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The UN speaks, Saddam hears

THE United Nations has once again justified its existence by preventing a war. Not delaying, threatening or mediating a war - preventing it. The Iraqi regime's unconditional acceptance of UN Security Council Resolution 1441 opens a welcome new act in this drama. The UN, unlike the present administration of the United States, does not seek to topple Saddam Hussein or re-make a sovereign nation. The UN seeks to abide by its charter, and prevent war by forcing antagonists to abide by universal consensus. That was the thrust of Resolution 1441, demanding Iraq open up to weapons inspectors or face (unspecified) consequences. Iraq's acquiescence takes the impetus of this effort away from the US Government and, as nations like Malaysia and its Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad have insisted all along, returns it where it belongs: with the UN.

For a world opposed to a US-led war on Iraq, this is cause for a collective sigh of relief, but no wild cheering. The play now changes sets and shifts scenes. The script now calls for drawn swords to be sheathed and barred palace gates thrown open to UN inspection teams. The territory ahead, however, remains extremely murky. Iraq's Parliament rejected the resolution just last Tuesday, against the urging of Saddam's son and heir Uday. Iraq's media have since remained conspicuously silent on both that nay-say and its subsequent over-ruling by their Government. This might signal dissent and disgruntlement among the Iraqi people or, more likely, that they are simply leaving it to their leader.

Doubtless, the fate of Iraq remains Saddam Hussein's to decide. The rest of the world, however, may be greatly relieved that the world's need to bring Iraq back into the fold of nations will no longer be spearheaded by the bellicose Bush administration and its allies, but by the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission and the International Atomic Energy Agency. For this also leads to a constructive cast change, with the ensemble of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice and Blair hooked back into the wings to clear the stage for UNMOVIC's Hans Blix and the IAEA's Mohamed El Baradei, who will now be the world's point-men in the taming of Iraq. At least, these officials will be seeking not to wage war, nor even to prevent it, but to eliminate once and for all the ways, means and reasons for war on - and by - Iraq.