



IRAQ CRISIS



Activists of environmental organization Greenpeace unfurl a huge anti-war banner at the Michael gate of the Vienna landmark the Hofburg castle during a protest against the US-led war against Iraq, late Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

Blair urges Britons to unite behind troops

Prime Minister Tony Blair urged Britons to unite behind the country's troops late Thursday, and announced that British forces were carrying out land operations against Iraq. In a sombre, five-minute speech, his first public statement on the war, Blair bluntly warned Britons that war was the only real option against President Saddam Hussein's "barbarous" and dangerous regime. "British servicemen and women are engaged from air, land and sea. Their mission: to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and disarm Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction," said the prime minister. Blair is US President George W. Bush's staunchest ally on Iraq, having sent 45,000 soldiers, sailors and airmen, 120 tanks, a 17-ship naval task force and more than 100 warplanes to the Gulf. British Royal Marine commandos launched an amphibious assault on Iraqi positions in the south of the country Thursday, securing a foothold for an advance on Baghdad, a journalist from The Times embedded with the force reported. With US troops, the elite soldiers pushed into the Fao peninsula, a vital oil export sea route for Iraq, southeast of the city of Basra, while others made beach landings and cleared Iraqi mines on land and at sea, said journalist David Sharrock in a pooled dispatch printed Friday. Meanwhile, the defence ministry confirmed that British Royal Navy submarines fired Cruise missiles at "command and control targets" in Baghdad Thursday, in a coordinated attack with US forces. A ministry spokesman would not reveal the number of submarines involved, their location, or the number of missiles fired. In Britain, however, there remains strong opposition to the war, and it

was evident Thursday in demonstrations in central London and in cities up and down the country. Blair acknowledged in his speech on the war: "I know this course of action has produced deep divisions of opinion in our country." The prime minister said, however, that "vast amounts" of chemical and biological poisons, such as anthrax, VX nerve agent, and mustard gas, remained unaccounted for in Iraq. "So our choice is clear: back down and leave Saddam hugely strengthened; or proceed to disarm him by force." He added: "I hope the Iraqi people hear this message. We are with you. Our enemy is not you, but your barbarous rulers." The Guardian daily reported Friday that Blair had been informed but not consulted by Washington on the timing of strikes on Baghdad early Thursday which heralded the start of the war. In Britain, during a day of anti-war demonstrations, police arrested 20 people for public order offences in Parliament Square, central London, and at one point pulled out their truncheons to keep bottle-throwing demonstrators from surging down Whitehall towards Downing Street. "One, two, three, four, we don't want your bloody war! Five, six, seven, eight, stop the killing, stop the hate!" a group of about 30 children were heard chanting, borrowing a slogan from Vietnam war days. The Stop the War Coalition, organisers of a major demonstration through London streets this Saturday, said the outbreak of war was "a day of shame for Britain." In the Scottish capital Edinburgh, 2,500 people took to the streets, causing gridlock on the roads, protesters said, while in the northwestern English city of Manchester, 2,000 people marched through the centre.

Britain reopens rift in EU

French counterpart, said on Friday: "I stand by the words I have used." "I don't regret the fact that we have argued, that we disagree with the French position, because we do," he told British reporters on the second day of the EU summit. Relations between Britain and France have sunk to their frostiest for years over Iraq, but Straw said he hoped the differences would not spill over into other EU issues. British Prime Minister Tony Blair, looking tired and drawn after Britain suffered its first casualties of the war in a helicopter crash, was seen shaking hands and chatting briefly with German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, another vocal opponent of military action, ahead of Friday's talks on the economy. Chirac entered the room only after cameras had been ushered out, avoiding being photographed with Blair. British officials said there were no plans for the two men to hold a private meeting during the summit. They spoke only sparingly in Thursday's Iraq debate, witnesses said. "There is a correct tone of voice, but you feel in the air that the atmosphere is tense," Swedish Prime Minister Goran Persson said on Thursday night. In their statement, the EU leaders could not agree to say who was responsible for the war or whether Iraq had missed a final opportunity to disarm before US-led forces attacked on Thursday. "We call on all countries of the region to refrain from actions that could lead to further instability," their joint statement said. Diplomats said the message was aimed at EU candidate Turkey, which has refused to let US troops invade Iraq from its soil but cleared the way for thousands of its own soldiers to move into northern Iraq, raising the risk of clashes with Kurds. The statement also called for a central role for the United Nations in humanitarian aid and the post-war order. This could cause friction with the United States, which diplomats said wants a very circumscribed UN mandate that would not tie its hands as the occupying power in Iraq. The leaders stressed their commitment to strengthening transatlantic relations, severely strained by the crisis. EU Commissioner for External Affairs Chris Patten said the diplomatic fallout from the war could be substantial. "I'm worried about the collateral political damage that has been produced. Damage to the European Union, to NATO, to transatlantic relations, to our relations with the Arab world and the United Nations," he told the Spanish daily ABC.

