

UN experts study Iraq dossier for nuke clues

REUTERS, United Nations/Baghdad

UN experts in New York and Vienna studied Iraq's voluminous weapons dossier on Monday to establish whether it has been a full disclosure and to see how close Baghdad came to making an atomic bomb.

The results of their work, which was expected to keep the dossier under wraps for at least a week, will be keenly awaited by the United States, which Iraq has challenged to produce evidence to justify its threats of war.

Washington stressed on Monday it would wait and see what was in the 12,000-page document flown from Baghdad on Sunday. But it made clear it was ready to take military action if necessary to rid Iraq of doomsday weapons it believes President Saddam Hussein possesses.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said on a visit to Tokyo that President Bush "has patience."

"He would much prefer to have Iraq disarm himself," Armitage told reporters. "But, as the president said, 'If Iraq won't disarm, then eventually, Iraq will be disarmed.'"

Armitage's words underlined Bush's message that US forces were ready to strike if the weapons inspection process launched by a November 8 UN resolution fails to satisfy US objectives to disarm Saddam.

Although Iraq insists it has no nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, a top Saddam aide hinted on Sunday it may have been near to making an atomic bomb. He invited the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to

see how close Baghdad came.

"We have the complete documentation from design to all the other things. We haven't reached the final assembly of a bomb nor tested it," Amir al-Saadi told journalists.

"It is for the IAEA to judge how close we were," he said, adding: "If I tell you we were close, it is subjective."

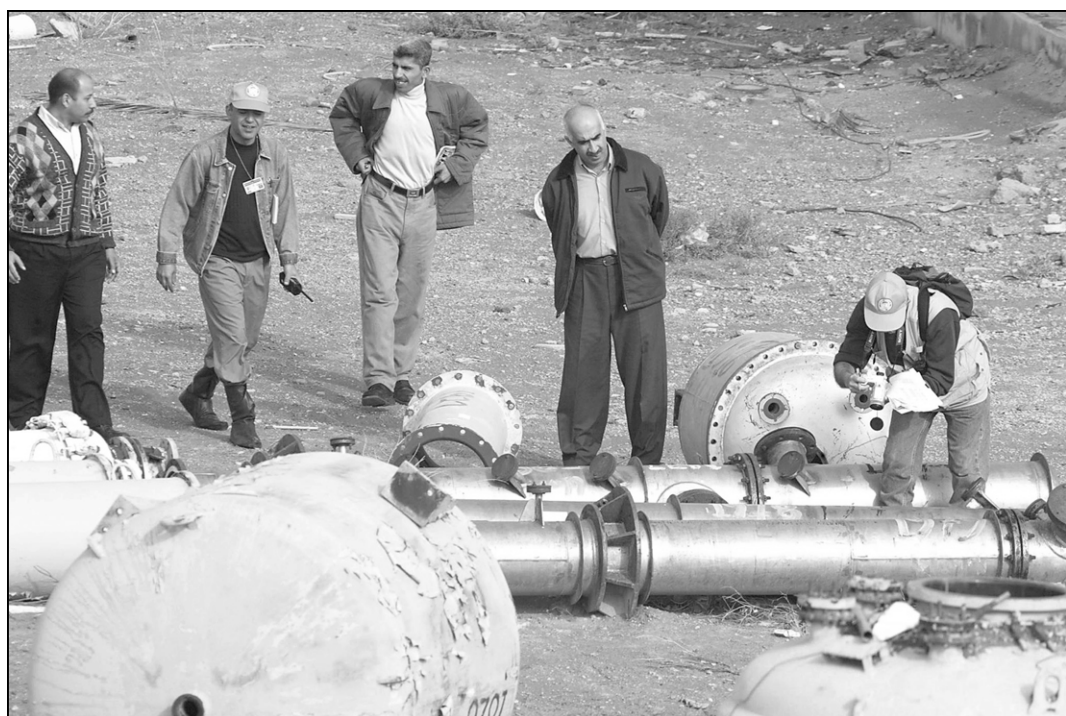
UN arms inspectors, who resumed work in Iraq last month for the first time in four years, searched al-Tuweiha Nuclear Research Centre on Monday, 20 km (12 miles) south of Baghdad, for the third time since their arrival.

