



Raising voice against war on Iraq: People in their thousands join anti-war rallies across the globe on Saturday and Sunday against the looming US-led war on Iraq. From Left to Right - a rally outside the residence of Australian Prime Minister John Howard in Sydney; demonstrators hold a banner near the Washington Monument and young Muslim girls' march in Washington, DC. Another protester holds a portrait of US President George W. Bush as Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler in Sao Paulo, Brazil, and a big board is showing caricatures of Bush and Osama Bin Laden on Pushkin square in Moscow. A member of Iraq's ruling Baath party waves a pistol in front of a man holding-up a picture of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the Iraqi city of Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam.

UN inspectors invited back to Baghdad

AP, Baghdad

Iraq invited chief UN weapons inspectors Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei to Baghdad to discuss outstanding disarmament issues as President Bush prepared to meet with his top allies about a possible war.

At the same time, President Saddam Hussein placed the country on a war footing, issuing a decree dividing Iraq into four military regions under the command of his most trusted lieutenants. Saddam's son, Qusai, was placed in charge of the regime's heartland, Baghdad and the president's hometown Tikrit.

Saddam himself retained sole authority to use aircraft and surface-to-surface missiles against invaders, according to the presidential decree distributed by the Iraqi News Agency.

The invitation came a day before Bush meets prime ministers Tony Blair of Britain and Jose Maria Aznar of Spain in an emergency summit in the Azores to work out their next step after their bid to give Iraq an ultimatum was blocked at the UN Security Council.

At UN headquarters in New York, Blix said he would study the invitation and discuss it with the council. Asked if the Iraqi invitation was a stunt, he told CNN, "I certainly wouldn't call it a stunt. ... We'll have to give serious thought to what the answer will be."

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said inspectors "would be wise to wait until after the summit before making any determination about going to Baghdad."

With nearly 250,000 US and British troops in the Persian Gulf ready to strike, Iraq has been emboldened by stiff opposition to war at the Security Council, where France and other nations have insisted inspectors should be given more time. As pressure on Baghdad has increased in past months, it has been making gestures to show it is cooperating with inspectors.

AFP adds: The chief UN weapons monitor has taken under consideration Iraq's urgent invitation for its inspectors to visit Baghdad in an attempt to head off war by offering evidence of accelerated disarmament.

"I think the (UN Security) Council is interested in that," chief weapons inspector Hans Blix told CNN, adding: "I don't think we have any firm views on where the invitation will take us at the moment. We're studying the contents of it and (are) discussing it."

In Baghdad, the Iraqi foreign ministry said the aim of the visit by UNMOVIC chief Blix and UN International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohamed ElBaradei, was to "examine ways to accelerate cooperation between Iraq and the two organizations in all areas, notably in verifying questions which Mr. Blix and Mr. ElBaradei consider still outstanding."

India denies refuelling facilities for US jets

AFP, New Delhi

India would not allow US or allied warplanes to refuel on its territory in case of a US request, Defence Minister George Fernandes said Sunday.

"I do not think that India will agree to provide such facility in case of a US request," Fernandes said in the eastern Indian city of Patna, as quoted by the Press Trust of India news agency.

He said Washington had not made such a request.

In the 1991 Gulf War, India had initially opposed the US-led operation to oust Iraqi forces from Kuwait but allowed US planes to refuel in Bombay.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Wednesday urged Washington and its allies to give Iraq more time to disarm and warned that any unilateral action would leave the United Nations "deeply scarred".

Thousands protest against looming war on Iraq

AFP, Paris

Hundreds of thousands of people around the world marched, chanted and carried banners Saturday to protest a looming war in Iraq, on the eve of an emergency summit by leaders of Britain, Spain and the United States.

In Italy, an estimated 400,000 people descended on the economic and financial capital of Milan from all corners of the country.

In Spain, some 300,000 people marched in Barcelona and Madrid, according to police.

