

France, Russia question US postwar plan

Washington lobbies UN to lift Iraqi sanctions

AP, United Nations
With the UN Security Council looking to avoid the bitter divisions that broke out before the war, France and Russia toned down objections to a new US plan for ruling postwar Iraq, but appeared intent to seek changes to give the United Nations a stronger role.

over a vision to rebuild Iraq - but the tone was muted compared with the bruising battle several months ago over an invasion of Iraq. In that debate, France, Russia and Germany blocked the attempt by the United States, Britain and Spain to win UN approval for a war - and ties between the two sides were left severely strained.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said in Washington he hoped the council would act quickly. "This resolution is straight to the point; it's a resolution that will serve the Iraqi people; it's a resolution that will ultimately result in the lifting of sanctions so that the world can again trade with Iraq," he said.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Yuri Fedotov said Saturday the US plan raises several questions and does not provide a clear picture on lifting the sanctions. French President Jacques Chirac insisted that "the United Nations should play a central role."

But Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder

said they were committed to "constructive negotiations" over the US draft. "We are ready for pragmatic solutions," Schroeder said at a summit with Chirac and the Polish president.

US diplomats stressed the proposal is not a "take it or leave it" plan.

Even co-sponsor Spain's ambassador, Inocencio Arias, said his country believes "this text can be improved ... But altogether it's a good way to try to find a solution to a situation which is rather complicated."

Others who did not support the US attacks on Iraq reacted favorably. Angola's Ambassador Ismael Gaspar Martins called it "a good start" and Chile's Ambassador Gabriel Valdes said, "Our initial reaction is very positive."

Under the draft, the United Nations would give the United States and Britain authority to run the country as they put together a new Iraqi government. In a letter to the council on Thursday,

Washington and London recognized for the first time their status as "occupying forces" in Iraq, which under the Geneva Conventions requires them to look out for the welfare of the Iraqi people.

The initial 12-month authorization would automatically be extended unless the council - where the United States and Britain hold a veto - decides to block it.

Reuters adds: The United States was bombarded with questions at the UN Security Council on Friday when it introduced a resolution to lift sanctions against Iraq and give Washington and its allies control over oil revenues.

US Ambassador John Negroponte explained the eight-page resolution, co-sponsored by Britain and Spain, in a closed Security Council meeting that participants said was devoid of the acrimony the Bush administration faced in March when it tried to get approval to invade Iraq.



Natalie Stocker, 17, wipes her brow as she tries to salvage what is left of her roofless bedroom on Friday following the previous night's tornado in Moore, Oklahoma, a suburb of Oklahoma City. More than 100 people were injured when the tornado tore through Oklahoma City, flattening homes, hurling automobiles into ditches and snapping power poles and lines.



US Army General Ray Odierno (C), the commander for the 4th Infantry Division, walks away from two armored Bradley vehicles, past Iranian flags and towards the house where he held disarmament talks with the leaders of Iran's main armed opposition group based in Iraq, the Mujahedeen e-Khalq (MEK) or Peoples Mujahedeen at one of their bases near the Iranian border in eastern Iraq in the Diyala province on Friday. The group, which has been listed as a "terrorist organisation" by the US State Department, the European Union and Iran, handed over all its checkpoints to US forces on Friday under a previously arranged ceasefire agreement, US officers said.

US in talks with Iranian 'terror' group

AFP, Northern Iraq

US Army General Ray Odierno discussed a possible role for Iran's main armed opposition group based in Iraq, during disarmament talks Friday with the militia's leaders, senior officers said.

An officer involved in the discussions said Odierno, commander of the Fourth Infantry Division, met leaders of the People's Mujahedeen at one of their bases near the Iranian border.

The group, otherwise known as the Mujahedeen e-Khalq (MEK), is classified as a "terrorist organisation" by the US State Department and the Iranian government.

But it claims it is merely fighting oppression by the Islamic government in Tehran, and reached a ceasefire agreement with US forces after its bases were bombed during the war in Iraq last month.

The US officer, who did not want to be named, said the talks focused on the "potential disarmament (of the MEK) and their future role".

He refused to comment on whether the Mujahedeen would be required to surrender completely or if they would have a part to play in ongoing US efforts to secure Iraq's border with Iran.

The Mujahedeen was supported by Saddam's regime as a buffer against Iranian influence in Iraq, and could provide US forces with valuable information about the ousted Iraqi leadership and pro-Iran militia groups in the region.

US officers are concerned that if the Mujahedeen is rendered powerless, rival guerillas from the so-called Badr Brigade will try to fill the vacuum and spread Iranian influence in Iraq, a fear Tehran has dismissed out of hand.

"I believe they (Badr) are an organisation (that will seek to extend) Iranian influence in the new Iraqi government," Odierno told AFP Thursday.

Tehran has already expressed anger at the ceasefire, saying it demonstrates the hypocrisy of Washington's "war on terror".

