

US advises inspectors to quit Iraq: IAEA

AFP, Vienna

The US government has asked United Nations inspectors to withdraw from Iraq, the UN's chief nuclear inspector said Monday.

"Late last night (Sunday), I was advised by the United States government to pull out our inspectors from Baghdad. Similar advice has been given to the United Nations Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC)," International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Mohamed ElBaradei said at the agency's headquarters in Vienna.

"I immediately informed the president of the Security Council and asked for guidance," ElBaradei told a meeting of the agency's board of governors, as monitored on the IAEA website.

"I also informed the United Nations Secretary General," he said.

"I understand that the Security Council will take up the issue today (Monday)," ElBaradei said. An IAEA source said the agency had not yet decided to withdraw.

Iraq rejects war ultimatum by 'summit of the outlaws'

New UN resolution has 'no chance': Russia, France

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq blasted Monday what it called a "summit of the outlaws" between Washington and its allies and rejected President George W. Bush's ultimatum for war, while vowing fierce resistance against any invasion.

Information Minister Mohamad Said al-Sahhaf denounced the US-British-Spanish summit in Portugal's Azores islands on Sunday for failing to justify the use of force.

"They are a few, three states whose officials have drowned the world with lies and did not present any proof" for their claims that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction, he told reporters.

US President George W. Bush gave the United Nations a 24-hour ultimatum to back war with Iraq, after holding emergency talks with British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar.

Shortly after the ultimatum, the UN Security Council announced it would hold a closed door meeting on Monday to try to break a months-long impasse over whether to declare war on Iraq.

Sahhaf said "we have done everything and we continue to cooperate with the Security Council...to avert the aggression against our country."

"Our people, our country and our leader Saddam Hussein will continue to work with the Security Council to reveal the truth...proving that there are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq," he said.

"The war merchants are afraid of this truth," he added in his condemnation of "the remarks that emanated yesterday from the summit of the outlaws."

Sahhaf accused the "war merchants" of "seeking to try new weapons on

people," but added, "they will fail."

He said Iraq was "sincere" in inviting chief weapons inspectors Hans Blix and Mohamad ElBaradei to return for more talks in Baghdad.

Reuters adds: A senior Russian foreign ministry official said on Monday a draft resolution backed by the United States, Britain and Spain for military action against Iraq had no chance of winning UN Security Council approval. "As before, this draft has no chance of getting through the Security Council," Interfax news agency quoted Yuri Fedotov, a deputy foreign minister, as saying.

