

## Iraq accuses US of gearing up for 'a world war'

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi warplanes shot down an unmanned US reconnaissance drone over the southern part of the country, as the government of President Saddam Hussein accused Washington of gearing up for "a world war."

Iraqi aircraft and anti-aircraft artillery shot down the unmanned US drone, a military spokesman said Monday, quoted by the state INA news agency.

"The sky eagles and the courageous men manning anti-aircraft artillery downed a US Predator reconnaissance aircraft which flew in from Kuwaiti airspace to violate our airspace," he said.

US military officials earlier said Iraqi aircraft shot down the Predator in a "no-fly" zone where US and British aircraft have stepped up attacks in recent weeks.

Iraqi aircraft are barred from "no-fly" zones over northern and southern Iraq, and the incident is likely to further raise tensions in the region as Washington presses ahead with its troop buildup in an apparent prelude for war against Iraq.

"This is a strategic buildup for a war reaching the level of a world war and targeting ... the entire Arab nation," Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said at an Afro-Asian solidarity meeting with Iraq here.

Some 65,000 US troops are currently deployed in the Gulf and 50,000 more are expected to be sent to the region.

"Does it make sense that this troop buildup ... targets just Iraq and is aimed only at changing the Iraqi regime?" Aziz asked.

"The direct target now is Iraq, but after Iraq no one will be safe -- neither in Marrakesh (Morocco) nor in Bahrain," Aziz said.

The return of UN arms inspectors to Iraq should be sufficient to allay fears about Baghdad's

armament programs, Aziz said.

Arms inspections resumed for the first time in four years just over three weeks ago. They were mandated by a tough UN Security Council resolution which left the door open to a UN-sanctioned military attack on Iraq if Baghdad did not sufficiently prove it was not developing weapons of mass destruction.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia warned Washington against going it alone, while also hinting it might cooperate in a UN-sanctioned war. Turkish Prime Minister Abdullah Gul also remained on the fence over the extent he was willing to involve Ankara in an attack on Iraq.

But US Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz insisted Washington is still looking for a peaceful solution.

US President George W. Bush "has not made any decision about the use of force to achieve the goal of disarmament of Iraq's arsenal of terror," Wolfowitz said in a letter published in Monday's Washington Post.

Meanwhile, inspectors carried out a 24th day of inspections Monday, visiting five sites including a factory making powdered milk for babies twice bombed by US warplanes.

A biological team from the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) entered the baby milk factory at Abu Ghreib, 20 kilometers (12 miles) northwest of the capital.

Suspected of secret biological weapons production, the factory was destroyed during the 1991 Gulf war and bombed again in 1998 after reconstruction.

The inspectors' spokesman, Hiro Ueki, said experts from UNMOVIC and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had carried out roughly 150 inspections since resuming searches, adding there were currently 102 UNMOVIC and six IAEA inspectors in Iraq. Ueki also said the inspectors were preparing to interview Iraqi weapons scientists who would brief the inspectors on their work.

### Iranian president visits Pakistan



## India unwilling to discuss peace: Musharraf

### Iran urged to mediate Indo-Pak peace

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has accused India of being unwilling to make peace and asked Iran for help to defuse tension.

"India's hegemonic ambitions and its unwillingness to resolve outstanding disputes have been the source of instability and tension in South Asia," Musharraf said during a state banquet held in honour of visiting Iranian President Mohammad Khatami.

"India should also refrain from committing atrocities against the Kashmiri people aimed at frustrating their struggle for freedom from Indian occupation," Musharraf said.

"We hope you (Khatami) will persuade India to agree to solve peacefully the dispute, in accordance with the UN resolutions and Kashmiri

people's wishes," Musharraf said.

Khatami arrived in Pakistan on Monday to discuss Afghanistan, a proposed gas pipeline across Islamabad's territory to India and a possible US-led war against Iraq.

Iran, at times at odds with Pakistan, has traditionally enjoyed good relations with India. Ties with Islamabad have improved greatly since the Pakistani government dropped its support for the Taliban in Afghanistan late last year.

Energy-rich Iran has proposed building a \$4 billion pipeline across Pakistan to India to tap into the huge Indian market and help promote peace between the subcontinent's feuding nuclear powers.

Pakistan and Iran agreed last year to conduct a study into the feasibility of the pipeline project.

"Iran's policy is to safeguard India and Pakistan's national interests," said Khatami.

Iran is worried about repercussions from any US-led war on Iraq, which borders Iran, and is seeking to garner regional support to head off a conflict.

Tehran hopes the gas pipeline will go some way to promote peace, but India is worried about the security of supplies through Pakistan despite promises from Islamabad.

"We are ready to guarantee the security of this pipeline...because economic issues should not be mixed with political ones," Pakistani Foreign Minister Mian Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri told Iran's official IRNA news agency.

## Israeli army pulls back from Bethlehem for Christmas

REUTERS, Bethlehem

Israel's army said Tuesday it had pulled back to the outskirts of Bethlehem to allow Christmas celebrations to proceed in the town where Jesus was born.

The army said there would be no troops in Palestinian-ruled Bethlehem during Christmas week as long as intelligence did not indicate attacks were planned against Israeli citizens.

It said Christians with security permits living in Palestinian West Bank towns would be allowed into Bethlehem, as well as foreign tourists and pilgrims.

But Israel maintained its ban on Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, a Muslim, from making

his Christmas Eve pilgrimage to Bethlehem for the second straight year. It has accused him of not doing enough to halt attacks on Israelis.

The army said troops would remain around Bethlehem's edges as they have done during much of the two-year-old Palestinian uprising for independence.

