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Powell says US argument is with Saddam Hussein, not Iraqi people

- The secretary of state is trying to persuade Arabs to maintain sanctions on Iraq

Kuwait City - The Associated Press

In a ceremony on the 10th anniversary of Kuwait's liberation, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell pledged that "freedom will live and prosper in this part of the world" in spite of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

"Aggression will not stand," Powell said on Monday as he joined former U.S. President George Bush and Norman Schwartzkopf, the U.S. commander in the Gulf War against Iraq, in honoring the approximately 300 Americans who died in the 1991 conflict.

They laid a wreath at the U.S. Embassy in tribute to the Americans who helped reverse Iraq's annexation of its smaller, oil-rich neighbor.

"The use of force was moral," Bush said under bright skies to an audience that included hundreds of U.S. troops who are on duty here to protect Kuwait from Iraqi threats.

The former president said he did not know if his son, President George W. Bush, will send more troops here. But, he said, "the United States will never let Kuwait down."

Powell, who was chairman of the U.S. joint chiefs of staff, described the U.S. mission as one of combatting evil.

"We want the world to know our quarrel is not with the people of Iraq. It is with the regime in Baghdad," he said.

Powell's rhetorical campaign against Saddam was sweet music here. Kuwait, having felt the sting of Saddam, has kept its distance from Arab sentiments against U.N. sanctions against Baghdad.

"This was a guy who invaded a country that was not doing anything to him," Powell said Sunday as he condemned the Iraqi leader as a dictator who has been stripped of his "stings" by the Gulf War and world pressure in the years afterward.

Powell is trying to persuade the Arabs to maintain U.N. sanctions on Iraq, but is running into complaints the Iraqi people are suffering as a result of the economic restraints.

His arguments are that Saddam is at fault and that only about 20 percent of Iraq's oil revenue is used to help the Iraqi people.

From Kuwait, Powell took his case to Saudi Arabia with a visit to Syria later in the day his last stop in the region. He is likely to look into reports Syria is helping Iraq transport oil illegally.

In Syria, official newspapers Monday criticized what they called America's "double-standard" policy in the Middle East - seeking to muster support for sanctions against Iraq while also backing Israeli policy toward Palestinians.

"Washington should play it fair. It should not side with Israeli aggressors on one hand, and play the part of supporter of U.N. resolutions against other nations on the other," the English-language Syria Times said in an editorial.

On Sunday, Powell had endorsed a Palestinian demand by urging Israel to lift an economic "siege" of the West Bank and Gaza as soon as possible.

The constraints, which include a ban on Palestinian workers going to their jobs in Israel and the withholding of tax revenues, do nothing to improve the security situation, Powell said after a two-hour meeting with Yasser Arafat at his headquarters.

Israel, in an effort to stem attacks on its soldiers and civilians, is using economic pressure as well as firepower. Peace talks have been shelved, and Powell said it will be a long time before they resume.

Before seeing Arafat, Powell met with Ariel Sharon in Jerusalem but evidently was unable to persuade Israel's incoming prime minister to ease that pressure. Still, Powell said the Bush administration's commitment to Israeli security was "rock-hard."

Before landing in Kuwait, Powell said Israelis and Palestinians are in touch with each other on security issues. "Whether that will bear fruit, I don't know."

On peacemaking, he described Sharon and Arafat as leaders looking down a long hallway, with a settlement at the end. "They have the keys," Powell said. But, he said, "it's going to take some time before they get back to negotiations."

In continued West Bank violence on Sunday, a Palestinian motorist was shot dead by Israeli soldiers and two Israeli motorists were shot and wounded.

Powell, on the second day of a six-country, four-day trek, went from the West Bank to Jordan, where he discussed Middle East peace and U.N. sanctions against Iraqi sanctions with King Abdullah.

Jordanian leaders have "a clear understanding Iraq's program of weapons of mass destruction has to be dealt with," Powell said en route to Kuwait. "They are solidly in line with what the U.N. has been doing, so I had a receptive answer."

