

Blair took war decision before parliament vote

British PM rejects claims of misleading country

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair said Tuesday he decided war against Iraq was unavoidable "a few days" before the British parliament on March 18 gave the green light for military action on Baghdad.

But Blair added that it would not have been "sustainable" for Britain to join the campaign against Saddam Hussein led by the United States if the parliament in London voted against it.

"I decided that we couldn't avoid conflict in the few days before the vote on the 18th of March, because it was then that it was obvious we couldn't get a second UN resolution that delivered an ultimatum to Saddam," Blair told a committee of senior British deputies.

"Once other countries had made it clear they were not prepared to support a resolution with an ultimatum in it, all we were going to get was a further condemnation of Saddam and an agreement to have another discussion. That wasn't enough."

March 18 was the date when Blair won backing from the British parliament for a military campaign. Two days later the war on Iraq was launched.

Blair told deputies: "I have never thought it was realistic for British troops to go to war if parliament voted against it. I don't think it would have been sustainable."

"We had to persuade the Cabinet, then we had to persuade parliament. If at any one of those stages opposite decisions had been

taken, it wouldn't have happened."

The prime minister insisted he had always wanted to resolve the Iraq crisis peacefully.

"Up until that point (March 18) I was still working to avoid the conflict. I very nearly had and believed I would have secured the necessary votes in the UN to have got effectively an ultimatum to Saddam and that could still have avoided the conflict. "All the way through I had in my mind an attempt, if at all possible, to do this peacefully."

Blair added: "We made an agreement under (UN resolution) 1441 that disarmament had to happen one way or another, that the inspectors had to have the full co-operation of Saddam and he never gave that."

Reuters adds: Prime Minister Tony Blair, fighting for his political reputation, on Tuesday rejected claims he misled Britain over the case for war in Iraq despite the non-appearance of weapons of mass destruction.

"I refute any suggestion we misled parliament or the country totally," Blair told a parliamentary committee. "I think we did the right thing in relation to Iraq, I stand 100 percent by it and I think our intelligence services gave us the correct intelligence and information at the time," he added.

Britain and America waged war on Iraq on the basis that former leader Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction posed a serious threat, but the failure so far to unearth those weapons has caused a furo over the case made for war.

The credibility of Blair's govern-



PHOTO: AFP

British Prime minister Tony Blair and an unidentified aide leave No. 10 Downing Street on Tuesday to face questions from the House of Commons liaison committee on the reasons given for going to war in Iraq.

ment has come under attack and the weapons row has dented his standing in opinion polls.

AFP adds: Prime Minister Tony Blair faces a grilling Tuesday from the House of Commons' watchdog select committees -- at 10 am (0900 GMT) just 24 hours after the release of the report from the foreign affairs committee.

It had investigated two dossiers

published by Blair's government in the run-up to war -- one of which included a headline-grabbing claim that Iraq could deploy chemical or biological weapons in 45 minutes.

The committee also probed a BBC report in late May quoting an intelligence source who claimed that the dossier published in September was "sexed up" with the 45-minute claim despite doubts among intelligence chiefs.

"We conclude that the 45-minute claim did not warrant the prominence given to it in the dossier, because it was based on intelligence from a single, uncorroborated source," the report said.

Goal of halving poverty could be met by 2015

China, India make development goals attainable, poorest nations still need more aid: UNDP

AFP, United Nations

The goal of halving world poverty by 2015 is likely to be met, as a result of economic growth in China and India, but the poorest nations still need more aid and better trade opportunities, this year's Human Development Report says.

The report, by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), said the proportion of people living on less than one dollar a day in China fell from 33 percent in 1990 -- the base year for the UN's Millennium goals -- to 16 percent in 2000.

In India, which began to introduce market-based reforms more than a decade later than China, it fell from 42 percent in 1993 to 35 percent last year, the report said.

China and India together represent one-third of the world's population of six billion.

