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ONE DAY LEFT

From James Hardy, Political Editor, in The Azores

PRESIDENT Bush and Tony Blair yesterday gave the UN 24 hours to demand the "immediate and unconditional" disarmament of Iraq, or war goes ahead.

Mr Bush called it a "moment of truth for the world" and Mr Blair "the moment of decision". But with the possibility of an allied strike on Iraq taking place as early as tomorrow night or Wednesday, horrified world leaders saw it as a moment of madness.

In an ultimatum to French President Jacques Chirac to drop his veto on the use of force or split the international community, Mr Bush said: "Tomorrow is the moment of truth. Many nations have voiced commitment to peace and security. Now they must demonstrate that commitment in the only effective way - by supporting the immediate and unconditional disarmament of Saddam Hussein."



CRISIS TALKS: Blair, Bush and Aznar in the Azores yesterday

Mr Blair, who said there would be last talks in an attempt to break the diplomatic impasse, added: "It is time for a strong and unified message. We are in the final stages."

The two leaders and their Spanish ally Premier Jose Maria Aznar agreed a comprehensive plan for military action at a mid-Atlantic war council in the Azores.

With time running out, they are determined that Mr Chirac should take the blame for the chaos at the UN by wrecking their chances of gaining a second resolution to authorise the use of force.

After two hours of talks, the three men appeared before the world's press smiling and laughing.

Mr Bush said: "Tomorrow is the day that we can determine whether or not diplomacy will work."

"The dictator of Iraq and his weapons of destruction are a threat to the security of free nations. He is a danger to his neighbours."

He said the French had risen to his challenge to "show their cards" but had come up with no alternative. Mr Bush said: "The cards have been played. We'll have to assess after tomorrow what they mean."

He added that he and Mr Blair would be "working the phones" throughout the day trying to break the diplomatic deadlock.

But in a clear sign he expects war to go ahead he said if force was required the three leaders would seek new Security Council resolutions to rebuild Iraq after the conflict.

His voice breaking, Mr Blair said: "For four-and-a-half months we have worked hard to get Saddam to co-operate fully, unconditionally, as resolution 1441 demanded."

"Some say there should be no ultimatum, no authorisation of force in any new UN resolution. But without a credible ultimatum more discussion is just more delay. We have reached the point of decision."

"We make an appeal for there to be a strong unified message that lays down a clear ultimatum to Saddam and that authorises force if he continues to defy the will of the international community."

The UN will be given one last chance to break the deadlock today.

Mr Chirac will be given an ultimatum on whether there are any circumstances in which he would back military action.

With 300,000 troops poised to strike, hawks in London and Washington are gambling that he will refuse to back down.

The summit came as US patience with Europe - and Britain in particular Britain - over Iraq appeared to be coming to an end.

White House officials are reported to have warned British counterparts they will not give any more ground to Labour doves.

Mr Blair will now face the threat of open mutiny among Labour MPs.

The path to peace closed after four months of weapons inspections failed to uncover a single missile or bomb to prove US and British claims that Saddam is a threat to world peace.

Speaking before the summit, Mr Chirac said weapons inspectors would tell the Security Council next week they believe it is possible to disarm the tyrant.

He said: "One month, two months - I'm ready to accept any accord that has the approval of inspectors."

But Foreign Secretary Jack Straw hit back: "The only chance of persuading Saddam to disarm is by setting out tests of co-operation with a short deadline, backed by the threat of force."

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Even if countries such as France and Russia did drop their planned veto then war would only be postponed.

This is because the timing would have to be agreed by UN members delivering Saddam a last ultimatum to comply before being disarmed by force. Chief weapons inspector Hans Blix said yesterday the Azores summit sent out mixed messages with Mr Bush talking of liberating Iraq and Mr Blair hinting at a last chance to unite the world.

The Attorney General Lord Goldsmith's advice on the legality of war could be published today. It is understood he will say conflict can be justified.

Saddam Hussein warned yesterday that if Iraq were attacked it would take the "wherever there is sky, land or water".

Foreign Minister Naji Sabri said Iraq had trained tens of thousands of "martyrs" to fight.

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