

## 'War a certainty as US pours troops into Gulf'

### Iraq not serious about disarmament: Bush

AFP, Baghdad

The United States is forging ahead with massive war plans and Baghdad charged Saturday that Washington will declare war whatever it does, although Russia insisted Iraq has not broken the UN arms resolution. News that more than 110,000 US troops will be deployed in the Gulf region by the end of January did nothing to calm fears in Iraq that conflict is coming.

The US contention that Iraq is in material breach of UN disarmament Resolution 1441 is all part of a premeditated plan to wage war, an official Baghdad newspaper said.

"The game that the United States is playing with Iraq, with the UN Security Council, with the UNMOVIC and IAEA (weapons inspectors) is a preconceived game with a clear target: to invade Iraq militarily," said Al-Iraq.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell's statement on doubts and suspicions concerning the Iraqi declaration "that it has no weapons of mass destruction" and all the other statements is part of this game," the newspaper said.

"The United States wants to drive us and the world into a dead end in the hope of getting the Security Council to issue a new resolution authorising it to wage war, or of provoking a split inside the council that offers the opportunity to go ahead with its aggressive plan unilaterally."

The influential Babel newspaper, run by President Saddam Hussein's elder son, Uday, said "Iraq has a choice between aggression or aggression."

The United States announced Friday it was virtually doubling its military strength in the Gulf as President George W. Bush said Iraq's weapons declaration was "not encouraging" for those seeking to avoid conflict.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair also urged troops to be ready for war as world powers braced for weeks and possibly months of wrangling at the United Nations over the best way to disarm Iraq.

The close allies have declared Iraq in "material breach" of its United Nations obligations because of omissions in its December 7 weapons declaration.

Another 50,000 US troops and additional military equipment will be sent to the Gulf by early January, a US defence official said. There are now about 65,000 US military personnel in the region, including 15,000 in Kuwait on the border with Iraq.

The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff inspected troops stationed in Qatar on Friday as part of the buildup he said was aimed at forcing Iraq to disarm.

It aimed to bolster "the diplomatic angle", General Richard Myers said, and make sure the Iraqi regime "understands the options that it has, that it is fairly up to them how we go," he said.

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

Bush, who on Friday postponed a planned trip to Africa from January 10 to 17, said Iraq has failed "those who long for peace" with its arms report.

"We're serious about keeping the peace, we're serious about working with our friends in the United Nations" to disarm Iraq, said Bush.

Meanwhile, the Iraq crisis intensifying, President Bush called off a planned trip to Africa next month to focus on his looming decision - expected in several weeks - whether to go to war to disarm Saddam Hussein's regime.

Hoping to increase pressure on Saddam to fully disclose and dispose of his weapons of mass destruction, Bush had already given the go-ahead to double the 50,000 US troop deployment in the Persian Gulf region in early January, a senior administration official said Friday.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld is expected to sign the deployment order in the next week or two as part of what another official called "a ramping up on various fronts."

A senior White House official, speaking like others on condition of anonymity, said the biggest international concern with Bush's Africa trip, which had been scheduled for Jan. 10-17, was the conflict with Iraq. Bush did not want to be out of the country and away from his foreign policy team during a crucial decision-making period.



US marines aim their weapons during US manoeuvres in the Kuwaiti desert, some 25 km from the Iraqi border on Friday. The United States declared that Iraq was in "material breach" of its obligations, with Secretary of State Colin Powell warning the world would not wait forever for Baghdad to disarm.

## Iraq has not breached UN resolution: Russia

AFP, Washington

Russia does not consider that Iraq has breached the UN disarmament resolution, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said Friday, commenting on Thursday's report by arms inspectors to the Security Council in New York.

The inspectors' report "is very comprehensive, but it does not contain alarming definitions that could be interpreted as a violation of the UN Security Council resolution by that country," Ivanov told Russian journalists in the US capital where he is taking part in talks on the Middle East.

"We cannot say that that Russia is or is not satisfied with the report. We have simply taken it into consideration," he was quoted as saying by Interfax news agency.

