



AFP, Baghdad
 An Iraqi man carries his belongings from his house hit on March 27 by a US missile in al-Yussufiyeh, some 30 km south of Baghdad. Eight people were killed and 44 wounded in a raid targeted a quarter housing employees of the roads and bridges department.

Iraq war must end immediately: Putin

AFP, Moscow
 Russian President Vladimir Putin called on Friday for an immediate end to the US-led war against Iraq, warning of a looming humanitarian disaster and global destabilization, news agencies reported.

"The only means to resolve the Iraqi problem is an immediate halt to hostilities and the resumption of efforts to find a peaceful settlement within the UN Security Council," Interfax quoted Putin as telling the leaders of the political parties in the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament.

The main task of the international community is "to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq," he warned.

"The military operation in Iraq is becoming bitter and long drawn-out. With every hour the killing and the destruction increases, civilians

die, American and British and Iraqi soldiers die," Putin said.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said that Moscow and a majority of other countries were doing everything they could to put a stop to the conflict.

"If the war is not stopped in the near future, there is a great threat of the worst possible humanitarian disaster, the worst the world has seen," he said at talks with Indian Deputy Foreign Minister Kanwal Sibal.

"We are working together with India and the overwhelming majority of the world in searching for ways to stop this bloodshed," he added.

In its consequences, the war in Iraq is becoming more than a local conflict, Putin warned.

It marks the first time since the end of the Cold War that the international community had encouraged "such a serious crisis capable of upsetting the fundamentals of global stability and international law", he said.

Moscow has strongly opposed the military campaign, which the United States says is aimed at disarming the regime of President Saddam Hussein by force, and has asked the United Nations to rule on the legality of the invasion launched on March 20.

Putin moreover rejected suggestions that Russia's position on Iraq was motivated simply by economic concerns.

"(Russia) has never based its policy towards Iraq solely on economic factors or interests. Economics is an important part of politics but if we get political assessments wrong, that leads also to economic losses," Putin said.

Russia remains open to cooperation with all sides engaged in the conflict, he added, stressing in particular that "our partnership with the Americans give us the basis for an ongoing, open dialogue."

Russia has noticeably hardened its stance towards the stand-off with Iraq since the start of hostilities, insisting that the conflict be returned to the UN Security Council and for the earlier weapons inspection regime to be resumed.

Putin has called the coalition invasion a "serious political mistake," warning that it could seriously destabilise the region, while foreign minister Ivanov on Wednesday warned that it was "illegal and doomed to failure."

The mounting tone between Moscow and Washington has led commentators to warn of a return to Cold War-era tensions.

Forget them all, Mr Bush

CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER, The Guardian

Don't go back, Mr. President. You walked away from the United Nations at great cost and with great courage. Don't go back.

No one knows when this war will end. But when it does, you'll have to decide the terms. Yet in the past few days both you and Tony Blair have said you will seek a new UN resolution, postwar, providing for the governance of Iraq.

Why in God's name would we want to re-empower the French in deciding the post-war settlement? Why would we want to grant them influence over the terms, the powers, the duration of an occupation bought at the price of American and British blood? France, Germany and Russia did everything they could to sabotage your policy before the war. Will they want to see it succeed after the war?

That is their game. Why should we play it? And why return the issue to Kofi Annan, who had the audacity to declare the war illegitimate because it is supported by only 17 UN resolutions and not 18?

Mr President, we lost at the UN.

Badly. But that signal defeat had one significant benefit. For the first time, Americans got to see what the UN truly is. The experience has been bracing.

You've seen the polls: 75% of Americans disapprove of how the UN handled the situation with Iraq. In December, polls showed a majority of Americans opposed to a war without UN backing. Today, after the UN debacle, 71% support the war regardless.

What happened? Americans finally had a look inside the sausage factory. Their image of the UN as a legitimating institution had always been deeply sentimental, based on the UN of their youth - UNicef; refugee help; earthquake assistance. The American public understands that this is not a body with which to entrust American values or American security.

On September 12 2002, you gave the UN a fair test: act like a real instrument for collective security or die like the League of Nations. The UN failed spectacularly. The American people saw it. And the American people are now with you in leaving the UN behind.

Why resurrect it after the war? When not destructive, as on Iraq, it

is useless, as on North Korea. China has blocked the Security Council from even meeting to deal with North Korea's brazen nuclear breakout. On this one, the Security Council wants the US to engage North Korea unilaterally - this amid daily exhortations of the US for "unilateralism".

The hypocrisy is stunning. But the deeper issue is that the principal purpose of the Security Council is not to restrain tyrants but to restrain the US.

