

Iraq stocks up food for looming US strike

US won't attack without UN backing: NATO chief

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq is increasing food rations to allow Iraqis to stock up on food ahead of any possible war with the United States, Iraq's trade minister said Thursday.

The minister, Mohammed Mehdi Saleh, also said any attack on Iraq would be no picnic and attackers would suffer heavy casualties. They would fail to achieve their goals, he added.

"Iraq has taken all required measures to protect the country from any possible aggression that could take place," Saleh told Reuters in an interview in English.

He said his ministry was one of the ministries responsible for taking some of these measures "to control the economic and trade situation during any possible war."

"We have basically supplied the people in quantity of food to be stocked in their houses for a minimum three months and we are going to increase the quantity in the coming months so that every body is secured in this regard," he said.

Iraq had distributed essential foodstuffs to every family every month. The rations include wheat, rice, cooking oil and powder milk. It began giving out a double ration once every two months earlier this year.

The foodstuff is imported by Iraq under an oil-for-food deal with the United Nations agreed since 1996 to ease the hardships of a 12-year-old economic embargo on Iraq.

Saleh said his ministry was also taking measures to ensure the local market continues to function in case of war.

"The internal market as well has been reviewed and measures have been taken to be implemented once any attack takes place," he said.

UN arms inspectors returned to Iraq last month after a four-year hiatus to resume a hunt for banned weapons of mass destruction, amid threats of war by the United States if Iraq fails to disarm under the terms of a United Nations resolution.

Asked if he believed a war with the United States was inevitable, Saleh, clad in green military fatigues, said: "The United States is preparing for war. We have taken measures to defend our country, our land and it will not be a picnic...."

"They will face hardship, difficulties and big losses if any aggression takes place and they will not achieve any objective from the war."

He said Iraqis had proved throughout the last century that they were tough fighters.

"Iraq has been able in very primitive weapons, even sticks, to kick out aggressors. Iraq is capable of defending its land and its territories," Saleh said. "We wish that no war will take place but we will be able to kick out any aggression."

AFP adds: The United States will not launch a unilateral war on Iraq without UN backing, NATO Secretary General George Robertson said Thursday in London.

He reiterated that the 19-member Alliance could support military action against Iraq, and has been asked to consider such an option, but said no decisions have yet been taken.

"Up to now the United States has kept very rigidly to the United Nations route. They still do, the inspectors are still there," he told the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

He added: "There is a certain amount of rhetoric, but in reality President Bush has strongly placed his country in the fold of NATO and also within international, multilateral institutions."



Iraqi Kurds walk at a village in Karkook, 250 km north of Baghdad on Thursday. UN arms inspectors continued their search across Iraq as Russia widened a rift on the UN Security Council over Iraq when it openly disputed Washington's claim of having proof that Baghdad is hiding weapons of mass destruction from UN inspectors and is in "material breach" of UN resolutions.

Al-Qaeda sleeper cells in US

AFP, Washington

Al-Qaeda sleeper cells in the United States and Canada had been in contact as recently as this month, Canadian intelligence experts were quoted as saying by the Washington Post on Wednesday.

A pizza delivery man, 34-year-old Mohamed Harkat, was arrested last week in Ottawa after making telephone calls to presumed members of Osama bin Laden's terror network in the United States, according to former Canadian Security Intelligence Service director Reid Morten.

Algerian-born Harkat, who has lived in Canada since 1995, is an associate of al-Qaeda operative Abu Zubaida, according to a court filing by the Canadian agency.

Zubaida, who was arrested in Pakistan last March, and is being held by US officials at an undisclosed location, identified Harkat as an al-Qaeda collaborator, the newspaper said, citing the Canadian agency.

Iran, Russia sign deal to boost nuke cooperation

AFP, Tehran

In a deal likely to spark fresh concerns in Washington, Russia and Iran agreed Wednesday to speed up the completion of the southern Bushehr nuclear plant and explore the construction of a second power station, IRNA reported.

