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## Bush and 2 Allies Seem Set for War to Depose Hussein

By DAVID E. SANGER and WARREN HOGE

**L**AJES, Azores, March 16 — President Bush and the leaders of Britain and Spain issued an ultimatum to the United Nations Security Council today, declaring that the diplomatic effort to win support for disarming Iraq would end on Monday. They made it clear that they were ready to start a war to depose Saddam Hussein, with or without the endorsement of the United Nations.

After a hurried meeting at an air base here on lush Terceira island in the eastern Atlantic, Mr. Bush and Prime Ministers Tony Blair and José María Aznar declined to say directly whether they would force a vote on the Security Council resolution authorizing military action to disarm Iraq, or would withdraw it.

That decision, they said, would come on Monday after one more attempt to persuade some of the six swing votes on the Council to approve military action, and after last-ditch pressure on France to refrain from exercising the veto it has threatened.

But Mr. Bush made it clear today that to his mind, the outcome at the United Nations made little difference, and that military action would begin soon.

"Tomorrow is the day that will determine whether diplomacy can work," he said today, his voice rising and his jaw clenched as he punched the air with his fist. He added: "Saddam Hussein can leave the country if he's interested in peace. You see, the decision is his to make, and it's been his to make all along on whether or not there's the use of military."

Mr. Bush's two main speechwriters accompanied him on Air Force One today and were reported to be drafting an address to the nation that Mr. Bush could deliver as soon as Monday night.

A senior administration official, briefing reporters here as the leaders ate and left the air base, said, "Win, lose or withdraw, the diplomatic process ends tomorrow."

The statement came only hours after France proposed giving Iraq roughly 30 days to comply with inspections.

Vice President Dick Cheney, appearing on television at home, rejected the proposal. "It's difficult to take the French serious and believe that this is anything other than just further delaying tactics," he said.

France was the clear target today. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell openly suggested that the French government had been influenced by its long history of "commercial relationships" with Iraq, and that in the short term, the American-French relationship had been damaged.

Mr. Bush was more blunt.

"I was the guy that said they ought to vote," he said, "and one country voted — showed their cards, I believe — it's an old Texas expression."

He added: "They said they are going to veto anything that held Saddam to account. So cards have been played. And we just have to take an assessment after tomorrow to determine what that card meant."

But in private, administration officials said they had no doubt what it meant: war without the sanction of the Security Council.

Senior administration officials said that if the three leaders determined by late Monday that the resolution was doomed, it was likely that they would withdraw it. Their position won support from the host of the meeting today, Prime Minister José Manuel Durão Barroso of Portugal, which administers the Azores as an autonomous region.

Mr. Bush has said he counted Mr. Barroso as part of the "coalition of the willing," but Portugal has little to offer other than these islands as a refueling spot, the reason the American base here was created in 1943.

Mr. Hussein did not respond directly to the ultimatum today, but late on Saturday he placed one of his sons and three other aides in charge of the defense of the nation.

Iraq's official news agency quoted him as saying, "When the enemy starts a large-scale battle, he must realize that the battle between us will be open wherever there is sky, land and water in the entire world."

Before the news from the Azores, United Nations staff members had been feverishly preparing for a consultative session scheduled for Monday. The consultations were set after United Nations officials formally received a declaration from France, Russia and Germany, seeking an immediate meeting of ministers to discuss the report by Hans Blix, chief inspector for chemical and biological weapons, on how the inspectors' work should proceed.

Diplomats said today that a Security Council vote on Monday was unlikely. Britain and Spain have both echoed the United States' view that military action would be legal under existing resolutions, and their officials are reluctant to bring the question to a vote.

A defeat at the Security Council could make any military action a violation of the United Nations Charter. No vote would create a legal ambiguity — the best Mr. Bush can hope to obtain now, unless votes change. "It's a complication we don't need," a senior administration official said. "The legal authority is clear without a vote."

Mr. Blair said he had no apologies for the deadline, telling reporters here: "Without a credible ultimatum with force, in the event of noncompliance, more discussion is just more delay. You would be left with Saddam Hussein armed with weapons of mass destruction and continuing with his brutal regime in Iraq."

