

Britons want Cherie out of the country: BBC poll

REUTERS, London

The wife of Prime Minister Tony Blair is the person Britons most want kicked out of the country after her links to a convicted conman were exposed in the recent "Cheriegate" affair, according to a poll on Wednesday.

In a tongue-in-cheek BBC survey drawing 15,000 votes, Cherie Blair topped the hall of shame with 31 per cent after damaging revelations last month about her property dealings with a convicted fraudster dominated headlines and embarrassed the government.

Cherie Blair, a high profile barrister, saw her public support tumble in December as the media focused relentlessly on details of how Peter Foster helped her buy two flats in Bristol, southwest England.

The BBC radio current affairs programme Today, which carried out the poll, said in a statement: "It has not been a good year-end for the prime minister's wife."

Two teens slain in British hair salon

AFP, Birmingham

Two teenage girls were shot and killed Thursday during an all-night party at a hairdressing salon in Birmingham, in the English Midlands, police said.

Two other girls were in hospital, their lives out of danger, as West Midlands Police opened a murder investigation and carried out a forensic search of the salon in the Aston district of the city.

"It appears that the girls had been attending a private party at a hairdresser's on Birchfield Road during the night," a police spokeswoman said.

"This was attended by a number of young people. It is not yet clear what led up to the shooting and we do not know who is responsible for the crime," she said.

A car riddled with bullet holes was found near the scene of the shooting, which took place around 4 am (0400 GMT).

As police began door-to-door inquiries, Chief Superintendent Dave Shaw appealed to Aston residents, whom he described as "close-knit," to help his officers find the killers.

US preparing for a 'war of aggression': Aziz

Baghdad slams expansion of banned goods list, UN experts at work on 5 sites

AFP, Baghdad

The United States is continuing preparations for its "war of aggression" against Iraq despite the fact that Baghdad is cooperating with UN arms inspectors, Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said Thursday.

UN experts, who arrived in Iraq on November 25, have been able to visit all the sites they have wanted to inspect and "will visit whatever sites they want to visit," Aziz said.

Despite that fact, the "American military deployment has been going on... They continue their preparation for a war of aggression," Aziz said.

"There is an imperialist design behind all the fuss that has been created by Washington, and that design is to invade Iraq, to occupy Iraq, and to use the national resources of Iraq for the purposes of the (US) military industrial complex, for the purposes of the capitalist regime," he said.

The United States announced Tuesday that an infantry division of up to 17,000 men had been given orders for deployment to the Gulf region.

Washington already has about 65,000 troops in the Gulf and Turkey and earlier this month announced plans to send another 50,000 by early January.

Experts from the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resumed

arms inspections in Iraq on November 27 after a four-year break.

The United States has threatened to disarm Iraq by force unless it does so peacefully, but Baghdad insists it no longer has any prohibited weapons.

Meanwhile, Baghdad's official press Thursday slammed the UN Security Council's expansion of a list of goods banned from export to Iraq, calling it a "despicable" move aimed at harming the Iraqi people.

Resolution 1454, which expands the list of so-called dual-use items, "is not just despicable, it also lacks legitimacy, coming at a time when the Security Council was supposed to set the stage for lifting the sanctions" in force since 1990, wrote Babel, which is run by President Saddam Hussein's elder son, Uday.

The Security Council voted 13-0 Monday to extend by 60 the list of goods that are banned from export to Iraq, including about five dozen chemicals, drugs, electronic items and vehicles.

Moreover, UN arms inspectors were at work on five sites Thursday, the 34th day of their search for Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction, the information ministry's press center said.

A team of missile specialists headed to the al-Fatah company in Baghdad, a site already inspected last month, while a chemical team went to the vast al-Taji military complex north of the capital to inspect the Ibn Farnas firm.



PHOTO: AFP

A UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection (UNMOVIC) expert gestures to an Iraqi officer as he walks out with his colleagues from the offices of Al-Fatah company for research and consultation west of Baghdad on Thursday. UN arms teams continued their search for Iraq's weapons of mass destruction that Baghdad denies having as the United States prepares to send more troops to the Gulf region.



PHOTO: AFP

A Royal Australian Air Force C-130 Hercules piloted by Flight Lieutenant Jamie Riddell flies a reconnaissance mission over the remote Polynesian island of Tikopia in the Solomon Islands which was devastated by cyclone Zoe on Wednesday. Zoe, rated category five and packing winds in excess of 300 km/h, caused widespread damage to crops and infrastructure when it hit the island last weekend though the extent of casualties among the 1,200 inhabitants is still not known.

Fate of cyclone-hit Pacific Islands remains unclear

REUTERS, Honiara

The fate of 3,700 South Pacific islanders hit by a massive cyclone five days ago was unclear on Thursday, although aid officials who flew over the remote area saw signs of normal life among damaged houses and shredded trees.

An officer at Australia's aid agency AusAID, Alan March, said the crew of an Australian air force plane reported the impact and likely death toll was not as bad as feared after flying over five cyclone-hit Solomon Islands atolls.

"On the evidence we have seen, there is damage to traditional housing, damage to crops and gardens, but there is no evidence -- albeit it from 500 feet -- of injuries or casualties," March told reporters in the Australian capital Canberra.

"Our assessment at this point in time is that it is not necessary to conduct an (air force) air drop (of supplies)."

