

UNSC braces for US sanction waiver plan

Washington lifts own embargoes against Iraq

REUTERS, United Nations

After suspending its own embargoes against Iraq, the United States hoped to introduce a Security Council resolution by Friday that would lift decade-old UN sanctions and allow Iraq oil exports to resume.

The resolution would phase out the UN oil-for-food humanitarian program over several months but honour some of the existing \$13 billion in outstanding contracts for food, medicine and other civilian goods ordered by the ousted government of Saddam Hussein, diplomats said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said on Wednesday the draft was expected to be given to all 15 council members this week and would

include a 'vital role' for the United Nations in a post-war Iraq.

But diplomats said that while the resolution called for a UN coordinator in Iraq, the job was ill-defined and appeared to leave nearly all power in the hands of the United States and its allies.

France, Russia, China and others had advocated a stronger UN role to give a US-chosen Iraqi authority international legitimacy. All three nations, along with Germany, opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq.

However, the resolution says that a UN representative named by Secretary General Kofi Annan would have a seat on a board that would oversee revenues from Iraq's oil industry, along with the

World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and others, the envoys said.

But the draft does not call for the return of UN arms inspectors to verify that Iraq no longer has alleged weapons of mass destruction, as specified in UN resolutions over the past decade and which council members have demanded.

Without adoption of the resolution, no Iraqi or US entity in Baghdad has the legal authority to export oil. The Bush administration wants the measure approved by June 3, when the existing oil-for-food program is up for renewal.

That multibillion dollar program was designed to ease the impact of sanctions which were imposed when Saddam Hussein's

troops invaded Kuwait in August 1990.

AFP adds: A senior US envoy was to hold talks Thursday in Moscow in a bid to persuade the Russian government to back a UN resolution lifting sanctions against Iraq, the US embassy here told AFP.

Assistant Secretary of State Kim Holmes was to meet with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Yuri Fedotov on a sensitive diplomatic mission, with the resolution expected to be put before the UN Security Council this week.

"He will discuss post-Saddam Iraq, a possible resolution to put before the Security Council which would lift sanctions against the Iraqi people," a US embassy spokesman said.



A girl in school uniform walks past a freshly-painted and erected anti-US President George W. Bush graffiti in Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, some 180 km north of Baghdad on Wednesday. Anti-US and pro-Saddam graffiti appeared recently in the deposed Iraqi leader's former stronghold.

Iraqi, US officials keep on talks on interim govt

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi leaders and US officials were to hold a new meeting here Thursday as a self-imposed deadline looms to forge a post-war interim government in Baghdad within the next few weeks.

Two new seats were expected to be added later the same day to the Council of Five, a core group of leaders tapped by the United States to oversee the birth of a democratic government after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The council is leading the political horse-trading ahead of a national congress, due to begin by the end of May, that will form a government and fill the political void that many Iraqis blame for the post-war chaos.

"There are a lot of problems now, there is no security," said Fadi Tahi, a vendor in the holy city of Karbala. "So many things are closed. We need a government."

US wants nuclear ruling against Iran: NY Times

REUTERS, New York

The White House, increasingly concerned about Iran's nuclear program, is pressuring member nations of the International Atomic Energy Agency to declare that Iran violated a non-proliferation treaty, the New York Times reported on Thursday.

Citing unnamed members of the Bush administration, the Times reported that the new US pressure was sparked by the recent assessment of an IAEA report on a

uranium enrichment plant in the Iranian city of Natanz.

"We knew that Iran was working on a centrifuge program," the Times quoted an administration official as saying. "But we were surprised by the number of centrifuge pieces waiting to be assembled. They had a hundred-plus centrifuges built, and they were building more."

Iran maintains the facility is only for peaceful purposes.

The atomic energy agency is scheduled to meet next month, and

a finding against Iran could spark punitive action by the United Nations, the Times reported.

Even as public attention focuses more on the wrangling with North Korea over its nuclear ambitions, US officials told the Times the Iran problem was equally urgent.

On Wednesday, an Iranian government spokesman said the country expected to receive a clean bill of health from the atomic energy agency, and that it was complying with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

31 die as train hits German bus in Hungary

REUTERS, AFP, Budapest

At least 31 passengers on a German tourist coach were killed when it was sliced in half by a train in central Hungary on Thursday, police said.

Police spokesman Laszlo Gelencser said the coach was hit by the Budapest to Nagykanizsa train just after 8.30 a.m. (2:35 a.m. EDT) as it crossed a railway line near Siofok on the shores of Lake Balaton, Hungary's leading tourist area.

He confirmed to Reuters that at least 31 people on the bus had been killed and 11 seriously injured. There were no reports of serious injuries to passengers on the train.

