

# Six-hour meeting comes to naught; war looms

GENEVA (AP) — Secretary of State James A. Baker and Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz met for six hours on Wednesday but failed to defuse the Persian Gulf crisis that threatens war in the Middle East. "The time for talk is running out," Baker said.

President Bush, in Washington, accused the Iraqis of "a total stiff-arm, a total rebuff," and refused to rule out launching the first attack if Iraq doesn't withdraw from Kuwait by next Tuesday's deadline set by the United Nations.

Aziz blamed the United States for the crisis and said, "We will not yield to threats" demanding Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.

Baker said the United States and its allies possess the "power and the will" to evict Iraqi forces, and some members of Congress said the outcome of the talks would make it easier for Bush to win congressional backing for such action.

The standoff in Switzerland seemed to leave UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar as the man with the best chance for forging a peaceful solution. U.N. officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said he would travel to Baghdad in the next few days on a journey blessed in advance by both Bush and Aziz.

The Baker-Aziz talks were the first high-level discussions between the two nations in the five months since Iraq invaded Kuwait. The two men sat across a blue-draped hotel conference table, with the world eagerly awaiting the outcome of their conversations.

Oil prices fell sharply in early trading as word spread that the talks had not broken apart abruptly, then soared within moments of Baker's pessimistic report of his session. Stock prices moved in the other direction — climbing as the talks wore on; plunging after Baker's statement.

In the Saudi Arabian desert, across the border from Iraq's occupying army, the massive American military force went about its business. Bush has ordered more than 400,000 troops into the region, backed by sophisticated aircraft, a huge armada and hundreds of tanks.

Aziz, whose nation invaded Kuwait last summer, pledged it would not attack first in the current crisis. But, in the event of a war, he said Iraq would "absolutely yes" attack Israel.

Bush, asked if he would make the same commitment, answered curtly, "No."

"It's not too late" to resolve the crisis short of war, he said, but added that he was discouraged by the day's events.

Baker told reporters his meetings with Aziz were diplomatically polite — no table-pounding or yelling. Yet he said Aziz refused to carry back to Baghdad a letter from Bush to Saddam. American diplomats will be leaving the Iraqi capital on Saturday, he added, three days before the deadline for possible

attack.

Aziz said the letter contained language inappropriate for an exchange between heads of state. Asked about that, Bush said the letter was "not rude" but direct, an attempt to make sure Saddam clearly understands the U.S. position.

Baker told reporters, "Regrettably, I heard nothing today that suggested to me any Iraqi flexibility" on a withdrawal from Kuwait. Aziz did not once bring up the subject of Kuwait during his news conference, outlining instead Iraq's call for a conference to address the rights of Palestinians.

Optimistic assessments of the talks were hard to find.

"It's the dialogue of the deaf," said Sen. John Glenn of Ohio. "They're just talking past each other."

Each side said it was up to the other to prevent war.

"Let us all hope that the (Iraqi) leadership will have the wisdom to choose peace," said Baker.

Said Aziz: "That's up to the American administration to decide."

In the meantime, the five-month war of nerves was unabated.

Said Saddam Hussein in Iraq: Americans will "swim in their own blood" if war breaks out.

The president issued an executive order giving the government authority to get priority delivery of any needed food or industrial material, and stepped up his campaign for a divided House and Senate to grant him unfettered authority to wage war. Some lawmakers said the outcome of the talks made it more likely that Bush would win the support he's seeking.

"It might change some

minds," said Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa.

Defense Secretary Dick Cheney said he was weighing whether seek presidential authority to keep reservists on active duty for up to two years under legal provisions that would permit him to call up a million reservists — something he said he has no intention of doing. Without a new presidential proclamation, tours of reservists in support units would expire after 180 days, for most of them in mid-February.

Said Bush in issuing his executive order, "The United States must have the capability to rapidly mobilize its resources in the interest of national security."

Bush said at the White House the talks had not advanced hopes for peace "one inch" unless Aziz returns to Baghdad

and tells Saddam of U.S. determination to press for a withdrawal.

Saddam sparked the crisis when he sent his invading army into Kuwait on Aug. 2.

Bush swiftly assembled a remarkable international coalition to oppose the action — including the Soviet Union — and the United Nations first slapped an economic embargo on Iraq and then issued the Jan. 15 deadline to withdraw or face the use of force.

The Baker-Aziz sessions were seen as perhaps the last chance to head off the movement toward war, although Baker said, "This is still a confrontation that Iraq can avoid."

Bush said in advance there would be no compromise on the United Nations for a complete, unilateral Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait.

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