The comment was Russia's first official reaction to the UN inspectors' report on Iraq's arms declaration, which was followed by blistering criticism of Iraq from Britain and the United States.

Ivanov noted that international weapons inspectors in Iraq had expressed doubts regarding "that this or that statement in the Iraqi declaration corresponds to reality. But it is for the inspectors to answer these questions."

Ivanov was speaking after a meeting with US Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington, Interfax said.



Firefighters (R) try to control a fire in Kolkata on Saturday. Hundreds of people were rescued from trapped buildings after a major blaze swept through one of the busiest markets in the West Bengal capital.

## Devastating fire at Bara Bazaar in Kolkata: 30 injured

AFP, Kolkata

At least 30 people were injured and up to 100 shops destroyed when a devastating fire raged through one of the busiest markets in the eastern Indian city of Calcutta early Saturday, officials said.

The blaze began around 1:15 am (1945 GMT Friday) at the Bara Bazaar (Big Market) in the heart of the city and was brought under control more than eight hours later at around 09:30 am, West Bengal state fire services minister Pratim Chatterjee told AFP.

"The fire, which was detected in an old dilapidated cotton godown (warehouse), spread quickly and engulfed the adjacent buildings triggering panic among the people," the minister said.

"Thirty have been reported injured, including some firefighters. Several hundred people who were trapped have been rescued."

## US to share intelligence with UN on Iraqi arms

REUTERS, Washington/Baghdad

The United States was poised on Saturday to hasten the moment of truth over Iraqi disarmament by giving UN arms inspectors secret data on suspected weapon sites and the names of scientists likely to have inside information. New signs of US preparations for a possible war on Iraq included President Bush's cancellation of a trip to Africa on a few weeks' notice and a US request to Germany to provide 2,000 troops to guard US bases in the country at the end of January.

Bush on Friday called the arms declaration provided by Iraq in response to UN Security Council Resolution 1441 "disappointing," echoing the grim tone of Secretary of State Colin Powell who had condemned it as a "material breach" of the resolution.

Iraq rejected the US "material breach" characterization -- a potential justification for war under Resolution 1441 -- as extreme. "This is an exaggerated response," General Hussam Mohammed Amin, the chief Iraqi official liaising with the UN inspectors, told Reuters. "It was political. Even before they were able to read and analyze the declaration they said it had many gaps."

The United States, seeking a swift conclusion to the arms inspection process initiated by Resolution 1441 last month, said it planned to give the UN inspectors new intelligence on sites where Iraq may be hiding its weapons of mass destruction program either on Friday or over the weekend.

There was no indication early on Saturday that the data had been provided yet.

Officials said the information would involve fewer than six sites where US intelligence believed Iraq has "suspicious chemical weapons or elements of production."

Other US officials said Washington may suggest names of Iraqi scientists for the UN experts to interview as early as next week.

"We may make suggestions ... possibly next week," a senior US official told Reuters. "We've told (UN inspectors) the Iraqis are not going to slow roll us on this (and) drag it out for months and months and months."

The Bush administration, believing information gleaned from Iraqi scientists could be decisive in showing Baghdad has weapons of mass destruction, has urged UN inspectors to take scientists and their families out of the country so they will feel free to talk.

## Senate leader Lott quits over segregation comments

AFP, Washington

Trent Lott resigned Friday as the incoming Senate leader over comments that raised a race controversy and embarrassed President George W. Bush's Republican Party.

Lott, who has been under intense pressure for more than a week, said in a statement he would step down as the Senate Republican leader on January 6, the day before Congress resumes.

"In the interest of pursuing the best possible agenda for the future of our country, I will not seek to remain as majority leader of the United States Senate for the 108th Congress effective January 6, 2003," he said.

The Republicans won back control of the Senate during mid-term elections in November. That would have made Lott the majority leader in January, putting him in a position to back Bush during the 2004 presidential election.

