



British Prime Minister Tony Blair (2nd L, front) is received at Kuwait's International Airport by Crown Prince and Prime Minister Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah al-Sabah (R), upon his arrival in Kuwait City on Wednesday. Blair arrived in Kuwait at the start of a visit to the Gulf that will see him become the first Western leader to go to post-war Iraq.

## Blair first Western leader to visit post-war Iraq

'Iraq war one of century's defining moments'

REUTERS, Basra

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who gambled his political career on the war on Iraq, on Thursday became the first Western leader to visit the country since the conflict that toppled Saddam Hussein.

Blair arrived in the southern city of Basra for a lightning visit to thank British troops controlling the area and throw his weight behind reconstruction efforts.

He told reporters en route to the Gulf that he wanted to thank the armed forces "for their magnificent performance, and take stock of humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Iraq."

The prime minister's visit coincides with fresh controversy over whether Saddam had weapons of mass destruction -- the chief reason given by the US and Britain for justifying the war.

But on Tuesday, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in an effort to explain why no such weapons had been found, said Iraq may have destroyed them before the US-led invasion in March.

AFP adds: British Prime Minister Tony Blair was Thursday to head for Poland, Russia and a meeting of the G8 nations bearing a tough message that Europe should finally put aside differences with the United States over Iraq.

Blair -- who was due to leave Kuwait Thursday evening after a lightning trip into Iraq itself visiting British troops who helped oust Saddam Hussein -- said that certain European nations had to realize it was time to "move forward."

He also starkly warned

Washington's critics that the United States was not about to give up its efforts to battle terrorism and weapons proliferation, and that pretending otherwise would do little good.

Casting himself in the role of fence-mender between Washington and opponents of the conflict such as France, Germany and Russia, Blair conceded that the US-led war had caused bitter divisions.

"I think there is an acceptance that we have been through a bad time in the international community," he told reporters during his flight to Kuwait.

"But I think it is still important that we discuss the nature of the trans-Atlantic alliance and how we strengthen it," he said.

"That debate can happen in a less febrile atmosphere now we have got the conflict in Iraq out of the way."

During the coming few days the British premier will come face to face with all shades of opinion about the Iraq war, to which Britain committed vigorous support as well as 45,000 troops.

Asked about continued divisions between Bush and Chirac, Blair insisted that the issue "should not be turned into a personal debate."

"It is about dealing with a world that is increasingly dominated by the economic power of globalisation and new security threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction," he said.

Critics of Washington should pay attention to other US actions, he said, singling out Bush's support for the Middle East "road map" peace plan, his backing for UN involvement in Iraq and increased aid for Africa.

From there, he heads to Saint Petersburg in Russia for the city's 300th anniversary, and then on to the annual gathering of G8 leaders this coming weekend in the French Alpine town of Evian.

A string of world politicians, including US President George W. Bush and European Union leaders

He was first due to hold talks in Warsaw, where the Polish government strongly backed the campaign and also contributed a small number of its own troops.

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## New tremor terrifies quake-hit Algeria

REUTERS, Reghia

A fresh tremor struck Algeria Wednesday, terrifying a nation still reeling from an earthquake that killed 2,200 people last week and an aftershock Tuesday believed to have buried several people alive.

Authorities said there were no injuries or damage from the latest tremor, measuring 5.2 on the Richter scale, but fear and panic spread throughout Algeria as it followed the disasters on Tuesday and last Wednesday.

Too afraid to return home, tens of thousands of people in the Muslim North African state's quake-battered Mediterranean coastal region -- including the capital Algiers -- will spend another night outdoors.

"With all the aftershocks people are scared. People still sleep outside even if they have a home," said Kamel Kabache, 28, who will sleep in a cramped tent with his family in Reghia, a poor town some 25 miles east of the capital.

"My assessment is that by next week I will arrive at a cease-fire agreement with Hamas," Abbas told the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Achronot in an interview published on the morning before talks were scheduled with Sharon.

"Hamas will commit to halting terrorism both within the Green Line (inside Israel) and in

territories," said Abbas, in comments aimed at calming Israeli concerns that Hamas would only agree to a partial halt on attacks.

But a senior Hamas official, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, said he was not aware of any such agreement was in the works and repeated the group's list of conditions for a truce that Israel has always rejected.

"Our position so far is the same position," Rantissi said. "If the Israelis stop killing Palestinian civilians, free prisoners, and end aggression, we avoid targeting Israeli civilians."

Hamas has spearheaded a suicide bombing campaign that has killed scores of Israelis since the start of the Palestinian uprising for independence in September 2000 when peace talks failed.

AFP adds: Deadly violence continued to plague the West Bank and Gaza Strip Thursday as Palestinian prime minister

Earlier, in the northern West Bank city of Jenin, a gunman belonging to Islamic Jihad was shot dead by Israeli troops, the group's

## 'US has no plans to use Azerbaijan for attacking Iran'

AFP, Baku

The US ambassador to Azerbaijan Thursday denied a Russian press report that the Pentagon plans to use the Caucasus republic as a launching pad for military action against Iran.

"We have no such plans," ambassador Ross Wilson told reporters in the Azeri capital Baku.

Russia's Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported Thursday that the Pentagon had readied a plan for military action against Iran, which would include the use of US troops stationed in Azerbaijan and neighboring Georgia.

