

White House defies protests, sticks to its Iraq troops plan

AFP, Washington

The White House is sticking to its plan to send extra US troops to Iraq, resisting public disapproval and opposition Democrats determined to pass a damning resolution against the strategy.

Vice President Dick Cheney said the plan, which includes sending 21,500 more soldiers to the war-torn country, should be given time to work.

"People are trying to make a judgment on whether or not this plan is going to work I think far too early," he said in an interview with Newsweek released Sunday. "And I think in fairness to the Iraqis, they need to be given an opportunity to follow through on their commitments."

He cautioned against the phased withdrawal backed by Democrats, saying Iraq would collapse into chaos and the United States would lose stature in the world.

"All of a sudden, the United States, which is the bulwark of security in that part of world, would

I think no longer -- could no longer be counted on by our friends and allies that have put so much into this struggle," he said.

Congress is due to vote in early February on a non-binding motion criticizing the surge in troops, with Democrats and Republicans moving to prepare other draft resolutions even as the violence in Iraq claimed more lives with at least 61 killed across the country on Sunday.

Democratic Senator Charles Schumer predicted a large number of lawmakers in Bush's Republican Party -- possibly "even a majority" - would support the resolution condemning the proposed deployment.

"And that will send shockwaves through the White House and through the country," Schumer told NBC.

Congress also appeared headed for a possible confrontation with Bush over requests for additional funds for the war, with lawmakers vowing to pile pressure on the president.

Bush has urged a skeptical US

public to give his new strategy a chance and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell told CBS that Senate Republicans were "not going to talk about failure" in Iraq.

"We're going to talk about success," he said. "But we don't want to allow these places, to become once again where these elements like Al-Qaeda can operate with impunity and then be prepared to launch attacks on us again here in America."

But the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, presidential hopeful Joe Biden, vowed a "full-throated debate" on the plan in the Senate despite administration promises to move ahead in face of the opposition.

The president faces an uphill battle to gain support for his plan, with even loyal Republicans like Senator David Vitter of Louisiana calling it "clearly the final shot."

"I think we should be stronger and clearer about benchmarks," the senator said on NBC, adding his support for a regional conference that includes Iran and Syria.

"We need to go over and over and over the issue of, is this new troop level enough to make a difference. Because I think, clearly, we have been wrong in the past about the adequacy of troop levels," he said.

Democrat-leaning independent Senator Joe Lieberman said Sunday he was working with Republican Senator John McCain on a text to try to bridge the divisions.

On the campaign trail in Iowa, presidential hopeful and Senator Hillary Clinton said it would be irresponsible for Bush to leave US troops in Iraq when his term ends in two years.

"The president has said that this is going to be left to his successor," the Democrat told a crowd in an auditorium. "I think it's the height of irresponsibility and I resent it."

On Saturday, tens of thousands of protesters -- including Vietnam War opponent US actress Jane Fonda -- took to the streets of Washington to denounce the president's plan and demand an end to the war.

Thousands write protest letters to Myanmar junta leader

AFP, Yangon

Thousands of people have written letters addressed to Myanmar's military leader, Senior General Than Shwe, to complain about the harsh conditions in the country, activists said yesterday.

The rare show of public discon-

tent was organized by a group of pro-democracy activists -- the 88 Generation Student Group -- which gave pencils and paper to the public and asked them to "open their hearts" about life in the military-ruled country.

Many in the group are leaders of a failed student uprising that demanded democratic reforms in

1988. Key student leaders were released from prison in the last two years after serving long sentences.

Min Ko Naing, one of the group's leaders, declined to say exactly how many letters they had received, but said thousands had been collected.

"We have seen most of the

letters are about the economic problems that the people are facing in their daily lives," he said.

The activists had planned to end the campaign on Sunday, one month after it began on Myanmar's Independence Day on January 4. They now plan to continue the letter-writing campaign due to its popularity.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Shia Muslims touch a horse representing one used by Imam Hussein in the Karbala battle as they take part in a religious procession on the ninth day of Moharram in Karachi yesterday.

Myanmar crackdown puts Indian rebels on the run

Naga insurgent leader discloses

AFP, Guwahati

A major military crackdown by Myanmar has sent Indian separatists fleeing and left a growing death toll, a rebel leader told AFP yesterday.

The junta had burnt down the general headquarters and two camps held by the S.S. Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN-K).

"Heavy fighting is going on with a brigade (about 3,000 men) of the Myanmar army using mortars and rocket launchers, launching a massive assault on our cadres since the weekend," senior NSCN-K leader A.Z. Jami said by telephone.

