



Iraqis work at the Al-Karama complex in Baghdad's northern suburb of Al-Taji following a visit by UN disarmament inspectors on Wednesday. The installation specialised before the 1991 Gulf War in producing guidance and control systems, including gyroscopes, for Al-Hussein missiles. UN experts stepped up their hunt for Iraq's suspected weapons of mass destruction after the arrival of more inspectors.

UN team affirms Iraqi N-site is inactive

Arms experts scrutinise 6 sites

AP, Baghdad

Nuclear inspectors have verified that an installation north of Baghdad where Iraq once sought to make atomic bombs shows no signs of new weapons work.

The report by the UN inspection agency came late Wednesday at the end of a day of extensive activity by UN weapons monitors, who paid unannounced visits to at least eight sites including a medical research centre and a new missile factory.

The UN teams, in the third week of resumed inspections, headed out again Thursday on their daily missions. Iraqi Information Ministry officials said one group travelled to a missile test site west of Baghdad.

The teams from the UN nuclear agency the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna have intensified their work this week, after receiving reinforcements Sunday that increased the number of nuclear inspectors to 27.

On that same day, Iraq's massive arms declaration was flown from Baghdad to New York and Vienna, where analysts are poring through its 12,000 pages in search of still more sites to visit and questions to answer.

The declaration was filed under a new UN Security Council resolution requiring Iraq to report on nuclear, biological, chemical and missile research and production. The resolution also mandates that Iraq surrender any weapons of mass destruction which it denies it has. The US government says it is sure the Baghdad government retains such weapons, and threatens war if Iraq fails, in Washington's view, to comply with UN disarmament demands.

The resolution also mandated the resumption of the inspections after a four-year gap. Before such monitoring ended in 1998 amid U.N.-Iraqi disputes, inspectors destroyed tons of Iraqi chemical and biological weapons

and dismantled Iraq's program to try to build nuclear weapons.

Reuters adds: Dozens of UN arms experts combed at least six suspect sites for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq Thursday.

Experts from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) drove to Al Nidaa Public Company in Zafaraniyah, a suburb in southwest Baghdad. The facility, run by Iraq's Military Industrialisation Commission, produces metal moulds.

A large portrait of President Saddam Hussein stared down from the entrance to the factory, guarded by soldiers manning a heavy machinegun.

Teams from the IAEA and the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) targeted five other sites around the country, Iraqi officials said. They said biological warfare inspectors had gone to a disused factory owned by the Arab Company for Antibiotics near Suweirah, 38 miles southeast of Baghdad. A missile team visited a test pad near Ramadi, about 75 miles northwest of Baghdad. Nuclear inspectors made their second trip in as many days to the Ibn Sina plant, a former uranium enrichment facility 25 miles north of Baghdad, and also went to the Mu'tassim factory in Jurf Sakhr, 25 miles south of Baghdad.

The Iraqi officials said UN experts headed for al-Rasheed factory, whose location and nature was not immediately known.

Iraq denies possessing banned weapons.

It submitted a 12,000-page dossier on its arms programs to the United Nations last Saturday in line with a Security Council resolution threatening serious consequences if it failed to cooperate with the inspectors.

The experts, in the third week of their mission since returning to Iraq after a four-year absence, have intensified their inspections since the dossier was handed over.

US releases shipment of missile to Yemen

AP, Washington

Skirting a face-off with Yemen, the United States on Wednesday let an intercepted shipment of North Korean missiles proceed to the Persian Gulf country after receiving assurances the Scuds would not be transferred elsewhere in the tense region.

The agreement was reached through unusual high-level diplomacy involving Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell, on the one hand, and President Ali Abdullah Salih of Yemen on the other.

Spanish authorities, whose naval forces intercepted the ship in the Arabian Sea, also were deeply involved in the awkward negotiations, as was Cambodia, in south-east Asia.

Bush administration officials acknowledged that boarding the ship and taking charge of its cargo probably violated international law. But administration decision-makers were guided by concern about an influx of weapons into the Persian Gulf region just as the United States is considering force to disarm Iraq.

N Korea to reactivate N-plant

China, US agree on need to denuclearise DPRK

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea said on Thursday it would immediately end a freeze on its nuclear power plant in response to an allied decision to suspend oil aid to Pyongyang.

The nuclear reactor, suspected of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons, was frozen in 1994 under the Agreed Framework with the United States. Under the pact, Pyongyang promised to scrap plans to develop nuclear weapons in return for provision of light water nuclear reactors and fuel oil supplies.

"The prevailing situation compelled the DPRK government to lift its measure for nuclear freeze taken on the premise that 500,000 tons of heavy oil would be annually supplied to the DPRK under the DPRK-US Agreed Framework and immediately resume the operation and construction of its nuclear facilities to generate electricity," said the Foreign Ministry statement, carried by the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). In October, Washington said

Pyongyang had admitted having a secret program to enrich uranium for weapons in violation of the Agreed Framework.

