

Bush administration stung by second report of Iraq inspectors

Patrick Martin
15 February 2003

The Bush administration reacted bitterly to the second report delivered Friday by the chief weapons inspectors, Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei, in which they declared that no evidence had been found that Iraq currently possesses nuclear, biological or chemical weapons.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell listened stone-faced as the reports of Blix and ElBaradei explicitly contradicted the basic premises upon which the Bush administration's drive to war is based.

Their report was immediately cited by diplomats from France, Russia, China and Germany as the basis for rejecting a US demand for the UN Security Council to authorize military action against Iraq.

Blix cited improved cooperation on the part of Iraq in recent weeks, including the first private interviews with Iraqi weapons scientists and permission for the UN to operate U-2 spy plane flights across Iraq's territory. Iraq was continuing to give full access to UN inspectors to visit whatever site in the country they chose, he said.

The Swedish diplomat explicitly rebutted several of the charges which Powell made last week in his address to the Security Council.

Referring to satellite photos of an Iraqi ammunition depot, which Powell had presented to the UN as evidence of Iraqi concealment of banned weapons, Blix said, "The reported movement of munitions at the site could just as easily have been a routine activity," rather than an attempt to hide materials from inspectors. "In no case have we seen convincing evidence that the Iraqi side knew in advance that the inspectors were coming," he said, contradicting another Powell claim.

Blix said that a UN weapons panel had concluded that Iraq's Al Samoud 2 missile was in violation of a Security Council ban on possession of missiles with a range exceeding 150 kilometers in range (93 miles). The missiles traveled 110 miles in a test firing, a relatively minor difference. More significant was Blix's admission that Iraq had voluntarily supplied the information about the missile.

Iraq has not supplied all the information sought by inspectors about when and how it destroyed previous stocks of chemical and biological weapons, built up during the 1980s with assistance from the United States and European countries, Blix

said. It was impossible as yet to prove conclusively that all these weapons had been destroyed.

"One must not jump to the conclusion that they exist," Blix said. "However, that possibility is also not excluded." In a clear reference to the unsupported character of allegations by the Bush administration, he said, "Inspectors, for their part, must base their reports only on evidence, which they can, themselves, examine and present publicly. Without evidence, confidence cannot arise."

ElBaradei's report was even less favorable from the standpoint of the Bush administration. "We have to date found no evidence of ongoing prohibited nuclear or nuclear-related activities in Iraq," he said.

ElBaradei, who heads the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), directly contradicted Bush administration claims that Iraq could hide a nuclear program, adding, "The IAEA's experience in nuclear verification shows that it is possible, particularly with an intrusive verification system, to assess the presence or absence of a nuclear weapons program in a state even without the full cooperation of the inspected state."

Powell was clearly taken aback by the thrust of Blix's report. The Bush administration has been assuring the media for several days that Blix would follow up his January 27 report with an even more critical assessment of Iraqi cooperation, providing the basis for a Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Baghdad.

Evidently unprepared to answer specific criticisms, Powell made no response to Blix's rebuttal of the alleged US "evidence" of Iraqi concealment of weapons, or to his criticism of the US refusal to hand over intelligence information to back its claims of Iraqi weapons stockpiles.

Instead he awkwardly combined praise for the inspectors' work in Iraq—obviously drafted ahead of time in expectation of a different kind of report—with bluster about the alleged threat of Iraqi weapons to the United States.

"We cannot wait for one of these terrible weapons to show up in our cities and wonder where it came from after it's been detonated by Al Qaeda or somebody else," he said. "This is the time to go after this source of this kind of weaponry."

As his remarks assumed the form of an incoherent diatribe,

Powell said that Iraq's cooperation with the inspectors—which he had praised as a positive step—amounted to “tricks that are being played on us.” The inspectors “are still being watched. They are still being bugged. They still do not have the access they need in Iraq to do their job well,” he said.

