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U.S. Says It Was Just Hours Away From Starting Attack Against Iraq

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The United States had prepared to begin a huge campaign of air strikes on **Iraq** today, but called off the attack after a last-minute flurry of diplomatic activity brought an Iraqi announcement that it would allow United Nations weapons inspectors to resume their work, **Clinton** Administration officials said.

Officials said the first wave of air strikes authorized by President **Clinton** had been scheduled to occur Saturday evening Iraqi time, or during the day in Washington. The strikes, they said, would have involved hundreds of cruise missiles launched from ships and B-52 bombers, as well as the bombing of Iraqi targets by jet fighters stationed aboard the aircraft carrier Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Persian Gulf.

The Administration rejected the Iraqi letter today as "unacceptable," and officials insisted that American air strikes this weekend were still an option. But the attack today was aborted, they said, because of a last-ditch plea to **Iraq** issued on Friday night by the United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, and **Iraq's** announcement hours later that it would allow United Nations weapons inspectors to resume their "normal work" in **Iraq**.

"It was almost as if he knew," a Pentagon official said, referring to the timing of President **Saddam** Hussein's move. "It was real close."

Administration officials said Mr. **Clinton** had been urged by senior advisers to begin the air strikes earlier this week, if only to avoid the situation that is now unfolding, with the United States left once again in the awkward position of rushing a huge force to the Persian Gulf to confront **Iraq**, only to have the Iraqis back down at the last minute.

But Mr. **Clinton**, they said, had decided to delay the attack until today so that more American warplanes and ships could be in place near **Iraq**.

Officials said they feared that the Administration, which had largely abandoned hope that the United Nations weapons inspections would be allowed to resume in any meaningful way, was left with the worst of all scenarios: an ineffective inspection program, President Hussein still fully in charge, and a large American military force in the Persian Gulf without a clear mission.

Although the Administration rejected the Iraqi letter, officials said **Iraq's** announcement that it would resume cooperation with the United Nations in the hunt for weapons of mass destruction would make it difficult for Mr. **Clinton** to order an attack without allowing Mr. Annan at least a little more time to try to hammer out a deal.

While he did not confirm that the attack on **Iraq** had been scheduled to begin today, the National Security Adviser, Samuel R. Berger, said at a White House news conference that "we were poised to take military action -- and we remain poised to take military action."

Officials insisted that American air strikes this weekend were still being actively considered by President **Clinton**, who abruptly canceled his plans to leave tonight to attend an economic summit of Pacific Rim leaders in Malaysia in order to deal with the crisis. "The President has decided to remain in Washington to evaluate appropriate next steps," said Joe Lockhart, the White House spokesman. Vice President Al Gore will attend instead.

The President's senior national security advisers -- including Mr. Berger, Defense Secretary William S. Cohen; Gen. Henry H. Shelton, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Director of Central Intelligence, George J. Tenet -- met at the White House for more than five hours today to discuss how to

respond to the **Iraq** announcement.

The decision by Administration officials to disclose details of the military's plans appeared to be an effort to convince both the American public and the Iraqi Government that Mr. **Clinton** had been prepared to act decisively after years of criticism that he had been too timid in confronting **Iraq**.

"There were many people in the Administration who wanted -- and expected -- that we would significantly weaken **Saddam** with a heavy, sustained bombing campaign," said an Administration official who was eager for an attack. "But once again, we've hitched our wagon with Unscm, even though Unscm doesn't work anymore."

Unscm is the United Nations Special Commission, which oversees the disarmament program imposed on **Iraq** after the Persian Gulf war in 1991. The current crisis began in August when the Iraqis ordered the United Nations to end most weapons inspections until crippling economic sanctions were lifted.

American officials now fear the Iraqis will once again play for time. And then, once the world's attention has turned away from **Iraq** and the United States has withdrawn much of its naval fleet and air armada from the region, **Iraq** could begin -- once again -- to interfere with the arms inspections, sparking yet another crisis requiring an American military buildup.

"It's a rerun," said an Administration official involved in **Iraq** policy. "What do we do now? I haven't the foggiest today. There are going to be a lot of glum faces on Monday."

The situation unfolding is similar in many ways to that played out late last year and earlier this year, when **Iraq** tried to expel Americans from the United Nations arms inspection teams, prompting Mr. **Clinton** to threaten air strikes against **Iraq** and to order warships and planes to the region.

The crisis ended when the Iraqi Government blinked at the 11th hour, but not before the United States had spent billions of dollars to beef up its military forces in the region, disrupting American military planning around the world for months afterward.

The American military force surrounding **Iraq** grew markedly more powerful this weekend when six B-52 bombers loaded with air-launched cruise missiles departed for the gulf before dawn today from Barksdale Air Force Base, La.

Officials said the B-52's, each loaded with as many as twenty 2,000-pound cruise missiles, had been expected to take part in the attack on **Iraq** that had been scheduled for today. The heavy bombers are expected to be stationed temporarily at the British air base on Diego Garcia, in the Indian Ocean.

The Air Force said the B-52's were to be followed by a additional fleet of F-15 and F-16 jet fighters and B-1 bombers. Six F-117 fighters, which make use of "stealth" technology that allows them to evade radar, departed today for Kuwait from Holloman Air Force Base, N.M. The aircraft carrier Enterprise, with about 50 jet fighters, is also en route to the gulf, and is expected to arrive on Nov. 23.

Photo: **Iraq's** United Nations representative, Nizar Hamdoon, left, discussed **Saddam** Hussein's letter yesterday with Secretary General Kofi Annan. (United Nations via Associated Press)

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