The report noted more modest progress in both countries towards other goals, such as halving by 2015 the proportion of people who suffer from hunger and those without access to safe drinking water, and reducing the under-five mortality rate by two-thirds.

"Significant progress" has also been made in Arab states, in Latin America and in the Caribbean, the report said.

In other regions, meeting the goals "remains a huge challenge," and at current rates of progress it would take sub-Saharan Africa well over a cen-

ture to do so, it said.

While much of the world benefited from sustained economic growth in the past decade, 54 developing countries saw average incomes fall, the report said.

And 21 states experienced declines on the human development index (HDI), a composite measure including life expectancy, educational enrollment, adult literacy and income per person. They include Russia and six other former Soviet republics, as well as 14 African nations, among them South Africa, the country worst hit by HIV/AIDS.

"Reversals in HDI are highly unusual, as these indicators generally tend to edge up slowly over time," UNDP Administrator Mark Malloch Brown said. Only four countries declined on the index in the previous decade.

The report argues that, to reverse the declines, development strategies must focus not only on economic growth -- and on the reforms recommended by the IMF and the World Bank to achieve it -- but also on more equitable distribution of wealth and services.

"There is plenty of evidence that the goals are reachable, but we need a new vision and a new deal," Malloch Brown told reporters.

The success of China and India depended less on international organisations or donors than on the efforts of "enlightened national leadership to bring underdeveloped regions into the mainstream economy," he said.

But many smaller countries were landlocked or were vulnerable to fluctuations in the international market price of a single cash crop, he said.

The report emphasised the need for rich nations to meet the eighth Millennium goal, a commitment to match economic and institutional reform in developing countries by lowering import barriers and reducing or eliminating unsustainable debts.

Agricultural subsidies in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries total 300 billion dollars a year, it said. Subsidies to US cotton growers are three times greater than US government aid to sub-Saharan Africa, while each dairy cow in the European Union receives a larger cash subsidy than per capita EU aid to sub-Saharan Africa.

Noting that per capita income in all of the 42 highly indebted poor countries is less than 1,500 dollars a year, the report called on rich nations to provide more meaningful debt relief.

It noted that the long decline in official aid flows was reversed last year, rising to 57 billion dollars from 52.3 billion the previous year.

But even if the rich countries live up to the commitment made at the UN's Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey, Mexico, last year, to increase official aid by 16 billion dollars a year, "the total will still fall short of the 100-billion-dollar minimum needed per year to meet the goals," it said.



PHOTO: AFP

A Delta II Heavy launch vehicle is engulfed in smoke as it lifts off from pad 17-B on Monday at Cape Canaveral, Florida starting the Mars Exploration Rover B on its journey to the red planet.

Mars probe successfully launched

AFP, Cape Canaveral

The US space probe Opportunity was launched late Monday on a mission to Mars, after five postponements due to weather and technical problems.

A Boeing-built Delta II "Heavy" rocket lifted off from a launching pad at an Air Force base here at 11:18 pm (0318 GMT Tuesday), after a defective valve discovered in the first stage of the rocket postponed the launch by an hour.

A camera mounted on the rocket allowed experts to monitor the probe's night-time ascent into the dark Florida sky.

The launch went without a hitch.



PHOTO: AFP

Mohammed Abdullah (R) receives his tickets for the Delhi-to-Lahore bus services from Delhi Transport Minister Ajay Makan at Ambdabkar terminal in New Delhi on Tuesday. Indian authorities began selling tickets for the first bus to Pakistan in 18 months, bringing relief to passengers who were turned away empty-handed on July 7 amid chaos and red tape.

No party will get majority in Lok Sabha polls: Survey

IANS, New Delhi

India's national elections due next year will throw up another fractured verdict and probably a more splintered Parliament than in 1999, says an election expert.

This means that for the sixth consecutive time since the 1989 parliamentary elections, no single party will win a majority.

Despite their best efforts, neither Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) nor the Congress is likely to get enough seats to cross the halfway mark, says an assessment by poll analyst N Bhaskara Rao.