“We cannot allow this process to be endlessly strung out,” Powell concluded. The overall impression left by Powell was that the Bush administration is deeply embittered and frustrated by the opposition that its drive to war has encountered.

The representatives of France, Germany, Russia and China all cited the reports of Blix and ElBaradei as proof that inspections should continue indefinitely. French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin was applauded by other diplomats and by the audience in the public gallery after he called for “an alternative to war,” an unusual event for the UN and a clear indication of the widespread international concern over the implications of the US war drive. There was no applause for Powell.

Villepin proposed the Security Council hold another ministerial meeting on March 14—a clear attempt to block a US military strike, widely believed to be timed for the first week of March, when the new moon provides the best conditions for stealth bomber attacks on Iraqi targets.

This underscores the intensifying conflict between American imperialism and its major rivals, especially in Europe. While the Bush administration has sought to utilize the UN to provide an international rubber stamp for its policy of aggression, the European powers, militarily weaker, seek to use the UN structure to set limits on the use of American military power.

The outcome of the diplomatic conflict is still uncertain. There are only three sure votes for a proposed British resolution backing military action against Iraq: the US, Britain and Spain. Four big powers remain opposed: Germany, France, Russia and China, three of them with a veto.

The remaining countries represented on the Security Council include Syria, Pakistan, Guinea, Angola, Mexico, Chile, Bulgaria and Cameroon. The votes of the smaller countries, in keeping with the usual practice of imperialist diplomacy, will be for sale to the highest bidder. This is likely to be the Bush administration, which is increasingly desperate to push ahead with its war plans. As one US official told the *Washington Post*, describing another reluctant US ally, Turkey, “They want money, as much as they can get.”

Should the US government fail to win support of a majority of the Security Council, as well as the support or abstention by France, Russia and China, the Bush administration seems determined to launch a war unilaterally, taking with it whatever governments it can browbeat or bribe into assisting in this criminal enterprise.

The prospect of open defiance of international law has caused trepidation even among sections of the US ruling elite who have long supported the project of war against Iraq. Such reservations were expressed by a number of public figures and

media commentators on the eve of the Blix report.

Republican Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, a member of the Foreign Relations Committee, criticized Bush's denigration of the UN in a speech to a Navy audience in Florida. “We need to deal not just with North Korea and Iraq but Afghanistan and the Middle East and beyond,” he said. “Sure, if we want to bolt from the UN structure and attack Iraq, there is little question that we would win. But at what cost?”

Former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski worried that if “we rush to war on our own for the sake of removing Saddam from power ... we will find ourselves much more isolated. The aftermath of the war will be exclusively our burden.”

The two principal diplomatic columnists for the *Washington Post*, both fervent supporters of war against Iraq, voiced fears that the Bush administration was going too far in alienating Europe. “These arguments and defiance are not only about Iraq and North Korea. They are now about the scope and nature of American leadership in global affairs,” wrote Jim Hoagland. He criticized the tendency of the White House to rely “on overwhelming strength” rather than diplomacy and strategy.

Columnist David Ignatius said the Bush administration's obsession with Saddam Hussein was coming to resemble Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick, and might end in a similar shipwreck. “Over the past few weeks, the hunt for Saddam Hussein has become so intense that it has seemed almost self-destructive,” he wrote. “The administration appears willing to sacrifice almost anything—America's alliances, its prosperity, even the security of its citizens—in its determination to oust the Iraqi leader from power.”

Despite such reservations, however, there is no section of the American ruling elite which dares to openly oppose the Bush administration's war drive or to say what is: this government is embarked on a course of reckless aggression around the world, preparing wars of plunder and seeking to establish worldwide US domination.

War is not merely an instrument of US policy, it has *become* the policy. The Bush administration has used the threat of terrorism and the prospect of war, first in Afghanistan and now Iraq, to deflect public attention from the deepening economic crisis of American capitalism and to divert opposition to its reactionary social policies. The trajectory of American imperialism leads inexorably to war, not only in the Middle East, but ultimately on a world scale.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact