

Blair blasts BBC for 'attack on his integrity' over WMD

Iraq operation still within 'original timetable'

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in a Sunday newspaper interview, accused the BBC of having committed "an attack on my integrity" by reporting that he and his staff embellished a report on the threat of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to war.

Speaking to the Observer on the eve of a House of Commons foreign affairs committee report on the way the government took Britain to war, Blair held back from demanding an apology from the public broadcaster.

But he said: "If people make a claim and it turns out to be wrong, they should accept it is wrong."

"Look, as far as I am concerned, the issue of what the BBC has done, I take it as about as serious an attack on my integrity as there could possibly be. The charge is untrue and I hope that they will

accept that," he said.

"I think they should accept it. That is all I am going to say."

BBC radio reported in late May, as Blair was visiting British troops in Iraq, that a September dossier on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction was "sexed up" despite reservations among intelligence chiefs.

It quoted an intelligence source as citing, by way of example, the dossier's claim that Iraq under Saddam Hussein could deploy chemical or biological weapons in as little as 45 minutes.

The issue has dogged Blair ever since, according to the results of a poll in the Mail on Sunday newspaper.

Sixty-two percent of respondents thought Blair's media strategist Alastair Campbell had "sexed up" the dossier, while 66 percent said they trusted the BBC to tell the

truth.

The poll, by the YouGov organisation, was conducted via the Internet with 1,704 adults taking part.

When he appeared before the foreign affairs committee, Campbell demanded an apology from the BBC, triggering a nasty public row between Downing Street and the public broadcaster.

Blair declined to go before the committee, which presents its report on Monday, but he is to field questions Tuesday during a meeting with the chairmen of all Commons select committees.

To the Observer, he reiterated the vigorous denials made to the cross-party panel by his foreign secretary Jack Straw that the September dossier was doctored to reinforce the case for going to war.

"The idea that that I, or anyone else in my position, frankly would

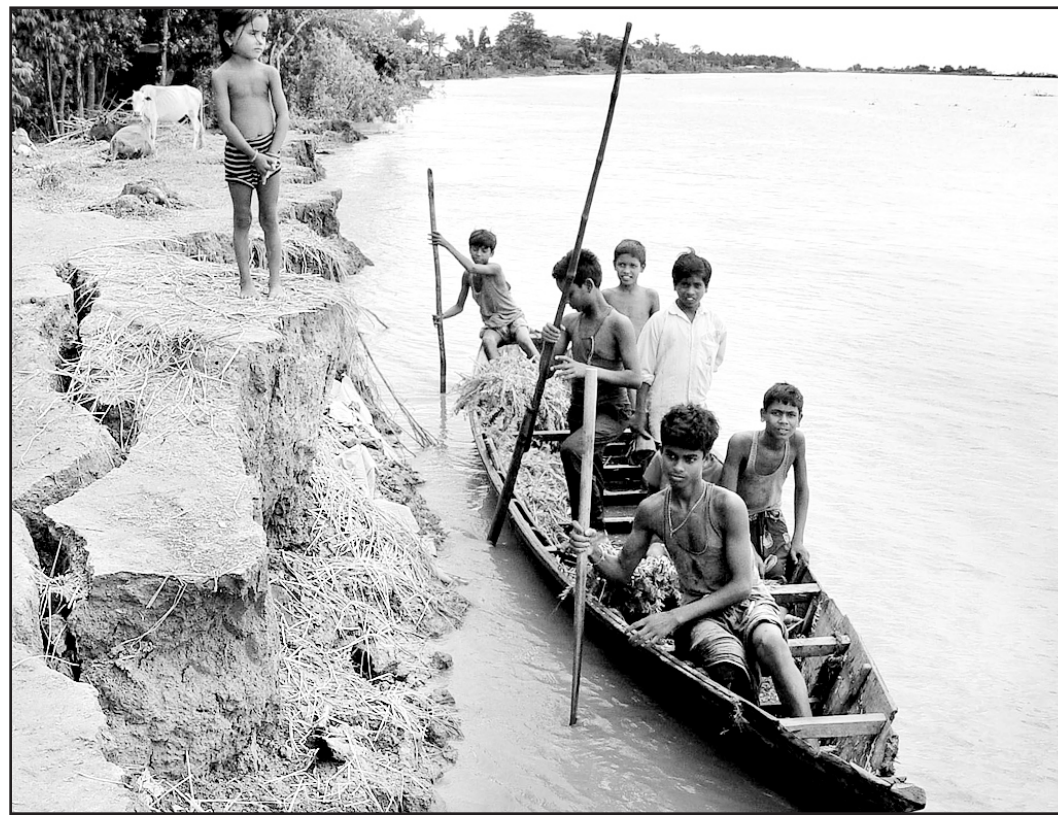
start altering intelligence evidence -- or saying to the intelligence services I am going to insert this -- is absurd," he said.

