

Iraq scrapping missiles, hands VX report to UN

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq began destroying more banned short-range missiles on Saturday, a day after handing the United Nations a promised report on the deadly nerve gas VX.

"The destruction of al-Samoud 2 missiles and related components is continuing," said Hiro Ueki, spokesman for the UN Monitoring and Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC).

The destruction of the missiles, which the United Nations says violate a 150 km (93 mile) maximum range imposed after Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War, was taking place at the Taji base, 25 miles north of Baghdad.

A total of 65 Samoud missiles and 42 warheads have been destroyed since Iraq, facing a possible US and British invasion, started dismantling the Samoud this month to meet a March 1 deadline set by chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix.

Washington and London have dismissed the move as insufficient and called for more sweeping steps to meet UN demands that Baghdad scrap all its alleged chemical, biological and nuclear weapons programs if it is to avoid war.

Iraq submitted a new 25-page report, half in English and half in Arabic, to the United Nations on Friday on VX, and whether it was able to produce it in sizeable quantities, UN officials said.

Iraq UN Ambassador Mohammed Aldouri told Reuters the report "will show reliable evidence that we have no more of these materials and that they have been destroyed."

"We are trying now our best to convince UNMOVIC that everything has been destroyed," Aldouri said.

UNMOVIC says there are many open questions concerning Iraq's VX production capability, including significant amounts in Iraq's past accounts of precursors for the gas.

The agency wants Iraq to present all documents relating to VX, including research and development. It also wants further explanations for Iraq's contention that it was unable to weaponise the gas and destroyed it unilaterally in 1991.

With the 15-nation Security Council deadlocked over a draft US-British-Spanish resolution that would give Iraq an ultimatum to prove its commitment to disarmament or face war, the United States gave little significance to the Iraqi report.

"They promised within a week we would have an explanation for where the anthrax and VX have gone. It has now been 13 days and counting and there is still no explanation," said Richard Grenell, spokesman for US Ambassador John Negroponte.

Iraq has said in the past it has lost documentation on the destruction, and has asked inspectors to estimate the amounts from the size of the contaminated areas.

Baghdad was expected to hand over a letter on anthrax early next week.

AFP adds: The United States plans to mobilise up to 380,000 troops for a possible war on Iraq, but not all would be deployed, a Pentagon official said Friday.

The figure was mentioned Friday at a meeting of defence experts led by Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace, the source said privately.

The same source confirmed that in the discussions, the joint chiefs' vice director of operations Army General Stanley McChrystal, said the Pentagon's overall plan included 380,000 troops.

The number includes staff already in the Gulf region or the eastern Mediterranean -- more than 250,000 -- as well as more who are waiting to ship out and some that have been mobilized and may be deployed later if the need arises during a possible conflict, the sources said.



A man holds a banner with a portrait of US President George W. Bush during a demonstration in downtown Tokyo on Saturday. About 10,000 people attended a rally and the demonstration.

Marchers worldwide call for peace

AP, Washington

The anti-war drumbeat was sounding urgently in Washington and around the world Saturday in a round of protests energised by the approach of conflict with Iraq.

The call for peace was heard in European cities Friday, where millions stopped work for 15 minutes; in Cairo, where 4,000 protesters shouted in the presence of even more riot police; and in Washington, where 70 former members of Congress asked President Bush to give UN weapons inspectors more time.

"Let us pull back from the brink of war and give peaceful solutions a chance to work," the ex-lawmakers said in a statement.

San Francisco police arrested nearly 70 protesters Friday during a demonstration that failed in its aim to shut the Pacific Stock Exchange. More protests were planned Saturday.

In chilly Washington sunshine, volunteers unfurled banners and stacked red buckets to collect donations in preparation for Saturday's march around the White House. Organisers said people were coming from scores of cities from as far away as Florida, Maine and Iowa for a non-violent show of dissent.

The route of the march in the capital was taking demonstrators to the Washington Monument during the afternoon and then to the White House before circling back. Familiar voices of the anti-war movement were featured, including civil rights activist Jesse Jackson, former Attorney General Ramsey Clark and labour leaders.

Demonstrators credited the anti-war movement for roadblocks faced by the administration in the U.N. Security Council and among allies, including the Turkish parliament's recent vote denying the U.S. military access to its country to attack Iraq.

Despite the 250,000 U.S. soldiers, sailors and aviators poised to strike Iraq, protesters insisted war is not inevitable.

"The strength of the movement has prevented a war from happening before now," said Tony Murphy of the International ANSWER coalition, the main march organiser. "We feel that it's not too late for the people to stop this war."

