

Egypt may be cleared of \$7 billion debt

WASHINGTON - President Bush will ask Congress to write off Egypt's \$7 billion military debt to the United States as "a symbol of our appreciation" for help in the Persian Gulf crisis, the White House said Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State James A. Baker III gave Congress a ringing defense of the Bush administration's decision to pour troops and weapons into the Middle East, saying the United States had to react vigorously to "one of the defining moments of a new era."

He noted that economic effects of the crisis already are being felt, in such ways as higher gasoline prices, but he said the issue was hardly that narrow.

"It is, rather, about a dictator who, acting alone and unchallenged, could strangle the global economic order, determining by fiat whether we all enter a recession or even the darkness of a depression," Baker told the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Baker also said the administration would consider "working with others to create a new security structure for the region," lasting beyond the end of the current crisis.

He gave little detail on how such

an organization might work, though he pointed to success by NATO in curbing Soviet expansion during the Cold War.

Presidential Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater said Bush already had consulted with members of Congress about forgiving Egypt's military debt and felt confident they would give the required approval. But Patrick Leahy, chairman of a Senate foreign aid panel, said the debt forgiveness would lead to similar requests from other nations and "I'm not willing to double or triple our foreign aid budget without a lot more understanding of what the United States gets out of it."

House Republican Leader Bob Michel, too, said the White House announcement "may be a little premature." He added, "I would like to hear firsthand from the administration the rationale" for the move.

In a White House briefing the day after Bush returned from his Kennebunkport, Maine, vacation, Fitzwater also said on other Persian Gulf topics:

- There "is no conflict with the Saudis" on ultimate control of the operations of U.S. forces stationed in Saudi Arabia. He said the United States

Bush will brief NATO leaders after superpower summit

WASHINGTON - Next week-end's U.S.-Soviet summit will give Presidents Bush and Mikhail S. Gorbachev a chance to prod slow-moving conventional-arms talks as well as forge "an even stronger bond" of opposition to Iraq's Saddam Hussein, administration officials said Tuesday.

Bush also is considering adding a stop in Europe to brief NATO allies on his way back from Sunday's superpower summit in Helsinki, presidential spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said.

Originally, Bush planned to return directly to Washington from the capital of Finland. But Fitzwater said the president would like to

be able to brief allied leaders on the summit if possible, just as he did after his meeting last December with Gorbachev at Malta. After that earlier summit, Bush stopped briefly in Brussels to brief NATO.

"There is some discussion about whether we need to make another stop," Fitzwater said. "Pack another pair of underwear," he added in an aside to reporters who cover the president.

Bush, on his first day back from an often-interrupted three-week vacation in Maine, met with his Cabinet and other top advisers to discuss the upcoming summit.

"A new foundation for world

order is being built and the spade-work begins in Helsinki," Fitzwater declared. "It is somewhat ironic that the prospect of war is forging a new blueprint for world peace. Both leaders will want to apply some new brushstrokes to this emerging picture."

Most public attention has focused on what the two leaders might say on the subject of Iraq's invasion and continuing occupation of Kuwait. But arms talks also were sure to be discussed.

Bush and Gorbachev will also discuss regional hotspots, including Cambodia and Afghanistan, officials said.

would not launch an offensive operation without consulting the host country, but he insisted that the chain of command for U.S. forces remains unchanged -- from the president through the Secretary of Defense and to the commanders.

- The U.S. Navy had stopped and

boarded a tea-laden Iraqi-flagged freighter in the Gulf of Oman as part of the trade blockade against Iraq. The spokesman said, "The ship was ordered to divert. It did not divert. It was then boarded and now has diverted. We don't have information now on where it's being diverted to."

- Some plane loads of cargo, reported to be food, have violated the international trade embargo against Iraq, and trucks continue to make it through the leaky border with Jordan, but those leaks are not enough to significantly harm the overall effectiveness of the embargo.

Researchers discover arthritis-causing gene

BETHESDA, Md. - Researchers on Tuesday announced the discovery of a gene that in some families causes osteoarthritis, a degenerative disease that can lead to stiffness, pain and crippling of joints.

Dr. Darwin J. Prockop of Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, and Dr. Roland W. Moskowitz of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland said the faulty gene was isolated in studies of three generations of one family.

The faulty gene appears to produce a protein mutation that leads to arthritis at an early age, they said.

"We have taken a disease and defined a specific cause," Moskowitz said. "Knowing where to target now will help us immeasurably" in developing a specific treatment for arthritis.

Treatment now consists only of treating symptoms and relieving inflammation. Severe cases can lead to crippling that can be corrected only by replacing the diseased joint with an artificial one.

Ten families with several generations of arthritis have been examined, and the faulty gene found in three of those families, Moskowitz said. Examination of the genetic pattern of the others is not complete, he said.

"We think it is likely that other genes are involved," Moskowitz said, adding that it was unlikely that the single gene is responsible for all forms of inherited osteoarthritis.

He said a search is under way to find other genes that may play a role in the disease.

The cause of primary osteoarthritis has long eluded science even though it is one of the most common ailments among people past the age of 55. The disease causes a breakdown of cartilage that covers and cushions joints.

It can affect any joint, but most commonly is seen in the hands, ankles, knees and hips.

"We now know that a gene can cause the problem," Prockop said.