If we're going to negotiate terms, it should be with allies who helped us, who share our vision and our purposes. Not with France, Germany, Russia and China, which see us - you - as the threat, and whose singular purpose will be to subvert any victory.

There were wars and truces and treaties before the UN was created - as there will be after its demise. No need to leave the organisation formally, Mr President. Just ignore it. Without us, it will wither away.

No act of commission is required. Just omission. Don't return, Mr President. Don't give Ambassador Pleuger the satisfaction of seeing you crawl back.

Saddam back on screen

AFP, Baghdad

Saddam was shown on television yesterday chairing two separate meetings reported to have been held on Thursday. The first included Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan, Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz and other top officials.

The second was with members of the ruling Baath party, which the television said had issued a statement vowing to "inflict maximum material and human damage among enemy ranks."

Explosions rocked Baghdad throughout the day and into the night, particularly on the southern rim, site of a vast military camp relentlessly hammered by US and British raids.

Blasts felt in the capital were amongst the biggest since the start of the war.

Defense Minister Sultan Hashem Ahmed vowed that Baghdad would not be taken, while

acknowledging that US forces were nearing the city limits.

"We will not be surprised if the enemy surrounds Baghdad in five or 10 days but he will have to take the city. Baghdad cannot be taken by the Americans or the Britons as long as the citizens in it are still alive," he said.

As many as 1,000 US paratroopers landed in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq to open a new front as US armour moved into position for the final push on Baghdad.

Meanwhile, in the neighborhood known as the "City of the People," tears and rage gripped grieving relatives who buried 14 people killed Wednesday when an air strike hit apartment complexes.

At the US Central Command briefing center in Qatar, Brigadier General Vincent Brooks said no US or British aircraft targeted that area, and added that his pilots had come under Iraqi anti-aircraft fire at the time.

US asks Japan to donate \$660 m for Iraq rebuilding

AFP, Tokyo

The United States has informally asked Japan to contribute 660 million dollars to the post-war reconstruction of Iraq, a newspaper said Friday.

The United States expects Japan to give support for refugees as Japanese military activity abroad is strictly limited by the post-war constitution, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun said without citing sources.

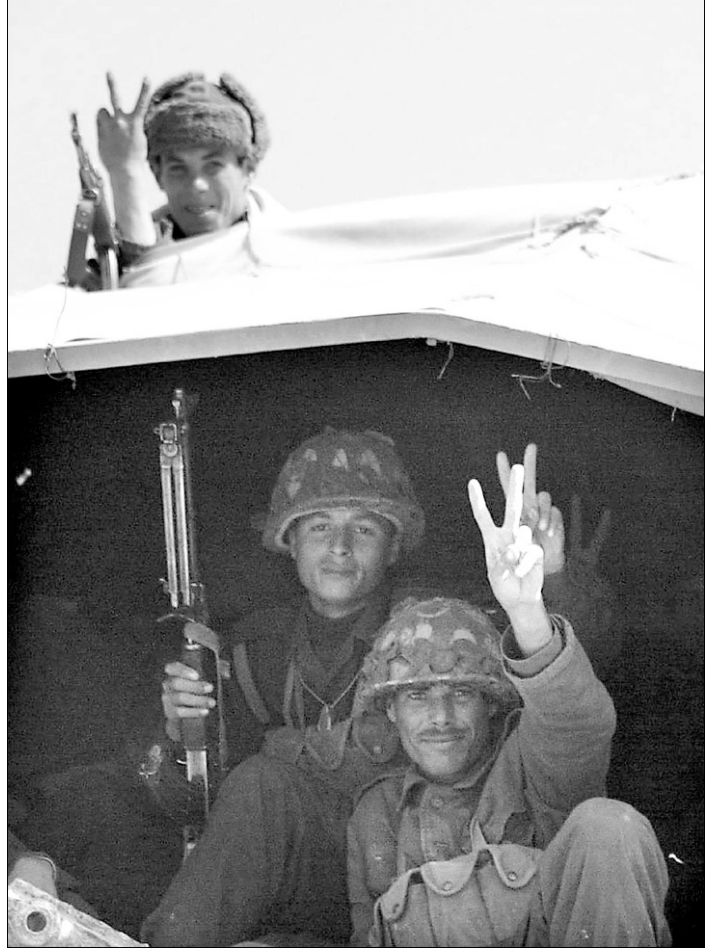
Japan is considering food aid and technical support for reconstruction of buildings and other public facilities, the business daily said.

On Friday, the government approved a plan to send 160 tents, which can house 1,600 people, to Jordan for people affected by the US-led war on Iraq, officials said.

Two planes operated by the Air Self-Defense Force are scheduled to leave Tokyo on Sunday with the supplies on board, and arrive in Amman on Monday.

