

Decision on Iraq within weeks: US

Washington faces fresh objections to unilateral move, Paris drafting UN plan

AFP, Washington

Top US officials said late on Sunday the growing threat from Iraq, including an alleged push to build nuclear weapons, hastened the need for action and that a decision on a military strike would be made within weeks.

"Iraq ... will eventually want to blackmail the entire international community," said national security adviser Condoleezza Rice on CNN television's Late Edition program.

"If we wait until that blackmail includes the ability to blackmail with a nuclear weapon, we will have made a grave mistake."

The United States had intercepted one shipment of aluminium tubes used in producing enriched uranium, a key component of any nuclear warhead, Vice President Dick Cheney told NBC television's Meet the Press.

"We do know with absolute certainty that he is using his procurement system to acquire the equipment he needs in order to enrich uranium," Cheney said, referring to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. "We can no longer ignore the threat."

While neither Cheney nor Rice would specify precisely how close Iraq was to developing nuclear capability, they insisted that delay in striking out against Baghdad could have grave consequences.

"We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud,"

Rice said.

Cheney said US President George W. Bush's planned speech Thursday to the UN General Assembly would be a crucial step in the diplomatic campaign in support of ousting the Iraqi leader.

"There should not be any doubt in anybody's mind that this president is absolutely determined to deal with this threat and do whatever is necessary," said Cheney, who served as defence secretary under Bush's father, former president George Bush, during the 1991 Gulf War to oust Iraq from Kuwait.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said whatever the reaction to Bush's UN speech, the president could still order a go-it-alone operation.

"The president will retain all of his authority and options to act in a way that may be appropriate for us to act unilaterally to defend ourselves," the top US diplomat told Fox News television.

But allied action remained the preferred option, he said. "The United States, often accused of being unilateral, is now bringing the problem back to its original source, the United Nations," he said.

Powell declined to elaborate on what Bush would tell the assembly, saying only that he would underscore Iraq's repeated violations of UN resolutions.

Meanwhile, the White House has enlisted British Prime

Minister Tony Blair in its drive to convince sceptical allies to back a regime change in Baghdad.

France, Germany, Russia and, most recently Canada, all say there is no concrete evidence to prove Saddam is attempting to compile a nuclear arsenal or that Iraq is part of the recent international terrorism threat.

"We have said there should be ... evidence that Iraq is somehow connected to al-Qaeda," Canada's Deputy Prime Minister John Manley said in a televised interview Sunday.

French President Jacques Chirac voiced similar reservations in an interview in Monday's New York Times.

Meanwhile, the United States faced new international objections on Monday to unilateral military action against Iraq as President Jacques Chirac revealed that France was drafting a two-stage plan that could lead to UN authorisation of military force against Baghdad.

According to British press reports, US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair will give the United Nations a "last chance" to resolve the Iraqi problem peacefully.

Blair will challenge the United Nations to reassert its moral authority by giving Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein "one last chance" to readmit weapons inspectors before facing US-led military action, the Independent reported following a weekend Camp David summit between the two allies.

In Wellington, Prime Minister Helen Clark Monday called for any military action against Iraq to be under UN mandate.



The body of a policeman, one of the victims of Maoist attack in Sindhuli police post in eastern Nepal, is carried for cremation in Kathmandu on Monday. At least 65 policemen and soldiers were killed as Maoist rebels launched massive attack on security posts after executing nearly 50 security personnel in different districts of the country.

UNGA session opens today

REUTERS, United Nations

The UN General Assembly officially opens its 57th session on Tuesday still reeling from the crushing impact of the September 11 attacks on the world's problems -- and on diplomacy itself.

"If there's one lesson we have learned from this crisis, it is that dealing with global issues such as combating terrorism requires a consolidated global response," said Han Seung-soo of South Korea, president of the assembly's 56th session, as he prepared to turn over the reins to his successor.

"No single nation can resolve such far-reaching global concerns," he said, calling the session now ending "one of the most eventful in the history of the United Nations."

Assembly openings are traditionally one of the top diplomatic events of the year, featuring plenty of pomp, days of weighty speeches and hundreds of head-to-head meetings and press conferences by world leaders.

And this year is no different, with more than 100 presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers flocking to the United Nations, many to commemorate the Sept. 11 tragedy.

President Bush addresses the assembly on Thursday followed by 15 other presidents speaking the same day: Thabo Mbeki of South Africa, Alejandro Toledo of Peru, Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Vojislav Kostunica, to name but a few.

Plane hijack bid after takeoff from Mumbai

AFP, Colombo

A man armed with a knife tried to hijack an Air Seychelles Boeing 737 in mid-air Monday, but he was overpowered by cabin crew and arrested when the plane landed in the Maldives.

The incident came just two days before the anniversary of the September 11 hijackings in the United States, and Air Seychelles immediately called for an investigation into security at Mumbai airport where the flight began.