## Hindu zealots barred from performing puja at Qutab Minar

AFP, New Delhi

Police in the Indian capital Saturday stopped around 150 Hindu activists from performing prayers at a mosque which they claim was built over 27 demolished Hindu temples, police said.

Members of the Vishwan Hindu Parishad (VHP, or World Hindu Council) and other radical Hindu outfits gathered at the mosque in a complex surrounding the world heritage Qutab Minar monument in the south of the city and tried to perform prayers, but were prevented by police.

The activists claim a Mughul emperor built the mosque in the 12th century after demolishing 27 Hindu and Jain temples.

"Around 150 activists who had gathered here demanding right to perform prayers were stopped from entering the protected monument and later arrested," a senior officer told the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

## Indo-Pak tensions brought down from 'alarming level': US

AFP, Washington

US and international diplomatic efforts have brought tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan down from "alarming levels," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Friday.

Prompted by a reporter to assess US-India ties in 2002, Fleischer said bilateral relations "are good, they are strong" and went on to say credit outreach to Delhi and Islamabad had gone a long way to defuse tensions.

"The situation between India and Pakistan has been one that has been marked by great tension.

There have been moments in this administration where the tension reached alarming levels," he said.

"As a result of the intervention of the president, the secretary of state, and numerous leaders around the world, including (Russian) President (Vladimir) Putin and (British) Prime Minister (Tony) Blair, there is now a markedly diminished point of tension," said Fleischer.

"The president has met with the prime minister of India on several occasions, and he looks forward to continuing to work on improving US-Indian relations," the spokesman concluded.

## Kuwait to push for Gulf stand on foreign troops in region

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait denied reports Saturday that it will demand that fellow Gulf Arab states take a united stand on the presence of foreign troops in the region, the official KUNA news agency said.

Al-Qabas newspaper quoted political sources saying that the emirate would present a "political paper" to the Gulf Cooperation Council summit on Saturday-Sunday seeking a joint stance on the foreign forces issue.

"There is no such paper though some ideas will be put to discussion at the summit," First Deputy Premier and Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah told reporters before departing to head the Kuwaiti delegation at the summit in Doha.

Sheikh Sabah added that such a paper is "very unlikely ... as there is no GCC state without a foreign presence," KUNA said.

## US admits detaining 450 Middle Eastern men KSA blasts US 'racism'

AFP, Los Angeles

US officials on Friday said that as many as 450 men of Middle Eastern descent, mostly Iranians, were detained when they voluntarily showed up to register under new anti-terror rules.

But senior Muslim leaders here said community leaders told them that more than 1,000 had been picked up in the roundup that sparked furious protests in Los Angeles' giant Islamic community. Officials at the US Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Justice Department however dismissed the estimate as "irresponsible and provocative," but conceded that hundreds of men and boys over the age of 16 had been held.

"We are still tallying up the numbers, but unofficial estimates indicate that around 450 people were detained in southern California," said Jorge Martinez of the Justice Department.

"But most of those people were quickly released and it appears that a dwindling number of just 100 are still in custody," he added. "These detentions have been blown out of all proportion," he told AFP.

Meanwhile, the detention of hundreds of Muslim men under a new US anti-terrorism campaign is an act of racism that will only deepen the divide between Muslims and Americans, Saudi dailies charged Saturday.

"To a great extent, it is similar to racist practices we thought had disappeared long ago. But now they come anew with hi-tech means," Okaz newspaper said. "The US security authorities are implementing the programme in a loathsome way, ordering thousands of detainees to strip ... under harsh weather conditions," the daily said.

US civil rights groups and Muslim leaders on Thursday called on Washington to scrap the "flawed and misguided" programme aimed at men from the Middle East, North Africa and North Korea following the arrest of scores of immigrants who voluntarily turned up to register under the new rules.

## US, UK jets bomb sites in S Iraq

AFP, Washington

US and British coalition warplanes bombed southern Iraq, destroying two air defense communication facilities, the Pentagon said Friday.

