

International

Bush orders officials to keep war plans on schedule

Gorbachev has 36 hrs to persuade Iraq: Le Monde

WASHINGTON, Feb 19: President George Bush has received a peace proposal made by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to Iraq but has ordered US military officials to keep their war plans on schedule, a White House spokesman said on Monday night, reports Reuter.

President Bush appreciates having received a summary account from President Mikhail Gorbachev of his meeting with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, spokesman Marlín Fitzwater said in a statement.

"The Soviets have asked that we treat the substance of this account as confidential, thus we will not comment further on it," Fitzwater said.

"Our military campaign remains on schedule," he said.

Gorbachev, in an eleven-hour bid to avert major

ground war in the Gulf, has reportedly called for Baghdad's unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait but pledged to keep Iraq intact afterward. Kremlin officials said they expected a response by Iraq without delay.

Bush and other US officials went out of their way to down play expectations that a diplomatic breakthrough was in the making.

Bush and his national security experts met into the night on Monday assessing the plan, which has drawn to official response from Baghdad.

When Bush arrived at the White House, he turned aside any comment about the Soviet proposal, telling reporters, "We're going to talk about it right now."

In exchange for a total withdrawal from Kuwait, the Soviet offer reportedly promised that Moscow would

work to preserve Iraq's national borders, oppose punitive measures against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, and attempt to resolve the Palestinian problem and other regional issues.

A Paris report says: Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev has 24 to 36 hours to persuade Iraq to pull out of Kuwait, the Paris daily Le Monde quoted informed French sources as saying Monday, reports Reuter.

The newspaper quoted the sources as saying Gorbachev, who presented a peace plan to Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz on Monday had earlier sought 10 days from the US-led coalition to secure a peaceful Iraqi withdrawal and avert a land war.

Aziz headed back to Baghdad with the Soviet plan and Soviet officials said Gorbachev was expecting reply, without

delay. Le Monde said: "Gorbachev has 24 hours - 36 at the very most - to succeed in his mediation between Baghdad and Washington."

It quoted its sources as saying that the only chance to avoid a land war would be for Iraq to drop all conditions and make a significant withdrawal immediately after a ceasefire was agreed.

The ceasefire allowed would be 'very brief -- in the order of a few hours'.

Le Monde said the French government was not very optimistic about Baghdad accepting such conditions but there was no other possibility of ending the war.

Gorbachev and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl discussed the Soviet plan on Monday. The German newspaper Bild said it included four main points.

The Gorbachev Plan

LONDON, Feb 19: Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's peace plan in the Gulf war includes a demand for Iraq's unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait, but promises that Iraq will survive, a Soviet spokesman said on Monday, reports Reuter.

"The Soviet message to Iraq is that Iraq should leave unconditionally," Sergei Grigoryev, Deputy to Gorbachev's chief spokesman, told Britain's independent television news.

"The message is, you leave unconditionally but you know at least that if you leave you can survive and there will be no further interference in the internal affairs of Iraq," said Grigoryev, who is visiting Britain.

"I would not call it a personal message (to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein)," he added. "This man needs a kind of a plan to save his face and at this stage it may be time to tell him, maybe not but that his administration will survive."

Gorbachev presented Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz

with a plan to end the war during talks on Monday. The initiatives is seen by many as the last chance to avoid a devastating land battle, widely believed to be imminent.

Aziz arrived in Tehran on Monday night to brief leaders on the talks in Moscow, the Iranian News Agency IRNA said.

It said Aziz would meet President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani Tuesday.

Grigoryev said the plan outlined to Aziz was "more or less" reflected in a report by the German newspaper Bild, which said it included a Soviet promise to preserve Iraq's borders and government structure and to oppose any attempt to personally punish Saddam.

Quran-reading contest

Malaysia won't invite states involved in war

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 19: Malaysia will not invite Islamic countries involved in the Gulf war to participate in its annual Quran reading competition, press reports said, reports AFP.

Public Enterprise Minister Yusof Noor, who is also the Quran-reading committee Chairman, said the countries were Kuwait, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.

He said the committee felt that the war would disrupt preparations by the countries concerned in sending participants to the competitions held here from March 7 to 11.

Mr. Yusof said that the Malaysian cabinet had approved the decision.

Feroze Khan new Pak Air Force chief

ISLAMABAD, Feb 19: Air Marshal Farooq Feroze Khan was named chief of Pakistan's Air Force replacing Air Chief Marshal Hakimullah Khan, officials here said Sunday, reports AFP.

Air Chief Marshal Hakimullah Khan will retire on March 9 after completing his tenure of years as Air Force Chief of Staff, they said.

Born in Bombay, India, in 1939, the new chief is son of former Olympic hockey player Feroze Khan, his official biography said.

