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Blix says Iraq search finds 'no smoking gun'

Diego Ibarguen and Jonathan S. Landay
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

UNITED NATIONS — The chief U.N. weapons inspector told the U.N. Security Council on Thursday that a two-month search for banned chemical, biological and nuclear weapons

programs in Iraq has produced "no smoking guns."

But Hans Blix said that "the absence of 'smoking guns' and the prompt access which we have had so far, and which is most welcome, is no guarantee that prohibited stocks or activities could not exist at other sites, whether above ground, underground or in mobile units."

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer was even more emphatic. "The problem with guns that are hidden is you can't see their smoke," he said. "We know for a fact there are weapons there. ... The heart of the problem is Iraq is very good at hiding things."

Still, the lack of proof that Baghdad has chemical and biological weapons presents a fresh hurdle to the Bush administration's hope of winning strong domestic and international support for an invasion to topple dictator Saddam Hussein.

The Bush administration may find it difficult to win Security Council support for an attack unless U.N. inspectors unearth evidence of illicit weapons programs that violate a series of U.N. resolutions passed since Iraq's defeat in

the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

At least two Security Council members — France and Syria — indicated following Blix's briefing that they are far from ready to authorize invasion.

French Ambassador to the U.N. Jean-Marc de La Sabliere said that the inspections are going well, and "there is no reason to give now a time limit."

Syrian Ambassador to the U.N. Mikail Wehbe took issue with U.S. and British assertions that Iraq is hiding banned weapons, saying "they are just an excuse for more accusation against the Iraqi people."

Wehbe said an invasion would destabilize the entire Middle East.

While President Bush has said that the United States is prepared to invade Iraq alone if need be, polls show that a majority of Americans will not support an attack that is not authorized by the United Nations and is not mounted by an international coalition.

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Some immigrants must be registered with INS by Friday

Thomas Ginsberg and Gaiutra Bahadur
Knight Ridder Newspapers (KRT)

PHILADELPHIA — A Syrian immigrant, Khattar Aizooky, said he felt a chill while being fingerprinted and questioned by the U.S. government last month, a decade after leaving his authoritarian homeland.

It reminded him of Syria. "This is one of the most open and accepting societies," said the 33-year-old Pittsburgh physician. "We hate to see it changing for the worse."

Today is the next deadline for thousands more men from selected Middle Eastern, African and Asian countries — almost all of them Muslim — to undergo "special registration" by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The fingerprinting, photographing and questioning, which started in September at border crossings nationwide, is provoking outrage as it expands to people already admitted into the country.

Immigration advocates are urging men to comply but also are fanning out to monitor the process at INS offices. An Arab American group has filed a class-action lawsuit to stop the registration. Other Arab and Muslim groups and at least three

members of Congress are demanding a halt. A protest network has called for actions at INS offices nationwide Friday.

Eventually, millions of foreign visitors — Muslim or not — are to be registered under the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System, or NSEERS, ordered by Congress after the Sept. 11 attacks and intended to track most of the 35 million foreign nationals who annually enter and stay temporarily in the United States.

The Justice Department has defended its system, saying it started with males from certain countries known to harbor terrorists. Initially, there were few complaints from immigration advocates, civil libertarians, and Arab-Muslim activists.

But the three-week-old process now is angrily criticized largely for being unfair in its implementation. While accepting the need for better record-keeping on foreigners, the critics complain that some men run the risk of being detained and face deportation after voluntarily walking in to register.

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