

Attack would open 'gates of hell'

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Cairo: Arab foreign ministers have urged the world to prevent a US war against Iraq, with Arab League chief Amr Mussa warning such a military campaign would "open the gates of hell" for the Middle East.

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The Arab foreign ministers, ending two days of talks in Cairo dominated by fears of a US attack, called for talks between the United Nations and Iraq in a bid to resolve the crisis over whether Baghdad possesses weapons of mass destruction.

The Arab states "categorically reject any threat of attack against any Arab country, particularly Iraq, and believe such threats are directed against the security of all Arab countries", the ministers said in a closing statement.

Mussa told reporters the ministers were demanding the return of arms inspectors to Baghdad in order to avert US military strikes.

The 22 members of the Arab League urged Iraq to "pursue the dialogue with the United Nations in order to attain a comprehensive solution which would guarantee the simultaneous application of all Security Council resolutions".

The ministers asked Mussa to contact the UN Security Council and Secretary-General Kofi Annan "to urge them to fulfill their legal responsibilities in line with the UN charter and to prevent any attack".

The statement demanded that the UN "sanctions imposed on Iraq be lifted" and that "there be an end to the suffering of its people, which would guarantee stability and security in the region".

For his part, Mussa warned a US invasion would spell catastrophe for the region.

"We will continue to work to avoid a military confrontation or a military action, because we believe that it will open the gates of hell in the Middle East," Mussa told a press conference.

Such a military strike "should be seen against the background of (Arab) frustration and anger" against Israel, he said.

"Everyone in the Middle East is angry and frustrated with what is happening in the occupied Palestinian territories. Therefore a strike against Iraq, I believe, will lead to serious repercussions in the Middle East and beyond," Mussa said.

Explaining the ministers' statement, Mussa said Arab countries back "the return of the inspectors within an agreement, an understanding between the government of Iraq and the secretary-general of the United Nations."

He added he expected Iraqi foreign minister Naji Sabri and Annan to hold talks soon on whether

to readmit the inspectors who fled four years ago ahead of a four-day US bombardment sparked by a showdown over inspections.

He said the return of the inspectors would allow the world to determine whether or not Iraq was violating UN Security Council resolutions calling for it to dismantle any programs for weapons of mass destruction.

"Iraq has asserted she has no plans for rearming, especially with weapons of mass destruction," Mussa recalled. "There are accusations to the opposite of that."

But the war drums have been beating for months as US President George W Bush has been calling for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, whom he accuses of developing nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

Saddam categorically denies those charges.

AFP

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/09/06/1031115929241.html>