

## Diplomatic battle rages on for UN votes on Iraq war

REUTERS, Washington/Baghdad

Washington was making its final diplomatic push yesterday to win Security Council members to its side for a UN vote on war with Iraq while opponents lobby with equal intensity against setting a deadline for Iraqi disarmament.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said on Sunday that the United States had a "strong chance" of getting nine or 10 states in the 15-member Council to vote for the US-backed draft that sets a March 17 deadline for Iraq to destroy all weapons of mass destruction, or face war.

Powell also said he would not be surprised if France blocked it with a veto.

French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin embarked on a whistle-stop tour of Guinea, Cameroon and Angola, "swing voters" in the Security Council, in the hope of persuading them to reject the US draft.

French President Jacques Chirac spoke by telephone with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, who also holds veto power in the council, and sources close to Chirac said the two concluded that, "We have the same approach."

Addressing the French position, Powell said, "I would not be surprised if they (France) vetoed, because they have been pretty clear that they want to stop that resolution."

"Right now I would expect the French to do everything they can to stop it," he said on "Fox News Sunday." However, Powell noted that France had not yet used the actual "veto word."

A Security Council resolution needs a minimum nine votes for adoption and there must be no veto by any of the five permanent members: the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China.

UN authorisation would be of huge value to governments of US allies in placating public misgivings -- especially in Britain, whose deployment of 45,000 troops is by far the biggest after the Pentagon's. More than 200,000 U.S. and British troops are in the region ready to strike.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party faces its biggest internal rift since it came to power in 1997 with the public threat of a ministerial resignation over the Iraq issue. International Development Secretary Clare Short, describing Blair as "reckless," said she would resign if there was a war

with Iraq without approval of a second United Nations' resolution.

One junior government aide has resigned and there was speculation that four others would follow if there is no support from the United Nations for the Iraqi war. A poll on Sunday indicated most Britons would support war if it had UN backing but only 15 percent would do so without.

Blair, Washington's closest ally, lobbied foreign leaders by telephone on Sunday, among them Chinese President Jiang Zemin, China's official media said.

Powell and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice were ready to travel as needed to press the case in person.

The showdown vote could come as soon as Tuesday, and the outcome is far from certain. A defeat of the resolution is not likely to avert war since Washington intends to lead a "coalition of the willing" into Iraq with or without UN approval.

The United States so far has the declared support of only Britain and Spain, which co-sponsored the resolution, and Bulgaria. Six members seem to oppose it, instead wanting arms inspectors to have more time in Iraq.



A US army soldier with the 101st Airborne Aviation Brigade carries equipment through a vast maze of Army vehicles at the port in Kuwait City March 9, 2003. 101st Airborne Aviation Brigade began unloading equipment 7 March to be taken back to Camp Udairi as the 101st Airborne prepares for a pending US led war against Iraq. PHOTO: AFP

### 8 shot, 2 stabbed at New York nightclub

AFP, New York

Eight people were shot and two others stabbed during a brawl at a popular dance club in New York's Times Square neighbourhood early Sunday, police here said.

According to witnesses, an unidentified man pulled out a 9-millimeter handgun and began firing into the crowd at the Broadway City Arcade, a cavernous entertainment complex at about 2:40 am (0740 GMT) Sunday.

Police were questioning two male suspects in the case late Sunday.

Witnesses said as many as 10 bullets were fired, touching off a stampede that led to some 200 people fighting to escape the club.

Frantic patrons spilled down an escalator from a second-floor dance space, and at least two more people were injured during the rush to the doors.

"People went crazy," Franklin Santiago, 21, who was shot in the knee, told the New York Daily News Sunday from his hospital bed.

## China's Li Peng bows out wishing well to his successors

REUTERS, Beijing

Li Peng, best known for announcing martial law before the army crushed the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, won praise for strengthening the rule of law in China as he took his final bow on the public stage on Monday.

Deputies to the largely rubber-stamp National People's Congress (NPC), China's parliament, gave plaudits to Li, 74, and had high hopes for the man analysts say is sure to take his place, Vice-Premier Wu Bangguo, who turns 62 in July.

Near the end of a one-hour speech, his last before retiring as part of a sweeping leadership transition to a new generation, Li broke from the script to encourage his successors.

"The pupil often surpasses the master," he said. "I believe the work of the 10th NPC will be even



China's outgoing parliamentary chairman, Li Peng, appears on a screen at the Great Hall of the People where he delivers a speech to delegates attending a session of the National People's Congress (NPC) in Beijing yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

better than the work of the 9th NPC, even more outstanding!"