In France, some 55,000 people turned out for a rally in Paris and at least 4,500 people marched in the Mediterranean port of Marseille, according to police.

"With or without UN, no war in Iraq," chanted the Paris protesters.

In the United States, thousands marched to the White House in Washington and other protests were set for Los Angeles and California.

As they swayed to music under blue skies and bright sunshine, Washington protesters chanted, "no blood for oil" and waved banners that proclaimed: "Hands off Iraq," "Peace is patriotic" and "Who would Jesus bomb?"

In Canada, 250,000 protesters took to the streets in Montreal, while thousands of others demonstrated in Toronto and Ottawa.

In Greece, some 15,000 people summoned by anti-globalization groups marched in Athens behind a giant replica of Picasso's celebrated anti-war painting, Guernica.

In Cyprus, some 2,000 Greek Cypriots banged drums, blew whistles and shouted anti-US slogans outside the US embassy in

Nicosia.

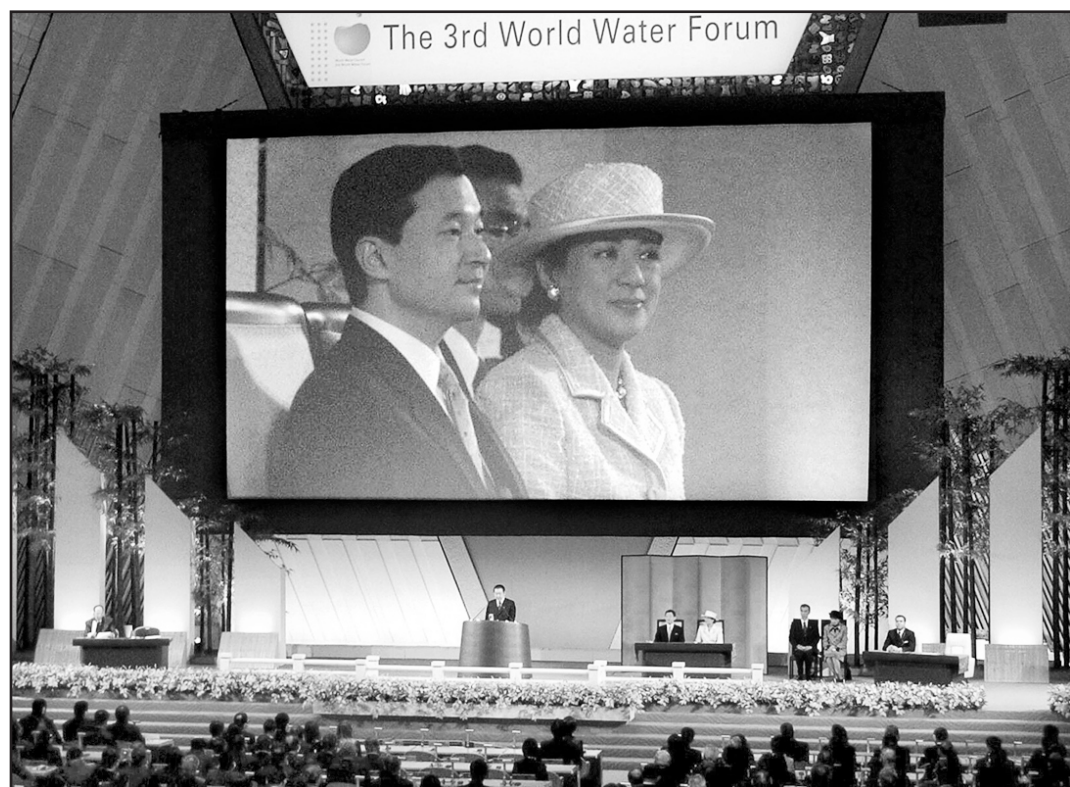
In Turkey, some 5,000 people gathered at the Mediterranean port of Iskenderun, where the United States has been unloading military equipment ahead of a possible invasion of Iraq.

