

Most Americans support attack

WASHINGTON, Dec 17: Most Americans support US and British air strikes against Iraq and reject speculation that the action was intended to delay a vote by the House of Representatives on whether to impeach President Bill Clinton, according to a poll by Reuters.

A CNN poll of 543 Americans late on Wednesday after Washington and London launched a round of air strikes showed strong support for the new get-tough stance against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Seventy-four per cent supported the US military action, while 13 per cent were opposed.

Thirty per cent viewed the military strikes as an attempt to divert attention from a vote originally scheduled today on whether to impeach Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky affair, while 76 per cent were confident about Clinton's ability to handle the situation in Iraq.

A separate poll of 510 adults taken by ABC News showed similar results, with 73 per cent supporting military action against Iraq, and 62 per cent rejecting the notion that Clinton ordered the strikes to delay the impeachment vote.

Americans' views on impeachment remained essentially unchanged with some 58 per cent opposed and 40 per cent supporting an impeachment vote by the house, the ABC poll showed.

US-British air strikes on Iraq

Staunch allies offer support, others condemnation

LONDON, Dec 17: Staunch allies such as Germany and Canada offered quick support for Wednesday's US-British attack on Iraq, while Russia and China angrily condemned the airstrikes and France said it deplored "the grave human consequences that they could have for the Iraqi population," report agencies.

The news broke too late for the first editions of most British papers, but the country's largest-selling tabloid, The Sun, led its front page with the headline "BLITZED."

"Saddam must be crushed. Blitz about time too," the paper declared in a Thursday editorial. But about 30 demonstrators disagreed, yelling "kill Tony Blair!" outside the prime minister's Downing Street residence.

In Moscow, President Boris Yeltsin denounced the United States and Britain on Thursday for attacking Iraq and demanded an immediate end to the campaign, warning it could shatter regional security.

"Russia demands an immediate end to military action, to show common sense and restraint and not to allow further escalation of the conflict which could result in the most dramatic consequences not only

for the Iraqi settlement but for the stability of the entire region," Yeltsin said in a statement.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, speaking in Madrid, Spain, blasted the use of force as "a violation of the United Nations charter."

China's UN Ambassador Qin Huasun was visibly angry when he emerged from Security Council session Wednesday evening, learning of the attack only after the fact.

There is absolutely no excuse or pretext to use force against Iraq," he said.

The German government noted, however, that the Iraqi leadership "had been warned" the international community would have to act if it failed to cooperate fully with UN weapons inspectors.

"The federal government regrets that, in the face of the attitude of the Iraqi leadership, it had to come now to the use of military measures," its statement said.

And in France added that it also "regrets that Iraqi leaders were unable to show proof of the spirit of complete cooperation" demanded by the February 23 memorandum of understanding signed by Secretary General Kofi Annan and Iraq's Tariq Aziz.

Iran condemned the US strikes as "unacceptable" and called for United Nations action to halt the operations. Tehran Radio said, Iran also urged Baghdad to cooperate with the United Nations to implement Security Council resolutions, it said.

"Such unilateral attacks against Iraq will worsen the suffering of the Iraqi people and increase instability in the region," the radio quoted Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi as saying.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was non-committal, saying, "Israel is outside the dispute, and in any case will take care of defending itself if the need arises."

India said the air strikes on Iraq undermined the authority of the UN Security Council and called for an immediate halt to military action.

"This attack raises serious question regarding the functioning of the collective and consultative procedures of the UN Security Council," Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said in a statement to parliament.

Calling the United States "international terrorists" for its attack on Iraq, Islamic

Pakistan's right-wing religious groups on Thursday vowed to show their anger in demonstrations outside mosques throughout the country on Friday.

Several senators in Pakistan's Upper House of Parliament added their voice to the chorus of condemnation.

The government of Pakistan, however, has been silent, although one senator belonging to the ruling Pakistan Muslim League also condemned the attack.

Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiromu Nonaka backed the United States and Britain, saying, "We strongly demand that Iraq immediately and unconditionally implement the UN Security Council's resolutions."

While Afghanistan's Taliban rulers on Thursday condemned the attack, most Afghans said they felt only pity for the Iraqis "who are suffering," while Saddam Hussein is safe in some basement.

The hardline Taliban rulers issued a statement calling the attack on Iraq an insult to Islam.

