



PHOTO: AFP

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-Salem 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 realise it was time to "move forwards".

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.

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.

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

such as French President Jacques Chirac -- a strong opponent of the war -- are due to attend the events. Blair appealed for all sides to forget their arguments over Iraq.

"I have always said that there is no point in disguising the differences that we have had. On the other hand, let's work out how to move forwards," he said.

And in a veiled slight to European opponents of the war, Blair pointedly reminded them that many of their eastern neighbours such as Poland -- famously dubbed "New Europe" by US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld -- held differing views.

"Sometimes people see the view in Europe as all one-way, and it isn't," he said.

"That is why I have often said that if you add in the new countries coming into the EU, probably a majority of Europe stood with us on that."

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.

New tremor terrifies quake-hit Algeria

REUTERS, Reghaia

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 Reghaia, a poor town some 25 miles east of the capital.

Abbas eyes truce with Hamas by next week

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas said in an interview published on Thursday that he expected to reach an agreement with the militant group Hamas by next week for a complete halt to attacks on Israelis.

A cease-fire deal with Hamas would be a major step forward on a US-backed "road map" that Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will discuss with President Bush in a three-way summit in Jordan on June 4.

"My assessment is that by next week I will arrive at a cease-fire agreement with Hamas," Abbas told the Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth 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 the

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 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

Mahmud Abbas prepared to meet his Israeli counterpart, Ariel Sharon, to discuss a peace plan ahead of a three-way summit next week with US President George W. Bush.

Israeli troops shot dead a militant from the headline Hamas group during a raid into the southern Gaza Strip city of Khan Yunis, Palestinian security sources said.

Relatives said the 24-year-old had been wounded and was being carried to his house when Israeli soldiers intervened and shot him dead in a nearby street.

The Israeli army said 29 people were arrested in the Khan Yunis sweep and moments later, militants from the armed wing of the radical faction were touring the city and calling over loudspeakers for bloody revenge.

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

local leader and Palestinian medical sources told AFP.

The army said it sent in some 20 tanks and armored personnel carriers to dismantle the infrastructure of cells suspected of preparing anti-Israeli attacks.

Troops also moved into the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah, and blew up four houses, damaging another 20, Palestinian security sources said.

Palestinian homes along the border with Egypt are demolished almost daily as the Israeli army is erecting a wall that cuts right through the heart of the divided city.

Also setting a tense backdrop for the Abbas-Sharon peace talks, Jewish settlers have showed their opposition to the roadmap by setting up two new wildcat outposts in the southern West Bank, Israeli public radio reported.

'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 neighbouring 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 harbouring terrorists and having a secret nuclear weapons programme.

A top US defence official said Wednesday that there was "serious unhappiness" in the administration of President George W. Bush about Iran.

Washington has complained publicly that Iran is doing too little to crack down on terrorists in the country, including al-Qaeda members. Washington has linked to May 12 suicide bombings in Riyadh.

US officials have also accused Iran of trying to undermine the US presence in Iraq through support of hardline Shiite Muslim groups.

Asked about a possible US military intervention in Iran, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said earlier this week that the US planned to maintain a "diplomatic approach."

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.

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.

