

Americans divided over invasion of Iraq

War unlikely before February: UK expert

AFP, Washington

Americans are divided on whether the United States should invade Iraq if the Bush administration provides proof that Baghdad is producing weapons of mass destruction, according to a Time/CNN poll released Thursday.

According to the survey, 54 percent of Americans would approve such action even if the UN inspectors do not find evidence of such production.

Thirty-eight percent said they would not favor that decision, while eight percent said they were not sure.

In the case of an invasion, 65 percent felt the US should use military force, including ground troops, to remove Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from power.

However, two-thirds, or 66 percent, said they would oppose invasion if neither the UN nor President George W. Bush offer such proof.

The same survey found that 67 percent of Americans approve of the job UN weapons inspectors are doing in Iraq, but three out of ten, or 31 percent, believe the US should invade right away if Saddam were to obstruct their work.

The telephone poll was conducted by Harris Interactive from December 17-18 and has a margin of error of 3.1 percent.

Meanwhile, the United States will beef up its military presence in the Gulf region with 50,000 combat troops and tons of military hardware in early January, The Washington Post said on Friday, quoting top defence officials.

The deployment will also include tens of thousands of reservists and will give US President George W. Bush the option to start combat operations against Iraq in late January or early February, the officials said.

The war would come after January 27, when UN chief weapons inspector Hans Blix provides the UN Security Council his first substantive report on Iraq's weapons declaration -- his initial evaluation on Thursday said it lacked "supporting evidence" for Iraq's claim that it has no chemical, biological or nuclear arms.

Moreover, a possible war against Iraq is not likely before the end of February as Britain and the United States need time to send enough forces to the region, a defence expert in London said Thursday.

"There's still probably a couple of months altogether before we end up in a potential war situation" allowing Iraq plenty of time to cooperate, said Timothy Garden from the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

"If you look at the build up of forces and the announcement this week by the UK that it's doing the preparatory moves it would take a certainly a month to get everything into theatre after you start deploying," the former serviceman told BBC radio.

US, UK not providing enough intelligence: Blix

World cannot be sure Iraq has no WMD

REUTERS, London

Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix said Friday that the United States and Britain were not giving him enough intelligence for his weapons search in Iraq.

"The most important thing that governments like the UK or the US could give us would be to tell us of sites where they are convinced that they keep some weapons of mass destruction. This is what we want to have," he told BBC Radio.

Asked if he was getting access to such intelligence information, Blix said: "Not very much, not yet. I hope we will and now that we are in full operation, I hope it will come."

"We get a lot of briefings about what they believe the Iraqis have. But what of course you really need to have is an indication of a place

where things are stored -- if they know it."

AFP adds: Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix said Thursday that the world cannot be sure Iraq does not have weapons of mass destruction.

In a briefing to the UN Security Council on Iraq's 12,000-page weapons declaration, Blix said there was "a lack of supporting evidence" for Iraq's claim that it has no chemical, biological or nuclear arms.

"The absence of that evidence means of course that we cannot have confidence that there do not remain weapons of mass destruction," Blix told reporters afterwards.

However, during the briefing, Blix also pointed out that he could not "disprove" the Iraqi claims to have destroyed all prohibited weaponry.

"Statements need to be sup-

ported by documentation or other evidence. Only so do they become verifiable," he said, adding that his overall impression was that "not much new significant information" had been provided in the voluminous Iraqi report.

Questions remained, he said, over Iraq's destruction of indigenous produced "training" missile engines, the accounting for 50 conventional warheads declared destroyed but not recovered, 550 mustard gas shells declared lost after the Gulf War and the destruction of biological warfare agents.

"While in most cases issues are outstanding because there is a lack of supporting evidence, in a few cases, there is information in our possession that would appear to contradict Iraq's account," Blix said.

He specifically cited indications

that Iraq's account of its production and unilateral destruction of anthrax between 1988 and 1991 "may not be accurate."

Iraq has admitted producing 8,500 liters of anthrax but later declared it was all destroyed. UN inspectors estimated the country could have produced 24,000 liters of the deadly spore.

"There was not sufficient evidence to show that all was destroyed. Hence, there is a question, is there still some anthrax in Iraq?" he said.

Iraq, Blix noted, had previously provided a table concerning the additional import of bacteria growth media -- used in the production of anthrax and other biological warfare agents.

