq.

Approval in the 15-member Council needs a minimum of nine votes for adoption and no veto by any of the five permanent members -- the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China.

So far, the United States can count on the support of Britain, Spain and Bulgaria. Seven of the 15 current members appear to oppose the measure.

Analysts say US promises of economic aid to the "undecided" may succeed where argument has so far failed.

Villepin declared France's opposition to any disarmament deadline on Friday, noting that chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix had said in his latest report that Iraq was offering greater cooperation.

Russia and China are also opposed to any new resolution that would implicitly or explicitly authorise military action.

President Bush appeared to be making little headway in gathering support ahead of the vote, which could take place as soon as Tuesday.

Chilean President Ricardo Lagos, whose country currently sits on the

Council, told Bush by telephone that the March 17 deadline for Iraqi disarmament was too short and added that the UN weapons inspectors should be given more time.

Bush could dispatch his national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, to Russia to lobby President Vladimir Putin in person. Secretary of State Colin Powell could also be called upon to visit leaders with swing votes.

Bush appealed in his weekly radio address on Saturday to undecided Security Council members.

"Allowing a dangerous dictator to defy the world and build an arsenal for conquest and mass murder is not peace at all; it is pretence," Bush said.

"The cause of peace will be advanced only when the terrorists lose a wealthy patron and protector, and when the dictator is fully and finally disarmed."

In Indonesia, up to 800,000 people gathered in the country's second city Surabaya on Sunday to pray for peace in the biggest anti-Iraq war rally yet in the world's most populous Muslim nation.

Indonesian politicians and religious leaders fear a US-led attack on Iraq could spark a serious backlash in a country where moderate and militant Muslims alike have strongly criticised US policy in the Middle East.

Iraq scrapped more of its banned missiles on Saturday but Bush dismissed the move as a charade that would not save it from war.

Bush said that as Iraq was crushing some al-Samoud 2 missiles, it was covertly making more.

"These are not the actions of a regime that is disarming. These are the actions of a regime engaged in a willful charade," he said in his radio address. "As a last resort, we must be willing to use military force."



Members of the Tacoma Park (MD) Kids for Peace group participate in a women's protest on Saturday at a peace walk in Washington, DC, coinciding with International Women's Day. Thousands of pink-clad people holding balloons and peace signs marched around the White House to protest plans for war with Iraq and to mark International Women's Day. The threat of a war in Iraq added extra urgency to many of the women's marches held across the world.

Unilateral US war on Iraq unjust: Carter

REUTERS, New York

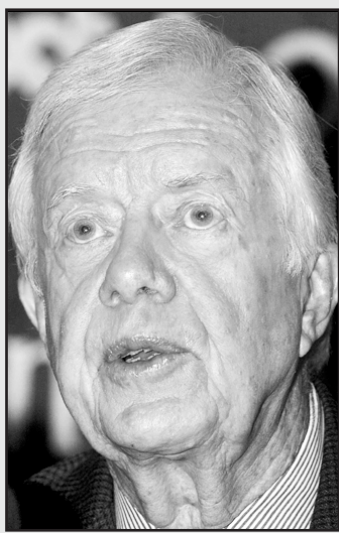
Former US president and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jimmy Carter on Sunday condemned preparations for a unilateral US attack on Iraq, saying it would be an unjust war "almost unprecedented in the history of civilised nations."

In an article in The New York Times, Carter said profound changes in US foreign policy had reversed "consistent bipartisan commitments that for more than two centuries have earned our nation greatness."

Carter, who served as president from 1977 to 1981, said that during his term he was "severely provoked by international crises."

"I became thoroughly familiar with the principles of a just war, and it is clear that a substantially unilateral attack on Iraq does not meet these standards," he said.

President Bush is facing wide-



spread international opposition to his threats to invade Iraq and

topple President Saddam Hussein, who Washington accuses of hiding chemical and biological weapons.

Bush has said he will not let the absence of UN approval stop him, describing US security as paramount. Saddam has denied having weapons of mass destruction and several members of the UN Security Council want continued UN arms inspections rather than war.

Carter, who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year, said Iraq did not directly threaten US security.

"But now ... despite the overwhelming opposition of most people and governments in the world, the United States seems determined to carry out military and diplomatic action that is almost unprecedented in the history of civilised nations," he wrote.

