

Logistics delay Iraq war

Baghdad faces burning questions, US doubles Gulf forces

REUTERS, Washington

US troops being deployed to the Persian Gulf region would not be ready for a full-scale war against Iraq before late February or early March because of logistical complications involved in putting a large fighting force into place, USA Today reported Monday.

Citing Pentagon officials, the report said the timing of a possible US invasion to oust Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had been pushed back from mid-February mainly because of the complexity of putting a large ground force into the field and getting it geared up for war.

A Pentagon spokesman was not immediately available for comment on the report.

USA Today reported that another factor contributing to the delay in the timetable for a possible war was Turkey had not agreed to host some 80,000 US troops who would participate in an invasion of Iraq.

"We need an answer," a defense official was quoted as saying.

According to the report, the delayed timetable contributed to the Bush administration's willingness to accept extending UN weapons inspections beyond Jan. 27 -- the date when UN inspectors are scheduled to give a formal assessment of Iraqi compliance with UN disarmament demands.

President Bush has said that he has made no decision on whether to invade Iraq over US charges that Baghdad is developing weapons of mass destruction.

But Jan. 27 has been viewed by some administration officials as a potential moment of decision on whether Iraq's cooperation has been sufficient to head off military action.

Meanwhile, UN arms inspectors will demand answers from Iraq this week to burning questions that could spark a US-led war against Baghdad, as Washington more than doubles its troops in the Gulf region to 150,000.

The two top UN inspectors, Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, will travel to Baghdad next weekend to confront Iraqi officials over what they say are big gaps in Iraq's declaration that it does not have any arms of mass destruction.

They told the UN Security Council last week that while searches in Iraq so far had not uncovered "smoking guns," or hard evidence, Baghdad had left a

"great many questions" unanswered.

Washington has signaled that if Iraq does not provide satisfactory answers, this could be deemed non-cooperation under UN resolutions and therefore a trigger for war.

Saudi Arabia put out peace feelers over Iraq on Sunday as a British minister signaled fresh unease in Prime Minister Tony Blair's government on joining a possible rush to war by Washington.

The United States announced new troop deployments amid signs in Europe and the Middle East that many states were increasingly nervous about war breaking out and wanted all other options explored. Jordan warned of suffering throughout the Gulf region.

President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair are the chief prosecutors in the case against Iraq, saying they have intelligence that it does have weapons of mass destruction and threatening war unless Baghdad comes clean.

A January 27 report by the inspectors took on fresh significance at the weekend when sources said Bush and Blair would meet soon afterwards to discuss what to do next on Iraq.

British newspapers said Blair would go to Washington to underscore his belief that the inspectors should be given time to deal with Iraq, but the meeting could turn into a council of war if Baghdad failed to come up with satisfactory answers.

UN officials have expressed dismay that Iraqi minders have accompanied all scientists interviewed so far, and Blix said last week that Baghdad had not cleared up issues such as chemical bombs, VX nerve gas and the import of missile engines.

The inspectors say Iraq must produce credible evidence to back up its stance that it destroyed all material that could be used for weapons of mass destruction while UN teams were out of the country from 1998 to late last year.

Iraq said on Sunday it was cooperating with UN searches. It also said two scientists interviewed by inspectors last month had refused to leave the country for further interviews.



PHOTO: AFP
Garbage collectors warm themselves next to a fire on a chilly morning in Kathmandu on Monday. At least 41 people died in the cold wave in Mahotari and Saptari, in eastern Terai district of Nepal bordering India. The temperature for the day range between 1 to 10 degree Celsius.

S Asia shivers as cold wave toll mounts

AFP, New Delhi

Wide swathes of tropical Bangladesh and Himalayan India and Nepal remained gripped by a savage cold wave Monday that has killed more than 1,100 since Christmas and left thousands more shivering.

Dhaka meteorologists warned Monday that Bangladesh's coldest winter in years, which has killed 540 people since mid-December, was tightening its icy grip after offering a short respite.

Millions of Hindus in India's frozen north began praying Monday for an end to the cold wave, hoping the annual Lohri festival to mark the start of spring would make the sun shine brighter, officials said.

