

Baker: Peace prospects better than ever

MOSCOW — Secretary of State James Baker, at the windup of a five-nation Middle East tour, said Thursday that chances of settling the Arab-Israeli dispute were better than ever before.

Baker arrived in Moscow from Syria to consult with Soviet leaders on their nation's own turmoil, as well as contributions the Soviet Union might make to a lasting Middle East peace. During a three-day visit, he also planned to talk to leaders of the growing opposition to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev.

The United States has promised

the Soviets a postwar role in the peace process, but has not said what that role should be. The Soviets supported the U.N. resolutions demanding that their former client, Iraq, give up Kuwait, but they declined to send troops for the international coalition that drove Iraq out.

Earlier, in Damascus, a senior U.S. official on the Baker trip said that Syria for the first time was considering "genuine peace" with Israel rather than simply a cessation of armed conflict.

"The Syrians told us they have changed their position," said the official,

who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Baker and Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Sharaa confirmed that dozens of Scud-C missiles and missile launchers, capable of reaching virtually all of Israel, had been delivered to Syria.

Other sources said Wednesday in Jerusalem the weapons had arrived on a ship from North Korea and may be capable of carrying chemical weapons.

Sharaa said Syria was still in a state of war with Israel, which has "so many weapons of mass destruction."

On the long detention in Lebanon of six American hostages by the fundamentalist Hezbollah group, Sharaa said that "the issue has to be resolved" and that Syria would exert maximum effort to secure their release.

"We are not pessimistic that this will happen," Sharaa said.

U.S. officials said that they welcomed Syria's help but that Iran, which backs Hezbollah, holds the key to the hostages' fate.

The secretary of state said he had "sensed a very serious intent on the part of the Syrian government to pursue an active peace process."

Baker said he also had detected an attitude in Israel that the allied victory over Iraq opened "a window of opportunity," to move ahead on the basis of two U.N. Security Council resolutions adopted at the end of the 1967 and 1973 Middle East wars.

The resolutions imply the acceptance of Israel by other Middle East nations and call for withdrawal from occupied territories.

"There is a better chance than there was before of real reconciliation, real peace," Baker said after seven hours of talks with Syrian President Hafez Assad that ended after midnight.

Going home

Kuwaiti emir returns to ruins of proud nation

KUWAIT CITY — Kuwait's ruler flew home Thursday after seven months in exile and kissed the ground of his once-prosperous nation, wrecked by Iraq in his absence.

It was a relatively low-key homecoming for the emir, Sheik Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah. Only about 5,000 people turned out to welcome him, and there was a minimum of ceremony. He has been criticized by some Kuwaitis for waiting so long to return.

"Thank God that our country and our land now belong to the Kuwaitis," Sheik Jaber said after arriving at his temporary home in a Kuwait City suburb, where he was cheered by a small, flag-waving crowd.

He also thanked the countries that helped drive Iraqi troops out of Kuwait, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria and "friendly countries led by the United States."

"I hope that God will help us rebuild our country after what the Iraqis destroyed," he said.

The 64-year-old monarch, one of the world's wealthiest and oft-married men, arrived from Saudi Arabia on a Kuwait Airways jet named Bubiyan. It was named after the Kuwaiti island that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had demanded before his Aug. 2 invasion of Kuwait.

As Sheik Jaber emerged from the blue-and-white jet, he stood on the top of the stairs with his hands over his eyes.

When he stepped onto Kuwaiti soil, the emir knelt and kissed the ground. The black braided band holding his white headress, called a keffiyeh, flopped onto the tarmac.

"This is the completion. This is the final stage," said Minister of Planning Sulaiman Mutawa, referring to the U.N. resolution calling for the restoration of

Kuwait's legitimate government.

Cabinet members, diplomats and friends applauded when the emir appeared, and mobbed him as he walked toward a VIP tent, set up in front of an airport building burned by the Iraqis.

In the distance, black smoke rose in the sky from several of the more than 500 oil wells torched by Iraq.

In Kuwait, the emir's plane arrived at 4:40 p.m., 40 minutes late. A military band from the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council played the Kuwaiti national anthem.

A Bedouin dance group brandished swords and performed in front of the emir's motorcade. There were no speeches.

"I said, 'Congratulations. Welcome home,'" U.S. Ambassador Edward Gnehm said. "He said, 'It's wonderful to be home.'"

"He was moved," British Ambassador Michael Westin said.

On the ride from the airport into Kuwait City, a half-dozen American GIs stood by the side of the road waving Kuwaiti flags. Small clusters of Kuwaitis did the same.

Arabian Gulf Road, along the city's coast, was packed with car-toting celebrants, but that has been the case every evening since liberation.

In Washington, the Pentagon reported a U.S. Army UH-60 Blackhawk helicopter crashed Thursday in the gulf area, killing six crewmembers aboard, all apparently Americans. No details were immediately available.

The Pentagon also said a U.S. F-16 fighter crashed Wednesday in the gulf area. The pilot was rescued safely. No other details were available.

Ex-POWs: Captivity filled with fear, faith

WASHINGTON — Seven former prisoners of war told stories of fear, loneliness and mistreatment today in their first meeting with reporters since returning from captivity in Iraq.

Two of the former POWs said the statements they made on Iraqi television were given against their will.

"About 90 percent of the time you felt you were in danger of losing your life," Navy Lt. Jeffrey Zaun of Cherry Hill, N.J., said at a suburban Washington hospital.

Zaun, Navy Lt. Lawrence Slade and five Marines appeared on an auditorium stage at the Bethesda Naval Medical Center, where they are undergoing treatment.

