

NATION & WORLD

U.S. worried about new Chinese stance on Taiwan

BY GEORGE GEDDA
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The Clinton administration expressed concern Tuesday over a warning by China that it could use force if Taiwan delays indefinitely reunification talks with Beijing.

U.S. diplomats relayed the administration's concerns to Chinese authorities in Beijing and Washington just a day after China issued the threat in an 11,000-word position paper.

At the White House, presidential spokesman Joe Lockhart recalled that the United States sent two aircraft carriers and other warships to the region to calm a crisis four years ago.

"We reject any use of force or any threat of force in this situation," Lockhart said.

"We believe that peaceful dialogue and bilateral engagement between the sides is the way to move forward," he said. "We have repeated, I think, in both actions and words that we view any threat to Taiwan with grave concern."

Meanwhile, Stanley Roth, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Chinese position paper appeared to be contrary to "the policy that is the bedrock of our relations" with China and Taiwan.

Members of Congress, where support for Taiwan runs strong, suggested

that the administration was not repudiating the Chinese with enough force.

"We need to articulate more clearly where we are," said Sen. Craig Thomas, R-Wyo., chairman of the East Asian and Pacific subcommittee.

Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., said China's statement "is unacceptable" and that the administration had the responsibility to make sure that China "not misinterpret where we are — in one way or the other."

At the State Department, spokesman James Rubin said it would be a mistake to exaggerate the significance of the Chinese statement.

"We've had much worse periods on this question in the past," he said. He added that the administration isn't considering any change in its opposition to legislation before Congress to strengthen U.S.-Taiwanese military relations.

Rubin said military ties with Taiwan, authorized under the Taiwan Relations Act, has enabled the United States to be "second-to-none" in its support of the anti-communist bastion. He said that arrangement has served U.S. interests extremely well.

"Nobody should doubt our willingness to act in our own national interest," Rubin said.

In 1996, China fired nuclear-capable missiles near Taiwan's two largest ports, prompting the United States to

send two aircraft carriers and other warships to the region.

China's muscle-flexing at the time was related to impending presidential elections. The new threat from Beijing appeared aimed at influencing presidential elections on Taiwan set for next month. Analysts said China seems intent on discouraging support for the candidate most identified with the pro-independence sector on Taiwan.

Lockhart recalled that in 1996, "we responded appropriately to what was viewed as a threat. And that should give you some indication of how we view this situation."

At the Pentagon, spokesman Kenneth Bacon said there has been no change in U.S. military operations in the Pacific in response to the threat.

"It is only rhetoric at this point," Bacon said.

Bacon said "it would be extremely difficult for China to carry out an invasion" of Taiwan, given the Chinese military's limited capacity to execute a large amphibious operation.

Lin Chong-pin, Taiwan's vice chairman of a council that handles Taiwan's China policy, wouldn't directly address the new threat but said tensions wouldn't ease as long as Beijing refuses to acknowledge that China is split and each side is controlled by a separate government.

Russian defense minister: Rebels have no way out

BY NICK WADHAMS
ASSOCIATED PRESS

GROZNY, RUSSIA — Thousands of rebels in Chechnya's mountains have "no way out" as Russian forces backed by artillery and air attacks close in on them, Russia's defense minister said Tuesday.

About 20,000 Russian troops nearly completed a blockade of the Argun Gorge, a key passage into the rugged slopes of Chechnya's mountains, the military said Tuesday. Russian warplanes and helicopter gunships flew more than 150 combat missions over the area in 24 hours, it said.

The Interfax news agency, citing sources at a Russian base in Khankala, said a Russian helicopter was lost Tuesday in the Argun Gorge. The Defense Ministry made no immediate comment on the report.

Russian strategists remained concerned about a rebel resurgence, and have warned repeatedly over the past weeks that rebels are planning substantial attacks for Wednesday. The day is both a Russian holiday honoring the military and a traditional Chechen commemoration of the beginning of their mass deportation to Central Asia in 1944 under Soviet dictator Josef Stalin.

Apparently in response to those concerns, Russia closed all its border crossings into Chechnya on Tuesday. Russia previously has shut border crossings for periods ranging up to several days at a

time.

In southern Chechnya, the rebels maintained their tight grip on the village of Duba-Yurt at the entrance to the Argun Gorge, according to the news agency Interfax. But Defense Minister Igor Sergeev said the fighters "have no way out anymore," Interfax reported.

But the rebels, skilled in guerrilla techniques, have repeatedly shown during the 5-month-old war that they are able to slip through Russian lines. They have mounted surprise attacks on Russian-held towns, and many fighters broke out of the capital, Grozny, this month, even though the city was encircled.

In the ruins of Grozny, troops appeared tense on Tuesday, generally sticking close to their checkpoints and bunkers. Soldiers were overheard discussing rumors that the Chechen warlord Khatatba was leading a band of 700 fighters to attack Gudermes, Chechnya's second-largest city.

Human Rights Watch said Tuesday it had documented accounts of a massacre of Chechen civilians that could be the worst atrocity of the war.

The group said at least 62 people died in Aldi, on the outskirts of Grozny, in a two-day rampage that began Feb. 5. It said about 100 soldiers systematically robbed and shot civilians. The troops also committed several rapes and hurled grenades into basements where residents

were hiding, the group said, citing survivors' accounts.

Russia has repeatedly denied reports that its troops have taken part in atrocities.

While Russian aircraft slammed the mountains with bombs and rockets, troops moving toward the rebels' mountain stronghold of Shatoi seized heights near the villages of Makhkety and Selmentazhen, the military said. Up to 5,000 fighters are concentrated around Shatoi, Interfax reported, citing military sources.

Soldiers have been fighting the rebels at the entrance to the Argun Gorge for weeks, and the flank offensive on villages east of the gorge seemed aimed at encircling the separatists.

In a tacit acknowledgment of the rebels' ability to maneuver around Russian troops, Sergeev said his forces were determined to wipe out the rebels before spring melted the mountain snow, which could open new escape routes.

A group of rebels tried to break out of the Argun Gorge and into neighboring Georgia, but were fought back by Russian border guards, the news agency ITAR-Tass reported Tuesday.

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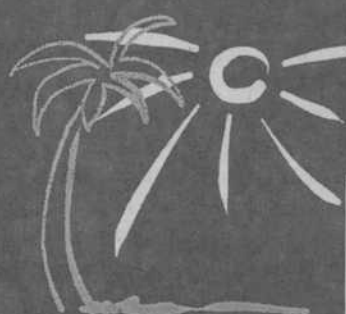
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