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BINDER UPDATE

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Showdown with Iraq

American U-2 planes, threatened by Saddam, resume flights today



Iraqi President Saddam Hussein

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The United States will not tolerate attacks by Saddam Hussein when American U-2 spy planes resume U.N. surveillance flights Monday over Iraq, President Clinton said Sunday.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott said Clinton would have the full support of Congress if he orders bombing runs against Iraq. Lott said the current standoff could be "a very telling moment in the administration."

The crisis could come to a head Monday when the U-2s flying under the U.N. flag are to return to the air despite Iraqi threats against them. Tariq Aziz, Iraq's deputy foreign minister, who was en route to New York to carry Iraq's message to the United Nations, told CNN Saturday that Iraq's anti-aircraft sites were in a "standby mode" and would fire on the spy planes.

Iraq also continues to turn back U.N. weapons inspection teams, insisting that it will not allow American participation in the teams.

Clinton, in an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press" taped Saturday and aired Sunday, reiterated it would be a "big mistake" for Saddam to attack the U-2 planes. "We will not tolerate his efforts to murder our pilots acting on behalf of the United Nations, under United Nations Security Council resolutions," the president said.

Clinton and other U.S. officials have not said specifically that an attack on the plane would provoke a military response. But Clinton warned again that "Saddam Hussein needs to understand that this is a serious business."

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, asked on CBS' "Face the Nation" whether the United States would go it alone against Iraq if other U.N. nations balked at military action, said: "People know that we will do what is necessary. I think we are going to work on having international accord, but we cannot afford to have anyone doubt our resolve."

She said that while there was some disagreement among the allies on the sanctions imposed on Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, "there is remarkable unity in terms of saying we must reverse this decision" to bar Americans from the inspection teams.

Lott, R-Miss., on "Fox News Sunday," said Congress would immediately give bipartisan support to any military action. "I do think they've got to be better than they were last time," he said. "It can't be a pinprick that actually left Saddam Hussein stronger after that very small slap."

In September last year the United States launched Tomahawk cruise missiles against military targets in several Iraqi cities and an air base to punish Saddam for moving troops into Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Iraq.

Bill Richardson, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, warning of "very grave consequences" told reporters in the Capitol that "no option is ruled out" in dealing with Saddam Hussein if he continues on his present course of defiance.

"He's headed toward making a big mistake," Richardson said during a break in a meeting with House members on fast-trade trade authority legislation.

He was asked about Iraq's action Sunday in again turning back U.N. weapons inspection teams that included Americans.

"We never know what Saddam Hussein means. He's very unpredictable. He's a sabre-rattler," Richardson said. "The United Nations Security Council must act tough with Saddam Hussein."

Albright said Saddam may have sparked the latest crisis because inspection teams were close to discovering secret weapons caches. She said a particular worry was Iraq's biological weapons, which Saddam "lied about."

Albright said Saddam is "just a congenital liar, and we have to remember that. He is the problem."

U.S. law forbids attempts to assassinate foreign leaders. It is legal, in a state of war, to go after an enemy commander in chief.

Albright would not comment on specific action against Saddam. "He is the commander in chief," she said, but added: "None of us has ever said we want him alive or dead."



Above: Iraqis gather at a protest rally in Baghdad, cheering for Saddam Hussein and shouting, "Down, Down, America!"