Iraq sees no hope in UN talks, fears 'smart sanctions'

- Baghdad raps UN chief for failing to condemn recent Western air raids

Baghdad - Reuters

Iraq on Monday published a letter by its foreign minister slamming U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan for failing to condemn recent Western air raids, just hours before that two were to meet in New York.

"Your refusal to clearly state your view on the no-fly zones that have been globally deplored does not prevent you from taking a clear stance on the recent aggression launched by American and British aircraft on Iraq," Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf told Annan in a letter carried by the official INA news agency.

Annan was due to start two days of talks later on Monday with a high-level Iraqi delegation led by Sahaf that would focus on getting arms inspectors back into Iraq, a key condition for lifting 11 years of U.N. sanctions on Baghdad.

The inspectors have been barred from Iraq since they left on the eve of a wave of U.S. and British bombings in December 1998.

INA said Sahaf was commenting on a letter by Annan on Feb. 21, five days after U.S. and British raids on radar and military communications sites around Baghdad.

It quoted Annan as saying the no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq had been imposed by "some Security Council members over Iraqi territory claiming they were authorized to do so within the framework of the Council's resolutions."

"If the international community accepted the American-British interpretation, then it would have added new authority that does not exist in the (U.N.) charter," Sahaf responded.

No hope in UN talks

Iraq said earlier on Monday that it saw no hope in the Sahaf-Annan talks, adding that Washington and London would use the expected failure of the meeting as a pretext to impose "smart sanctions" designed to keep a stranglehold on Iraq.

"Iraq does not pin any hope on this dialogue which is conducted with a party (the U.N.) that has no authority to take decisions," said al-Thawra, the ruling Baath Party's newspaper.

Annan is said to anticipate little progress unless all five permanent members of the Security Council -- the United States, Britain, Russia, France and China -- unify around one policy. They have been divided for several years.

"Iraq is keen to take part in any dialogue in which it would table the injustices inflicted upon it and defend its national rights at international arenas," al-Thawra said.

But it said the United States and Britain were waiting for the failure of the dialogue to use it as a "pretext to take new steps that have already been cooked by them."

British and U.S. officials met in Washington last week to explore a switch to "smart sanctions" focused more tightly on banning arms imports and axing controls on civilian goods imposed on Iraq after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

An Iraqi statement issued late on Sunday after a meeting chaired by President Saddam Hussein said Baghdad had fulfilled its obligations to scrap its weapons of mass destruction and it was now up to the U.N. to meet its obligation to lift sanctions.

"Iraq will not deal with any formula that does not include a complete lifting of the sanctions and implementation of paragraph 14 of (Security Council) resolution 687 on all countries of the region, especially the Zionist entity," Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz said.

Resolution 687 ended the Gulf War after Iraq's defeat in 1991, and paragraph 14 calls for ridding the Middle East of all weapons of mass destruction. Arab countries say Israel has nuclear weapons.

Bosnian Croat gets 25 years for war crimes

The Hague - Reuters

A former Bosnian Croat political leader was sentenced to 25 years in jail for crimes against humanity on Monday, the first senior politician to be convicted by the U.N. war crimes court for former Yugoslavia.

Dario Kordic, once vice president of the self-proclaimed Bosnian Croat state, was found guilty of persecuting, killing and detaining Muslims in central Bosnia from late 1991 to 1994. He was the most important Bosnian Croat yet convicted by the Hague Tribunal.

"The fact that you were a politician and took no part in the actual execution of the crimes makes no difference; you played your part as surely as the men who fired the guns," Judge Richard May told the dark-suited, close-cropped Kordic.

"Indeed, the fact you were a leader aggravates the offenses," he added.

Kordic, 40, stood trial together with Bosnian Croat military commander Mario Cerkez, who received a 15-year sentence. They were found guilty of involvement in a string of attacks on Bosnian Muslims as part of a sustained campaign to create an ethnically pure territory to be joined to Croatia.