It was not clear why they returned again to the country's main nuclear program facility, which is the location of the Osirak reactor bombed by Israel in 1981. Several tons of uranium have been under seal by the IAEA at Tuweiha since 1998.

In an indication of how long the latest round of inspections could take, IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei said he believed patience would be needed.

Asked in Tokyo about reports the inspection process could take up to a year, he said: "I think that's accurate."

The UN ordered Iraq to destroy its weapons of mass destruction after Baghdad's 1990 invasion of oil-rich neighbour Kuwait. Iraqi troops were ousted in the 1991 Gulf War.



UN disarmament inspectors work at a factory, 50 km north-west of Baghdad on Monday in the sprawling Fallujah complex, which played a key role in Iraq's chemical and biological arms programmes and was placed under permanent monitoring by the previous UN inspections mission which pulled out in 1998. The United Nations took the opportunity to make return visits to two key sites they have already visited once since inspections resumed on November 27.

Karnataka tense after body of ex-minister is found

AFP, Bangalore

Police in the southern Indian state of Karnataka were on high alert Monday as tension mounted after a former state minister kidnapped by India's most-wanted bandit more than three months ago was found dead.

"Top police officials in all 27 districts of Karnataka have been asked to be on high alert," T. Madiyal, state police chief said.

The Karnataka state cabinet was planning an emergency meet Monday to review the situation, an official said.

Former state minister Hannur Nagappa was kidnapped from his home on August 25 by notorious bandit Koosa Muniswamy Veerappan, who is wanted for more than 100 murders and elephant-poaching.

Israel bars Arafat from Bethlehem for Christmas

REUTERS, Ramallah

Israel said on Sunday it would bar Yasser Arafat from making his Christmas pilgrimage to Bethlehem for the second straight year after he said he wanted to attend celebrations in the biblical town.

"He's going to stay put," Raanan Gissin, a senior adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, told Reuters. "We're not going to let Arafat go to Bethlehem." Gissin made his remarks shortly after the Palestinian president said he would try to attend Christmas Eve mass in Bethlehem after Israel had prevented him from doing so last year, accusing him of failing to rein in militant violence.

DNA matches Bali suicide bomb suspect

AP, Bali

DNA found at the site of the Oct. 12 Bali blasts matches that of a suspected suicide bomber, the chief investigator said Monday, adding to fears that terrorists are adopting tactics until now foreign to Indonesia.

An alleged terrorist identified as Iqbal was believed to have detonated a bomb inside his backpack in one of two near-simultaneous blasts in nightclubs on Bali island. Police last week said they were collecting DNA from his relatives to see if they matched that found at the site.

"Iqbal has been confirmed as the suicide bomber," said I Made Mangku Pastika, the chief investigator.

HR issues to dominate next round of Lankan talks

AFP, Colombo

Human rights issues are to be discussed at the next round of Norwegian-brokered negotiations between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tigers rebels, a government negotiator said Monday.

"Human rights will be a major topic at the next round of talks," the top government negotiator and constitutional affairs minister G.L. Peiris told reporters here.

Attention is also to focus on women's and child rights, Peiris added.

The next round of negotiations is scheduled for January 6-9 in Thailand.

The Tigers continue to be accused of forcibly recruiting children in their armed separatist campaign, though they have promised to demobilise the "baby brigade" under a joint programme with UNICEF.

EU in last-ditch talks with 10 candidates

AFP, Copenhagen

The European Union held 11th-hour talks with 10 candidate states Monday hoping to hammer out final terms of its expansion, to avoid a public show-down at a summit this week.

The EU's Danish presidency met with the 10 mostly ex-communist states, before a gathering of EU foreign ministers charged with paving the way for a deal at the Copenhagen summit.

