

Mugabe will be isolated if polls rigged: Blair

REUTERS, CooLum, Australia

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said yesterday he was disappointed the Commonwealth had not suspended Zimbabwe but was confident President Robert Mugabe would be isolated if an election next weekend was not democratic.

Blair's call to suspend Zimbabwe immediately from the 54-nation group of mostly ex-British colonies was rejected yesterday with the Commonwealth deferring any action until after a team of observers report back on the March 9-10 presidential election.

"We have postponed the day of judgement in a sense on Zimbabwe and I think that was the wrong thing to do, we should have taken action now," Blair told reporters at a Commonwealth leaders' summit on Australia's tropical eastern coast.

"But we have at least the possibility of a mechanism in place to suspend Zimbabwe, to take really tough action, if Mugabe ends up the victor in a rigged election through violence and intimidation."

Commonwealth leaders agreed on Monday to set up a taskforce comprising the leaders of Australia, South Africa and Nigeria which has the power to suspend Zimbabwe if a team of Commonwealth election observers

now on the ground reports back negatively.

Blair, although losing his battle for Zimbabwe's suspension, saved face when the Commonwealth leaders agreed at the 11th hour to include the threat of suspension in their Zimbabwe statement.

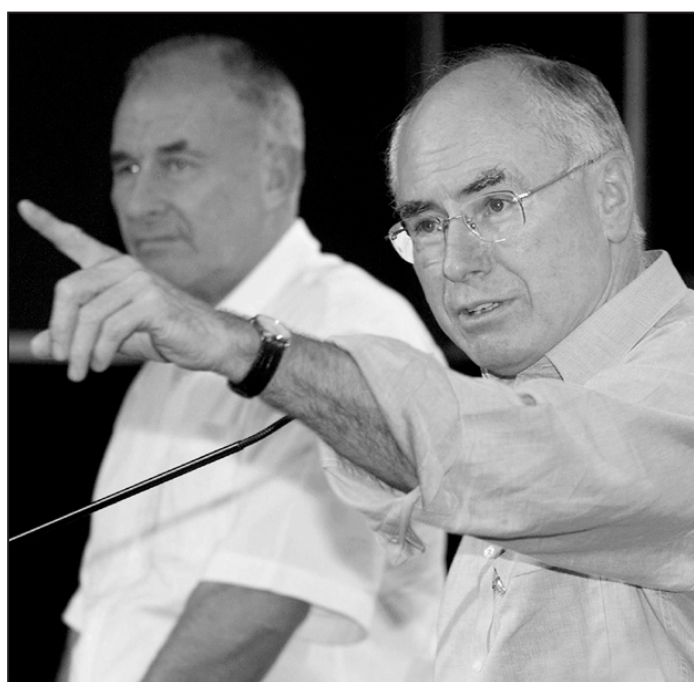
Blair said he had no doubt the report would be adverse with reports of violence and intimidation by local militia sponsored by Mugabe who were disrupting opposition rallies and had attacked opposition politicians.

"If the commonwealth observers to their job -- and I have no doubt at all that they will find that violence and intimidation have taken place -- people would expect the Commonwealth to act," Blair said.

"I think you'll find the Commonwealth does the right thing in the end," he said.

Blair dismissed concerns that two of the three leaders in the Commonwealth taskforce -- South African President Thabo Mbeki and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo -- had so far opposed taking punitive action against their neighbouring African country.

"They have made it clear that if the evidence is there from the Commonwealth observers report then they will back the necessary action," Blair said.



Australian Prime Minister John Howard (R) makes a point on Monday during a joint news conference at CHOGM as Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon of New Zealand (L) looks on.

'50 feared dead in Afghan quake'

AFP, Islamabad

Some 50 people are feared dead and 100 are missing in two northern Afghan villages one day after an earthquake, a spokesman for the World Food Program said Monday, quoting local authorities.

"We have received information from the governor of Samangan province that two villages, (in the area of) Takhdi Rustum, were hit by the earthquake and 50 people were killed and around 100 missing," said Khaled Mansour, a WFP spokesman in Islamabad.

"We have no independent confirmation for that. This is what we received from the governor's office," he said.

Mansour said the WFP was trying to send two helicopters to assess the situation and bring relief

supplies.

