

## Christopher defends U.S. efforts on air strikes

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WASHINGTON, April 21 (Reuter) - Secretary of State Warren Christopher Thursday defended U.S. efforts to expand NATO air strikes in Bosnia before sceptical senators, saying the Bosnian conflict threatens to grow into a wider war.

The Clinton administration consulted NATO allies and Russia on its proposals to protect six U.N. "safe areas" from Bosnian Serb attacks but continued to resist Russian President Boris Yeltsin's appeal for a U.S., Russian and European summit on the issue.

White House spokeswoman Dee Dee Myers said the summit was "something that could not happen in the next few days or even in the very near future" because it would require extensive preparation.

Christopher tried to lay down a firm policy justification for President Clinton's proposal for expanded allied military and diplomatic action in Bosnia before a panel of senators who kept asking why there, why now and why us?

Portraying a conflict that could embroil Europe in warfare and a tide of refugees, he said important U.S. and allied interests were at stake.

The courtly Christopher took exception when Senator Ernest Hollings, a South Carolina Democrat who chairs the appropriations subcommittee, said Bosnian Serb-Moslem fighting was merely a civil war unworthy of U.S. military involvement.

"I think this is more than a civil war," Christopher said. "The aggression of the Serbs, I think, is quite transparent.

"They have in mind a Greater Serbia. They're looking to the south to Kosovo, possibly to Macedonia. They're moving into Bosnia and perhaps into Croatia."

His comments represented the fullest assessment yet of what the United States views as Bosnian Serb military objectives. Last week, as Bosnian Serbs advanced on Gorazde, U.S. spokesmen explained away allied inaction saying they did not know Bosnian Serb intentions.

As Christopher defended the policy on Capitol Hill, the White House rejected criticism that Clinton had acted indecisively in handling Gorazde and thus contributed to a damaging of American prestige.

Many U.S. lawmakers and various newspaper editorials and Washington pundits have excoriated the president for showing a lack of leadership in Bosnia.

"This isn't about American prestige," Myers said. "It's about what to do next to move the situation toward the only reasonable conclusion, which is a

negotiated settlement. Obviously, nobody's happy about the situation, nobody's happy about the way circumstances have worked out."

Christopher showed some of the frustration the U.S. government feels over the issue. "This aggression began in 1992 on somebody else's watch," he said in a swipe at Clinton's Republican predecessor, George Bush.

Georgia Democrat Sam Nunn, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said NATO must be prepared to hit targets in neighbouring Serbia, supplier of Bosnian Serbs, because Bosnian Serbs have a limited number of lucrative targets.

And he said if air strikes are escalated it would be a good idea to pull out U.N. peacekeepers and humanitarian relief officials to remove them from harm's way and prevent their being taken hostage.

The secretary of state went to Capitol Hill to explain the U.S. proposal that NATO vastly expand its threat of air strikes against Bosnian Serb positions, tighten enforcements of economic sanctions and step up humanitarian relief efforts.

He stressed the objective of a bolder new allied effort would be to force the Bosnian Serbs to the peace table, but said air strikes could also raise the price for continued attacks on besieged Moslem enclaves like Gorazde even if they could not stop them entirely.

Allies like Britain and France, who have peacekeeping troops in Bosnia, have in the past opposed increased NATO air strikes, as has Russia, an ally of the Serbs.

Hollings and others rubbed some political sore points by saying the administration seemed more interested in allied government support than that of the Congress, and noting it had backed away from comparable U.S. commitments in Somalia, Haiti and Rwanda, where only blacks were involved.

Christopher said the administration was consulting Congress regularly and that the difference between Bosnia and the other trouble spots was national interest.

Senate Republican Leader Bob Dole and other senators of both parties introduced an amendment requiring the president to unilaterally lift the arms embargo against the Bosnian Moslems.

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