6 killed in Indian anti-tank explosion

NEW DELHI, Feb 19: Six game hunters died instantly when an anti-tank rocket they had picked up from a military firing range exploded, the Statement newspaper reported Monday, reports AFP.

The blast occurred Saturday when the hunters tried to smash open the rocket with rocks and strip it of copper and lead parts for sale to scrap dealers in Gujrat state, the Daily said.

Off the Record

And now Scud fried rice

BANGKOK - A Bangkok restaurateur says his latest dish, "Iraqi fried rice" shaped like a downed Scud missile, has become a big hit with customers, especially American tourists, reports AP.

The Saigon Bakery, which specializes in Vietnamese cuisine, has been offering the 60-baht (2.40-US dollar) dish since the Gulf War started last month.

Bad taste? Certainly not, said restaurateur Vu Viet Quoc: "It's great - try some."

"It was just a joke and I didn't plan to keep it long. But it's doing very well," he said Monday. "First people didn't want to eat it, but now everybody wants to try it, especially the Americans."

The recipe is simple: Just stir-fry sliced fruit, carrots, oregano and bacon, then add rice and a scuttle fish to represent a broken-up Scud.

Quoc said customers preferred the Iraqi fried rice to American fried rice, a Bangkok favorite since the Vietnam War, when thousands of US soldiers stopped over for rest and recreation. American fried rice contains ham, fried eggs, chicken and a Frankfurter.

He said no Iraqi customer had yet tried his new concoction, which he planned to keep serving until the war ends, "may be in six months."

Wool to soak Gulf oil spill

WELLINGTON - Special spheres of New Zealand wool which can effectively soak up 40 times their own weight in oil will be used in the cleanup of oil spilled in the Gulf, officials said Friday, reports AP.

The manufacturer, Donaghys Textiles Ltd., said tests proved successful on samples encased in two 10-foot (3-meter) mesh booms sent to Saudi Arabia.

Donaghys marketing manager Hugh Ross said the company was asked Thursday to immediately send 60 more booms.

The Olayan Trading Co. in Saudi Arabia, which is coordinating the entire cleanup, is gearing up to buy bulk shipments and will send its own cargo plane to collect 400 or 500 at a time until shipping routes reopen, Ross said.

Donaghys had just started making oil containment booms and oil absorption booms from wool balls when the war began last month.

Ross said he expects the cleanup to take up to five years.

The booms exploit wool's natural ability to attract grease. Researchers say wool has the capacity to absorb up 40 times its own weight in viscous oils.

Oil spill-hit birds heading for India

NEW DELHI - Migratory birds affected by oil spills in the Gulf are likely to head for Indian shores this summer instead of winging long distances to Siberia or Southern African, reports Reuter.

Cranes are likely to avoid the war-hit Middle East "flyway" and detour to India's Kutch region, ornithologists told reporters in Bombay Sunday.

Greater black-backed gulls and herring gulls from the Makaran coast of Iran and Pakistan are also expected to reach Bombay soon. Press reports quoted an expert at Bombay's Natural History Society as saying:

"The gulls will make it to India even if they were marginally affected by the oil slick," SA Hussain said, but warned that it was already too late to save a majority of the birds presently in the spill zone.

He warned that if the Gulf war dragged into March, when active migration commences, birds flying through Iraq, Iran and Israel towards Siberia and South Africa via China will "Run into trouble".

Teams of Indian bird-watchers have stationed themselves in the main roosting zones in India's south and east to receive the incoming birds, the expert said, adding that some flamingoes have already arrived from Iran's Lake Rezai at Kutch western state of Gujrat of the Arabian Sea.

Flamingo migrations to Indian lakes have shrunk over the years because of hunting in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the past Iran-Iraq war.

Phone in the sky

CHICAGO - In September 1987, Pope John Paul picked up the telephone in his airliner above the United States and became the first world leader to use a pay phone in the sky for a radio broadcast speech, reports Reuter.

Now the airborne is gaining increasing popularity among ordinary business passengers.

Since the first in-flight pay phones installed in 1984, more than 9.4 million calls have been placed abroad commercial jetliners. Travellers on 16 airlines based in North America can phone home from more than 1,400 commercial jets.

Competition for customers in especially fierce among airlines these days, and the pay phone service seems on its way to becoming standard, industry officials say.

A former journalist in quest of Gulf peace Primakov knows Saddam for the last 25 years

MOSCOW, Feb 19: As the Persian Gulf totters on the brink of another devastating war following Iraq's annexation of Kuwait the world is watching in anguish for any signs that a peaceful solution to the crisis might yet be possible, reports IAN.

These signs have not been many though, and the sabre-rattling in the region has so far drowned out the voices of diplomats. But peace, efforts have nevertheless persisted and unexpectedly for many have centred around the Soviet shuttle diplomacy conducted since by Presidential Envoy Yevgeny Primakov.