"If these helicopters are made available today (Monday), they will be sent today. Otherwise they will be sent at first light tomorrow."

The quake measured 6.7 on the Richter scale at its epicenter in the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan, 250 km north of the western Pakistani city of Peshawar, according to Pakistani seismological officials.

Officials in Kabul said two people were killed in the Afghan capital by the quake when one of the walls of their house collapsed on them. They said reports were still being collected from other parts of the war-torn country.

Tremors were felt throughout northern Pakistan, in neighbouring Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and as far as away as New Delhi.

Lanka military on red alert despite truce with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan security forces were on a high state of alert Monday even though the government has entered into a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire with Tamil Tiger rebels.

The military have also been ordered to step up training, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told parliament during an informal debate on the cessation of hostilities pact signed with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) two weeks ago.

Wickremesinghe said there was a high level of mistrust between the two parties given the decades-old history of the conflict, which has claimed over 60,000 lives.

"Therefore, while we go forward to implement this (ceasefire) agreement, we will continue to keep our armed forces on constant alert," Wickremesinghe said warning that the peace process would be difficult.

With confidence-building measures taking effect,

Wickremesinghe said the move towards military disengagement would depend on the ground situation.

He said many were still concerned about the true intentions of the LTTE amid fears that the guerrillas were not truly interested in a ceasefire but wanted to buy time to regroup and start attacking government forces again.

Under the truce deal, both the government and Tamil Tiger rebels, who have been fighting for an independent homeland in the north and east of the island for the minority Tamil community, have agreed to stop their attacks against each other.

Norway, which has been acting as a mediator, is currently assembling a team of Scandinavians to monitor the ceasefire. A retired Norwegian army general, Trond Furuhovde, held talks here Saturday with Wickremesinghe on monitoring the truce.

Li Peng gives boost to China's legislature

AFP, Beijing

When Li Peng was put in charge of China's parliament four years ago, it was supposed to be his swan song. Instead he has risen like a Phoenix from the ashes, observers say.

Li, permanently tainted since the bloody crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in 1989, has done far better at the head of the 3,000-strong National People's Congress (NPC) than most credited him for when he took over the reins.

"Li Peng's performance has been unexpectedly satisfactory," said Joseph Cheng, a China expert at the City University of Hong Kong. "He has certainly not been in favour of reform, but during his tenure the NPC has improved considerably its legislative work."

This year's NPC session, which opens Tuesday, may mark the beginning of the end of Li's political

career, which goes back to 1941, when he was sent to study at the Communist Party's wartime headquarters.

Given 74-year-old Li's poor reputation at home and especially abroad, where he is routinely met by angry demonstrators, he is all but certain to retire next year after his term at the NPC expires.

The only obvious position open to the former premier is that of state president, now held by Jiang Zemin, and despite rumours to the contrary, few observers see him as a successful candidate.

"The state president is supposed to represent the country," said Cheng. "He is not fit to do that."

Li's low popularity at home is partly the result of rumours of widespread corruption among his near and dear.

'Palestinians should beg for truce'

Israel hints worst retaliation, 8 Palestinians killed

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's Justice Minister Meir Sheerit said Monday that the Palestinians should "beg for a ceasefire" after the army steps up its efforts to suppress their 17-month uprising.

His colleague in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's right-wing Likud Party, Jerusalem mayor Ehud Olmert, and Labour Sports Minister Matan Vilnai meanwhile warned Israelis to prepare for a long war.

Sharon's security cabinet decided late Sunday to increase military pressure on the Palestinians after 21 Israelis were killed by a suicide bomb in Jerusalem and operations by gunmen in the Palestinian territories over the weekend.

"When 21 of our citizens are murdered in 24 hours I approve any operation aimed at punishing the Palestinians until they beg for a

ceasefire," Sheerit, a Likud moderate, told Israeli public radio.

"Our action will be much more intense. We are at war and the Palestinians must know this. When they want to talk, then we'll see about it," he said.

Sheerit warned: "We are going to make things hard for them, because we have no choice, they are deliberately killing our children and systematically destroying our families."

"We will use all the means that we think suitable to put an end to terrorism."

Vilnai for his part said that "Israel is expecting a coordinated escalation of terrorism."

