

Blair may bow out sooner rather than later

AFP, London

Despite his third straight mandate, Prime Minister Tony Blair could be leaving the political stage sooner rather than later after voters dealt him a "bloody nose" over the Iraq war, experts said.

"It is a bit of a bloody nose for Tony Blair," said Rosie Campbell, from the politics department of Birkbeck College, part of the University of London, as the Labour Party returned to power but with a significantly reduced majority in the House of Commons.

"It is a message that the country has reacted in a hostile way to his handling of Iraq," she told AFP as the results started to pour in from Thursday's general election.

Campbell noted, however, that the results could have been much worse.

"It definitely sets a third term for the Labour Party, which is unprecedented, and I think it means Tony Blair can hang on for a bit longer but not indefinitely," she said.

She gave the prime minister two more years in Downing Street, despite his announcement last year that, if re-elected, he would serve a full term and then step aside.

Blair, who turned 52 on Friday, has swung from an electoral asset in his first two elections as Labour leader to being a seeming liability, largely due to his decision to back the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Conservative leader Michael Howard branded Blair a liar during a bruising month-long campaign for allegedly misleading the public over the conflict. The Liberal Democrats meanwhile sought to capitalise on its anti-war stance.

Opinion polls repeatedly showed

many Labour backers saying they supported the party in spite of Blair, rather than because of him, and that they wanted him to step down in favour of his popular finance minister, Gordon Brown.

"I do not think the Labour Party truly understood how deeply the war eroded its support among middle class people in this country," said Richard Sennett of the London School of Economics (LSE).

"One clear message about this... is that as in Spain and as in Poland and perhaps as in Italy, Blair's alliance with (US President) George W. Bush has cost him dear," said Sennett.

Like Campbell, Sennett predicted that Blair will retire as prime minister in two years, rather than serve a full term that could run to a maximum five years.

Blair tried to limit the fallout from

Iraq by campaigning frequently alongside Brown, who opinion polls showed would be a more popular choice for prime minister.

"Tony Blair has lost the trust of the population. Gordon Brown has come to the rescue and can succeed his way to Downing Street rather faster than he might otherwise have done," said Iain Begg of the LSE's European Institute.

The Guardian newspaper, which reluctantly endorsed Labour, said in an editorial Friday: "The politics of the ensuing days and weeks will focus on the future of Mr Blair after his superhuman majorities have now been cut down to something more like politics as normal."



A heckler jumps up on some railings to confront British Prime Minister Tony Blair (L) accompanied by his wife Cherie Friday. Blair was arriving to give a speech at the National Portrait Gallery after winning a third term in office for Labour in the British Elections.

European heavyweights greet Blair

AFP, Paris

Leading members of the European Union, avoiding differences over the war in Iraq, congratulated British Prime Minister Tony Blair on his general election victory on Friday and promised to work with him during his presidency of the EU and the G8 later this year.

Expressing "warm congratulations" on behalf of France, President Jacques Chirac said in a message to Blair that "the closeness that has grown between us over the years" would enable the two leaders to confront the challenges they face.

Chirac did not mention the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, which he opposed and Blair supported and which some analysts said was responsible for the large drop in the parliamentary majority of Blair's Labour Party.

With results declared in 618 of the 645 constituencies, Labour held 353 seats in the House of Commons, ensuring a majority of at least 66 over all other parties combined, but sharply down from 161 in the previous parliament, according to television projections.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

Former Nepalese prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba (C) addresses media representatives in Kathmandu late Thursday after being charged with corruption by the Royal Commission for Corruption Control. Nepal's powerful anti-graft Commission have charged former premier Deuba with misappropriation of government funds while in office, pertaining to alleged irregularities in a nearly half billion USD water project contract.

Nepal govt promises to restore democracy

Hindu religious leader slain

AFP, AP, Istanbul/Kathmandu

Nepal's finance minister promised the Asian Development Bank (ADB) here Thursday that his country would implement all aid agreements and restore democracy in three years despite the king's takeover in February.

Minister Madhukar Shumshere J.B. Rana told the ADB annual meeting in Istanbul that his government would carry out reforms "towards making the economy market driven by providing full political space for the private sector."

Speaking to finance officials from the 62 other ADB member nations, Rana said that "in three years, we will find Nepal a peaceful, multi-party constitutional democracy."

He said the Nepalese government was "fully and sincerely committed to implementing the aid

agreements in their letter and spirit," despite King Gyanendra's takeover.