The attacks "were characterized by a ruthlessness and savagery...in which no distinction was made as to the age of its victims -- young and old were either murdered or expelled and their houses were burned", the judge said.

Kordic was found guilty of ordering the notorious Ahmici village massacre in April 1993, in which Bosnian Croats murdered more than 100 people before torching their homes.

Powell has first meeting with restive allies today

Brussels - The Associated Press

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell sits down today with a roomful of not altogether happy allies who don't like Washington's plans for a ballistic missile defense system and care even less for what some see as an arrogant, go-it-alone attitude.

Eleven of the 19 allies are also members of the 15-nation European Union, which has its own gripes against the United States on issues ranging from bananas to American tax breaks on exported goods to global warming.

The special NATO foreign ministers' meeting, called at Washington's behest, will only last a couple of hours, followed by another hour or so over lunch. In that short period Powell will again explain the American rationale behind plans to develop and deploy a national missile defense system.

The Russians and the Chinese adamantly oppose it, though Russia apparently agrees there is a threat. Most of the allies are against it too, though nearly all of them have accepted the inevitability of the United States going ahead with the plan whether they like it or not.

The Americans want to develop missile interceptors that will shoot down ballistic weapons fired by what the United States calls "nations of concern," such as North Korea, Iran or Iraq. Washington is willing to provide the European allies and Canada with the same technology, if they want it or can afford it.

The allies are concerned that Washington's missile defense system would wreck the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty between the United States and Russia and set off a new arms race, striking a blow to nonproliferation efforts. Nonetheless, they realize that the ABM treaty is a bilateral agreement and that their arguments are unlikely to stop a determined United States.

The United States has promised to consult closely with the allies on the missile program, but for some of them, these consultations amount to little more than being informed about what Washington has already decided to do.

For the moment, however, the technology has not been perfected and plans for deployment have been delayed.

The United States, for its part, is concerned about European Union plans to develop a 60,000-man rapid-reaction force to be used in peacekeeping or humanitarian crises in which NATO as a whole decides not to get involved. Washington has said it supports such a force, which would have access to NATO assets, as long as it does not undermine the alliance.

The caveat is the key. The United States is not yet convinced that the European force will not ultimately weaken the alliance and drive a wedge between Washington and Europe. The discussions between the European Union and NATO on how the two organizations will cooperate have been difficult, particularly on how planning will be done and by whom and how the EU will use NATO assets such as transportation, communications and intelligence.

In many ways, however, disagreement and tussling in NATO have been part of the game for half a century and dire predictions of a split in the alliance have always been wrong.

Powell and the allies will also review the situation in Bosnia and Kosovo, where NATO leads about 60,000 peacekeepers from more than 30 nations. Of particular concern is the rising violence in Kosovo and southern Serbia, where ethnic Albanian rebels have clashed continuously with Serb security forces in the Presevo Valley and in other parts of Kosovo where Serbs have come under attack.

The European Union has threatened to cut off funding for the region if the violence persists.

Besides a meeting of NATO's North Atlantic Alliance, Powell will have separate talks with the foreign ministers of Turkey and Greece and with NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson. After lunch, the secretary of state will travel across town to the European Union for talks with the president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, and the EU's commissioner for foreign affairs, Christopher Patten.

Thirty people injured in Texas during Mardi Gras celebrations

Some participants in weekend Mardi Gras festivities threw beer bottles and punches and smashed windows, injuring about 30 people. More than 50 people were arrested.

Six people were treated at hospitals, including an Austin police officer.

Austin police arrested 35 and another 21 on charges ranging from indecent exposure to public intoxication.

Police used tear gas and shot rubber pellets to disperse the crowd of partygoers, estimated at about 100,000 people.