In Russia, some 1,000 people rallied in front of the US embassy in Moscow.

"I love this man, he is like Stalin," Nina Gulcheyeva, a protestor, said of Saddam, whose portrait was emblazoned on a banner that she carried. "Someone should bomb Washington."

In London, approximately 2,000 people marched against war and some 20 Kurds gathered in front of the French embassy to protest that country's stance in the Iraq crisis.

France has vigorously opposed the use of force against Baghdad and has promised to veto any resolution that automatically authorizes the use of force.



Former Japanese prime minister, Ryutaro Hashimoto (C-on stage), who is also chairman of the National Steering Committee of the Third World Water Forum, delivers his opening remarks under a huge screen image of Japanese Crown Prince Naruhito (top-L) and Princess Masako (top-R) during the opening ceremony of the eight-day international forum in Kyoto, western Japan Sunday. The largest international conference on water issues started with delegates from more than 150 countries calling for concrete actions to help some 1.4 billion people without access to safe drinking water.

Rebels attack Kashmir police post: 11 killed

AFP, Srinagar

Eleven people were killed Sunday when Kashmiri rebels destroyed a police post in Indian part of Kashmir, in what officials here said was a sign of renewed guerrilla incursions over the disputed border with Pakistan.

The dead included nine policemen and two civilians, including one whose throat was slit by rebels who suspected he was a police informant, a police spokesman said.

The guerrillas also took hostage five policemen after demolishing the police post with rockets and assault rifles, the spokesman said. At least five people were injured, including two children and a woman.

An Indian air force helicopter was sent to bring out the injured, but could not land as militants continued to fire from the hills, he said.

The militants launched their attack before midnight at the post in Gool in the Udhampur district, about 150 kilometres (95 miles) north of Indian Kashmir's winter capital Jammu.

The assault, the third by rebels in the past week, came hours after

Kashmir's police chief Ashok Kumar Suri said more guerrillas were flowing into southern Kashmir as snow was melting on the de facto border with Pakistan.

"Routes have become passable with the improvement in weather in the border area," Suri told AFP.

"Agencies across the LoC" -- the Line of Control which divides the territory between India and Pakistan -- "have concentrated on Poonch and Rajouri sectors to push into Indian territory groups of rebels," he said.

In northern Kashmir, by contrast, heavy snow was still blocking rebel movement, he said.

The issue of infiltration is highly sensitive, as it was at the heart of a 10-month military standoff between India and Pakistan last year.

India said Pakistan promised a US envoy at the height of the crisis to shut off support for rebels and seal the Line of Control.

Pakistan contends there is at most minimal movement along the Line of Control and reacted furiously in January when the US ambassador to Islamabad, Nancy Powell, urged the government "end the use of Pakistan as a platform for terrorism."

Death sentence to tuskers

AFP, Sootea

Authorities have ordered a hunter to track down and kill two elephants who have killed 12 people in India's northeastern state of Assam, officials said Sunday.

Assam's wildlife department has declared the two male elephants "rogues" and given the professional sniper until the end of March to impose the death penalty.

The move was ordered after complaints by residents of Sootea, some 240 kilometres (150 miles) north of Assam's capital Guwahati, who complained the elephants had wreaked havoc for the past year, trampling to death 12 people.



Newly appointed Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (L) is congratulated by outgoing premier Zhu Rongji (C) as former Chinese president Jiang Zemin (R) looks on at the National People's Congress (NPC) in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Sunday. Political survivor and skilled technocrat Wen Jiabao took the helm of China's government, replacing retiring economic czar Zhu Rongji, and cementing the transition to a younger leadership.

Rebels capture Central African Republic's airport

AP, Bangui

Insurgents loyal to a former army chief captured the Central African Republic's airport, large swatches of its capital and several presidential residences on Saturday while the president was out of the country.

