

U.N. cease-fire nears; relief not enough

U.S. draws line, cautions Iraq: Keep forces away from refugees

WASHINGTON - The United States, drawing a new line in Iraq, said Wednesday it had told the government there not to use "ground or air forces" that might be a threat to fleeing Kurds or to relief operations.

"We are simply saying that we do not expect the humanitarian efforts to be interrupted or thwarted by Iraqi military, period," said Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater.

He said the warning covering much of northern Iraq was delivered over the weekend through the United Nations and the Iraqi Embassy here.

His announcement implied that any Iraqi combat helicopters or other aircraft used against the Kurds would be shot down.

Rebel groups have said they have been attacked by Iraqi military helicopters, and critics have said the Bush

administration should have done more to stop such attacks.

Fitzwater would not specify the area that is now off-limits to Iraqi military operations, saying only that it covered the areas where Kurds have taken refuge.

But a senior Pentagon official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that the warning covers everything above the parallel that marks 36 degrees north latitude.

That takes in all of northern Iraq, where hundreds of thousands of Kurds live.

The White House statement asserts U.S. military authority in northern Iraq for the first time since the informal cease-fire. U.S. forces control considerable territory in southern Iraq.

Officials said the U.S. declaration

prohibited helicopter gunships and fixed-wing aircraft from opening fire on the tens of thousands of homeless Kurds, and other people.

Fitzwater said there had been no military activity in the region over the past few days and there was no reason to believe that Iraq would ignore the U.S. warning. "We thought it was nevertheless important that they know our views," he said.

The administration called attention to its humanitarian aid, in an effort to blunt criticism that it had done nothing militarily to help the Kurds from being routed by Saddam Hussein's forces.

Fitzwater went before live television cameras to announce the new U.S. warning.

The spokesman reiterated the U.S. position not to get involved in Iraq's

Kurds' suffering increases despite U.S. efforts to help

IN NORTHERN IRAQ - Rebel leaders and relief officials said Wednesday that growing numbers of Kurdish refugees are dying despite international efforts to help them.

At the United Nations, Security Council diplomats said an official cease-fire is due to take effect at 10 a.m. on Thursday, if no council members object by then. Iraq has accepted the cease-fire terms, which strip Saddam of much of his military might.

Rebellions by Shiite Muslims

in the south and Kurds in the north broke out after Iraqi forces were driven from Kuwait by the allies.

In the rebel-held highlands of northern Iraq, Masoud Barzani, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, told reporters that cold, hunger and disease were causing deaths among the 300,000 to 400,000 Kurds headed for the Iranian border.

He said none of the aid air drops organized by the United States, France and Britain had reached the cold mountain passes near the Iranian border. Most fell near Turkey.

internal strife. But, he added, "we will not stand by in the face of humanitarian need."

"The refugee tragedy must be alleviated," he added.

The spokesman also announced an increase in the U.S. aid effort and said that heavy helicopters might be sent in to augment the four-day-old U.S. airdrop.

Byelorussian workers strike

MINSK, U.S.S.R. - More than 100,000 workers defied an appeal from Mikhail Gorbachev for a moratorium on protests, pouring out of factories Wednesday in the Byelorussian capital to strike for higher pay.

"The Communist Party Drove Us Here!" read one placard held by workers marching in a light rain to Minsk's central Lenin Square. "Put Food from Chernobyl on the Government Table," read another sign.

"The people are waking up!" Sergei Klyuchko, a miner from Donetsk in the neighboring Ukraine, told the estimated 40,000 workers and others packed into the square at midday.

Organizers said 64 major businesses — including an automobile plant, electronics factory and tractor works — were on strike in the Minsk area. They said the firms employed at least 100,000 people.

The walkout ignored an impassioned appeal from Gorbachev on national television Tuesday for a moratorium on strikes and demonstrations.

"We face the danger of economic collapse," the Soviet president said, citing stepped up challenges to Kremlin authority. He also proposed a simultaneous acceleration of the transition to a free-market system.

But Gorbachev's plan for salvaging the union of 15 republics comes amid widespread pessimism about his ability to halt a demoralizing economic decline and his seriousness about fundamental democratic reform.

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Soviet president Gorbachev

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The action in Byelorussia, a western republic of 10.4 million people, followed a three-hour warning strike Tuesday.

"Everything is a mess in Byelorussia, which until recently seemed so stable, sensible and reliable. Now passions are red hot," the Communist Party newspaper Pravda commented Wednesday.

The demonstrators in Lenin Square remained peaceful while listening to speeches and folk songs, and police did not interfere.

The strike in Minsk was the biggest boost to the country's fledgling independent labor movement since coal miners began a nationwide walkout on March 1 with economic and political demands.

An estimated 300,000 miners from the Ukraine to Siberia are calling for Gorbachev's resignation and new parliamentary elections, among other demands.

The official Tass news agency on Wednesday quoted Metallurgy Minister Serafim Kolpakov as saying the coal strike has caused the shutdown

of 21 steel plants, is costing the country billions of dollars and could jeopardize millions of jobs in other industries.

Tass said Kolpakov proposed improvements in work and living conditions for steelworkers to keep them from joining the strike.

