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Another war the world can do without

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THE world is entering the new year with foreboding. Barely a year after the United States launched an attack against Afghanistan to destroy the al-Qaeda terror network it blamed for the Sept 11, 2001 suicide bombings,

Washington is again massing its armed forces to invade another country.

The target this time is Iraq whose ruler President Saddam Hussein is accused of pursuing nuclear, chemical or biological weapons programmes banned by the United Nations Security Council.

Washington has also warned Iran and North Korea - which with Iraq have been denounced by US President George W. Bush as members of the "axis of evil" - for allegedly planning to develop nuclear weapons.

These confrontations in regions strategically sensitive to powerful nations, carrying risks of hostilities escalating into indiscriminate use

of weapons of mass destruction, have intensified the danger of triggering

an apocalyptic world war.

Mankind's quest for peace remains as elusive as ever. Although huge strides have been made in the expansion of knowledge and material wealth since the end of World War Two, the belligerence of militarily-strong states and their willingness to resort to force to settle their differences remain undiminished.

Scores of wars, big and small, have been fought since 1945. More than a

dozen armed conflicts are still raging, from the Palestinian struggle for

an independent homeland against Israeli occupation to ethnic violence in Indonesia's remote provinces; from the never-ending civil wars in Africa to

the on-off border clashes between India and Pakistan.

The toll in lives lost in wars and armed conflicts, from 1945 to 2000, has been estimated at over 50 million, including deaths from war-caused starvation and disease.

The scale of casualties, which is rising with the invention and use of ever deadlier weapons, has been no deterrent to war. Basic human aversion

to war falters quickly as nations struggle for political or economic advantage.

But history has shown that interstate wars rarely resulted in lasting peace. The build-up of armed forces and acquisition of sophisticated weapons by countries around the globe have failed even to provide them the

sense of security.

The United States, despite its unequalled political and military power,

today resembles a country hunkering in a bunker, hating its enemies outside and fearing betrayal inside.

Surface-to-air missiles ring Washington, fighter planes patrol US

skies,

US Embassies around the world close at the whisper of rumour and US

Vice-

President Dick Cheney is spirited to secret locations and guarded by Secret Service agents for long periods, ready to take over if Bush is harmed.

The rules of war have changed. So has war itself. The common image of war as a clash between armies fighting and killing to protect or advance the interests of their countries is now the exception.

The "war on terror" advocated by the armchair warriors of Washington adds a fearsome dimension to human conflicts. The doctrine of this war defends pre-emptive strikes against suspected enemies and rejects the principle of national sovereignty and integrity.

As the sole global superpower, the US demands acquiescence if not total support. Its President has warned countries: "Either you are with us or you are against us."

America is a war-like nation. Its armed forces have been deployed in wars and other conflicts outside US territory in every decade since the end of World War Two. US leaders have been accused of manipulating events to justify going to war.

There are historical parallels to the present situation. The official account of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, which catapulted America into the Second World War, has been questioned by historians.

They said the sequence of events just before the attack suggested that President Franklin D. Roosevelt knew about it in advance but concealed the information from his commanders in Hawaii.

He had promised the American people not to take their country into the war against Nazi Germany unless America itself was attacked. Pearl Harbor duped Germany's Adolf Hitler to declare war on America. It was Roosevelt's backdoor to war.

In the Vietnam War, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in August 1964 is widely acknowledged as the trigger for large-scale US involvement. The US Government had announced that North Vietnamese torpedo gunships attacked two American destroyers on "routine patrol" in the Gulf but were driven off by return fire.

President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered retaliatory air strikes against North Vietnamese facilities in a momentous escalation of the conflict.

The truth, according to some accounts, was very different. The North Vietnamese attack never happened.

But North Vietnam had come under increasing assaults by the US-supported South Vietnamese navy and Laotian air force as part of a campaign of increasing military pressure on the North.

Johnson was quoted in a comment in 1965: "For all I know, our navy was shooting at whales out there."

President Richard M. Nixon, who replaced Johnson, authorised the secret

bombing of Cambodia and Laos, that eventually sucked the two countries into the Vietnam quagmire, with disastrous consequences for their people.

Now, another American President is openly planning war against a foreign country, justifying it on "intelligence reports" that it possesses weapons of mass destruction. But no trace of these weapons had been uncovered although more than 100 UN arms inspectors had been searching Iraq since Nov 27.

That little fact is unlikely to stay Bush and the Washington hawks. Said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in an interview published in New Straits Times on Dec 26: "I think they (US) will go to war in Iraq. If they can find an excuse, they will. They are bent on having this war."