

U.S. says Iraq is hiding arms from inspectors

Warren P. Strobel and Jonathan S. Landay
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — The White House said Thursday that President Bush has evidence that Iraq retains hidden caches of weapons of mass destruction, dramatically raising the stakes in the U.S. confrontation with Saddam Hussein and suggesting that Bush is preparing for war.

Top aides to Hussein have said Iraq will report to the United Nations this weekend that Iraq is free of the chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and missiles that it was barred from possessing after the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

But White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Bush had a "solid basis" for U.S. claims that Hussein is hiding such arms from U.N. weapons inspectors, who have generally reported cooperation from Iraqi officials in the early stages of their work.

"The Iraqi government has proved time and time again to deceive, to mislead and to lie," Fleischer said.

He did not offer evidence for the assertion that Iraq is misleading the inspectors.

But a senior U.S. official said this week that, once Iraq makes a report that the Bush administration expects to be false, the United States will push for more aggressive U.N. weapons inspections designed to prove its case. That effort will be backed by more American intelligence-sharing with the U.N. inspections teams, this official and others said.

First, U.S. experts plan to take several days or more to pore over what is expected to be a voluminous Iraqi report, looking for misstatements.

If the United States concludes that Iraq is failing to comply with a U.N. disarmament resolution that passed last month, it could ask the U.N. Security Council to approve military action against Iraq or, alternately, move on its own to topple Hussein.

Senior defense officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the United States could start an air campaign against Iraq even though an invasion force has not yet been sent from the United States. The ground force could be dispatched as the air strikes progressed, they said.

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First Lady offers her holiday wishes, decorations to public

Diego Ibarguen
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

WASHINGTON — It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas in the nation's capital, where a heavy snowfall blanketed the city Thursday and the White House unveiled its annual holiday decorations.

First lady Laura Bush led a guided tour of the presidential mansion, through several rooms adorned with grand green pine trees, radiant red poinsettias and a tribute to animals, great and small, that have lived and worked alongside U.S. presidents. Capping the day was an evening "Pageant of Peace," during which the national Christmas tree was lit.

Accompanied by the first couple's two dogs, Spot and Barney, Laura Bush offered the nation her seasonal wishes.

"I wish for peace," said the first lady, who was clad in a red suit. "I hope that all Americans will remember other people during this Christmas, that they'll ask senior citizens in, visit with people who are lonely, that they'll work in their food banks, that they'll make sure that they use their good fortune to help people who are less fortunate."

She asked Americans to thank families of military personnel around the world.

On the tour, the first lady said this year's decorating theme was "all creatures, great and small." Animals were represented around the mansion in a variety of forms.

In the oval Blue Room, the 18-foot White House Christmas tree was covered with birds created by artists from around the country. Laura Bush, who described herself as an avid bird watcher, said her favorite was a big turkey that hung near the bottom of the tree.

In the State Dining Room, the traditional gingerbread house — made with 80 pounds of gingerbread, 50 pounds of chocolate and 20 pounds of marzipan — was surrounded by marzipan figurines of past and current presidential pets. An alligator, a snake, raccoons, sheep, dogs and others symbolized "animals that have lived here, worked here, entertained and comforted presidents and their families for the whole history of the house," the first lady said.

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