Iraqi Shiite leader returns home after 23-yr exile

AFP, Basra

One of Iraq's most influential religious leaders returned to his homeland Saturday after 23 years of exile, coming back to a changed nation after the fall of his nemesis, Saddam Hussein.

Ayatollah Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim, the top spiritual leader for Iraq's majority Shiite Muslims, was cheered by hundreds of jubilant supporters as he crossed the border from Iran, his base since 1980.

The 64-year-old's Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI) was one of the main opposition movements that battled Saddam's reign, and it now plays a pivotal role in Iraq's political destiny.

"Yes, Yes, Islam ... Yes, Yes, Hakim," the crowd chanted, as sheep were slaughtered in ritual to mark his triumphant return. "Sun-nites, Shiites, no difference ... all united behind Islam."

Tornado strikes again near Oklahoma City

REUTERS, Oklahoma City

A large tornado struck near Oklahoma City on Friday night, a day after another twister tore through a separate area south of the city, destroying 300 homes and injuring more than 130 people.

The tornado on Friday hit northeast of downtown Oklahoma City, tossing cars asunder on highways and snapping power poles like twigs. With power out to most of the areas in the tornado's path, the full extent of the damage will not be known until after dawn breaks, police said.

The tornado damaged about 40 hangars at commuter air link Wiley Post Airport, north of the city. There were no immediate reports of injuries from the tornadic storm and about 30,000 homes were without power, authorities said.

Rescue officials said they expect numerous injuries -- mostly broken bones, sprains and cuts. They hope the precedent of Thursday's tornado -- in which there were no fatalities -- will be repeated as residents heeded tornado warn-

ings and immediately sought shelter.

The storm that caused Friday's tornado headed to the east and storm watchers said the funnel cloud touched down in a few spots along the way.

The two tornadoes struck about four years after one of the worst recorded tornadoes in US history hit near Oklahoma City, killing 44 people.

A large tornado tore through Moore about 15 miles south of Oklahoma City on Thursday during the evening rush hour, ripping through buildings and snapping power poles like twigs. The storms injured 133 people, about a dozen of them seriously, the state's Emergency Medical Services Authority said.

Severe weather has battered America's heartland this week. Tornadoes and flash floods have killed 43 people in Missouri, Kansas, Tennessee and Illinois. Tennessee was battling flooding around Chattanooga, which killed a homeless man and left sections of the city underwater.

Bush uses trade pledge to promote ME peace

REUTERS, Columbia

Ahead of a new round of Middle East talks, President Bush bluntly called on Israel on Friday to "take tangible steps now" to ease the plight of Palestinians and promised to reward Arab allies by creating a US-Middle East free-trade area within a decade.

Vowing to advance Middle East peace, Bush said he was sending Secretary of State Colin Powell to the region this weekend with "my personal commitment; America will work without tiring to achieve two states -- Israel and Palestine, living side by side in security and prosperity and in peace."

Bush also called for democratic reforms across the Middle East, including Iran, where he said the "desire for freedom is stirring" and promised reformers that Washington "strongly supports their aspirations."

The White House hoped the new trade initiative, announced by Bush in a commencement address

at the University of South Carolina in Columbia, will foster goodwill in a region deeply suspicious of Bush's goals in post-war Iraq and beyond.

But some analysts doubted it would add much to the peace process as Powell promotes a US-backed plan that sets out steps toward the goal of creating a Palestinian state by 2005.

Bush called on the Palestinians to take "concrete steps" to crack down on terrorism and said Israel "must take tangible steps now to ease the suffering of Palestinians and to show respect for their dignity."

Bush also stepped up pressure on Arab leaders, calling on them to renounce terrorism and "recognize and state the obvious once and for all -- Israel has a right to exist as a Jewish state at peace with its neighbors."

Analysts said Bush, despite pressure from religious conservatives and other pro-Israel groups, was sending a tough love message

to the Israeli prime minister, Ariel Sharon.

"It sounds like he was trying to send a message both to Sharon and to Arab leaders that if this is going to work, everyone is going to have to do their share and not just complain to Washington," said David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said late on Friday that Bush and Sharon would meet at the White House on May 20 to discuss "efforts to move ahead toward a peace settlement."

As an inducement for Arab leaders to cooperate, Bush held out the promise of increased US and Middle Eastern trade, which he called "the engine of economic development."

But Bush's vision of a US-Middle East free-trade area -- opening markets to reciprocal trade and investment -- could take up to 10 years to realize.

US forces will stay as long as necessary in Iraq: Rumsfeld

AFP, Washington

US forces will stay in Iraq as long as is necessary to establish a secure environment, even if it takes longer than the year sought by US diplomats from the UN Security Council, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Friday.

A draft UN Security Council resolution being pushed by the United States would give US-led forces authority to run Iraq for at least a year, and longer if necessary unless the Security Council decides otherwise.

Rumsfeld said the initial year was "probably just a review period, because anyone who thinks they know how long it's going to take is fooling themselves. It's not knowable."

