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United Press International

January 18, 2003 Saturday 11:44 AM Eastern Time

LENGTH: 617 words

HEADLINE: Arabs in Lebanon, Syria protest Iraq war

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DATELINE: BEIRUT, Lebanon, Jan. 18 (UPI)

BODY:

Thousands of Lebanese and Syrians demonstrated Saturday in Beirut and Damascus, respectively, to protest the prospects of a U.S.-led war against Iraq and to show support for the Palestinians in their fight against Israel.

The demonstrators took to the streets in response to calls for holding such protests in more than 70 countries in the world to mark the International Day of Support of Iraq and the Palestinians. Similar events were expected in Egypt, Japan, Germany, Canada and other countries, as well as two cities in the United States. Some 10,000 Lebanese from various leftist groups marched to Beirut's downtown area and gathered in front of the United Nations House shouting against a war on Iraq. This was the largest such protest in Lebanon in support of Iraq in many years.

The protesters were joined by various political leaders, including Druze chief Walid Jumblat, and visiting British Labor Party parliamentarian George Galloway.

Galloway, who earlier met with Lebanese President Emile Lahoud and Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, said he expects some one million people to participate in a demonstration in Britain in February to denounce an Iraq war.

Galloway warned of the grave consequences of any such war, and of attempts by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to launch an even fiercer attack on Palestinians in case Washington goes ahead with its war plans against Baghdad.

He called on U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the leader of his own party, to consider carefully before launching a military strike against Iraq.

President Lahoud on his part called for exerting maximum effort to avoid the war and to implement U.N. resolutions.

In Damascus, some 15,000 Syrian protesters fanned across the streets, waving Syrian and Palestinian flags as well as pictures of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

They shouted "Down, Down USA" and raised placards that called for peace and lifting the 12-year U.N.-imposed embargo on Iraq.

"Bush Go Home" read one placard. "No to striking Iraq. **No to war**, Yes for Just Peace."

Medhat Abou Qassem, one of the demonstrators, said the protest was to demonstrate that not only the Syrians but all the Arabs were against war on Iraq.

Qassem said Syria, which currently holds a rotating seat on the U.N. Security Council, has

helped "uncover the U.S. policies to the whole world" and "disclose Israeli ambitions." Washington wants not only to control Iraq but the whole region and its oil resources, he declared.

"We refuse Iraq to be attacked and we reject the continued Israeli massacres against the Palestinians," he called before the crowd.

Another protester, who refused to be named, said, "We should all support the Iraqi and Palestinian people regardless of the positions of the Arab regimes."

According to Mona, 16-year-old student, "We should all fight the Americans and boycott them."

Meanwhile, Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Sharaa headed Saturday to Tehran for talks with top Iranian officials to discuss a Syrian call for holding a six-nation meeting on Iraq in Damascus next week.

The foreign ministers of Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran are expected in Damascus to prepare for a summit meeting in Ankara for discussions of a peaceful settlement of the Iraqi crisis. However, diplomatic sources in Damascus told United Press International that the Ankara meeting was most likely to discuss "a safe refuge in exile" to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein "in line with guarantees" -- although the countries have repeatedly and officially emphasized that any regime change in Iraq was an internal matter.

(Thanaa Imam in Damascus contributed to this report.)

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