

Troops begin new countdown; Bush 'resolute'

(AP) — The midnight deadline for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to pull his forces out of Kuwait passed Wednesday and more than 680,000 U.S. and allied troops began a new countdown to war.

Barring an attack by Iraq, the start of a Persian Gulf war lay in the hands of President Bush and allied leaders. Bush, armed with congressional authorization to drive Iraq from Kuwait, was described Tuesday as resolute and "at peace with himself."

Iraq declared a "furnace of hell" awaits anyone trying to dislodge its 545,000 troops from Kuwait, taken over in an Iraqi blitz on Aug. 2. What Saddam faced was thousands of combat aircraft, scores of warships and some of the world's most sophisticated weapons, spearheaded by 415,000 U.S. troops.

Baghdad's shouts of defiance combined with a worldwide clamor of last-minute appeals to Saddam and anti-war protests.

The deadline expired at 8 a.m. Wednesday local time in Baghdad, where the Iraqi government gave no last-minute sign it was willing to withdraw from the small emirate it overran in a dispute over land and oil.

After the deadline, set Nov. 29 by the United Nations Security Council, U.N. members are authorized to drive Iraq out of Kuwait by force.

Deadline expiration at midnight Tuesday, Eastern Standard Time, did not mean war was inevitable, but exhausted diplomats said efforts to find a peaceful solution were practically dead.

At a packed news conference, U.N. Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar made a final appeal to Saddam Hussein to withdraw his troops and avert war. He assured Iraq that once it gives a decisive withdrawal, its forces would not be attacked.

Perez de Cuellar said he also had promised "from the highest levels of government" that with the crisis over, "every effort will be made to address, in a comprehensive manner, the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the Palestinian question."

That links the Persian Gulf crisis with the Palestinian issue, a connection the Iraqi president sought and the United States and Britain opposed.

Perez de Cuellar's statement came six hours before expiration of the U.N. deadline.

Bush somberly walked the White House grounds at dawn Tuesday, then met with his national security advisers.

The Defense Department said Iraqi forces in Kuwait were continuing to dig in against a multinational force that had grown to 680,000, including 35,000 troops from Britain, 10,000 from France, 150,500 from Saudi Arabia and 38,500 from Egypt. The Pentagon said U.S. forces ran battle drills and flew air combat exercises in the

hours before the deadline. NBC-TV News said Tuesday night that B-52 bombers had been moved to bases in a gulf country it did not identify. The Air Force has never conceded that B-52s have been assigned to Operation Desert Shield, but a detachment is known to have been based at Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean.

Lt. Col. Stuart Wagner, a Pentagon spokesman, said he could not comment on the network report.

Iraq's U.S. ambassador, Mohamed Sadiq Al-Mashat, left Washington with several aides Tuesday night on his way to London and then Baghdad. Four other Iraqi diplomats will remain at the embassy.

Iraqi state TV said Saddam visited the front in occupied Kuwait on Tuesday. It said he toured military zones around Kuwait and the Iraqi city of

Basra, just north of the emirate invaded and conquered by Iraq Aug. 2.

Saddam met corps and division commanders and repeated that Iraq would not submit to the U.N. resolution demanding withdrawal.

"There will be no compromise on the nation's rights. The slogan of expelling the aggressors from the land of Islamic sanctity will be our slogan which we will not give up," he was quoted as saying.

France said its last-minute initiative to avoid war drew a blank. "There is a fatal moment where one must act," French Premier Michel Rocard told lawmakers Tuesday night. "This moment has, alas, arrived. After we have done everything to avoid it."

Rare rain fell in parts of the Saudi Arabian desert, where hundreds of thousands of

American troops stood grimly ready to do battle.

In Washington, White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said, "I would say that the president is at peace with himself. He's ready to make the tough decisions ahead that are necessary."

Fitzwater said a decision on launching an attack against Iraq was likely to come "sooner rather than later" after the deadline.

Trading on U.S. financial markets Tuesday slowed to a crawl as Wall Street monitored news reports but took little action pending the U.N. deadline. The stock market inched higher, oil prices finished lower, the dollar and gold were mixed, bonds declined.

In Baghdad, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets in a government-orchestrated show of defiance. "The

holy war is about to begin!" said one man, waving his AK-47 rifle.

Iraq's army daily, Al-Qaddisiya, said of Bush: "Let him know that the furnace of hell will be open to the Americans and to their allies when they come."

But many Iraqis fled the capital. Shops were closed and parks and playgrounds were deserted.

Allies in the coalition arrayed against Iraq were girding for battle.

"We are not thirsting for war, though if it comes ... I believe it would be a just war," British Prime Minister John Major told Parliament.

Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney said Canada, which has about 1,850 troops in the gulf region, will join in any military attack against Saddam.



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