The man tried to enter the cockpit of the plane, but was tackled by a cabin crew member who received minor injuries, Maldivian Director General of Civil Aviation Mohammed Razi told AFP.

Officials said the man had told the cabin crew he had planted a bomb onboard, but Maldivian civil aviation officials said they had thoroughly searched the aircraft and found no explosives.

"The drama had ended by the time the aircraft landed at the Male International airport," Razi said. "We have arrested one man who is in the custody of the police."

"We are not sure of his nationality, but he was carrying an Indian passport. We are also questioning another passenger who could be linked to the man in custody."

"The man with the knife had said he wanted to divert the aircraft to another destination, but we have no other details," he said.

4 killed in PNG quake, tidal waves

AFP, Port Moresby

Up to four people died and dozens of homes were destroyed Monday when a powerful earthquake struck off the north coast of Papua New Guinea, sending a small tidal wave onto islands and coastal villages, officials said.

The quake, measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale, hit at 4:44 am (1844 GMT) and was centred just 40 kilometres off the coast and about 100 kilometres northwest of the provincial capital Wewak, according to observatories in Port Moresby and Australia.

A meter-high tidal wave hit the coast and six islands shortly after the quake, washing 10-15 meters (30-50 feet) inland and knocking some houses off their stilts, said officials in Wewak, a town of 25,000.

UN resumes operations in Chechnya

AFP, Moscow

The United Nations resumed operations Monday in Chechnya for the first time since the abduction of a Russian aid agency associate in July but stressed it remained concerned about the security in the war-torn republic.

"The decision to resume operations followed extensive consultations with the Russian government, the donor community, non-governmental organisations and civilians in need in the republic," the UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Russia said in a statement. The UN suspended activities in the Caucasian republic after the abduction there on July 29 of Nina Davydovich, the head of Russian non-governmental organisation Druzhba, which was working with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Egyptian court jails 51 Islamists

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian military court on Monday sentenced 51 Islamists to between two years in jail and 15 years in jail with hard labour in connection with an alleged plot to overthrow the government.

The court acquitted 43 others, an AFP correspondent at the court said.

Charges against the 94 ranged from forming an illegal group to plotting the assassinations of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, senior officials and prominent religious and cultural leaders as well as blowing up public buildings.

Three were sentenced to 15 years in prison with hard labour, including a national of the Russian republic of Dagestan, 36-year-old Omar Hajaiev Mehdi Mohammed.

Musharraf reiterates support for anti-terrorism coalition

Indo-Pak ties at lowest ebb

AFP, Cambridge

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has reiterated his support for an international anti-terrorism effort and said Islamic radicals must be held in check in his nation and elsewhere.

Musharraf also said his country's relations with India were "at their lowest ebb" and accused India of "intransigence."

India's and Pakistan's "forces confront each other eyeball to eyeball with most dangerous possibilities of eruption of conflict by accident or design," he said.

Speaking at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government on

Sunday, Musharraf said the world needs a better understanding of Islam and the roots of terrorism, saying hate "must be stamped out with the same zeal with which the fights against terrorism is being pursued."

"We must diagnose the malaise and treat the root causes of terrorism. What is it that conjures up such storms in the mind? What motivates a suicide bomber that his instinct for survival is overcome by a death wish?"

Musharraf is in the US for the start of the annual debate at the United Nations' General Assembly, at which the United States is expected to make its case for a

military action against Iraq.

However, Musharraf has said he was not interested in playing a role in any future US military operation against Iraq.

Moreover, the Pak President pledged unstinting support Sunday for the US-led war on terrorism, but warned of a growing anti-Muslim bias that threatened to split the Islamic world and the West.

In a wide-ranging speech at Harvard University, Musharraf also ruled out Pakistani involvement in any US effort to topple Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, took a swipe at archival India and defended recent moves extending his military rule.

Floods still swamping Thailand

AFP, Ta Pan Hin

Dozens of provinces throughout Thailand remained in the grip of severe flooding on Monday which officials said has left at least 55 people dead over the past six weeks.

The northern provinces of Chiang Mai and Phetchabun reported gradually receding waters, an interior ministry report said, but the situation in the central province of Pichit was worsening, with several towns and villages facing rising water levels as relief operations expanded.

Over 100 people in Ta Pan Hin district were evacuated to a nearby temple after their houses were inundated, according to an AFP photographer, and authorities were using boats to distribute relief packets of rice, water, cooking oil and instant noodles.

They were among more than 5,000 people who have been evacuated, according to figures released by the civil defence department.



Two Thai boys carry a gas tank and other belongings as they waded through a flooded street at Ban Ka Mang in Pichit province northern Thailand on Monday.

'Magdalene Sisters' wins Golden Lion in Venice

AFP, Venice

Scottish director Peter Mullan's "The Magdalene Sisters", the story of an abusive Catholic convent, won the Golden Lion for best film at the Venice Film Festival on Sunday.

