

Bush seeks solid Atlantic front against terror

'Evil' must be resisted: US president

REUTERS, Krakow, Poland

President Bush said on Saturday that the United States was still committed to a strong Atlantic alliance, in comments seeking to rebuild ties with Europe after bitter divisions over the Iraq war.

In a keynote speech in Poland, Bush also said commitments by new Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas to oppose attacks on Israelis were a "hopeful sign" for peace in the Middle East.

"The United States is committed to a strong Atlantic alliance, to ensure our security, to advance human freedom and to keep peace in the world," Bush said in Krakow.

"This is no time to stir up divisions in a great alliance," he said, calling for global cooperation against "terrorism."

on his week-long trip to Europe and the Middle East, thanking Poles for their support in the war to overthrow Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

He will seek to build bridges with France and Germany, dismissed by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld as "old Europe," and with Russia at talks in St Petersburg later on Saturday, followed by a Group of Eight summit in the French town of Evian.

"As the Atlantic alliance has expanded it has also been tested... Each nation has faced difficult decisions about the use of military force to keep the peace. We have seen unity and common purpose. We have also seen debate: some of it healthy, some it divisive," Bush added in Krakow.

Bush, trying to end violence by meeting the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers in Jordan next week, said he saw a hopeful sign that his vision on the Middle East can come true.

"Today in the Middle East the emergence of a new Palestinian leadership, which has condemned terror, is a hopeful sign that the parties can agree to two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security," he said.

"The work ahead will require difficult decisions... For peace to prevail all leaders must fight terrorism."

"I will do all that I can to help the parties reach an agreement and then to see that that agreement is enforced."

Earlier in the day, a grim-faced Bush toured the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camps, pausing at the ruins of a Nazi crematorium to make his case to the people of Europe.

"Mankind must come together to fight such dark impulses," he said at the sprawling complex where German invaders committed genocide during World War II with assembly-line efficiency.

Meanwhile, President Bush toured the Nazi death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau on Saturday, stating his case for standing up to "evil" dictators.

Pausing before the brick ruins of a crematorium, Bush said Hitler's gas chambers were a "reminder of the power of evil and the need for people to resist evil."

"This is also a strong reminder that the civilized world must never forget what took place on this site," he said.



US Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz is projected on a screen as he speaks during the first plenary session of 2nd IISS Asia Security Conference in Singapore on Saturday. There is no "short-term" solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis, Wolfowitz said, as he called on all Asian nations to form a united front against Pyongyang.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

The sun is largely covered by the moon during an annular eclipse over Noordpolderzijl in Groningen, The Netherlands during sunrise on Saturday. A total eclipse could only be witnessed from Iceland. The next full solar eclipse would be visible from Iceland after 45 years.

Russia-EU summit opens in Saint Petersburg

AFP, St. Petersburg

The first summit between Russia and the European Union since the war in Iraq opened Saturday in Saint Petersburg.

The summit, attended by 14 of the 15 current EU leaders and hosted by Russian President Vladimir Putin, was also marked by the presence of leaders from 10 new EU membership hopefuls from central and eastern Europe.

"We are glad to see everyone, but I would especially like to thank the prime minister of Luxembourg," Putin said in opening remarks.

"If you remember, it was his idea to meet like this," Putin said in reference to the 10 new EU member states who were attending talks held in the Kremlin chief's native city amid its tercentenary anniversary celebrations.

"It was an unusual idea to meet in this expanded form," said Putin.

The meeting was taking place in the grand Konstantinovsky Palace, once a tsarist mansion, which the Russian government reconstructed at great expense so that Putin can stage summits in Saint Petersburg,

his native city.

"If you remember, this place was, basically, a dump," Putin said of the palace. "Even the roof once caved in."

Putin then appeared to surprise his guests by showing a brief film -- complete with space age music -- on the reconstruction of the palace.

As the camera covering the event panned over the visiting heads of state, some scratched their heads and others cupped their chins in the palm, looking alternatively bemused and bored.

The Russian leader then suggested -- and got agreement from his guests -- that all the proceedings of the summit be broadcast direct to journalists in the media centre.

"Bearing in mind the interest hundreds of journalists will have in what the heads of state have to say, I propose that the transmission continues. No objections? Agreed then," Putin said.

He said the broadcast of the summit would, in normal circumstances, have ended after the statement following his own, by EU President Romano Prodi.

Abbas confident of halting attacks on Israel

Israelis, Palestinians drafting joint statement

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian premier Mahmoud Abbas said he believes he can convince all militant groups to agree within three weeks to halt anti-Israeli attacks, as yet another radical fell to Israeli gunfire Saturday.

That optimistic forecast, only days ahead of a peace summit with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and US President George W. Bush, came despite the headline Islamic group Hamas vowing to continue its attacks as long as Israel fails to make substantial concessions.

Two summits slated for next week are part of efforts to end 32 months of Palestinian-Israeli bloodshed with the so-called roadmap for peace, which calls for both an end to violence and the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005.

The first will be hosted Tuesday by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh and will bring together Bush and a number of Arab leaders.

On Wednesday, King Abdullah II will host Bush, Abbas and Sharon in the Jordanian coastal resort of Aqaba.