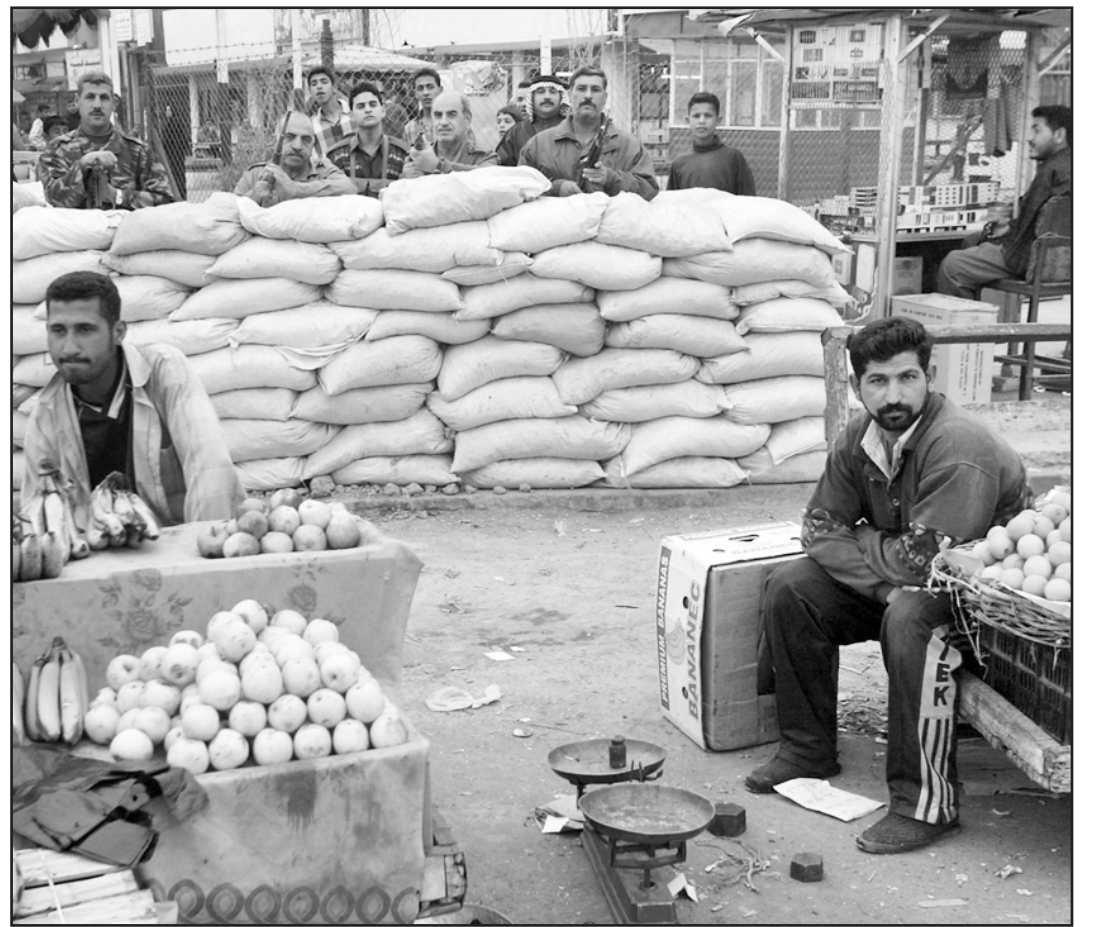
"We consider that further resolutions are not required," he said in Russia's first official comments since a summit of the United States, Britain and Spain set Monday as a "moment of truth for the world" in the crisis over Iraq.

A US-led war against Iraq would be "a mistake with the most serious consequences," Russian President Vladimir Putin said Monday.

"We favour resolving the issue (of Iraq disarmament) by peaceful means. Any other development would be a mistake, leading to casualties and the destabilisation of the international situation as a whole," the Russian leader said.

Moreover, France cannot accept a new UN resolution giving Iraq an ultimatum to disarm or face war, Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said Monday, apparently dooming any chance of UN approval for an attack on Baghdad.

"France cannot accept the resolution on the table that lays down an ultimatum. I do not see how this resolution can be envisaged," de Villepin told Europe 1 radio.



Members of Iraq's ruling Baath Party stand guard behind a barricade at a market in Baghdad on Sunday. Iraq Information Minister Mohamad Said al-Sahhaf blasted the US-British-Spanish "summit of the outlaws" in the Azores over the weekend, saying the allies wanted to try out new arms in a war against Iraq.



Blair braces for revolt as UN Iraq talks stall

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair prepared for a major revolt within his government Monday as last-minute attempts to sway UN doubters over Iraq appeared in vain in the light of an imminent US-led attack.

After his dramatic summit in the Portuguese Azores with US President George W. Bush and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, Blair flew home late Sunday to begin a frantic final round of telephone calls to try to persuade countries to back a fresh UN mandate.

If the 24-hour diplomatic window is slammed shut without success Blair appears ready to risk his premiership by joining a war which is opposed by a majority of voters and even members of his

own government.

But there appeared little doubt that any last-ditch diplomatic efforts would be in vain as Britain told its nationals on Monday morning to leave Kuwait and advised Britons against travelling to Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The Foreign Offices of both France and Russia reiterated Monday that there was no chance of their approving the British-sponsored draft resolution on Iraq.

Meanwhile British Foreign Office spokesman Mike O'Brien rejected suggestions that the government had gone into the diplomatic process determined to have a war regardless of its outcome.

"That is absolutely untrue. We have never been determined to have a war, we wanted to resolve this through the peaceful process of applying pressure through the

UN on Saddam Hussein," he told BBC radio.

"What has now happened is that our effort to go for what is called a second resolution has been frustrated by the French threat of a veto."

That threat had resulted in "enormous" damage to the whole diplomatic process, he added.

According to widespread reports in the British media Blair is expected to hold an emergency "cabinet" meeting of his top ministers later Monday once it is clear the UN process has broken down.

