Administration Moves to Toughen Stance on Iraq

By Eugene Robinson

WASHINGTON

Anticipating that Iraq may continue attacks on Shiite Muslims in southern Iraq, the Bush administration is preparing military options including air strikes and creation of a Shiite "safe haven" modeled after the sanctuary established for the country's minority Kurdish population in the north, officials said Friday.

Administration officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, described the ban on Iraqi flights imposed by the United States, France and Britain earlier this week as a "first step" in a graduated pressure campaign against Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Their comments contradicted those of President Bush, who said in announcing the new ban Saturday that Iraq's main purpose was to "monitor" Iraqi military activities in the region.

"This is a first step with the aim of deterrence" of Saddam's military activities in the south, said a senior Pentagon official. "But should deterrence fail, we have to look at alternative, additional steps ... There's quite a number of things" that can be done.

Although the officials declined to offer specifics, they said the options included bombing Iraqi military targets — not only in the southern part of the country — and establishing a more aggressive security zone in which Iraqi military activity of any kind would necessarily be harnessed. "This is a first step with the aim of deterrence," another official added.

The officials said further that they hoped to accomplish what one official described as a "facilitory" benefit of weakening Saddam's leadership and perhaps achieve the long-standing goal of encouraging a coup by elements of the Iraqi leader's military. "He's losing some of his sovereignty," a senior administration official added.

The officials' willingness to discuss their military plans in more detail reflected in part a desire to counter criticism that the administration had not figured out a long-term policy on Iraq and was preparing for a short-term goal of grounding Iraq flights south of the Euphrates River has been achieved. A number of analysts and members of Congress have begun to argue for a more aggressive approach to ousting Saddam, including creation of an Iraqi government-in-exile that could be provided with arms and money.

For now, Saddam has opted not to challenge the ban, which is being enforced by U.S., British and French fighters and being monitored by U.S. and Saudi Airborne Warning and Control System radar planes flying from Saudi Arabia.

Pentagon spokesman Bob Hall said at a news briefing Friday that coalition aircraft had dropped leaflets warning the Iraqis of the consequences if they send planes aloft to challenge the air defense radars to direct surface-to-air missiles.

Coalition forces logged 72 flights without incident in the 24 hours after the ban went into effect at 10:15 a.m. EDT Thursday, Pentagon officials said.

Administration and Pentagon officials acknowledged Friday that the strategy poses risks for the Bush administration, especially if Saddam opts to challenge the coalition partners by mounting ground attacks against Shiite rebels and villages with artillery, tanks and the estimated 60,000 Iraqi troops in the region.

Effectiveness of Future Yugoslavia Talks Uncertain

By Eugene Robinson

WASHINGTON

When new talks aimed at ending the carnage in the former Yugoslavia begin next week in Geneva, whether anyone at the negotiating table will actually have the power to stop the fighting is unclear, mediators in charge of the talks acknowledged Thursday.

Cyrus R. Vance, the special United Nations representative charged with ending the five-month-old civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, said he was not sure that any of the parties expected in Geneva next Thursday can deliver on promises to rein in the Bosnian Serb forces holding the capital, Sarajevo, and other Bosnian cities under siege. The Serbs have been fighting Bosnia's declared independence, mainly targeting the republic's Slavic Muslim population.

Slobodan Milosevic, nominal leader of the Bosnian Serbs, has agreed to go to Geneva, but Vance said he does not know whether Karadzic "has the strength to carry out the commitments" he made during an international conference on Yugoslavia held here this week.

Milosevic, prime minister of the rump Yugoslav federation, is adrift in Montenegro, also made a number of conciliatory promises, but Vance said that he may lack the authority to bring the Serb irregulars in Bosnia under control.

And Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, the man most of the officials gathered here blamed for the Serb aggression in Bosnia and other parts of the former Yugoslav federation, is not even scheduled to attend next week's Geneva sessions, singled him out several times by asking him point-blank whether he supported the principles approved here as guidelines for seeking a settlement.

Vance, who will be co-chairman of the Geneva talks with Lord David Owen, a former British foreign secretary named as the European Community's mediator in the Balkan conflict. The two chairmen agreed Monday that the meeting would be in almost continuous session until an agreement is reached.

Milosevic, Vance said, has been asked to come to Geneva "to explain the position of his government" and "to receive the answer from us." "We will have to watch and see," said Vance, who will be co-chairman of the Geneva talks with Lord David Owen, a former British foreign secretary named as the European Community's mediator in the Balkan conflict.

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