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HEADLINE: US would welcome exile for Saddam: Bush

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US President George W. Bush said Thursday he would welcome exile for Saddam Hussein, though the White House warned it was still planning for a possible war to disarm the Iraqi leader.

If the vast US troop buildup in the Gulf convinces Saddam and his top associates to quit power and leave Iraq, "we would welcome that, of course," Bush said as he met here with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

"Let's hope it happens, but plans are being made on the likelihood that it won't," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said earlier, refusing to say whether the United States was making any preparations for Saddam to go into exile.

With Washington deploying some 150,000 troops to the Gulf region to make good on Bush's pledge to disarm Iraq by force if necessary, Fleischer warned that efforts to disarm Iraq peacefully would last "weeks, not months."

But he added: "The more pressure on Saddam Hussein and the more unified the world is, the more the likelihood of this being resolved peacefully -- as a result, for example, of his going into exile."

Bush was to attend a hastily arranged meeting with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal later Thursday, as Riyadh reportedly pushed for the exile option.

Saudi Arabia, along with Turkey, Egypt and other Arab countries, has been working on convincing Saddam to go into exile in order to avert a US-led war.

"If Saddam Hussein were to go into exile, that would be a very helpful event for the world," said Fleischer,

who would not say whether Washington believes that the Iraqi leader was seriously considering that possibility.

"There's only one person who knows the answer, and that's Saddam Hussein," he said.

"The president still wants this resolved peacefully. Make no mistake: If Saddam doesn't disarm, I think people understand, there will be consequences. But the president has not given up hope," the spokesman said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell delivered a slightly different message on Wednesday, saying Washington was prepared to help arrange a place for Saddam and his family to live in exile if they agreed to leave Iraq.

"If he were to leave the country and take some of his family members with him and others in the elite who have been responsible for so much trouble during the course of his regime, we would, I am sure, try to help find a place for them to go," Powell said.

US officials had said in the past that Washington would look favorably on Saddam's exile but had always refused to offer any assistance to efforts aimed at convincing the Iraqi leader to leave power voluntarily.

Powell's remarks came a week ahead of a highly anticipated briefing he is to give to the UN Security Council to lay out new evidence that Iraq is violating disarmament demands.

Immunity from prosecution would likely be a key demand if Saddam were to even consider exile.

Last week, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Britain would be ready to see Saddam offered immunity from prosecution if he agreed to relinquish power and go into exile.

"I think that, given that kind of choice, ... people would swallow hard and think 'Well, it is better to provide some degree of immunity if it meant that we could resolve this peacefully and the Iraqi people could have put in a far better regime, which in due course could turn into a representative government,'" he said.

Thus far, Saddam has shown no sign of any willingness to step down from power.