"You could not make a more serious charge against a prime minister -- that I ordered our troops into conflict on the basis of intelligence evidence that I falsified," he said.

"The charge happens to be wrong. I think everyone now accepts that that charge is wrong."

Meanwhile, the US-led military intervention in Iraq is still within the "original timetable" of 125 days set out by its commanders, British Prime Minister Tony Blair said in a Sunday newspaper interview.

Speaking to the Observer, Blair sought to put ongoing guerrilla attacks on coalition forces in Iraq -- which have left at least 26 US and six British soldiers dead since May 1 -- into perspective.



A girl stands on top of an eroding river bank on the Jadhansiri River as a boat passes nearby in flood-affected Bondia Chapori, Darrang district of Assam, 70 km from Guwahati on Sunday. At least 65,000 more people were left homeless after fresh flooding overnight in India's northeast, taking the total number of those displaced by the rains to more than 926,000.

US holding several Turkish troops

REUTERS, Kirkuk

A US military official confirmed on Sunday that US forces in northern Iraq had detained several soldiers they believed to be Turkish.

Asked about accusations from Ankara that US troops had seized Turkish special forces, the official said: "There was a raid. The US military is still trying to determine their ethnicity but they are probably Turkish."

Turkey's Hürriyet newspaper said around 100 US soldiers grabbed the Turks in the northern city of Sulaimaniya on suspicion of planning an attack on the Kurdish governor in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk about 100 km away.

Turkey's foreign minister dismissed the charge as "nonsense."

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan accused the United States on Saturday of seizing the troops in an "ugly incident" on Friday afternoon. He later said some of them had been freed.

The case threatens to exacerbate tensions between the two NATO allies. Relations were already strained after Ankara refused to allow US troops to stage attacks from Turkish soil during the war on Iraq.