Iraqi collaborators of US forces on hit list

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi police came under attack in Baghdad overnight in what US-led authorities have described as a growing pattern of Iraqi strikes and threats against compatriots cooperating with the occupying forces.

Unidentified assailants lobbed grenades at the police station in northern Baghdad, injuring two Iraqi policemen, a US intelligence officer told AFP, asking not to be identified. He said no US soldiers were wounded in the attack.

At least two attackers threw three or more grenades and fired gunshots at the police station in the city's Ash-Shab district, where US military police are stationed to train members of Iraq's new police

force.

"Two Iraqi police were wounded by shrapnel, one in the hand and one in the pelvis," the officer said, adding that the US army believed one attacker was wounded in an ensuing exchange of fire but escaped.

The attack follows a weekend bomb attack in Ramadi, around 100 kilometres (60 miles) west of Baghdad, in which seven Iraqi police recruits were killed and dozens of others wounded.

Residents in the town said there had been threats warning Iraqis not to cooperate with the US-led coalition prior to the bombing.

A senior coalition official said last week that the US-led authority

believed it had noticed a pattern of "Iraqi-on-Iraqi" attacks after a number of incidents, including a power worker being gunned down at home.

With the wave of attacks on US troops and those working with them showing no sign of a let up, the coalition announced Tuesday it will offer rewards starting at 2,500 dollars for information leading to the arrest of the perpetrators.

"Coalition forces will give a 2,500 dollar reward to those who give us information leading to the arrest of people responsible for killing or shooting coalition soldiers or Iraqi policemen," the coalition's newspaper said.

Abbas calls off meet with Sharon

Blast at house near Tel Aviv : 2 killed

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas Tuesday scrapped a planned meeting with his Israeli counterpart Ariel Sharon in protest at Israel's handling of the Palestinian prisoners issue, sources said.

The cancellation of Wednesday's talks came after Abbas's approach to the ongoing peace process was criticised at a gathering of senior Palestinian officials held here late Monday, chaired by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

It would have been the second meeting of the two prime ministers in eight days, which have seen hopes rise of progress for the US-backed "roadmap" for peace which aims to bring an end to the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A statement obtained here Tuesday said that the meeting on Monday had agreed that all Palestinian prisoners must be released unconditionally.

"The leadership rejects Israel's approach to the prisoners issue and all attempts to categorise them

according to political affiliation or to control the destiny of each one of them according to the law of occupation and aggression against our people," it said.

Meanwhile, Israeli police said Tuesday that an explosion at a house near Tel Aviv which left two people dead was most likely to have been the work of a Palestinian suicide bomber.

"There is a very, very strong chance that it was the result of an attack by a Palestinian suicide bomber," Tel Aviv's police commissioner Yehuda Bahar told military radio.

Officers had recovered a detonator amid the rubble left by the blast at a house in the village of Kfar Yabatz, near the West Bank, on Monday night, police sources added.

"Apparently it was not caused by a gas explosion, the damage is too extensive and one of the bodies has been totally blown to pieces", in a further indication that it was a suicide attack, another senior police official, Amichai Shai, told the radio.

