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**HEADLINE:** IRAQI ENVOY TO INDIA: GROUND ATTACK NOT "IMMINENT", MILITARY COUP "IMPOSSIBLE"

**BODY:**

Age web site on 18 January

New Delhi, 17 January: A ground attack by the United States on Iraq is not imminent, according to Iraqi ambassador to India Salah al-Mukhtar, who has just returned from Baghdad.

He said there was no movement on the ground to suggest that the current military posturing by the Bush administration was anything more than "drum-beating to terrorize Iraqis".

Iraq, however, is expecting an air attack "any minute, any moment", but the US is still not prepared for ground action as it is not ready to sacrifice soldiers, the ambassador said. He said the figure of 100,000 US troops was not enough to even seize a city in Iraq, pointing out that in 1991 the Americans had deployed 750,000 soldiers and were only able to effect a unilateral cease-fire. The war clouds have not ebbed, but they have not gathered to a point to cause concern in Iraq. Iraq President Saddam Husayn, who promised to defeat the Americans at the gates of Baghdad on Friday 17 January, is, however, leaving no stone unturned to prepare his country for war. "There is a well for water in every house and government ministry," the ambassador said. The government has advanced five months supply of food and essential commodities to every household and released more weapons to arm the tribes and others who had not been given weapons till now. Six million people in Iraq are already armed and this figure does not include the Army of four million. Of course, it is another matter that the weapons are outdated Kalashnikovs manufactured locally now but, as Mr Mukhtar said, "We believe that it is the soldier, and not just high technology, that wins a war."

The decision to ensure regular water and food supplies comes from the 1991 experience when the Iraqis suffered greatly from an acute shortage of both. The other major development that has taken place in recent months is a unification of Iraq in the face of an external threat. "Even those opposed to Saddam Husayn a year ago are now together with him to fight the Americans. Every Iraqi knows that the war is against the people of Iraq and their first priority is to defeat the foreign aggressors," the ambassador said. He added that this was one of the most positive developments in recent months.

The official response from the Arab world remains muted. However, in a new development, Turkey has sent out invitations to Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt for a "no war" conclave as soon as possible. This has generated considerable interest in Iraq and West Asia, particularly as Turkey has always been seen as close to the Americans. Mr Mukhtar

admitted that it could just be a "ruse", but pointed out that Turkish strategic interests were at stake and "we are watching the developments closely". He said Iraq's neighbours were beginning to realize that US aggression would not remain limited to Iraq but would encompass the Arab world.

Mr Mukhtar dismissed reports of a possible military coup as "impossible". He said the Iraqi Army was "ideological" and emphasized that today entire Iraq was behind Saddam Husayn in confronting the Americans. He said that, over the past several days, citizens of all parts of the world, particularly the US, had been holding anti-war demonstrations outside the UN office in Baghdad. In fact, ever since US President George W. Bush began making noises of war, President Husayn went into a major diplomatic blitz, inviting foreign delegations, observers for his referendum, NGOs and eminent citizens to Iraq.

Mr Husayn has also been making a direct appeal to the Arab street. He has changed the language of his speeches to use more religious phraseology. He has also succeeded in virtually equating the Israeli "aggression" on the Palestinians and the US-led attack on Iraq through state-organized propaganda that has made him a new hero amongst the young of the Arab nations. It is this people-generated pressure that appears to have worked on Turkey, which is now taking the initiative to convene the **no-war** Arab conclave.

Ambassador Mukhtar was quick to point out that the US propaganda of a war, which he believes cannot be fought from the air, "has been more successful outside Iraq than within". He said his government is still waiting for a first concrete movement to indicate ground action.

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