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Powell: Fissures with Europe Being Closed

By George Gedda

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THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) - U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell ended four days of consultations with European leaders on Friday saying that differences growing out of the Iraq war "are now being closed."

After meeting with European Union officials here, Powell cited as progress a European commitment to send additional forces to Afghanistan and additional trainers to Iraq, co-operation on Sudan and a joint effort to help avert a political crisis in the Ukraine.

He said the disagreements over Iraq have sometimes been exaggerated but acknowledged the existence of some "fissures."

Powell spent several hours conferring with EU Secretary General Javier Solana and with officials from the Netherlands, which holds the EU presidency as part of a rotating system.

He arrived here in the morning from Belgium, where he attended a NATO foreign ministers meeting after spending two days in Bulgaria for discussions with the 55-nation Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Powell's goal has been to restore confidence between the United States and Europe; U.S. President George W. Bush himself will visit the continent in February toward that objective.

The Dutch government has been angered by a new U.S. law that would authorize the United States to take military action against the Hague-based International Criminal Court if any U.S. serviceman is hauled before the tribunal to face war crimes charges.

Asked about the law, Dutch Foreign Minister Ben Bot said the subject did not come up in Friday's meeting but added that the United States is well aware of his government's views. Washington has refused to join the court and does not recognize its jurisdiction. The Bush administration is concerned that U.S. servicemen could face prosecution based on charges that are politically motivated.

Powell planned an early evening departure for Morocco for an international conference on political, economic and social development in the Arab world.

On Thursday, former Irish Prime Minister John Bruton presented his credentials to Bush as the EU Commission's representative to the United States.

In a letter to Bush, Bruton said he regarded his new position as an opportunity to further strengthen EU-U.S. ties, which constitute "the most important economic relationship in world

history" and "the indispensable partnership" in tackling the scourge of terrorism, fighting poverty and working for peace and stability around the world.

Before his official talks here, Powell fielded questions from Dutch university students. He said the Palestinian elections set for next month coupled with the plan of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to withdraw from Gaza open opportunities for a peaceful settlement in the region.

On Iran, he said he was optimistic about the prospects for political liberalization because of the pressure that younger Iranians will be exerting on the Islamic government for change.

He also called attention to the major role the European Union is playing in an effort to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. The EU has designated Britain, France and Germany as negotiators with Iran to ensure that the country complies with commitments not to develop nuclear weapons.

On North Korea, he described the "old Stalinist regime" there as "very hard to deal with" in counter-proliferation talks.

Powell has said little about his plans once he steps down as secretary of state next month. In response to a question on Friday, Powell said he plans to relax for a while, spend time with his two grandchildren and become involved in private sector pursuits.