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HEADLINE: **Major powers** rebuff U.S., insist on more time for inspections in Iraq after inspectors cite cooperation by Baghdad

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BODY:

In a dramatic showdown, **major powers** rebuffed the United States in the Security Council on Friday and insisted on more time for weapons inspections after top U.N. inspectors failed to give Washington the ammunition it needs to galvanize support for military action against Iraq.

A visibly exasperated Secretary of State Colin Powell, setting aside his prepared remarks, warned that the world should not be taken in by "tricks that are being played on us." But only Spain and Britain spoke up for the U.S. position in the 15-member council, and even Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw held out hope for a peaceful solution if Iraq dramatically accelerates its cooperation.

The day belonged to French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, whose impassioned speech seeking more time for inspections elicited rare and loud applause from diplomats in the chamber. By contrast, ambassadors and dignitaries greeted Powell's remarks with silence. De Villepin told The Associated Press afterward that France wouldn't support a U.N. resolution authorizing war. China and Russia, also with the power to veto resolutions, pressed for more inspections and threw their support behind France.

The presentations by chief weapons inspectors Hans Blix and Mohamed ElBaradei were far more measured than the harsh assessments of Iraq they issued two weeks ago to the council. As Powell listened and scribbled notes at his seat across the horseshoe-shaped table, Blix even cast doubt on some of the U.S. intelligence the secretary of state shared one week ago with the council.

Washington and London had hoped for tougher reports that would help them push through a new resolution quickly, and there had even been talk of a Saturday council meeting to introduce it. But their plans were put on hold Friday, and British diplomats privately conceded they no longer knew when and how they would be able to circulate a draft.

Considering the strong anti-war response in the council, it appeared highly unlikely that the United States could muster the nine votes needed to authorize war now.

The United States and Britain say they are willing to go to war without U.N. backing but would prefer to have it. U.N.-backing is particularly important for the British government,

which faces strong public opposition to a war.

Powell said he would return to Washington and consult with President Bush and others and make a decision "in the not too distant future" about a new resolution. Later, in an interview with CNN, he said the Iraq issue would be decided within "weeks."

The differences between the council powers were so serious that a planned meeting of the five veto-holding members was canceled. De Villepin caught the United States by surprise when he called for another ministerial-level council meeting on March 14.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said the mid-March proposal would push back the possibility of war, but Powell said it was too early to schedule such a meeting. U.S. officials noted that another report from Blix is due on March 1.

Powell sat silently as speaker after speaker rejected the United States' position that Iraq has run out of time to comply with a string of U.N. disarmament resolutions.

"More inspections - I am sorry - are not the answer," Powell told the council when it was his turn to speak.

Iraq's U.N. Ambassador Mohammed Al-Douri, the final speaker, stressed to council members his country's commitment to full cooperation and "the path of peace."

"The French speech and the reaction was extraordinary," he later told AP. "I have been worried but today I am a little calmer."

Hours before the U.N. presentations, Saddam Hussein decreed a ban on all weapons of mass destruction from Iraq, a longtime U.N. demand. The White House scoffed at the announcement but inspectors welcomed it.

In his report, Blix cited improved cooperation by Saddam's government and reported the hunt for banned arms had thus far failed to find weapons of mass destruction. Blix said it was significant that "many proscribed weapons and items are not accounted for."

He also noted that a new Iraqi missile system had a range exceeding the permitted limits and chastised Iraq for not giving a full accounting of chemical and biological weapons programs.

ElBaradei, the nuclear chief, told the council his inspectors found no evidence Iraq had resumed its nuclear weapons program and said inspectors could do their job without Iraq's full cooperation.

He later told CNN that he needs another six more months of inspections, which resumed in November after a four-year break.

The inspectors' reports were strong fodder for council members opposed to war. Anti-war protests were planned for around the world Saturday.

"Only when we go along the line of political settlement can we truly live up to the trust and hope the international community places in the Security Council," Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan said.

Diplomats in the chamber and members of the public in the gallery greeted the remarks of the French and Russian foreign ministers with applause. The unusual response caught the council by surprise and led German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who presided over the

meeting, to ask for order.

Powell was undeterred by the outpouring of anti-war sentiment.

"The threat of force must remain," he told the council, adding that Iraq was strengthening its links with terror groups. "We cannot wait for one of these terrible weapons to turn up in our cities."

In a surprise move, Blix chose to address some of the evidence against Iraq that Powell shared with the council in a dramatic presentation last week.

Pointing to one case Powell highlighted using satellite photos of a munitions depot, Blix said: "The reported movement of munitions at the site could just as easily have been a routine activity" rather than one designed to hide banned materials before inspections.

"In no case have we seen convincing evidence that the Iraqi side knew in advance that the inspectors were coming," he said.

In response, Powell told reporters afterward that the United States had additional evidence to support its claims.

Blix said private interviews with three Iraqi scientists "proved informative," but since the interviews conducted in Baghdad on Feb. 8-9 no more had been done in private - "on our terms."

"I hope this will change," he said. "We feel that interviews conducted without any third party present and without tape recording would provide the greatest credibility."

Under intense pressure, Iraq agreed earlier this month to prod scientists to agree to private interviews. Previously, all scientists insisted on being accompanied by an Iraqi official or having their interview tape recorded.

ElBaradei, head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, reiterated that inspectors found no evidence Iraq had restarted its nuclear weapons program.

In addition, he said, inspectors did not need Iraqi cooperation.

"The IAEA's experience in nuclear verification shows that it is possible, particularly with an intrusive verification system, to assess the presence or absence of a nuclear weapons program in a state even without the full co-operation of the inspected state," ElBaradei said.

In other developments:

-Iraq decided to give up its turn at the rotating presidency of the world's top disarmament forum, a prospect that had prompted strong U.S. opposition. Iraq was to take over the monthlong chairmanship of the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament on March 17.

-The U.S. government expelled an Iraqi journalist who covers the United Nations for the official Iraqi News Agency, saying he is "harmful" to the security of the United States. The announcement came as Iraq informed Fox News that its four staff members in Baghdad would have to leave the country.

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