



IRAQ INVASION DAY 16



Iraqis flee Baghdad yesterday. US troops reached Baghdad airport after fierce fighting with Iraqi forces in move on Baghdad from two directions to choke off the regime of President Saddam Hussein.

Powell discusses post-war Iraq with European FM's

AFP, Brussels

US Secretary of State Colin Powell began talks Thursday with his European counterparts focussing on rebuilding Iraq after the war, officials said.

Powell, in bilateral talks ahead of an extraordinary joint gathering of EU and NATO foreign ministers, also met NATO chief George Robertson.

The talks, which could also help mend shattered diplomatic fences with Europe over Iraq, were aimed at discussing reconstruction and plans for an interim authority in Iraq, Powell said.

"I want to hear ideas from them about reconstruction and contributions the EU will be able to make," he said before arriving in Brussels late Wednesday.

On Thursday morning he first met Robertson, who is hosting the talks, followed by the foreign ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Spain and

Italy.

He was also due to meet during the morning with French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, whose country led European opposition to the war on Iraq.

Diplomats have warned his task will be delicate as anti-war countries focus on demands for a central role for the United Nations after the conflict.

But the meetings are also "a sign that nobody wants to be cut off from the Americans for a long time, above all if one wants to have an influence on what happens after the war," one diplomat said.

Among others, Powell will hold one-on-one talks with his counterparts from France and Russia, Dominique de Villepin and Igor Ivanov, whose countries have led opposition to the war.

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, diametrically opposed on

the war, will also be among ministers lunching with Powell in Brussels.

Security will be tight for the talks, with activists in fiercely anti-war Belgium announcing plans for demonstrations outside NATO headquarters where the meetings will take place.

Powell will notably attend a meeting of NATO's decision-making North Atlantic Council (NAC) at the level of foreign ministers.

NATO was plunged into an unprecedented crisis in February after three anti-war countries blocked a US request to help boost Turkey's defences in preparation for a war.

The row was resolved after a deal bypassed France, but Germany and Belgium, while reluctantly agreeing, have since threatened to withdraw their support if Turkish troops move into northern Iraq.

That issue is likely to be discussed at Thursday's talks, which come after

Powell visited Ankara on Wednesday.

He said that there was no need for Turkey to send military forces into northern Iraq as US forces there had the situation "under control."

Meanwhile Powell will also have a joint meeting with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, the EU Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten and Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreu.

The European Union, while deeply split between the French-led anti-war camp and the pro-US group led by Britain, is mostly agreed on the need for a "central" role for the United Nations.

A NATO official declined to be drawn on hopes for reconciliation.

"There will be open and frank discussions, as diplomats say," he said, adding: "We should not be over ambitious."

Fear, thirst still hang over Umm Qasr

AFP, Umm Qasr

Two weeks after being captured and occupied in the opening days of the war, this southern port town of 40,000 people located on the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border, is securely in the hands of coalition forces.

Thousands of British and US troops are stationed around the run-down community, which has been turned into the main point for humanitarian aid deliveries.

But for the locals, the struggle between the Western soldiers and the Iraqi forces for control of the region is less important than their own struggle to recover their daily lives.

There has been progress. Electricity -- cut off the first day of the war -- is available in much of the town since Monday thanks to generators. Petrol can be bought at the one service sta-

tion. A few shops are offering eggs, tomatoes, onions, cigarettes and bread. But existence remains tough.

"Our biggest problem is still the lack of water. And in this heat, that's not a good thing," says Tamal, who lives with his mother and seven siblings in a fragile house.

The few water trucks driven up from Kuwait and the daily water distributions organised by British troops are insufficient for the needs of the arid region, especially now that midday temperatures are already hitting 35 degrees Celsius (95 Fahrenheit).

The town's sole hospital, meanwhile, is overflowing with patients looking for help with health problems caused by the war or compounded by the paucity of basic necessities.

Just two doctors treat the daily line of around 200 people. Two of their three other colleagues have gone to the main

southern city of Basra, besieged by British forces for more than a week, to help out, while the other has been called away by a family emergency.

"It's been three days now that we haven't received one litre of water," says the hospital's director, Doctor Mohammed al-Mansoury.

Fear that the invading forces might fail to kill or depose Saddam Hussein also reigns.