Interpol issues warrant for arrest of Fujimori

REUTERS, Lima

The world-wide police authority Interpol has issued an international arrest order for former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori on charges of murder in connection with a 1991 massacre of 15 people, Justice Minister Fausto Alvarado said on Saturday.

The order was issued after Peru's Supreme Court this week sent information to the Interpol office in Lyon, France to back its request for Fujimori's detention.

"Interpol's main office in Lyon has put out the arrest order with the goal of extraditing Alberto Fujimori. (The order) will be issued worldwide for human rights crimes for which he can be pursued and which do not expire," Alvarado told Radio Programas del Peru.

The charges include murder, kidnapping and crimes against humanity, Alvarado said.

Activists plan strong anti-war strategy

AP, Boston

They have marched and chanted, hoping to use persuasion to prevent war. If that fails, though, activists are readying a more aggressive strategy of sit-ins and social disruptions, meant to restore peace in Iraq.

Protest sit-ins, especially at federal buildings, defence recruiting offices and military bases, have been mapped out for dozens of cities in the first day or two of any war, anti-war organisers say. Some also foresee widespread walkouts at schools and workplaces. A smaller number talk of blocking roads and bridges.

"Once war happens, there will be civil disobedience. It's bringing to a higher level what people have been doing," said coordinator Bal Pinguel at the American Friends Service Committee, an arm of the pacifist Quaker church.

The peace movement that has taken shape in the United States and around the world uses organising technology - including the Internet and e-mail - that was not available the last time such large-scale domestic anti-war activism took place, in the Vietnam War era.

On Saturday, demonstrators gathered by the hundreds in cities across the nation, an increasingly common sight as the conflict looms closer. In Washington, police and organisers estimated between 4,000 and 10,000 demonstrators turned out in conjunction with International Women's Day; by late afternoon, 25 people were arrested on charges of crossing a police line in front of the White House.

The event was organised by the group CodePink, whose name protests the government's terror alert system. "The White House is definitely afraid of women in pink

and the power of love," said CodePink co-founder Jodie Evans.

Once spearheaded largely by leftist students, hippies and draft-card burners, the peace movement is now taking on more support from the mainstream: Labour unions, war veterans, middle-aged professionals, and teenagers born years after the last draft. Almost 100,000 backers have donated to Peace Action, one of the biggest anti-war groups, over the past six months, coordinators say.

Still, despite its broader reach, it is unclear if the highly decentralised peace movement can marshal protests that can disrupt the war effort or win public sympathy. Some peace activists themselves harbour doubts that they can prevent a war against Iraq. "There's a good chance we won't be able to stop it," said Kate Pearson, a Chicago organiser at Not in Our Name.

17 killed in van-bus collision in India

AFP, New Delhi

At least 17 people were killed and 13 injured Sunday when a van they were travelling in collided with a bus in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency said.

The dead included seven women and two children, it said.

Police quoting witnesses said the accident occurred when the driver of the van, which was travelling at high speed, lost control of the vehicle and collided head-on with the bus.

Sixteen people died on the spot and an 18-month old baby died in a hospital, PTI said.

Three of the injured passengers of the van were in serious condition.

The driver and eight passengers of the bus too were given first-aid, police said.



Attiya Inayatullah (R), former federal minister for women affairs, along with current Education Minister Zubaida Jilal (L) lead a peace rally against war in front of the Parliament House in Islamabad on Saturday. More than 150 women protesters carrying peace symbols and placards marched on the road and condemned possible military strike on Iraq. They shouted slogans against war and demanded peace in the world.

Archaeologists leave for Ayodhya to excavate site

AFP, New Delhi

A team of archaeologists left here Sunday for the northern Hindu pilgrimage town of Ayodhya where they are to excavate a disputed religious site claimed by Hindus and Muslims.

Media reports said the 15-member team from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), a government body responsible for historical sites and monuments, could begin excavation work in Ayodhya on Monday.

The move follows a court order issued in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh last week ordering the excavation of the site -- where Hindu zealots in December 1992 destroyed the 16th century Babri Mosque -- to determine whether a Hindu shrine previously existed there.

Hindus claim the mosque was built by Mughul emperor Babur after destroying a temple to their god Ram, whom they say was born on the site. No religious group has

been allowed to use the site until the matter is resolved by the courts, which control the site.

