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*Article Content*

THREATS AND RESPONSES: BAGHDAD; EXPERTS CONFIRM NEW IRAQI MISSILE EXCEEDS U.N. LIMIT

By Julia Preston With Eric Schmitt

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A panel of arms experts convened by United Nations weapons inspectors has confirmed that a missile Iraq has developed exceeds range limits set by the Security Council.

The panel's conclusion will add fuel to the United States' argument that Iraq is defying Security Council disarmament resolutions, and it is likely to deepen the discord here over whether to go to war against Iraq or allow inspections to continue, as several critical Council nations insist.

In an atmosphere of tension, Germany, France and Russia surprised the United States today by laying plans for an open meeting of Council foreign ministers on Friday to hear the report of the chief weapons inspectors, Hans Blix and Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei.

In Washington, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell said the Council was ''reaching a moment of truth'' with the meeting on Friday and confirmed that he would attend.

''Nobody wants war, but sometimes it's necessary when you need it to maintain international order,'' he said.

Pentagon officials asserted today that Iraqi forces had moved explosives into the southern part of the country in preparation for blowing up bridges, bursting dams and igniting oil fields in a strategy to slow an American attack. The officials said the tactic would impede an allied effort to provide emergency food and relief to millions of Iraqi civilians.

Military officials said they detected suspicious movements of explosives by rail and other means in recent days, and interpreted it as part of a strategy by President Saddam Hussein to create havoc in the opening moments of a war. Top American commanders say their war plan includes measures to prevent or mitigate Iraqi sabotage and will not hinder their assault, but some senior officers have expressed doubts privately.

The panel of independent missile experts at the United Nations reached its conclusion on Iraq's Al Samoud 2 missiles after meetings Monday and Tuesday in New York. The panel, including one American, was convened by Mr. Blix to provide additional technical support in analyzing the missile.

Mr. Blix has already told the Council that the missiles, with a range of about 180 kilometers, or 114 miles, appeared to be a ''prima facie'' case of a violation by Iraq of the range limit of 150 kilometers, or about 90 miles, established by the Council. The missiles have already been given to the Iraqi armed forces, he said. The panel did not reach a conclusion about a second missile, Al Fatah, but said it required further study.

Until now, the United States' argument for war has been based mainly on negatives, particularly its contention that Iraq has failed to cooperate with Council-mandated inspections and has not provided thorough proof that it destroyed weapons it was known to have in the past. Mr. Blix and Dr. ElBaradei have said repeatedly that they found no ''smoking gun.''

The conclusion about the missile violation seems certain to provoke new controversy. The inspectors learned of the range of the missiles from test results that were provided in the 12,000-page arms declaration Iraq delivered at the start of the inspections. The missile data was part of the relatively small amount of new useful information the inspectors found in the vast document.

Resolution 1441, the Council measure that set up the inspections, does not spell out what should be done if the inspectors find active illegal weapons. United States officials have argued that any prohibited weapons that emerge would be proof of Iraq's cheating, while French officials, among others, contend that the conclusion on the missiles is proof that the inspections are working and should be allowed to continue.

''An exceeding of the range was declared,'' said Yuri V. Fedotov, a Russian disarmament specialist who attended a meeting here today with Mr. Blix. It should be taken ''precisely as an example of cooperation'' by Iraq, he said.

Council diplomats said Mr. Blix seemed to be moving toward demanding that Iraq turn over the missiles to the inspectors for destruction, a concession many diplomats expect that Mr. Hussein will be unwilling to make as the prospect of an American-led attack grows imminent.

The plans for the Friday report by Mr. Blix and Dr. ElBaradei were made in a closed Council session this morning led by Germany, which holds the rotating Council presidency for the month. Envoys from France, Russia and China -- all permanent members with veto power -- strongly supported the plan for a session open to the media where their foreign ministers would be able to counter charges against Iraq and make their appeals for more time for the inspections.

Dominique de Villepin of France, Igor S. Ivanov of Russia and Tang Jiaxuan of China as well as Joschka Fischer of Germany, which is a nonpermanent member, are the foreign ministers who today confirmed their participation in the meeting. Foreign Secretary Jack Straw of Britain also said he would attend. Mr. Powell confirmed his participation later in the day.

Until today, the meeting was scheduled to be a closed session where the chief inspectors would present their report and Council envoys would immediately discuss in private their reaction to the report. American and British diplomats warned that the new format would allow little time for closed debate, where views are expressed with more candor, and said they feared that the tactic could be a new effort to postpone the discussion about whether to go to war.

Several nonpermanent Council members, including those that support France's reluctance to go to war soon, were dismayed by the plans.

''It's a mess,'' one envoy said, adding that he feared more posturing than substance at such a critical juncture. ''We are supposed to be getting work done,'' he said.

