

News Digest

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Clinton administration warns Iraq

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Clinton administration warned Iraq Thursday it could face military action or economic sanctions if it continues to bar United Nations inspections of its weapons facilities.

"I think sufficient warnings have been given," Defense Secretary William Cohen said.

Meanwhile, Pentagon officials canceled a scheduled port call for the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz, keeping it within striking range of Iraq.

The warship had been scheduled for a rest stop at the United Arab Emirates in the far southern end of the Gulf over the weekend. The visit has been delayed for an unspecified time, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said.

Cohen said Iraq's blockade of U.N. inspection teams and its admitted tampering with surveillance cameras are clear violations of the 1991 cease-fire accords that ended the Persian Gulf War.

"This is not a negotiable item," Cohen said of Iraq's refusal to admit

U.S. members of the U.N. weapons inspection teams. "It is imperative that Iraq comply with U.N. mandates."

The defense secretary said the United States will wait to act until it sees reports from a U.N. team in Baghdad.

"There is sufficient time to consider" a series of steps that might be taken, Cohen said.

Asked whether those include U.S. military strikes, the defense secretary said, "They could include further economic measures. They could include military as well."

The impasse apparently is allowing the Iraqis to avoid inspections and hide equipment at suspected arms sites. U.N. officials also have delayed flights of the American U-2 surveillance planes while the U.N. delegation is in Iraq.

"It is a real setback," Bacon said of the delayed inspections.

For the fourth time Thursday, Saddam Hussein barred U.S. members of an international weapons inspection team from entering the

Persian Gulf country to look for biological and chemical weapons. The Iraqi president claims the Americans are bent on spying.

The chief weapons inspector, Richard Butler, suspended U.N. weapons inspections last week after Baghdad ordered American members of the inspection teams out of the country, precipitating the current standoff.

"There is no substitute for actually getting into buildings. We need eyeball-to-eyeball studies, and that's why it's absolutely crucial" the United Nations inspections continue, Bacon said.

He charged the Iraqis with attempting to maintain the ability to build Scud missiles and renew production of chemical and biological weapons.

U.N. sanctions and inspections "are valuable because they do prevent Iraq from developing weapons of mass destruction," Bacon said.

In College Station, Texas, where President Clinton was helping dedi-

cate George Bush's presidential library, the commander in chief said that was exactly why Hussein wants the inspections halted, and "why it's so important that they resume immediately."

Barring just the American inspectors "may just be a ruse," Clinton said. "Maybe ... there's something that they're covering up, which is exactly why the international community has to resume the inspections."

Sanctions imposed by the United Nations bar Iraq from exporting oil, which is its major source of income. The sanctions have devastated the economy, and will not be lifted until U.N. inspectors certify Iraq has destroyed its major weapons systems.

A U.N. oil-for-food program permits Iraq limited oil sales to buy food and medicine, and the Iraqi government makes food available at below-market prices.

Bacon said the program "clearly ... could be disallowed" if the U.N. decides to follow Cohen's suggestions for stiffer sanctions.

Legislators set air bag timetable

WASHINGTON (AP) — An agreement between the Clinton administration and key senators Thursday should allow consumers to have less forceful air bags until more advanced air bags are available in the next century.

The agreement also sets a timetable for requiring advanced air bag technology to better protect all occupants from the potentially deadly force of a deploying air bag.

It requires the Transportation Department to issue a proposed standard in mid-1998 for more sophisticated air bag testing that would spur the more advanced air bags. The new standard would then be phased in starting with model year 2001 and ending with model year 2005.

"We want to continue to experience the benefits of air bags but minimize the injury and deaths they will cause," said Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater. "We believe this agreement will help us do that."

Air bags deploying at up to 200 mph have been blamed for the deaths of 49 children and 38 adults — particularly smaller women — in low-speed accidents they otherwise should have survived.

In response to a public outcry over the deaths, federal regulators in March allowed auto makers to install air bags that were 20 percent to 35 percent less powerful.

However, the rule allowing less forceful air bags was to expire in 2001. The agreement would allow for less forceful air bags past that date.

In September, Sen. Dirk Kempthorne, R-Idaho, proposed an amendment that would have forced federal regulators to permanently drop a test requiring auto makers to design air bags that cushioned an unbelted male dummy in a 30 mph crash.

Kempthorne and other safety experts argued that the test required too much force for an air bag deployment, leading to accidental deaths — especially among children. They said air bags are a supplementary safety device and should be designed first for people wearing seat belts and for children.

Slater has agreed to suspend that test until it is replaced with the more sophisticated government air bag testing involving all types of dummies, including those representing children and small women.

"We had a crisis. It was just not conceivable that Congress could sit by and watch this body count of killed precious children," said Kempthorne. "We are doing something for the future, for the children, and we are doing it now."

Slater has the right to restore the test if he gives Congress notice. In the meantime, a less rigorous test that was started in March and allowed less forceful air bags remains in effect.

