

INTERNATIONAL

Deadline passes; Iraq stays put

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.N. deadline for Iraq to give up Kuwait passed today with no hint of a withdrawal, leaving President Bush at the threshold of deciding whether and when to unleash a U.S.-led offensive.

The Pentagon said the more than 415,000 American forces arrayed against Iraq in the Persian Gulf area were ready to fight, but many Americans held out hope that Bush could be persuaded to put off war and give diplomacy another chance.

While the White House had underscored Bush's warning that war could come "sooner rather than later," it issued a statement minutes after midnight that said: "Jan. 15 was a day for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. It was not a deadline for U.N. action."

Thousands of antiwar protesters gathered in front of the White House, at United Nations headquarters in New York and on college campuses nationwide. In San Francisco, police in riot gear pulled protesters from a human chain outside a federal office building and arrested more than 400 people Tuesday in one of the largest demonstrations.

In a sign of diplomacy's failure in the gulf crisis, the Iraqi ambassador to the United States, Mohamed Sadiq al-Mashat, and a half-dozen aides left Washington for Baghdad on Tuesday night. The ambassador was recalled by President Saddam Hussein, although the Iraqi embassy was not closed.

Bush left the Oval Office at his usual time of about 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, and the White House gave no indication that he was reconsidering using force in the gulf.

Presidential spokesman Martin Fitzwater said Tuesday that Bush had not made a final decision on whether to order an attack on Iraq to liberate Kuwait, but Pentagon officials said U.S. armed forces were ready to roll if need be.

"The Department of Defense is ready to execute any order we might receive from the president," said Pete Williams, chief spokesman for Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.

Bush had U.N.-sanctioned authority to launch a military offensive against Iraq's dug-in troops in Kuwait as of 12:01 a.m. EST today, which was 8:01 a.m. in Kuwait.

The corridors of the Pentagon were quiet as midnight arrived, and visible security appeared normal. At the entrance to the tightly restricted National Military Command Center, where Cheney would meet with senior officers in the event of war, the hallways were quiet and no one was in sight.

On Tuesday, Saddam appeared to be increasing the size and firepower of his forces in the area, Williams said.

"We don't see any evidence that they are in any way pulling out of Kuwait. Quite the contrary," Williams said, adding that the number of Iraqi troops in and around Kuwait had reached 545,000, about 5,000 more than five days ago.

The Iraqis also have added several hundred tanks, armored personnel carriers and artillery pieces, the Pentagon spokesman said.

American forces in Saudi Arabia and the surrounding seas continued intensive training, Williams said.

NBC News reported Tuesday

night that B-52 bombers had been moved to bases in a gulf country it did not identify. The Air Force has never acknowledged publicly that B-52s have been assigned to Operation Desert Shield, but a detachment is known to have been based at Diego Garcia, an island in the Indian Ocean about 2,500 miles from Kuwait.

Lt. Col. Stuart Wagner, a Pentagon spokesman, said, "I can't talk about B-52s."

The Navy has four carriers — the USS America, USS Theodore Roosevelt, USS Saratoga and USS John F. Kennedy — in the Red Sea, while two others — the USS Midway and USS Ranger — are in the Persian Gulf, the spokesman said.

Aboard the carriers are more than 450 warplanes, including bombers, fighters and electronic warfare planes, that could be launched in an attack on Iraq.

Williams said he couldn't comment on the alert status of U.S. forces in the gulf region, but he strongly hinted that the troops had been placed on heightened alert as the U.N. deadline approached.

"We're taking prudent actions," he said.

The Pentagon also has declined to discuss its estimates of how many American troops might be killed or wounded in an offense against Iraq, but on Tuesday a private defense analyst published his own study on the human cost of a Middle East war.

Joshua Epstein of the Brookings Institution said a U.S.-initiated war that opened with an extended air campaign followed by a ground assault designed to push Iraqi forces from Kuwait but no farther likely would result in the deaths of 1,049 to 4,136 American troops and wounds to an additional 3,344 to 16,059.

The ranges are so broad, Epstein said, because of the numerous combinations in which U.S. forces could be used and the various possible Iraqi responses. "Iraq is soundly defeated even on pessimistic assumptions," he said.

Other private analysts have said U.S. casualties could go as high as 30,000, while Rep. Les Aspin, D-Wis., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said last week that U.S. forces could defeat Iraq with as few as 500 American deaths and 2,500 wounded.

The Pentagon was placed on a higher alert condition Tuesday, which meant that walk-in tourists were kept out but that scheduled group tours were allowed to proceed. Three bomb scares briefly closed separate sections of the building.

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