"There were people in the crowd going to dumpsters in alleys and pulling bottles out and throwing them at police," witness Halley Cornell told the Austin American-Statesman. "Then police started storming toward them and spraying pepper spray. It was a stampede situation."

In Seattle, about 200 police in riot gear used pepper spray, rubber bullets and concussion bombs to break up Mardi Gras festivities early Sunday. Police said several people in a crowd of about 2,000 threw bottles, rocks and firecrackers at officers soon after bars closed at about 1:30 a.m.

Seven people were arrested on charges ranging from assault to property damage. One person was stabbed, a police officer suffered a broken arm and a woman was hit by a car.

Seattle police said they would continue to prepare for large crowds and drunkenness as Mardi Gras events continued.

Crowe hits out at "imbecilic" criticism of romance

Oscar-nominated actor Russell Crowe hit back on Saturday at criticism that his short-lived romance with U.S. co-star Meg Ryan was to blame for their latest movie's poor box office showing.

Crowe and Ryan, who was married to actor Dennis Quaid, began a much-publicised affair while filming "Proof of Life" in Ecuador last year. Ryan, 38, ended her nine-year marriage to Quaid, but split with Crowe, 37, earlier this year.

"Proof of Life" director Taylor Hackford said at the film's London premiere on Wednesday that the romance had "an indelible and very destructive effect" on the U.S. release of the film over the Christmas period.

Hackford claimed the relationship overpowered the film, but New Zealand-born Crowe hit back during a whirlwind promotional tour in Australia.

"I think Taylor is being impolite, impolitic and imbecilic by saying that," Crowe told reporters.

"I think you will see that the Proof of Life box office, when it's not such a family-oriented time as Christmas, will be much higher. What we know, personally, is that we put as much effort into the process as possible and are pleased with the outcome," he said.

Crowe said the hostage drama was a good film but not a great one.

"I think it's a good movie. Is it a great film and is it going to change your life? No. But not all of them can be," Crowe said.

Crowe has been nominated in the best actor category at both the American and British Academy Awards for his role in the Roman epic "Gladiator".

Crowe said he was even happier this year than when he received an Oscar nomination for his work in "The Insider" last year.

'Gladiator' takes best film at British Academy Film Awards

"Gladiator" conquered the British Academy Film Awards with five awards, including best film, but it took the 14-year-old newcomer from "Billy Elliot" to win the audience's heart.

Teen-age star Jamie Bell from Teesside in the north of England beat back no fewer than three nominees for the U.S. Oscars to win best actor.

"I was kind of thinking: 'I'm not bothering coming. What's the point?'" Bell told the cheering black-tie crowd inside the Odeon Leicester Square in London's West End. Instead, Bell found himself at the podium, beating out such Hollywood heavy-hitters as Tom Hanks ("Cast Away") and Russell Crowe ("Gladiator").

Crowe, Hanks, and fellow nominee Geoffrey Rush ("Quills") will again face off against one another at next month's Academy Awards on March 25. Bell had been cited as a possible Oscar nominee but did not make the final list of five.

"Billy Elliot" took two further awards: best supporting actress for Julie Walters, who is an Oscar candidate this year; and the Alexander Korda Award for best British film.

It was a good week for Walters, who 48 hours earlier had won an Olivier Award - London's equivalent of the Tony - for her theater performance last summer in "All My Sons."

Best actress went, as expected, to Julia Roberts for "Erin Brockovich," while the supporting actor prize went to a second Oscar front-runner, Benicio Del Toro for "Traffic." Neither performer was on hand to collect the prize.

Besides Ang Lee's citation for directing - a prize he also won at the Golden Globes last month in Los Angeles - the martial arts romance "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" won for best film not in English, as well as costume design (Tim Yip) and Tan Dun's original score.

"Gladiator," which recreated second-century Rome on a colossal scale using striking digital effects, dominated the technical awards, winning for editing, cinematography and production design. It also earned a special audience award, which is voted on not by the British Academy but by close to 100,000 members of the public.

