

US revises sanction resolution on Iraq

Powell, Schroeder call for quick waiver of embargo

AP, United Nations

Stepping up the pressure for a vote next week, the United States presented a revised resolution to the UN Security Council to immediately lift sanctions against Iraq but indicated it might agree to suspend them instead, as Russia and France want.

"We think we've moved significantly," said Richard Grenell, spokesman for US Ambassador John Negroponte, noting that the new US draft makes more than 25 changes to address concerns of council members.

But the revised draft does not significantly change two key concerns of many council members - the limited role of the United Nations in post-war Iraq and the powerful role of the United States and Britain as occupying powers.

The United States handed the nine-page draft to council experts at the start of a meeting Thursday.

The experts agreed to meet again on Friday.

"There are some things that are positive," said Syria's deputy UN Ambassador Fayssal Mekdad, "but the most sensitive issues are still here."

The revised draft beefs up the language used to describe what a new UN coordinator for Iraq will do - but it does not beef up the UN's role in forming a new Iraqi government.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Kursheed Kasuri, whose country currently holds the Security Council presidency, said that greater UN involvement in post-war Iraq would make conditions more transparent, reducing criticism of the United States and Britain.

As for power in Iraq, the new text would still authorise the United States and Britain to run the country for a year, with automatic extensions, and to control a develop-

ment fund where money from oil sales would be deposited.

The United States faces resistance from four key countries which opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq - France, Russia, China and Germany. They say they haven't even started to negotiate the text, and all four have expressed concerns about a variety of issues.

Russia and France have called for sanctions to be suspended - not lifted - because under Security Council resolutions, UN weapons inspectors must certify that Iraq's weapons of mass destruction have been eliminated. Since the end of the war the United States has barred UN inspectors from returning, deploying its own teams instead.

The Bush administration would like to lift sanctions immediately, but agreeing to a suspension might be the price it has to pay to get the resolution adopted quickly.

At a press conference in Sofia,

Bulgaria, US Secretary of State Colin Powell hinted at a compromise, saying that eliminating the embargoes was preferable "but we will look at the idea of initially suspending sanctions."

The White House and the US Mission to the United Nations quickly issued "clarifications," stressing that the US position was to lift sanctions.

AFP adds: German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Friday called for sanctions against Iraq to be lifted "as soon as possible", after talks in Berlin.

"We are of the opinion that the sanctions that were levelled at the time no longer make sense in light of developments and should be lifted as soon as possible," Schroeder told reporters after a 30-minute meeting with Powell at the chancellery.



The towers of Munich's Frauenkirche (Woman's church) in Germany are seen in the foreground early Friday during the lunar eclipse.

PHOTO: AFP

5 killed as Israel raids Gaza town

AP, Beit Hanoun

Israeli troops seized a Gaza town on Thursday and five Palestinians were killed, as Palestinians marked the 55th anniversary of the "naqba," or catastrophe, their term for their displacement during the 1948 creation of Israel.

With the latest incursion, aimed at stopping rocket attacks from Gaza at Israeli towns, Israel signalled that it will not let up in its campaign against Palestinian militants, even with the United States and other mediators calling for steps toward calm and the first Israeli-Palestinian summit meeting since 2000 set for Saturday.

At about 3 a.m., Israel sent dozens of tanks into Beit Hanoun in northeast Gaza, as bulldozers tore up Palestinian farmland between the Palestinian town and the Gaza-Israel fence.

In clashes between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians, five Palestinians were killed, including a 12-year-old boy and two 15-year-olds. An Israeli commander denied Palestinian charges that soldiers blocked ambulances from entering and said his troops fired only at gunmen.

In a separate incident late Thursday, soldiers shot and killed a Palestinian who was running toward an Israeli base near Rafah on the Egyptian border, the military said. It was not known if he was armed.

US forces detain 260 during raid in Iraq

AP, Ad-Dawr

Heavily armed US Army forces stormed into a village near the northern city of Tikrit before dawn Thursday, seizing more than 260 prisoners, including one man on the most-wanted list of former Iraqi officials.