Asked whether Britain, United States and Spain might withdraw the resolution, Mr. Blair said that "whatever the tactics within the U.N. — and that's something we can decide," the moment has come "when we decide whether we meant it and it was his final opportunity to disarm" or "we're simply going to drag out the diplomatic process forever."

The resolution sets Monday as the deadline for disarmament. A determination to withdraw the measure would begin the countdown to war within days.

Mr. Bush seemed almost dismissive of the United Nations' role in any military action, but said that even if the Security Council chose not to enforce its own resolutions,

it would be invited to assist in the rebuilding of what he called "post-Saddam Iraq." For the first time, he spoke publicly of creating an "Iraqi Interim Authority," which his aides have described in recent days as a first effort to put the control of daily life but not the "power ministries" into the hands of Iraqis.

The leaders did everything they could to tamp down talk that the session today, held in the officers' club of the air base here overlooking placid Atlantic waters, was a "war council." But it had the air of one. A communiqué issued this afternoon committed them to a "unified Iraq with its territorial integrity respected."

The communiqué continued: "All the Iraqi people — its rich mix of Sunni and Shiite Arabs, Kurds, Turkomen, Assyrians, Chaldeans and all others — should enjoy freedom, prosperity and equality in a united country."

In interviews, administration officials have said that task will be equal to rebuilding Germany or Japan in 1945, replete with a new constitution, new currencies, new institutions and heavy aid. But the plans, a senior official said on Friday, are "still just concepts," and while American officials have promised not to maintain military rule over Iraq longer than needed, they have set no timetables.

Two contractors working with United Nations inspection teams withdrew five helicopters after saying their insurers had demanded that they be removed before war was declared. It was the first sign that the inspectors were being forced to cut back on their operations because war was growing near.

In another sign, the State Department said it had ordered nonessential diplomats and their families out of Kuwait, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Damascus.

[A spokesman for United Nations observers monitoring the Iraq-Kuwait border said on Monday that they had stopped all operations in the demilitarized zone, near an area busy with United States preparations for an attack on Iraq, Reuters reported. The next step would be to evacuate, the spokesman said.]

In response to today's events in the Azores, Mr. Blix said: "I find the message from there slightly divided. On the one hand President Bush seems to be talking mainly about how to liberate Iraq and make sure they have no weapons left there, while Blair and Aznar on the other hand are giving more weight to having a last chance to unite the world and give Saddam an ultimatum." He spoke in an interview with SVT2 Swedish public service television, The Associated Press reported.

Today the inspectors in Iraq supervised the destruction of two more Samoud 2 missiles and related items. About 70 of a fleet of between 100 and 120 missiles have now been destroyed, the United Nations said.

No mention of that action was made here today. They were intent on giving at least the appearance of a final push for consensus at the United Nations, at a moment when both Mr. Blair and Mr. Aznar need credit with their skeptical publics. In both countries, debate pivots on the question of whether all political possibilities have truly been exhausted.

Sizable majorities in Britain and Spain are opposed to military action in Iraq, and protesters went into the streets on Saturday in both countries to press home that point.

Briefing reporters on his return flight to London, Mr. Blair sharpened the focus on President Jacques Chirac of France. He said he, Mr. Bush and Mr. Aznar had felt they had had enough votes in the Security Council until France declared it would exercise its veto.

"The purpose of today was to give people a chance to change their position," Mr. Blair said. If they don't, he said, "it is difficult to see how we can take this much further."

The Council members considered swing votes are Angola, Cameroon, Chile, Mexico, Pakistan and Guinea.

In Baghdad today, a sudden, sharp increase in anxieties was evident among officials. At the Information Ministry, where most of the Western media have their Baghdad offices, an emergency meeting concluded in early afternoon with a decision to replace all the government "minders" assigned to the reporters. At least some replacements were apparently drawn from the intelligence services.

Officials said the decision reflected high-level frustration with the chaotic arrangements at the ministry, rather than any determination to tighten the controls on visiting reporters. Still, officials at the ministry acknowledged that tensions were rising rapidly. After one ill-tempered exchange with a reporter, one official apologized, saying Iraqis in government jobs were becoming more nervous with every passing day.

"You are under pressure? It is nothing compared with us," he said. "We are the ones who are going to be attacked. It is our families, our jobs and our lives that are threatened."