INTERNATIONAL

US-France ties damaged but not beyond repair

Powell backs end to Europe-US divisions thru' Iraq rebuilding

Relations between France and the United States have been damaged by France's stance against a US-led war on Iraq, but will not fall apart, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said, also expressing confidence over the future of both the United Nations and NATO.

"Bilateral relations with France took a hit but will not fall apart," Powell said in an interview with the BBC filmed earlier this week and due to be broadcast Saturday night.

"There has been some damage done, no doubt about that," he also

Powell was equally sanguine about prospects for the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the United Nations, which have been split by dissent over the Iraqi wai

"NATO is not going to go away. The

UN is not going to fall apart," Powell

He noted that there had been disagreements between the United States and other allies in the past, and ioked: "The US and France have been married ... for 225 years and we have been in marriage counselling for all of

But the fact is we do many things together in a cooperative spirit," he added. "We are strong partners in the NATO alliance and in the (UN) Security

US President George W. Bush said Thursday that French President Jacques Chirac would not be welcome to his Texas ranch "any time soon", but also expressed hope that bilateral tensions over Iraq would eventually

The two leaders are due to meet in June at a G8 summit in France, in the

resort town of Evian near the Swiss

Powell told the BBC that he was in no doubt that weapons of mass destruction would eventually be found

"They are there. We will have to wait and be patient while the troops finish stabilising the country. There are more and more people coming forward as they are free to speak."

'We've got an exploration team in the country now \dots and this exploration team have found documents and have interesting interviews," Powell said, referring to a 1,000-strong team deployed by the United States in Iraq.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Friday expressed the hope for an end to inter-European and transatlantic divisions through a joint commitment by the United States and

interview to be broadcast Sunday on

"What can pull us all together again is if we all commit ourselves now to helping the Iraqi people," he said, going on: "The war is over. The issue of weapons of mass destruction and monitor ing and more monitors and all those sorts of issues, that's all behind us now.

"We can all now rally behind the need of the Iraqi people for humanitar ian aid to rebuild their schools, to rebuild their hospital system, to give them clean water, to make sure that everybody is being fed, to make sure they put in place a democratic form of government so they can begin to look like the members of NATO with respect that kind of government.



A woman walks past a destroyed Iraqi tank carrying a missile in Baghdad on Friday, days after the US-led invasion that topped the regime of Saddam Hussein.

A Greek Cypriot man waits under an umbrella as others, seen in a traffic mirror, queue to cross the ceasefire line dividing the city of Nicosia on Friday. United Nations peacekeepers reinforced Greek and Turkish Cypriot police struggling to control thousands of Greek Cypriots trying to swarm into Turkish-held northern Cyprus. Hundreds of people aiming to cross the UN-manned Green Line on foot on the third day since Turkish Cypriot authorities opened the border between the two sides jammed the road through the buffer zone at the Ledra Palace checkpoint in Nicosia.

UK ministers were ready Powell plans to quit over Iraq

REUTERS, London

Senior British cabinet ministers said in interviews on Saturday they would have quit with Prime Minister Tony Blair if his Labour government had failed to win parliamentary support for the war in

The revelations by Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Home Secretary David Blunkett followed a newspaper interview last week in which Blair said the war could have cost him his job.

Straw told Saturday's The Times newspaper that in the "very dark moments" in the run-up to the war he would have resigned if the revolt by Labour members of parliament had

"I was simply conscious of the fact that if it went wrong -- if we did not get the support we needed in the Commons -- he (Blair) would almost certainly go and I would go with him," he said.

