

## New threat of air strikes

# US moves B-52s towards Iraq

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The Clinton administration has ordered a series of measures to beef up American military presence in the Middle East, indicating that Washington may be preparing a new confrontation with Iraq.

The most significant move is the dispatch of a squadron of seven B-52 bombers from North Dakota to the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia. The seven bombers replace an equal number which were sent to Diego Garcia from Louisiana during the preparations for US bombing raids last November.

The action is an important escalation of pressure on Iraq, since it means that B-52s will be stationed on Diego Garcia indefinitely, within striking distance of Baghdad. Bombers from the island were actually in the air, headed for the Iraqi capital, when Iraq agreed to the resumption of UN weapons inspections November 15.

Several hundred US troops arrived in Israel to install Patriot anti-missile batteries that will be operated by the Israeli military. The deployment coincides with Clinton's official visit to Israel, Gaza and the West Bank. At the same time, the US Navy boarded and searched an Iraqi ship which was carrying wheat, a measure denounced by Baghdad as 'a provocative and criminal act.'

The new US moves coincided with another clash between UN weapons inspectors and Iraqi officials on December 9, when the inspectors attempted to enter the headquarters of the ruling Baath Party. Iraqi officials demanded a list of items that the UN inspectors wanted to see, but they refused and withdrew.

The raid was clearly intended to spark a conflict, since neither UN nor US officials can seriously believe that nuclear or biological weapons are stored in the main offices of the Baath Party in downtown Baghdad. The incident was followed by a series of reports in the American and British press about stepped-up efforts by

the Clinton and Blair governments to assist political opponents of the ruling Baathists in overthrowing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Confirming the provocative character of the inspectors' action, US officials declared that military strikes could follow immediately. A White House spokesman said, 'If UNSCOM cannot do its job effectively, we remain poised to act.'

American Secretary of Defense William Cohen said that US warplanes could strike Baghdad at any moment, without warning, if the administration determined that Iraq was no longer in compliance with UN mandates. His comments were echoed by US Secretary of State Madeline Albright, during a visit to Paris where she discussed the Persian Gulf situation with French President Jacques Chirac.

The Clinton administration said that it would not order air strikes until after chief UN weapons inspector Richard Butler makes a formal report on Iraqi compliance sometime next week. Butler sent a letter to the Security Council Wednesday night, denouncing the Iraqi action, and filed an interim report Thursday listing what he claimed were a total of four instances in which Iraqi officials halted or limited the operation of the weapons inspections.

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