US troops encountered no resistance during the five-hour sweep, officers said. About 230 of those detained were being released later in the day, the military said.

Elsewhere, soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division shot and wounded a looter in Mosul after being fired upon, US military officials said. The shooting came a day after military officials, who had been criticised about the continued lawlessness in Iraq, denied issuing a shoot-on-sight policy against looters.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Colin Powell (L) and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder are on their way to the podium on Friday in the chancellory garden in Berlin, to give a joint press conference. Powell pays a 24-hour visit to Germany, seen as a vital step toward improving damaged relations between Germany and the United States.

Iraqis gain civilian rule in small town

REUTERS, Baghdad

US forces launched a new war on crime in Iraq, where one small town became the first on Thursday to take a key step from military to civilian rule.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said the United States would consider a suspension of UN sanctions against Iraq but later backed away from the idea, saying sanctions needed to be lifted. Washington wants Iraq to start generating revenue from oil.

Iraq's economy was ravaged during years of UN sanctions over ex-president Saddam Hussein's 1990 occupation of Kuwait and by the US-led war to oust him which ended in April.

In southern Iraq, the British Army handed over the port town of Umm Qasr to Iraqi civilian rule -- the first such handover of power since the end of the war. Local elections that would mark the rebirth of democracy in Iraq are

due in the town next week.

Iraqis in Mosul elected an interim council earlier this month to run govern the country's third largest city, but US troops remain in overall control there. Eager to both kick-start the economy and re-establish law and order, the country's new US civilian administrator said US forces would put thousands of criminals released by Saddam back in jail and break the grip of lawlessness on Baghdad.

"There is a serious law and order problem, we will continue to address it," Paul Bremer told his debut news conference.

"Let us put things in perspective, this is not a country in anarchy, people are going about their business, they are going about their lives," he said.

One of the top US generals in Baghdad said US forces had begun a new initiative on Thursday to create a sense of order in the capital, boosting security patrols and collecting refuse.

Thousands flee Congo fighting

AP, Kinshasa

Fleeing civilians jammed roads out of an eastern Congo city by the thousands Thursday, trying to escape rival ethnic militias battling for control with mortars and machetes.

More than 10,000 frightened residents have gathered around a UN compound in Bunia and the nearby airport, seeking the protection of 625 Uruguayan troops stationed there.

UN officials and others have warned of possible genocide in Bunia and elsewhere in the Ituri province, where the rival Hema and Lendu tribes have fought since Uganda pulled out the last of its 6,000 troops on May 7.

FBI, CIA join hunt for Riyadh bombers

REUTERS, Riyadh

American FBI and CIA agents joined the hunt for masterminds behind the suicide bombings in Riyadh, which US Ambassador Robert Jordan compared to a Pearl Harbor or September 11 terror attack for Saudi Arabia.

Jordan also called the attacks on three expatriate housing compounds in which 34 people died as clearly an assault on Saudi Arabia's royal family. He said he was confident the kingdom's rulers were taking this seriously.

A team of up to 60 members of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency arrived in the kingdom on Thursday to help the Saudi authorities hunt down those behind Monday's bombings in the world's biggest oil exporter.

The State Department warned Americans in Saudi Arabia of a report of a possible imminent attack targeted at the Red Sea port city of Jeddah.

"The US Consulate General in Jeddah has received an unconfirmed report that a possible ter-

rorist attack in the Al Hamra district of Jeddah may occur in the near future," the State Department said in a statement.

Jordan, who had criticised the kingdom for not responding quickly to US warnings before the bombings, told foreign journalists on Thursday the attacks marked a watershed for Saudi Arabia's role in the global battle against terror.

"This was, if not the Saudis' September 11, certainly their Pearl Harbor," Jordan said, referring to Japan's attack on US warships which brought the United States into World War II.

"There is a very clear suggestion that this...was aimed at undermining the government...as much as it was an attack on American interests...to create fault lines," he said. At least seven Americans died in the attacks.