The deal was signed between visiting Russian Energy Minister Alexander Rumyantsev and the head of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization Gholam-Reza Agazadeh, who were both quoted as asserting the project was for providing civilian power only.

The United States has been demanding Russia ditch the project, which will earn Moscow an estimated one billion dollars, arguing that the power station could form part of an alleged secret nuclear weapons programme.

In the protocol, the two sides reiterated the need for "speeding up the completion of Bushehr plant",

and "agreed to form a joint commission to carry out feasibility studies for the construction of another nuclear energy plant", the state news agency said.

The protocol also highlights Russia's obligation to finish the plant on schedule. Russia had initially undertaken to finish the Bushehr plant in 2005, but the country later announced it could be completed by the end of 2003.

It was not immediately clear if a new completion date had been set.

At a press conference earlier Wednesday, Rumyantsev asserted the project would go ahead despite US pressure and argued the nuclear cooperation with Iran was well within international norms.

"Iranian-Russia cooperation is in accordance with international regulations and the rules of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)," he asserted as he wrapped up a four-day visit here.

However, there was no immediate indication the two sides had formally signed a deal on the provision and return of plutonium to feed the reactors, even though Iranian President Mohammad Khatami announced in Pakistan on Tuesday that nuclear waste would be returned.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said last week the United States questioned why oil-rich Iran needed to pursue a nuclear energy programme.

Washington has identified two sites in the centre of Iran - Arak and Natanz -- that it says are part of Iran's fledgling covert nuclear weapons programme. Iran's atomic energy authority has labelled the US allegations "propaganda".

The Vienna-based organisation IAEA said last week its director general, Mohammed ElBaradei, would visit Iran in February to examine the Arak and Natanz facilities and possibly other sites.

3000 homes destroyed, 15 hurt in Iran quake

AFP, Tehran

Some 3,000 homes were destroyed and 15 people injured when an earthquake measuring 5.3 on the Richter scale hit western Iran, the official news agency IRNA reported Wednesday.

The tremor was registered at 8:33 pm (1703 GMT) Tuesday by Tehran University's geophysics centre, with the epicentre located some 50 kilometres (30 miles) northeast of western town of Kermanshah.

The report said the 3,000 homes destroyed in 50 villages in Kermanshah province had already suffered between 30 and 60 percent damage during a quake last April.

State radio said the intensity of the tremor -- which jolted a wide area in the west of the country near the border with Iraq -- was such that many residents rushed out onto the streets.

UN put Iraqi scientists under scrutiny

AFP, Baghdad

UN experts, pursuing the hunt for Iraq's elusive weapons arsenal, interviewed Thursday the head of Baghdad's Technology University after Russia disputed US claims of proof linking Iraq to international terrorism.

It was the second reported meeting with Iraqi scientists since disarmament inspectors resumed their work here a month ago, but little detail about the interviews has emerged.

"The inspectors asked me questions about the organisation of our establishment, the names of teachers and the work of the university," Mazen Mohammad told the Arab satellite news channel al-Jazeera.

"They also asked questions about our relations with the various universities and government bodies," in Iraq.

The interview began in his offices about 9:00 am and lasted about 100 minutes as the inspectors worked on through the Christmas holiday.

The inspectors had Tuesday interviewed an Iraqi scientist privately for the first time since they resumed work on November 27.

Sabah Abdul Nur, a professor at the technology university, had previously been linked to Iraq's nuclear programme.

He said he had been interviewed by representatives of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) before the last round of inspections ended in December 1998.

The United States has urged the inspectors to use their powers under disarmament resolution 1441 to spirit Iraqi weapons scientists and their families out of the country to interview them safe from any intimidation by the Baghdad regime.

However a leading Iraqi newspaper underlined once again they would find nothing untoward.

The United States and Britain should halt their hostile policy to Baghdad and "save face" before UN weapons inspectors prove the elusive arms do not exist, Babel said.