World reactions to Mr. Primakov's October earlier two visits to Iraq and other Arab countries during October have been mixed, ranging from enthusiastic approval to profound scepticism. However, it would certainly be wrong to brush them off as non-events, as the western media has hastened to do.



MOSCOW— President Mikhail Gorbachev's special envoy Primakov, who, through his shuttle diplomacy, could successfully bring a pause in Allied air raids on Iraq. He was instrumental in formulating Gorbachev Plan following his frequent meetings with President Saddam Hossain with go-ahead from President George Bush.

With its history of special relations with Iraq on the one hand, and the new atmosphere of co-operation with the West on the other, the Soviet Union has been placed in a unique position to act as a mediator between Baghdad and the world community. And Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev appears determined to make the most of this advantage with his choice of envoy for this delicate mission.

For one thing, the 61-year-old Soviet academic Yevgeny Primakov has personally known Iraqi President Saddam Hussein for about 25 years, since he was Pravda's correspondent in the Middle East in 1965-1970 and helped mediate between the Iraqi leaders and Kurdish rebels. Latter on, working at Research Institutes in Moscow, he also carried out some semi-official diplomatic missions in Baghdad, in particular during the crisis caused by Iraq's nationalisation of the oil industry and during its war with Iran.

Furthermore, he has no connections with the Soviet Foreign Ministry which cannot boast of any particular breakthroughs in the Middle East in recent years.

As a member of the close Presidential council, whose role has been steadily growing since its establishment earlier

this year, Mr. Primakov has high enough official status to emphasise the importance the Soviet President attaches to this mission.

Last but not least, Mr. Primakov is a recognised authority on the Middle East. For eight years he headed the Moscow Institute for Oriental Studies and has published several books on the problems of the region.

In 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to the Kremlin, Mr. Primakov took over as Director of the more prestigious Moscow Institute of World Economy and International Relations and helped shape up the Soviet foreign policy of new thinking. He was closely associated with the Soviet-American disarmament talks and the Soviet leader's historic summits in Washington, Peking and New Delhi.

His political career reached its high point in 1989, when he was elected Chairman of the House of the Union, one of the two Chambers of Soviet Parliament, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.

However, less than a year later, in March 1990, he gave up the post to join the newly formed Presidential Council. His resignation was reportedly caused by some frictions with the House, but this does not necessarily indicate a lack of diplomatic skills on his part. As the example of Mikhail Gorbachev shows, sometimes it is easier for Soviet leaders to common language with their foreign partners than with fellow politicians at home.

As a House Speaker, Mr. Primakov developed important contacts with world leaders, including President Bush. This has clearly been an advantage during his current shuttle diplomacy, which has taken him both to Arab and Western capitals. Mr. Primakov's Middle East mission appears to be part of a co-ordinated Soviet-American strategy, with the Americans playing the role of an angry policeman ready to club down a defiant lawbreaker and the Soviets acting the part of a patient lawyer persuading the culprit to comply and avoid being beaten up.

BRIEFLY

Tariq Aziz in Tehran: Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz arrived in Tehran on Monday night to brief leaders on his Gulf peace talks in Moscow, the Iranian News Agency IRNA said, reports Reuter.

IRNA said Aziz would meet President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani Tuesday. The Iranian leader said earlier there were bright prospects of ending the war following an Iraqi reply to his peace proposals.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev presented Aziz with a plan to end the Gulf war during talks on Monday. The initiative is the last chance to avoid a devastating land battle, widely seen as imminent.

Iran to host 1 lakh expatriates: Iran is ready to host 100,000 expatriates fleeing neighbouring Iraq but should be ready for a million or more refugees if Iraqis also join the exodus, an interior ministry official said on Monday, reports Reuter.

Mohammad Hussein in Nicosia said camps in five border provinces were prepared to receive this number under arrangements with the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees.

The Iranian News Agency IRNA says 8,441 foreigners have crossed into Iran since the Gulf war began on January 17.

Self immolation protesting war: A young man burned himself to death in the centre of this university town on Monday in an apparent protest against war, police in Amherst said, reports Reuter.

The man, identified only as apparently white and in his 20s, appeared on the Amherst town common carrying a sign which read "peace" and doused himself with liquid, police said.

The man then lit a match which went out and lit another which resulted in a fireball engulfing him in flames. Amherst police spokesman Dan O'brian said, quoting eyewitnesses.

OPEC may not change quota: OPEC is unlikely to reintroduce oil output quotas suspended after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait last August unless the Gulf war is over when oil ministers meet in Vienna next month Gulf Arab OPEC delegates in London said on Monday, reports Reuter.

Even if oil-producing states involved in the conflict suffer a further drop in world prices, they are unlikely to review their policies at the Vienna meeting.