Britain on Saturday indicated it would

not be prepared to grant asylum to

Tareq Aziz after a newspaper reported

the former Iraqi deputy prime minister

had asked to move here in exchange for

information on Saddam Hussein's

The Sun, Britain's best selling daily

tabloid, reported that Aziz had told his

US interrogators that he was willing to

reveal all if he could have a new identity

Ouoting an unnamed "insider", the

Sun said Aziz feared being executed by

Iraqis or being detained by US authori-

Office said: "It is ridiculous to suggest

asylum will be granted to an individual

who has been involved in activities that

have abused the human rights of oth-

Governments normally have to

consider all asylum applications but the 1951 Refugee Convention makes an

A spokeswoman for Britain's Home

and was allowed to move to Britain.

UK rules out

asylum for

Tareq Aziz

Blunkett told The Guardian newspaper that he and other ministers had beer braced to quit too

Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said he warned his US counterpart Donald Rumsfeld that Britain might have had to back down from attacking Iraq if the government lost the vote.

"I had a long conversation with him warning him that if the vote went wrong we might not be able to be there," he told the Guardian

In the event, Labour's leadership won the vote comfortably despite suffering one of the biggest parliamentary revolts in modern British history. The opposition Conservatives helped Blair by supporting his government.

For Blair, the critical yardstick was winning the support of more than half his Labour MPs in the parliamentary vote. In the event, 139 out of 412 Labour members of parliament voted against the

ME trip next week: US officials

AFP, Washington

Secretary of State Colin Powell will visit the Middle East next week in a new bid to advance the peace process, US

Powell is to leave Thursday for Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

However, the Israeli and Palestinian stops depend on the Palestinian legislature's confirmation of Mahmud Abbas as prime minister, a move that will trigger the release of the long-delayed "roadmap" for Middle East peace, officials said.

Because of uncertainty over the vote and discussions about how the roadmap -- drawn up with the European Union, Russia and the United Nations -- will be presented to Israel and the Palestinians, the officials said, Powell's exact itinerary was not

US sends technocrats to help run Iraq

REUTERS, New York

The Pentagon has begun sending a team of Iraqi exiles to Baghdad to help set up a temporary American-led government, The New York Times said on Saturday, citing Pentagon officials.

Most of the exiles have a background in administration and are set to take up positions at each of the 23 Iraqi ministries. They will work closely with American and British officials under Jay Garner, the retired general who is functioning as Iraq's civil administrator, the paper said.

A defence contractor, SAIC, will actually employ the team of Iraqi technocrats that was initially selected by Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz two months ago. They have been working from a suburban Virginia office, the Times said.

The Pentagon referred questions to a

Wolfowitz spokesman, who was not mmediately available for comment.

Emad Dhia, an Iraqi engineer who left his country 21 years ago, heads the group, named Iraqi Reconstruction and Development Council. He will become the top Iraqi adviser to Garner.

The job of the exiles will be to rebuild the structures of a government that would then be handed over to the new Iraqi authority, administration officials told the Times

The task of the team is to help Garner "turn over functioning ministries to the new Iraqi interim authority after a period of time," the Times quotes Victor Rostow, a Pentagon policy official and liaison to the Iraqi team, as saying.

team, at least 10, including Dhia, left for Kuwait on Friday on their way to Baghdad, A further 25 are expected to be in Baghdad by the end of next week.

Among the 150 Iraqi exiles on the

Americans everywhere in Baghdad but out of reach

AFP, Baghdad

Outside what was once Saddam Hussein's chief Baghdad palace, now set to serve as headquarters of the interim US-led government in Iraq, two sobbing women demand answers from soldiers

Fatiha, a 55-year-old widow, has been returning each day to check on her house, located on the grounds of the sprawling riverside compound that until just weeks ago was a potent symbol of Saddam's iron grip on power.

"I left before the war -- I was afraid of the bombs. Now I cannot get to it. I'm not asking to move back in, just to recover some of my things," she said, frustrated to the point of tears.

Saddam had expanded the already giant palace, which was regularly pummelled in the coalition air campaign, in recent years.