About 60 Japanese troops carrying arms for personal protection will board the government jets, the officials said.

The move is in response to requests by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which has called on Japan to send relief materials and a medical team for refugees.



AFP, Baghdad
 Iraqi Republican Guards flash the "V"-sign for victory as they leave Baghdad heading to the southern front on Thursday. Iraq has denied reports from US commanders that it has lost around 1,000 men in fighting in and around the Shiite pilgrimage centre of the city of Najaf which lies close to the Euphrates river some 150 km south of Baghdad. Iraq has been under attack by US-led forces since March 20.

Explaining the war to public carries added risks

WASHINGTON POST

He has been called a CEO in war-time, a chief executive content to delegate to his generals and to cheerlead from the Oval Office. But President Bush has played a somewhat different role in the war with Iraq, and like the planners at the Pentagon, he has been forced to adapt to the realities of the battlefield.

For the first few days, he remained mostly out of sight. Having made the decision to begin the war, he let the generals take over. Bush, aides said, was barely following the bombing of Baghdad on television.

On Thursday, with questions continuing about the war plan, the president was out in public -- for

the second day in a row -- offering assurances of progress and warnings that victory may take time.

In doing so, Bush has effectively taken personal control of the message machine for the war. That may be necessary, but by doing so, he risks personalising the war even more than he has, putting him at greater jeopardy for anything that may go wrong.

People close to Bush said his aides initially emphasized a hands-off approach because they wanted to insulate him from bad news and because they did not want him to appear obsessed with or emotional about the war. These aides quickly realised they had overdone it, potentially making Bush look out of touch. But his advisers have concluded that scripted remarks,

rather than off-the-cuff comments, may be required in assuring that the message of the day gets delivered forcefully.

Given Bush's Harvard MBA and the widespread descriptions that he is far from a detail person, his advisers encourage the image of the confident president as CEO, and yet that masks the way he has operated since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Bush constantly prodded his advisers to demonstrate results -- as quickly as possible. He wanted details of the hunt for the leaders of the al Qaeda terrorist network and the pace of the war in Afghanistan, to the point that his advisers in the White House told him that he should stand back and not try to assume the role of general himself.

He has, aides say, played a similar role in preparing for the war in Iraq, questioning -- along with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld -- the plans and proposals from General Tommy Franks, the commander of forces in the Persian Gulf region, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While Bush may give the generals a wide berth, he is hardly content to let the action flow without getting involved. Aides said he questioned whether the plan was too conventional, what the Iraqis might have learned from the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and he constantly asks what can go wrong with the plans and how ready the generals are if something does go wrong.

Bush receives two briefings a day on the war, one in the morning and the other in the late afternoon.

Aides say Bush has had many questions: the tactics of the Fedayeen forces that have attacked US troops on the way to Baghdad; the strength of the elite Medina Division of the Iraqi Republican Guard; the status of the Turkish military; the morale of US forces; whether the United States is effectively communicating with the Iraqi people.

"The plan is set, the plan is being implemented," one presidential adviser said. "He does not and will not micromanage the plan. Instead, what he does is pepper people with questions to ascertain how the plan is going and to get the latest details and the latest information."

Saddam pledges reward for seizing US vehicles

AFP, Baghdad

President Saddam Hussein has promised to pay a reward to any Iraqi who seizes a military vehicle from the US-led coalition seeking to topple him, state media said Friday.

"President Saddam Hussein ordered that any national who captures vehicles from the enemy has to take them as war booty," the Iraqi News Agency (INA) reported in an overnight dispatch.

Anyone who seizes coalition vehicles is required "either to hand it over to the state or destroy it, and the state will pay him for it." INA did not give a figure.

Iraqi state television has shown a number of US and British vehicles abandoned in the desert of southern Iraq, where coalition troops are meeting fierce resistance from Iraqi regular forces, militiamen and tribal fighters.

The Qatar-based Arabic satellite channel Al-Jazeera on Thursday aired images of a US Apache helicopter and a pilotless reconnaissance drone said to have been shot down by anti-aircraft fire in the mid-Euphrates region, south of Baghdad.

On Tuesday, the Pentagon acknowledged the loss of an Apache helicopter with two pilots aboard held by the Iraqis.

US forces later destroyed the downed helicopter to prevent confidential information from falling into Iraqi hands.

Resistance creates logistics headache for allied troops

AFP, Central Iraq

heavy fighting is still being encountered, prompting the deployment of the military workhorse CH-46 helicopters to bring in supplies.

Supply trucks and other vehicles carry machine gunners and armed troops but do not have the same armour as tanks and amphibious assault vehicles, leaving them prone to attacks.