In a blow to national pride, the film's British director, Ridley Scott, did not win in his category.

"Almost Famous," the critical darling that has been a box office disappointment, won both for Cameron Crowe's original screenplay and for best sound. Stephen Gaghan of "Traffic" won for adapted screenplay.

"Erin Brockovich" co-star Albert Finney, the British screen and stage veteran, lost in the supporting actor category but earned the night's sole standing ovation as recipient of the Academy Fellowship for lifetime achievement.

"What I want is a good time; the rest is propaganda," he said, quoting a line from an early film success of his, "Saturday Night and Sunday Morning."

Over a career spanning more than four decades, that remark now seems "philosophically true," the 63-year-old Finney said.

The British Academy Awards are enjoying a renewed significance now that they have been moved up six weeks in order to precede the Oscars, which are on March 25.

In the past, coming after the Oscars by two weeks or more, the British ceremony resembled an awards also-ran, not a potential indicator of prizes to come.

Formerly called simply the Baftas, the awards are now known in full as the Orange British Academy Film Awards after their sponsor, the cell phone company Orange.

The British Academy membership boasts nearly 5,000 people: 3,750 in Britain, 700 in Los Angeles and 300 in New York.

'Amanda' paints in primate colors

Her art is abstract, at best. Her methods are uncouth. But her stuff sells, for hundreds of dollars.

The 24-year-old artist woke up late and sleepily climbed a cargo net to greet visitors. Her studio stank, and banana peels lay rotting where they'd been carelessly tossed.

Amanda normally paints only once a week. But when inspiration strikes the 100-pound (45-kilogram) orangutan, she expects to start immediately.

"She's getting a little frustrated," Como Zoo keeper Mike Thell said as he readied bottles of nontoxic poster paint. "What happens is, she starts to spit."

Through heavy chain-link caging, Amanda dipped her brush into red, purple and yellow bottles held up by Thell. After each thoughtful brushstroke, she popped the brush into her mouth and slurped it clean. There was much slurping.

After a few minutes, Amanda handed the brush back to Thell and swept excess paint from the paper with pointed tongue. Colors blended, giving the piece the look of a child's finger painting.

"She usually gives it the tongue signature," Thell said.

After a little coaxing from Thell, Amanda slid her creation under the cage door and flashed a blue-stained

smile.

Amanda's art debuted to the public at the zoo's Primate Exhibit building. More than 400 people arrived to bid on 22 framed originals.

The auction raised about \$ 4,800 for the zoo. The top price: \$ 360 for a work called "Like the Weather;" zoo officials won't say who titles them.

Amanda was not shy about demonstrating her skills to the auction-goers.

"We know that she likes the attention," said zoo spokeswoman Jennifer Lauerman. "She definitely knew what was going on."

The Sumatran/Bornean orangutan started painting in June as part of the zoo's enrichment program, meant to stimulate captive animals. The program challenges gorillas to unlock treats from plastic bottles, has a polar bear work its way through a block of ice to reach a frozen fish, and lets lions roll around in their favorite herbs and spices.

Amanda shares a cage with three other orangutans but is the zoo's only artist. Her usual reward is a bottle of Kool-Aid or orange juice.

"She's highly intelligent so far as orangutans seem to go," Thell said. She took right to painting after a couple of demonstrations of what to do with paint and brush, he said.

She's not the first zoo animal to delve into art.

Paintings by an elephant named Ruby at the Phoenix zoo fetched as much as \$ 3,000. A dolphin at the Clearwater, Florida, Marine Science Center took up a brush in 1992 and originals went for as much as \$ 175.

Curry craving leads to fast food delivery world record

A craving for curry led to what could be a new world record for the longest fast food takeout Monday when a hungry English backpacker received her order on the other side of the world.

Rachel Kerr placed an order via the Internet last week for a curry from her favorite Indian restaurant, the Rupali in the north-east English city of Newcastle. Four days later, Kerr received the meal atop the Sydney Harbor Bridge, 17,500 kilometers (10,850 miles) away.

