

Blair urges UK voters to swallow Iraq mistakes

REUTERS, London

On the eve of an election likely to give him an historic third term, Tony Blair appealed to voters yesterday to swallow misgivings over Iraq and return him to power as a reward for Britain's healthy economy.

"Of course there has been disagreement about Iraq," the prime minister said as the US-led war to topple Saddam Hussein again dominated a news conference, his last of the campaign.

"(But) who do people trust with the economy, with the investment in our public services, with the interests of the country?" he asked. "I think we can make a pretty good case of it... Those are the issues that really motivate people."

Blair -- whom polls show is well ahead of the main opposition Conservatives -- was like other party

leaders engaged in a frenetic last day of interviews and campaign stops around the country before polls open at 7 a.m. (0600 GMT) on Thursday.

Blair is hoping Britain's robust economy, which has outperformed its European neighbours during the global downturn of recent years, will be his trump card.

But British voters, including many in his own centre-left Labour Party, remain deeply uncomfortable with Blair's backing of the US-led invasion.

"It is not telling the truth that makes politics seem negative, that makes people think all politicians do not tell the truth," said Conservative leader Michael Howard, again accusing Blair of lying over the legality of the war.

Charles Kennedy, leader of Britain's third party the Liberal Democrats, added: "Cast your vote

to restore Britain's reputation on the international stage. Vote Liberal Democrat if, like us, you say 'never again' to an episode like Iraq."

The Conservatives' attack is handicapped by their support of the Iraq war, but the Liberal Democrats opposed it from the outset and are likely to benefit from anti-Blair protest votes.

Despite a week of attacks on his integrity, polls put Blair on course to win a third consecutive term, albeit with a likely reduction in his massive 161-seat parliamentary majority.

The latest, a Populus survey for the Times newspaper, gave Blair's ruling Labour Party a commanding 14-point lead on 41 percent versus the Conservatives on 27 and Lib Dems on 23. Other recent polls have put him between 3 and 10 points ahead.

If Blair is celebrating on Friday --

his 52nd birthday -- he would be the first Labour leader to win 3 successive elections.

Blair, who has said he will step down at the end of a third term, insisted economic stability and investment in health and education would be his domestic priorities.

Africa and the environment were his foreign policy priorities, he added. "I remain passionate about these things."

Blair's first task on re-election will be to shape a new Cabinet. He has already made clear his powerful finance minister and likely successor, Gordon Brown, will remain in his post.

Analysts believe Blair will step down before he completes a third term -- precipitated, perhaps, if he loses a planned 2006 vote on the EU referendum -- and hand over to Brown.

Pakistan catches top al-Qaeda leader

BBC ONLINE

Senior Libyan al-Qaeda suspect Abu Faraj al-Libbi has been arrested in Pakistan, the government says.

Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said that Libbi was captured with five other suspected foreign al-Qaeda militants in the past few days.

They were captured in a gun battle in Waziristan in North-West Frontier Province, security sources said.

Libbi is said to have become third in the al-Qaeda hierarchy after Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was caught in 2003.

Libbi is wanted in connection with two attempts on the life of Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf.

Pakistan had put a reward of 20m rupees (\$340,000) on the head of Libbi in August last year.

"This is a very important day for us," Mr Ahmed said.

Two Pakistani security officials told the Associated Press the men were held after a gun battle in Mardan, 50km (30 miles) north of Peshawar, capital of North-West Frontier Province.



PHOTO: AFP
Bangladesh's ambassador to the United Nations Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury (2nd L), Mayor Tadatoshi Akiba (L) of Hiroshima, Mayor Donald L. Plusquellic (2nd R) of Akron, Ohio and Nagasaki Mayor Kazunaga Itoh (R) take part in a discussion on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons on Tuesday at the UN in New York, on the sidelines of a UN conference on nuclear proliferation.