Myanmar calls Suu Kyi pawn of US

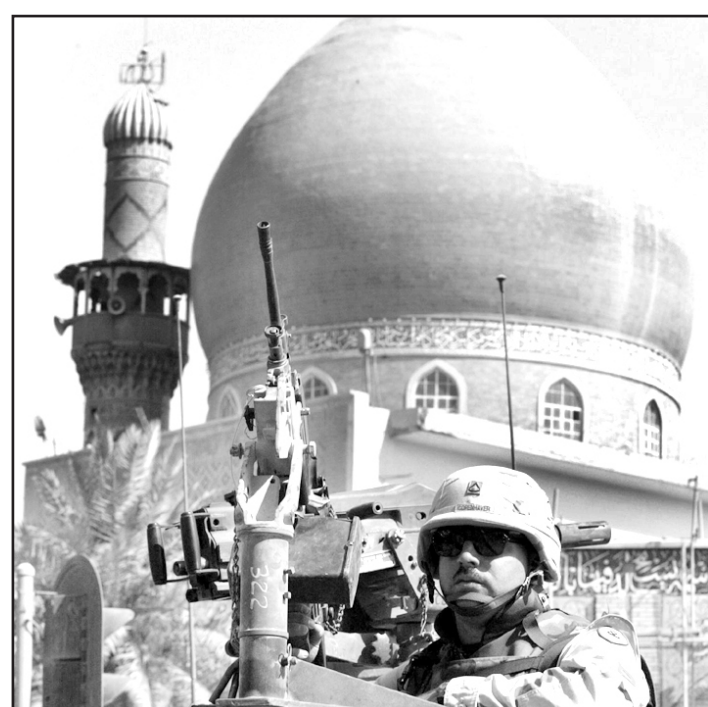
AP, Yangon

Myanmar's official media lashed out against detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi for the second day Sunday, accusing her of being a pawn of the United States.

Adding to the salvo, the country's intelligence chief Gen. Khin Nyunt said countries were bullying Myanmar by imposing economic sanctions and exerting other pressures to demand her release.

The United States and the European Union are threatening harsher sanctions against Myanmar if its military regime does not free the Nobel Peace Prize winner, who was detained following a bloody confrontation in northern Myanmar May 30.

"If pressures are exerted and sanctions imposed unduly, the countries which do so breach laws and regulations of the international community and bully another country," Khin Nyunt, the country's third-ranking leader, said in a recent speech carried by the Myanma Ahlin newspaper Sunday.



A US soldier mans his rifle atop an armoured vehicle stationed close to the al-Kilani mosque in the center of Baghdad on Sunday. US troops are coming under attack on a near daily basis in Baghdad and other towns in Iraq, although the US military has launched two major offensives in June to crush the resistance.

Amnesty urges coalition to restore order in Basra

AFP, Dubai

Amnesty International lambasts British forces in control of southern Iraq in a new report calling for an end to disorder in Basra, three months after the occupation began.

"The climate of fear and insecurity is overwhelming in Basra," notes the London-based group in the reported title: "Iraq: The Need for Security" and dated July.

"The widespread looting and scavenging of public buildings, witnessed in the first days of occupation, has decreased, but crime, often involving violence, remains much higher than before the occupation," Amnesty says after sending delegates to Basra from April 24.

"Interviews with lawyers, police and judges indicate that theft of public and private property is pervasive, and in many cases is accompanied by the use of firearms."

"Murders motivated by personal enmity or political revenge are reported to occur daily."

Another Palestinian group signs up to truce

AFP, Gaza City

The militant Palestinian group the Popular Resistance Committees announced Sunday that it was signing up to a three-month freeze on anti-Israeli attacks called by other major factions last week.

"We agree to a truce of three months on condition that Israel frees Palestinian prisoners, ends assassinations, incursions and settlements and lifts the siege of (Palestinian leader) Yasser Arafat," the Gaza-based group said in a statement.

Palestinian security services arrested Thursday several members of the group, accusing them of carrying out rocket attacks on the Kfar Darom Jewish settlement in southern Gaza.

Four Palestinian groups -- including Hamas and Islamic Jihad -- agreed on June 29 to call a three-month halt to anti-Israeli operations but attached a string of conditions including an end to the targeting of wanted militants as well as the release of all prisoners from Israeli detention.

Meanwhile, Washington is likely to step up pressure on Israel in coming weeks to stop construction on a controversial fence between Israel and the West Bank, the New York Times reported Sunday.

US objections to the fence signal a new willingness by the administration of President George W. Bush to be tough on Israel and to get involved in details of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, insiders and observers told the Times.

National security advisor Condoleezza Rice criticised the Israeli government's construction of the security fence in a meeting with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon during her trip to the Middle East last week.

In another development the Israeli government on Sunday gave the green light for the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, Israel army radio reported.

The cabinet agreed by 13 votes to eight a motion authorising the release of more than 300 prisoners on the basis of a list drawn up by the Shin Beth security service.

The list had been drawn up at the request of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who is keen to make a goodwill gesture to his Palestinian counterpart Mahmud Abbas who made the releases a key demand at their joint meeting last Tuesday.