In his speech on Tuesday, Gorbachev urged acceptance of what he called "anti-crisis measures" in an address to the Federation Council, which consists of top national officials and the leaders of the 15 Soviet republics.

"We have to act so as not to allow our country to (fall into) a catastrophe," he said.

His proposals also included a stepped-up effort to conclude a new Union Treaty to hold the republics together by shifting some powers away from the Kremlin.

Tass said the program, to be presented to the Supreme Soviet national legislature, would move the country toward a market economy with "measures to encourage entrepreneurship, to demonopolize the economy."

The package includes budget cuts, efforts to create commodity and finance exchanges and to make the ruble convertible in international markets, the agency said.

The program also would encourage the development of small and medium-sized businesses, especially in trade and the service sector, Tass said.

Baker takes peace proposal to Arab world for approval

CAIRO, Egypt - Secretary of State James Baker took an Israeli peace proposal to the Arab world on Wednesday, uncertain about the reception it would receive but eager to maintain momentum begun in Jerusalem.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was ready to confront Baker with a five-point plan of his own calling for Israel to relinquish land in order to gain Arab acceptance of its existence.

Other provisions in Mubarak's plan included a halt to new Israeli housing construction on the West Bank and in Gaza and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The Egyptian leader did not rule out the regional peace conference proposed by the Israeli government.

Israel's plan would have the conference held under U.S. auspices, preferably in Washington, with the Soviet Union participant. Reporters traveling with Baker were told the Soviets would have to restore full diplomatic relations with Israel if they hoped to sponsor peace talks.

Egypt's approach would involve other nations, many of which have opposed Israeli actions in U.N. votes.

Baker and his senior aides declined to hazard a guess how the Israeli plan would be received in

his talks with Mubarak and with Prince Saud, the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, in Cairo.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Esmat Abdel-Meguid warned before Baker's arrival from Jerusalem that Israel could not have peace until it yielded what he called Arab land.

Baker has called Israel's proposal "constructive," and it gave his second Mideast peace mission in less than a month a momentum U.S. diplomacy in the region had lacked.

Baker held a two-hour meeting with Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir before flying to Egypt. A senior U.S. official said the Israeli leader had given "very satisfactory" replies to questions raised by Baker.

Baker waited until night fell before meeting with Mubarak. This is the season of Ramadan, which imposes a daytime fast on Muslims.

Baker quickly got a strong impression of Mubarak's thinking through the pages of Al Ahram, a newspaper that generally reflects the thinking of the country's leader.

It rejected Israel's procedural suggestion that negotiations be held separately with each of the Arab governments. The objection was designed to ensure a united Arab front.

Daily Nebraskan
Editor: Eric Planner 472-1766
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Survey sharpens picture of religions

NEW YORK - New religions and immigration from the Far East and Arab world have barely dented the overwhelmingly Christian composition of the U.S. population, a 13-month survey of 113,000 adults has found.

Study director Barry Kosmin of the City University of New York Graduate School called the findings the most extensive religious profile available of 20th century America.

The survey found 86.5 percent of Americans identified with Christian denominations, including 26 percent Roman Catholic and 60 percent Protestant.

Only 2 percent refused to reveal their religious identification, and only 7.5 percent said they had no religion.

Richard John Neuhaus, editor in chief of First Things, a monthly journal on religion and public life, said it should come as no surprise that

Americans are so pervasively religious.

Neuhaus said the one surprise for him in reading about the survey was the researcher's conclusion, after accounting for language barriers in the poll, that Muslims represent 0.5 percent of the U.S. population, or 1.4 million Americans.

"I think over the last five years, most of us in this business have used the figure of 3 million plus," Neuhaus said Wednesday.

The finding indicates that half of Arab-Americans either have Christian origins or converted in America.

About 40 percent of the Muslims are black, but only 2 percent of the blacks surveyed are Muslim.

The survey also found that most Asian-Americans are not Muslims, Buddhists or Hindus, but Christians. And most of those who say they are of

Irish ancestry are Protestants, not Catholics.

"Another surprise was the way the so-called new religions were much smaller than we anticipated," said professor Seymour Lachman, CUNY dean for community development.

The researchers estimated that 20,000 adults describe themselves as adhering to the New Age spiritual movement, which combines mysticism, psychology and holistic healing.

"It's something that's just swirling through the culture," Neuhaus said. While such movements may get a lot of media attention and generate high book sales, they include "a lot of people in the Christian category that flirt with New Age and other esoterica," he said.

Kosim said his estimates should not be expected to match figures given

out by denominations, which use varying standards for counting.

"This is not religious affiliation. These are people's perceptions of what they are," Kosmin said. "If I want to call myself a duck, I'm a duck even though I can't swim and haven't got feathers."

The U.S. Census does not ask about religion. Nationwide polls often do, but their samples of 1,000 or 2,000 people include too few Muslims, Hindus and other minorities to make reliable conclusions about them.

The City University researchers had ICR Survey Research Group of Media, Pa., provide information from standard poll questions used in 2,000 telephone interviews a week with a random cross-section of adults in the 48 contiguous states. Much of the survey was conducted last year, and the results were released this month.