The NSCN-K, fighting for an independent homeland for Naga tribal peoples in the northeastern

Indian state of Nagaland, has at least 50 camps with some 5,000 guerrilla fighters in Sagaing, northern Myanmar.

"We have lost three of our cadres and as many wounded in the attacks. In retaliatory strikes, our boys killed more than 12 Myanmar army soldiers and injured many more," the rebel leader said.

"About 60 of our cadres who were at the general headquarters during the raid managed to flee the camp."

The offensive comes a week after India's Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee visited Yangon and sought the junta's help against rebels from the northeast who have sought refuge across the border.

"The offensive by the military junta has the backing of the Indian

government with most of the weapons used in the operation supplied by New Delhi," another senior rebel leader said, asking not to be named.

Mukherjee's trip followed reports that hundreds of rebels from Assam escaped into Myanmar after India launched a military operation against the guerrillas earlier this month.

Authorities in Assam blamed the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) for violence that saw 86 people killed -- mostly Hindi-speaking migrant workers.

At least four other militant groups from India's northeast, including the Ulfa, have training camps in Myanmar's jungles.

There was no confirmation of the military offensive from Myanmar.

Nepal minister resigns over ethnic unrest

AFP, Kathmandu

A Nepali minister has resigned after accusing the government of failing to stem unrest that has seen at least seven people killed and dozens injured in the country's rural southeast, he told the wire service yesterday.

"I have submitted my resignation letter to the prime minister through the government chief secretary. The government has failed to address the genuine issues of the Mahadhesi," industry and commerce minister Hridayesh Tripathi told AFP.

The towns of Birgunj, Janakpur, Kalaiya and Lahan in Nepal's Terai region, bordering India, remained under curfew yesterday, after nearly two weeks of violent unrest.

The violence over demands by the Mahadhesi community for greater political representation has erupted in a country that only recently saw an end to ten years of civil war between government forces and Maoist insurgents.

"The situation in the Terai is getting serious but the government has not paid any attention to it," said the minister, a Mahadhesi and member of a small political party in Nepal's seven-party alliance government.

On Sunday, the UN human rights office in Nepal called for restraint and dialogue from both sides to end the violent protests.

Asians graduate in Australia 'despite bad English'

AFP, Sydney

More than one-third of foreign students graduating from Australian universities, mainly Asians, have such poor English skills they should never have been admitted, research released yesterday showed.

A study by demographer Bob Birrell found that more than 50 percent of South Korean and Thai students did not have sufficient English to work professionally in Australia, along with more than 43 percent of Chinese graduates.

Some 17 percent of students from Singapore and India, where English is more widely spoken, also failed to reach the required level, Birrell found.

Overall, 34 percent of the graduating foreign students offered permanent residence visas in 2006 did not have competent English.

Birrell, of Melbourne's Monash University, said almost all the 12,000 graduates tested for the survey were from Asia because these students are the most likely to apply for permanent residency on completing their studies.

However, he said that he believed the study to be representative of all foreign students, partly because Asia was a major source

of fee-paying overseas students for Australian universities.

"It does raise questions about university standards," Birrell told AFP.

Education Minister Julie Bishop described the survey as "an extraordinary attack by professor Birrell on our universities."

"International students must meet international benchmarks in language in order to get a place in a university in Australia," she said.

The study found all graduates tested had enough command of the language to cope in most situations.

"But people who have reached this standard are still not capable of conducting a sophisticated discourse at the professional level," it said.

Tertiary institutions are reliant on international students because they provide 15 percent of funding, leading to suggestions that academic standards are sacrificed in favour of financial rewards.

In his report, Birrell said there was a "mountain of anecdotal material" that many overseas students struggle to meet their course requirements and that universities cope by lowering the English demands of courses.

"There is widespread recogni-

tion of the English problem," he said.

But universities were hesitant to make students take extra language courses because this would make them more expensive and therefore less attractive than rival institutions, he said.

Professor Gerard Sutton, the president of the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee, said most foreign students would be proficient in reading, writing and listening to English.

"What I think has been highlighted is a deficiency in spoken language," he told AFP, adding that a deficiency in this area would not prevent them from completing a university course.

Of the students surveyed, those from South Korea fared the worst with 55.5 percent not meeting the required English standard.

They were followed by Thailand (50.9), Nepal (47.9), Taiwan (47.4), China (43.2), Hong Kong (42.9), Bangladesh (42.0), Japan (36.8), Vietnam (32.9), Indonesia (32.0), Sri Lanka (25.1), Pakistan (24.8), Malaysia (23.5), Singapore (17.8) and India (17.3).