Judge awards \$104m to kin of Sept 11 victims

AP, New York

For their complicity in the Sept. 11 attacks, Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, Saddam Hussein and others must pay millions of dollars to victims' families, a federal judge has ruled.

Judge Harold Baer concluded Wednesday that lawyers for two victims "have shown, albeit barely ... that Iraq provided material support to bin Laden and al-Qaeda."

The written decision issued in US District Court in Manhattan outlines nearly \$104 million in damages, and also names al-Qaeda and the former Iraqi government as liable.

Israel says no to pullback

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli forces will not be withdrawn from reoccupied Palestinian self-rule areas until the new Palestinian administration "starts to make war on terrorism," a senior Israeli official told AFP Thursday.

Speaking just two days before a visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, the official said: "We cannot pull back from these sectors if we don't have a guarantee that terrorist organisations will not take control and organise anti-Israeli attacks which would sabotage any chance of implementing the roadmap."

The roadmap, a three-phase international peace plan to revive the stalled peace process and

create a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, calls for an end to Palestinian attacks and an Israel withdrawal from areas reoccupied since the start of the 31-month Palestinian uprising.

Israel has reoccupied most of the West Bank since last June, when a wave of Palestinian suicide bombings killed dozens of Israelis.

The Israeli official, who asked not to be named, also said that Israel would not order a freeze on Jewish settlements, as stipulated in the first phase of the roadmap, until "the Palestinians have successfully passed the test of waging war on terrorism."

He added there were no US pressures on Israel to make "gestures of goodwill" ahead of

Powell's arrival on Saturday evening. Powell is to meet Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and new Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas.

AP adds: The appointment of Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas marks a "quiet revolution" in Palestinian leadership that could lead to an end of 31 months of violence, Israel's army chief said Wednesday, but three Palestinians, including a baby, were killed in separate incidents.

Abbas, meanwhile, flatly rejected a new Israeli condition for peace talks, outlining a confrontation that could delay or even scuttle implementation of a new international peace initiative.

KSA uncovers al-Qaeda cell plotting major attacks

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Osama bin Laden, says it has uncovered a cell belonging to the al-Qaeda terror network which had planned to carry out major attacks in the kingdom aimed at disrupting internal security.

Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz said in remarks published Thursday that the members of the cell had trained in Afghanistan.

US troops testing Iraqi mobile lab

AP, Washington

American forces in Iraq are doing tests on a trailer that matches the description of a mobile biological weapons lab given by various sources including defectors, the Pentagon said Wednesday.

It was the first time the Defence Department has announced it might have evidence of the sort of prohibited unconventional weapons program that it said justified forcibly disarming Saddam Hussein.

"On the smoking gun, I don't know," Under Secretary of Defence for Intelligence Stephen Cambone said, when asked whether this was a breakthrough in the continuing coalition search for weapons of mass destruction.



Iraqi children stand amidst litter and polluted water at the edge of a vegetable market in Iraq's southern port city of Basra on Wednesday. The World Health Organisation (WHO) said on Wednesday it expected a cholera epidemic in southern Iraq, where 17 cases have already been registered in two hospitals.

Fear in Iraq over US use of depleted uranium

AFP, Baghdad

Several years after the 1991 Gulf War, Dr Salma Haddad started noticing more and more children at Baghdad's Al-Mansur hospital with an aggressive form of cancer.

Haddad, a leading Iraqi specialist, was especially alarmed since the disease, acute myeloblastic leukemia, is closely associated with exposure to radiation -- and suspicion fell on the use of depleted uranium (DU) munitions.

With the fighting now all but over in the war to topple Saddam Hussein, worries are growing that another surge in long-term health problems, for Iraqi civilians and soldiers on both sides alike, is on the way.

"Many studies show a relationship between the use of depleted

uranium weapons and an increase in cancer," said Haddad, displaying a chart that shows her department admits five times as many children with cancer than in 1991.

Other causes from pollution to malnutrition could be a reason, she said, but added that many of the cases were reported in southern areas around Basra, where US tanks engaged in fierce combat.

During the 1991 Gulf conflict, Abrams tanks, Apache attack helicopters and A-10 tank-buster planes fired an estimated 300 tonnes of DU munitions.

It is unknown how many were used in this war, but both the Pentagon and Britain said their troops would keep using them -- even though they are classed by the United Nations as an illegal weapon of mass destruction.



With the Sydney Opera House in the background, Australian scientist Robert Goldworthy demonstrates his spraying machine after claiming to have developed a formula that is effective against all airborne and surface bacteria and viruses including the SARS virus sweeping Asia, in Sydney on Thursday. The formula is already being used in the Singapore General Hospital, the Ritz Carlton in Singapore and the Prime Minister's residence in Singapore.