

## British Muslims urge Blair to change foreign policy

AFP, London

British foreign policy puts civilians at increased risk both at home and abroad and is fuelling extremism around the world, Prime Minister Tony Blair was told yesterday. A total of 38 British Muslim groups and politicians put their names to a full-page advertisement in a number of national newspapers, calling for a change in London's stance to world affairs, particularly in the Middle East. "It is our view that current British government policy risks putting civilians at increased risk both in

the UK and abroad," the open letter said.

"To combat terror, the government has focused extensively on domestic legislation. While some of this will have an impact, the government must not ignore the role of its foreign policy.

"The debacle of Iraq and now the failure to do more to secure an immediate end to the attacks on civilians in the Middle East not only increases the risk to ordinary people in that region, it is also ammunition to extremists who threaten us all."

Signatories to the letter include the main Muslim Council of Britain

umbrella group, four Muslim members of parliament's lower House of Commons plus three of the four Muslim members of the upper House of Lords.

The complaint about British foreign policy fanning the flames of fanaticism is not a new one: the Muslim community here has long been critical of British policy on Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East.

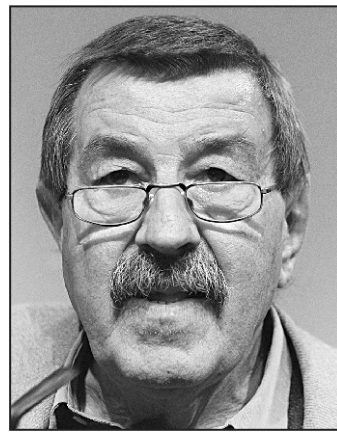
Muslim leaders identified it as one of the key causes of radicalism and alienation of young British Muslims in a report commissioned after last year's suicide bomb attacks on London's public trans-

port network.

Blair himself has repeatedly defended the country's role in Iraq and Afghanistan and his stance on the conflict in Lebanon; but he has rejected the idea that foreign policy is responsible for fostering radicalism.

The letter continues: "We urge the prime minister to redouble his efforts to tackle terror and extremism and change our foreign policy to show the world that we value the lives of civilians wherever they live and whatever their religion.

"Such a move would make us all safer."



## Gunter Grass reveals he served in SS

AFP, Berlin

Nobel literature laureate Gunter Grass was drafted into Germany's notorious Waffen SS during World War II, he has told the Saturday edition of the daily Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

The 78-year-old Grass said he revealed this for the first time in his memoir "Peeling Onions" which is due to appear in September.

So far, it had only been known that the author of "The Tin Drum" was conscripted into the German air defence forces.

But in his autobiography he also recounts that he tried to join the Third Reich's submarine forces when he was 15 years old but was rejected because he was too young.

He says that he was drafted into the Waffen SS the following year but denies suggestions that he joined willingly.

Grass, now a prominent leftist and pacifist, was wounded in 1945 and sent to an American prisoner of war camp.

## 2 strong quakes shake Sumatra

AFP, Jakarta

Two strong earthquakes yesterday shook the west coast of Indonesia's Sumatra island but no casualties or damage were reported, the US Geological Survey and local meteorological officials said.

The first quake, measured at 6.0, was centred 364 kilometres south of Banda Aceh, capital of Aceh province, the USGS said.

It struck at 3:54 am (2054 GMT Friday) with a depth of 10 kilometres.

The second quake, measured at 5.1, struck at 13:15 pm (0615 GMT) and was centred 69 kilometres southeast of Sinabang island, off western Sumatra, said the Indonesian National Earthquake Center in Jakarta.

Both readings were based on the open-ended Moment Magnitude scale, now used by US and other seismologists, which measures the area of the fault that ruptured and the total energy released.

"We received no reports of damages or casualties caused by the quakes but they were felt by residents in several towns on Sumatra island," the centre's Budi Waluyo told AFP.

A massive 7.7-magnitude earthquake earlier this month triggered a tsunami that lashed the south coast of Indonesia's Java island, killing more than 600 people.

## Mahathir's letter claiming his right to speak

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's former premier Mahathir Mohamad yesterday began circulating a letter to the country's ruling party claiming his right to question the government amid alleged attempts to stifle him.

The letter is being distributed to some three million members of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), whom Mahathir said were prevented from hearing his views after a series of party speaking engagements were cancelled.

"What are they afraid of? This is what worries me," Mahathir told reporters after speaking at an UMNO local division meeting west of Kuala Lumpur.