Faced with a bloody, nine-year Maoist rebellion, the monarch declared a state of emergency, suspended most civil liberties and jailed thousands of political opponents and activists.

Although he recently lifted the state of emergency, the king still rules without an elected government and hundreds of dissidents remain in prison.

Rana defended the king's actions, saying they were needed to fight terrorism and to avoid worsening civil strife.

He also called on aid donors to provide humanitarian assistance to as many as 600,000 people displaced by the insurgency.

Despite the conflict, he stressed, Nepal has been able to lower the level of poverty and maintain macro-

economic stability.

Officials earlier said that the ADB, a multilateral aid agency, has not released any new loans or grants to Nepal since the king's takeover, but is maintaining the projects that have already been launched there.

AP adds: Unidentified gunmen fatally shot a prominent Hindu religious leader yesterday while he was touring villages in southwestern Nepal, police said.

Narayan Pokhrel, the chief of the World Hindu Council's Nepal chapter, was attacked by six assailants at Ramuhapur, a village about 185 miles southwest of Kathmandu, a local police officer said on condition of anonymity. The motive was unclear.

One of his aides was wounded, said the officer reached by telephone.

Britons hope Blair will heed warning

AFP, London

Many Britons hoped Friday that Prime Minister Tony Blair would "sit up and listen" after public anger over Iraq cut his Labour Party's power base while still granting him a record third term in office.

Others, however, dismissed the outcome of Thursday's general election as a waste of time, since all politicians make promises and fail to deliver.

Blair, who celebrates his 52nd birthday Friday, enjoyed a sober victory after Labour was elected for a third successive time but lost scores of seats in parliament, largely to the main opposition Conservatives.

"I am content with this result because I voted for Labour, even though I was against the Iraq war," said Ferenc Ebzue, 26, a chartered surveyor in London.

"I think this sends a message to the government that people were not happy with the way the prime minister handled Iraq," he said.

"It will make the government sit up and listen more," Ebzue added before rushing to work.

With ballots counted so far in 620 of 645 constituencies, Labour had won 353 seats in the 646-seat House of Commons, well ahead of the main opposition Conservatives with 195 seats and the smaller Liberal Democrats with 60.

The party's majority, however, is expected to be much lower than the landslide victories enjoyed in 1997 and 2001, meaning that Blair will be unable to lead the government in the presidential style he had adopted, analysts said.

They also predicted the outcome would force Blair to hand power prematurely to Gordon Brown, his chancellor of the exchequer, despite pledging to serve a full term.

In post-election remarks, Blair said it was "clear that the British people wanted the return of the Labour Party, but with a reduced majority," and promised to respond "sensibly, wisely and responsibly".

EU pushes Myanmar to release Suu Kyi

AFP, Kyoto

The European Union on Friday pushed Myanmar for the immediate release of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and other detainees in the 25-nation bloc's first ministerial talks with the Yangon junta.

On the sidelines of an Asia-Europe Meeting, two top EU diplomats handed Myanmar Foreign Minister Nyan Win a list of prisoners which he agreed to review, an official said.

European Commissioner for External Relations Benita Ferrero-Waldner and Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn told him the detainees should be immediately released "not just out of justice but out of humanitarian concern as many on the list are ill," said Ferrero-Waldner's spokeswoman, Emma

Udwin.

"He undertook to consider the list," Udwin said. "It was a useful meeting."

"The point of this meeting was to make very clear face-to-face our concerns about the situation in this country and to press for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other prisoners," she said, without giving the number of people on the list.

"We also underlined the need of rapidly moving toward democracy," she said.

It was the first time the EU leadership has met with the Yangon junta on the level of foreign ministers, Udwin said.

She said the meeting was part of a European effort both to engage Myanmar through aid but impose "targeted sanctions" aimed at pressuring the junta.

'Interrogation of al-Qaeda topgun proceeding well'

AFP, Islamabad

The interrogation of a captured Libyan accused of being number three in al-Qaeda's hierarchy is "proceeding well" and follow-up action is under way, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said yesterday.

The capture of Abu Faraj al-Libbi by Pakistani forces in the tribal area of northern Waziristan Monday is seen as a major coup against the network, and security officials hope he can put them on the trail of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Asked whether al-Libbi was cooperating with interrogators, Aziz told a small group of journalists in an interview in Malaysia: "I know that interrogations are going on and are proceeding well."

Nationalists step up campaign against aid deal with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan nationalists yesterday warned they will step up protests against a proposed government deal with Tamil rebels for the distribution of tsunami aid amid fears for the shaky ruling coalition.