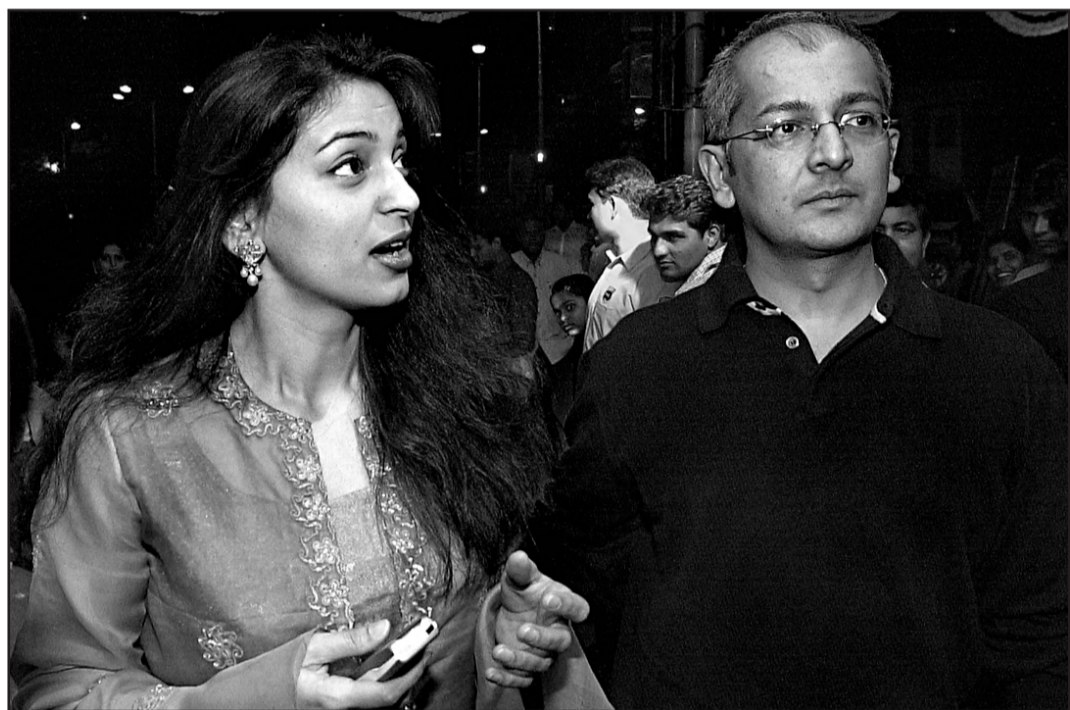


PHOTO: AFP
Bollywood actress Juhi Chawla (L) and her husband Jay Meheta arrive at the premiere of the movie 'Kaante' in Bombay on Thursday. Director Sanjay Gupta's movie 'Kaante' which features top Bollywood actors is based on the Quentin Tarantino's Hollywood hit 'Reservoir Dogs'.

3 women killed in Kashmir after dress warning

AFP, Jammu

Two Muslim women were beheaded and a third gunned down in Indian-administered Kashmir overnight, just days after militants had issued a warning that strict Islamic dress code should be followed, police said Friday.

A spokesman said a group of militants entered Hasiot village in Rajouri district, 150 km from the state's winter capital Jammu, and killed the three college students late Thursday.

The spokesman said two women, who were cousins, were beheaded while a third was shot dead. They were all aged between 18 and 20.

The fathers of the cousins had also been killed by militants a few months ago.

Police believed the killings could be linked to the dress code warning, coming just two days after militants of the Lashker-e-Jabbar (LeJ) outfit had put up posters at the college ordering women students to wear burqas, an all-covering head-to-toe garment, and men to wear sherwanis (traditional coats) and caps.

Britain seeks second UN resolution for Iraq war

AFP, London

Britain will seek the UN's explicit approval for war on Iraq in a second resolution at the end of January if arms inspections show President Saddam Hussein is in breach of United Nations demands, The Times reported Friday.

The daily said the British decision emerged after the US on Thursday declared Iraq in material breach of its UN weapons obligations because it had flouted Security Council resolution 1441 through omissions in its arms declaration.

That development brought the US to the brink of war, British newspapers said.

The reason for Britain's keenness for a second UN resolution was that it wanted to obtain full international backing for military action to disarm Iraq, and it was confident it could obtain one, The

Times said.

Government sources told the paper that the US administration would go along with the British plan so long as it believed a new resolution would be approved.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Tony Blair told the left-wing Guardian daily in an interview that the US, Britain and other members of the UN security council would decide the seriousness of Saddam's breaches of UN resolution 1441, not the UN weapons inspection team -- which would only establish the facts of any breach.

"The inspectors will, as it were, state the facts. The judgement as to the seriousness of the facts is obviously a matter for the nations at the UN," Blair said.

The right-wing Daily Telegraph reported that Britain's defence ministry was looking in the shipping

market to hire four more roll-on roll-off ferries from January 15 to take British armour to the Gulf.

The paper quoted shipping sources in Paris as saying the French and the Dutch were also looking for similar ferries in an indication that France would also respond to America's call for allies.