"I think they are trying to hide something, that's why they don't allow people to hear," he said, referring to the government, whom he accused of "an abuse of power".

Copies of the letter were available at the meeting, the first UMNO event Mahathir has addressed since the start of a bitter row earlier this year with the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The former leader said in the letter that several local UMNO divisions and groups had retracted their invitations for him to speak under duress from the party, led by Abdullah, also UMNO's president.

"They tell me they are being pressured heavily. Where is freedom?" he said the letter signed by Mahathir and dated August 11.

"Why is the leadership of UMNO afraid to let UMNO members meet and hear my explanations? They are in their hundreds, they have power, they have control over the newspapers and television," he said.

## String of Iraq rebel attacks follows arrest of al-Qaeda suspects

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq insurgents killed eight civilians and a police captain in attacks around the country yesterday, as a joint Iraqi-US security operation arrested dozens of alleged al-Qaeda suspects in Baghdad.

US troops announced the arrest of 60 suspected members of a car bomb cell after swooping on a funeral ceremony near where a 5,000-strong US-Iraqi joint force is conducting a major house-to-house sweep to flush out so-called death squads.

The US-led coalition said those captured in the raid were thought to be linked to the Sunni extremist movement al-Qaeda in Iraq, which is inspired by Osama bin Laden's network and which has killed hundreds of civilians.

They were "detained without incident" on Friday after intelligence data led troops to a funeral in Arab Jabur, on the southern edge of Baghdad.

Arab Jabur is a Sunni area close to the restive Dura district, which was this week the focus of a massive joint Iraqi-US operation designed to cordon off flashpoint areas, conduct weapons searches and root out armed gangs.

Since February, when a bomb attack against a Shiite mosque in Samarra, triggered a wave of tit-for-tat sectarian killings, Baghdad has been in the grip of an urban dirty war between rival Sunni and Shiite extremist groups.

"Operation Together Forward" has put more than 50,000 Iraqi troops and police and more than 10,000 Americans into the fray in a bid to quell the violence, which leaves around 50 people dead every day.

Last week US generals said the violence could push Iraq into civil war.

Observers warn that this new "Battle of Baghdad" represents Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's last chance to impose the authority of his national

unity government and avert the fragmentation of his country.

US-led forces also announced the arrest of "a new senior al-Qaeda in Iraq leader in the Bajji terrorist network" in Bajji, 200 kilometres (140 miles) north of Baghdad, accusing him of sending killers to Baghdad.

At the same time, however, violent attacks continued around the country.

In Baquba, north of the capital, attackers shot dead a police captain as he was heading in to work and separately detonated a roadside bomb, injuring seven officers conducting a patrol, police said.

Two civilians were also killed by drive-by shootings in the town.

Meanwhile, in Baghdad proper, five officers were injured when a roadside bomb detonated in the Adhamiyah district in the north of the city. No one was killed, an interior ministry official said.

## 40 'Islamists' held in Italy

AFP, Milan

Forty suspects have been arrested in Italy during a police control operation launched after an alleged terrorist plot to blow up US-bound airplanes was uncovered in Britain, the Italian interior ministry said Friday.

The operation conducted on Thursday and Friday involved 14 Italian provinces and focused "on places frequented by Islamists" such as "centers for telephone calls, Internet access and centers for transferring money overseas, the ministry said in a statement.

Twenty-eight of the detainees were arrested for violating their residency permits, while 15 search operations had been launched in "foreigners' apartments, almost all Pakistanis, in a joint operation with the Belgian police", the ministry said.

The Belgian authorities are investigating a group of Pakistanis suspected of financing terrorist training by Lashkar-e-Toiba, a group also active in Jammu and Kashmir, still considered a region of jihad (holy war), the ministry said.

It was not immediately known if any of the 40 people arrested had any connection with the alleged plot uncovered by British police.

## Nepal's airport bans carrying of liquids by passengers

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal yesterday banned passengers using the country's lone international airport from carrying liquids in hand baggage following a foiled plot to blow up airplanes leaving Britain for the United States.

"As part of precautionary measures, security at Tribhuvan International Airport has been put on high alert," said police superintendent Prakash Kunwar.

"Passengers have been barred from carrying aerosols, gels, mouthwash, toothpaste, perfumes, liquid soaps, shaving creams and other forms of liquids in hand luggage," he said.

International airlines fly from Tribhuvan International in Kathmandu to 12 countries, Kanwar said.