Analysts say Li, an orphan raised by revered late Premier Zhou Enlai, slightly strengthened the parliament during his five-year tenure.

"I think it was basically his swan song in the sense that he was trying to really say that he has done a lot for legislative reforms in China and also for rule of law," said one Western diplomat.

"Many people do appreciate the effort that he put in creating an institution in that sense out of the People's Congress," he said.

During the speech, President Jiang Zemin, also due to retire from that job this week, scooted into Li's seat on the dais to chat with Wu, a member of the ruling Communist Party's nine-man Politburo Standing Committee and an ally from Shanghai.

## Dalai Lama urges China to address the Tibetan problem

AFP, Dharamsala, India

Tibet's exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama urged China on Monday, the 44th anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day, to address the Tibet problem before it became insoluble.

"Looking around the world, we cannot fail to notice how difficult it is to reach a mutually acceptable solution through a political culture of non-violence and dialogue," he added.

The Dalai Lama said the visit of a Tibetan delegation to Beijing last September to meet Chinese leaders was a positive sign.

"I was encouraged that the exchanges were friendly and meaningful," he said.

"I had instructed my envoys to make every effort to pursue a course of dialogue with the leadership in Beijing and to seize every opportunity to dispel existing misunderstandings and misconceptions in Beijing about our views

and positions," he added.

On March 10, 1959, Tibetans staged a massive protest against what they say was the "invasion" of their country by China.

The uprising resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Tibetans, and the escape into exile of many more, including the Dalai Lama.

The spiritual leader, who has set up a headquarters-in-exile in this northern Indian town, said the release of several "Tibetan and Chinese political prisoners" during the past year has given him further hope for a peaceful solution.

He said several Chinese leaders who had succeeded one another had acknowledged that the Tibetans had a distinct cultural identity and history, but in practice had shown little sympathy.

"In reality, whenever Tibetans demonstrate allegiance and concern for their own people, the Chinese authorities resort to their

usual policy of merciless repression, whereby they are labelled as dissidents," he said.

Then they are imprisoned and "have no opportunity to speak out the truth," he added.

Beijing, meanwhile, Monday slammed the efforts of the Dalai Lama to better protect the environment in the Tibetan Plateau.

In a white paper issued on the environmental protection of Tibet, the State Council, China's cabinet, pledged to consider the impact of what is expected to be the unprecedented extraction of mineral resources in the region.

Environmental protection could not be assured unless the impoverished Himalayan region continued to develop economically, it said.

"Ecological improvement and environmental protection in Tibet cannot be achieved if development steps falter," the paper, carried by the Xinhua news agency, said.

## Political parties boycott Nepali PM's meeting on peace talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Several major political parties in Nepal boycotted an all-party meeting on Monday held by Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand to discuss talks with Maoist rebels.

"None of the leaders of the major political parties participated in the all-party meeting called by Prime Minister Chand, saying the government was formed unconstitutionally and undemocratically by the king," said an official at the Prime Minister's secretariat.

Chand called the meeting to discuss a code of conduct for peace talks with the rebels following a ceasefire announced in January.

Those who boycotted the meeting included the Nepali Congress, the Nepal Communist Party, United Marxist and Leninist, the Nepal Peasants' and Workers'

Party and the People's Front Nepal.

But the president of the rightist National Democratic Party, Pashupati Rana, and some senior leaders of the pro-India Nepal Sadbhavana (Goodwill) Party and Samata Party attended the meeting.

The main political parties are furious that Chand, a royalist, was installed as head of government by King Gyanendra in October after he sacked the elected prime minister and postponed elections.

They said the Chand government does not have a mandate to negotiate with the rebels.

The Maoist insurgency in support of a communist republic in the Himalayan kingdom has claimed over 7,800 lives since it was launched in 1996.

## Pakistan to raise Kashmir issue at OIC meeting

PTI, Dubai

Pakistan has said it would raise Kashmir issue at an Organisation of Islamic Conference ministerial-level meeting though it was not part of official business.

Pakistan Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed, who was in Abu Dhabi on his way to attend the OIC Information Ministers' meeting in Cairo, said he would raise the Kashmir issue at the two-day meeting of the 56-nation grouping, beginning on Monday.

He said New Delhi's assertions about Pakistan-backed infiltration of terrorists into Jammu and Kashmir were "rubbish", adding India should accept Islamabad's proposal to increase the number of UN observers along the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir to monitor any infiltration, the Khaleej Times reported.

