



Head of Babel's car battery factory in Baghdad extends a welcoming hand to UN disarmament experts as they tour the factory yesterday. UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix said that he would give the Security Council a report next week defining the remaining disarmament tasks expected of Iraq.

Iraq should have declared drone: Blix

REUTERS, United Nations

Chief UN inspector Hans Blix criticised Iraq for not declaring a drone some US officials say may be a "smoking gun" but said his disarmament teams still had to determine if it was legal.

UN arms inspectors, in a revised report of a 173-page document on Friday, said they discovered an undeclared Iraqi drone with a wingspan of 24 feet 5 inches, suggesting an illegal range that could threaten Iraq's neighbours with chemical and biological weapons.

US officials have faulted Blix for not speaking more about the existence of a drone in his generally upbeat report to the council last Friday. But Blix said, "Everyone tries to squeeze us to get as much mileage as they can."

"Iraq should have declared this vehicle... and they did not," Blix told

reporters after closed-door council consultations where he was questioned on the drone.

Blix also said his document nowhere asserted that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. In answer to a question whether the drone could be the "smoking gun," Blix said again, "We're not yet at that stage."

Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations Mohammed Aldouri downplayed revelations that Iraq has a pilotless drone potentially able to disperse chemical or biological weapons.

Asked for his response to Monday's revelations over the existence of the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) whose fuel capacity enables it to fly beyond the 150-kilometer (93-mile) range limit imposed by the United Nations, Aldouri said it was "not new information."

Bush begins telephone diplomacy to win support on Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

Despite new veto threats, President Bush and his top aides engaged in last-minute telephone diplomacy to world leaders on Monday in an uphill struggle to gain support for a UN resolution setting up war against Iraq.

The White House suggested Bush could agree to some changes in the resolution in order to make it more palatable to undecided nations.

"We are in the thick of diplomacy," said White House spokesman Ari Fleischer.

As the effort continued, senior US officials said Iraq had placed explosives at the Kirkuk oil fields in northern Iraq to prevent them from being taken over in the event of a US-led invasion.

"There are indications that has taken place," said one official.

US Army Gen. Tommy Franks, the man who would lead any invasion of Iraq, departed for the Gulf region to visit several countries and end up in Qatar, where the high-tech US command headquarters is located.

Bush needs nine votes out of the 15-member UN Security Council -- and no vetoes from permanent members France, Russia or China -- to gain approval of a resolution that would give Iraq a final deadline of March 17 to disarm or face invasion.

The Security Council vote was expected this week, and both France and Russia made clear their intention to veto the resolution as it stands.

Six undecided Security Council members were searching for a compromise that might include specific disarmament demands for Iraq to meet and a longer deadline for Iraqi compliance.

"Some nations have suggested such things as benchmarks. There are ideas that are being explored and looked at and so it is too soon to say what the final document that will be voted on will include," Fleischer said.

Bush made little headway, at least publicly, in a phone call to Chinese President Jiang Zemin, who wants UN inspectors to have more time.

Jiang urged Bush to resolve the



Iraqi crisis peacefully and to let inspections continue, China's official Xinhua news agency said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell telephoned Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos, Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf and Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez -- three key swing votes on the council.

Pakistani sources said later that Pakistan planned to abstain. Mexico said it was still undecided.

Bush talked to Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, whose nation is not on the Security Council but supports the new resolution.

He spoke as well to South African President Thabo Mbeki, who had sent a team to Baghdad to convey information about South Africa's own disarmament of a nuclear weapons program. And Bush talked to Oman's Sultan Qaboos, a close U.S. ally in the Gulf.

In an afternoon round of calls, Bush talked to close ally Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar and the head of Turkey's ruling party, Tayyip Erdogan, whose nation has refused to let US troops transit the country for a northern front against Iraq.

Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo and Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade also received presidential phone calls about Iraq.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov struck a blow at Bush's efforts by saying in Moscow that Russia would vote against the measure.

Bush has maintained strong

relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin. But in a sign of the split that could come, the White House pointed out that Russia had also objected to a UN resolution on stopping Serb repression of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo in 1999, forcing NATO to do the job without UN support.

"The president would indeed be disappointed if Russia were to veto. The president would look at this as a missed opportunity for Russia to take an important moral stand to defend freedom and to prevent the risk of a massive catastrophe taking place as a result of Saddam Hussein's development of weapons of mass destruction," Fleischer said.