Amid the brinkmanship, there was some relief from one cloud which has also been hanging over the summit Thursday and Friday: Turkey's bid to join the bloc.

Backing down from Ankara's headline position of demanding a start date for talks in Copenhagen, Foreign Minister Yasar Yakis said the summit could decide to put off a date until June 2003.

Jakarta, Aceh rebels sign truce

AFP, Geneva

The Indonesian government and separatist rebels from the province of Aceh on Monday signed a truce agreement here aimed at ending almost three decades of bloodshed.

"With the signing of this cessation of hostilities agreement between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement, a victory has been achieved," said chief Indonesian negotiator S. Wiryo.

But the Indonesian official warned: "There is still a great deal of work to be done before we can say a durable peace exists in Aceh."

He was speaking after signing the truce with one of the Aceh separatists' leaders, Zaini Abdullah, in Geneva.

"The achievement today is the direct result of the struggle and sacrifice of our people," Abdullah said.

The deal reads: "Both sides agree that hostilities and all acts of violence by both sides should cease forever in Aceh."

At least 10,000 people have been killed in fighting in Aceh, at the northern tip of Sumatra island, since 1976.

Fatal clashes continued in Aceh on Sunday evening, with a girl aged 17 among the latest victims.

Peace deal for Indonesian Aceh

Signals the end of a 26-year-old war

- Population:** 4.2 million
- Religion:** Muslim (97.6%), Christian (1.7%), Buddhist (0.55%), Hindu (0.08%)
- Economy:** coconut, coffee, timber, tobacco, oil, natural gas
- Oil and gas revenue:** US\$1.2-1.5 billion (2001)

History of rebellion

- 1873:** Dutch declare war on Aceh Sultanate, complete conquest in 1904
- 1945:** Aceh becomes part of Indonesian republic as a separate province
- 1951:** Aceh merged into Christian province of North Sumatra
- 1953:** Separatists declare Aceh an Islamic state, sparking a 9-year military crackdown
- 1961:** Aceh becomes separate province again
- 1976:** Free Aceh Movement (GAM) forms to fight for an Islamic state
- 1988:** Resurgence of GAM armed activities
- 1989:** Jakarta begins 9-year anti-rebel operation
- 1999:** Strikes after military shoots 42 civilians; mass rally for referendum on self-determination
- 2002: May** Rebels, government agree to elections in 2004, an autonomy package
- December 9** Rebels, government expected to sign peace deal in Geneva

Mars was never warm

AP, San Francisco

New observations by a NASA spacecraft orbiting Mars show a planet rich in water, but suggests that for billions of years it has done little other than remain frozen in the soil. The finding challenges theories that Mars was once a warm, wet place hospitable to life.

Instead, the current Martian surface - a cold, dusty and overwhelmingly dry place - may have been the norm for much of the planet's history, scientists said on Sunday during a briefing at the fall meeting of the American Geophysical Union.

"Mars may have water, but it's cold," said Philip Christensen, of Arizona State University, Tempe. "It's there, but it can't do much."

Since NASA's 2001 Mars Odyssey satellite arrived in orbit around the planet more than a year ago, it has turned up evidence that there is lots of ice mixed in its soil, buried as little as 18 inches (46 centimeters) from the surface, said William Boynton, of the University of Arizona, Tucson.

Spread across the planet, the amount of water is not huge by Earth standards - it's the equivalent of about two Lake Michigans. In places, however, ice makes up 70 percent of the soil by volume, a significant concentration.

US gets full access to Iraq's arms papers

Baghdad challenges Washington on evidence claim

AP, United Nations

International inspectors began hunting through a massive Iraqi arms declaration for clues about whether the country is free of weapons of mass destruction, after an Iraqi general urged Washington to produce evidence that it has banned arms.

US officials will soon be able to start their own review of the documents after the Security Council agreed late Sunday to give the United States, Russia, France, Britain and China full copies of the 12,000-page declaration on Monday.

