

US moves towards air attack on Iraq

Martin McLaughlin
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Clinton administration officials have told the press that US military forces in the Persian Gulf could launch air attacks on Iraq within a few weeks, because of Iraq's decision to halt all weapons inspections by UN agencies. Surprise inspections by UNSCOM were suspended in August, and on October 31 the government of Saddam Hussein began blocking even routine inspections.

The Iraqi government said that it would not permit inspections to resume until the United Nations set a firm date for the lifting of economic sanctions which have devastated the country and caused the death of an estimated half a million people since the end of the Persian Gulf war.

Iraqi officials denounced threats of force by the Clinton administration, saying that air strikes would kill fewer people than were dying from sanctions each day. The US-imposed blockade has cut off all but a trickle of food and medicine shipments to the country of 25 million people, producing widespread malnutrition among children and a huge increase in the infant mortality rate.

A top-level conference of US security officials was held at the presidential retreat at Camp David Sunday, with reports from Defense Secretary William Cohen, who visited eight Arab capitals, and National Security Adviser Sandy Berger, who traveled to Paris and London.

Cohen encountered virtually unanimous opposition to air strikes on the part of the Arab regimes who collaborated with the US assault on Iraq in the Persian Gulf war. Saudi officials reiterated the position they adopted during a previous confrontation between the United States and Iraq last February, when they refused permission for the Pentagon to use Saudi air bases or air space to launch an attack on Baghdad.

Similar positions were taken by the rulers of Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan and the United

Arab Emirates. A Qatari official, appearing at a joint press conference with Cohen, noted the overwhelming public opposition to military action throughout the region. To avoid such embarrassments, Cohen had carried out the whirlwind trip without a press contingent accompanying him and with his itinerary kept secret.

Since the February standoff with Iraq ended with a compromise brokered by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, US military forces in the Persian Gulf have been reconfigured so that air strikes can be launched on Iraq without making use of air bases in the neighboring states.

The number of US planes in the region has been reduced from 430 to 174, half of them on board the carrier *Dwight D. Eisenhower*, which can launch them at sea. At the same time, the number of cruise missiles has been more than doubled, to about 300, more than were used throughout the Persian Gulf war. The result is that a substantial military strike can be carried out using only carrier-based planes and cruise missiles fired from planes and Navy ships.

On the diplomatic front, US officials said the Clinton administration has decided to act without issuing an ultimatum, i.e., without any last-minute warning or diplomatic efforts of the type that forestalled military action in February. They said that the November 5 UN Security Council vote condemning Iraq and demanding restart of UNSCOM inspections was all that was required to provide a legal basis for military action.

France and Russia, which opposed US military action in February, voted for the resolution. France withdrew its chargé d'affaires from Baghdad and Russia made no move to send a special envoy to avert military action, as it did in several previous crises.

Clinton is scheduled to leave Washington Friday for a 10-day trip to Asia, and administration officials suggested that a military strike on Iraq was not likely

until his return, but such assurances have been made as deliberate disinformation before previous US military actions.

More significant were the warnings made to the *Washington Post* by unnamed officials that the US government was closer to launching military action against Iraq than at any time since last February. Pentagon and CIA officials were reportedly concerned that if the current threats did not lead to military strikes, the government's credibility would collapse.

Even more ominous was the language in a *New York Times* article on Sunday, November 8, reporting that the Clinton administration was prepared to abandon UN inspections and instead turn to force and the threat of force as the means for handling Iraq.

Citing a 'senior American official'--a euphemism for Berger, Cohen or Secretary of State Madeline Albright--the *Times* delivered this message to Saddam Hussein: 'If he tries to use weapons of mass destruction, he should know that we will obliterate Iraq.'

In addition to this threat, a scarcely veiled reference to the use of nuclear weapons, the *Times* also reported that one possible target of US attack would be 'Hussein's ethnic base in Tikrit.' This is a particularly brazen admission that US air strikes will target the civilian population of Iraq, Tikrit being a city of 20,000, about 100 miles north of Baghdad.

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