There are five OPEC members involved in the war. It is a bigger thing for them than one or two dollars off the oil price, said one delegate. "I doubt if we are going to get an agreement while the war is going on."

Palestinian shot dead: An Israeli settler shot dead a Palestinian teenager Monday at his home near Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank, Palestinian sources in Jerusalem said, reports AFP.

The leaders of the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza strip called meanwhile for an escalation in the intifada as part of the Gulf war.

Palestinian sources said a settler armed with a gun entered the home of the Muslim family in the village of Beit Sakhour and fatally wounded the son, 15-year-old-Salam Jallah. He died two hours later in hospital.

Gulf war a testing ground: The Gulf war has provided the military of the US-led coalition with a testing ground for their latest weaponry and a showcase for future arms sales, reports AFP from Paris.

The armaments on show in the first month of the war, the conflict's air phase, have notably been aircraft, helicopters and missiles, most of which were originally designed for use in the European theatre.

Television viewers worldwide have watched the performance of US Patriot missiles zipping across the night sky to smash Iraqi-fired Scud missiles, while aircraft-mounted cameras give the impression of a video game as high-technology weapons home in on their targets.

Gulf tides favourable for Allied offensive

WASHINGTON, Feb 19: The Gulf tides are right for an amphibious landing. The next few nights are moonless — well-suited to heighten the Allied advantage over Iraq in high-tech night-fighting gear, reports Reuter.

US and Allied forces are said to be as ready as they ever will be to launch what could be the largest land battle since World War Two.

And some experts say they could lose their edge if the offensive were delayed for a week or more because favourable weather will have eroded by then.

But Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev added a new twist on Monday that could affect whether and when the troops are ordered into action — an element that may be irksome to President George Bush.

With US-led forces poised to attack Iraqi troops in Kuwait, Gorbachev gave new proposals to Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz to head off the looming ground war. Details were not immediately disclosed, but a Soviet

Spokesman said Moscow expected a "reply without delay."

The White House quickly made clear on Monday that its hopes for forcing Iraq from Kuwait rested on war — and that it was doubtful the Soviet Peace Plan would avert the ground phase.

"All of our hopes at this point are on the conflict — in the air and on the ground in terms of pushing Iraq out of Kuwait," spokesman Marlín Fitzwater said in Kennebunkport, Maine, where Bush was spending a holiday weekend.

Asked whether the timing of a land offensive might be delayed to see where the Soviet Plan leads, Fitzwater said: "I wouldn't make any assumptions."

The Gorbachev proposal left Bush with a series of delicate problems. One of these is avoiding an appearance of rushing into a potentially bloody battle when a diplomatic option was available.

Against this and other considerations, including concern for Soviet support, Bush must balance a host of military and

strategic considerations.

One is that the US and Allied troops, who have been streaming north towards the Saudi-Kuwait border in recent days, could be jarred and left off balance by the delay.

Donald Rumsfeld, US Defence Secretary from 1975 to 1977, said it was very difficult to maintain a stage of top readiness indefinitely.

"You can lean forward in the trench only so long, and at some point you have either have to go forward or ease back somewhat," he said in an interview on Cable News Network.

PLO won't side with Iraq in war

SAO PAULO (Brazil), Feb 19: Palestine Liberation Organisation leader Yasser Arafat has ruled out the prospect of the PLO fighting side by side with Iraq against the US-led coalition, reports Reuter.

In an interview published by the newspaper Folha De Sao Paulo, Arafat was asked whether the PLO would participate in the land battle widely expected to start soon against the troops of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

"We have no troops in the region and Saddam does not need our help," said Arafat, who predicted a long, bloody battle.

"Remember this, the battle will be very long and the number of victims will be very high. I repeat my appeal to the European leaders and especially to US President George Bush. Enough, we have to put an end to this insane war, to interrupt the massacre and the bloodbath," he said.

Folha De Sao Paulo said it interviewed Arafat in the Jordanian capital Amman on Sunday.

Bush also may want the land battle sooner rather than later to avoid an outcome that might leave President Saddam Hussein in power, with the potential to rebuild his forces in a matter of years.

Though Saddam's ouster is not one of Bush's paramount declared goals, the administration's strategy would not be entirely fulfilled if he managed to stay on, US officials and lawmakers have acknowledged.

"I would say that there is a very strong feeling that Saddam Hussein's leadership is going to make it very, very difficult to negotiate or to see safety in the Middle East following this war," said Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, a member of the Foreign Relations committee.

Allied commanders said last Friday they were close to a key objective, destruction of half of Saddam's front-line armour. That would pave the way for Allied battle plans emphasising speed, maneuvering ability and high-technology weapons.



SAMAWA (Iraq) —Inhabitants of Samawa, 250 kilometres south of Baghdad, use small boats February 17 to cross the Euphrates river as three bridges (one of them in background) were smashed in Allied air raids. —AFP/UNB photo