

Interview: Paul Heinbecker Discusses Canada's Proposal to Impose a Disarmament Deadline on Iraq

All Things Considered: March 5, 2003

MICHELE NORRIS, host:

So both sides are hardening their positions today over what the next step should be for dealing with Iraq. On the line now from New York is Canada's ambassador to the United Nations, Paul Heinbecker. He's been promoting a Canadian proposal to try to break the deadlock, by delaying a Security Council decision about war until March 31st and setting a new timetable for Iraq to meet specific demands.

Ambassador Heinbecker, thank you so much for joining us.

Ambassador PAUL HEINBECKER (Canada's Ambassador to UN): Thank you for inviting me.

NORRIS: Ambassador, Secretary Powell said today that Saddam Hussein has essentially thrown away his last chance to disarm. So what does that mean for the Canadian proposal? The US is essentially saying, 'Time's up.'

Amb. HEINBECKER: We certainly don't want to see this issue go sour. We think it's in everybody's interests that the United States and the Europeans find a way to come together, that the UN Security Council take its responsibilities, that they find a way forward which, on the one hand, meets the American point that inspections cannot go on forever and, on the other hand, meets the European point that inspections really have to be given a chance.

We've proposed a compromise, and that is setting a date sufficiently far in the future that it would allow the international community and the Security Council in particular in cooperation with the weapons inspectors to determine whether the Iraqis were cooperating on substance or whether they were just cooperating on process. It's very easy for the Iraqis to create commissions and to issue decrees. What we want to see is real disarmament.

We think we've seen some real disarmament in the destruction of the Al Samoud missiles which is taking place, but there's a lot more to it than that. At the same time, we do understand that if you relieve the pressure on Iraq, the cooperation will not be forthcoming. The record on that is very clear. Were it not for the pressure the United States is exerting on Iraq, the weapons inspectors probably wouldn't be back there. And if they weren't there, we wouldn't be getting the possibility of dealing with this issue in a peaceful way.

NORRIS: If the Security Council is unable to reach a compromise, are you concerned that the UN might emerge from this divided and somewhat diminished?

Amb. HEINBECKER: I don't think there's any question that it will have a negative and perhaps a profoundly negative impact on the United Nations and on the Security Council. Central to the purposes of the United Nations is the idea of collective security. And if the UN were divided and if in the process it stayed divided for a lengthy period of time or longer, then I don't see how the UN is going to be able to be able to help us with the issues that we have lying in front of us.

NORRIS: Is there a growing sense at the UN that war is inevitable? There is now published reports that the US has prepared a blueprint for postwar Iraq, which seems to suggest that war is on the horizon.

Amb. HEINBECKER: The UN is doing contingency planning, and we would be criticizing the UN if it weren't doing contingency planning. I don't think that war is inevitable yet. I think that there still is room for compromise. And I think that what the UN is doing now--the UN secretariat, I should say, is doing now is just positioning themselves to do their jobs in the event that war does come.

And, of course, according to the compromise we're proposing, war could come, or it might not if the inspection process were proven to be working. In either case, the UN is simply being prudential, and there is not yet a feeling here that war is inevitable.

NORRIS: If the US and its allies go to war without the UN's blessing, will Canada participate? And if so, at what level?

Amb. HEINBECKER: The Canadian government has said that it would respect the judgment of the inspectors and the decisions of the Security Council. And if the Security Council mandated action, Canada would do its part. And the Canadian government will make its own decision based on the facts that it sees when the time comes.

NORRIS: Ambassador Heinbecker, thank you so much for joining us.

Amb. HEINBECKER: Thank you.

NORRIS: Paul Heinbecker is Canada's ambassador to the United Nations.

Copyright ©2003 National Public Radio®. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to National Public Radio. This transcript may not be reproduced in whole or in part without prior written permission. For further information, please contact NPR's Permissions Coordinator at (202) 513-2000.

This transcript was created by a contractor for NPR, and NPR has not verified its accuracy. For all NPR programs, the broadcast audio should be considered the authoritative version.