But about 50 families, including Fatiha's, resisted pressure to abandon their homes and ended up finding themselves inside the high palace walls and subject to daily snooping by presi-

"I am afraid the house has been ransacked and I would even suspect my neighbors of stealing from me," she US troops are everywhere in the

capital, and yet to most Iraqis they seem beyond reach, with the new rules citizens are expected to play by just as maddeningly mysterious. At the entrance to the former presi-

dential compound, the army has rolled out 100 meters (yards) of barbed wire.

This is the place from which Jay Garner, the retired US general known for his blunt talk and folksy charm, is to

run the country until an Iraqi government can take the reins.

"I've seen names on the doors, it's a good sign. But until now there's no furniture, no water, no electricity," said Master Sergeant Ron Przysucha, a US public relations officer, on the pace of progress at the headquarters.

Hasna Hassani, who has also marched up to the gate, tells a similar story to Fatiha's, weeping that she has been unable to return to her house, near the international airport that has served as a base for US forces.

"I am living with my brother, life is impossible," she lamented to the sol-

Przysucha tried to put things in

"It is a military zone, but it's temporary, we'll give it back," he said.

exception of war criminals. 4 blasts rip thru' Lebanon camp

REUTERS, Beirut

Four bombs ripped through Lebanon's largest Palestinian refugee camp overnight on Saturday, ending a shaky lull in violence there that had lasted throughout the US-led war on

"It seems the Iraq war truce ended in the Ain el-Hilweh camp," said Maher Shabayta, responsible for a Fatah armed faction in the camp. "The goal of the explosions was to make the situation tense in Ain el-Palestinian security sources said

assailants threw grenades at a UN school, into a residential area and near the camp border, prompting armed members of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement to open fire into the air. A fourth grenade exploded out-

side the home of a Fatah official, Abu Majdi al-Sharqawi, who was inside with his family at the time. The blast damaged the walls of the house.

No one was injured in any of the attacks or the subsequent gunfire in the camp, near the southern port city

in parts of Baghdad

Power, water supply restored

AFP, Baghdad

US officials in Baghdad who hoped to announce progress Saturday in restoring badly needed water and power to the war-battered country were dealt a blow when a massive arms dump exploded in

Electricity and running water have been restored to parts of Baghdad and elsewhere but the speed of the rebuilding effort led by the retired US general running post-war Iraq, Jay Garner, has drawn anger from frustrated Iraqis.

The New York Times reported that the Pentagon has begun sending a team of Iraqi exiles to Baghdad to be part of Garner's administration and work in the nation's key ministries after the general

said many would re-open this week. Progress in Baghdad has been slow.

The streets of the capital are piled high with garbage and debris, electricity is only intermittent where it is turned on at all, most shops remain closed and hospitals are in dire condition. Public rage deepened Saturday

when at least nine people died and as many as 20 were wounded after a rocket or missile from a nearby dump of captured Iraqi arms hit three houses.

CNN reported that US troops were forced to pull back from the wreckage after being stoned by furious residents although AFP found the mood had calmed as the search for missing people

Garner made his first visit to Baghdad last week as he took the reins of power of the civilian administration that will run the country until an interim

Iraqi government has been established.

The New York Times said the team of Iraqi exiles had been selected by US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, one of the key US administration war planners, and that they would be led by Emad Dhia, an engi-

The paper said Dhia had fled Saddam Hussein's regime more than two decades ago and that he would become the top advisor to Garner for the reconstruction effort.

It quoted a Pentagon official as

saying the team of around 150 exiles would "turn over functioning ministries to the new Iraqi interim authority after a

Garner announced Thursday that Iraqi government ministries would begin reopening this week and an aide said oil was again flowing.

The announcements, following a four-day inspection tour of the country appeared aimed at assuring Iraqis the pace of reconstruction was picking up after a halting start that exasperated

While pledging to build an Iraq for Iraqis, the Americans are taking no pains to hide who is in control of the

'Cuban hijackers' execution was to avert US aggression'

AFP, Havana

In his first public address since launching a crackdown, Cuban President Fidel Castro said the recent execution of three ferry hijackers was an exceptional measure aimed at avoiding US

military aggression against Cuba. In a "special appearance" on Cuban tried to hijack a ferry April 2 to get to the United States were executed nine days later to prevent a wave of hijackings that could provoke a crisis with Washington and serve as a pretext for a

military action against the island. "We had to pull the evil out by the roots," Castro said in his almost fourhour address late Friday.