Snowstorm hits northeast of US

REUTERS, Boston

A major snowstorm swept the US Northeast on Wednesday, dumping up to three feet of snow in parts, disrupting air travel and bringing New England its whitest Christmas on record.

Scores of flights were diverted from New York and New England airports, including John F. Kennedy International and La Guardia, airport officials said.

Dulles Airport outside Washington D.C. took in 27 diverted flights starting about 6 p.m., said Tara Hamilton of the Washington Metropolitan Airports Authority. Baltimore-Washington International Airport took in about a dozen, mostly from New York's Kennedy Airport, said Cheryl Carley, an airport spokeswoman.

A Japan Air Boeing 747 was stuck in the snow at Kennedy and had to be towed back to the gate, said Laura Brown, a spokeswoman for the Federal Aviation Administration.

"This will be the biggest Christmas Day snowstorm on record," Eleanor Vallier-Talbot, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Taunton, Massachusetts, told Reuters.

Saddam says no to sat TV channels

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein on Wednesday turned down a suggestion to lift a ban on foreign satellite television, saying it was illogical to relay enemy or immoral material, state television reported.

Saddam told a cabinet meeting during which the suggestion to allow Iraqis to receive satellite broadcasts was made that only an elite in Baghdad was interested in receiving such broadcasts while the man in the street was busy with more mundane pursuits.

Moreover, "airing the views of others ... who are in enemy ranks would be tantamount to sabotage," he said, according to the state television.

And "banning immoral behaviour while simultaneously helping spread it (by airing footage that would encourage such behaviour) would bring God's wrath down upon us," said Saddam, whose speeches increasingly have religious overtones.



An F-14 Tomcat is prepared for launch from the USS Constellation on Thursday in Gulf waters. The USS Constellation is conducting operations to help enforce the "no-fly zone" over southern Iraq, code-named Operation Southern Watch (OSW).

Soldiers work through holiday in Gulf

AP, Prince Sultan Air Base

There was no Christmas break for US pilots patrolling Iraqi skies from the Saudi base, and similar flights screamed off the deck of a US aircraft carrier at sea.

But holiday spirit was plentiful Wednesday among the American troops stationed in the Persian Gulf region - a force of 60,000 and growing as the United States contemplates war with Iraq.

Football games, turkey and roast beef dinners, brightly coloured gifts from home and phone calls to family brightened the day. Mess halls were decked with coloured lights, garlands, shiny paper ornaments and elaborate cakes. Officers at Camp New York in Kuwait donned chef hats and dished out turkey with

trimmings.

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., dropped by with Christmas greetings for American troops at Prince Sultan Air Base. He assured them that the military pressure on Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has strong bipartisan support back home.

About 4,000 US personnel are stationed at this desert base of sand-coloured buildings from which US commanders ran the 1991 Gulf War and now direct air patrols over southern Iraq.

"What you have done to keep Saddam in the box and to put us in a position now where we are challenging him to live by the promises he made at the end of the Gulf War to disarm is an invaluable service," Lieberman said through a bullhorn

in the "Rolling Sands" dining hall, where soldiers filtered in and out for Christmas dinner.

Lieberman, considered a likely contender for the Democrats' 2004 presidential nomination, said he would meet with Crown Prince Abdullah later Wednesday.

Daily air patrols head from the base for southern Iraq, and Brig. Gen. Dale Waters, commander of the 363rd Air Expeditionary Wing, said pilots have seen more attempts to shoot them down in recent months even though Iraq's air defence system is "fairly beat back."

"The situation in southern Iraq is always one with some inherent risk because we're flying over hostile territory," said Waters, originally from East St. Louis, Ill.

US confirms military rapes in Myanmar

REUTERS, Washington

Military officials from Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, raped ethnic minority women and girls on a systematic basis and the State Department has confirmed it, according to a report in Thursday's Washington Post.

Following reports by human rights groups in Thailand in June of 625 rapes by Myanmar army troops in Shan State, the State Department sent an investigator to the Thailand-Myanmar border in August, the newspaper said.