Intense artillery and smaller arms fire began around 3:15 p.m. local time as the rebels entered the capital, Bangui, from the north. The fighters identified themselves to residents as loyalists of former Army chief Francois Bozize, whose forces narrowly failed to capture the capital during fighting in October.

Shooting also started at the nation's main international airport. The fighters claimed they captured it - a development confirmed by a top official in a 300-strong African security force policing the city.

Thousands join funeral of slain Serb PM

REUTERS, Belgrade

Hundreds of thousands of mourners silently followed the funeral procession on Saturday of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic, assassinated by a sniper believed to be acting on the orders of gangster bosses.

It was the biggest gathering Serbia had seen since a mass uprising led by Djindjic and other reformers toppled former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic in 2000, after a decade of wars and international ostracism for the impoverished republic.

Afghanistan to release all Pak prisoners

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan has granted the release of all Pakistani prisoners held in its jails on charges of fighting alongside al-Qaeda and the Taliban, Pakistan's ambassador to Kabul said Sunday.

"His excellency the president (Hamid Karzai) has issued a decree which would enable the government to set at liberty Pakistani prisoners who have been held in detention for well over a year," ambassador Rustam Shah Mohmand said.

Israel closes borders with WB, Gaza

'US statehood plan positive'

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army late Saturday closed the borders with the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, a military spokesman said.

"No Palestinian will be authorised to enter Israeli following alerts of attacks during the Jewish festival of Purim," celebrated from Monday to Wednesday, the spokesman said.

It added that the Allenby and Adam bridges over the river Jordan linking the West Bank and Jordan would remain open to traffic.

The borders were closed at 2200 GMT Saturday.

A Palestinian security source told AFP that the army had turned back more than 10,000 workers early Sunday from the Gaza Strip who were trying to reach their employers in Israel.

On Saturday Israeli military authorities also banned Palestinian men aged 15 to 35 from leaving the West Bank and Gaza Strip for an indefinite period, the Palestinian source said. As a result around 100 Palestinians had been turned back at Rafah, a Palestinian town in the southern Gaza Strip which lies hard on the border with Egypt.

Palestinian local government minister Saeb Erekat denounced the move as "a new escalation in

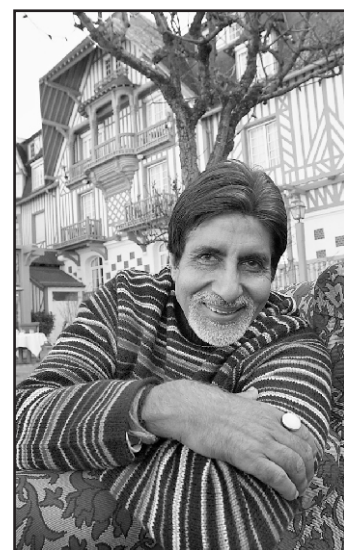
Israeli's policy of aggression against the Palestinian people", adding "One can expect more repressive measures in the run-up to a war in Iraq."

AP adds: Palestinian legislators said Saturday the US administration's promise to adhere to last year's "road map" for Palestinian statehood was a positive sign, signaling that President Bush would push for the plan's implementation without any changes.

Still, some argue the plan has yet to clear its biggest hurdle: getting the Israelis and Palestinians to agree on how and when it is to be implemented.

Bush said Friday he would present the "road map" once a credible Palestinian prime minister took power. The Palestinian Legislative Council is expected to decide next week whether to approve Yasser Arafat's choice of Mahmoud Abbas, an executive in the PLO, for the new position. Palestinians have clearly said it will be Arafat who retains control in negotiations and security.

Palestinian Cabinet Minister Saeb Erekat said US Middle East envoy David Satterfield reassured him Saturday that the United States would stick to the draft plan presented last year. He also said it was time to talk about implementation, Erekat said.



Indian actor Amitabh Bachchan poses during the 5th Asian Deauville Film Festival in France on Saturday. Bachchan will receive a lifetime achievement award during the festival.