River rises to record level as flooding worsens in China

AFP, Beijing

Officials in the eastern province of Anhui blew up a dike Sunday and urged 760,000 along the Huaihe river, a tributary of the mighty Yangtze, to maintain vigilance as its water levels reached a record high, federal anti-flood authorities said.

An agency spokesman told local television that 46,000 people have been evacuated, noting some 446 places where water has seeped through barricades and caused flooding.

There have been no casualties reported from the floods yet thanks to swift government action in exploding the dike to prevent its rupture, he said, while acknowledging that those who were evacuated lived in areas normally used as run-off areas to stabilize high waters.

A provincial flood prevention official who did not want to give his name said the controlled explosion occurred at around noon.

'Indo-China joint exercise to enhance mutual trust'

PTI, Beijing

The proposed first-ever Sino-Indian joint military exercise would increase mutual understanding and trust between the armed forces of the two Asian giants and also promote regional as well as global security and stability, analysts have said.

"The decision to enhance military exchanges between China and India is an important step to enhance bilateral relations," Professor Ma Jiali from the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), said on Sunday.

Welcoming the decision of the Chinese and Indian governments to allow their Navies to hold the first-ever joint naval exercises later this year, Ma said the move would boost mutual understanding and trust between the two neighbouring nations, especially since the two sides have reached wide-ranging consensus during the recent visit to Beijing by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Muslim Board rejects Kanchi's proposal

PTI, Lucknow

The All India Muslim Personal Law Board Sunday rejected Kanchi Shankaracharya Jayendra Saraswathi's new formula to resolve the Ayodhya tangle, saying there would be no compromise on constructing the mosque at the place where it was, according to a participant.

"We have rejected the proposal," Abdul Mannan, AIMPLB lawyer who attended as a special invitee the working committee meeting of the Board which discussed the seer's proposal, told reporters here.

However, the Board's vice president Maulana Kalbe Sadiq said the proposals had "not been rejected totally" and the doors for dialogue to resolve the issue would be kept open.

Though Kanchi Seer Jayendra Saraswathi's formula was disappointing but it had not been totally rejected as "we feel that process of mutual negotiations should continue," he said.

Sadiq said the seer's first letter to AIMPLB chairman Maulana Rabe Hasan Nadvi was encouraging, but his second letter encouraged yesterday in response to some clarifications sought by Nadvi, was disappointing.

It appeared that the seer wrote the second letter under pressure from the Snagh Parivar and the VHP, he said without elaborating.

The vice president said he personally felt that a Board's committee should meet the Shankaracharya shortly to suggest its formula for resolution of the issue.

Mannan said there were several proposals including one which talked about constructing a temple and a mosque at a distance.

Meanwhile, appealing to the All India Muslim Personal Law Board not to be "rigid" in its stand, Anjuman Minhaj-E-Rasool Chairman Maulana Syed Athar Hussain Dehlavi on Sunday said the board should find a way for continuing the talks to resolve the temple-mosque issue in Ayodhya.

India shelve development of short-range missile

AFP, New Delhi

India's defence ministry has shelved plans to develop a short-range surface-to-air missile due to technical glitches, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency said Sunday.

The homegrown Trishul (Trident) missile, India's version of the US-made Patriot, was one of five developed by India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) since 1983.

The missile -- developed for the army, navy and air force -- was powered by a solid fuel engine and configured to deliver a 15-kilogram (33-pound) warhead up to nine kilometres (five miles) away.

But V.K. Aatre, scientific advisor to the defence minister and head of the DRDO, confirmed media reports that the three billion-rupee (62.5 million dollar) project was being scrapped.

Lankan peace gamble pays early dividends

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka abandoned war and allowed increased foreign role in efforts to end its ethnic conflict, risking domestic political backlash, but 18 months later it is savouring the peace dividend.

A Norwegian-brokered truce has been troubled by violations from both sides, but it has delivered a better-than-expected 5.5 percent GDP growth rate for the first quarter of this year, compared to 0.5 percent in the corresponding period last year.

