



World hopes for peace, war looms

DHAHRAN, Saudi Arabia (AP) — A waiting world watched Baghdad and the bleak Arabian desert Wednesday — Baghdad for word on peace, the desert for news of all-out war.

American helicopters carted off hundreds of Iraqi prisoners after one action and Iraqi gunners zeroed in on a U.S. unit in another, killing one American and wounding seven.

A key French lawmaker said the Desert Storm allies would give Iraq until late Thursday to respond to a Soviet peace proposal, or face a final offensive to drive its forces from Kuwait.

"Now, more than ever," said French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, "the ultimate decision rests with Saddam Hussein."

Late Wednesday, Baghdad radio said Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz would travel to Moscow "soon" with

the reply of President Saddam and the rest of the Iraqi leadership to the Soviet plan, believed to call for an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, coupled with vague assurances that Saddam could stay in power and the Palestinian question eventually would be addressed.

The U.N. secretary general, Javier Perez de Cuellar, described the initiative as a "historic opportunity," and U.S. ally Italy also endorsed it. House Speaker Thomas S. Foley said that if the withdrawal is unconditional, "I don't know how (President Bush) could fail to accept it."

Bush kept a public silence on the issue Wednesday, a day after describing the plan as "well short" of U.S. requirements. Although Bush did not elaborate on his objections, Republican House leader Robert H. Michel said, "We want to see conditions change."

Dismissing the alliance's strategy for an assault on Kuwait, Baghdad radio declared: "Their paper plans will be nothing when the ground battle starts."

Desert Storm commander Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf said the Iraqi army, under aerial bombardment for a month, was "on the verge of collapse." Other senior U.S. officers added that they still expected a bloody fight.

"There's still a formidable force out there," one said.

British military sources said Iraqi troops were dispersing multi-rocket launchers and other artillery at the front in apparent readiness to take on the allies with chemical weapons.

Early Wednesday afternoon, a U.S. task force clashed with Iraqi forces south of the Saudi border, and the Iraqis called in artillery fire that killed one American and

wounded seven others, the U.S. command reported. It said the Iraqi fire hit an American anti-aircraft gun and two Bradley personnel carriers, and U.S. forces destroyed five Iraqi tanks and 20 artillery pieces, and captured seven prisoners.

A short time later, the command said, U.S. Army strike helicopters attacked a complex of Iraqi desert fortifications just north of the border, destroying 15 to 30 bunkers and leading 400 to 500 stunned Iraqi infantrymen to surrender.

As darkness fell, Army Ch-47 Chinook helicopters were completing the task of ferrying the prisoners to a holding camp in northern Saudi Arabia, said command spokesman Brig. Gen. Richard Neal.

It was the largest roundup of prisoners yet by U.S. forces.

Senate defeats 'gulf orphans' protection plan

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate Wednesday night defeated the so-called "gulf orphans" measure that would have asked the Defense Department to reassign single parents and military couples with children who have been deployed to the Persian Gulf.

"It is a grave danger to the well-being of our military families and their children to allow the children of American servicemen and women to become orphaned," argued the sponsor, Rep. John Heinz, R-Pa., before the senate rejected the measure 54-38.

Sen. John Glenn, D-Ohio, said in opposition that such a provision would be "grossly unwise" on the apparent event of a ground assault aimed at driving Iraqi troops out of Kuwait. He said it could severely disrupt the war effort.

Sen. John Warner, R-Va., who just returned from the Middle East, said "not one person" he had spoken with in the U.S. military had raised the issue of giving some parents compassionate leave.

Allies criticize Soviet peace proposal

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The United States and Britain have insisted in their responses to a Soviet peace plan that specific Iraqi concessions must accompany an Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, U.N. diplomats said Wednesday.

They said Washington and London separately considered what they called shortcomings in the plan and independently informed Soviet diplomats of their governments' views. Details of the Soviet plan have yet to be released.

The diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity, indicated that the Soviet plan:

- Lacked a firm timetable for Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.
- Made no mention of prisoners of war, restoration of the Kuwaiti government or reparations for damage to Kuwait, and

- Did not insist on compliance with all 12 U.N. Security Council resolutions adopted since Iraq invaded Kuwait on Aug. 2.

Soviet officials have claimed their plan does assure compliance with all 12 council resolutions. Some reports have said the plan has a specific timetable for Iraqi withdrawal.

But the diplomats indicated these and other shortcomings must be covered in any peace plan acceptable to the United States and Britain. They said their views were being discussed with other members of the coalition arrayed against Iraq.

Response to the Soviet plan was being handled in Washington and London, the diplomats said. They said there was no single joint document or list of allied conditions.

Pilots say Iraqi army poses threat

AT AN AIRBASE IN SOUTHWESTERN SAUDI ARABIA (AP) — U.S. combat pilots said Wednesday that Kuwait is already a burning, cratered battlefield, but that allied forces still face a formidable, dug-in Iraqi army with plenty of tanks.

F-111 pilots have been flying round-the-clock bombing missions to prepare the battlefield in Iraq and Kuwait for a ground offensive, and report that the allies have destroyed a significant part of the Iraqi war machine.

"The whole military establishment

is burning," said Capt. Bradley Seipel, 34, of Virginia Beach, Va. As a weapons system officer of an F-111F fighter-bomber, Seipel directed some of the bombs that started the fires.

He and other airmen at this desert airbase for U.S. Air Force F-111 strike aircraft gave a bird's-eye view of what the battlefield will look like to allied troops moving forward in a ground war.

"It is amazing flying up there. You look at Kuwait, that whole area, it's just fire," Seipel said.

"It's like constant explosions, constant fires," said Capt. Mike Russell, 33, of Bradenton, Fla., the pilot on Seipel's jet. "It's just awe-inspiring night after night how we ripped them up."

The airmen with the 48th Tactical Fighter Wing (Provisional) have been concentrating on tanks, artillery and Iraqi army reserves in their nightly missions in Kuwait and Iraq.

"This is a war and we're beating them bad," Russell said.

Baker

In Congress, said lawmakers share the administration's concern about Saddam remaining "a serious problem in the gulf for years to come." But if Saddam agrees to an unconditional withdrawal, Foley said, Bush would have "a very difficult choice."

"I don't know how he could fail to accept it."

He said later that the question might well be academic because

there has been no indication Saddam is prepared to withdraw unconditionally, despite much discussion of a still-secret Soviet proposal on the subject.

Lt. Gen. Thomas Kelly, director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, noted that he and other officials had said a day earlier a ground war would be won "in short order."

"I should have said 'good order,'"

he said. "I don't think it's going to be any kind of pushover. ... It's not going to be a snap."

One military official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said "we are in the eye of Desert Storm. There is something of a lull right at the moment." He added, "It suggests the machinery is in place and we are waiting for presidential orders."

"We want to stay on course with

our military tack and not be delayed," said House Minority leader Robert Michel, the Illinois Republican.

The Iraqi president was weighing a Soviet peace proposal, which was still secret but which Bush had dismissed on Tuesday as "well short of what would be required" to end the conflict.

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