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AT THEATRES SOON

Russia, Jackson appeal to Yugoslav

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia (AP) — Russia pitched a new peace plan as a chagrined NATO struggled Thursday to explain how another of its missiles in the Kosovo air campaign went astray, damaging a house near the capital of its ally Bulgaria.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson crossed into Serbia from Croatia by car on a mission to win freedom for three U.S. POWs held by Yugoslavia.

And NATO continued its round-the-clock air assault on Yugoslav targets, striking during daylight to take out bridges leading into Kosovo province. Heavy explosions and intense anti-aircraft fire were reported Thursday afternoon near an oil refinery northwest of Belgrade.

As the bombings persisted for the 37th day, former Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin launched his latest peace initiative, promoting what Moscow said was a new plan for ending the Kosovo crisis.

While acknowledging "movement" toward a settlement following talks with the Russian envoy, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder insisted that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic has to withdraw Serb forces from Kosovo first before the bombing could be suspended.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan met in Moscow with Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who stressed the need for the United Nations to play a major role.

"The stakes are now very high, not only for the Balkans and Europe, but for the whole world," Yeltsin said.

Bulgarian officials said a NATO AGM-88 HARM missile, intended to destroy Serb anti-aircraft batteries, slammed late Wednesday into a suburb of the capital Sofia, causing no injuries but blowing the roof off a house.

Bulgarian President Petar Stoyanov demanded an explanation.

In Brussels, NATO spokesperson Jamie Shea said an alliance jet fired the missile "in self-defense" but it "strayed from its target and unintentionally landed in Bulgaria," about 30 miles from Yugoslavia's southeastern border.

NATO officials acknowledge the errors but say only "a tiny fraction" of its 4,500-plus air attacks on Milosevic's war machine have led to "unintended consequences."

NATO was apologetic about the Sofia accident, with Shea promising to "minimize still further the chance of this happening again."

Schroeder, who conferred for 90 minutes with Russian envoy, dampened expectations for a breakthrough. "This is the beginning of a process, not the end," he said.

"The stakes are very high now, not only for the Balkans and Europe, but for the whole world."

The Russian plan calls for a U.N. conditional peacekeeping force in Kosovo.

Yugoslavia's ambassador to Russia, Biserko Djindjic, who is also the Yugoslav leader's brother-in-law, said he would accept a civilian U.N. force, but a Russian component but excluded any NATO force.

Those who are bombing Yugoslavia, he added, "cannot be a part of any peace process."

Jackson, arriving in Zagreb, Croatia, said he was freeing the American soldiers could give a boost to peace efforts, although the White House has demanded their unconditional release. The U.S. captured March 31 along the Yugoslav-Macedonian border.

"My experience has been whenever captives are released, it at least creates a window of opportunity," Jackson said. He and a delegation of U.S. lawmakers later Thursday entered Serbia by car to meet Milosevic, where they hoped to meet Milosevic's prisoners.

Jackson went to Syria in 1984, where he arranged the release of a U.S. Navy pilot who was shot down by Syrian forces in Lebanon. Several months later, Jackson made arrangements with Cuba for the release of American and Cuban political prisoners.

Congressional delegation to head to Balkans

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Majority Leader Dick Armey will lead a congressional delegation to the Balkans over the weekend, eager to see for himself the conditions on the ground for both American troops and Kosovar refugees.

"I want to talk to some of our troops there," Armey said in a conference call Thursday with Texas reporters. "I have a chance to talk to refugees. I'm prepared to have my heart broken in some of those conversations, but I think it's the sort of thing we need to do."

The Irving Republican's comments came a day after the House sharply repudiated President Clinton's policy in the Balkans — refusing to endorse the five-week-old NATO air campaign in Yugoslavia and insisting on congressional approval before any ground offensive is launched.

While House Democratic Leader Dick Gephardt called the votes "a low moment in American foreign policy and in the history of this institution," Armey placed blame at Clinton's feet.

The votes were "just a matter of validating the larger point we were trying to make with the president: Don't make commitments and then come to Congress when our (military) people are on the ground or in the air and ask for our validation or repudiation," Armey said. "We need to have the consultation prior."

Armey is leading a 19-member congressional dele-

gation that leaves Friday morning for the Balkans Base in Germany, where some of the U.S. troops engaged in the NATO operation are stationed. On Saturday, the lawmakers head to Albania and then to Aviano Air Base in Italy and then on to Kosovo headquarters in Brussels.

Sunday, they will meet with NATO officials returning to the United States.

The trip marks Armey's first time overseas as a congressional delegation. He has shown a fondness in the past for foreign travel. "I've been in the middle of a very difficult circumstance and have been fairly involved with it on all fronts," he said of his participation in the Balkans delegation.

The delegation will include two other House members: Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Houston, and Mark R-Clarendon.

Thornberry, who serves on the House Intelligence Committee, said his top priority is to get a better feel for how the military mission is going.

He said he plans to talk to air crews flying over Yugoslavia. "I want to know if they're doing the thing they need to do their job," he said. "In the past if you have a chance to go and see the folks who are doing the work, they're going to tell you what they did."



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