The Telegraph said that Britain's defence ministry had three giant ferries of its own operating under a private finance initiative.

It chartered three ships on Wednesday: a ferry to carry tanks and armoured personnel carriers, a container ship to transport stores and equipment, and a semi-submersible which will move landing craft, the Telegraph said.

The four additional ferries would be needed for 90 days from January 15, with an option for a further 90 days, the paper added.

18 policemen killed in Indian ambush

AFP, Ranchi

At least 18 policemen were killed and 21 injured in an ambush by Maoist rebels in a dense jungle on the borders of the eastern Indian states of Jharkhand and Orissa, an official said Friday.

Jharkhand state home secretary Sushma Singh said the ambush took place in the Manoharpur district, near the border with Orissa, Thursday night.

Police were on their way to a village in the area to investigate a murder case when they were ambushed.

Singh said six policemen had been admitted to the Manoharpur hospital in Jharkhand, while another 15 were taken to Rourkela in Orissa.

The death toll could rise as the condition of some is serious, she said.

Nearly a dozen vehicles were torched in the attack.

Pak battle against terror a long haul

AFP, Islamabad

The arrests of nine alleged al-Qaeda backers in a US-backed raid and the likely death of a suspect in the Daniel Pearl murder reinforce Pakistan's fears that the battle against terrorism will be a long haul, analysts said Friday.

Pakistani police and US FBI agents Thursday arrested the suspected al-Qaeda members, including two American citizens and a Canadian, after a shoot-out in the eastern city of Lahore.

They detained the house's owner, Doctor Ahmad Javed Khawaja, who police sources said is believed to have treated Taliban or al-Qaeda extremists and was maintaining contacts with them.

Eight of his relatives were also arrested.

Also Thursday, a suspected al-

Qaeda associate and one of Pakistan's most wanted men, Asif Ramzi, was believed to have been killed in a blast at a warehouse used by Islamic extremists in the violence-plagued southern city of Karachi, according to police.

Ramzi had a three-million-rupee (50,000-dollar) bounty on his head for allegedly helping plot the kidnapping and murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl and for attacks against Islam's Shiite minority.

The developments were the latest apparent successes for Pakistani authorities in their campaign against terrorists, but security sources say Islamic extremists still have a nationwide reservoir that provides them with shelter, money and political support.

Venezuela strikers defy court order

REUTERS, Caracas

Venezuela's opposition, ignoring a temporary Supreme Court order to restart the strike-hit oil industry, planned on Friday to intensify street protests and keep a clamp on oil operations in a drive to pressure President Hugo Chavez to resign.

The actions signaled no let-up in the crippling 19-day-old opposition strike that has hit oil production, choked off exports and caused unprecedented food and gasoline shortages in the world's fifth-largest petroleum exporter.

Leftist former paratrooper Chavez, who was elected in 1998 and survived a coup in April, has vowed to break the strike and has given the armed forces powers to help him do this. He is refusing opposition calls to quit and hold early elections.

'India, China helping Iran make N-bomb'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

Iran has been secretly engaged in building large facilities to produce nuclear weapons, procuring materials from India and China via phoney front companies to camouflage its bid to enter the nuclear club, says the Washington Post.

Scientists from Ukraine and Russia were aiding Iran in building the secret facilities at Natanz and Arak south of Tehran, according to a report in the Post on Thursday. It said Iran was building the clandestine facilities for the past five years under the garb of using it for producing electricity.

The report, quoting US government officials and information obtained by an Iranian opposition group, said that two recently disclosed sites, near the cities of Natanz and Arak south of Tehran,

appear designed to help produce enriched uranium or plutonium, the fissile material needed for nuclear weapons.

Until the facilities were revealed in August by the opposition group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the Iranian government had not disclosed their existence to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), an arm of the United Nations.

The Post said US officials have not been able to determine whether the Russian involvement in the Iranian program is officially sanctioned, but they have pressed Russian officials to halt any cooperation in Iran's nuclear efforts. Russia is helping Iran build a reactor at a nuclear plant on the Persian Gulf coast at Bushehr, which will become operational late next year or in early 2004.

Roh for revamping ROK-US ties

REUTERS, Seoul

President-elect Roh Moo-hyun called Friday for a revamp of South Korea's relationship with the United States, but ruled out radical change and pledged to work with Washington to curtail North Korea's nuclear arms program.

Roh, a 56-year-old human rights lawyer who won Thursday's presidential election after campaigning for greater autonomy from Washington, said he would propose amendments to a pact governing US forces stationed in the South since the Korean War.

Washington, which favors a tougher line on the unpredictable and possibly nuclear-armed North than Roh and outgoing President Kim Dae-jung, put a brave face on the result, the latest indication that its popularity around the world may be waning.

