

World voiced anger over US strikes on Iraq on Thursday. From L to R -- a protester wearing a US President George W. Bush vampire mask waves to traffic passing near the White House (background) in Washington, DC after the attack while British students shout anti war slogans on the street in front of the House of Commons. In Australia a protester holds a no-war placard at Sydney's central business district and protestors gather outside the US embassy in Athens, and light candles shaping the word USA with the nazi symbol. In Nepal students hold anti-war placards and banners while in Pakistan activists of Islami Jamiat-i-Taluba chants anti-US slogans.

# World condemns war against Iraq

AFP, Paris

World leaders Thursday condemned the launch of a US-led war against Iraq, calling for the bombing to stop to save thousands of lives, amid fears the campaign could also trigger a devastating backlash.

In a statement, the German government, which for months led a spirited opposition to war seeking to find a diplomatic solution to the US-Iraq standoff, said news of the outbreak of hostilities had "caused great concern and dismay."

The government "hopes that the fighting will end quickly," and that the warring parties "will do everything possible to avoid civilian casualties," it said just hours after the first US air strikes hit Baghdad.

"Now everything must be done to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe among the Iraqi people," the statement added.

France, which with Germany and Russia, vowed to oppose any UN resolution authorising the use of force to disarm Iraq, noted the outbreak of hostilities with "deep concern," foreign ministry spokesman Francois Rivasseau said.

France "hopes that the conflict which has just begun can be ended as soon

as possible," he added in the statement.

Russia was also vocal in its opposition to the war with Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov voicing the Russian leadership's "regret" over the first US strikes against Iraq.

China also urged the United States to stop using force against Iraq, adding "as long as there is hope we will continue to work hard for peace."

"We urge relevant countries to stop their military action and return to the right path," said foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan, saying China was "seriously concerned" about the war.

Confirming growing fears of a protracted war with unforeseen consequences, US President George W. Bush warned in a national address just hours after the first air strikes hit Baghdad that the campaign "could be longer and more difficult than some predict."

"At this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger," he said.

Following his announcement, government leaders called hasty emergency cabinet meetings to monitor the situation, while many prepared to address their people in a bid to calm fears.

Acting Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the war would have devastating consequences, warning "anti-American sentiment around the world will rise, as will extremism and militancy."

"The world is now at a critical juncture following the action of the United States and its allies, which will go down as a black mark in history," he said in a national broadcast.

A defiant Saddam, in military uniform, vowed Iraq was not just going to surrender to the amassed 300,000 US and British forces poised in the Gulf to strike his country.

"You will be victorious against your enemies," Saddam told the nation. "We will resist the invaders... the devil will be defeated."

He urged his people to "unsheath their swords" in a speech punctuated with historical references to the glory of the Arabs.

There were immediate fears the start of a US-led war against Iraq could trigger terrorist attacks, prompting instant measures to step up security at major installations, and transport hubs such as airports. Some airlines began to cancel flights to the Middle East.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the staunchest Bush ally in the standoff, called a meeting of his core cabinet ministers for 8:30 am (0830 GMT) to dis-

cuss the Iraq war, a Downing Street source said.

British government sources echoed comments by US officials that Thursday's early air strikes on Baghdad were not the start of the main campaign to oust Saddam, hinting that the worst was yet to come.

The governments in Italy and Spain were also holding crisis meetings, while France deployed 500 extra troops to ensure internal security, a police source said.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) meanwhile issued a solemn appeal to all parties to respect humanitarian laws, and warned it would be illegal to resort to chemical or biological weapons.

"The ICRC solemnly and strongly appeals to all parties to abide by the rules of international humanitarian law, which sets limit to violence," Jakob Kellenberger, the president of the wartime aid agency told journalists.

Aid organisations have been drawing up contingency plans for months on how to cope with an expected flood of refugees as well as casualties once the expected US bombing blitz starts.

Iran, designated last year by Bush along with Iraq and North Korea as part of an axis of evil, also condemned the US attack but said it would not take sides in the conflict.



Pakistani expatriates push trolleys at the airport lounge in Karachi on Thursday after their arrival from Kuwait. Eighty Pakistanis reached home in the first flight from Kuwait. The Overseas Pakistanis Foundation estimates 1.8 million Pakistanis are living in different countries in the Middle East.

## Lankan talks close amid fears of Iraqi war fallout

AFP, Hakone

Sri Lanka's peace negotiators wrapped up talks in this Japanese spa resort Thursday amid fears that war in Iraq could overshadow their fledgling peace bid and divert much-needed foreign cash, officials said.