"Continuation of the ceasefire has led to enhanced service sector activities particularly in the telecommunications, transport, hotel and related services," Finance Minister K.N. Choksy said last week.

Unveiling a review of the economy, Choksy made it clear the government was betting on peace to consolidate the recovery which began with the ceasefire that took effect from February last year.

He said the truce between government forces and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) contributed to better economic activity which saw tourism earnings rise by 28 percent in the first quarter compared to the same period the previous year. Industrial production was up 4.6 percent while foreign remittances from Sri Lankans abroad rose by 11 percent, strengthening the island's external reserves position to cover 5.1 months of imports.

Greater foreign engagement in the peace process has been criticised by President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her People's Alliance (PA), which is the main opposition in parliament, but it has also brought unprecedented aid.

Turkish gas station blast injures 200

AP, Ankara

Explosions at a liquefied petroleum gas station injured nearly 200 people Saturday, officials said, after a fireball was launched into the air as a wedding reception was being held upstairs.

The explosions in a low-income district occurred while a tanker was discharging LPG at the station, the Anatolia news agency reported. The exact cause of the explosion was not known.

Firefighters soon brought the flames under control, but thick smoke still filled the sky. The blaze also spread to three nearby homes, but those fires were quickly extinguished.

Health Minister Recep Akdag said some 180 people sought treatment in hospitals. Many of them were promptly released, but some 40 were hospitalized -- at least 11 with serious injuries, Akdag told NTV television.

Mahmut Koc, a chief medic at Ankara's Numune hospital, said some 50 injured arrived there seeking treatment. Six were in serious condition, he told private NTV television. At least 50 more people were registered at six other hospitals.

One witness, Senol Kucukosman told private NTV television he saw the bride leave the area in tears. The hall holds about 300 people.

"First the sky lit up and then there was a huge fireball," said Camer Senyuva, who witnessed the explosion from a high-rise.

Police evacuated the area.

CNN-Turk television showed police helping a man with apparent burns on his torso and neck. Other people were shown being taken away on stretchers.

Pakistan nabs 15 men over Quetta killing

REUTERS, Quetta

Pakistani police said on Sunday they had detained at least 15 people suspected of being involved in an attack on a Shiite mosque in the city of Quetta that killed at least 47 people.

Humayun Jozgezi, deputy police chief in Baluchistan province, said police had rounded up members of various outlawed radical Sunni Muslim groups in overnight raids in southwestern Quetta, where tensions between Shiites and majority Sunni Muslims remained high.

"The detained people are now the part of our investigations but we are looking into all other aspects, including involvement of foreign hands," he added.

Three men had wheeled a trolley up to the gate of the mosque during Friday prayers before pulling guns from under a cover and opening fire on worshippers, police said.



A policeman helps a man carry a victim of the blast near Tushino airport on Saturday. At least 17 people were killed and 50 injured when two female suicide bombers blew themselves up at a Moscow rock concert. The two women blew themselves up at a ticket booth at the entrance to the outdoor concert at Tushino airport in northwestern Moscow after police prevented them from entering the site.

Putin tightlipped on Moscow blast

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin remained conspicuously quiet Sunday on a deadly suicide attack at a Moscow rock concert which served as a clear sign that his moves towards peace in breakaway Chechnya were not going according to plan.

Putin issued condolences to the families of people who died Saturday when two female suicide bombers blew themselves up at the concert's ticket booth, killing at least 16 other people and injuring around 50 others.

But the Russian leader has made no comment since then.

Officials immediately said the suicide blasts were the latest in a series of deadly attacks carried out by Chechen separatist rebels aimed at disrupting Russian plans to pacify the war-ravaged republic.

Putin coasted into the Russian presidency nearly four years ago after taking a hard line with Chechnya, launching the second war in the republic in October 1999 while serving as prime minister.

Yet with increasingly loud worries over the number of young Russian soldiers killed in the