Weather experts, however, poured cold water on the hopes of the millions who on Monday prepared Lohri bonfires, warning the chilly temperatures were likely to last.

"We don't expect the cold wave to subside in the next two days at least," Northern Hemisphere Analysis Centre Director Onkari Prasad said in Delhi, where temperatures crashed to 3.7 degrees Sunday.

Heavy fog Monday made for a gloomy day in the northern states of Haryana and Punjab, disrupting rail, air and road traffic, officials said in the joint capital of Chandigarh.

All of northern India has suffered

prolonged brown-outs for the past two weeks as electricity consumption shot up by 15 to 20 percent amid cold-related demand, power ministry officials said.

The shivering eastern Indian state of Bihar on Monday reported 54 more deaths in the past 24 hours, taking the national cold wave toll to at least 518.

State authorities have begun to dole out blankets to Bihar's poorest, many of whom have moved to schools and government buildings to shelter from the wind-aided cold wave, officials said.

In adjoining Uttar Pradesh, the industrial city of Kanpur last week recorded an all-time low of zero degrees Celsius.

On Monday, Kanpur and adjoining areas continued to grapple with bad weather as the mercury hovered at three degrees Celsius. In Nepal, 41 people, many of them former child workers, have died this month in a bitter cold wave sweeping the Himalayan kingdom, state radio said Monday.

Exposure to the cold in the southwestern Terai region, a populous and largely poor lowland area bordering India, was responsible for their deaths.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists from non-governmental organisations burn an effigy of the US President George W. Bush during protest in Karachi on Sunday. Demonstrators chanted slogans against the US military preparations for the possible attack on Iraq. A fresh wave of anti-American protests sparked across the country after the military tension between US and Iraq and new immigration rules for Pakistanis and other nations living in the US.

'Inspections to take a year'

Iraq 'far away' from owning nuclear bomb: IAEA

REUTERS, London

UN inspections for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq could take around a year to complete, a spokesman for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Monday.

IAEA spokesman Mark Gwozdecky told CNN in an interview that chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix and IAEA head Mohamed ElBaradei had made it clear the inspections could take "in the vicinity of a year."

"Dr Blix and ElBaradei made it very clear as late as last spring that this is an operation that could take in the vicinity of a year and frankly we think it is worth to wait to get a sustainable and long term peaceful solution.

"It is a far better option to wait a little bit longer than to resort to war,"

he said from Vienna.

He said Iraq was "a big country" and the longer arms inspectors were there, the more likely it was that they would find something.

He said the UN Security Council had given the inspectors unanimous support, saying: "They are willing to give us the time that we need."

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cooperation under UN resolutions and therefore a trigger for war.

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AFP adds: UN weapons inspec-

tors believe Iraq probably does not have a nuclear bomb, but Iraq should realize that if it fails to comply with UN weapons inspectors "in substance ... the end is near," IAEA boss Mohamed ElBaradei has told Time magazine.

Speaking ahead of his visit next week to Baghdad, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency said the current US pressure on Iraq was positive, but Washington should let UN weapons inspectors in Iraq know "if it knows Baghdad is close to owning a nuclear bomb."

"They should tell us," ElBaradei was quoted as saying in the latest edition of Time.

"If they (the Bush administration) are talking about indigenous capability, Iraq is far away from that. If Iraq has imported material hidden, then you're talking about six months or a year. But that's a big if," he said.

Pak cops nab Australian for al-Qaeda links

AFP, Islamabad

An Australian man is being held in the southern Pakistani port city of Karachi while police investigate his suspected links to the al-Qaeda network, officials said Monday.

The man, a Caucasian, was detained at Karachi's international airport on January 4, said a senior Karachi-based security official who is involved in the investigation.

"He was offloaded from a plane at Karachi airport," the official told AFP on condition of anonymity. He was unaware of the plane's destination.

"He's a white Australian. He's in custody and is being being investigated for his links to some Arabs who are suspected of links to al-Qaeda."