Marine Corps Lt. Col. Clifford Acree said that statements made by the POWs on videos for broadcast by the Iraqis were made under duress, but he declined to go into detail.

Zaun, describing the making of the videos, said, "They took me to a TV studio and sat me next to the big guy and then told me what questions they were going to ask and they told me what my answers were going to be."

He said he tried to "screw up" his answers but he didn't think it made any difference because they were translated into Arabic anyway.

In the Iraqi television broadcast, Zaun spoke in a slow monotone and said: "I think our leaders and our people have wrongly attacked the peaceful people of Iraq."

At today's news conference, Zaun said he was apprehensive that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein might use the videos to convince his people that they were winning the war, but he did not worry about the reaction of Americans.

"I had enough faith in Americans to know that anybody who saw this was going to say, 'This is ridiculous,'" he said.

Zaun, whose badly bruised face was widely pictured in the United States after the video, said about 90 percent of his facial injuries occurred during his ejection from his airplane and "maybe a little bit of it was getting slapped around."

Diplomatic signs point to possible hostage release

WASHINGTON — As Terry Anderson ends his sixth year in captivity, his friends and family mounted a lobbying campaign on Capitol Hill on Thursday, their hopes buoyed by fresh diplomatic signs that he and other hostages in Lebanon soon may be freed.

"The news from the Middle East is great," said Peggy Say, Anderson's sister.

She has helped organize the lobbying effort and a ceremony on Friday to honor Anderson, 43, the chief Middle East correspondent for The Associated Press.

Say's positive feelings stemmed from reports from Syria, where Secretary of State James Baker raised the issue of the six American hostages with Syrian President Hafez Assad and members of his inner circle.

Asked if there has been any progress on the hostages, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa responded: "We have the feeling that the hostage issue has to be resolved."

The Syrian army controls the region of Lebanon where the hostages are thought to be held by pro-Iranian Muslim Shiites known as the Hezbollah.

Anderson is the longest-held American hostage.

He said he also banged his nose in the hope that he could disfigure himself so he would not be shown on television.

Capt. Russell Sanborn of the Marines described captivity as a "terrifying experience" in which the prisoners were kept in solitary confinement.

"There was some mistreatment and the food was less than adequate," Sanborn said. He described the medical treatment as "minimal."

Bush rules out PLO for talks

TROIS-ILETS, Martinique — President Bush said Thursday that he had no intention of renewing talks with the Palestine Liberation Organization in the search for a Middle East peace.

He said PLO leader Yasser Arafat "bet on the wrong horse" in backing Iraq in the Persian Gulf crisis.

At a news conference with French President Francois Mitterrand, Bush also said a Palestinian state "is not the answer" to the Arab-Israeli dispute that underlies many Middle East problems. But he said diplomacy after the Persian Gulf war is "going to have to address . . . the homeland

question."

Mitterrand said, "I have used the word 'state,' and added that it was dangerous to deny a people "any form of identity."

Bush again cautioned Iraq against using combat helicopters to crush internal unrest. He said, "makes it very, very complicated" to arrange a permanent cease-fire in the Persian Gulf war that would permit a complete withdrawal of American forces.

Bush was asked about the fate of the Western hostages being held in Lebanon and said it was "clearly in the interests of those countries that have any influence" to see that they

are freed. Iran is believed to hold influence over the hostage takers. Terry Anderson, chief Middle East correspondent for The Associated Press, is the longest-held captive, approaching the end of his sixth year.

Bush noted that Secretary of State James Baker had raised the issue of hostages on his recently concluded trip to the Middle East.

"I don't have any specifics (on hopes for release) or can I say there are any positive points of optimism," the president said.

Bush and Mitterrand met with reporters after holding private talks on this Caribbean Island.

— Mother madness has infiltrated March Madness, the annual college basketball craziness which culminates in the NCAA championship.

A North Carolina booster posted a sign that promised, "The Tar Heels will defeat the great Satan Duke in the mother of all ACC tournament games." Seton Hall's first Big East championship title prompted alumnus Brian Duff to proclaim it "the mother of all victories."

Duff likely would be challenged by Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf, although not by Pirate coach P.J. Carlesimo.

Pro sports are receiving the same treatment: the New York Post headlined a story about a New York Knicks-Philadelphia 76ers contest,

"Streaking Knicks eye mother of all games."

Syndicated political cartoonist Patrick Oliphant proposed these postwar positions for Saddam: proprietor of "The Mother of All Junkyards," owner of "Mom's," a diner serving "the mother of all Iraqi cuisine;" a salesman for "Mother Bunker" used bunkers.

Saddam himself was named the "father of the mother of all cliches" in a U.S. News & World Report story, leaving in the dust football-baseball star Bo Jackson's "Bo knows" commercials, which instantly invaded public consciousness.

As for the coming glut of instant books on the Persian Gulf war, expect the "mother of all rush jobs," as one headline put it.

Saddam's offspring: mother of all clichés

Phrase runs from battle to Bartlett's

NEW YORK — Only Bo knows when a catch phrase has become cliché so quickly.

"The mother of all (your word here)" is popping out of the mouths of talk show hosts, parade planners, headline writers and hoops fans.

It's been just two months since Saddam Hussein promised "the mother of all battles," but the folks at Bartlett's Familiar Quotations already say the memorable line could make their 1992 edition. It's enough to leave Oedipus' head spinning.

Consider these: — Johnny Carson opened a recent show by promising "the mother of all monologues." His fill-in, Jay Leno, later reported that "even Saddam Hussein's mother is mad at him: 'You called it the what of all battles?'"

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Editor Eric Planner 472-1766
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