The Japanese-hosted talks between the Sri Lankan government and the rebel Tamil Tigers concluded their hard bargaining Thursday, leaving Friday to finalise a joint statement, diplomats said.

All sides expressed fears that protracted US military action against Iraq could dim Sri Lanka's recovery hopes and take away crucial international attention from peace effort.

## Arafat appoints Abbas new Palestinian PM

AP, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat appointed his longtime deputy Mahmoud Abbas as prime minister Wednesday, a senior official said, marking the first time that Arafat has been forced to share power.

Arafat sent a letter to Abbas, the No. 2 in the PLO, asking him to form a new Cabinet, said Palestinian Cabinet minister Saeb Erekat. Abbas, widely known as Abu Mazen, has five weeks to complete the task.

Also Wednesday, gunmen from a Palestinian militant group killed an Israeli motorist near a Jewish settlement in the northern West Bank.

Arafat agreed to appoint a premier under intense international pressure but tried until the last minute to limit the powers of the new position. On Tuesday, the Palestinian parliament rebuffed Arafat's efforts to insert a clause that would have appeared to give him the final say over Cabinet appointments.

## US press hopes for speedy end to war

AFP, Washington

Leading US newspapers on Thursday voiced hopes for a rapid end to the just-launched war against Iraq as well as concerns over its aftermath, both in Iraq itself and around the world.

"Now that the first strikes have begun, even those who vehemently opposed this war will find themselves in the strange position of hoping for just what the president they have opposed is himself hoping for: a quick, conclusive resolution fought as bloodlessly as possible," The New York Times wrote in its editorial.

But it warned: "There is no strategic exit in the offing, as there was when the coalition forces stopped well short of Baghdad in 1991. Now it is (ousting Iraqi leader) Saddam (Hussein) or nothing. There is no sense of international coalescence, a mission that bound disparate nations together. This mission has unbound the world."

The goal of transforming Iraq into "a free and hopeful society"

has barely been discussed in the United States, the Times said, urging: "Even as we sit here at home, worrying about the outcome of the fighting, we must start to debate what comes next." USA Today meanwhile said: "Winning the separate battle for world public opinion is critical to building the broadest possible support for what promises to be a long and costly reconstruction of Iraq."

"Success requires making good on President (George W.) Bush's pledge to the Iraqi people Monday night that the US military campaign is 'directed against the lawless men who rule your country and not against you.'"

"Acting on the promise... could help the US regain the goodwill of the international community and mend fences with foreign governments now bitterly opposed to military conflict," the daily added said.

The Washington Post wrote in its editorial: "There are some who believe that victory will come swiftly and with few casualties. We certainly hope so."

## Muslim nations enraged

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Muslim nations and groups in Asia reacted with fury and dread to the start of the US-led military campaign against Iraq Thursday, with some calling for holy war.

While condemning the United States for launching the attack on Iraq, the government of Muslim-majority Malaysia urged its citizens to avoid retaliatory violence against Westerners.

"America has signed its own death warrant," declared Maulana Fazlur Rahman, secretary general of Pakistan's Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal alliance of six Islamic fundamentalist parties.

"Now jihad (holy war) is justified, but it should be jihad against American oppression and not against the Western world," he told AFP.

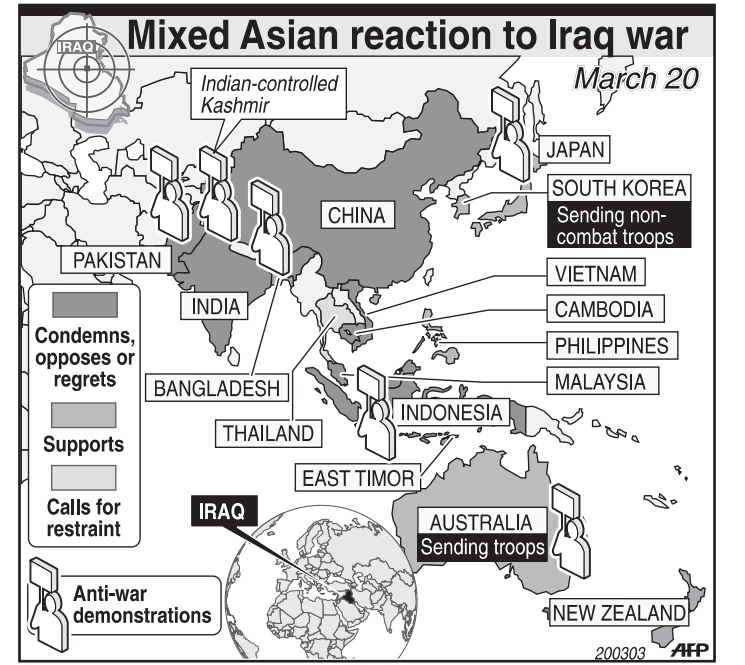
Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Rashid said Pakistan, a key ally in the US-led war on terrorism, regrets the US attack on Iraq.