The decision overrode one made Friday to distribute censored copies to the council. The council's other 10 members will only have access to the report once inspectors have translated, analysed and gleaned it of sensitive material including possible instructions on bomb-making.

Iraq insists it has no programs for developing nuclear, biological or chemical weapons although on Sunday, an adviser to President

Saddam Hussein suggested that more than a decade ago Iraq may have been close to building an atomic bomb.

"It's for the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) to judge how close we were" to a nuclear bomb, Lt. Gen. Amer al-Saadi said in Baghdad.

Al-Saadi said the United States should stop playing games and hand over its evidence that Iraq has banned weapons.

"The sooner they do it the better," he told reporters.

Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix said Sunday that his staff would "immediately take a look," at the Iraqi material, make copies and discuss the report's handling with the Security Council. He is expected to brief all 15 council members on Tuesday.

The head of the IAEA said his staff could have a report ready on the nuclear section of the dossier within 10 days but it could take longer to weed through, analyse and translate thousands of pages and CD-ROMs dealing with Iraq's

biological, chemical and missile programs.

Meanwhile, a top adviser to President Saddam Hussein challenged Washington on Sunday to "come up" with evidence it claims to have that Baghdad still holds weapons of mass destruction.

At the same time, Lt. Gen. Amer al-Saadi told reporters that a huge, new Iraqi arms declaration, submitted to the United Nations on Saturday, does not offer fresh Iraqi evidence to allay UN suspicions that Baghdad may retain weapons in two crucial areas: VX nerve agents and biological weapons.

Al-Saadi said the report documents the weapons programs that Baghdad has acknowledged pursuing up until 1991 including its drive to develop a nuclear weapon.

"It's for the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) to judge how close we were," al-Saadi said.

The report also details the chemical, biological and nuclear programs since 1991, which Baghdad contends were peaceful.

Armitage meets Japanese leaders

AFP, Tokyo

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage held talks with Japanese premier Junichiro Koizumi Monday to drum up support for Washington's policy on Iraq and the North Korea nuclear stand-off.

The number two at the State Department paid a 15-minute courtesy call to Koizumi as well as meeting Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi and Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda.

Armitage met Koizumi just before Iraq's 12,000-page arms declaration arrived at the United Nations in New York, meeting a deadline imposed by the Security Council, and said he was in no position to comment on the document.

"I don't think we've done an analysis now, we have to wait for the analysis before I can speak," he told reporters.

The document is expected to determine whether the UN disarmament process ends in peace or war.

ROK leaders try to calm anti-US sentiment

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung Monday called for calm and ending contenders for the December 19 presidential election joined efforts to defuse an alarming rise of anti-Americanism.

With the 50-year-old alliance between Seoul and Washington under strain, Kim, for the second time in three days, urged protesters to reign in their attacks on the United States.

Anti-US sentiment has been simmering since the acquittal last month of two US soldiers accused of causing the deaths of two local schoolgirls in a traffic accident.

In talks Monday with US senators Daniel Inouye, a Democrat from Hawaii and Arkansas Republican Ted Stevens on Monday, Kim said efforts should be made both here and in Washington to restore calm.

"The two countries should make special efforts to prevent bilateral relations from being hurt by the conflict over the death of two schoolgirls," Kim told the senators, according to his spokeswoman Park Sun-Sook.

US kicks off war games in Gulf turning up heat on Iraq

AFP, Doha

US forces kicked off Monday a major military command exercise in the Gulf, turning up the heat on Iraq as the crisis over its alleged weapons of mass destruction reached a crucial phase. About 1,000 US and British battle staff led by General Tommy Franks, commander of US forces in the Gulf, launched the "Internal Look" computerised war games from Qatar's As-Sayliyah army base south of Doha, officials said.

They were testing the capabilities of a 58 million dollar (euro) mobile command centre, with sophisticated computers, maps and communications facilities that could direct an eventual war in Iraq.

Officials of the US Central Command, which flew in some 600-700 top war planners from its base in Tampa, Florida, said the exercise started shortly after 7:30am (0430

GMT) and would last a week or more.

