

Church officials praise deal, urge lifting of Iraq embargo

WASHINGTON (CNS)— Church officials and others voiced opposition to the use of force and called for an end to the U.N. embargo against Iraq days before the U.N. secretary-general and Iraqi officials reached an accord.

The Vatican hailed a written agreement on the Iraqi crisis and expressed hope that the accord would open the way to lifting the embargo against the Persian Gulf country.

The Vatican comment came Feb. 23 after U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan worked out a deal with Iraqi officials to resume U.N. weapons inspections, thus seemingly averting a U.S. bombardment of Iraqi targets. U.S. officials were still cautious about the accord, which was signed in Baghdad, Iraq, after three days of negotiations.

"The Holy See expresses its satisfaction with the agreement, which should eliminate the threat of military action," said Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls. He said he hoped the accord would be ratified by the U.N. Security Council.

Backed by Britain, the United States has threatened to attack Iraq if President Saddam Hussein does not open all sites capable of producing weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons, to U.N. inspection.

Details of the Iraqi agreement were not immediately announced, but reports said it gave weapons inspectors unlimited access to eight presidential sites. The sites had earlier been declared off-limits by Saddam.

Archbishop Renato R. Martino, Vatican nuncio to the United Nations, noted that Annan attended a World Day of Peace Mass celebrated by Cardinal John J. O'Connor Feb. 15 at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. In the homily, Cardinal O'Connor also encouraged Annan to visit Iraq in an effort to prevent war, Archbishop Martino reported.

Speaking in an interview with the Italian magazine *Il Regno* in mid-February, the Vatican nuncio to Iraq, Archbishop Giuseppe Lazzarotto, criticized the embargo of Iraq, the U.N. weapons inspection efforts there and what he said were U.S. economic interests behind the threat of military action.

Archbishop Lazzarotto said it was time that world opinion recognize that the tactics adopted against Iraq "are against human rights and, in reality, hide enormous economic interests."

He said the U.S. policy decisions were explained by the fact that oil prices had decreased to the point that oil companies were losing millions of dollars a day.

Iraqi Chaldean-rite Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid said he thought the current crisis in Iraq could be solved quickly if the West would lift the "humiliating" trade embargo against his country.

In an interview Feb. 18, the patriarch said he did not understand why Americans and others believe Saddam is amassing new weapons or making plans to use them. He called such accusations "illusions."

Patriarch Raphael also said he had written to U.S. President Bill Clinton several months ago, urging him not to use "the policy of two measures" when judging Iraqi actions. He said he thought it was unfair for the United States to accuse Iraq of being a threat to peace in the region without making the same accusation against countries like Israel.

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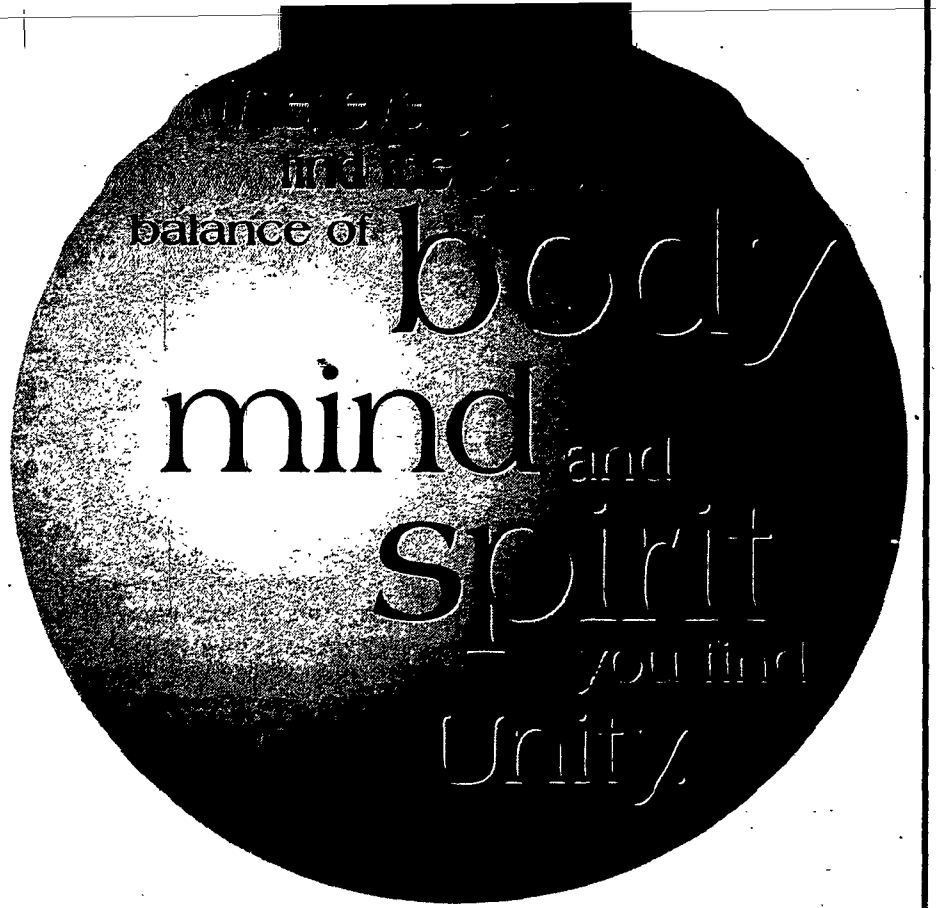
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