The Australian's arrest was connected to the arrest five days later of two Arab al-Qaeda suspects during a violent pre-dawn raid on a private home on Karachi's outskirts.

US offers talks to DPRK

N Korea intensifies war of words

REUTERS, Seoul

The top US envoy for Asia said Monday that Washington was willing to talk to North Korea and would even address its energy shortages if the nuclear crisis could be resolved.

Washington has insisted it is not prepared to negotiate new terms to resolve the crisis, but US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, visiting South Korea, appeared to be offering an inducement to Pyongyang's rulers.

"We are of course willing to talk," he said in the capital, Seoul. "Once we get beyond nuclear weapons, there may be opportunities with the US, with private investors, with other countries to help North Korea in the energy area."

Kelly's task is complicated by rising anti-US sentiment in the South, where increasing numbers of people are taking a critical look at the half-century relationship with Washington and are keen for more of a say in policy on the Korean peninsula.

"We're going to be talking here with government people over how are some of the best ways to do

that," Kelly told a news conference after talks with President-elect Roh Moo-hyun.

The latest round of Stalinist North Korea's apparent game of brinkmanship to force the US to the negotiating table began last month, when Pyongyang threw out UN weapons inspectors.

Pyongyang, which the Bush administration suspects of developing nuclear arms, last week pulled out of a global treaty aimed at preventing the spread of atomic weapons and said it was free to resume missile-firing tests.

It heaped abuse on the US over the weekend saying its people could disappear in "a sea of fire" and again denying it had ever admitted to a nuclear weapons program.

Kelly called the headline anti-US rhetoric and threats to restart missile tests "a little mystifying" and repeated US statements that Pyongyang's diplomats covered no new ground in weekend talks in New Mexico with the former US ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson.

"It was a little disappointing because we really hadn't heard

anything from the North Koreans...that we hadn't heard in their public pronouncements before," he said.

Richardson urged the Bush administration Sunday to open talks with Pyongyang to defuse the nuclear crisis.

"What I think the administration needs to do, with all due respect, is just pick up the phone," Richardson said on ABC's "This Week."

AFP adds: North Korea on Monday stepped up its war of words against Washington as a top US envoy repeated a call for talks to end a deepening nuclear crisis.

Rodong Simnun, mouthpiece of the North's ruling communist party, warned that Pyongyang would hit back a "thousand-fold" if the United States launched military aggression against it.

"If the United States dares challenge the DPRK (North Korea) with a 'military punishment', the DPRK will take a thousand-fold retaliation against it and root out the very source of aggression on the Korean peninsula," the newspaper said in a statement carried by the Korean Central News Agency.

Collision alert on cosmic highway

THE STATESMAN/ANN, New Delhi

Sooner than later nations will have to join hands to launch satellites. Because good souls will always find a place in heaven but for the satellites, there is a limit to how many more can be pushed up there and be expected to stay there without bumping into one another. Or trash they leave behind.

Last week at the Space Summit in Bangalore, President Dr APJ Abdul Kalam made out a case for space agencies to get together, asserting that further expansion of man's activities in Space can and must take place only in a global cooperative manner that will integrate all nation's space capabilities.

The geo-stationary orbit is nearly full, he pointed out to the Space technologists. However, Dr James Dodge, director, Earth Sciences, at USA's National Aeronautics and Space Administration, had his reservations about the Common Minimum Global Space Mission that Mr Kalam suggested, but agreed that countries needed to come together for sending space missions rather than sending individual satellites that could create problems in Space.

Vajpayee endorses Kalam's call

THE STATESMAN, ANN, New Delhi

The Governors who hitherto have been occupying Raj Bhavan as a figure head may now find themselves in the "development mould". For, after the President, it was the Prime Minister's turn to endorse a "pro-active" role for Governors.

Speaking at the Conference of Governors at Rashtrapati Bhavan on Monday, Atal Behari Vajpayee said: "The need for the Governors to play a pro-active role in the state administration is there with a sense of total sense of partnership." In the existing set-up itself, it is possible for the Governors to participate in the development process.