He said it would fight Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat as "the one who took the decision to order this escalation," adding, "It will be long, painful and difficult, and we will continue at the same time to hold out a hand to those who want to

throw a bridge over this ocean of blood."

Olmert echoed Vilnai's words, telling the radio: "It is a different war which confronts us, a long, difficult and painful war, but the public must be prepared to face up to it, in each house, each school, each street."

He added, "The government must act to change the order of priorities. We must take the necessary measures and stop deluding ourselves... we must tell the truth to the public -- there will be more attacks and we must meet them."

Olmert also called, without naming him, for a strike against Marwan Barghout, the West Bank head of Arafat's Fatah movement, who praised Sunday the "heroic operations" of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a radical offshoot of Fatah.

Meanwhile, Israeli troops shot dead eight Palestinians Monday, including four during incursions in

West Bank and Gaza Strip refugee camps, as an Israeli minister hinted the worst of the army's retaliation for the weekend killing of 22 Israelis was yet to come.

In Jenin, Amjad Fakhuri, the local leader for an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah whose attacks have rocked Israel, was killed by tank fire, Palestinian security sources said.

He fled to death before the army let ambulances reach him, hospital sources said.

His group, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, claimed responsibility for the suicide blast which killed 10 Israelis and the bomber in Jerusalem Saturday night as well as a string of other attacks.

It was specifically singled out as a target by aide to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, whose security cabinet decided late Sunday to step up the military pressure on the Palestinians.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) pays floral tributes to parliament Speaker G.M.C. Balayogi, at Parliament House in New Delhi on Monday. The body of the Speaker was flown to New Delhi from the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh where he was killed in a helicopter crash on March 3.

Riots put India's secular fabric in tatters

AFP, Ahmedabad

India began picking up the pieces Monday after days of bloody sectarian riots that claimed more than 580 lives and raised fundamental questions of national and political unity.

In the western state of Gujarat, there were no reports of any fresh violence following four days of fearsome Hindu-Muslim clashes.

Security in the state was largely in the hands of the army, which was deployed in Gujarat's riot-torn cities on Friday as it became alarmingly clear that the police were either incapable or unwilling to prevent the bloodletting.

"The state is responsible for the security of every single citizen irrespective of the religion and the community he adheres to," Home Minister L.K. Advani said as he toured areas of Gujarat on Sunday.

But there are many who feel that the state -- both in Gujarat and in New Delhi -- has failed woefully to live up to that responsibility.

"Last week was one of the most brutal that this nation has ever had the misfortune of experiencing, one in which India failed to protect its greatest asset -- its

integral unity based on communal harmony," the Indian Express newspaper said in an editorial.

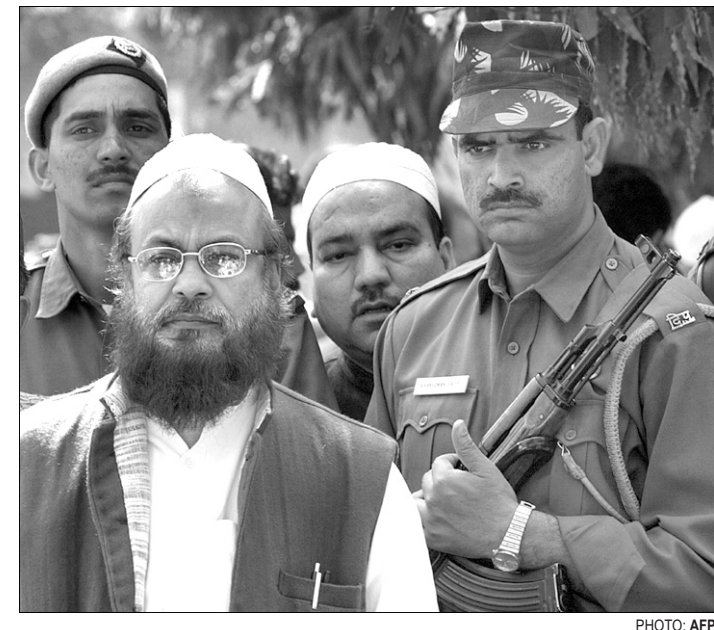
Police officials in Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad said 523 people had been killed in rioting across the state since Wednesday morning's attack on a train carrying Hindu activists that left 58 dead, including women and children.