While Indonesia, the world's most populous Islamic nation, called on the United States and Iraq to demonstrate restraint. "We call on the conflicting

parties to settle their problem peacefully and through diplomatic ways," said acting Foreign Ministry spokesman Imron Kotan.

Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy said his government supported the airstrikes, adding that Canada had not been asked to contribute militarily.

"Saddam Hussein has brought this crisis on himself," Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien said.

Australia, New Zealand, Spain and Norway gave their support to the air attacks, putting the blame squarely on Iraq.

Key southeast Asian governments expressed concern over the air attack but urged Baghdad to comply with UN Security Council resolutions in order to resolve the crisis.

"It's rather unfortunate that this happened. I hope we can avoid the loss of innocent lives," Philippine President Joseph Estrada told journalists after attending the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, which ended Wednesday in the Vietnamese capital Hanoi.

"This is an unfortunate turn of events," Singapore Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar said in a

statement issued in Hanoi.

"Over the last year Singapore has consistently urged the Iraqi government to comply with the relevant UNSC resolutions and to fully cooperate with UNSCOM."

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said he was opposed to the US led bombing of Iraq.

"We're against it, we do not think they should use force," Mahathir said in Hanoi.

Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan said "we are very concerned" about developments in Iraq.

"We hope that the conflict would be resolved as soon as possible. The best resolution is to give the Secretary-General of the United Nations another chance to try to mediate the conflict," he said.

Victims of United States raids on Cambodia in the 1970s said they empathised with Iraq, as officials voiced regret over the use of violence without UN Security Council approval.

"We regret they had to use violence bypassing the UNSC, even though we condemn Iraq's non-compliance with weapons inspections," said Secretary of State for Information Khieu Kanharith.

Britain's top court debating Pinochet's fate for second time

LONDON, Dec 17: For the second time in a month, Britain's highest court is debating the fate of Gen Augusto Pinochet, reports AP.

His return to the court comes because one of the judges who denied the former Chilean dictator immunity from arrest is the director of the fundraising arm of Amnesty International.

A five-judge tribunal in the House of Lords may announce a decision Thursday.

If Pinochet wins this round, the judges would order a new hearing Jan. 10 on the key question of whether as a former head of state he has immunity from arrest. This would mark a setback in Spain's efforts to extradite the 83-year-old general to face charges of murder and torture.

If the Lords reject the latest move by Pinochet's lawyers, the extradition process would be back on a track — but it is a slow one anyway.

A final decision could take months, or longer. Pinochet, who was arrested Oct. 16 while recovering from back surgery, remains under police guard at a rented mansion in Wentworth.

Next month, the 83-year-old general is due to start fighting the Spanish extradition warrant at a London court.

BRIEFLY



A youth raises his arms on a burning car in a Toulouse suburb, southwestern France, during an overnight riot early Wednesday. Youths angered by the police killing of a 17-year-old, rioted for a third night, burning cars and throwing stones. Earlier, the policeman who shot and killed the teen during an arrest Sunday appeared before a judge to face possible manslaughter charges.

— AP/UNB photo

Navy gunboats sink LTTE boat: Sri Lankan naval gunboats sank a Tamil Tiger rebel boat during a confrontation in seas off the country's north, killing at least 15 guerrillas who were on board, navy officials said yesterday. Reuters reports from Colombo.

They said the rebel boat was detected and engaged by naval gunboats on patrol on Tuesday south of Delpi Island off the northern Jaffna peninsula. "The boat was destroyed and sunk, sailors had seen some 15 people on board, they were killed," said a senior navy official. There were no navy casualties.

Dissident Wang's trial closes: The trial of pro-democracy activist Wang Youcai closed yesterday but without result, officials said, AFP reports from Haghzhou, China.

"The hearing has been closed for the day but there is no result," an official with the Hangzhou Intermediate People's Court said but gave no further details. Wang, the founder of the fledgling opposition China Democracy Party (CDP), faces charges of subverting state power after he attempted to legally register the CDP during a visit to China by US President Bill Clinton in June.

Chechen rebels threaten Russia: Chechen Islamic militants accused of killing four foreigners threatened to launch attacks on Russia if authorities clamp down on their operations, a news report said Thursday. AP reports from Moscow.