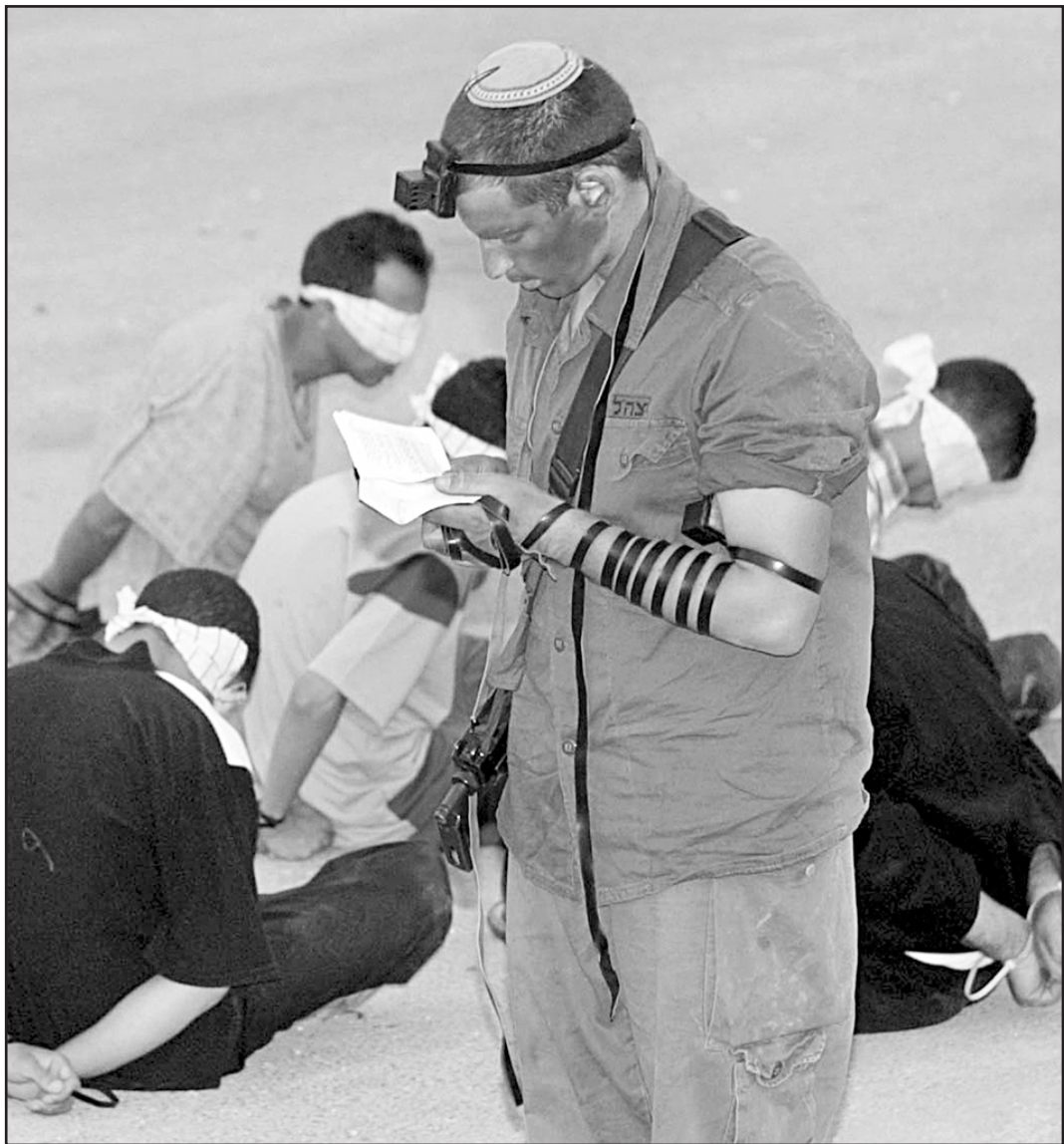


PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli soldier prays while he guards arrested Palestinians in the southern Israeli checkpoint of Kissufim on Thursday. The Israeli army arrested 29 people and killed one Hamas militant during an operation in the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah. Violence continued in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmud Abbas prepared to meet his Israeli counterpart, Ariel Sharon, to discuss a peace plan ahead of a three-way summit next week with US President George W. Bush.

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 Comunicatii 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.

While the language used in

announcing the penalties as well as the measures themselves were similar, the sanctions were imposed under different US laws and regulations, the department said.

The Moldovan entities were sanctioned under the Arms Export Control Act while the sanctions on the Iran firm were imposed, as well as under that act, by an executive order and International Traffic in Arms Regulations, it said.

The sanctions include a two-year ban on any US government contracts, assistance and a bar 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.

'Saddam letter' calls for resistance

BBC ONLINE

A letter attributed to deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein calls on his people to boycott any US-appointed regime and may give credence to claims of organised resistance inside Iraq.

The message published in the London-based al-Quds newspaper also calls on Iraqis to expel from Iraq anyone who supported the US-led invasion.

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.

"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 Falluja, north-west of Baghdad, killing two soldiers and wounding nine others.

Authenticity questions BBC Arab affairs analyst Magdi Abdelhadi says the timing of the letter's publication might give credence to those who claim there is organised resistance to the US in Iraq.

But he cautions that the letter may not be genuine, saying it was in a lighter style to previous "Saddam" letters, and contained no specific references to attacks of recent days.

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 Hadithah 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."

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.

The troops, which Feith said will

include military police units from Italy and Spain, are expected to be deployed by July.

Fifteen nations have already agreed to contribute to the force, he said.

But Feith acknowledged that some of these contributions were likely to be purely financial and was reluctant to name those who will operate under British and Polish command.

"I do believe there are some Arab countries that are participating," he said.