US Central Command (Centcom) said the sites near An Nasiriyah, 160 kilometers (100 miles) southeast of Baghdad and Basra, were bombed at about 0730 GMT.

The Pentagon said the strikes carried out by fighter jets using precision-guided weapons were "executed as a self-defense measure in response to Iraqi hostile threats and acts against Coalition forces and their aircraft."

In Baghdad, a military spokesman said the US and British warplanes bombed civilian targets in three provinces in southern Iraq, without reporting any casualties.

"Enemy warplanes bombed at 0700 GMT civilian installations in the provinces of Basra, Zi-Qar and

Wasset before being forced to flee to their base in Kuwait under fire from missile batteries and anti-aircraft artillery," he said, quoted by the state news agency INA.

He said the "enemy warplanes also staged armed sorties over 15 southern provinces and towns."

Baghdad has long opposed the twin no-fly zones which the Western allies have enforced over southern and northern Iraq since the aftermath of the Gulf War without the sanction of any specific UN resolution.

The most recent bombing occurred Wednesday when coalition aircraft struck an Iraqi air defense radar site south of Al Kut, 160 kilometers (100 miles) southeast of Baghdad, the US Central Command said in a statement.

Iraqi forces have clashed almost daily with US and British patrols enforcing the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq.

## US vetoes UN resolution condemning Israel

### ME quartet calls for truce

AFP, United Nations

The United States Friday night vetoed a UN Security Council draft resolution proposed by Syria that would have condemned Israel for the murders of several UN employees in the Palestinian occupied territories.

Of the 15 council members, 12 voted for the Syrian resolution and two - Bulgaria and Cameroon - abstained.

The United States, as one of the five permanent members of the security council, wields an absolute veto over any council action. The other four are France, Russia, Britain and China.

draft covering all the questions," said US Ambassador John Negroponte. "Unfortunately, the sponsor (Syria) refuses to engage our proposition."

Negroponte said that, in voting against the resolution, the United States remained "deeply concerned by the situation of UN employees in conflict situation."

The Syrian draft resolution was in response to the death of several United Nations employees killed by Israeli occupational forces" as well as the destruction of a World Food Program warehouse and its contents of 537 tons of food aid in the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, the European Union, the United States, the United

Nations and Russia on Friday called for an immediate ceasefire between the Palestinians and Israel.

In a statement issued in place of a "roadmap" for peace efforts that the United States declined to adopt until after next month's Israeli elections, the so-called diplomatic quartet on the Middle East renewed their commitment to Palestinian statehood. The text was issued after talks at the White House between President George W. Bush and quartet representatives Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moeller, whose country chairs the European Union until December 31, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan.

## Venezuelan opposition holds massive rally

AFP, Caracas

Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of Caracas Friday to oppose President Hugo Chavez, as oil workers defied a court order and pursued a 19-day-old strike.

The mood was upbeat among protesters, despite international warnings that the crisis could explode into violence as government opponents pledged to keep the vital oil sector paralyzed.

"He's out, he's out, he's out next week," the flag-waving crowd chanted to a beat provided by a cacophony of horns, whistles and drums.

"We are fighting for liberty, against the dictator Hugo Chavez who has brought us nothing but misery, hunger and hate," said Marco Selis, a 26-year-old engineer, a Venezuelan flag painted on his face, T-shirt and cap.



Women activists and supporters of the People Front shout slogans during a torch-lit rally in Kathmandu on Friday. The demonstrators protested against the king's sacking of the prime minister in October.

## WTC steel turned into plaques for families of victims

AFP, New York

Steel from the debris of the New York World Trade Towers devastated in terrorist attacks on September 11 last year has been melted to turn into plaques that will be given to the families of the victims.

The 10-centimetre by 13-centimetre (four-by-five-inch) plaques were made following an initiative by Lee Ielpi, a retired fireman, whose fireman son was among the almost 2,800 dead in the towers hit by two hijacked jets.

"There are a lot of people out there that don't have their loved ones at home, in a small way this might be a little piece they can hold," said a tearful Ielpi during a press conference.