Following Pyongyang's admission, Washington and its allies, including South Korea and Japan, decided to suspend fuel oil shipments to the poverty-stricken country from December.

"Whether the DPRK refreezes its nuclear facilities or not hinges upon the U.S.," said the KCNA statement.

DPRK is the acronym for the communist North's official title, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

South Korea convened a special National Security Council meeting at 3 a.m. EST to analyse the statement, chief presidential spokeswoman Park Sun-sook said in a statement.

A South Korean Unification Ministry spokesman said: "North Korea-US relations are heading toward the end of a cliff, but we have to see if the North is actually about to implement this or if it is using it as a negotiation tactic," the

spokesman added.

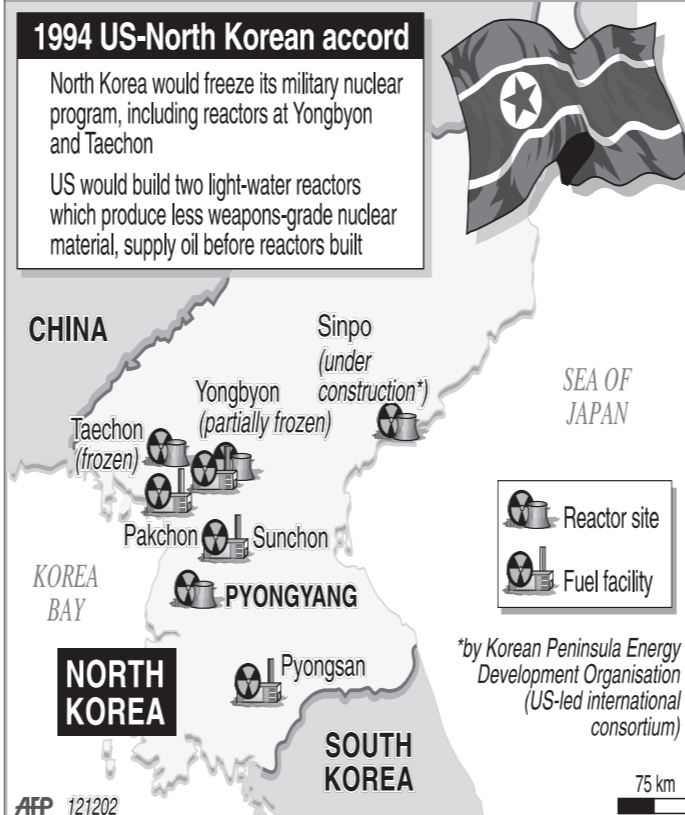
President Bush branded North Korea, Iraq and Iran this year as part of an "axis of evil" making weapons of mass destruction that could be obtained by terrorist groups.

AFP adds: US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said Thursday that China agreed with the United States that ways should be found to denuclearise North Korea, as Pyongyang announced plans to "immediately" reactivate its nuclear programme.

"I think China shares the same concerns the US has, South Korea has and our Russian friends have and the Japanese have and that is we have to find a way to denuclearise the peninsula of Korea," Armitage said before meeting more leaders on the second day of his China visit.

"And I'm sure the Chinese will be urging some different behaviour on the North Koreans," he told reporters.

North Korean nuclear facilities



US, Qatar ink military pact

Rumsfeld rallies US troops to counter-terror fight

AFP, Doha

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld signed a new accord with Qatar Wednesday to formalise the American presence at a massive base here and make the close US-Qatari military relationship even tighter.

The deal was signed with Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jasssem bin Jabr Al-Thani shortly after Rumsfeld's arrival here to watch US-British war games that are unfolding as the White House mulls a possible invasion of Iraq.

At a joint press conference with the Qatari foreign minister, Rumsfeld hailed "the wonderful cooperation between our countries in the war on terrorism" and praised Qatar as an "important and valued defence partner."

The agreement signed Wednesday formalises the US presence at the al-Udeid air base south of here that houses the largest stockpiles of US arms and equipment in the Middle East.

Rumsfeld, on the final leg of a tour that also brought him to the Horn of

Africa, said the new pact would improve life for the estimated 4,000 US troops working at the al-Udeid base here and allow technical upgrades at the facility.

For his part, Sheikh Hamad welcomed the latest agreement that builds on a defence pact signed after the 1991 Gulf War.

"The relationship between both countries is growing. This is part of a relationship that started more than a decade ago," he said.

Earlier, Qatari foreign ministry official Khaled al-Mansouri told AFP the accord "legalises the presence of the US troops at the base."

No further details were available on the new pact between the Americans and the Gulf state, which is also hosting a new forward command post at another base that could direct an eventual war against Iraq.

Rumsfeld arrived in Qatar to attend the major command exercise launched by Gulf commander General Tommy Franks and his senior battle staff on Monday at the As-Sayliyah base.

About 1,000 US and British staff went into a third day of war games at the desert base, running a high-tech

mobile command headquarters through various computer-generated crises involving Iraq and other hotspots.

Meanwhile, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld inspected Thursday a hi-tech command post in Qatar that could be used to direct an invasion of Iraq but preached patience in deciding whether Baghdad had weapons of mass destruction.