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 an anti-aircraft gun, 40 rocket-propelled grenade launchers, two AK-47 rifles, encrypted radio systems and ammunition was discovered in Mosul.

In Bayji, a US security sweep resulted in the capture of two local Fedayeen Saddam leaders, 10 former members of the Special Security Organization and several former army officers, the military said.

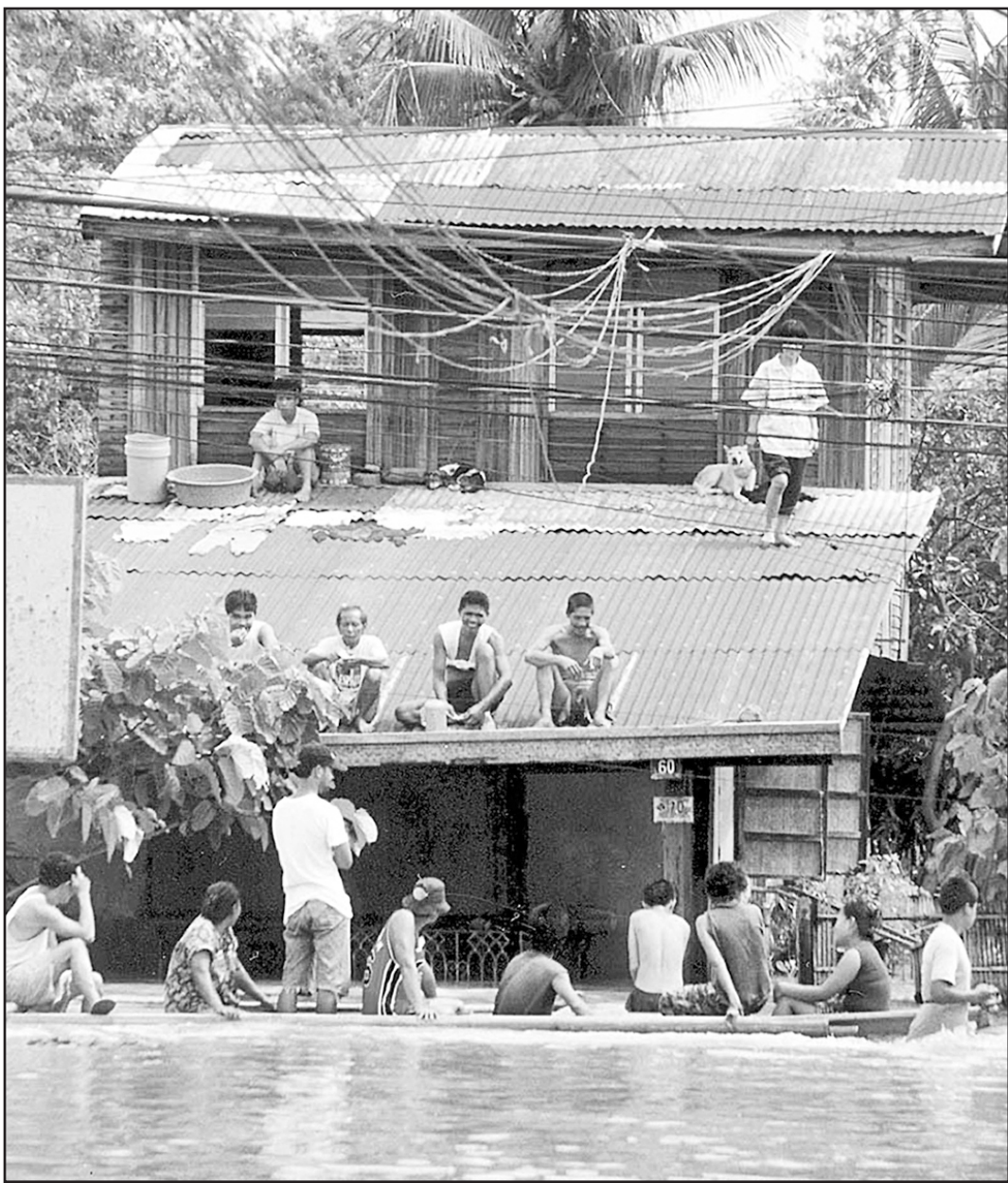


PHOTO: AFP

Villagers aboard a raft check on neighbours stranded on roof of a house near the village of Calasiao, Pangasinan province, in the northern Philippines on Thursday. Many provinces remains submerged in floodwaters unleashed by tropical storm Linfa, which left 18 dead here as it exited the Philippines.