

Lebanese News

Petition urges Saddam to step down
Strongman's three-decade reign 'has been a nightmare'

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Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A group of Arab intellectuals, tired at the inability of the region's leaders to resolve the crisis with Iraq, are compiling a petition calling on Saddam Hussein to step down to avoid a "catastrophe" in the Middle East.

The petition, which is being discussed by key Iraqi opposition figures, comes as Arab leaders weigh a move to grant Saddam safe haven in another country if he relinquishes power peacefully.

"We call upon public opinion in the Arab world to exercise pressure for the dismissal of Saddam Hussein and his close aides in Iraq in order to avoid a war that threatens a catastrophe among the peoples of the region, foremost among whom are the Iraqi people," the petition reads. "The immediate resignation of Saddam Hussein, whose rule for over three decades has been a nightmare for Iraq and the Arab world, is the only way to avoid more violence."

It also calls for "the rule of democracy in Baghdad and for the stationing across Iraq of human rights monitors from the United Nations and the Arab League to oversee the peaceful transition of power."

Some 15 Arab academics, writers and lawyers have signed the petition, which is due to be made public this week, and the number is increasing as the document is circulated, according to Chibli Mallat, a professor of international law at Universite St Joseph in Beirut.

"There has been a tragic silence on the fate of the Arab world by the Arab world," Mallat said. "Our lives are at stake with all these chemical weapons and clearly (Israeli Premier Ariel) Sharon wants to do his nasty business, so we had this sort of reaction that we should do something."

The United States is steadily building up its forces in the Gulf, reinforcing the belief that a war against Iraq is a near certainty. Almost 60,000 US troops are deployed in the Gulf and that number could soon double, with additional units having been ordered to the region.

The prospect of a potentially destabilizing war has galvanized Arab leaders to explore the option of persuading Saddam to leave office voluntarily.

Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been at the forefront of the initiative, with emissaries secretly dispatched to Baghdad in the past two weeks to gauge Saddam's willingness to step down.

Last week, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said Arab leaders have urged Saddam to seek a peaceful resolution, but he would not confirm if an initiative to offer the Iraqi leader exile is under way.

Turkish Prime Minister Abdullah Gul is believed to have focused on the idea of

Saddam's ouster in talks he held over the weekend with the leaders of Syria and Egypt.

"Communication is continuing on levels announced and unannounced, but all the Arab countries are involved in preventing any military action against Iraq," he said. Last August, Qatar's foreign minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani, visited Baghdad for talks with Saddam which newspaper reports said included an offer of exile for the Iraqi leader in an undisclosed country. Qatari and Iraqi officials denied the reports.

Qatar last month called for an emergency Arab summit to discuss the crisis with Iraq, raising speculation that the tiny Gulf state hopes to win backing for Saddam's peaceful departure. The 22-member Arab League has yet to set a date for an emergency session, although a regular meeting is scheduled for March in Bahrain. Top US officials such as Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell have welcomed the idea of Saddam leaving power without the use of force, but Washington has not said if it is negotiating such a deal with Arab leaders.

Many Arab and Western diplomats and analysts believe that Saddam will not leave Iraq voluntarily even if staying in power means the destruction of his regime and his possible death.

"They are dreaming if they think this man will leave," said Abdullah Bishara, head of the Diplomatic Center for Strategic Studies in Kuwait. "Saddam believes he has a historic destiny for Iraq which has been thwarted by external forces ... He will bring down the walls like Samson."

Joe Wilson, a former diplomat in Baghdad and the last US official to meet Saddam, said that the Iraqi leader was the "epitome of 'l'Etat c'est moi.'"

"In his own mind he is Iraq. He would not easily give that up, if at all," Wilson told The Daily Star.

He added that on a more practical level Saddam would fear being extradited from his country of exile to face charges of human rights abuses, like former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

"Far more likely," Wilson said, "is that he will try to manage the crisis to survive and if that is not possible, to go down as a martyr in the Arab struggle against Israel and the ... humiliations inflicted by the West."