

UNSC splits in 3 groups over Iraq war deadline

REUTERS, United Nations

The UN Security Council split into three broad groups over Iraq on Friday, with signs that the United States, Britain and Spain did not have the minimum nine votes needed for a new resolution giving Iraq until March 17 to show the council it is willing to disarm.

The United States and its allies, along with Bulgaria, argued that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has not complied with UN demands and the Security Council should pass the new resolution.

The second group, led by France, Russia and Germany, says that UN weapons inspections are making progress and should continue without any early deadlines.

The third group, mainly small nonpermanent members of the council, would rather not take sides in the dispute.

The split between the pro-American group of four members and the anti-war group led by France remained much the same as on February 14, when foreign ministers last heard a report from the chief UN weapon inspectors.

But Chile and Pakistan, previously in the undecided group in the middle, appeared to move closer to the anti-war camp, complicating Washington's quest for a UN resolution, which it could portray as authority to attack and invade Iraq.

A resolution in the 15-member Security Council needs a minimum of nine votes for adoption and no veto by any of its five permanent members -- the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China. Seven of the 15 members appear to oppose the measure.

Here are the members of the Security Council, divided into their groups, with excerpts from the speeches their representatives made in the council on Friday:

Governments which favor a new resolution giving Iraq a deadline to

disarm or possibly face attack:

-- The United States -- Secretary of State Colin Powell said: "Now is the time for the council to tell Saddam that the clock has not been stopped by his stratagems and his machinations. We believe that the resolution that has been put forward for action by this council is appropriate and in the very near future, we should bring it before this council for a vote. The clock continues to tick, and the consequences of Saddam Hussein's continued refusal to disarm will be very, very real."

-- Britain -- Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said: "Nobody, not one minister before this council, in my hearing, has said that Iraq is now fully, actively and immediately in compliance with (Security Council resolution) 1441. They have not so far taken this final opportunity."

-- Spain -- Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio said: "Only maximum pressure or credible threat of force has any type of impression on the Iraqi regime ... What is the message that this council should send? First, that we will not tolerate any more of Saddam's games."

-- Bulgaria -- Bulgarian ambassador Stefan Tafrov said: "Despite the indispensable coupling of diplomacy with force, Iraq's cooperation remains inadequate; it is neither immediate, nor unconditional nor active ... Bulgaria is prepared to support the draft resolution."

Governments which say that an attack on Iraq would be premature and that UN inspections should continue:

-- France -- Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said: "By imposing a deadline of only a few days would we merely be seeking a pretext for war? ... I will say it again: France will not allow a resolution to pass that authorizes the automatic use of force."

-- Russia -- Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said: "The possibilities for disarming Iraq through political means do exist ... Now we need not new Security Council resolutions; we have enough of those. We need now active support of the inspectors in carrying out their tasks."

US, allies see N Korea set for missile test

REUTERS, Seoul/Washington

South Korea and the United States said North Korea appeared set to test a missile within days, stepping up pressure for US concessions in a nuclear standoff while Washington is preoccupied with Iraq.

Allies Seoul and Washington played down the communist state's declaration of a maritime exclusion zone -- an apparent preparation for a missile launch -- while Japan urged Pyongyang to avoid further steps to escalate the nuclear crisis.

South Korean and US officials said the North declared the exclusion zone in the Sea of Japan from March 8-11, in what was seen as a strong sign it was planning its second missile test in two weeks.

"We are aware that they are preparing to fire a missile, probably between this weekend and early next week," a South Korean Defence Ministry spokesman said on Saturday.

On February 24, North Korea fired a short-range anti-ship cruise missile into the Sea of Japan, a test that startled its neighbors and carried out a day before South Korea swore in its new president, Roh Moo-hyun.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian woman holds a placard during a rally on the occasion of the International Women's Day in New Delhi on Saturday. The marchers demanded a 50 per cent reservation for women in parliament and government job and protested against the looming US-led war on Iraq.

US air operations surge around Iraq Forces for war stand at 240,000

AFP, Washington

With more than 600 US combat aircraft now deployed around Iraq, US planes are flying hundreds of patrols a day to keep the Iraqi military guessing about the timing of a US air assault, defense officials said Friday.

Flights have surged to up to 900 a day over the past week, but the numbers of aircraft in the air have varied from day to day so as not to present a predictable pattern for Iraqi ground forces to attack, they said.

"As you move closer and closer to potential hostilities, you clearly want to prepare the battlefield for a different look every day -- high activity one day, low activity another day," said a defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"So if you do decide to go you'll have some element of tactical surprise," the official said.

The United States now has between 600 and 700 aircraft deployed in areas around Iraq, the official said.

They include some 250 combat aircraft aboard five aircraft carriers,

three of them in the Gulf and two in the eastern Mediterranean. The others operate from land bases in the region.

A Pentagon spokesman confirmed that sortie rates have climbed into the hundreds each day as the size of US and British forces in the region has grown.

"As we add aircraft, pilots are familiarizing themselves with the area, so there are more sorties," said Lieutenant Colonel Dave Lapan.