The destruction of the mosque sparked riots across India that claimed about 2,000 lives. It was also a factor in communal clashes last year in western Gujarat state that killed another 2,000 people, mostly Muslims.

ASI has been ordered to complete the excavations within a month and to give a progress report to the court on March 24.

R.M. Srivastava, a senior administration official in Ayodhya said security had not been increased in or around the disputed site as "everything here is normal."

He said so far no excavating machines had been sent to Ayodhya.

"In all probability this work (the excavation) would be done manually as it concerns several fragile artefacts."

Al-Qaeda may hit allied forces: CIA

AP, Washington

Al-Qaeda operatives are planning to strike at US and allied forces taking part in a war in Iraq, according to information acquired by American intelligence agencies, counterterrorism officials said Saturday.

The operatives are subordinates of Abu Musab Zarqawi, whom CIA officials describe as a senior associate of Osama bin Laden. Some are in Baghdad; others are elsewhere in Iraq, the counterterrorism officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The intelligence does not suggest any kind of coordination between the government of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the al-Qaeda operatives; instead officials believe the terrorists are looking to capitalise on the chaos created by any military conflict to strike at American and allied troops.

A CIA report, passed to senior government officials last week, warned of the potential strikes.

A CIA spokesman declined to comment.

The New York Times first reported the information Saturday on its Web site.

The counterterrorism officials

said operatives may be planning to use explosives or toxins to conduct the attack.

The new information comes against a murky backdrop regarding whether Iraq supports al-Qaeda, or to what extent there are ties.

However, intelligence officials have generally agreed they have nothing to document that Saddam Hussein had a hand in the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks or that Saddam and Osama bin Laden are coordinating terrorist operations.

At the centre of US allegations that there are links between Iraq and the terrorist group is Zarqawi, a Jordanian terrorist operative, and some of his followers.

CIA Director George Tenet and others have described Zarqawi as a senior associate of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, but officials acknowledge some difference of opinion within US intelligence whether it is correct to describe him as a member of the organisation.

Zarqawi has been linked to the failed millennium bombing of a tourist hotel in Jordan and the killing of an American diplomat in Amman in October.



Chelsea joins consultancy job in NY

AFP, New York

Former first daughter Chelsea Clinton has landed a lucrative New York consultancy job, Newsweek magazine reported Saturday.

According to the magazine's web site, Clinton recently rejected a 100,000 dollar a year offer from the top consulting firm McKinsey and Company in London, but said yes to an offer from the company's New York office Friday.

McKinsey has confirmed Clinton's acceptance, Newsweek reported.

Saudi Arabia admits hosting more US troops, denies aiding Iraq war

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has admitted US troops have deployed near the northern border with Iraq, but the kingdom categorically denied it intends to become a launchpad for Washington to attack Baghdad.

The closure of a small airport at Arar, on the Iraqi border, to civilian flights and increased military activity near the northwestern city of Tabuk have raised speculation about a possible Saudi role in a US-led war on Iraq.

Two senior Saudi ministers, while reiterating that Riyadh would neither take part nor allow the use of its territory to attack Iraq, conceded late Saturday that the number of US troops in the kingdom had increased.

"Yes, we have closed the Arar airport and moved air traffic to the nearby Jouf province. We have received some technical assistance from the Americans," to be able to deal with an expected influx of Iraqi refugees in the event of war, said Defence Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz.

"The command is Saudi and the (American) friends are there only for humanitarian and technical assistance ... preparations are

being used for humanitarian purposes," the ministers said.

Prince Sultan said the kingdom encountered a major refugee problem during the 1991 Gulf War, when about 150,000 Iraqi refugees crossed into the kingdom and now does not want a repetition.

More than 12 years after the Gulf War, about 5,000 Iraqi refugees still live at a camp at Rafha, about 300 kilometres (180 miles) east of Arar.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal also denied that Arar airport had been closed to civilian flights because US troops were landing there to take part in an anticipated US-led war on Baghdad.

Some 5,000 US troops have been stationed in Saudi Arabia, mostly at the Prince Sultan Air Base in al-Kharj, 80 kilometres south of Riyadh, from where they have been helping to enforce a "no-fly" zone over southern Iraq since the end of the 1991 Gulf conflict.

But a US defence official said Friday the number of US troops in Saudi Arabia had increased to 8,000.