'Israel holding 1,000 Palestinians without charge or trial'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel is detaining 1,007 Palestinians in administrative detention, without charge or trial, the Israeli rights group B'Tselem reported Thursday, calling for their immediate release.

"For the first time since the previous Intifada (1987-1993), more than 1,000 Palestinians are being held in administrative detention," said the group, which monitors human rights in the occupied territories.

"B'Tselem urges the Israeli government to release all administrative detainees immediately. Detainees against whom there is evidence should be brought to a fair trial, and given the right to present their case," the statement said.

Administrative detainees are held without trial or charges, sometimes without even being questioned told why they are being held, for extendable periods of six months.

Their imprisonment is authorised

by a major general's order rather than by judicial decree. It is permitted under international law, but B'Tselem charged that Israel ignores many restrictions on its implementation.

Former dovish justice minister Yossi Beilin had planned to abolish administrative detention, which is based on notorious emergency regulations introduced in 1945 by the British authorities who then ruled Palestine.

In an end-of-year report, the Palestinian Society for the Protection of Human Rights and Environment (LAW) also slammed Israel's systematic use of administrative detention.

"Israel's treatment of administrative detainees, including the location and conditions of their detention, contravenes not only international human rights standards but also the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention," the group said in a report.

N Korea tries to divide US, South Korea

AP, Seoul

Seeing an opportunity in widespread anti-American sentiment in South Korea, North Korea urged South Koreans on Wednesday to back its confrontation with the United States over its nuclear program.

"It can be said that there exists on the Korean Peninsula at present only confrontation between the Koreans in the North and the South and the United States," the communist state said in its New Year's message.

It is North Korea's long-standing strategy to drive a wedge between Seoul and its chief ally, Washington. But its emphasis on "cooperation" with South Korea comes at a time when Seoul is criticizing a possible US plan to use economic sanctions to force North Korea to abandon its suspected nuclear weapons program.

North Korea's overtures are also driven by economic needs, experts said.

Under President Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine" policy of engaging North Korea, South Korea has launched a series of unfinished inter-Korean projects, including a cross-border rail link and tourist and industrial parks, that would bring the impoverished North badly needed investment.

North Korea, which can hardly feed its 22 million people without outside relief, risked losing key sources of aid in the recent weeks by expelling UN inspectors and threatening to pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to free its nuclear facilities from international controls.

"North Korea has been digging deeper into isolation these days, and the United States is pouring hot

water into the hole to force it to come out," said Koh Yoo-hwan, a North Korea expert in Seoul's Dongguk University.

"At this hard time, North Korea increasingly sees that South Korea is its only friend, as it tries to avoid the brunt of US diplomatic pressure," Koh said.

Although North Korea's recent decision to reactivate its nuclear program angered much of the world, it stirred little reaction among ordinary South Koreans. US officials say North Korea may use its nuclear facilities to build atomic bombs.

A top South Korean diplomat met with Chinese Foreign Ministry officials in Beijing on Thursday to discuss North Korea's nuclear program, bringing together two major regional players in a bid to defuse tensions on the Korean peninsula.

'Iraq war would be Nakba catastrophe for Arabs'

Israeli helicopter gunships hit Gaza camps: 4 killed

AFP, Cairo

A US war against Iraq would hurt the Arabs as much as the creation of Israel in 1948 did, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said in an interview published here on Thursday.

In his remarks to the Egyptian government newspaper Al-Ahram, Arafat also said an upcoming meeting of Palestinian factions in Egypt was aimed at forging unity rather than ending the uprising against Israeli occupation.

A war in Iraq "will not just have repercussions for Iraq, but the entire region will be affected as it was affected by the events in Palestine in 1948," Arafat warned.

Known as the Nakba (catastrophe), the proclamation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the defeat of hostile Arab armies by the new Jewish state led to a massive exodus of Palestinian refugees to neighboring Arab states.

"It should not be ruled out that

one might see a new Sykes-Picot," Arafat warned.

Signed in 1916, the secret French-British Sykes-Picot carved up the non-Turkish provinces of the Ottoman Empire ahead of its collapse two years later.

Palestine and Iraq were controlled by Britain, and Syria and Lebanon by France.

The Arabs blame the Sykes-Picot accord for all the conflicts which have ravaged the region since then.

Reuters adds: Israeli forces backed by helicopter gunships battled gunmen in two Gaza refugee camps Thursday after killing four Palestinians who the army said were on their way to attack Jewish settlements.

In a separate incident, police said they killed a Palestinian gunman who broke into a home in the Israeli village of Maor, three miles from the West Bank. An Israeli couple in the house escaped when

his assault rifle jammed.

The army said it sent infantry and armour, supported by assault helicopters, into the Nusairat and Bureij refugee camps in the central Gaza Strip as part of its "continuing battle against terrorism."

The camps are considered strongholds of Palestinian militants waging a more than two-year-old uprising for independence.

Ambulance workers said several Palestinians were wounded before Israeli forces withdrew several hours later.

The violence came amid US calls for Middle East calm to avoid jarring Washington's plans for possible war on Iraq.

Called to arms from mosque loudspeakers, gunmen flocked to the streets of Nusairat and Bureij and exchanged shots with Israeli troops on the outskirts of the camps, scattering occasionally under fire from helicopters overhead.



PHOTO: AFP

A tugboat breaks the ice in the port of Helsinki, Finland, on New Year's Day. The temperatures dropped to around minus 20 degrees Celsius in the Helsinki region.