FBI interviewing Iraqis in US

The FBI said Thursday that its agents are on the trail of Iraqis in the United States, seeking information about terrorist attacks that Baghdad might contemplate in reprisal for a US-led attack. "We are running down every lead, responding to every threat, coordinating with every partner, and doing our utmost to keep terrorists from striking back," Federal Bureau of Investigation director Robert Mueller said in a statement. The operation, dubbed Liberty Shield, is meant to protect US lives and infrastructure. The task, Mueller said, involves "sending Special Agents to interview a number of Iraqi-born individuals and others in the US to assure them of the FBI's responsibility to protect them from hate crimes and to elicit information on any potential operations of Iraqi agents or sympathizers," Mueller said.

UN urges Iraq's neighbours to keep borders open

The UN's top refugee official Rued Lubbers on Thursday urged Iraq's neighbour states to keep their borders open to refugees fleeing the US-led war in Iraq. "We must do everything we can to alleviate suffering (for the Iraqi people), including keeping borders open so that those fearing for their lives can reach safety in neighbouring states," the High Commissioner for refugees told reporters. The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) has also asked for unlimited access to Iraq's border regions for emergency teams to monitor the flow of refugees and protect their rights. "We have people and resources in the region, and more are arriving every day. But to save lives, we must have open borders and access to all of those seeking temporary asylum," Lubbers said. The UNHCR has made contingency plans for 600,000 refugees leaving Iraq in the event of war. UNHCR has estimated that it would need about 154 million dollars (144 million euros) to provide shelter for those refugees over six-month period. To date it has received just 21 million dollars from donors, and has already had to dip into emergency reserves to meet expenditures. "We also expect the international community to do its part by supporting humanitarian efforts throughout the region," Lubbers said.

Panic-stricken Kuwaitis flee city

Kuwait, where over 100,000 US and British troops are primed for a ground invasion, came under surprise missile attack from Iraq Thursday, plunging the country into a panic not seen since the 1991 Gulf War. Residents in Iraq's southern neighbour scrambled for gas masks and chemical warfare suits and headed for makeshift shelters as air raid sirens wailed repeatedly amid fears of chemical attack from Baghdad's snap retaliation to pre-dawn US air strikes. None of the six Iraqi missiles the defence ministry said were fired from across the border was known to have caused any casualties but two were intercepted by Patriot missiles, one over Kuwait Bay on the northern rim of the city. Normal broadcasting on state television was interrupted and a rotating air raid siren appeared every time a missile was incoming, with a warning of danger and an instruction to citizens not to venture outside. Sirens began wailing in short bursts from around 12:30 pm for about an hour as news emerged that the first missile had been fired on



Kuwaitis flee the city and pack the southbound freeway bumper-to-bumper as they drive out of Kuwait City for safer havens on Thursday. PHOTO: AFP

northern Kuwait, where the majority of the US and British forces ranged against Saddam have set up base. Police cars flanked by armoured vehicles were also seen cruising the streets, broadcasting the same message by loud hailer. Of the six missiles fired at Kuwait, the last two were longer-range Scuds but the first four had a medium-range, Colonel Yussif Al Mulla, a Kuwait defence ministry spokesman, said on state-run television. Speculation focused on Iraq's banned Al Samoud 2 missiles, which UN weapons inspectors were destroying before the disarmament mission halted ahead of yesterday's attack on Baghdad. The last two missiles were both intercepted over the country by Patriot missiles, while the first two crashed into the Mutlaa desert, 40km north of Kuwait, around 10:30 am, the defence ministry said. Some two hours later, the ministry announced that three more missiles had hit Kuwait. The sirens sounded again and the ministry said a sixth missile had struck. The latest siren alert, at around 3:30 pm, turned out to be a false alarm, Mulla said. The few stores which were open were doing brisk business in protective equipment and emergency provisions. Special Kuwaiti security forces are deployed all over the country

and road blocks set up along the main coastal road. Police cars flanked by armoured vehicles were also seen cruising the streets, broadcasting the same message by loud hailer. Of the six missiles fired at Kuwait, the last two were longer-range Scuds but the first four had a medium-range, Colonel Yussif Al Mulla, a Kuwait defence ministry spokesman, said on state-run television. Speculation focused on Iraq's banned Al Samoud 2 missiles, which UN weapons inspectors were destroying before the disarmament mission halted ahead of yesterday's attack on Baghdad. The last two missiles were both intercepted over the country by Patriot missiles, while the first two crashed into the Mutlaa desert, 40km north of Kuwait, around 10:30 am, the defence ministry said. Some two hours later, the ministry announced that three more missiles had hit Kuwait. The sirens sounded again and the ministry said a sixth missile had struck. The latest siren alert, at around 3:30 pm, turned out to be a false alarm, Mulla said.

