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Oil reason behind US aggression, says Iraqi Minister

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - The United States' aggression on Iraq will continue for as long as the US has the idea that it is in control of oil in the Gulf and subsequently of all countries in the world economically.

Iraqi Minister of Industry and Minerals Muyassar Rija Shlah said the United States and its allies, especially Britain, would exert pressure on Iraq from all directions to achieve its goals.

He believed that the focus on Iraq was mainly due to the oil factor.

Muyassar said the aggression was also due to Iraq's independent stand on various issues, including the Palestinian issue, its active membership in the Non-Aligned Movement and its status as an Islamic nation.

"The United States is doing this (making threats and exerting pressure) despite having no evidence to substantiate its claims that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction ... we have repeatedly maintained that we don't have such weapons," he said in an interview at the Palace of Golden Horses today.

Muyassar, who is head of the Iraq-Malaysia Joint Commission, is here to attend a three-day meeting of the commission which begins today.

Challenging the United Nations weapons inspectors to show proof if Iraq was involved in such activities, he said the inspectors failed to find evidence despite having visited places which British Prime Minister Tony Blair had mentioned in his reports on Iraq's alleged activities.

"They have also visited sites which have been mentioned in the reports submitted by the CIA and British intelligence," he said.

The UN weapons inspectors are to report to the Security Council tomorrow and deliver a major assessment on Iraqi compliance with council resolutions on Jan 27.

None of the UN inspection chiefs has reported evidence of an illegal weapons programme since the inspectors returned to Iraq in November last year.

Muyassar said Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had written a letter to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad explaining the current situation in Iraq and Iraq's relations with UN Security Council.

"I will hand over the letter to Dr Mahathir before I leave for Iraq. This is being arranged," he said.

Saddam has said on Monday that his country is ready for war.

He also accused the UN weapons inspectors of engaging in intelligence work.

The United States has increased deployment of troops to the Gulf to at least 120,000 for a potential war with Iraq.