

U.S. warns against inaction against Baghdad

By Dafna Linzer
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Top weapons inspector Hans Blix on Monday said Baghdad had not genuinely accepted U.N. resolutions demanding that it disarm, while his counterpart Mohamed ElBaradei said there was no evidence so far that Iraq was reviving its nuclear program and asked for a "few months" to complete the search.

Asked whether the threat from Saddam was imminent, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said, "From the president's point of view, it remains a very grave threat."

Other Security Council members with the same veto power as the United States disagreed.

"The job has not been completed. We share the view of many that this process has not been completed and more time is needed," said China's deputy U.N. ambassador Zhang Yishan. Russian Ambassador Sergey Lavrov said his country strongly supported calls "for inspections to continue."

France's U.N. Ambassador Jean-Marc de la Sabliere also supported the need for inspections "to go forward...with the objective of Iraq's verifiable disarmament," adding that it could be "several weeks" or "a few months." He said there was strong backing in the 15-member council for additional time.

"The purpose of this exercise is not inspections but the disarmament of Iraq. Our quarrel is with Iraq's behavior in this process," he said.

The differing views on the inspectors' reports could make or break international support for military intervention in Iraq, Iraqi Ambassador Mohammed al-Douri defended his country's actions. "We open all doors to Mr. Blix and his team. If there is something, he will find it. We have no hidden reports at all."

ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said so far nuclear inspections of 106 sites had turned up nothing.

"We have to date found no evidence that Iraq has revived its nuclear program since the elimination of the program in the 1990s. However, our work is steadily progressing and should be allowed to run its natural course."

"With our verification system now in place, barring exceptional circumstances and provided there is sustained proactive cooperation by Iraq, we should be able within the next few months to provide credible assurance that Iraq has no nuclear weapons program."

In a toughly-worded assessment of Iraq's cooperation with 60 days of inspections, Blix, head of the U.N. Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission, chided the Iraqis for failing to cooperate on substance "in order to bring the disarmament task to completion, through the peaceful process of inspection, and to bring the

monitoring task on a firm course."

So far, he said: "Iraq appears not to have come to a genuine acceptance, not even today, of the disarmament that was demanded of it." He did not specifically call for more time but made clear that his inspectors have only just begun their work.

Most of the Security Council believes that's a determination they must make based on the inspectors' assessments. The 15 members of the Security Council will reconvene Wednesday, a day after President Bush delivers the State of the Union address, to discuss the inspectors' reports and begin debate on Iraq. In the meantime, Blix and ElBaradei will update the council again on Feb. 14.

He noted that Iraq's 12,000 page arms declaration contained little more than old material in the areas of chemical and biological weapons and said his teams now believe Iraq's claims that it was unsuccessful in producing the VX nerve agent, were untrue. "There are indications that the agent was weaponized," Blix said. Inspectors have also discovered a mustard gas precursor during recent inspections.

On biological weapons, Blix said Iraq had failed to produce "convincing evidence" that it unilaterally destroyed its anthrax stockpiles and that there are indications that Iraq could have had larger quantities than it reported to inspectors.

ElBaradei said his teams had concluded the aluminum tubes Iraq had tried to import were earmarked for missile programs and not for a nuclear program, as the Bush administration claimed last fall. But he said the investigation continued.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Naji Sabri said that his nation has cooperated fully with weapons inspectors and he accused the United States and Britain of setting the stage for an unjustified attack.

He said accusations against Iraq by U.S. officials were "all lies to hide America's true intentions" which he said were to take control of the nation's oil resources and protect "American interests in Israel."

Despite assurances from Iraq that it would encourage its scientists to submit to private interviews, no such interviews have taken place and Baghdad continues to block inspectors from using a U-2 reconnaissance plane that could be helpful in the hunt for weapons of mass destruction. Blix noted that Iraq had provided new information "in the fields of missiles and biotechnology" and said he would ask the Iraqis to stop tests of two types of missiles while inspectors determine their actual range and capabilities.

Annan said he remained hopeful that Iraq could be disarmed peacefully and he praised Blix and ElBaradei, whom he called "determined and independent-minded."

The White House reacted with skepticism. "When people say give them more time, the more time they get the more time they get the run-around," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

"From the president's point of view, it remains a very grave threat."

— Ari Fleischer
White House spokesman

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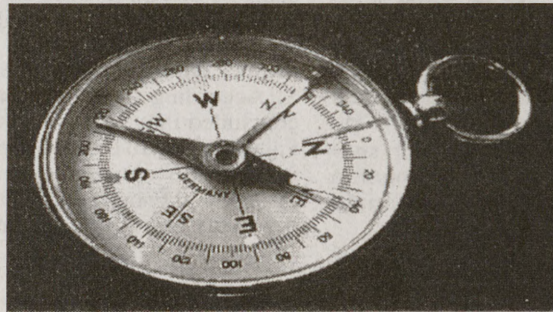
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