Almost nobody talks politics in town, at least "not right now," as many say, and no-one wants to go near a particular abandoned building in the middle of Umm Qasr -- the local headquarters of Saddam's Baath party.

Ask anybody to point it out, and they quickly wave their hand in its direction. "It's over there. But I won't take you," they say.

Straw rules out war on Syria

AFP, Dubai

US and British forces waging war on Iraq have no plans to take similar action against Syria or Iran, but Damascus must prove that it is not acting as a conduit for military supplies to Baghdad, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Wednesday.

"We have absolutely no plans for any military action against Iran or Syria," Straw told the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya news channel when asked about US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's recent warning to the two countries.

Last Friday, Rumsfeld warned Syria and Iran to steer clear of the Iraq war, saying that military supplies crossing from Syria were a "hostile act."

Rumsfeld said that equipment including night-vision goggles had

passed through Syria and that Tehran-backed Iraqi rebels had been seen crossing the border from Iran.

Britain has good relations with Iran which, "unlike Iraq that is a dictatorship," is "an emerging democracy and a country that deserves respect," Straw said according to a transcript of his remarks made available to AFP.

He said London was also trying hard to improve relations with Damascus, but "we in the coalition feel there is good evidence that such (military) supplies have been going through Syria and into Iraq."

"We are sharing whatever we have with the Syrian government," he added. Asked about the role of the exiled Iraqi opposition, Straw said it would not have a "free ticket" to govern post-war Iraq.



Iraqi Kurd Nasrat Ghaeb and her daughter Diagarad stand next to their only rice sack at their house in the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)-controlled town of Kifri, some 130 km southeast of Kirkuk on April 2. Kifri is the town on the border with Iraqi government's northern frontline.

Al-Jazeera TV suspends work in Iraq after ban

AFP, Doha

Qatar-based Al-Jazeera satellite television is suspending the work of its journalists in Iraq after authorities banned one correspondent from working and asked another to leave, the station announced early on Thursday.

Al-Jazeera "has decided to suspend, until further notice, the work

of all its correspondents in Iraq" after the information ministry informed its office in the Iraqi capital of the ban on Baghdad-based correspondent Diyar al-Umari and the request for Tayseer Alluni to leave the country "as soon as possible," it said.

The station, "which regrets this surprising and unjustified stand," will continue with a minimum

service, airing pictures from its offices in Baghdad, the southern city of Basra and the northern town of Mosul, a news presenter said.

Al-Jazeera said the Iraqi information ministry had given no explanation for its move.

US officials had criticised Al-Jazeera for allegedly presenting a one-sided version of the US-British war on Iraq and for airing pictures of coalition dead and prisoners of war.

Arab nations demand UNGA session on Iraq

AFP, Cairo

Arab nations will press for a UN General Assembly meeting to discuss the war in Iraq, despite US opposition, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher said on Wednesday.

Maher has been in close contact with his Moroccan counterpart Mohammed Benaissa and Arab League secretary general Amr Mussa over the possibility of Arab foreign ministers calling for such a meeting.

"We have to pursue our efforts as the situation is very serious and the Iraqi people is being subjected to bombardments and death every day," Maher said.

In New York, US ambassador to the United Nations John Negroponte said

he saw no need for a General Assembly session on Iraq.

"We do not think that it is either necessary or desirable," he said.

The five permanent members of the Security Council -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- cannot exercise their veto right on the General Assembly, which comprises all 191 UN members.

Negroponte said there would be ample opportunity for the Council to discuss Iraq in April, when humanitarian aid would be the main issue.

Arab foreign ministers decided on March 24 to call for a General Assembly if the Security Council failed to call for an end to the US-led war on Iraq.

Saddam warns Kurd leaders not to join invaders

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, in a letter read Wednesday on state television, warned Kurdish leaders to end their alignment with invading US and British troops, telling them his regime was staying put.

"I advise you not to rush toward anything that you will regret, as you know that this leadership and the state leading the confrontation against the invaders are staying," Saddam told Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Saddam urged Talabani to "avoid confronting the (Iraqi) army and people," in a letter read by Information Minister Mohammad Said al-Sahhaf.

"A copy of this letter is sent to Massoud Mustapha Barzani, head of the

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)," said the message.