The security was stepped up after British police said Thursday they foiled a plot to smuggle liquids in hand baggage onto planes bound for the United States from London's Heathrow Airport that would be made into bombs.

Kanwar said Nepal authorities were "strictly monitoring Delhi-bound flights as India has raised security at its major airports".

India on Friday announced stringent security measures at five key airports in the country after Britain said it had uncovered the plan to blow up flights and US warnings Friday of possible Al-Qaeda attacks in India.



Liquid items no longer allowed on planes. Bottles of water, deodorant, shampoo and even toothpaste fill a trash container near the American Airlines ticket area at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, Illinois.

## Disruption starts easing at British airports

AFP, London

Air passengers in Britain faced a third consecutive day of disruption yesterday due to stringent security measures brought in after a police raid on an alleged plot to blow up US-bound aircraft.

But the British Airports Authority (BAA) and airlines reported a much improved situation from the previous 48 hours, with only a handful of cancellations in and out of the country's major airports.

National carrier British Airways (BA) cancelled 10 out of its 75 scheduled long-haul flights out of

London's main Heathrow Airport Saturday, all to the United States, a spokesman told AFP.

Thirty-one out of 202 planned short-haul internal or European flights into and out of Heathrow have also been scrapped, he added.

At London Gatwick, the country's second-busiest airport after Heathrow, only 10 BA domestic flights out of a total of 101 flights have been cancelled.

The picture contrasts sharply with Thursday when 652 in-bound and departing flights on all airlines at Heathrow were scrapped, including more than 400 BA services That

figure was reduced to 96 on all operators Friday.

"We're operating as close to normal a service as we can," said a spokesman for BAA Heathrow.

"There are delays. We're advising passengers to arrive early and check with their airline before they leave and be mindful of the security restrictions."

Passengers are currently banned from taking anything into aircraft cabins, except essential items like travel documents, following allegations of a plot to use liquid explosives smuggled on board in hand luggage.

## ANTI-TERROR LAWS

# Over 1,000 arrested in Britain since 9/11

AFP, London

More than 1,000 people have been arrested under British anti-terrorism legislation in the last five years but only 158 have been charged with terrorist-related offences, police said Friday.

London's Metropolitan Police, which leads anti-terrorism operations across the country, said 1,047 people had been arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000 between September 2001 and June 30 this year.

Of these, 174 people have been charged with non-terrorism offences,

69 have been detained under the country's immigration laws and 158 charged with offences under the Terrorism Act 2000.

About 60 people are currently awaiting trial on terrorism-related offences.

The figures do not take into account arrests made since July 1, including those of 24 people in pre-dawn raids Thursday in connection with an alleged plot to blow up US-bound aircraft.

The 24 — the majority of them reportedly Britons of Pakistani origin — were detained on suspicion of the

"commission, preparation and instigation of acts of terrorism under the Terrorism Act 2000".

Britain's Muslims population feel they have been unfairly targeted by the legislation, with the finger of suspicion being pointed at their community, particularly after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States.

The Metropolitan Police has been strongly criticised recently for its use of the legislation, in particular following the high-profile June 2 raid on a suspected chemical bomb factory in east London that yielded nothing.



Members of the Federation of Cuban Women chant slogans in Havana in support of ailing strongman Fidel Castro who turns 80 today.

## Castro's birthday party goes on as he recovers

AFP, Havana

Cubans hung flags and decorated the "Anti-imperialist Tribunal" stage for a concert within earshot of the US mission in Havana, all to celebrate the 80th birthday of Fidel Castro — nowhere to be seen in 12 days.

Castro, who turns 80 today, handed over power provisionally after undergoing intestinal surgery to his brother, Raul, 11 days ago. Neither one has been seen since.

Yet the birthday party goes on, although Fidel Castro, the country's "comandante" for 48 years, asked that the celebration be postponed while he recovers.

Cuban officials have insisted regularly over the past week that Castro is recuperating from surgery, and that life in the only Communist country in the Americas was "completely normal," as they did again Friday.

Castro himself has always answered questions of who would lead a post-Castro Cuba by saying that the revolution would go on with him or without him. Cuba is not peppered with his portraits and statues, as if to say Cuba is something more than Castro.

That, despite wishes of the Cuban exile community in Miami, which launched spontaneous street celebrations on news that Castro was ill, but which have since died out.

US officials told Cubans in Miami and in Cuba to stay put and wait to see what comes next, for fear of conflict in Cuba or of mass immigration into the United States.