"The military action is designed to complete a popular uprising on which the Pentagon is counting," said the paper, adding that the operation's launch date would be decided at a meeting to be held Thursday in the White House.

The report has also been denied by Azerbaijan and Georgia. A spokesman at Georgia's embassy in Moscow said it "knew nothing about US plans in respect of Iran."

Azeri official Fuad Akhundov told Moscow Echo radio: "Not one word corresponds to reality. This article is aimed at torpedoing relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, which are improving."

The newspaper report appeared to stem from a recent toughening of Washington's stance on Iran, which it accuses of harboring terrorists and having a secret nuclear weapons programme.

Meanwhile, fresh signals in Iran of a get-tough policy on al-Qaeda members may be seen as a response to mounting United States pressure, but diplomats believe the move is unlikely to satisfy Washington's apparent appetite for regime change in the Islamic republic.

The Russian newspaper report speculated that the main thrust of any US military action against Iran would be launched from Iraq, but that the former Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia would also be used.

Azerbaijan shares a border with Iran. Like its neighbour, Azerbaijan has a majority Shiite population but it has close ties with the West and supported the US-led actions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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It is the third letter attributed to Saddam Hussein published by the Arabic-language al-Quds, which has taken a pro-Saddam editorial line and blamed the Iraqi people for his toppling.

In the past, the letters have been met with scepticism, in part because the handwriting did not appear to match that of Saddam Hussein.

The sanctions include a two-year ban on any US government contracts, assistance and a ban on any imports of the entities' products into the United States, the department said.

In addition, the Moldovan entities will be barred for two years from obtaining US export licenses for any missile-related technology, it said.

Iranian firms are already denied such licenses under existing sanctions.

On May 16, 2002, the State Department identified Vladov and Cuanta SA, along with eight Chinese and two Armenian firms and individuals, as having violated the provisions of the Iran Nonproliferation Act of 2000.

That act prohibits the sale of chemical and biological weapons components and missiles and missile technology to the Islamic republic.

While the language used in

## US slaps sanctions on Iranian, Moldovan firms for missile tech sales

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday slapped punitive sanctions on an Iranian company, two Moldovan firms and one Moldovan businessman for trade in missile technology, the State Department said.

In separate announcements published in the Federal Register, the department identified the companies and the individual as the Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group of Iran and Cuanta SA, Computer and Communications SRL, and Mikhail Pavlovich Vladov, all of Moldova.

Department spokesman Richard Boucher said later that the two sets of sanctions were related and had both taken effect on May 9.

In addition, he pointed out that Cuanta SA and Vladov were among 12 entities named and penalized last May for transferring sensitive technology and equipment to Iran.

The sanctions were imposed on the Moldovan entities and persons because they contributed to missile programs in Iran, Boucher told reporters.

The Iranian firm "was penalized for its material contribution to Iran's ballistic missile programs through its involvement in this activity," he said.

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## US asks 50 countries to help police Iraq

AFP, Washington

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In the past, the letters have been met with scepticism, in part because the handwriting did not appear to match that of Saddam Hussein.

"While we fight and hunt the cowardly American and British enemy, we call on you to activate your political role by boycotting everyone that the criminal invading forces install to manage any of the Iraqi governmental and popular departments," the letter states.

It is published in the wake of a series of attacks on US soldiers in Iraq.

On Tuesday, gunmen fired rocket-propelled grenades and shot at a US army unit in Fallujah, north-west of Baghdad, killing two soldiers and wounding nine others.

"We know that there are elements of the country, elements of the old regime -- from the military, from the intelligence, from other institutions -- that remain at large, hostile, armed, and they are going to try to attack us," Feith said. "And we are going to be defending ourselves."

The key pillar of the proposed security structure will be an international stabilization force that will comprise at least two multinational divisions -- one led by Britain and the other by Poland, according to Pentagon officials.

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## 'Saddam letter' calls for resistance

BBC ONLINE

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## US asks 50 countries to help police Iraq

AFP, Washington

The United States has asked nearly 50 countries to send police officers to Iraq as it tries to mount an international effort to curb chaos and violence in the country, a top defense official said Wednesday.

But only seven countries had so far heeded the appeal and agreed to dispatch advisers to help train a reorganized Iraqi police force and assist US troops in daily patrols, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith said.

The announcement came as the George W. Bush administration, faced with intensified guerrilla-style attacks on US forces, scrambled to put together a security structure for postwar Iraq to ensure peace and tranquility.

Two US soldiers were killed and nine wounded Tuesday when a group of Iraqis armed with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades attacked them in the city of Fallujah.

On Monday, two more US servicemen were killed and four were wounded in an ambush near the town of Haditha and in a suspected landmine explosion on a road leading to Baghdad airport.

"We know that there are elements of the country, elements of the old regime -- from the military, from the intelligence, from other institutions -- that remain at large, hostile, armed, and they are going to try to attack us," Feith said. "And we are going to be defending ourselves."

According to Feith, one or two more nations were also considering organizing divisions for deployment, but their role has not been clearly defined.

Eager to curb hostile attacks and street crime, the United States has already assigned 21,000 troops out of the 46,000 deployed in Baghdad to daily security operations, according to a situation report made public by the Pentagon.

The number of US military police is being more than doubled, to 4,000.

But despite these efforts, Iraq remains a dangerous place.

A US patrol in Baghdad was fired at from a rooftop, but no one was hurt, the Central Command said.

A cache of weapons, including