Attorney General Peter Goldsmith, a non-cabinet government minister who advises the government on legal issues, will make a statement saying that war would be legal without a new UN mandate, the Financial Times reported.

US orders diplomats to leave Israel, Syria, Kuwait

AFP, Washington

The United States on Sunday ordered its non-essential diplomats and the families of all embassy personnel to leave Israel, Syria and Kuwait, in a move that could signal a war with Iraq is imminent.

In separate announcements released just hours after the leaders of the United States, Britain and Spain gave the UN Security Council a one-day deadline to act to disarm Iraq, the State Department said it was ordering the diplomats to leave for security reasons.

Using identical language in each, the department said it had taken the step "as a result of a deteriorating security situation in the region" and because of fears of anti-US attacks with chemical or biological weapons.

"The decision to move to ordered departure status is a result of an overall assessment of the security situation in the region due to the threat of military action in Iraq," it

said.

Similar measures were taken in the days leading up to the 1991 Gulf War during which Iraq launched Scud missiles into Israel and Saudi Arabia.

"In the event of military action in Iraq, there is a risk that Iraq or terrorist organisations may use chemical and/or biological materials which could affect the region," the department said.

Louis Finton, a department spokesman, said Washington was not aware of any direct threat to US citizens in the three countries but made clear the apparent likelihood of war was behind the decision.

"We do not have threat information specific to these areas, however, we believe that a move to ordered departure status represents a prudent measure as we prepare for various contingencies in the region, including the possibility of commercial air service disruptions should military action against Iraq become necessary," he said.

UN observers halt operation along Kuwait's border with Iraq

AFP, Kuwait City

UN observers stationed along Kuwait's border with Iraq ceased all operations on Monday, a spokesman told AFP after the United States gave only one more day for diplomacy to resolve the Iraq crisis.

The UN Iraq-Kuwait Observer Mission (UNIKOM) had raised its state of alert to phase four.

"We went to phase four today, which means ceasing all operations" in the demilitarised zone (DMZ), UNIKOM spokesman Daljeet Bagga said.

Moving to phase five would mean total evacuation of all personnel out of the country to safe havens.

The observers had no orders to evacuate but were assembling in one place, waiting to hear from headquarters in New York during the day.

"For the time being we are reviewing our security plans in consultation with UN headquarters. We will know today if we are staying in the DMZ or moving out," he said.

Imminent war fears spark exodus

Tensions spike across Gulf

AFP, Dubai

Fears of imminent war in Iraq precipitated Monday a final exodus from Baghdad and pushed the United States and Britain to urge their nationals to quit Kuwait forthwith amid terror warnings in Dubai.

The 24-hour ultimatum from US President George W. Bush for the UN Security Council to back war or stand aside galvanised diplomats and foreign agencies into action across the region.

With more than 165,000 US and British troops massed in the northern Kuwaiti desert, poised for an invasion of Iraq, Washington had immediately warned UN weapons inspectors to get out of Iraq.

As a likely riposte, the US embassy in the United Arab Emirates revealed intelligence on "a possible terrorist attack against nightclubs in Dubai," which has invested billions to become the

Gulf's tourist and leisure hub.

In Baghdad, the 160 inspectors and backup staff were ready to go on short notice but the evacuation order was not expected until about three hours after the Security Council meets at 1500 GMT in New York.

"There is no evacuation order yet, and should there be one, it would come after the Security Council session," a UN official told AFP, requesting anonymity.

In Vienna, the UN's chief nuclear inspector disclosed that the US government had Sunday night asked all inspectors to withdraw from Iraq.

Some diplomats were not waiting for the bombs to fall on Baghdad.

The Germans and Chinese took to their heels Monday morning. The Swiss were expected to follow as others sat on packed suitcases awaiting orders to escape.