Protests were called in a dozen cities worldwide Saturday, in what could be a last chance to voice mass opposition before bombs start falling. Activists also planned peace vigils in several thousand cities Sunday evening.

Roh, Bush agree on peaceful solution to nuke crisis

ASIA NEWS NETWORK/ THE KOREAN HERALD, Seoul

President Roh Moo-hyun and US President George W. Bush reaffirmed yesterday that their countries will seek a peaceful resolution to North Korea's nuclear issue, Cheong Wa Dae said.

Roh and Bush held telephone talks to discuss the North's nuclear threat, a possible war against Iraq and a visit by the South Korean president to the United States, presidential spokeswoman Song Kyoung-hee said.

"The two leaders shared the view that the North's nuclear issue should be settled peacefully through diplomatic efforts," Song said.



Newly appointed Chinese President Hu Jintao (R) listens to outgoing President Jiang Zemin during voting at the National People's Congress (NPC) in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Saturday. China's new president Hu Jintao has been carefully groomed for the top echelons of power for more than a decade, but his political persona remains vague, even as he was appointed president by the National People's Congress, replacing Jiang Zemin as part of a generational change in top Chinese leadership.

Happy tunes mark China's political succession

AFP, Beijing

With a vast amount of pomp and ceremony, China Saturday managed to present a facade of an election which installed a younger generation of leaders, but in a sign that little has changed, the star of the show was still outgoing president Jiang Zemin.

Even before the voting began, cameras operated by the state-controlled media focused on the 76-year-old, who flashed his perpetual smile across large screens set up in the Great Hall of the People where the event was held.

The spotlight only occasionally turned to his successor Hu Jintao, formally anointed president in a

highly-orchestrated "election" which also saw Jiang reappointed military chief and his right-hand man, Zeng Qinghong, made vice president.

Few people wanted to talk about the flaws in the "election," where all candidates are chosen by the country's top leadership, and only one candidate stands for each post.

Instead, happy tunes including "Bu bu gao" -- which means making steady progress -- flowed from giant speakers as delegates lined up and took turns putting their ballots into bright red boxes.

Pretty women dressed in aqua skirts made their way through the

aisles to the stage where the top leaders were sitting, pouring hot water in cups filled with Longjing tea -- Jiang's favorite.

In an indication of the real power Jiang still exerts, a steady stream of delegates asked Jiang for his autograph.

Hu, sitting next to Jiang, quietly gazed into the audience. Fewer asked for his signature.

Long before the election, it was clear Jiang wanted to cling to power by staying on as head of the state's Central Military Commission (CMC). He gave the best hint of that in November when he decided to keep the parallel position as the party's CMC.

US lifts sanctions against Pakistan

AP, AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush continued the waiver of sanctions against Pakistan, clearing the way for that country to receive hundreds of millions of dollars in US economic aid.

Pakistan had been under sanctions that barred US economic and military assistance because of the bloodless 1999 military coup that brought President Pervez Musharraf to power.

But after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, when Musharraf sided with the United States in the war on terror and in ousting the Taliban from Afghanistan, Bush lifted the sanctions that had been imposed against Pakistan and India after the two countries tested nuclear weapons in 1998. The next month, Congress removed the last remaining sanctions, which barred all foreign aid to Pakistan.

On Friday, Bush renewed that waiver, saying in a memo to Secretary of State Colin Powell that doing so "would facilitate the transition to democratic rule in Pakistan" and is important to the United States' global war on terror.

Pakistan is one of six countries undecided about the US-backed effort to get UN backing for the use of force to disarm Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

Washington had been counting on Pakistan's support, but it wasn't clear whether it would be forthcoming if a vote were called.

On Friday, the White House also announced that Bush will meet in Washington with Pakistan's Prime Minister on March 28 to discuss the war on terrorism and other issues affecting the two nations. Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali has said he wants Saddam Hussein to be given more time to disarm before any military action is taken against Iraq.

AFP adds: US President George W. Bush unveiled two new sweeteners for his Pakistani anti-terror ally President Pervez Musharraf Friday, waiving sanctions imposed after a 1999 coup and announcing he would welcome Musharraf's prime minister this month.

Bush dispensed with the last set of US punitive measures against Pakistan, as Musharraf agonised over which side to take on a US-

sponsored United Nations resolution which could trigger war with Iraq.

He styled the move as important to US efforts to win the campaign against terrorism launched after the attacks on New York and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 and argued it would help Pakistan transition to full democracy.