Chechens President Aslan Maskhadov accused the group, Islamic Jamaats or Warriors of Islam, of beheading the foreigners after a rescue attempt went wrong last week. The group has denied any connection with the killings. In a statement made on Chechen television Wednesday night, group leaders threatened to attack Russian sites outside Chechnya if Maskhadov tries to fight them.

French anti-Israel writer jailed: Roger Garaudy, a 85-year-old author of "The Founding Myth of Israel" and some other works in which he attacked Israel, was sentenced to nine months in jail plus 160,000 francs (27,000 US dollars) in fines by an appeals court of Paris on Wednesday. Xinhua reports from Paris.

He was convicted of contesting crimes against humanity, racial defamation, and provocation of hatred by the 11th Chamber of the Appeals Court of Paris, which rejected an appeal by Garaudy against an earlier sentence by a lower court. Garaudy, a former member of the politburo of the French communist party but now converted to Islam. In "The Founding Myth of Israel" said the number of dead in the Holocaust was as claimed by Israel was exaggerated.

Serb security presence in Kosovo up: The Serb military and police presence appears to have increased on roads and in the cities of Kosovo, the State Department said Wednesday. AP reports from Washington.

Spokesman James P. Rubin said US monitors have also seen a pattern of combined military and police checkpoints and have raised this matter with police authorities. The deaths this week of dozens of Albanians and Serbs have shattered the Kosovo's fragile ceasefire.

Lebed may run for president: Former national security chief and regional governor Alexander Lebed said he would run for president of Russia in 2000 if he feels the country needs him, according to an interview published Wednesday. AP says from Moscow.

Lebed, who came in third in Russia's 1996 election, has said he would not run unless he solves the problems of the Siberian region of Krasnoyarsk, where he was elected governor in May.

Argentina, Chile sign border deal: The presidents of Argentina and Chile signed an accord on Wednesday ending the final border dispute between the two Andean countries. AP reports from Buenos Aires.

The agreement centres around carving up a lacer area known as the Southern Glaciers Field along the Andes Mountains, which divide the two countries. The plan still needs congressional approval in Argentina and Chile.

Army chief rejects LTTE's offer: New chief of Sri Lankan Army Lt Gen Sri Lanka Weerasooriya yesterday dismissed the recent unconditional peace talks offer by the LTTE chief V. Prabhakaran, reports PTI from Colombo.

Weerasooriya, 54, who took over from Lt Gen Rohan Daluwatte, said ultimately a political solution to the ethnic crisis was needed to end the 15-year-old war. He said the objective of the 1.20 lakh strong army was to eliminate the fighting capability of the LTTE in order to pave way for a political settlement.

What Baghdad experienced

BAGHDAD, Dec 17: Anti-aircraft guns opened fire over Baghdad shortly after midnight Thursday, and explosions were heard in the Iraqi capital. Orange tracers lit the sky as the guns let loose volley after volley of shots from rooftops, reports AP.

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein said US and British airstrikes hit several targets, and accused the two nations of cowardice for using long-range missiles instead of fighting face-to-face.

In a statement carried by the official Iraqi News Agency, Saddam urged Iraqis to "fight the enemies of God, enemies of the nation, enemies of humanity." He did not say how many targets were hit.

He said the attackers did not "come to meet you face to face" and depended "on a long technological arm, which is not a measure of bravery."

Iraqi anti-aircraft guns opened fire after air raid sirens broke the night's silence — and just before Washington and London announced airstrikes on military and security installations. The explosions continued into the pre-dawn hours, stopping briefly before the morning azaan calling Muslims to prayer wafted from the city's mosques.

The Information Ministry said it planned to take reporters to see the damage caused by one missile in the Karada neighbourhood.

Karada is across the Tigris river from the Old Presidential Complex in central Baghdad. It was not clear if the palace was damaged. Saddam's whereabouts also were not known.

Unlike during previous Western alliance attacks on Baghdad, there was no black-out. There were no immediate reports of casualties, and the streets of Baghdad were nearly empty.

State-run television did not mention the attack and instead continued to broadcast pictures of Saddam meeting Wednesday with ruling Baath Party officials.

Along with the anti-aircraft fire, at least two large blasts were heard, and foreign television transmissions showed a huge fiery glow on the horizon. Smoke could be seen trailing into the dark sky in the distance.