United States officials said they had stepped up work this week, together with British diplomats, on a new resolution to declare that Iraq is once again in ''material breach'' of its Council obligations.

The Bush administration has not yet decided whether to go forward with the resolution, American officials said. But Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman, made it clear that the administration was not considering an extension of inspections.

''Well, given the fact that several weeks ago the president said this is a matter of weeks, not months, I think the timetable remains locked in at what the president said,'' Mr. Fleischer said.

Mr. Powell, appearing again in Congress, said he still thought that the disputes at the Security Council and within NATO could be worked out. ''I hope that in the days ahead we will be able to rally the United Nations around the original resolution and what other resolutions might be necessary in order to satisfy the political needs of a number of countries,'' he said.

But if this cannot be done, he added, the United States would lead a ''coalition of the willing'' against Iraq, and it would be ''a good coalition, a strong coalition.''

The Pentagon officials' account of events unfolding in Iraq supported predictions by top American intelligence officials this week.

''If hostilities begin, Saddam is likely to employ a 'scorched earth' strategy, destroying food, transportation, energy and other infrastructure, attempting to create a humanitarian disaster significant enough to stop a military advance,'' Vice Adm. Lowell E. Jacoby, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said in testimony prepared for the Senate Armed Services Committee today.

Meantime, American and allied troops continued to flow into the Persian Gulf region. More than 150,000 American forces are now in or near the gulf, including 70,000 ashore in Kuwait. About 45,000 British forces are also on the ground in the region or en route.

Four aircraft carriers, each with 50 attack planes, and their accompanying armadas of missile-firing ships and submarines are now in the gulf or the Mediterranean Sea. The Pentagon said today that nearly 40,000 additional reservists were activated in the last week, bringing the total number of reservists on active duty to 150,000.

Stepping up its psychological operation in Iraq, coalition aircraft dropped tens of thousands of leaflets near Baghdad, the closest the allied airdrops have come to the Iraqi capital. The leaflets, written in Arabic, warn civilians to avoid areas occupied by the Iraqi military, and tell which radio frequencies the allies are broadcasting on.

Gen. Tommy R. Franks, commander of American forces in the Persian Gulf, flew to Washington today for meetings this week with President Bush, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and Gen. Richard B. Myers, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

One of the major topics on the agenda, officials said, is predicting Mr. Hussein's response to any American-led attack, an issue that is proving to be one of the biggest planning challenges facing Mr. Bush, Mr. Rumsfeld and their military commanders.

At the Pentagon today, Mr. Rumsfeld held a war-planning session with his British counterpart, Geoff Hoon. Afterward, Mr. Hoon acknowledged the reports that Iraqi forces were rigging explosives to destroy their oil fields.

''Clearly, we are aware of some preparations,'' he said. ''But obviously, there are areas of concern, not least given his track record of having destroyed oil wells in Kuwait. It must be something that we have to be prepared for and have to deal with.''

In Congress, lawmakers pressed Admiral Jacoby and George J. Tenet, the director of central intelligence, about Mr. Hussein's response to an American attack.

Admiral Jacoby predicted that Mr. Hussein would unleash his chemical and biological weapons on his own people and blame the United States. But he expressed less certainty about whether and when the Iraqi leader might use the same weapons against American troops.

Also in Congress, Mr. Powell was asked about efforts to offer asylum to Mr. Hussein and others, and he said the United States was ''in touch with a number of countries that have expressed an interest in conveying this message to the Iraqi regime that time is up.''

Mr. Powell was questioned extensively about the possibility of the Arab world's exploding into violence in the event of an Iraq war, or of Osama bin Laden's attacking the United States in retaliation.

''I'm sure there will be disturbances,'' he said. ''I'm sure there will be some blowback, as you mentioned. And that is to be expected. But we can't say that because there's going to be blowback, we shouldn't act, either with or without U.N. permission.''

Asked if American policies were not bringing Iraq and Mr. bin Laden closer together, he said he disagreed. ''What's bringing them closer together is their common hatred of the United States and the nexus between terrorist organizations who would love to get their hands on weapons of mass destructions,'' he said.

***Correction:****Feb. 14, 2003*

*A front-page article yesterday about the conclusion by arms experts that an Iraqi missile exceeds range limits set by the United Nations Security Council misstated the name of the missile in some copies. It is Al Samoud 2, not Al Samoud. The article also rendered a word incorrectly, reversing the meaning, in a comment by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell about the possibility of violence against the United States in the event of war with Iraq. He said, ''But we can't say that because there's going to be blowback, we shouldn't act, either with or without U.N. permission'' -- not ''should act.''*

*Because of an editing error, the article omitted a given name in some copies for the Chinese foreign minister, who is to attend the Security Council meeting on Iraq today. He is Tang Jiaxuan.*