Pakistan emerged as a key US ally after those attacks, severing its links to the Afghan Taliban rulers who protected the al-Qaeda network of terror suspect Osama bin Laden.

In return, Bush lifted a raft of nuclear and non-proliferation sanctions against Pakistan, signed off on a large package of aid and debt relief, and administered frequent doses of praise for Musharraf.

The biggest dividend from that cooperation came with the recent arrest of alleged terrorist mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, a key lieutenant of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Terrorists set fire to village in Kashmir

13 killed in violence

PTI, Jammu

In stepped up violence in the Rajouri-Poonch belt of Jammu and Kashmir, terrorists on Saturday set fire to an entire village belonging to a particular community but there was no casualty, official sources have said.

A day after they attacked a police party in Poonch killing six, heavily armed terrorists, in a pre-dawn attack, swooped down on the hilly Nerojal village in Rjaouri district and set afire 16 houses, the sources said.

All these houses belonged to a particular community which had migrated from the village after the killing of two youth in November last year, the sources added.

After the houses were gutted the terrorists escaped from the spot.

Police and security forces who reached the spot have launched a combing operation for the terrorists.

This is the fourth major terrorism-related incident in the Rajouri-Poonch belt during the last three days.

AFP adds: Indian security forces Friday shot dead seven Kashmiri militants, while three policemen and three civilians were killed in a hostage-taking incident, officials said.

Three more civilians died elsewhere in Kashmir in overnight separatism-linked violence, a police spokesman said.

The Indian army, backed by police and paramilitary forces, killed five heavily-armed Kashmiri rebels in separate gunbattles in two villages of the southern Anantnag district.

Army spokesman Lt. Colonel Mukhtair Singh said two of five militants slain were members of the hardline militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad.

A sixth militant and a civilian were killed elsewhere in Kashmir on Friday.

P.L. Gupta, police chief of Kashmir's winter capital, meanwhile, reported a fiery end to the hostage-taking by militants in a privately-run hotel in the town of Poonch, 240 kilometres (149 miles) west of Jammu.



In a symbolic connection between the European Union and Hungary, a 413 metre long and 6.5 metre wide pontoon bridge consisting of 62 parts, is assembled by Hungarian troops of the 32nd 'Ferenc Rakoczi' Technical Brigade in front of the parliament building across the river Danube on Friday, a day ahead of the 155th anniversary of Hungarian revolution in 1848. A referendum on EU membership will be held on April 12.

Bush ties ME peace roadmap to new Palestinian PM

10 Palestinians killed in Israeli raids

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush said on Friday he would unveil a long-delayed Middle East peace plan when new Palestinian prime minister with "real authority" takes office, hoping to deflect Arab and European criticism of US policy ahead of a possible war with Iraq.

But the White House questioned the willingness of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to relinquish authority over security and peace policy to the prime minister as Bush has demanded.

"The time has come to move beyond entrenched positions and to take concrete actions to achieve peace," Bush said in a hastily arranged appearance in the White House Rose Garden with Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Before announcing his plans for the so-called road map, with its goal of creating a Palestinian state

Bush ties ME peace roadmap to new Palestinian PM

REUTERS, Washington

By 2005, Bush consulted with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Jordanian King Abdullah and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah.

As progress is made toward peace, Bush said Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories "must end."

AP adds: Israeli forces attacking in two nighttime raids killed at least 10 Palestinian militants from violent Islamic groups in the West Bank. Five of the deaths were in the battle-scarred Jenin refugee camp.

Backed by helicopter gunships and tanks, the Israeli troops on Friday struck a house used as a hide-out by members of the Islamic Jihad in the impoverished Jenin shantytown at the northern edge of the West Bank.

The militants had just gone to bed when Israeli forces surrounded them, said a local Islamic Jihad leader, Sheik Bassam Saedi.

Bush ties ME peace roadmap to new Palestinian PM

10 Palestinians killed in Israeli raids

REUTERS, Washington

By 2005, Bush consulted with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Jordanian King Abdullah and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah.

As progress is made toward peace, Bush said Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories "must end."

AP adds: Israeli forces attacking in two nighttime raids killed at least 10 Palestinian militants from violent Islamic groups in the West Bank. Five of the deaths were in the battle-scarred Jenin refugee camp.

Backed by helicopter gunships and tanks, the Israeli troops on Friday struck a house used as a hide-out by members of the Islamic Jihad in the impoverished Jenin shantytown at the northern edge of the West Bank.

The militants had just gone to bed when Israeli forces surrounded them, said a local Islamic Jihad leader, Sheik Bassam Saedi.