"The traditional friendship and alliance between ROK (Republic of Korea) and the United States must mature and advance in the 21st century," Roh told a morning-after news conference.



PHOTO: AFP
South Korean president-elect Roh Moo-hyun pays respects to Korean War victims by putting incense on an unknown soldier's grave on Friday at Seoul National Cemetery. Liberal reformer Roh Moo-hyun, who rejects US efforts to isolate North Korea, declared victory on Thursday in South Korea's tightly contested presidential polls.

Palestinian polls set for delay

ME quartet divided over roadmap

AFP, Gaza City

A Palestinian militant and a Jewish settler were killed Friday as violence continued in the Gaza Strip, while in Washington top world diplomats were to meet to discuss a peace "roadmap" which the United States has already delayed until after Israeli polls next month.

In Ramallah, the Palestinian electoral committee was expected to recommend to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat that he delay scheduled presidential and legislative polls also due in January until after Israeli troops pull back from the West Bank, occupied for six straight months.

In the central Gaza town of Deir El-Balah, an overnight raid by 10 Israeli tanks and two bulldozers left a Palestinian militant dead. The Israeli armoured column was backed up by helicopters which fired machine-guns over the town.

Israeli troops ordered the inhabitants of the home of an activist of Arafat's Fatah movement to evacuate the building before destroying it with explosives, Palestinian security sources said.

The slain man was identified by witnesses as Nadjji Mussa, 23, a member of the Popular Resistance Committees which are made up of former members of all Palestinian factions and maintain close ties with each.

Six other Palestinians, mostly

youths, were injured in the foray.

The army said in a statement it had dynamited three houses belonging to "terrorists" and arrested 10 people, three of them wanted for anti-Israeli attacks.

During searches in the town, the troops unearthed a home-made mortar and bomb-making equipment, the army said. It added that shots had been fired at the Israeli forces as they entered the town, although no soldiers were injured.

Meanwhile, top officials from the United States, Russia, the United Nations and Europe meet here Friday for talks clouded by disagreement on how best to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

The diplomatic "quartet" on the Middle East was expected to have finalized a "roadmap" towards a final settlement -- but the United States, under pressure from Israel, decided the document would not be adopted until after next month's elections in the Jewish state.

The move came as a stinging diplomatic rebuff to Europe, which had called at its Copenhagen summit last week for the document to be adopted at the quartet ministerial meeting.

"Because of the Israeli election, because of the number of issues that are before the Israeli public right now, we think it would be wiser in this instance for us to continue to work on the roadmap and wait until after the

Israeli election is over," US Secretary of State Powell said.

Disagreement over the roadmap burst into the open at a US-EU ministerial meeting here on Wednesday.

"To European opinion it's very important that the voters of Israel know what the world thinks about the situation," Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moeller said.

In an apparent bid to assuage European anger over the decision, President George W. Bush is expected to meet members of the quartet at the White House.

Bush told Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak by telephone on Thursday that despite stalling on the roadmap, he still backed the eventual creation of a Palestinian state, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

Suggestions of a damaging EU-US rift on Middle East policy have multiplied throughout the year, with some European observers viewing Bush administration hawks as too lenient towards Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

EU External Relations commissioner Chris Patten was pessimistic about the chances of much progress in peace efforts until after the January 28 polls.

"I rather doubt whether we'll be able to take any very practical steps in the next few weeks, while there is an election campaign in Israel," Patten said Thursday.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinians and foreigners protest on Thursday in the center of Nablus against the presence of Israeli soldiers and checkpoints in and around the self-rule northern West Bank city. After six months of reoccupation, curfews and deadly clashes, Palestinians were wallowing in increasing despair as their plight drags on with no end in sight.

Bone marrow stem cells used to create brain cells

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Stem cells from a person's own bone marrow can be used to generate brain cells and other nervous system cells that, when put back into the body, may be a way to treat diseases like brain cancer or Alzheimer's, researchers said on Friday.

"Neural stem cells have a lot of characteristics that make them an attractive means of treating neurological disorders -- but they come from precarious sources," said Dr. John Yu, co-director of the brain tumor program at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles and the study's senior author.

He was referring to the political and ethical issues surrounding the use of embryonic and fetal stem cells in medical research.

Using renewable stem cells culled from bone marrow solves that dilemma -- as well as potential problems with tissue rejection and uncontrolled growth of stem cells cultivated in a lab dish, Yu said.

Stem cell research is a broad but preliminary field based on the discovery of master cells that can give rise to various cells of the body. Most adult tissue and blood contain small numbers of stem cells but the more controversial source is from very early embryos, whose cells can become any kind of cell.