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16-0650 GULF-HUSSEIN

KING HUSSEIN SAYS SADDAM AGREED TO QUIT KUWAIT

NEW YORK, Oct 16, Reuter - Jordan's King Hussein said in an interview published on Tuesday that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein had agreed in August to withdraw from Kuwait if the Arab League did not criticise him, but the group's condemnation ended the deal.

In what the New York Times called Hussein's first full public accounting of his attempts to prevent and then contain the Gulf crisis, he revealed that on August 2, the day of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, U.S. President George Bush gave him 48 hours to secure a commitment from Saddam to withdraw his troops.

The king said Saddam promised to begin pulling out if the Arab League did not condemn him. But it did, and the efforts collapsed, Hussein said.

Hussein quoted Saddam as saying shortly after the invasion "Within a week we'll be gone", but also that the Iraqis would not respond positively to threats or intimidation".

The king said he still did not understand why his initiative was undermined. Suddenly, it was all torn apart," he said.

Hussein, 54, said if war broke out it would be in part because Bush and other Western leaders failed to respond in time to signals from Saddam that he was ready to withdraw from most of the occupied territory.

Hussein also revealed that Saddam told him late in July he had decided to seize all of Kuwait instead of just territory in dispute, because he expected the United States to respond militarily. He thought he would be in a stronger position if he could withdraw only far enough to leave Iraq with the disputed territory.

The king told the New York Times he believed a peaceful end to the Gulf crisis was still possible if the United States and its Arab allies were willing to compromise.

But Hussein said his conversations with Saddam had convinced him that the Iraqis would fight if diplomacy failed and that a war would be catastrophic for the entire region and for the West.

In a report covering a series of interviews conducted over the weekend, the New York Times said Hussein called for an end to the current embargo on dialogue. A dialogue across the airwaves is not constructive".

Most Arab states, but not Jordan, have deplored Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and called for withdrawal. But the king pointed out that Jordan has supported all United Nations resolutions on Kuwait.

Jordan has opposed the presence of American forces in Saudi Arabia, a position Hussein characterised as neither anti-Western nor pro-Iraqi, but pro-peace".

Of all Arab leaders, Hussein said President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt had disappointed him the most. At a meeting in August, Hussein said he thought Mubarak was trying to pay back Iraq for having led the campaign against Egypt" following Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel.

Asked if he thought Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was justifiable, the king said I honestly can't tell...I can't justify or condone, but the reason must have been pretty substantial to have had it happen."

The newspaper said the king seemed most agitated when expressing the view that the invasion of Kuwait could have been prevented. He said he had tried at least five times since 1988 to persuade Kuwait to resolve its territorial disputes with Iraq.

REUTER CM JXK RB