He condemned seven hijackings in Cuba in as many months, including two commercial airlines diverted to the United States and the foiled ferry plot.

No one on the boat was harmed in the attempt, but the 11 hijackers were given summary trials and their three leaders were sentenced to death and shot at dawn on April 11, sparking an international outcry

US-Russian crew blasts off to keep ISS flying

Reuters, Baikonur

A US-Russian crew blasted off from the Baikonur cosmodrome on Saturday in a mission to keep the International Space Station operating despite the US space shuttle disaster.

capsule and its crew of two into a partly cloudy sky at 0353 GMT amid a cloud of orange smoke. It was the first manned $flight to the \, ISS \, since \, Columbia \, broke \, up$ on re-entry in February. Space officials said the craft had

entered Earth orbit without incident.

Preparations were under way for the

A Russian rocket lifted the Soyuz

Soyuz to dock with the ISS on Monday, after orbiting Earth 33 times. "This flight is proceeding according to plan. All parameters are according to norms," Vladimir Solovyov, flight director for the ISS, told reporters at mission control outside Moscow. "The

crew is feeling fine but they have a long

working day ahead." The six-month mission by Russian flight commander Yuri Malenchenko. 41, and US flight engineer Edward Lu, 39, aims to keep the \$95 billion ISS flying and underscore the importance of continued work in space.

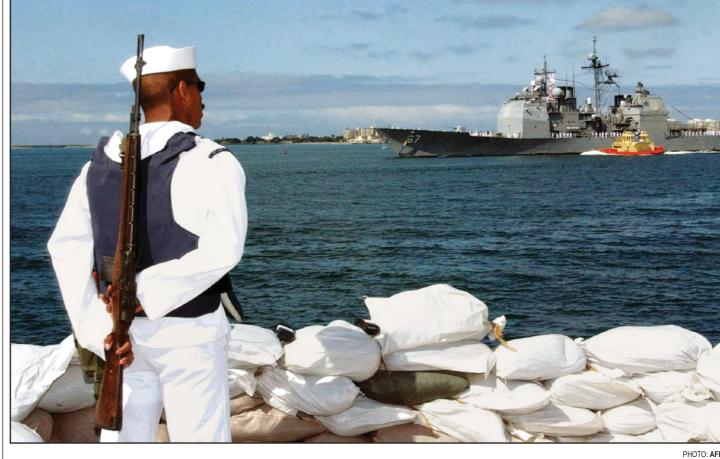
US shuttles have been out of action since seven astronauts died aboard Columbia, leaving Russian spacecraft to ferry crews and supplies to the station from the Baikonur cosmodrome $Moscow \, rents \, from \, Kazakhstan.$ Lu's girlfriend Christine Romero,

tears in her eyes as the rocket soared into the sky, embraced the US astronaut's younger brother Rick and said she felt a "sense of relief." "Most of the world doesn't realise, even the United States, how much the

The current mission is to replace a crew of three -- US station commander Ken Bowersox, flight engineer Donald Pettit and Russian flight engineer Nikolai Budarin

Russians have come through for us," she

Their return to Earth was put back from March because of the Columbia disaster. The crew will now return on May 4 aboard a Soyuz craft already docked at the 16-nation station, while the new capsule will remain there.



A United States Navy man stands at a security post on the San Diego Bay on Friday in San Diego, California, as the guided missile cruiser USS Shiloh arrives in port after a nine-month deployment in the Arabian Gulf, including action in Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Shiloh and the USS Mobile Bay were the first two ships to return to port after participating in the war in Iraq.