

The clock ticks down to war

A grim-faced James Baker emerged from more than six hours of talks yesterday in Geneva with Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz to tell the waiting world that last-ditch attempts to avert war appear to have failed.

According to the secretary of state, Iraq had maintained its refusal to pull out of Kuwait and had shown no flexibility. Assurances by the U.S. not to attack Iraq if it withdrew unconditionally from Kuwait failed to sway Baghdad. It was what diplomats call a frank exchange of views — in other words, total disagreement.

The talks appear to have foundered on the issue of "linkage," as the Iraqi foreign minister somberly underlined. Iraq suggested it would pull out of Kuwait if the U.S. would give some assurances that the question of Israel's occupation of Arab territory could be addressed at some later date. As in the past, the Bush Administration adamantly refused at Geneva to even consider linkage — or even vague promises that the matter would be taken up in the future.

In the U.S. view, such acceptance would reward Iraq's aggression — particularly since the invasion of Kuwait had nothing, Baker claimed, to do with the Palestinian question. Aziz insisted the Palestinian question and the threat he claimed Israel posed to Iraq were at the heart of the issue.

Other Arab observers suggested President George Bush appears prepared to go to war and accept American casualties so that Israel could maintain its hold on occupied Arab territory.

It was a spectacular and immensely depressing failure, one that is sending waves of dismay around the world. Almost everyone had expected that Iraq and the U.S. would make sufficient concessions to at least delay war and permit further negotiations. The exhausted Baker, who reportedly does not share President Bush's eagerness for war, left only a hint of hope by saying that UN Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar might still be able to effect some 11th-hour diplomatic

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solution before Tuesday's deadline.

Is war inevitable? Very likely, after the impasse in Geneva. But there is still a slim chance the European Community, led by France, will make a last-ditch effort to head off war. Britain and the Netherlands favor war. But the rest of Europe is deeply frightened by the prospect of a long, unpredictable war that could engulf the entire Mideast.

Yesterday, French President Francois Mitterrand announced he favored some form of linkage between an Iraqi pullout and a future attempt to resolve the question of the Palestinians — a clear break between Paris and Washington. The French, strongly supported by Germany and Italy, may yet stage a dramatic diplomatic initiative in the next few days. There's even the remote possibility the European members of the anti-Iraq coalition may refuse to embark on offensive military operations, depriving Washington of the fig-leaf of allied co-operation.

In the next two days, the U.S. Congress will be debating whether or not to endorse military action against Iraq. Chances are Congress will approve such action, but a slight possibility remains that it will oppose war, placing President Bush in a difficult position. Senior Republican party sources insist Bush will still go ahead with war even if Congress demurs. He is reportedly determined to "get Saddam" no matter what.

All this still leaves Saddam Hussein with the option of making a dramatic, last-minute offer to withdraw in part or in full from Kuwait. But judging from recent events, the mood in Baghdad seems as stubborn as in Washington. Saddam looks like he's ready to go down fighting.

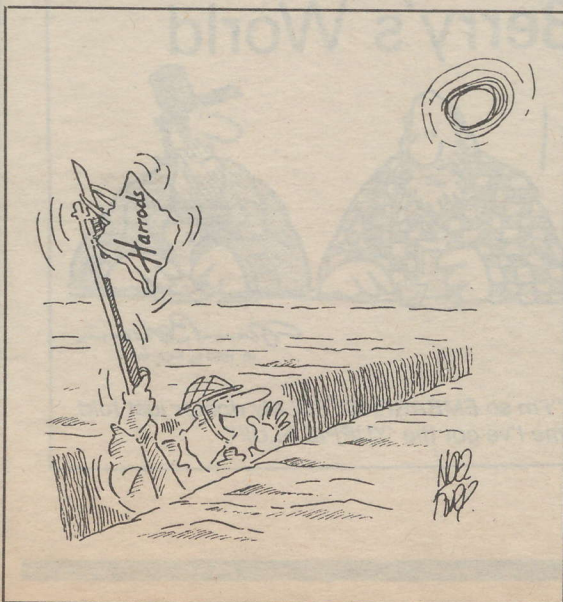
There is also a slight possibility Iraq might launch a pre-emptive attack on allied forces in the Gulf and a missile attack against Israel before the Jan. 15 deadline, or soon after. There's also a possibility Israel, which Aziz said would "definitely" be attacked by Iraq in the event of war, might launch its own pre-emptive strike. The Israelis are mobilizing and poised for action.

Egypt just announced that if Israel entered the fray, it would not fight Iraq but join in fighting Israel. Syria, for now a U.S. ally, has said it will defend Jordan against any Israeli attack.

Quite clearly, the situation is exceptionally dangerous and unpredictable. The next week is going to be filled with steadily mounting tension as the clock ticks down to war. Some reports from the Mideast suggest the U.S. is quietly moving nuclear and chemical weapons into the region and that Israel is readying its tactical nuclear weapons for a possible retaliatory strike against Iraq.

Something close to a miracle will now be needed to avert war. Perhaps the French, the world's most skilled diplomats, will still save the day. Or perhaps Saddam will finally bend, ostensibly at the behest of the UN secretary general. Right now, however, war seems only days away.

Punch



"Oy! — Saddam!"