The Iraqi blasts violently shook the glass windows of the Information Ministry building near the centre of Baghdad where foreign reporters are based.

The anti-aircraft fire began at 12:49 am Thursday (21:49 GMT Wednesday). A barrage of

blasts lighted the sky several hours after the Clinton administration warned that it would make a military strike against Iraq at any time.

President Clinton ordered airstrikes on Iraq over a protracted impasse with Saddam over UN weapons inspections just minutes before the blasts began. Less than an hour later, Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that British had participated in the airstrikes.

An Iraqi official seemed resigned even before the attack began.

"We have done everything in our capacity," Iraq's UN Ambassador Nizar Hamdoun said at the United Nations.

Earlier in the day, long lines formed outside Baghdad gas stations and customers cursed Clinton for planning an attack before the holy Islamic month of Ramadan, which is expected to begin Sunday.

"It seems that Clinton ... wants to kill some people in a hurry out of respect for Ramadan," said Amin Jadir, a government worker.

The crisis unfolded quickly after chief inspector Richard Butler submitted a report Tuesday, accusing Iraq of obstructing their search for weapons of mass destruction. The monitors were pulled out of the country Wednesday.

In Baghdad, a special joint meeting of the decision-making Revolutionary Command Council and the ruling Baath Party issued a statement, saying Iraqis can "depend on God to knock the dreams out of ... (the) empty heads" of the United States and Britain.

The airstrikes are the first large-scale military action against Iraq since September 1996. Over two days, US ships and jets fired scores of cruise missiles at Iraqi anti-missile sites to punish the Iraqi military for venturing into the Kurdish "safe haven" in northern Iraq.

Until the chemical and biological weapons are destroyed, the United Nations will lift economic sanctions imposed on Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, which led to the Persian Gulf War.

Iraq says it has complied with every UN demand, and accuses Butler of prolonging the inspections at the behest of the United States.

On Tuesday, Butler gave a report to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in which he said Iraq's claim to be free of banned weapons "cannot be accepted without further verification." But verification is impossible as Iraq is obstructing the inspectors, he said.

Clinton's prospects growing dim

Impeachment vote postponed



Nearly 1,000 people participated in an anti-impeachment rally at the Federal Building in the Westwood section of Los Angeles Wednesday. Several celebrities, including Barbra Streisand, Jack Nicholson, Ted Danson and Mary Steenburgen, attended the event in support of President Clinton.

— AP/UNB photo

WASHINGTON, Dec 17: Despite strong cynicism about the timing of airstrikes against Iraq, House Republican leaders postponed a history-making impeachment vote against President Bill Clinton. They advised lawmakers to stay in town and stand by, reports AP.

"We're going to ask that all members, Republican and Democrat, remain available ... for further action possibly Friday, possibly Saturday, but within the near future," said incoming Speaker Bob Livingston, a Louisiana Republican.

Before Wednesday's decision to postpone, the president's prospects were growing increasingly dim as one Republican moderate after another declared support for impeachment. That outlook is not expected to change by a short delay.

"I would think the votes are pretty much in place," said Rep. Peter King, a New York Republican who favours censure over impeachment. "Right now it certainly looks like the president will be impeached."

Republicans intend to convene the House on Thursday and approve a resolution of support for military personnel. Livingston said Republicans decided "in the interest of sup-

port of our troops — the only thing that we need to do — pass a resolution of support for our troops."

Democrats rushed to defend Clinton. House Democratic leader Dick Gephardt suggested that the House of Representatives "not take up impeachment until the hostilities have ended. It shouldn't come up as long as our troops are in harm's way."

He also joined with Senate Democratic leader Tom Daschle in warning Saddam Hussein to "make no mistake that despite domestic political differences in the United States, the American people and Congress stand firmly behind the defence of our nation's vital interests."

Clinton, near the end of a televised address on the bombing, broached the subject himself. "Saddam Hussein and the other enemies of peace may have thought that the serious debate currently before the House of Representatives would distract Americans or weaken our resolve to face them down," the president said.

Livingston contended that Republicans "have left the issue of impeachment to the conscience of the men and women in the Congress," while the White House has waged a major lobbying campaign.