Thousands of other servicemen were involved worldwide. About 300-400 British personnel took part at As-Sayliyah, but there was no word on the participation of any other nations.

Franks, flanked by about 50 of his senior intelligence and operations personnel, began the operation with a pep talk in a state-of-the-art war room in the most secure part of the As-Sayliyah base, an official said.

"Internal Look has begun and is proceeding on schedule," said Jim Wilkinson, director of strategic communications for the Central Command (CENTCOM).

"This exercise will give General Franks and the battle staff a front-line opportunity to learn new lessons and improve the command's ability to be decisive on the modern battlefield."

The war games were the fourth in the Internal Look series since 1990, when they helped to produce a blueprint for the US-led drive to oust Iraqi troops from Kuwait. This year's edition was the first held outside the United States.

Officials refused to draw any explicit link to US threats to use force if necessary to strip President Saddam Hussein's regime in Baghdad of suspected weapons of mass destruction.

But the round-the-clock exercise intensified the pressure on Saddam as the task of assessing his compliance with UN disarmament resolutions hit a juncture.

It started just hours after Iraq handed over a long-awaited declaration claiming there are no weapons of mass destruction, and a new batch of UN weapons inspectors arrived in Baghdad to bolster disarmament teams.

22 killed as LeT truce ends in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Twenty-two people, including thirteen terrorists, were killed in fresh wave of violence in Kashmir, where a four-day ceasefire by a terrorist group ended Sunday, police said.

Nine security personnel, including three officers, were also injured when militants fired four rifle-grenades at a security camp in the heart of Srinagar, the summer capital.

The camp is in a stadium which is the main venue for official state functions such as Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations. The attack happened at around 7.00 pm, about the time a unilateral four-day ceasefire called by hard-line militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba came to an end.

Lashkar had called for the truce between December 5 and 8 to enable Muslims in the region, plagued by separatist-linked violence unrest, to celebrate the biggest Muslim festival Id ul-Fitr peacefully.

Eid, which marks the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan,



An undated picture shows an Air Force, and civilian technicians from the United States Central Command setting up lap tops for use at the mobile headquarters presently being set up for the upcoming exercise "Internal Look" at As-Sayliyah base, 20 km south of Doha. Battle staff led by General Tommy Franks, commander of US forces in the Gulf, went over the "Internal Look" exercise on Sunday to test the capabilities of a high-tech forward headquarters mounted at the base.

Chavez may use army to break strike

REUTERS, Caracas

An opposition strike in Venezuela that is crippling the world's No 5 oil exporter entered its second week on Monday, piling up pressure on a defiant President Hugo Chavez who appeared ready to use soldiers to try to break the protest.

The week-old strike, called by opposition leaders to force the leftist president to quit or hold early elections, has disrupted refinery operations, halted export shipments and cut output by half in South America's biggest oil producer.

Organisers, accusing former paratrooper Chavez of intransigence, have extended the shutdown into an eighth day.

In what has become a nightly ritual in Caracas over the last week, thousands of anti-government demonstrators beat pots and pans late Sunday in noisy protests that resounded across the capital. There were similar protests in other cities.

Government and opposition negotiators, who have failed to agree on the timing of elections in peace talks brokered by the Organization of American States,

were due to sit down to fresh discussions Monday while the strike continued.

The shutdown posed the most determined opposition challenge to the rule of the outspoken president since he survived a brief coup in April by rebel generals and admirals. He was restored by loyal troops and officers.

Chavez, who accuses his foes of trying to overthrow him again by crippling the vital oil industry, is counting on the armed forces to both keep him in power and help counter the opposition protest that has closed many shops and businesses.

In a rambling five-hour television broadcast Sunday, Chavez, at times cajoling, at times threatening, said he would not let opposition strikers halt the operations of the giant state oil firm PDVSA, the motor of the recession-hit economy.

"They are not going to break PDVSA, they are not going to stop it," he said. Striking PDVSA executives, tanker captains and other dissident oil staff would be replaced, he added.