"After the two summits... we will continue the negotiations with the Palestinian organizations and within

two or three weeks maximum, we will succeed in having a universal agreement which we can count on," Abbas said in an interview with Israeli public television Friday night.

"I am an optimist: we will achieve an agreement on a halt in the violence," he said.

Abbas also said the Palestinian security services would be ready in about the same amount of time to take responsibility for certain areas of the Gaza Strip and West Bank where Israeli troops have taken control.

"We're talking about 'Gaza First,' and certain cities in the West Bank. We will take responsibility for the security (in these areas) in two to three weeks," he said.

Abbas had met with Sharon late Thursday in Jerusalem office for the second time in two weeks to discuss kickstarting the roadmap.

In line with the plan's call for Israeli troops to withdraw to positions they held before the uprising broke out, Sharon agreed to a phased handover of security control in Gaza and West Bank towns.

In return, Sharon has demanded Abbas move to halt the violence, including "dismantling terror organizations, confiscation of illegal weapons and the ending of incitement."

If the Palestinians cracked down on their radical groups, Sharon vowed he would begin political negotiations on the establishment of a Palestinian state.

In his interview, Abbas said: "I believe that both parties understand that the only way to peace is negotiation. The other means don't help."

He added that he believed the Palestinian territories needed "one sole authority and one sole legal armed force."

The comment was probably aimed at Hamas, which warned Friday it would only stop its suicide attacks if Israel halts all "aggression" against the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, Israelis and Palestinians will craft a joint statement Saturday to be released at the close of next week's three-way summit of US, Israeli and Palestinian leaders, Palestinian sources said.

The sides agreed to draft the statement at the Thursday night meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his Palestinian counterpart, Mahmud Abbas.

Powell, Straw voiced doubt over Iraqi WMD evidence

AFP, London

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and US Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed doubts in private over public claims they were making about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to war, the Guardian said Saturday in a report denied by the Foreign Office.

The left-wing British daily said the two men voiced concerns about intelligence on Iraqi weapons during a private meeting in New York.

The encounter came shortly before a key UN Security Council meeting on February 5, when Powell presented what he claimed was clear evidence that Iraq was concealing banned weapons, the Guardian said.

Its story was based on information from a unnamed diplomatic source, who the paper said had read a transcript of the conversation between Straw and Powell.

The transcript recorded Straw voicing concern that assertions being made by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George W. Bush about Saddam Hussein's arsenals could not be proved.

The document quoted Powell as allegedly saying he was "apprehensive" about intelligence assessments containing circumstantial evidence, and telling Straw he hoped the facts, when they came out, would not "explode in their faces".

The Guardian, which opposed

the US-led war against Iraq, said that the transcript appeared to have been leaked by diplomats who were supportive of the use of force against Baghdad at the time, but now feel they were lied to about its justification.

But the Foreign Office dismissed the Guardian report as "simply untrue" and insisted that "no such meeting took place" between Powell and Straw.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Colin Powell was under persistent pressure from the Pentagon and White House to include questionable intelligence in his report on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction he delivered at the United Nations last February, a US weekly reported Friday.

US uncovers Baath sleeper cell in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

American military police raided the new Iraqi police academy Saturday and detained 15 senior officers holding a secret meeting of Saddam Hussein's Baath party, the US policing supremo Bernard Kerik said.

"Fourteen people were arrested for taking part in an illegal activity and one for resisting arrest," said the former New York police commissioner.

Those held included the dean of the academy, Major General Akram Abdul Razak, five brigadier generals, three colonels and a lieutenant colonel.

Kerik said the raid on the meeting had followed a tip-off to his

office and was greeted with celebration by some 100 to 150 ordinary policemen gathered outside.

He blamed intimidation by the Baath conspirators for the failure to uncover the underground sleeper cell sooner despite the tough crackdown on the Baath party it launched earlier this month.

"There was huge applause by police officers. I think they knew this was going on but were afraid to come forward," he said.

The head of the US-led administration in Iraq, Paul Bremer, set up Monday the Iraq De-Baathification Council to advise on his May 16 decision to bar former middle- and high-ranking Baathists from public service.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators display placards during a protest march for the cancellation of third world debt in Berlin on Friday. Some 5,000 protesters took part in the march, which took place on the sidelines of Germany's historical Ecumenical Church Day meeting.

16 Moro rebels killed in Philippines

AFP, Cotabato

At least 16 Moro separatist rebels and seven government militiamen were killed in fierce clashes Saturday in the southern Philippines as troops ignored a truce offer and stepped up an anti-terrorist campaign.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) guerrillas ambushed a group of government militias near the town of Upi in Maguindanao province at dawn, killing seven of them, regional army chief Major General Generoso Senga said.

The rebels also fired rocket-propelled grenades into two detachments of the Marines, but there were no immediate reports of casualties.

The military immediately retaliated by launching air assaults against MILF positions in the area, leaving 12 of them dead, Senga said.

Four MILF rebels were also killed and six others captured when members of the army's 47th Infantry Battalion launched a preemptive raid against the guerrillas in nearby Datu Paglas town also in Maguindanao province.

The military strike was ordered after the rebels were seen massing nearby, possibly to sabotage a power pylon owned by the state-run National Power Corp., Senga said.