The United States "is prepared to keep any number of troops that are appropriate and necessary in

Iraq for as long as it takes to create a secure and permissive environment," he said.

At a news conference with General Tommy Franks, the commander of US forces in Iraq, Rumsfeld said conditions in Iraq were steadily improving but he cautioned that people had to be realistic about how long it will take to bring Iraqi life back to normal after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

"I think that the reality is, that it is a very difficult transition from despotism and repression into a freer system," he said. "It's untidy. There'll be fits and starts, and a couple of steps forward and a step back. There'll be bumps along the way."

Franks said that while "decisive combat operations" were over in Iraq, pockets of resistance and instability remained.



A woman at the Iraqi Ministry of Justice shows off the twenty US dollars she received as a one-time emergency payment given to all employees at the Baghdad Justice headquarters on Saturday. The institution received from the new US temporary administrators 50,600 US dollars to be distributed among employees at four different points of the city plus another 20,000 US Dollars as start-up funds, under the plan to aid Iraq rebuild its social mainframe.

3 killed in US helicopter crash in Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

A US Army UH-60 Black Hawk crashed into the Tigris River near the Iraqi city of Samarra on Friday, with three crew members killed and another hurt, defense officials said.

The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said they did not have word of hostile fire bringing down the helicopter, saying it appeared to have struck power lines before going down in the river. The officials said the incident was being investigated.

The Black Hawk is the Army's front-line utility helicopter used for missions including air assault and medical evacuation.

Samarra is about 62 miles north of Baghdad.



French President Jacques Chirac, Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder shake hands on Friday in the southwestern Polish town of Wroclaw for a summit meeting taking place within the framework of the Weimar Triangle set up as a forum for trilateral dialogue in 1991, the year after German unification.

At 10,000 feet the door of plane flipped open

THE GUARDIAN, Nairobi

More than 120 people were reported to have been sucked to their deaths in an extraordinary incident when the giant back door of a Russian-built transport aircraft flipped open as it flew 10,000 feet over the Democratic Republic of Congo late on Thursday. Forty-five minutes after takeoff from the capital, Kinshasa, the plane's door slid open, catapulting bodies and baggage from its cavernous interior, according to one of the few surviving passengers.

"I think there were about 200 people on board, soldiers and their families, women and children," said Prudent Mukalayi, a soldier recovering at Kinshasa's main hospital.

"I was asleep, and then I heard people screaming. When I woke up the pilot told everyone to get to the front of the plane and there were

about 40 of us, but people kept dying ... there were only about 20 survivors," said Mr Mukalayi, who said he survived having wedged himself behind a packing case before falling asleep.

Others in Kinshasa spoke of only 13 survivors - nine passengers and the plane's four Russian crew. They were all in Kinshasa's main hospital yesterday, being treated for minor injuries and psychological trauma.

"They were traumatised and spoke of their baggage flying everywhere," said Kabamba Mbwebwe, head of the hospital's emergency ward.

The Ilyushin 76 cargo plane had been chartered by Congo's government to fly police officers and family members from Kinshasa to the second city of Lubumbashi, according to airport officials in Kinshasa.

Baghdad residents blast 'treason' of Arab world

AFP, Baghdad

Baghdad residents are venting their anger at the "treason" and indifference shown by Arab states, accusing some countries of sharing responsibility for the looting that followed the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime a month ago.

"It was the Kuwaitis and no one else," said one Iraqi blaming his country's neighbours for the fires that raged in numerous ministries and public buildings in Baghdad after the regime's fall on April 9.

"The looting was the work of the Iraqis, all the criminals Saddam freed," said Rahim al-Dulaymi in reference to the common-law prisoners released by Saddam in October ahead of a presidential vote.

"But the Iraqis would never have set fire to the ministries. They

know that these buildings are important," Dulaymi said.

"It's a plot. The traitors sold Iraq as they sold Lebanon and Palestine."

Ali Nayef added that he saw with his own eyes Kuwaitis getting out of an American tank and setting fire to buildings in the Al-Bayaa district of southwest Baghdad.

"The Kuwaitis set fires alight out of pure vengeance because of the (1991) Gulf War," said another Iraqi working as a UN staffer in reference to the conflict that ended Iraq's seven-month occupation of Kuwait.

Anthony Healy, media coordinator for US Army's Third Infantry Division, categorically denied the accusations.

"If they had done it, we would have caught them," Healy told AFP.

"I haven't heard of a single Kuwaiti captured."

Jordanians also received a tongue lashing from the Iraqis on the street. "They took part in the destruction of Iraq. They only sought to look after their own interests," one electricity department worker said.

"But they will pay for it. They will no longer have oil," he said.

Before the war, Iraq supplied Jordan annually with 5.5 million tonnes of crude oil and by-products, half for free and half at preferential rates.

"Jordan's position is bad because the country refuses (to entertain) the emergence of an Islamic state in Iraq," Mohammed Abbas said to the nodding of approval from other Baghdadis sat in the shade of a poplar tree.