Meanwhile, US forces deployed in the Gulf region and the Mediterranean for possible military action against Iraq rose to more than 240,000 by week's end, including 130,000 in Kuwait, a US defense official said Friday.

The total deployed in the region was 255,000, but that includes about 14,000 US troops tied down in Afghanistan and surrounding Central Asian countries, the official said.

The US force in Kuwait, the main staging area for a ground offensive into Iraq, grew to 130,000 from 111,000 about a week ago, the official said.

Asia uses Women's Day to plead for peace

AFP, Kabul

Calls for peace, political clout and workplace protection were trumpeted across Asia Saturday as thousands celebrated International Women's Day.

Afghanistan's nascent administration has made strides to heed such calls and has reserved seats in parliament for female lawmakers and included women's groups in decision-making efforts to soothe the fissures caused by more than two decades of civil war.

President Hamid Karzai, who failed to attend a Kabul conference to mark the day as previously scheduled, voiced his support for greater freedoms in a written address delivered in his absence.

"Women ... have suffered more than everybody else over the past two decades and they deserve being given their rights," he said.

"Moving towards the creation of a civilised society is impossible without the active participation of women."

More than 3,000 women attended a conference in Kabul at a tented venue that played host to last year's Loya Jirga Afghan grand

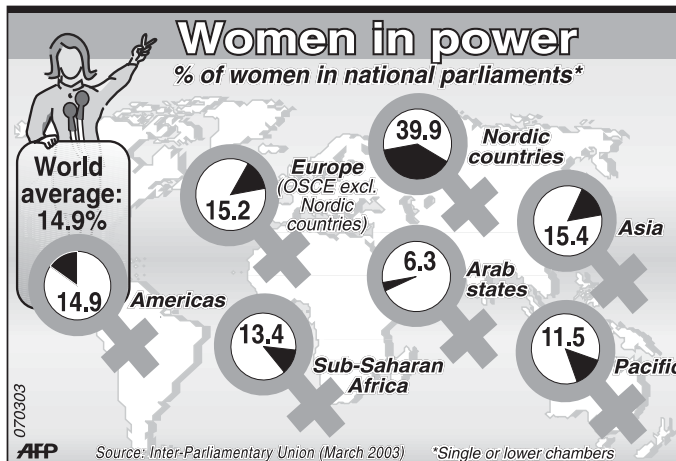
assembly, at which women enjoyed their first political representation in 17 years.

A lack of attention to women's political rights, health concerns, basic literacy needs and protection from abuse are not endemic to Afghanistan, however, as women from Indonesia to Thailand sought to highlight Saturday.

Women activists in Thailand had planned to hand a petition to Thai Prime Minister Thaksin

Shinawatra demanding a better deal for women workers, but refused to do so because they were met by a junior official.

In Singapore, the political and civil rights group Think Center organized an exhibition of colorful dolls depicting women as professionals, housewives and prostitutes, to inspire the public to "reflect on how each of us could play our role to overcome such discrimination in our family, workplace, schools and society."



Asia greets new UN challenge on Iraq

AFP, Sydney

The latest US-led challenge to the United Nations to disarm Iraq was greeted in Asia Saturday by resounding government support that drowned out public challenges to a US-led military campaign against Baghdad.

Australia, one of only two nations to send troops to join the US military buildup in the Gulf in anticipation of war, was quick to proclaim the need for support in the UN Security Council for the 10-day deadline offered Friday by the United States, Britain and Spain for

Iraq to finally disarm.

Voting against the draft resolution, which challenged the sharply-divided 15 member Council to authorize war if Iraq does not disarm or demonstrate "full, unconditional, immediate and active cooperation" by March 17, would undermine the body's authority, said Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer.

"This is a very difficult resolution for any country to vote against," the top diplomat for Australia, which does not sit on the council, said.

Bush slaps sanctions on Mugabe

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush has frozen the assets of Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe and 76 other government officials, charging they have undermined the African nation's democracy, the White House said Friday.

The March 6 executive order freezes their assets and bars US citizens or residents from engaging in any transaction or dealing with the targeted individuals, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said in a statement.

US detains 7 in Afghanistan as hunt intensifies for Laden

AFP, Bagram Air Base

The US military said Saturday it was holding seven men in Afghanistan linked to bomb plots against US forces as efforts to track al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden intensified in Pakistan. US military spokesman Colonel Roger King said the men were seized by Special Forces in Helmand province, which stretches from Afghanistan's centre to its southern border with Pakistan's Baluchistan province.

"These people were taken under control based upon intelligence that we've had relative to planning

attacks on coalition forces," he told reporters at Bagram air base north of Kabul, the hub of an international military force.

"There was material found in their possession that led us to believe the information we had about them was true, information about building bombs."

King joined in a chorus of denial of reports cited by a Pakistani regional official that two sons of al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden had been captured in southwestern Afghanistan where its border with Pakistan and Iran meet.

The claim Friday by Sardar

Sanaullah Zehri, the home minister of Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province, has also been denied by Pakistan's central government, Afghan and US officials.