Troops entered Bethlehem a month ago after a man from the area carried out a suicide bombing on a Jerusalem bus that killed 11 people, weeks after troops pulled back to ease conditions in Bethlehem.

During that period, the army imposed curfews and conducted constant patrols,

searching house to house and arresting dozens of suspected militants. No patrols were spotted Tuesday morning.

Witnesses said troops had pulled back to about 200 yards from the Church of the Nativity in central Bethlehem, where local Christian dignitaries were to attend Christmas Eve mass Tuesday night.

Arafat, from his headquarters in the city of Ramallah, 18 miles north of Bethlehem, blasted Israel Monday, demanding: "Is it fair that the whole world celebrates Christmas in freedom while our people in Palestine and Bethlehem are banned from celebrating Christmas?"

## Muslim mayor's home bombed in Philippines

### Mayor among 13 killed in blast

AFP, Cotabato

A bomb planted in the residential compound killed 13 people including a prominent Muslim mayor in the southern Philippines Tuesday.

Datu Piang Mayor Saudie Ampatuan was one of 13 killed when a homemade bomb exploded during a party he was hosting in his compound on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, military spokesman Julio Ando said.

Town councillor Rodolfo Wahab and 11 others were also killed, many of them succumbing to injuries in hospital. Another dozen people were injured, many seriously.

The incident comes barely a week after the mayor's younger brother, Hoffer Ampatuan, was shot dead in a nightclub in an unrelated

incident.

Ando said Muslim separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels were likely behind the incident, citing their previous use of similar home-made bombs and their conflicts with the Ampatuans, a prominent Muslim political clan.

The bomb featured a timing device and two mortar shells, a hallmark of explosive devices constructed by the MILF.

Ando said a witness identified a follower of MILF "Commander Rambo" as having planted the bomb.

Maguindanao provincial Governor Andal Ampatuan, the father of Saudie and Hoffer, condemned the incident through his spokesman Nori Unas but declined to name any suspects.

## US talks tough on DPRK

### Pyongyang takes steps to produce plutonium

REUTERS, Washington

The United States cautioned North Korea against using the world's focus on Iraq to indulge in nuclear brinkmanship, saying the United States could fight and win two wars at once.

But Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, despite his tough talk, said diplomacy still seemed the best way to deal with the reclusive and unpredictable communist state.

In South Korea, which would be in the front-line of any conflict, officials said President-elect Roh Moo-hyun scheduled Tuesday meetings with the ambassadors of China, Russia and Japan, neighbors of the North who also favor a softly softly approach.

Rumsfeld said Pyongyang would be making a mistake if it assumed the campaign to rid Iraq of weapons of mass destruction would divert attention from its own nuclear ambitions.

"We are capable of winning decisively in one (war) and swiftly defeating in the case of the other," he told a Pentagon briefing Monday. "Let there be no doubt about it."

North Korea, denounced by President Bush as a member of an "axis of evil" with Iraq and Iran, has set alarm bells ringing by removing UN monitoring equipment at a nuclear reactor capable of yielding weapons-grade plutonium.

But Rumsfeld drew a distinction between Pyongyang and Iraq,

saying years of diplomacy with Baghdad had failed.

North Korea says it has a right to possess nuclear weapons if it chooses and insists that Washington sign a non-aggression pact as a basis for talks on their differences.

Washington says Pyongyang must respect its international commitments, particularly a 1994 agreement to abandon its nuclear ambitions in return for fuel oil and help with energy production.

"The situation in North Korea is a fairly recent one," Rumsfeld said. "The diplomacy that's under way there is in its early stages with the United States and the interested neighboring countries."

AFP adds: Undaunted by strong US warnings, North Korea is taking concrete steps to produce weapons-grade plutonium by starting to repair mothballed nuclear facilities, reports said here Tuesday.

Yonhap news agency quoted South Korean government sources as saying that North Korean experts began repair work at a five-megawatt nuclear reactor from which plutonium was produced during a 1994 nuclear crisis.

"After removing the seals and disabling monitoring cameras at the five-megawatt reactor, North Korean technicians are believed to be doing repair work at the reactor," a government source said.

"This is interpreted as preparations for reactivating the reactor," the source was quoted as saying.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian children in Santa Clause outfits distribute candies to other children near the Church of the Nativity (not in picture) in the southern West Bank town of Bethlehem on Monday. The traditional midnight mass on December 24 is held at the church, but for the second year in a row Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will not be able to attend it due to an Israeli siege.



PHOTO: AFP

USS Truman aircraft carrier, carrying 80 aircraft -- F-14 and F-18 fighter/bombers and EA-6B electronic jammers -- arrived off the southern French port city of Marseille on Monday for a four-day stopover before heading to the eastern Mediterranean to support a possible war on Iraq.

## Republicans elect Frist as Senate leader

AFP, Washington

US Senate Republicans unanimously elected heart surgeon Bill Frist as their leader Monday, concluding the controversy that led up to the messy resignation of Trent Lott.

The 51 Republican members of the Senate elected Frist in a telephone conference call.

President George W. Bush, who is close to Frist, was quick to congratulate the 50-year-old Tennessee senator.

## Maoists set free 45 Nepalese schoolboys

AFP, Kathmandu

Some four dozen schoolboys kidnapped at gunpoint by suspected Maoist rebels in rural Nepal have safely returned home, an official said Tuesday.

Gun-wielding Maoists barged into the secondary boys school Saturday in the remote town of Lekgaon in Surkhet district and took about 45 students away, a district official told AFP.

The adolescents returned home, unharmed, late Monday, the official said. They had been ordered by their captors not to say where they were taken.