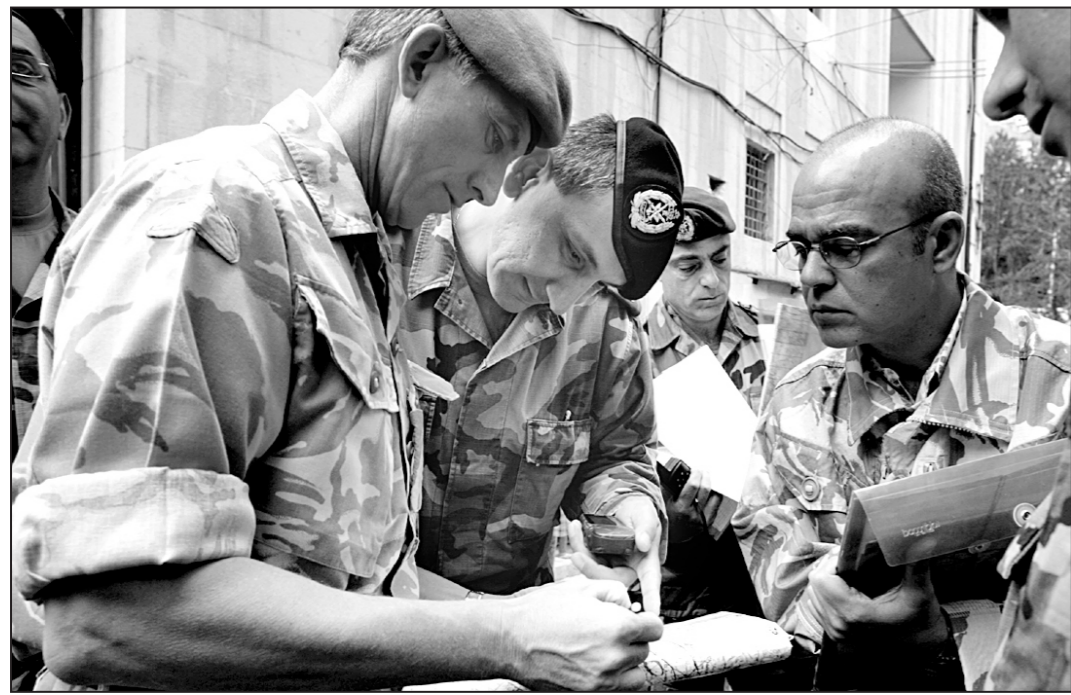


PHOTO: AFP
British UN Colonel Ian Sinclair (L), one of the nine-member UN team charged with verifying Syria's troop withdrawal from Lebanon, looks at a map with an unidentified Lebanese officers Wednesday and a former Syrian intelligence officer in Zahle in the Bekaa valley. The UN team verifying Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon said yesterday that it was "satisfied" with the mission so far.

UN says satisfied with Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon

AFP, RAYAQA, Lebanon

The head of the UN team verifying the Syrian troop withdrawal from Lebanon said yesterday he was "satisfied" with their mission so far.

Brigadier General Elhadji Mouhamadou Kandji of Senegal, the deputy military advisor for UN peacekeeping operations, told AFP his team has "not encountered a single Syrian soldier".

But as the team approached the border village of Qoussaya, where the pro-Syrian Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command still maintains positions, shooting was heard by journalists who were not allowed to proceed with the team.

The PFLP-GC later said the "shooting was not intended at preventing the investigators from inspecting the positions in Qoussaya."

"The UN team did not alert our

command of their visit, which disrupted coordination with the personnel in charge of the base of Qoussaya, and provoked a minor misunderstanding," Abu Anwar, PFLP-GC leader in Lebanon told AFP.

"The inspectors of the United Nations are welcome," Abu Anwar added.

Syria, facing relentless international pressure, said last week it had completed its pullout from Lebanon after 29 years of military domination.

The UN team arrived in Lebanon on Monday to verify the withdrawal on the ground and "will stay as long as we need to," said Kandji.

Finnish commander Kari Olavi Makinen said the team had already inspected areas in northern Lebanon, Tripoli and the Beirut area.

"It (the mission) will take more than a week. If we are not satisfied, we'll come back," he added.

Labour Party the default choice for S Asians

AFP, London

The train travels west into the outskirts of London, and arrives at the heart of south Asian Britain: English and Punjabi signs, curry restaurants, Muslim butchers, a Hindu temple, a gold-domed Sikh gurdwara and churches.

