

Bush for disarming Iraq now

Powell wants Arab League to rekindle Saddam exile possibility

REUTERS, Washington

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has no intention of disarming and must be forced to do so, President Bush said in a newspaper interview published on Friday.

"My attitude about Saddam Hussein is that if he had any intention of disarming, he would have disarmed," Bush told USA Today.

"We will disarm him now," he said later in the interview.

Bush called war his last option, but he also said he believes Americans fully understand that the United States could soon go to war, the newspaper said.

"I've thought long and hard about the consequences and the price that could be paid," Bush said.

In preparation for a possible war with Iraq, Washington has amassed a large military force in the Gulf region, including about 200,000 ground troops.

Bush has said the United States will lead a coalition of nations to disarm Iraq by force if necessary if Saddam does not comply with UN demands to destroy his alleged banned weapons of mass destruction.

"We're still a battlefield," Bush said, speaking of his belief that Saddam is a threat to the United States and the world. "Part of that war is dealing with a

dictator who can serve as an arsenal and or training ground for terrorist networks."

The newspaper said Bush expressed little concern about the debate at the United Nations, the opposition of some allies, or the prospect of a veto of a second UN resolution that would legitimise an invasion of Iraq.

Bush said that seeking a second resolution was "a commitment to our allies and friends," adding that regardless of the outcome, "the most important part about whatever happens is that (Saddam) be disarmed."

AFP adds: US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Thursday resurrected the idea that war with Iraq could be avoided if Saddam Hussein would step down and urged Arab leaders to encourage such a step at an upcoming summit.

Powell's unprompted comments were unusual in that previous similar suggestions have dwindled and seemed to lose credibility amid the lack of a sponsor and Saddam's categorical rejection of exile.

"I never see war as inevitable but time clearly is running out," Powell told reporters after an EU-US ministerial meeting here, before launching his apparent 11th-hour appeal to prevent conflict through Saddam's departure.

He said he wanted the Arab League, whose leaders will meet this weekend in Egypt to discuss the Iraq crisis, to tell Saddam that he is "running out of time" to comply with UN disarmament demands or face war.



PHOTO: AFP

A Lebanese child stands with adults from the Permanent Peace Movement during a candle-lit vigil at the United Nations' headquarters in Beirut on Thursday. Throughout the Arab world nearly daily anti-war demonstrations are taking place in one capital or another on a nearly daily basis, as the United State tries to muster more support for a US-led war against Iraq.

7 charged with trafficking US missile to China

AFP, Los Angeles

US authorities said Thursday they had charged four people and three companies with illegally exporting or plotting to ship US missile and fighter jet parts to communist China.

The seven defendants were charged at the end of a five-year investigation into the illegal shipping of sensitive weapons, including parts used in surface-to-air missiles and fighter aircraft, prosecutors revealed.

All seven, including two people of Chinese origin, were based in the Los Angeles area and allegedly attempted to export parts for weapons such as the AIM-9 "Sidewinder" heat-seeking anti-aircraft missile to China.

Strategies can halve heart disease

REUTERS, London

Strategies such as reducing blood pressure and cholesterol levels and cutting salt in fast foods could halve cases of cardiovascular disease worldwide, health experts said Friday.

Heart disease and strokes are a leading causes of death and disability worldwide, but an international team of researchers said an assessment of health strategies used in wealthy nations could also benefit people in less developed nations.

US drops terror alert level to yellow

AP, Washington

The Bush administration lowered the national terror alert Thursday from orange to yellow, suggesting the immediate threat of an attack on US soil had eased.

Still, Americans were warned to "continue to be defiant and alert."

Counterterrorism officials said al-Qaeda remains capable of attacking, and they cautioned people not to think the threat had passed.

"Al-Qaeda will wait until it believes Americans are less vigilant and less prepared before it will strike again," Attorney General John Ashcroft and Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said in a joint statement.

N Korea tested booster for Taepodong missile

Pyongyang stands defiant in nuke stand-off

REUTERS, Tokyo

North Korea tested a rocket booster for a Taepodong ballistic missile at a launch site on the country's east coast in January, a Japanese newspaper reported on Friday, quoting Japanese and US government sources.

The report adds to rising tensions in the region, where North Korea's neighbours have already been alarmed by its move to reactivate a nuclear program and its apparent firing of a short-range missile in military exercises earlier this week.

For Japanese, the Taepodong brings back disturbing memories of 1998, when the same type of missile was launched by the communist state and flew over Japan's main island.

The mass-circulation Yomiuri

Shimbum daily quoted Japanese government sources as saying that Pyongyang had not yet started to assemble the engine and main body of the missile.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi declined to confirm the report. "Various information is going around, but we must not overreact," he told reporters.

Defence Minister Shigeru Ishiba said Japan did not believe that North Korea was about to launch a ballistic missile.

Defence experts believe North Korea has been developing missiles such as the Taepodong-1 and -2, with ranges of up to 6,000 km (3,750 miles).