The film, set in 1960s Ireland and denounced by the Vatican as "angry and rancorous provocation," had been among the favourites for the coveted prize after strong festival reviews.

Mullan strode proudly onto the stage to collect the Golden Lion dressed in a tartan kilt, and held the prize aloft to loud applause from the crowd packed into Venice's Lido.

"This is a great honour for me,"

he said, adding that he hoped abused women who saw the film would be able to free themselves, and "free their minds".

Chosen by a jury chaired by Chinese actress Gong Li, Mullan's film, based on a true story, depicts the mistreatment of three young women sent to work in Irish laundries set up by the Catholic Church and run by nuns.

British director Ken Loach was awarded the International Federation of Film Critics prize for his contribution to "11'09'01" -- an acclaimed collaboration by 11 international directors depicting an alternate view of the September 11 attacks, but screened out-of-competition.

Kashmir militants kill 11 ahead of polls

REUTERS, Srinagar

Suspected Muslim militants killed 11 people in escalating violence in Indian Kashmir ahead of state elections starting next week, police said on Monday.

The rebels, who have threatened to kill anyone involved in the election as nuclear-armed India and Pakistan confront each other over disputed Kashmir, barged into houses in a remote village in Rajouri district late on Sunday, killing five people, including two women.

"They fired indiscriminately," police official S.S. Bijral said. He said the victims, who were all Hindus, had refused to move out of the area after a guerrilla attack in a

nearby village last month in which eight Muslims had died.

Voting begins in Rajouri on September 16 as well as in several other parts of Jammu and Kashmir where India is struggling to quell a nearly 13-year-old separatist revolt.

The election, being staggered to allow security forces to ensure a peaceful vote, will end in October. India, which considers the whole of Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir an integral part of the country, is banking on the vote to boost the legitimacy of its rule.

Also on Sunday night militants attacked a police patrol in the Kashmir Valley, killing three policemen, a police spokesman said.

Saudi charities furious over terror-funding charges

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Islamic charities, accused of funding Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network and other terror organisations, are hitting back one year after the September 11 attacks.

The charities, many run by respected Islamic organisations, are the backbone of Muslim fund-raising and relief activities throughout the world and strongly dispute the US allegations.

But numerous organisations and personalities have been placed on US terror-funding lists, such as Saudi businessman Wael Hamza

al-Julaidan, head of the Rabita Trust of the Mecca-based Muslim World League, whose name was added to the list only Friday.

Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayef moved Saturday to defend Julaidan, denying US statements that Riyadh had supported action against him and demanding proof of his implication.

The charities view the general charges brought by the US Treasury Department as politically-motivated and orchestrated by Christian neo-conservatives and their Zionist allies with the aim of stopping Islamic benevolent work.

"America has tried to establish a link between terrorism and Islamic (charity) societies and failed," said Al-Haramain Islamic Foundation director general Oqail al-Qoail.

"We have more than once affirmed that well-known Islamic societies refrain from using their funds for violence and extremism," Oqail said in an interview with AFP.

"Let everyone know that moderate Islamic foundations which are committed to the right path of Islam had long been at loggerheads with those groups which adopt violence... and permit the killing of the innocent," he added.



Jean Larsson (2nd L front) weeps as she is comforted by her husband Roy Larsson (L front) as they and others attend a candlelight vigil at a local park in Brooklyn, New York on Sunday. Jean was late to work on September 11, 2001 and missed the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre that killed thousands in New York City. Jean lost seven co-workers that day.

51 small planes fly over WTC to payhommage to victims

AFP, New York

Fifty-one small planes, each representing a US state and bearing its flags, flew over Ground Zero Sunday to pay homage to the victims of last year's terror attacks on the United States.

The planes, which had flown across the United States in their "Flight Across America" tour to commemorate the September 11 attacks, took off from Fairfield airbase, New Jersey on Sunday.

They flew down the Hudson River, passing close to the site of the felled twin towers of the World Trade Centre, where most of the 3,000 victims of last year's attacks lost their lives.

They went on to make a half-turn around the Statue of Liberty.

Aboard one plane, bearing the Union Flag, was Erik Lindbergh, the grandson of famous US aviator Charles A. Lindbergh who became the first person to cross the Atlantic in a single-engine plane.

The planes then landed again at Fairfield, for the flags to be handed over to be carried by helicopter to the USS Intrepid, the aircraft carrier stationed at a quay of the Hudson River and transformed into an Air and Space museum.

The flags will be presented to the public in a ceremony.

Another of the sites where the planes have a scheduled landing is in the field in Pennsylvania where one of the four planes hijacked by terrorists a year ago crashed.



Scottish director Peter Mullan (R) holds the Golden Lion award for his film "The Magdalene sisters" as Italian actor Stefano Accorsi hods the Volpi Cup of the best actor during a photo call at the 59th Venice Film festival on Sunday.