"We regret that war could not be stopped. We tried our utmost to prevent it," Rashid said, adding that Islamabad "will continue to pursue diplomatic efforts to seek an early end to the war."

people. The United Nations Security Council did not approve war. It is America's own decision," he said.

In Indonesia, Muhammad

Ismail Yusanto, spokesman for the Hizbut Tahrir radical Muslim group, said: "The attack now clearly shows the world who the real terrorist is."



## US may use 'e-bomb'

AP, Washington

US forces may use a new "e-bomb" during the expected invasion of Iraq as part of a 21st century blitzkrieg designed to render Saddam Hussein's forces blind, deaf, dumb and incapable of retaliation.

The highly classified bomb creates a brief pulse of microwaves powerful enough to fry computers, blind radar, silence radios, trigger crippling power outages and disable the electronic ignitions in vehicles and aircraft.

"They would be useful against any adversary that is dependent on electronic systems," said Loren Thompson, a defence analyst at

the Lexington Institute, a think-tank based in Arlington, Virginia.

In modern warfare, electronics undergird virtually every weapon more sophisticated than a rifle or hand grenade. For that reason, Air Force scientists have worked for decades on a practical way of producing powerful but brief pulses of microwaves that can incapacitate electronic equipment without damaging buildings or harming people.

Officially, the Pentagon does not acknowledge the weapon's existence. Asked about it at a March 5 Pentagon news conference, Gen. Tommy Franks said: "I can't talk to you about that because I don't know anything about it."

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continue to work hard for peace. We strongly appeal to the relevant countries to stop the use of force."

There was no immediate reaction from Asia's other giant, India, but Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called an urgent meeting of senior cabinet ministers shortly after the strikes began on Iraq.

New Delhi has previously opposed military action and said all efforts to disarm Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein should be coordinated by the United Nations.

In Canberra, Prime Minister John Howard said Australian special forces troops had begun combat duties alongside US and British forces.

"I can inform the House and inform the Australian public in general that forces have com-

menced combat and combat support operations," Howard said.

Thousands of Australians took to the streets meanwhile to voice their opposition to the war, in which 2,000 Australian troops are taking part.

"US, please explain, why did you install Hussein?" chanted a crowd of some 20,000 protestors marching through Melbourne, Australia's second biggest city.

Thousands more marched through central Sydney chanting "No War, No War" while other protests were held in major cities across the country.

In Tokyo, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi said Japan supports the United States but would not take an active part in the military campaign.

## Rumours of high-level Iraqi defections swirl

AP, Doha

Rumours of high-level Iraqi defections and reports of skirmishes swirled much as wind-blown sand twirled around the columns of American and British troops moving toward Kuwait's border with Iraq.

Wednesday began with a rumour that Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz had fled to the Kurdish autonomous area in northern Iraq. Another rumour said Aziz had been shot and wounded while trying to escape

Iraq.

After a few hours, Aziz deflated both by appearing at a news conference in Iraq's capital to deny he had abandoned Saddam Hussein's regime.

The secrecy that descends on front lines when war approaches often breeds sketchy reports that cannot be verified.

A London tabloid carried a story that American and British commandos clashed with Iraqi troops Wednesday at Basra, the southern Iraqi port that is expected to be an early objective of the allies if war

starts. Britain's Ministry of Defense denied the report.

Meanwhile, the Iranian news agency IRNA said Iraqi opposition sources had reported a revolt by Iraqi troops and civilians in southern Iraq. It's an area that rose up against Saddam after the first Gulf War, but there was no independent confirmation.

A possible source for the reports of fighting in the south could be the explosions from bombs dropped by US and British warplanes enforcing the "no fly" zone in southern Iraq.

## Australia, Japan, S Korea back US war on Iraq

AFP, Tokyo

US allies Australia, Japan and South Korea backed the US-led war on Iraq on Thursday but China demanded an end to the military campaign and Muslim nations and groups in Asia angrily condemned the attack.

China, one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and an opponent of military action by the United States without UN sanction, said it was "seriously concerned" by the outbreak of hostilities.

"We urge relevant countries to stop their military action and return to the right path," said Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan.

"As long as there is hope we will



Jordanian Red Crescent workers set-up a camp for expected refugees from Iraq in the border area of Ruwished, some 250 km east of Amman on Wednesday. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis are expected to flee into neighbouring countries in case of a US-led military strike on Baghdad.