US officials said earlier this month that Pyongyang had a three-stage Taepodong-2 missile that could reach the West Coast of the

United States, but that the missile had not been tested.

AFP adds: North Korea warned Friday that it would never yield to US pressure and back down in the mounting nuclear standoff, with Seoul expressing concern at the North's reactivation of a nuclear reactor.

Pyongyang rejected suggestions that it was using "brinkmanship" to extort economic benefits from the international community, threatening to take "tougher measures" if Washington steps up military threats and pressure.

The warning came after US officials said the isolated communist state had restarted the reactor at its controversial Yongbyon complex, which has been at the centre of the tense nuclear standoff on the peninsula.

New Sharon govt takes over, puts peace efforts on hold

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's hard-right government took office early Friday with a mission to rescue the country's declining economy but looked set to wait for a broader coalition to tackle the key issue of peace with the Palestinians.

The line-up which received the Israeli parliament's confidence is one of the most right-wing in the Jewish state's history and drew early warnings of insurmountable differences within the cabinet leading to a collapse.

The Israeli stock exchange reacted positively to Sharon's promise to focus his government's efforts on economic recovery and the appointment of the charismatic freemarketeer Benjamin Netanyahu as finance minister.

But Israeli opinion was doubtful that, with diplomacy novice Silvan Shalom taking the post of foreign minister and two pro-settler parties pulling the cabinet to the right, the government could achieve any other results.

According to an opinion poll published Friday in the Yediot Aharonot daily, 64 percent of Israelis think it will be incapable of "stopping terror attacks" by Palestinian groups or even curbing

them substantially.

The same poll revealed that 52 percent of Israelis also think Sharon's new cabinet is not capable of "promoting an agreement with the Palestinians", while 46 percent expressed the opposite view.

In his swearing-in speech Thursday night in parliament, Sharon was non-committal on the thorny issue of Palestinian statehood -- saying it would be dealt with "in due time" -- and appeared to put the Palestinian issue on the back burner.

US President George W. Bush has upped the pressure on the Palestinians to reform their security and their institutions but also on Israel to prove its commitment to the so-called "roadmap" for Middle East peace which was drafted by the quartet of diplomatic players and calls for a Palestinian state by 2005.

But commentators said that a settlement with the Palestinians was a low priority for both Sharon and Bush, as war clouds were gathering above Iraq.

"The US president is now busy with preparations for the occupation of Iraq, and the prime minister is more interested in reviving the economy and dealing with issues of religion and state," the daily

Haaretz said in an editorial.

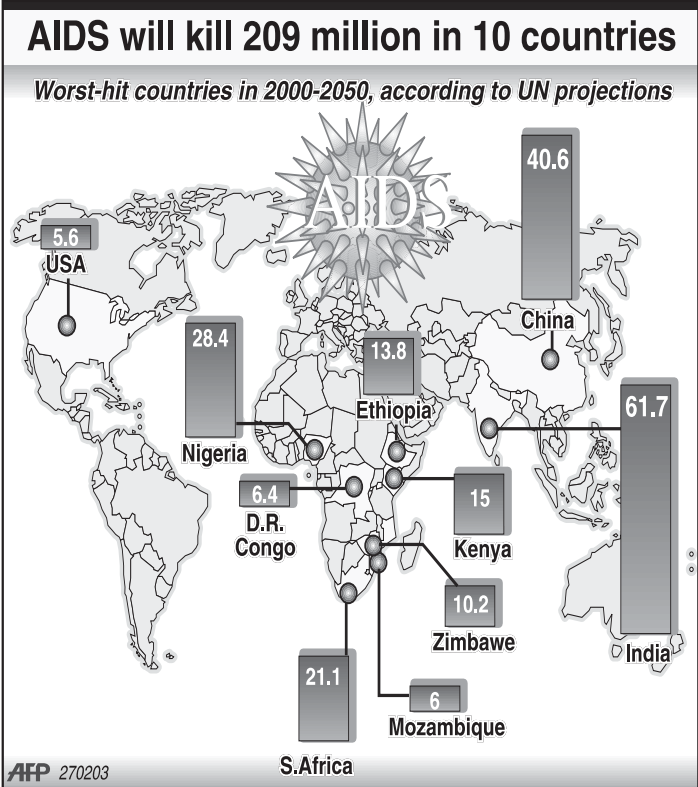
"As far as both of them are concerned, the diplomatic process can, and must, wait until their agenda clears up from more urgent matters," editorialist Aluf Benn added.

Some commentators have already suggested the new government, which was born after intense political wrangling, could be reshuffled before long and that Sharon would need to bring in the Labour party and dump the extreme-right to take the peace process forward.

Likud tried to lure Labour into a national unity government such as the one Sharon set up after his first electoral victory in March 2001, but new Labour leader Amram Mitzna consistently refused.

He responded to Sharon's inaugural speech by promising to lead a "responsible but fighting" opposition. "You have an opposition party which Israel needs very, very much," he told Sharon in front of the Knesset.

Analyst Gerald Steinberg predicted that even if Mitzna stood firm, his ailing party could split and some members could decide to join Sharon "within a few weeks, in the context of a war with Iraq or immediately afterwards."



Bush admin refuses to put price tag on Iraq war

AFP, Washington

Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz refused Thursday to give US lawmakers an estimate of how much a Iraq would cost the United States which is struggling to keep an economic recovery on track.

Wolfowitz ducked questions and said he expected US allies would chip into the overall price of a military incursion and post-conflict rebuilding once any war was over.

"There will be an appropriate point when we will give you the numbers and the appropriate assumptions," he told the House Budget committee. "We are not ready to do that now."

His statements infuriated some representatives who felt the administration was holding back information. Press reports were citing officials as putting the cost of the anticipated war as high as 95 billion dollars.

US House gives nod to total cloning ban

AFP, Washington

The US House of Representatives on Thursday overwhelmingly approved a total ban on human cloning.

In a 241 to 155 vote, the lawmakers passed the bill, rejecting arguments to prohibit reproductive cloning but allow therapeutic cloning for medical research purposes.

The ban reflects the Bush administration's stance opposing any language that would permit human embryos to be created and then destroyed to enable embryonic stem cell research.

The House, under the previous congress, had passed a similar bill on July 31, 2001 by a vote of 265-162, but the bill died before it ever reached the Senate floor.

In the minutes leading up to the vote, Representative Dave Weldon, a Florida Republican, urged his colleagues to support the comprehensive ban, saying otherwise "it will open a Pandora's box that I think we as a civilisation do not want to open up."

Chandrika close to ousting Ranil govt

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga was set to join with Marxists in a bid to oust her right-wing cohabitation government that is engaged in peace talks with Tamil rebels, her party said Friday.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) said it will within a week finalise a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the JVP, or People's Liberation Front, on forming a new alliance.

PA spokesman Sarath Amunugama declined to give details of how they will bridge the sharp differences between Kumaratunga's party and the JVP over the Norwegian-backed peace bid with Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

Amunugama, however, said the PA supported the ceasefire deal with Tamil Tigers and did not believe the country should revert to war, although it had reservations about implementation of the truce.

The PA had earlier challenged the ceasefire as a threat to national security and Kumaratunga accused Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of compromising sovereignty with the truce deal.

The JVP on the other hand has already petitioned the Supreme

Court seeking a scrapping of the ceasefire and pressed for the expulsion of Norway as a peace broker. The case is still pending.

"Norvegians may come and go," PA's Amunugama told reporters here. "These are all logistical details which we can discuss. What we are saying is that we have a spineless government that is giving into everything the Tigers want."

It was Kumaratunga who formally announced that she had invited Norway to be a peace broker after she survived a suicide assassination attempt carried out by Tamil Tiger rebels in December 1999.

Kumaratunga lost her right eye, but went on to narrowly win the December 1999 presidential elections.

The peace bid was put on hold in April 2001, but Wickremesinghe, who defeated Kumaratunga's party at parliamentary elections, revived it in December 2001.

The uneasy cohabitation has locked horns on the handling of the peace process, with Kumaratunga on several occasions threatening to sack the prime minister after accusing him of jeopardising national security.

Iraqi, US envoys vie for Pak support

AFP, Islamabad

United States and Iraqi envoys were due to hold talks with President Pervez Musharraf here Friday with Pakistan still to declare whether it will vote for a new UN resolution on Iraq.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christina Rocca and Iraqi Information Minister Mohammad Said al-Sahhaf are both in Pakistan to bid for its support in the Iraqi crisis.

Rocca asked Pakistan to back a resolution authorising war on Iraq during talks with Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri and Foreign Secretary Riaz Kokhar late Thursday.

"She did ask for Pakistan's support for the US resolution, and we have not said no to the US or anyone else for that matter," foreign ministry additional secretary Tariq Usman Haider told a press conference.

"We continue to review the situation. We are looking at the situation and we have not made any decision."

Pakistan, one of the UN Security Council's non-permanent members, is torn between loyalties to fellow Muslim countries and its

alliance with the US in the so-called war on terrorism.

Musharraf's government has been treading a diplomatic tight-rope, urging Baghdad to disarm, opposing unilateral military action and lobbying for a peaceful resolution.

Shortly after Rocca's meetings al-Sahhaf arrived in Islamabad, bearing a special message from Saddam Hussein for Musharraf, a foreign ministry official told AFP.

The visit by al-Sahhaf was "of the Iraqis' own initiative," the official said, declining to be identified.

Kasuri told reporters before Thursday's talks with Rocca that Washington was "not only sending envoys to Pakistan but the world over to talk about Iraq."

"We want a peaceful solution because in the event of war, no other country would be affected as Pakistan would," the minister was quoted as saying by The News daily.

"We already have Afghanistan next door and we hope that peace prevails," he said in reference to the 16-month old US military operation to crush Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants in Pakistan's western neighbour.