The Prime Minister stressed the need for evolving employment-oriented economic programmes and assured that resources would not be a constraint. He said his government was committed to making India a developed country by 2020 and concurred with the President's opinion that all people should actively participate in reaching this goal.

11 more killed in ME violence

REUTERS, AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's latest crackdown against a Palestinian uprising left at least nine Palestinians dead in a weekend of escalating violence throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Two Israelis were also killed in fighting, as tensions rise on both sides in the run-up to the country's January 28 election.

Israel's army has stepped up operations since back-to-back Palestinian suicide bombings in Tel Aviv last week that killed 22 people.

Israeli helicopter gunships fired three missiles into a Gaza Strip orchard on Sunday, killing two Palestinian teenagers and wounding a Palestinian man, witnesses and medical officials said.

A senior Israeli security source confirmed an air strike on the orchard by the road between Khan Younis and Rafah refugee camps in Gaza and said "three wanted men were hit."

Palestinian hospital officials said none of the three teenagers killed in the missile strike, nor another youth wounded in the attack, were known to be members of militant groups waging the uprising for statehood.

India wrestles with nuke status paradox

REUTERS, New Delhi

Nearly five years after India and Pakistan became nuclear powers, New Delhi is finally coming to terms with what that status means -- the threat of a Pakistani first strike has neutralized its conventional superiority.

Analysts say last year's inconclusive military standoff between the neighbors highlighted what many had feared when the two conducted tit-for-tat nuclear tests in 1998, that India would no longer dare go to war with Pakistan.

"India has become a victim of nuclear blackmail," said C. Raja Mohan, strategic affairs editor at The Hindu newspaper.

So, unable to go back, India is copying the example of the United States and the former Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War, building its nuclear deterrent to the point of mutually assured destruction so that neither side would dare go

nuclear.

Over the course of this month, it has announced a new nuclear command and control structure, appointed a Commander-in-Chief of the so-called "strategic forces" and begun a fresh series of tests of nuclear-capable missiles.

"These are building blocks. Unless all of them are in place, the nuclear deterrent can neither be credible nor effective," said retired lieutenant-general V.R. Raghavan.

India massed its 1.1 million strong military along the border for 10 months last year in a standoff prompted by an attack on its parliament on December 13, 2000 which it blamed on Pakistan-based Kashmiri separatists.

Pakistan responded by mobilizing its own half a million armed forces and the two sides came to the brink of war in June.

But under intense international pressure, India ultimately pulled back its troops rather than run the

risk of a conventional conflict which could go nuclear, and analysts now concede that New Delhi gained little from the standoff.

India, which is mostly Hindu but officially secular, continues to accuse Islamic Pakistan of training and arming militants to attack Indian targets in a "proxy war" meant to wrest control of Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state.

Pakistan denies the charges, saying it gives only moral support to the Kashmiri "freedom struggle."

But Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf appeared to suggest last month it was the nuclear threat which prevented a fourth war, between the two since independence from Britain in 1947.

Musharraf said the threat of a "non-conventional war" helped avert a conflict. While his spokesman later said he was talking about a popular uprising, India believed he meant a nuclear war.

Thais set world record in movie watching

THE NATION/ANN, Bangkok

Seventeen exhausted Thais set a new world record for continuously watching movies Monday by sitting through just under 65 hours of films, organisers of the event said.

Eleven men and six women clocked up 64 hours and 58 minutes watching 36 films, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) said in a statement.

Although 38 films were originally scheduled, on the advice of a doctor the organisers wrapped up the screening two films early.

Some 172 film buffs sat in on the record-breaking attempt in the capital when it kicked off Friday, lured by a total of 700,000 baht (16,279 dollars) in prize money offered by the TAT.

The Thais broke the world record of 53 hours and 22 minutes -- grabbed by the United States from Thailand last year -- helped along only by a 15-minute break every third film.



PHOTO: AFP

Dressed up in traditional kimonos, Japanese women aged 20 take pictures by a mobile phone with a camera before a ceremony to celebrate Coming-of-Age Day at Toshimaen amusement park in Tokyo on Monday. The number of Japanese who have turned 20, considered the age of maturity in Japan, totalled 1.52 million.