WFP prepares for crisis

The United Nations food agency, believing that it may be facing the largest and most costly humanitarian crisis in history, is making contingency plans to feed the people of Iraq. In New York, the UN Secretary General is seeking immediate authorisation from the Security Council to take over the agency's oil-for-food programme. It has been jointly administered until now by Baghdad and the UN. The programme, which has been in operation since 1996, collapsed with the outbreak of war and the evacuation of UN personnel, leaving 60 per cent of Iraqis without access to fresh food. Officials at the World Food Programme (WFP) headquarters in Rome are deeply concerned. Under their new plan Iraq's oil revenues are channelled into a UN bank account from which Saddam Hussein has been paying for food, medicine and other basic necessities for the civilian population. The programme avoids the UN trade embargo imposed after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. WFP officials say the Iraqis have only about six weeks' food supplies in reserve. Their warehouses are almost empty and unless very large quantities of food reach Iraq soon, there could be a devastating hunger crisis. So far the UN agency has stockpiled about 30,000 tonnes of food in countries bordering Iraq - that is enough to feed two million people for one month. But Iraq's population is 26 million and if the war drags on, in a month's time the agency might have to feed the entire population. Hundreds of thousands of tonnes of food have to be ordered within days. The final cost could be more than \$1bn. Meanwhile, in Geneva, another UN agency, the High Commission for Refugees, has appealed to Iraq's neighbours to keep their borders open to people fleeing the war.

US envisions radical change in world order

Washington sees the war on Iraq as the first stage of a radical change in international order, including acceptance of the concept of "preventive war," the "reshaping" of the Middle East, and a reshuffling of traditional alliances. Many US officials close to the so-called "neo-conservatives" now moving to the fore in President George W. Bush's entourage have long seen the Iraqi conflict as inevitable and have been working toward redrawing the world political map. This school of thought, the object of heavy criticism both abroad and in liberal American circles for its unilateral tendencies, wants to put the United States at the center of a new post-cold war order, unshackled from the inherited burden of treaties and international institutions. Its most noted proponents are vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz. Numerous advisors in the White House, Pentagon and State Department also share that vision of a new world order. Even Secretary of State Colin Powell, a reputed moderate long wedded to classic multilateralism, has in recent months evolved in this direction, notably talking of "reshaping" of the Middle East. Bush has on numerous occasions bolstered the voices of the neo-conservatives, notably in rejecting the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, and in pulling out of the US-Russian anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in order to pursue his anti-missile shield plans. In January 1998, 18 noted Republicans, half of whom today hold top posts, had already sent an open letter to then president Bill Clinton proposing the course of action his predecessor has now taken against Iraq. The 18 urged Clinton to "enunciate a new strategy that would secure the interests of the US and our friends and allies around the world. "That strategy should aim, above all, at the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime from power," said the letter. They also urged that US policy on Iraq not be shackled by the United Nations, a policy today being embraced by Bush. US officials see three main new concepts coming into play: -- The idea of "preventive war," put forth by Bush last year as a central pillar of US defense against threats from terrorist-friendly "rogue states" like Iraq, Iran and North Korea. -- the reshaping of the Middle East, or the so-called theory of "democratic dominoes," which assumes the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime will trigger a move toward democracy in other countries of the region, and, notably, facilitating peace between Israel and the Palestinians. -- New alliances. Figuring that major

institutions like the United Nations and NATO have demonstrated their limitations, and disappointed by traditional US allies like France and Germany, Washington wants to develop "coalitions of the willing," more pliable, less restrained and more inclined to rally around the United States. Tried out with the "anti-terrorist coalition" formed after the September 11 2001 attacks, this idea is getting legs today with the "coalition for the immediate disarmament of Iraq," serving as the international mantle of support against Iraq that Washington sought but failed to get from UN Security Council. Many foreign officials and commentators began Thursday, the morning after the war on Iraq began, to denounce Washington's "unilateralist vision," fearing the conflict was proof only of a desire to dominate, to the detriment of the United Nations.