In an address to some 400 troops in a sprawling warehouse at As-Sayliyah army base near Doha, Rumsfeld was remarkably low key about prospects for war with President Saddam Hussein's regime and did not mention Iraq in initial comments that focused on the war on terrorism.

Asked whether he believed Iraq's arms dossier filed this week claiming it has no weapons of mass destruction, the secretary said the United Nations was at an early stage in the process and consultations with other UN Security Council members would be required after examination of the document.



Demonstrators opposed to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez march in Caracas on Wednesday to protest the deaths of demonstrators on December 6. Venezuela has restarted its crude exports that were blocked by a general strike, regaining control of 2.4 million barrels of oil, Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez said on Wednesday.

'Venezuela's strike to go on until Chavez resigns'

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's opposition said Wednesday a crippling 10-day-old strike would continue until President Hugo Chavez resigns.

"We declare total resistance until the final goal, which is to force President Hugo Chavez to step down and early elections to be called," said trade union leader Carlos Ortega.

All Americans to have smallpox vaccine: Bush

AP, Washington

After agonising for months, President Bush has decided to make a risky but effective smallpox vaccine available to all Americans, beginning with the military and health workers who would be front-line defenders against a bioterror attack.

Bush will announce the program Friday and shots are expected to begin in January, senior administration officials said Wednesday.

Summit host takes tough line with EU candidates

REUTERS, Copenhagen

Denmark, host of one of Europe's most important summits on Thursday, has taken a tough stand toward Turkey, Cyprus and East European nations which hope to join the bloc now facing its biggest ever expansion.

With diplomatic pressure building on all fronts, Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen has also told Washington it is up to EU leaders alone to decide whether to admit Muslim Turkey to a bloc set to grow at last past Cold War borders.

In interviews and statements on the summit eve, Rasmussen warned the 10 applicants not to price themselves out of the market; urged Turkey to be patient about getting a date to start talks about joining; and pleaded for a united Cyprus to join.

But with key summit issues undecided only hours before the European Union summit opens at noon EST on Thursday, Rasmussen said he had already arranged for the meeting to go into the weekend if necessary.

"Hopefully the meeting can be completed on Friday," he said in a welcoming letter to the EU's 15 leaders. "However the Presidency is prepared to continue into the weekend if that should prove necessary

in order to achieve results aimed for."

The decisions the 15 leaders must make are far reaching, ambitious and unlikely to satisfy all in the biggest expansion in the EU's 45-year history.

The 10 nations poised to be accepted are Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Cyprus and Malta.

Turkey, backed by phone calls to EU leaders like Rasmussen from President Bush who sees Ankara as a key ally in a possible war against Iraq, wants a date by next year at the latest to start talks about joining the bloc.

But most EU states back a Franco-German plan to open talks with Ankara only in mid-2005.

"We will fight until the last second in Copenhagen to get before the end of 2003 a firm date for when talks can start," Turkey's ruling party leader Tayyip Erdogan said in an interview published in Germany's Sueddeutsche Zeitung newspaper on Thursday. "It is not Turkey that is now being tested, it is the EU. It must show its colours," he said.

Rasmussen said that Bush had sent a clear message in his telephone call that the European Union should send a "strong and positive signal to Turkey."

US moves for democracy in ME

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell will Thursday launch a sensitive US initiative to strengthen democracy in Middle East countries.

The so-called US-Middle East Partnership Initiative, which has been delayed several times, is also to answer critics who say that the US administration favours authoritarian pro-American governments to the detriment of those leaning toward democracy.

Powell will make the official announcement in a speech to the Heritage Foundation.

But the program, if not handled with care, runs the risk of offending Arab governments, which, although allied with Washington, are not considered paragons of social and political freedoms.

"The US-Middle East Partnership Initiative... will provide

funding and a framework for the United States to work together with governments and people in the Arab world to expand economic, education and political opportunity," said a State Department statement.

It also intends to strengthen economic and cultural links, added the statement.

Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage will serve as coordinator for the project, to be managed by the department's Bureau of Near East Affairs, it said.

The initiative follows several US analyses seeking the cause of resentment of the United States by a large part of the Arab population following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

It is intended, say observers, as a response to accusations that Washington's interest in the region is oil and support of Israel, and that it is indifferent to the aspirations of

Arab people.

The initiative was to have been announced on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September but this was called off as President George W. Bush was then pressing the United Nations to take a tough line with Iraq.

The State Department then leaked that it would be announced in November, but that, too, was put off to an undetermined date near the end of the year.

US officials were concerned at the time that the project would not get a warm welcome from countries in the region.

A State Department official said Wednesday that Washington was counting on allocating some 20 million dollars to the initiative, but that the project would also include a review of existing US aid to the countries involved with an eye to improving democratic reform.



US actress Drew Barrymore arrives at the premiere of her film "Confessions of a Dangerous Mind," in Los Angeles, California on Wednesday. The movie is the directorial debut of US actor George Clooney.