Privately, US officials acknowledged the resolution could go down in defeat. Bush has threatened to attack Iraq with or without U.N. backing.

In a sign that the United States may be moving closer to military action, US officials said the State Department was expected as early as this week to order some US diplomats out of Kuwait, Israel and Syria ahead of a possible war.

Palestinian gunmen kill Israeli soldier in Hebron

REUTERS, Hebron

Palestinian gunmen killed one Israeli soldier and wounded five in a shooting attack in the West Bank city of Hebron, sparking a fierce gunbattle with Israeli troops, the army said on Tuesday.

Tension has been high in the Hebron area since Palestinian militants disguised as religious Jews infiltrated the nearby settlement of Kiryat Arba on Friday, where they shot dead a man and his wife before being killed by Israeli soldiers.

The shooting sparked a fierce firefight between the troops and the gunmen, who were holed up in a house near the Cave. The army

said Israeli troops surrounded the house, called to the gunmen to surrender, then shot at its upper stories.

A new exchange of fire ensued, after which army bulldozers began to demolish the house, the army said. It was not immediately clear whether there were any casualties inside.

The incident was the latest in a wave of Israeli-Palestinian violence that has set back US hopes for calm as it seeks international support for a possible war on Iraq.

AFP from Ramallah: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was to sign into law a parliamentary bill yesterday creating the post of Prime Minister in charge of internal

affairs, while leaving foreign policy and national security in his hands, as the conflict with Israel claimed more lives.

A day after parliament endorsed the new job of premier -- a key demand by Israel and the international community for reforming Arafat's much-criticised administration -- the veteran leader would officially name his number two at the PLO, Mahmud Abbas, to the top job, officials here said.

In a landmark debate on Monday which some deputies saw as the start of real change in the Palestinian political leadership, parliament gave the prime minister responsibility for internal affairs but left Arafat in charge of

national security and external policy.

It was not clear whether these powers would induce Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen, to accept the position. He has said he would reject it if the job did not have the authority to push through sweeping reforms.

Abbas has been an outspoken critic of the military escalation of the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation which has claimed more than 3,000 lives.

His dovish stance has earned him tough criticism from headline Islamist groups like Hamas, which have vowed to continue suicide bombings and shooting attacks.



Israeli soldiers have their vehicle checked by a US military policeman as they enter the Patriot missile base in Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv, March 10, 2003. Preparations are continuing in case there will be an Iraqi missile attack on Israel following an eventual US-led attack on Iraq.

Khalid met Laden two months ago : ISI

REUTERS, Islamabad

A top Osama bin Laden aide arrested this month has given information on the elusive Al-Qaeda leader and told them he met bin Laden in December, Pakistan's intelligence agency said.

The powerful military Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) said on Monday Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's arrest in the city of Rawalpindi on March 1 indicated the hunt for the world's most wanted man was moving forward.

An intelligence source said another Al-Qaeda suspect who had been arrested in the northwestern city of Peshawar as part of swoops since Saturday was believed to have had contact with bin Laden.

"Progressively we are moving (in the hunt for bin Laden)," a senior intelligence official said at the first news conference that the ISI has held for foreign journalists in its history.

The official said the ISI was not sure whether to believe Mohammed, suspected mastermind of the September 11 attacks on the United States, when he said he had met bin Laden because he had refused to say where the meeting took place.

"He confirmed he met (bin Laden) in December," the official

said. "I don't believe him unless he tells us the locations and gives us witnesses."

In another glimpse into the hunt for bin Laden, the intelligence source said the man arrested in Peshawar had received a telephone call that was traced by a team monitoring satellite and mobile phone conversations of suspected terrorists.

"We think he was in contact with Osama bin Laden," said the source, but added that it was unclear if a conversation with the Al-Qaeda leader had been among those monitored.

The man, one of 10 Al-Qaeda suspects arrested in Peshawar since Saturday, was identified only as Masood and reported to be either an Afghan or an Egyptian.

The ISI showed journalists a grainy video purporting to show the night-time raid on the house where they say Mohammed was seized together with Saudi national Ahmed al-Hawsawi, an alleged key financier of the September 11 attacks.

The video did not show Mohammed's face -- just his back and neck before his head was hooded -- nor any sign of the struggle which officials say took place.



Sting (L), and Stewart Copeland (R) of the Police take a bow after performing during the 18th Annual Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony in New York March 10, 2003. The Police is one of the nine being inducted into the Hall of Fame.