Laden's mother denies links to al-Qaeda

AFP, Riyadh

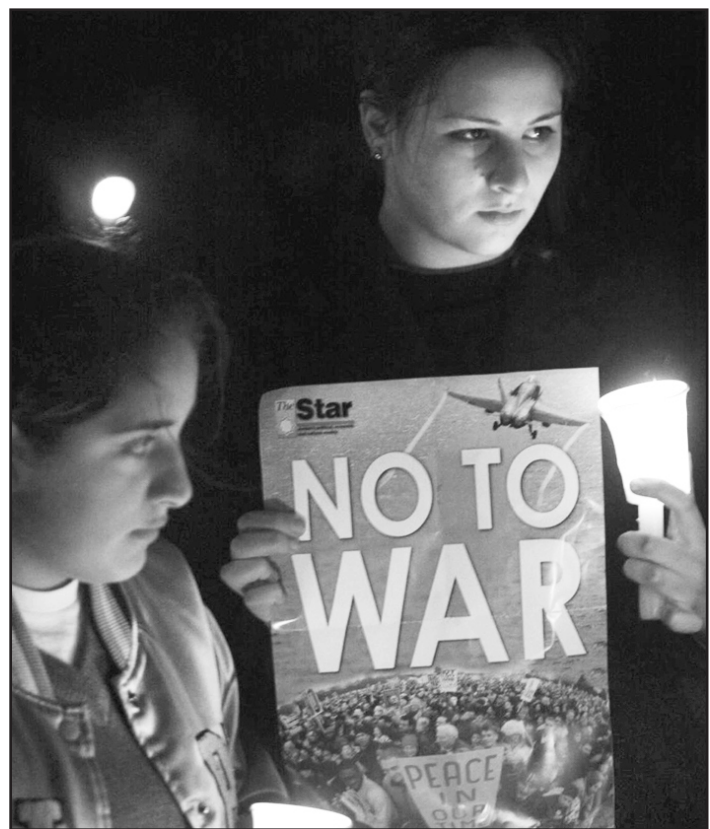
The mother of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden denied in remarks published Monday that she has links with the terror network, but said she was concerned about her son.

"I have no links with al-Qaeda organisation," the mother of the world's most wanted man told the Saudi-owned Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper.

"I am concerned about my son and his news," said the mother, who was not named in keeping with Saudi tradition but is now married to a second man, Mohammad bin Omar al-Attas, and leading a normal life in the Red Sea city of Jeddah.

She has three sons and one daughter from her second marriage, all of them married and living in Jeddah, the mother said, adding that a number of Osama's children were living with her "under my personal care."

She denied that restrictions had been imposed on her movements inside and outside the kingdom and reports that her properties had been confiscated.



Jordanians take part in a candle light vigil in Amman on Sunday against a possible US-led war on Iraq.



This handout picture given by peace movement International Solidarity Movement (ISM) shows US ISM activist Rachel Corrie in front of a bulldozer on Sunday in Rafah, southern Gaza. Corrie, 23, was crushed to death on Sunday by an Israeli army bulldozer as she and other activists tried to prevent the destruction of Palestinian homes in Rafah.

Israeli bulldozer crushes US peace activist to death

AFP, Jerusalem

An Israeli army bulldozer Sunday crushed to death a US peace activist trying to prevent house demolitions in the Gaza Strip, where Israeli gunfire killed two Palestinians in separate incidents.

The United States demanded a full and immediate Israeli investigation into the young American woman's death, which the army termed a "regrettable accident".

The latest killings occurred as Israel sealed off the Palestinian territories amid fears of a Palestinian attack during the Jewish spring festival of Purim and as a US-led war against Iraq loomed.

War on Iraq is coup against ME: Arafat

9 more Palestinians killed in Israeli raid

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat warned Sunday that a war on Iraq would amount to a "coup" against the region.

"It (the war) wouldn't just be against Iraq but would constitute a coup against the Middle East, a (new) Sykes-Picot," Arafat said in an interview with the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya satellite television station.

The 1916 Sykes-Picot treaty between Britain and France redrew the map of the Middle East following the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

Separately, the Palestinian leader asked for guarantees for the quick implementation of the "roadmap" for peace with Israel developed by the United States, United Nations, European Union and Russia.

"We want our funds to be unfrozen, the Israelis to withdraw immediately from our lands and towns and the Mitchell report and the Tenet accords to be implemented," he said.

US President George W. Bush said Friday that the long-delayed "roadmap" for Middle East peace will be published as soon as the Palestinians confirm the appointment of a strong prime minister, a move that could happen as early as next week.

Meanwhile, Israeli troops killed nine Palestinians, including a toddler and a 13-year-old boy, in raids on the Gaza Strip launched just hours before the Palestinian parliament was to meet to debate a revised bill defining the mandate of a new power-sharing prime minister.