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INTERNATIONAL

Iraq backs off on threat

NEW YORK (AP) - Western governments reacted with outrage Thursday to Iraq's threat to execute diplomats who shelter foreigners, but Baghdad sought to portray it as a misunderstanding, saying the warning was aimed at its own citizens.

Eight weeks to the day after Iraq overran Kuwait, its exiled emir addressed the United Nations General Assembly, decrying the "rape, destruction and terror" inflicted by Saddam Hussein's armies and appealing for a withdrawal of Iraqi troops.

But Iraq tightened its grip on the conquered emirate, ordering Kuwaiti nationals to apply for Iraqi citizenship.

Oil prices advanced again Thursday, briefly breaking the \$40-a-barrel mark, a day after President Bush ordered the sale of some oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve to fight soaring prices.

International finance officials, meanwhile, expressed new concerns about long-term financial consequences of the Persian Gulf crisis. The head of the World Bank said he might be forced to call on wealthy nations to boost their support for the international lending institution by early next year.

Britain, in a surprise move, announced the restoration of diplomatic ties with Iran, which were severed after the Ayatollah Khomeini's death decree against author Salman Rushdie for his book "The Sa-

tanic Verses."

Iraq was the target of a blistering new round of international criticism on Thursday, after a drastic threat against diplomats who shelter foreigners. In a note delivered to some Western embassies on Wednesday, the Baghdad government said giving sanctuary to a foreigner was punishable by death.

The Iraqi Foreign Ministry refused to elaborate on the message, but Iraqi officials speaking on condition of anonymity said it was referring to Iraqis harboring Westerners, not to diplomats giving refuge to their own nationals.

Even as Baghdad backpedaled, Western governments reacted angrily.

"Iraq's threat makes it impossible to take seriously any pretensions on its part to be a civilized state," Britain's Foreign Office said. In Paris, a French Foreign Ministry spokesman in Paris called the threat "utterly intolerable."

Secretary of State James A. Baker III, who first disclosed the threat on Wednesday, called it "repugnant."

Thousands of Westerners trapped by the invasion have been prevented from leaving. Some are being held by Iraq at key installations to serve as human shields against potential attack.

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