Welcome to Southall.

The thriving London neighbourhood of Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims from Pakistan and India, in addition to dozens of other immigrant nationalities, illustrates the governing Labour Party's waning support among ethnic minorities.

Labour incumbent Piara Khabra is likely to beat Conservative Mark Nicholson and Liberal Democrat

Nigel Bakhai to hold onto the seat for Ealing-Southall, but with a smaller majority than he had in the last two elections in 2001 and 1997, analysts within the South Asian community say.

However, the anticipated result is less a ringing endorsement for Prime Minister Tony Blair than a reflection of the lack of real alternatives.

Indeed, election watchers expect Labour will win virtually all of the 70 races nationwide where the Asian vote -- both Muslim and non-Muslim -- is a factor, but with a slimmer margin than last time.

It is not just Asian Muslims who are upset with Prime Minister Tony Blair's war in Iraq and tough anti-

terrorism measures.

Non-Muslims have also voiced discontent because of Blair's policies on the Middle East and worries about education and immigration.

Though some may vote Liberal Democrat -- the third force in British politics, and the only main party to oppose the Iraq war -- many do not know where to turn if they drop Labour, said S.S. Virk, the Sikh managing director of Des Pardes, a British-Punjabi community newspaper.

Virk, who has received many letters expressing discontent with Labour, said people "feel they need a change but then again, they know Labour is going to win, so better support them."

PENTAGON SAYS

Iraq, Afghan wars erode US military's abilities

REUTERS, Washington

The US military's operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have constrained its ability to tackle other potential conflicts, making any future war more likely to be longer and bloodier, according to America's top general.

In an annual classified report required by Congress, Air Force Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said stress on manpower and equipment could limit the ability to win other possible wars as quickly as the Pentagon had previously forecast, defence officials said on Tuesday.

Myers stated in the report that US armed forces would "succeed"

in any future major conflict but "may be unable to meet expectations for speed or precision."

"Any future armed conflicts "may result in significantly extended campaign timelines, and achieving campaign objectives may result in higher casualties and collateral damage," the report stated.

Potential hot spots include Iran, the Korean Peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait.

Myers, due to step down from his post in September, said the report showed "we have very high standards in how we measure ourselves."

"The timelines may have to be extended. And we may have to use additional resources. But that

doesn't matter because we're going to be successful in the end," Myers told reporters.

The United States has about 138,000 troops in Iraq and another 17,000 in Afghanistan, and has shifted troops from such places as South Korea, where they guarded against aggression by communist North Korea, to maintain force levels to combat the Iraqi insurgency.

There are 1.4 million active-duty US troops and another 1.2 million in the Reserve and National Guard.

The White House emphasised that the report maintained the US military remained fully capable of meeting any threat posed in the world.

RIGHTS GROUPS SAY

Nepal's emergency lifting may be 'ploy'

US asks king to restore democracy

AFP, Kathmandu

International human rights groups said yesterday King Gyanendra's lifting of emergency rule in Nepal could be a "tactical ploy" to persuade military donors to resume shipments to his ill-equipped army.

Gyanendra ended emergency rule last weekend after seizing power February 1, a move that prompted India and Britain to suspend military supplies to Nepal's army battling to crush a bloody Maoist revolt.

The United States is mulling similar action.

Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists said the king's lifting of emergency rule "might be a tactical ploy to convince" military donors to resume military aid.

"Without specific and direct action by the king to an immediate return to full democratic, constitutional rule, this could simply turn out to be a cynical attempt to convince

India and others ... to resume their military aid," the groups said in a statement.

The groups noted the lifting of emergency rule was immediately followed by an order banning "public gatherings, meetings or any kind of protest programs in public spaces and roads."

"A key test for the king is whether he will now allow journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders to operate freely," said Purna Sen, director of the Asia Pacific Programme at Amnesty International.

Meanwhile, the United States on Tuesday welcomed the lifting of a state of emergency in Nepal but said the government must also release all political detainees and restore democracy.

The State Department, in a written response to a question posed at the daily press briefing, also urged Nepal's "legitimate political forces" to reconcile and unite against the country's Maoist insurgency.