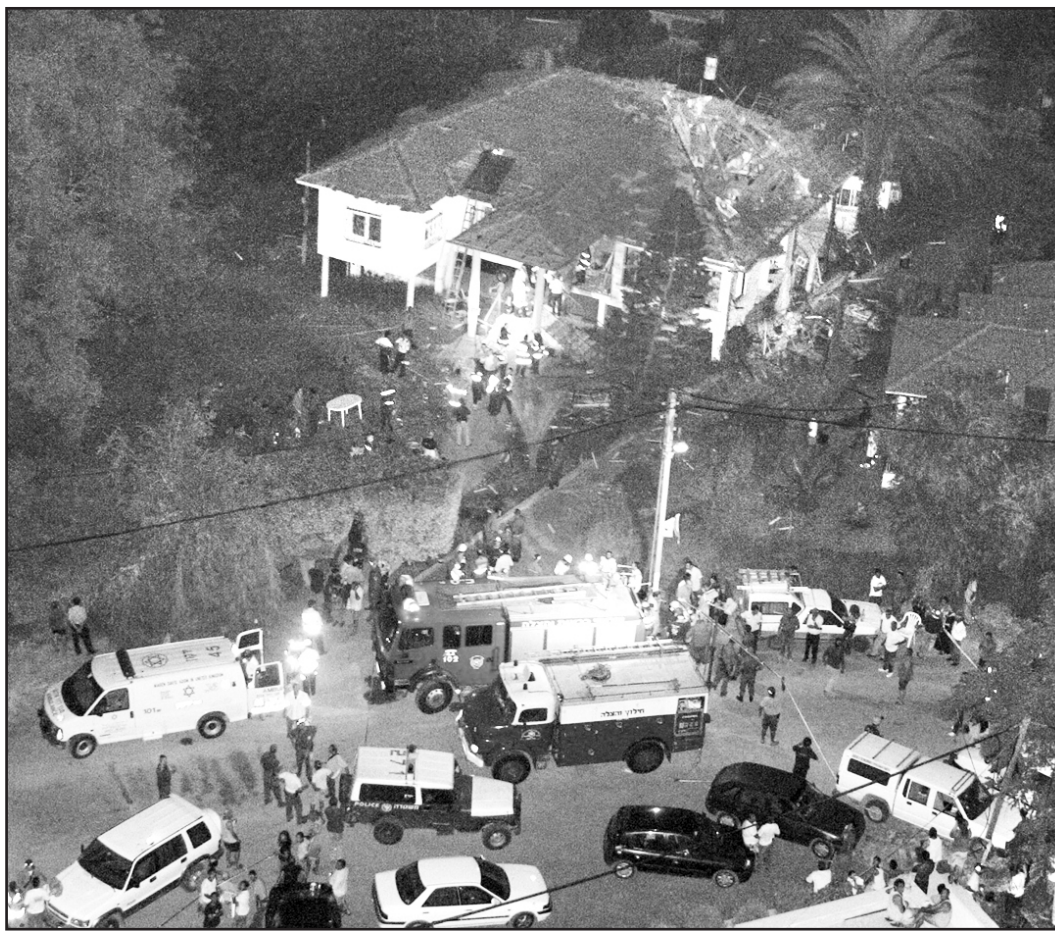


PHOTO: AFP

Israeli rescue units work at the site of a powerful explosion in the village of Kfar Yabatz, northeast of Tel Aviv, late Monday. Authorities said the blast occurred in the village, near the West Bank, killing a man and a woman and destroying a house.

White House admits mistake in uranium for Iraq claim

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration has acknowledged for the first time that President Bush's claim in his State of the Union address in January that Iraq had sought to buy uranium from Africa was an error. The Washington Post reported on Tuesday.

"Knowing all that we know now, the reference to Iraq's attempt to acquire uranium from Africa should not have been included in the State of the Union speech," a senior Bush administration official said in a statement authorized by the White House, the newspaper reported.

The report said the administration official's statement came in response to questions about a British parliamentary commission report that raised questions about the reliability of British intelligence cited by Bush in his Jan. 28 speech.

The statement, released late on Monday, effectively conceded that intelligence underlying the president's uranium-purchase claim was wrong. The Washington Post said.

A White House spokesman was not immediately available for comment early on Tuesday.

Controversy is raging in the United States and Britain over charges that the governments of the two countries manipulated intelligence about weapons of mass destruction to make the case for war against Iraq.



PHOTO: AFP

A US military team unloads a Russian-built MI-8 helicopter, which landed inside the US embassy enclosure on Monday in Monrovia. Thirteen members of a 32-strong team of US military experts arrived on Monday from the Sierra Leone capital Freetown amid international pressure for Washington to lead a peacekeeping force to the war-cracked Liberia.