"My friend and I were laughing about how you can't get proper curry in Sydney," Kerr told The Associated Press. "We found a website ... and were joking around and said, 'Wouldn't it be funny if we e-mailed them and (asked them) to send us a proper curry,' because we're missing it."

The e-mail got through to Newcastle-based Madaboutcurry website director Rick McCordall.

"I was gobsmacked, absolutely stunned by the order," McCordall was quoted as saying in The Australian newspaper Monday. "We get some really unusual requests on the website, but to actually get a curry order to the other side of the world - we just had to do it."

McCordall organized Rupali curry house chef Abdul Latif to fill Kerr's order of vegetable biryani, pappadums, naan bread, pickles and rice. The meal was frozen and meat-free to meet customs requirements.

McCordall said he hoped the delivery would make the Guinness Book of Records for the longest fast food delivery.

The existing record was set in 1998 when a pizza base was sent from New York City to Tokyo - a distance of 10,867 kilometers (6,752 miles).

Kerr said she would share the feast with travelers at a nearby youth hostel. "All the backpackers miss their curries," she said.

The 24-year-old was sure the curry would be worth the wait, but said the different circumstances under which it would be eaten could alter the taste.

"It really should be eaten late at night when you've been out on the booze, so it's not really quite the same at 11 o'clock in the morning," Kerr said.

Gay and military stepfamilies face daunting

challenges, experts say

Beyond the basic complexities confronting most stepfamilies, those in the military and those headed by same-sex couples face additional daunting challenges, experts told a U.S. conference.

For military stepfamilies, temporary overseas deployment of a spouse may leave a stepparent alone with children who have yet to accept a new authority figure. Same-sex couples may have to cope with prejudices, and their children may struggle in explaining the family structure to others.

The issues were raised at the National Conference of Stepfamilies, a first-of-its-kind symposium bringing together experts from a variety of fields to consider ways of improving support for stepfamilies.

Francesca Adler-Baeder, a parent education specialist affiliated with Cornell University, discussed her work with the U.S. Defense Department, trying to identify the problems posed by stepfamilies in the military. About 55 percent of all service members are married, and at least one-fifth of them are estimated to be in stepfamilies, she said.

Relocations within the United States, as well as temporary overseas deployment, can be particularly stressful for military stepfamilies, Adler-Baeder said. She cited the example of a child who wants to continue regular visits with a noncustodial parent, then learns that his or her day-to-day family is being transferred to a faraway post.

"You're obligated to move," said Adler-Baeder. "And it's usually not where you want to go."

Anne Bernstein, a family therapist and professor at the University of California-Berkeley, discussed the distinctive challenges facing same-sex couples in cases where one of them has custody of one or more children at the time the adults become partners.

"Even more than other stepfamilies, these families are at variance with the models in our dominant culture," Bernstein said. "These people can feel invisible or rejected as a family."

She said members of such families may have difficulty finding the right terms for each other; a child might fumble for a reply when asked by a teacher, "Who is this person who picks you up from school?"

Bernstein said most of the same-sex couples she works with are lesbians, but she has detected particular problems faced by some gay men thrust into stepfather roles.

"For gay men, being a parent is often not what one expected to include in one's life story," she said. "Being a stepparent is a very different lifestyle."

Bernstein said her home town of Berkeley, California, is relatively tolerant, but noted that some same-sex couples with children in other areas fear stigmatization - or possibly even losing custody of the children - if their sexual identity becomes public.

"These issues are not easy, especially when you have children," she said.

The final full session of the conference ended with a plea by organizers for more energetic lobbying in state legislatures on behalf of stepfamilies.

"State laws give almost no legal recognition to the residential stepparent," said Margorie Engel, president of the Stepfamily Association of America. "The legal system focuses too exclusively on bloodlines."

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