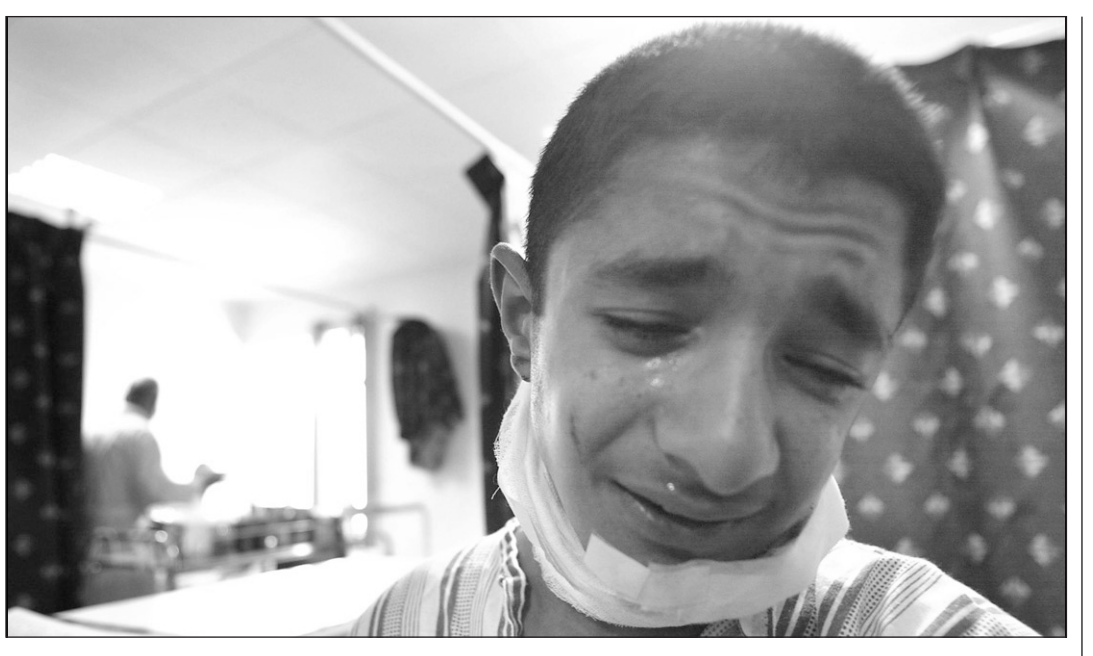
Dust storms, rain and hail during the first days of the invasion also contributed to shortages by grounding helicopters and ruling out air as an alternative supply source until Thursday.

"This sucks," said one supply sergeant, who declined to be named.

He said a shortage of bottled water required troops to rely on filtered and heavily chlorinated water while they took time to re-group and re-supply before pushing further north.

Water shortages have been partially alleviated by the installation of filtration systems in local rivers and canals. One military spokesman said more were planned.

Another senior officer, who also declined to be named, stressed that troops were not suffering from a lack of water or ammunition and that any need could be ferried in by helicopter.



AFP, Baghdad
 An Iraqi boy injured in the bombing of al-Shaab neighborhood in Baghdad the day before, cries on his hospital bed on March 27. A missile hit the neighbourhood on Thursday leaving 17 people dead and dozens injured. Iraq announced that more than 350 people had been killed in the first week of the war, and accuses the United States of dropping cluster bombs on civilians in Baghdad.

More anti-war demo across Arab world

AFP, Sanaa

Another day of anti-war protests across the Arab world saw 100,000 take to the streets in Yemen, while Egypt threatened a crackdown on demonstrations over fear of potential civil unrest. Police and organisers said around 100,000 people turned out in the Yemeni capital Sanaa after the protest was announced on state television Wednesday night.

The marchers, venting their anger at the "unjustified" invasion of Iraq led by the United States, chanted: "Jihad, jihad, from Sanaa to Baghdad" calling for a holy war.

"No US embassy in Sanaa" also echoed from the huge gathering on Liberation Square, closely watched by large numbers of security forces.

Among those attending were many leading political and religious figures, one of whom, Islamist ideologue Abdul Magid Zandani, addressed the crowd with a fiery speech.

Zandani, deputy leader of the Islamist Al-Islah party, told the crowd its ideology called for young Yemenis to heed calls for "jihad to come to the help of the Iraqi people, whose blood is being spilt for oil."

He also called on Arab governments to "start listening to their people".

The protesters dispersed peacefully by early afternoon, although a small group tried to make their way to the British embassy and were halted by police.

They proceeded to throw stones at an American fast-food restaurant close to the embassy, but police intervened.

Yemen's ministry of religious affairs had called for a one-day hunger strike on Thursday and prayer for Iraq's victory.