AP, AFP, Kabul

About 20 suspected insurgents and one Afghan policeman were killed in fighting in southeastern Afghanistan, and six US soldiers were among the wounded, the US military said.

The battle occurred yesterday in Dehchopan district of Zabul province, the US military said in a statement. It said US helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft were used against a group of about 25 insurgents and that the casualty figures

were still preliminary.

A village leader with suspected links to the Taliban and six other attackers were detained by US forces, the statement added. One insurgent was also wounded during the battle, it said.

The firefight was one of the biggest since militants from the Islamic regime, which was ousted by a US-led coalition in late 2001, began a renewed offensive coinciding with the end of winter in Afghanistan.

The US military said the rebels

launched an unprovoked attack after an Afghan man led local police to a place where he said he had been beaten by a group of unknown individuals.

"Afghan National Army forces and US soldiers operating in the area quickly moved to the site and cordoned off the insurgent forces by use of small-arms fire and support from coalition fixed-wing and rotary-wing aircraft," the statement added.

"Initial reports indicate approximately 20 insurgents were killed and one wounded."

Most Americans now say Iraq war was not worth fighting

REUTERS, Washington

A majority of Americans do not think it was worth going to war in Iraq with support at the lowest level since the United States launched the invasion in 2003, according to a CNN/USAToday/Gallup poll released on Tuesday.

Fifty-seven percent of those polled said it was not worth going to war compared to 41 percent who thought it was. In a February poll, 48 percent said the war was worth it and half said it was not.

A poll in April 2003, shortly after the war began, found that 73 percent of Americans held the view that the war was worth fighting.

'Mogadishu blast an attack on Somali PM'

AFP, Nairobi

Tuesday's deadly blast in a Mogadishu stadium was the result of an apparent failed attempt to assassinate transitional Somali prime minister Ali Mohamed Gedi, diplomatic sources said Wednesday.

The sources said the explosion that killed at least 15 people was not an accident and occurred when guards stopped an as yet unidentified militiaman from throwing a hand grenade as the prime minister was delivering a speech.

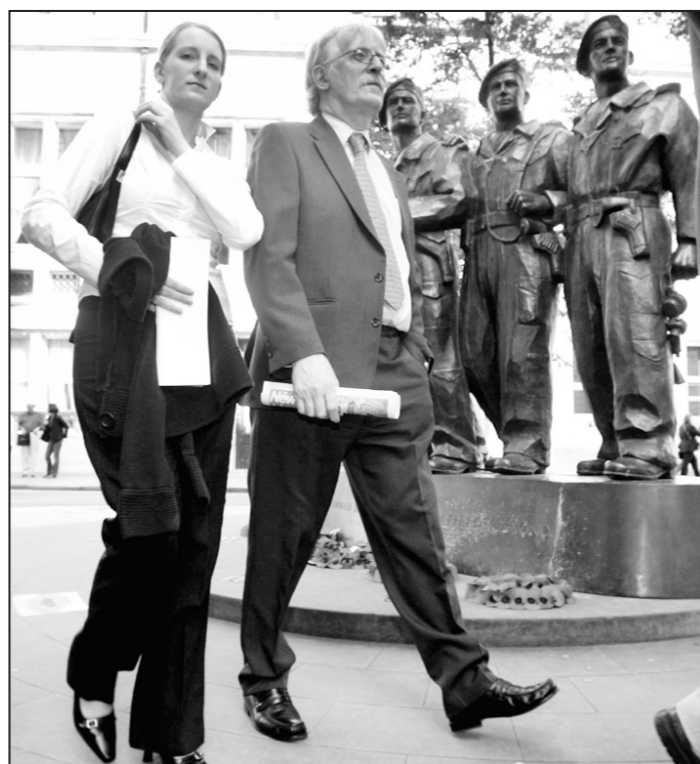


PHOTO: AFP
Helen and Peter Brierley, sister and father of Lance Corporal Shaun Brierley who died while serving with the 1 Armoured Division and Signal Regiment in Iraq, walk past a war memorial on their way to No.10 Downing Street to demand a fresh inquiry into the Iraq war Tuesday in London.