The vast majority of riot victims were believed to be Muslims.

"Everything we had, our home, our possessions, our money, it's all gone," said Rehmat Bibi, sheltering along with several hundred Muslim families in a well-guarded Ahmedabad mosque.

Bibi and her family were lucky to survive after a mob of more than 1,000 Hindus attacked a Muslim residential district for close on five hours on Friday night, looting, burning and killing.

Bibi said the police did nothing to control the mob, which only dispersed once the army arrived on the scene.



Indian Muslims stand close to policemen during a protest in New Delhi on Monday against the recent inter communal violence. More than 580 people are now confirmed to have died in India's worst outbreak of sectarian violence in a decade between Hindu and Muslim communities.

Shiite doctor gunned down in Karachi

AFP, Karachi

Two unidentified gunmen Monday shot dead a doctor from Pakistan's minority Shiite Muslim community in an apparent sectarian attack here, police said.

Ale Safdar Rizvi, a kidney specialist, was on his way to Jinnah Hospital when assailants ambushed his car in southern Karachi, police chief Tariq Jamil said.

"Two gunmen sprayed his car with bullets. He sustained multiple bullet wounds and died in the hospital," Jamil said, adding the incident appeared to be a sectarian killing.

A string of sectarian attacks has occurred in Pakistan over the past two weeks in violence attributed by police to extremists returning from Afghanistan after the collapse of the Taliban regime.

US busts Israeli spy ring

AFP, Paris

US authorities have broken a network of Israeli spies living in the United States who were trying to burrow into the justice and defence departments, a French website specialising in intelligence matters reported Monday.

The site, Intelligence Online, said it had exclusive access to a US justice department report that showed that "a huge Israeli spy ring operating in the United States was rolled up by the Justice Department's counter-espionage service".

Around 120 Israelis were arrested or deported as a result of the operation, which it said had been kept top-secret up to now.

The website said the ring was active in the states of Arkansas,

California, Florida and Texas. It was arranged in around 20 cells of between four and eight members, who were aged between 22 and 30 and had recently completed Israeli military service in an intelligence division.

It named several Israelis alleged to be espionage operatives, including three 13 Israeli "art students" it said were arrested in the Texan city of Irving on March 26 and 27 last year.

Intelligence Online editor-in-chief Guillaume Dasquie told AFP that the network had been trying "to penetrate justice department and defence department systems" through drug-fighting agencies such as the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), which has access to files from other US departments.

Hillary, Tenzing to do it again

AFP, Auckland

Almost 50 years after the world's highest peak was first conquered, Hillary and Tenzing are preparing to climb Mount Everest again.

But this time the climbers will be Sir Edmund Hillary's son Peter and Tenzing Norgay's grandson Tashi Tenzing Norgay.

The pair will try to reach the summit next month to start a year of celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the original climb in 1953.

Peter Hillary, 47, will meet Tenzing Norgay's son, Jamling Tenzing Norgay, at base camp. Hillary, who made his first ascent of Everest in 1953, will then climb the southern face of the mountain from Nepal -- the route his father took in 1953.

The brooch, made in Tenzing's hometown of Darjeeling, depicts an ice-axe, edelweiss and climbing

boots.

Peter Hillary said the climb, which would take two to three months, was a celebration of mountaineering and his father's and Tenzing's achievement.

"It's like a birthday party, and I'm not talking about my own climbing. I'm thinking about what Dad has done and also New Zealanders in that field."

He hopes the documentary and anniversary will help to celebrate New Zealand's long connection with Everest.

Peter Hillary said his father was excited about the climb but wanted his son to weigh up the risks.

"He wants me to be careful, and I appreciate that."

Sir Edmund Hillary lives here and still travels annually to Nepal.

Swiss voters choose to join UN

REUTERS, Zurich

Swiss voters abandoned centuries of political isolationism and narrowly agreed on Sunday that their staunchly neutral country should join the United Nations.

Official figures showed the "yes" camp won 54.6 per cent of the popular vote and 12 of 23 full cantons, a double majority required under the Swiss system of direct democracy.

The vote leaves the Vatican the only state that is not a full member of the world body.