## Malaysia urges NAM members to vote against war

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia, as chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), has urged its six non-permanent members in the UN Security Council to vote against a war on Iraq, foreign minister Syed Hamid Albar said Monday.

"We have written to all of them. I hope they will vote on the basis of what has been decided during the NAM Summit," he told reporters. "We hope they will vote in our (NAM) favour for the sake of global peace and security."

The six NAM members are Syria, Cameroon, Chile, Guinea, Pakistan and Angola.

The council is expected to vote Wednesday on a resolution proposed by the United States, Britain and Spain, that would set the stage

for a military strike on Iraq by declaring it in non-compliance with UN disarmament demands.

The 116-nation body had said in a statement at the end of a summit here on February 25 that NAM rejected any war against Iraq not sanctioned by the United Nations.

It said war on Iraq "will be a destabilising factor for the whole region, and that it would have far-reaching political, economic and humanitarian consequences for all countries of the world."

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, as NAM chairman wrote the letter, including to all the other nine council members last week, the foreign minister said.

Syed Hamid said he hoped the six NAM countries would not be pressured to vote in favour of war.



Activists of the Tibet Youth Congress shout anti-China slogans during a peace march in New Delhi yesterday. The march was organised to raise awareness on alleged human rights violations in Tibet on the 44th anniversary of Tibetan National Uprising Day. PHOTO: AFP



Members of the cast of "Chicago," including Catherine Zeta-Jones (back-L), Richard Gere (C) and Rene Zellweger (R) hold their awards for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in Theatrical Motion Picture during the 9th Annual Screen Actors Guild in Los Angeles, Sunday night. PHOTO: AFP

## Israel vows to target more Hamas leaders

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel vowed on Sunday to follow up its killing of the founder of Hamas's armed wing by targeting other leaders of the militant Islamic group that has led suicide attacks in a Palestinian uprising for statehood.

"No terrorist chief, with the emphasis on Hamas, will be immune," Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz told Army Radio. "Israel will lay its hands on anyone involved in terrorism."

Mofaz spoke a day after Israeli attack helicopters blew up a car in Gaza carrying Hamas's Ibrahim al-Maqadma, 51, the most senior militant killed by Israel in the 29-month-old uprising.

"Maqadma was the ultimate arch-terrorist," Mofaz said in an interview with Israel Radio. "He was involved up to his neck in planning hundreds of terrorist attacks."

Hamas has killed hundreds of Israelis in suicide bombings since historic interim peace deals between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation were signed in 1993.

After the killing of Maqadma and three other militants in his vehicle, Hamas vowed revenge and attacks on Israeli leaders.

Israel has stepped up action against militants in Gaza with raids

that have drawn international criticism over civilian casualties and raised Palestinian fears of a tougher moves while world attention focuses on a possible US war on Iraq.

On Friday, the army seized a chunk of the northern Gaza Strip, where it effectively set up a security zone it said was aimed at preventing Hamas rocket attacks on southern Israel.

But Hamas managed to fire four rudimentary Qassam rockets at the Israeli town of Sderot on Sunday in the first such attack since the start of what Israel described as an open-ended Gaza deployment. No one was hurt.

Meanwhile the Central Council of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's PLO approved on Sunday his nomination of leading PLO moderate Mahmoud Abbas to the new post of prime minister.

The council had formally decided to create the post -- as demanded by international peace mediators -- at a late night session on Saturday.

Abbas, 67, also known as Abu Mazen, has criticised the uprising for its focus on attacks on Israelis instead of popular protest and said he first wanted to see what powers he would be granted before accepting the post.

The Central Council also called on Palestinian militants "fighting

Israeli occupation and settlement not to target Israeli civilians inside Israel" so as not to give Israel a reason "to continue its annihilation war against our people."

It did not ask the militants to refrain from attacks on Jewish settlements built on Arab land. The international community regards settlements as illegal under international law. Israel disputes this.

Arafat has been under intense pressure by the so-called Quartet of peace mediators -- the United States, European Union, Russia and United Nations -- to rid the Palestinian Authority of corruption and violence with wide-ranging reforms and appoint a powerful prime minister to govern its day-to-day affairs.

The Palestinian legislature was due to meet on Monday to determine the powers and responsibilities of the premiership.

"I hope there will be a Prime Minister with authority who will lead the Palestinians in another direction," Mofaz said, referring to the uprising in which more than 2,600 people have been killed.

In the West Bank city of Hebron, the Israeli army demolished the family homes of three militants whom it said carried out recent attacks on Israelis, including a Hamas suicide bombing that killed 16 people on a bus in northern Israel on Wednesday.