The agreement must be approved by Congress to take effect. Taking part in the agreement, aside from Kempthorne and Slater, were senators on the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, including its chairman, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

Assassin's friend revealed as agent

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — A right-wing agitator who befriended the man who assassinated Yitzhak Rabin was an agent of the Shin Bet security service, government officials confirmed Thursday.

The first acknowledgment of long-standing reports about Avishai Raviv came after Cabinet ministers were allowed to see a secret report dealing with Shin Bet efforts to infiltrate extremist circles in the turbulent months before Rabin's November 1995 assassination.

Justice Minister Tsahi Hanegbi, however, said there was no evidence in the report to support "outlandish" claims that the Shin Bet was somehow involved in the prime minister's killing.

Israel's opposition Labor Party has sharply criticized Cabinet members who they say have lent credence to conspiracy theories by asking that they be investigated.

Labor lawmakers view this as an attempt to shift attention away from the campaign of incitement against Rabin spearheaded by the right-wing parties now in power.

Rabin's widow and Labor leaders have blamed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, then the opposition leader, for creating the political climate that encouraged assassin Yigal Amir to pull the trigger.

Netanyahu, in turn, has complained he also was the target of incitement by Israeli doves trying to exploit the assassination to discredit the entire right wing.

Raviv was the leader of the radical group Eyal and was known for leading some of the most virulent protests against Rabin's land-for-peace policy.

He befriended Amir, a 27-year-old ultranationalist Jew now serving a life term for killing Rabin after a Nov. 4, 1995, peace rally.

The Haaretz daily, quoting unidentified security officials, said Thursday that Raviv did not always listen to his handlers' orders and was sometimes reprimanded for outbursts during anti-government protests.

It quoted Shin Bet officials as saying Raviv began working for the agency in 1990, but that he was only a minor informer who was given free meals, but no money. Raviv had boasted to friends that he was given \$3,000 a month by the Shin Bet, Haaretz said.

The government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Raviv was an agent who "was assigned" by the Shin Bet to work with right-wing activists but was overly enthusiastic.

Natan Levy, an extreme-right activist, told Channel 2 TV Thursday that at rallies, "Raviv ... told people to shout ... 'Death to Rabin.' He distributed pictures of Rabin in an S.S. uniform. He told one activist that Rabin had to be 'taken out.'"

After the killing, Raviv was arrested and placed in Amir's cell — apparently to ply him for details about who helped him carry out the shooting.

He was quickly released, and months later testified before the state commission investigating the assassination before disappearing from the public eye amid reports of his involvement with the Shin Bet.

Raviv did not answer his mobile phone Thursday.

Israeli media reports said Raviv had immunity from prosecution.

But Justice Ministry spokeswoman Ety Eshed said "there is no immunity," and added that Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein is considering whether to prosecute Raviv on charges of having failed to prevent crimes. That was apparently a reference to the possibility that Raviv knew Amir was planning to kill Rabin.

The questions about Raviv's role have given fresh momentum to theories spread by a right-wing fringe that the Shin Bet knew of Amir's plan from Raviv and intended — with Rabin's knowledge — to replace his bullets with blanks and let him fire them in order to discredit the right wing.

A government-appointed commission issued a report in March 1996 ruling out any conspiracy. The report also had a secret addition, which was opened to Cabinet ministers Thursday.

Hanegbi, who read the report Thursday, said "there is no link between the outlandish claim of a conspiracy and things connected to the activities of Mr. Raviv."

But Police Minister Avigdor Kahalani, who also saw the report, said "anyone who reads the section connected with Avishai Raviv will raise an eyebrow." He did not specify exactly what was written.

Delayed fire evacuation gets criticism

OMAHA (AP) — A fire in the boy's locker room at an Omaha middle school Thursday had firefighters questioning why an evacuation was not immediately ordered.

Bryan Middle School Principal Raymond Ramsey said standard procedure calls for an evacuation, but he delayed the order because it was cold outside, there did not appear to be an immediate danger to all students and he wanted to know more about the fire's location.

A T-shirt was on fire in a locker, and the 8:45 a.m. fire spread to an adjoining locker, causing a lot of smoke, Ramsey said. Firefighters were investigating whether it was deliberately set, he said.

A firefighter at the scene said officials would investigate why an evacuation was not immediately ordered. One student was taken to a hospital as a precaution. Ramsey said the student may have become overexcited by the fire.

Ramsey said students in the gymnasium area were ordered to the other side of the school. All 830 students were evacuated upon a police officer's suggestion, which happened about the time the school officials found approximately where the fire was, Ramsey said.

"I know I will be criticized terribly," Ramsey said. "I'm sure I would have been criticized for sending the kids out into the cold."

The school's fire evacuation plan calls for students to go to designated areas. Because Ramsey knew only the fire's general location, he feared he sending the seventh- and eighth-grade students into the fire, he said.

The evacuation procedure will be reviewed Monday, he said.

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