The Patriotic National Movement (NPM) said nationwide demonstrations will be held within the next 10 days to try to stop President Chandrika Kumaratunga from setting up a joint mechanism with Tiger rebels to disburse aid.

'Lifting of EU arms ban on China could be tied to HR'

AFP, Kyoto

European Union president Luxembourg said that a lifting of the arms embargo on China could be linked to human rights, amid caution within the 25-member bloc over ending the ban.

Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing lobbied at the 38-nation Asia-Europe Meeting in Kyoto, Japan for a withdrawal of the embargo on arms sales imposed after the 1989 massacre of democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square.

"People have to know that lifting the embargo does not mean it will be replaced by nothing," Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn told reporters.

Fatah survives Hamas challenge in polls

REUTERS, Ramallah

President Mahmoud Abbas's ruling Fatah movement came out ahead in the Palestinian municipal election despite a strong showing by the Islamic militant group Hamas, unofficial final results showed yesterday.

The Palestinian Election Committee said Fatah won control of 52 of 84 municipal councils across the West Bank and Gaza Strip to 24 for Hamas. Smaller factions took four councils, with four municipalities undecided.

Hamas, which made inroads in several key population centres, disputed the figures and said it was not ready to concede defeat in a poll widely seen as an indicator of Palestinian public sentiment ahead of a parliamentary election in July.

Fatah had seen its popularity slip amid corruption allegations while support for Hamas has been on the rise.

But political analysts said Fatah had fought back by stepping up internal reforms aimed at giving a younger generation of activists a stronger voice in the mainstream faction.

It did well in recent student elections in several Palestinian universities and fielded reformist candidates for the municipal vote.

The election came against the backdrop of a fragile ceasefire with Israel engineered by Abbas that has raised hopes of reviving Middle East peacemaking following 4-1/2 years of Palestinian uprising.

Fatah is committed to a two-state solution with Israel, while Hamas -- the driving force behind a suicide bombing campaign against Israelis during the uprising -- is dedicated to the destruction of the Jewish state.



PHOTO: AFP

Hamas supporters celebrate in Rafah refugee camp in the northern Gaza strip Thursday. Hundreds of people turned out to cast their ballots at polling stations to elect 906 municipal council representatives from among 2,519 candidates, including 399 women.

Bush extends economic sanctions on Syria

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

President Bush on Thursday extended economic sanctions on Syria imposed last year and said the Arab country supported terrorism and was undermining efforts to stabilise Iraq.

Bush extended a ban on certain US exports to Syria and other sanctions that were imposed on May 11, 2004, to "beyond May 11, 2005" but did not specify a date.

Bush accused Syria of supporting terrorism, pursuing weapons of mass destruction, undermining efforts to stabilise Iraq and "continuing its occupation of Lebanon" and said this posed a "continuing,

unusual, and extraordinary threat" to the United States.

The United States demanded Syria remove all its troops and intelligence officers from Lebanon after the Feb. 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri. Syria ended its 29-year military presence in Lebanon last week.

The sanctions severed banking relations with the Commercial Bank of Syria, froze the assets of Syrians suspected of involvement in terrorism or WMD development, and prohibited Syrian flights to and from the United States.

AFP adds: Saudi Arabia's crown prince will use his upcoming visit to

Syria to ask President Bashar al-Assad to cooperate in stabilising the region and not meddle in Lebanon, after having urged US President George W. Bush to ease pressure on Damascus, aides said Thursday.

Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, de facto ruler of the oil-rich kingdom, is due to hold talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh on Friday before going to Damascus.

A court official in Amman told AFP Thursday the Saudi prince would also visit the Jordanian capital for a few hours Saturday for talks with King Abdullah II on "the situation in the region and peace prospects in the Middle East."

Indian army under fire for putting soldiers at risk in clearing mines

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian army came under heavy attack yesterday for putting soldiers at risk in a gigantic operation to clear more than a million landmines laid along the border during a near-war with Pakistan in 2002.

The Comptroller and Auditor General watchdog said the manual demining was a result of the army's failure to import hardware in good time after the 20-month military standoff.

"The delay in getting robotic equipment to defuse over one million landmines laid along the western front had led the army to clear substantial landmines manually, with a high degree of risk to human life," the federal watchdog said in a report.

Dozens of soldiers were killed and hundreds more maimed while clearing mines laid across vast swathes of land from disputed Kashmir to the northern Indian states of Punjab and Rajasthan.