According to the investigator, who talked to refugees in Thailand, "We were able to locate many victims and record chilling new stories of rape and other atrocities in just three days."

4 Muslim groups sue Ashcroft over arrests of US immigrants

HINDUSTAN TIMES, Washington

Four Muslim organisations, including the National Council of Pakistani Americans, have filed a class action lawsuit against Attorney General John Ashcroft and the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) following a wave of arrests of immigrants from several Islamic countries over the past week.

The lawsuit alleges that the INS arrested a large number of people (estimates range from 250 to 1,000) who had come forward to voluntarily comply with the new registration requirements for immigrants from 20 countries, most of them Islamic.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were recently added to the list of "high risk" countries whose nationals in the US were required to register with the immigration authorities and undergo finger-printing.

The lawsuit, filed in a Los Angeles federal court on Tuesday, alleges that the immigrants were arrested without any warrant, handcuffed and locked

up for days.

There was no immediate official word from INS, but the reported offence in most cases was that the arrested persons have overstayed their visas. The petitioners claimed that those arrested were persons caught up in the lengthy process of obtaining permanent residence ("Green Card") in the US.

"It is unlawful and unjust to arrest and deport people who are eligible to apply to legalise their status based on family relationships or their employment. Some detainees with avenues available to legalise their status are being detained without bail or bail hearings," the four groups alleged.

In another move, which has attracted criticism, the Federal Bureau of Investigation has asked colleges and universities to furnish personal information about all foreign students and faculty. Some schools have held the new FBI request to be illegal. Those questioning the legality include Democratic Senators Patrick J. Leahy and Edward Kennedy.

Israel to protect WB settlements with 'security zones'

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army has started to establish "special security zones" around Jewish settlements in the West Bank in a bid to prevent Palestinian infiltrations, the Haaretz newspaper reported Thursday.

The daily quoted an anonymous senior military official as saying these buffer zones were several hundred metres (yards) wide and marked by fences.

Haaretz said special rules of engagement would apply inside the "special security zones", which will "allow the soldiers to fire at anyone who tries to infiltrate these areas."

"The fences will include watch-towers, and soldiers will also patrol within the zones to ward off infiltration attempts," the newspaper quoted the senior army source as saying.

The officer insisted that the new zones would not infringe on Palestinian farmland and that they did not allow the settlements to expand.

The international community considers all Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories to be illegal.

The move comes a month ahead of the January 28 legislative elections, which will pit Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon against Labour leader Amram Mitzna, whose campaign centrepiece has been a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the dismantlement of isolated West Bank settlements.

Meanwhile, Israeli troops killed three Palestinians, including a leader of the hardline Islamic Jihad group, and rounded up 12 more wanted men Thursday during a fresh sweep of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Senior Islamic Jihad militant Hamza Abu Ghob, 35, was killed after being surrounded by troops in his Qabatya home which was then destroyed by tank shells, Palestinian security sources said.

85 killed in Christmas holiday accidents

AFP, San Jose

About 85 people were killed and another 200 injured in car accidents or bouts of violence over Christmas in Latin America, officials said.

In Salvador, 22 people died and another 65 injured on Christmas Eve alone, according to the National Emergency Committee. Over half the dead were killed in car crashes.

In Guatemala, 21 people were killed and 56 injured in car accidents, gun fights or knife attacks, the firemen said.

In Honduras, 10 people died, including five by gun fire, and 11 were wounded, a police spokesman said.

Six people died and 20 were injured in both Panama and Nicaragua according to the police and emergency workers.

Five people died and one was wounded in Costa Rica, the Red Cross said.



Two Asian women join the crowd in St. Peter's Square on Wednesday for Pope John Paul II's "Urbi et Orbi" (to the town and to the world) blessing. The Pontiff, in his Christmas Day message to the world, urged the world to avert a conflict in Iraq and appealed for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. In his appeal, his first public reference to the crisis in Iraq, the Pope said believers in all religions should build peace.