Jordan also said in a report on the British Broadcasting Corp that the royal family "view this as their 9/11" -- the devastating attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, blamed on the al-Qaeda network.

Laden ordered Riyadh attacks?

ANI, LONDON

Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden had personally issued directives for terrorist attacks in Riyadh, a British newspaper reported on Thursday.

Saudi security officials have claimed that Mohammed al-Johani was the mastermind behind the attacks who had arrived in Saudi Arabia on forged travel documents two months back and remained untraced since then. He is a Saudi national and left his country when he was only 18.

Meanwhile, FBI has warned of a possible big al-Qaeda attack in Britain. In a letter FBI told authorities that the next target of the terrorist network is Britain. Terrorists have planned to hijack and transform an oil tanker in Britain into a mobile bomb, the letter said.

Scotland Yard has strengthened security measures after the FBI warning.

New terror alerts from Kenya to Asia

REUTERS, Singapore

Terror alerts spread around the world on Friday with Australia and New Zealand warning their nationals to be on their guard in Southeast Asia, a region still haunted by last year's Bali bombings.

As Saudi, FBI and CIA agents hunted for the masterminds of this week's suicide bomb attacks in Riyadh, the State Department said on Thursday it feared an imminent attack by Islamic militants in another Saudi city, Jeddah.

Lebanon said it had smashed a plot to attack the US embassy in Beirut, while Britain banned flights to Kenya, where past terror attacks have killed hundreds.

Lebanon foils plot to attack US embassy

REUTERS, Beirut

Lebanon has arrested nine people plotting an attack on the US embassy and kidnappings to try to force the release of Islamic militant prisoners, military intelligence officials said on Thursday.

News of the arrests came three days after suicide bombings on foreigners' housing compounds in Saudi Arabia killed at least 34 people, including seven Americans, the first major attack on US targets since the war in Iraq.

The Lebanese army said that it and Syrian military intelligence had detained members of a cell planning "sabotage and attacks on various targets, the most important being the embassy of a major Western state, security and military outposts and kidnappings of officials" to bargain for the detainees' release.

The army statement did not identify the embassy or the people allegedly targeted for abduction, but military intelligence sources said the heavily fortified US embassy compound in Beirut was the target.

Rift between US, France widens

AP, Washington

New cracks are showing in the damaged French-American relationship with the disclosure that the Pentagon will snub the upcoming Paris Air Show and France's allegation that the Bush administration is planting false stories about it with US media.

Senior State Department official Richard N. Haass said the two countries will soon have good opportunities at upcoming meetings to resolve their differences.

And French Ambassador Jean-David Levitte said in a letter that the nations must continue to work together.

But Thursday's developments made it clear that it won't be easy to overcome the rancor between the historical allies over France's opposition to the US-led war in Iraq.

In a move critics said was aimed at punishing France, the Defence Department is cutting the number of people and aircraft it's sending to the Paris Air Show, a premier international event for the aerospace industry beginning June 15.

An industry official criticised the Pentagon move as bad for business.

And Levitte sent a letter to administration officials and lawmakers complaining that "some members of the American media have issued false accusations against France" and "they all rely on information from 'anonymous administration officials'."

Among the stories cited were alleged French weapons sales to Iraq and a report last week that French officials provided passports to Iraqis trying to escape the US-led invasion. Levitte called these "denigration and lies."

White House spokesman Sean McCormack denied the accusation. "There is no such organised effort," he said.

But Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said he couldn't say whether military-to-military relations between the two had changed.

"There's so many linkages and connections between the United States and NATO allies that I wouldn't want to say yes or no," he told a Pentagon news conference.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian woman holds up a symbolic key that reads "We will return" as she chants anti-Israel slogans during a demonstration held in front of the legislative council in Gaza City on Thursday. Some 1000 Palestinian protesters gathered to mark the 55th anniversary of al-Nakba or "catastrophe", the 1948 forced exile of Palestinians from their homes when the state of Israel was created following the WWII.