Habibie tells army

Anti-govt protests must be curbed

JAKARTA, Dec 17: Indonesia's president told the powerful military Thursday that anti-government protests must be curbed to prevent the sprawling Southeast Asian nation from breaking up.

"If the protests are not controlled it can lead to the disintegration of the nation," said President BJ Habibie at a graduation ceremony of new army officers.

Habibie, who has promised democratic reform after decades of authoritarian rule, said that freedom of expression that allows protests is now guaranteed under Indonesian law.

"But in carrying out these rights people must also respect other people's rights," he said.

Indonesia with a population of 202 million people is the world's fourth most populous country. It has more than 300 ethnic groups spread over about 17,000 islands.

For weeks, students have been holding street protests demanding that Habibie force the military out of politics and put his autocratic predecessor, ex-President Suharto, on trial for corruption.

The protesters and security forces have clashed on several occasions.

On Wednesday in Jakarta police fired tear gas and swung batons to disperse hundreds of protesters who had entered the grounds of the Defense Ministry, no far from Habibie's presidential palace.

On Nov. 13 security forces shot dead nine student protesters when thousands tried to march on the Parliament.

Student protests and deadly riots last May also forced Suharto to quit after 32 years in power.

Habibie has promised to open up the tightly controlled political system and to hold elections next year. But the students are not satisfied and stage demonstrations almost daily in Jakarta and other cities.

Anger at Habibie's seven-month-old government has been sharpened by a continuing economic crisis, which has resulted in soaring inflation, mass unemployment and rising poverty.

Spontaneous rioting and looting has hit some parts of the country.

Robot spacecraft on target for rendezvous with asteroid

WASHINGTON, Dec 17: A robot spacecraft is on target for a rendezvous with an asteroid and history's first orbit of a speeding space rock called Eros, mission scientists said today, reports AP.

Officials said the Near-Earth Asteroid Rendezvous spacecraft will begin a series of rocket firings on Jan. 10 that will aim the small craft directly at the asteroid.

"This will be the first time that we have ever put a spacecraft in orbit about a small body," said Robert T W Farquhar, a Johns Hopkins physicist and the mission manager for the undertaking.

The craft is to dip within 14 kilometers of Eros' surface during about a year of orbital operations.

Instruments aboard the spacecraft will determine the composition and mass of the 38-kilometer long brick-shaped asteroid.

Eventually, the craft may be brought to a near hover and perhaps even a touchdown on the dusty asteroid, Farquhar said.

Mission scientists said they are interested in learning the

composition and density of the asteroid as part of fundamental research that would be needed to defend the Earth against any potential collision with a space rock of destructive size.

Farquhar said it would be important to know how to operate on and near such a small body in the event that an asteroid aimed at Earth is discovered. One scenario for protecting the Earth from such a collision is to bombard its surface with nuclear weapons in an effort to shatter the object.

In order to do this, officials said, they have to understand the composition and strength of typical asteroids.

Asteroids are thought to be the building blocks of the solar system — aggregates of rock and dust that were left over after the formation of the planets. Most of the asteroids are in the so-called asteroid belt between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter. Eros, however, is on an orbit that swings it past Mars and close to the orbit of Earth.

The asteroid, however, has never actually threatened Earth; it last pass went by the planet in 1975, missing by 72 million kilometers.

Mandela caught in tornado, escapes unhurt

JOHANNESBURG, Dec 15: South African President Nelson Mandela escaped unhurt when he was caught in a freak tornado that killed 13 people and left hundreds injured, state television reported today, reports Reuters.

Mandela was trapped in a pharmacy in the south-eastern town of Umtata when the tornado hit but escaped injury after being protected by his bodyguards.

"The bodyguards shielded the president, the president is well," presidential spokeswoman Priscilla Naidoo told Reuters.

The tornado caved in the ceiling of the shop.

Mandela, who celebrated his 80th birthday this year, was on vacation in his home town of Qunu and had gone to Umtata to shop, Naidoo said.

The 13 had been killed when the tornado, which hit without warning and caused widespread devastation, brought a wall down upon them, state television reported.



Marilyn Monroe lookalikes pose outside Madame Tussaud's in London Wednesday as a child looks on. The models were lining up ahead of open auditions as sculptors at the waxwork museum launched a search for a body double to help them re-model a new Marilyn Monroe wax portrait.

— AP/UNB photo