The PUK and KDP, both allied with US forces, have enjoyed de facto autonomy in northern Iraq since the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf war, with the protection of US and British warplanes which have restricted Iraqi flight in the area.

Saddam told the Kurdish leaders: "For a long time, we have been hearing and seeing you flirt with America and the Zionists."

"But the flirting has entered a dangerous phase now... which has turned into welcoming the American forces... and opening a front in the north against the Iraqi people and army," Saddam said.

"It is my moral, basic and constitu-

tional duty to warn you of the dangers of this game, if you have surrendered to it," he said.

Saddam's appeal came after Kurdish military sources in the autonomous region reported that their fighters were gaining ground.

An AFP correspondent Wednesday saw Iraqi troops relinquish a military position near the town of Kalak, which is located some 40 kilometres (25 miles) from Mosul, on the demarcation line between Kurdish- and government-controlled territories.

Kurdish sources said the peshmarga, or guerrillas, took over the position and were hoping to advance beyond the hills by Thursday to the two bridges leading to the village of Khazer, where the Iraqi forces have an important base.



China, Russia to keep eye on US

AFP, Paris

Having failed to block war in Iraq, China and Russia are retooling strategies to attenuate US dominance and ensure that Washington cannot override their interests with impunity in the future, experts say.

Both states remain committed to closer relations with the United States, yet both were also deeply dismayed by Washington's handling of the crisis and are less inclined to pursue US ties at high cost to other national interests.

For China, this may translate into a more muscular assertion of its role as the dominant Asia-Pacific power while Russia can be expected to reiterate its geostrategic value as a nuclear power straddling several ancient civilisations.

"China is above all keeping its eye on the consequences of Iraq for the Asia region," said Francois Godement, director of the Asia centre at the Institut

Francais des Relations Internationales (IFRI), a Paris think tank.

"China would like to consolidate relations with the United States, but is also very pragmatic and determined to defend what it regards as its own interests," Godement explained.

This was evident the day hostilities broke out in Iraq: while predictably condemning the US-led war, Beijing also seized the occasion to fire off warnings to North Korea, Japan and Taiwan on how it expected them to behave.

A similar reaction occurred in Russia: after an expected blast of vitriol directed at the United States, Moscow said it was delaying ratification of a nuclear disarmament treaty and soon thereafter test-fired a strategic missile.

Moscow said the timing of the missile test was unrelated to the Iraq crisis. But many see in these and other developments nascent and none-too-

subtle policy recalibrations to remind Washington that other big players remain on the stage.

"For the United States, the Iraq crisis has been purely and simply about Iraq," said Steven Miller, director of the international security program at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government in the United States.

"But for Russia, China and much of the world the crisis was at least as much about the United States, about what kind of role the United States would play in the world and whether the United States would play by the rules.

"Contending with American power is, I think they believe, more important than dealing with Iraq," Miller said.

For China and Russia, as well as India, France, Germany and other powerful states, this contending with American power is producing new, "outside the box" foreign policy thinking that may influence the world for

generations to come.

Writing Sunday in The New York Times, columnist Thomas Friedman posited for example that a transformed NATO, where Russia gradually supplants France, would emerge as the guarantor of a western-oriented "World of Order" in years ahead.

Experts say Moscow's hard line with Washington on Iraq is predicated by core interest in an orderly world, an interest that could be met by a NATO-like alliance provided Russia had a seat at any top table within it.

"The delay in ratification of the treaty was not so much to send a message to Washington as for internal reasons," said Viktor Baranovsky, deputy director of Russia's Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IEMO).

"Russia has an interest in a more orderly world. The current mechanisms for bringing this about are few and not

very effective. If in the future NATO becomes that mechanism, that could be very good for Russia," Baranovsky said.

Though measurably more cautious in its official rhetoric, China is also on the lookout for new alliances or institutional mechanisms that would level the playing field more with the United States in managing global affairs.

Tang Shi Ping, deputy director of the Center for Regional Security Studies at China's Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, voiced China's anxiety over US global power and called for a new "axis of restraint" to offset it, playing on US President George W. Bush's term "axis of evil."

China, Russia and other powerful states "must form an axis of restraint" whose purposes could include military support for Iran to check US control of the Persian Gulf, Tang wrote last month in Singapore's The Straits Times daily.