"If there is a winner in this election, then it is our country because we can now bring as much as possible our values, our traditions, and our good services into the UN", Foreign Minister Joseph Deiss said in Bern.

Although Switzerland is deeply engaged in UN activities and hosts its European headquarters in Geneva, its fierce neutrality and independent-mindedness had kept it from becoming more than just an observer.

Many who voted "yes" in the referendum felt the decision to join the United Nations had been long overdue.

"I think Switzerland has missed the world's growing together. Switzerland can no longer stand on the sidelines," said Ladina Fuchs of Zurich.

Opinion polls had suggested most voters would back becoming the UN's 190th member, but left open whether most cantons would agree. The voting system lends extra weight to small, German-speaking regions traditionally wary of the wider world.

Turnout was relatively high at nearly 58 per cent. The canton of Geneva approved by a two-to-one margin amid strong support in Francophone western Switzerland, while German-speaking eastern Switzerland was mostly opposed.

At issue in the watershed vote was not just foreign policy and the government's credibility, but also Switzerland's definition of itself and its place in the world.

Opponents said joining the United Nations would undermine Swiss sovereignty and make the Alpine country of 7.3 million a pawn of the world's great powers.

"The UN doesn't change anything. It is a paper tiger. The vote on the UN is a purely emotional and not a rational issue," grumbled "no" voter Peter Guenter of Zurich.

Maoist strike closes schools in Nepal

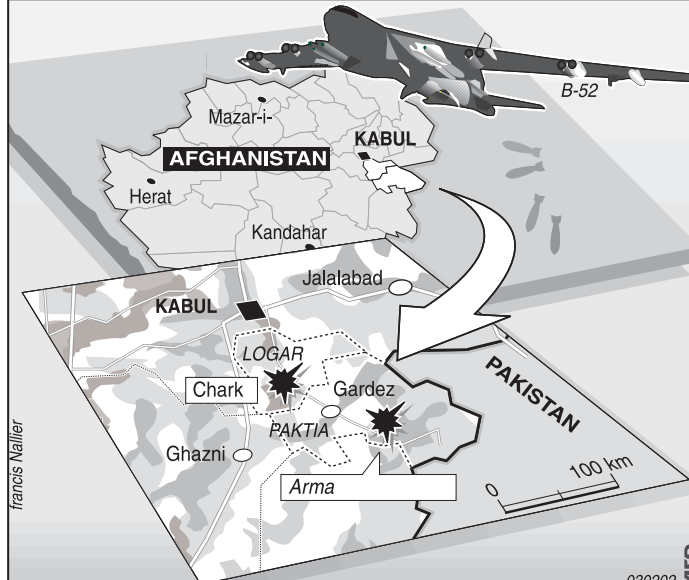
AFP, Kathmandu

More than 2,000 schools in Nepal were closed Monday after a strike call by a pro-Maoist student union, officials said.

Some 350,000 students were affected by the two-day strike in the Kathmandu Valley area called by the All Nepal National Free Students' Union-Revolutionary (ANNFSU-R), education officials said.

"We received a letter from the ANNFSU-R with various demands and urging us to close schools for two days," said B.B. Shah, of the Public and Boarding School Organisation Nepal.

Fresh fighting in Afghanistan



US jets pound Afghan mountains

AFP, Gardez

US warplanes pounded suspected al-Qaida hideouts Monday in the eastern mountains of Afghanistan, as a local official reported the heaviest firefights yet between Afghan forces and the militants.

"The fighting is non-stop between the Afghan-Americans and the al-Qaida," Taj Mohammad Wardak, governor of Paktia province, told AFP. "I think it was the worst fighting so far overnight both on the ground and in the air."

US warplanes have been pounding the area since late Friday in a bid to oust the al-Qaida and Taliban fighters holed up in the snowy Arma mountains.

At least two clouds of dust from the bombing were seen rising behind the mountains Monday afternoon, as a warplane hovered overhead.

Under the guidance of US advisers, some 1,000 Afghan troops have been trying to mount a ground offensive, but soldiers said progress has been halted by stiff al-Qaida resistance.

"The al-Qaida are not in a position to launch a counterattack, but as soon as the Afghan-Americans come close they are opening fire from the caves. As the security belt gets tighter, so the resistance gets stronger," Wardak said.