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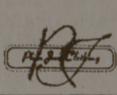
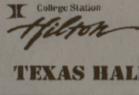
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Attack on Iraq not yet ruled out

WASHINGTON (AP) — Saudi Arabia's reluctance to allow U.S. use of its air bases for attacks on Iraq does not shut the door on President Clinton's options. The United States could still deliver a powerful blow using warplanes from aircraft carriers and bases elsewhere in the Persian Gulf.

Saudi Arabia is the most important American ally in the Gulf, and U.S. Air Force planes and support systems based there would be especially useful — but not vital — in any air campaign against Iraq that lasted more than a few days.

Administration officials said Tuesday they still expect to gain a Saudi go-ahead and they trumpeted the expressions of support Secretary of State Madeleine Albright won from Kuwait, Bahrain and Egypt.

The Saudis told Albright on Monday they favor using "all diplomatic means" to resolve the standoff over U.N. inspections of Iraq's weapons programs. They withheld permission to use their bases to launch attacks.

U.S. officials said a firm Saudi "no" would complicate the war planning. "Would it be a show stopper? No. Would it be a challenge? Clearly," one senior defense official said Tuesday, briefing reporters on condition of anonymity.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, the Saudis initially were reluctant to invite in American forces, but they relented when it looked as though the Iraqi Army might make a grab for Saudi oilfields. During the ensuing war, allied air and land forces used Saudi Arabia as their main base.

Most of the American aircraft that Clinton might call on to deliver bombs and missiles at Iraqi targets this time, such as suspected biological weapons sites or underground command centers, are based outside Saudi Arabia.

Of the roughly 100 American aircraft at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, nearly half are support planes such as KC-10 and

KC-135 tankers for the 135 and EF-111 planes jamming and electronic dropping. EC-37B electronic command and U-2 spy planes.

The Air Force fleet includes about 15 fighters. The U.S. also maintains its headquarters in Bahrain, reluctance appears to be two concerns of the Saudis.

First, they see little overtly joining hands in a repeat of past Saudi attacks on Iraq. In these "pinpricks" on Iraqi President Saddam, who the Saudis consider a threat.

Second, the Saudis worry about anti-Western forces within the military in Saudi Arabia hit by terrorists, including the 1996 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Riyadh that killed 19 U.S. injured hundreds.

James Baker III, secretary of state when the administration launched the Gulf War strikes, said the Saudis are at odds with the administration's military force if diplomatic means fail.

"I feel reasonable any difference, it revolves a question of how forceful a military would be," Baker said in a recent interview. Baker said the Gulf War U.S. attacks included a June 1991 ship-launched cruise missile on a quarters building of the September 1996 attack on an air base targets in southern

U.S. military plane kills 20 in collision

TRENTO, Italy (AP) — A U.S. military plane on a low-level training flight over the snowy Alps sliced through a cable-car line, sending a gondola full of skiers crashing hundreds of feet to the ground. At least 20 people inside the car died.

Officials at the U.S. air base in Aviano in northern Italy, where the Marine EA-6B Prowler was based, said the accident was being investigated and all low-level missions by U.S. military aircraft in Italy have been suspended.

The pilot and his three-member crew returned safely to Aviano, said Brig. Gen. Tim Peppe, commander of the base's resident 31st fighter wing. The plane sustained minor tail damage.

Peppe, speaking at a news conference at Aviano, did not speculate on a cause, only discounting engine trouble.

In Washington, U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the pilot "was apparently unaware that he had struck a cable or injured anyone."

Base officials said American pilots fly dozens of training missions over Italy every day. The accident occurred at 3:15 p.m. local time under sunny skies at a ski resort in the Val di Fassa area of the Dolomite Mountains near Trento. The cable car was traveling from the town of Cavalese, 80 miles northeast of Trento, to the top of Cermis mountain, site of a popular local ski resort.

The cabin had just begun its ascent from the base at Cavalese, at an altitude of about 3,000 feet, and was heading toward a mid-station when it fell, said Alessia Dezugliana, an employee of the Alpe Cermis ski area.

RAI footage showed the crushed wreckage of the yellow cable car

resting on the snow feet below its route. The car was twisted and crushed.

"You couldn't guess the car anymore," said a police official who arrived an hour after the crash.

"All the four walls of the car were crushed and opened up like a can. The bodies were all crushed against the sheet metals. Most were torn apart," he said.

One of the victims was an Italian operator. The pilot and at least six of them were killed.

Police Officer Robert Cavalese said the pilot was "apparently unaware that he had struck a cable or injured anyone."

William Cohen
U.S. Defense Secretary

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