The studies, he said, showed that in some families there is one defective gene and one good gene for the production of collagen II, a protein that the primary component in cartilage.

The defective gene, Prockop said, changes a single amino acid in the collagen II. The result is an altered and weakened collagen, which leads to an early onset of arthritis.

"With this discovery, we hope to find ways to make the good gene work better and the bad gene work less well," Prockop said.

Researchers, he said, are looking for ways to manipulate the gene or block its action. But Prockop said much more research is needed before candidate drugs can be developed.

John D. Stobo, a Johns Hopkins University medical professor and president of the American College of Rheumatologists, said the discovery "provides real hope that a cure will be forthcoming."

U.S.-backed attempt unlikely

Saddam's assassination discussed

WASHINGTON - The easiest way for the United States to end the Persian Gulf crisis might be to have Iraq's Saddam Hussein removed -- and don't think the idea hasn't occurred in Washington.

But assassinating foreign leaders is prohibited by a 14-year-old presidential directive and, say some experts, is far more difficult than it might seem. Saddam came to power via the assassin's route and since then has survived dozens of plots against his life. He's on guard.

Not surprisingly, no one in the executive branch is publicly embracing Sen. Richard Lugar's formula for dealing with the Iraqi president: "It seems to me important that Saddam Hussein must either leave or be removed."

But neither does President Bush walk away from the concept. Maybe he simply wants to make his antagonist nervous, but Bush doesn't say, "No, that's a violation of American policy and principle."

Three former directors of the Central Intelligence Agency -- Richard Helms, William Colby and Stansfield Turner -- reject the idea of a U.S.-sponsored assassination.

"When push comes to shove, Americans don't believe in having America assassinate foreign leaders," Helms said. "They want somebody else to pull the trigger."

Colby said Bush clearly hopes the economic squeeze on Iraq will become so severe that within the country "people will get the idea, 'we've got to get rid of this guy.'"

Turner said assassinations offend American morality and can backfire. "I don't think an American could possibly kill Saddam Hussein and survive, so you'd end up hiring someone else and who knows what they might do," Turner said. "They might

kill 5,000 people to get Hussein. It's a very chancy thing."

Assassination is a much discussed topic in Washington because diplomacy seems to have such a scant chance of getting Iraq out of Kuwait and because the full-blown military alternative could result in the deaths of thousands of Americans and Iraqis on the way to its predictable outcome: the defeat of Saddam's outnumbered, outgunned forces.

Lugar, a solid member of the Republican establishment from Indiana, is not speaking for himself alone

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When push comes to shove, Americans don't believe in having America assassinate foreign leaders. They want somebody else to pull the trigger.

Helms
former CIA director

when he raises the possibility of Saddam's removal.

Lugar said a week ago that Bush's goal of restoring Kuwait's independence is not enough if Iraq is left with the ability to produce chemical and possibly nuclear weapons.

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger makes much the same point. "If it should be concluded that sanctions are too uncertain and diplomacy unavailing," he has written, "the United States will need to consider a surgical and progressive destruction of Iraq's military assets -- especially since an outcome that leaves Saddam Hussein in place and his

military machine unimpaired might turn out to be only an interlude between aggressions."

Bush, asked about Lugar's view, said on Thursday that he had "great respect for Dick Lugar" but added that he had not altered his "publicly stated" objectives.

Ten days after Iraq invaded, Bush said he hoped the U.S. military buildup in Saudi Arabia would produce a change in Saddam's behavior.

"If that means Saddam Hussein changes his spots, so be it," Bush said. "And if it doesn't, I hope the Iraqi people do something about it so that their leader will live by the norms of international behavior that will be acceptable to other nations."

Rep. Dave McCurdy, D-Okla. and a member of the House Intelligence Committee, was asked as he was leaving on a trip to visit U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia last week about Saddam's removal.

"The future of Saddam Hussein is of concern to everyone, the potential power and resources he would have available," the congressman said. "You fear his ability to regroup."

But as far as an assassination, McCurdy said simply, "That's out of our hands."

And Sen. William Cohen of Maine, ranking Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee, told a reporter that "there's every possibility that one could exploit the dissension within the military ranks (of Iraq)."

He said Saddam "is not so beloved a figure as he would have everyone believe."

On the other hand, the Wall Street Journal quoted Sahib al-Hakin, an Iraqi dissident in London, as saying that removing Saddam would not make much difference since those around him who might succeed him are as ruthless.

Justice nominee receives highest rating from American Bar Association panel

WASHINGTON - Supreme Court nominee David H. Souter on Tuesday received the highest rating from the American Bar Association's judicial screening panel, the Justice Department said.

Souter received a unanimous "well qualified" rating from the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Federal Judiciary, according to a letter from the panel to the Justice

Department.

Souter, a former member of the New Hampshire Supreme Court, was nominated by President Bush in July for the vacancy created by the retirement of Justice William Brennan.

Souter received a similar "well qualified" rating earlier this year when he was nominated for a seat on the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Boston. He took the federal bench

last spring but has not heard any cases.

The 15-member ABA committee rates judicial nominees either "not qualified," "qualified" or "well qualified" but applies different standards to evaluate candidates for district, appellate and Supreme Court judgeships.

The Senate Judiciary Committee is scheduled to open hearings on Souter's nomination on Sept. 13.

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