King said the coalition had no troops operating in the corner of Afghanistan's southwestern Nimroz province, as claimed by Zehri, and none had been in the area for several weeks.

Pakistani officials have said that bin Laden's Egyptian deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri is being hunted along the 1,600 km border between Afghanistan and Baluchistan.

2 Israelis, 7 Palestinians killed in settlement raids

Senior Hamas official killed

AFP, Hebron

Two Israelis were shot dead by Palestinians disguised as religious Jews at a West Bank settlement Friday, while Israeli troops reoccupied parts of the northern Gaza Strip, creating fears the conflict was spiralling ahead of potential war in Iraq.

The two gunmen who launched the deadly attack on Kiryat Arba settlement, near the divided city of Hebron, were among seven Palestinians killed by Israeli troops after having apparently launched attacks on Jewish settlements in the occupied territories.

The Palestinians were also gearing up for major meetings set to start Saturday after Yasser Arafat reluctantly offered the new post of prime minister to dovish Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) veteran Mahmud Abbas.

The attack on Kiryat Arba, a hardline settlement previously targeted by militants, was the first of two launched almost simultaneously Friday night.

Israeli military sources and media said the gunmen entered the settlement dressed as religious Jews and, like many settlers, were openly carrying weapons.

They opened fired and threw grenades before killing a husband and wife in their home while as they were celebrating Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest.

Another eight people were wounded, the military sources said. One of the Palestinians was wearing an explosives belt, they added, but he failed to detonate the charge, averting further bloodshed.

Two other Palestinians were shot dead by soldiers a short time later as they attempted to infiltrate

the nearby Nahal Negohot settlement in an apparently coordinated operation which left no Israeli victims.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army struck a heavy blow to the radical Palestinian Islamic group Hamas Saturday morning, killing its security chief and three other of his bodyguards in a helicopter attack on the man's car here, a day after Hamas carried out a deadly assault on a Jewish settlement.

The attack, which also left 10 school children and a Hamas bodyguard wounded, drew a swift and chilling response from Hamas military wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, who said it would now target Israeli political leaders.

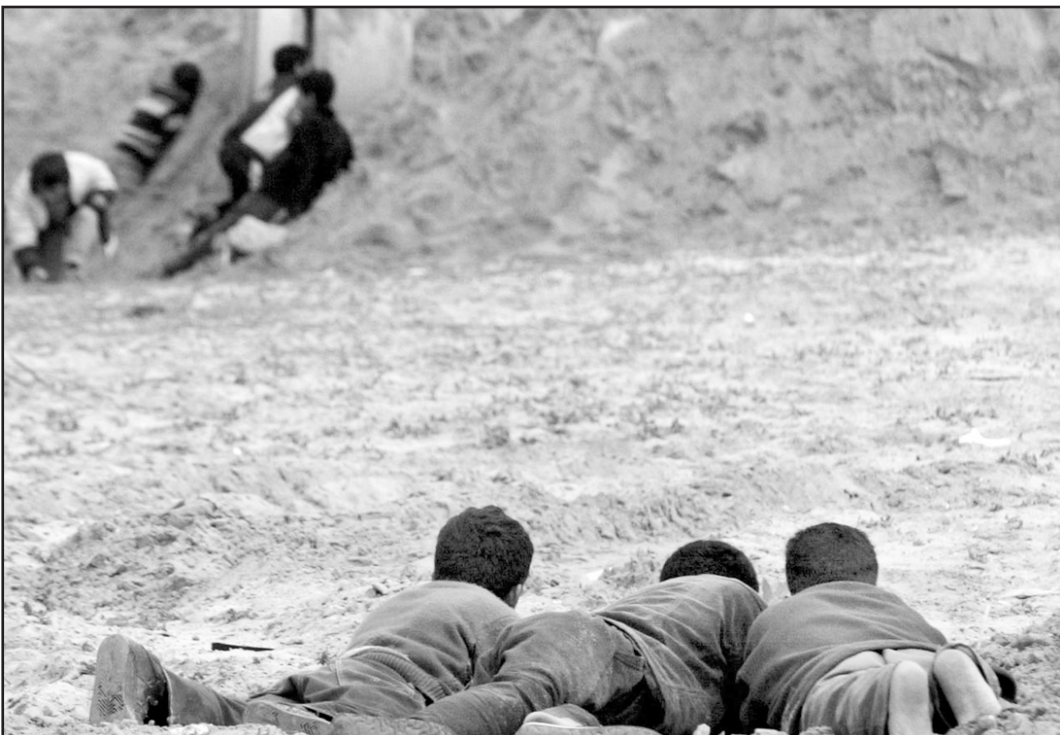


PHOTO: AFP

Three Palestinian boys, one in shoes, one in slippers and the third bare footed, take to the ground behind a huge mound of soil after throwing stones at an Israeli tank (unseen behind soil) in the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Lahia on Friday. Israeli army units with dozens of tanks continued to occupy the area after advancing overnight in an "open-ended operation".