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White House touts international support for military campaign

Official describes Bush as 'undeterred'

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WASHINGTON (CNN) --With the nation at war, President Bush summoned his Cabinet to the White House Thursday where he touted international support for the attack on Iraq, thanked the armed forces for their "great skill and great bravery" and expressed his confidence in "the future of our country."

Bush, who described the military campaign as an effort to "make the world more peaceful," touted the international support for the operation even though some world leaders, such as Russian President Vladimir Putin, have called for an end to hostilities.

"Over 40 nations now support our efforts," Bush declared. "We are grateful for their determination, we appreciate their vision and we welcome their support." In brief comments to reporters, Bush highlighted domestic priorities -- specifically changes to Medicare and education -- suggesting his administration would not neglect the home front even with a conflict abroad.

"We're confident we can achieve our objectives," he said.

Throughout the day, the Bush administration stressed the cooperation of what it has dubbed the "coalition of the willing," apparently sensitive to criticism that the United States was acting largely on its own.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer outlined in broad terms the contributions from other nations, saying the contributions included military, logistical and intelligence support, specialized chemical and biological response teams, overflight rights and humanitarian aid. Most of the nations were not directly involved in the military operations.

"Every major race, religion and ethnic group in the world is represented," Fleischer said, adding that the coalition represents about 1.18 billion people from countries with a combined gross domestic product of \$21.7 trillion. "The coalition includes nations from every continent on the globe. And for this, the president is grateful."

Fleischer said the president respected the views of world leaders who disagreed with him about the need for military action, but he made it clear it would not alter the U.S. strategy.

"That will not deter the United States and the coalition of the willing from disarming the Iraqi regime," Fleischer said.

The president spoke by phone Thursday with several world leaders, keeping them abreast of the military campaign and shoring up support, aides said.

Bush -- who notified the nation Wednesday night that strikes against Iraq had begun -- met with top advisers at the White House throughout the day, following his decision to launch a "broad and concerted" military campaign to topple the regime of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

After a brief night of sleep, Bush started his day with a briefing from National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. He also met with Vice President Dick Cheney, CIA Director George Tenet and Chief of Staff Andy Card.

Congressional leaders were quick to issue statements of support for U.S. armed forces, and lawmakers rushed to the floor Thursday to make their sentiments clear.

A somber Bush addressed the nation Wednesday night and prepared Americans for the possibility that the war would not be quick or easy.

"A campaign on the harsh terrain of a nation as large as California could be longer and more difficult than some predict," he said. "And helping Iraqis achieve a united, stable and free country will require our sustained commitment."

Administration officials, including Fleischer and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, encouraged Iraqi leaders to surrender. Asked specifically about Saddam, Fleischer replied, "One thing you can rest assured of is, after a military action is taken to disarm Saddam Hussein's regime, we have no intention of leaving Saddam Hussein in charge of Iraq."

The administration, Fleischer said, is still working on a cost estimate for the war and will send a supplemental budget request to Congress when one is ready.

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