

Blair 'astonished' by coverage of memos

AP, London

For Prime Minister Tony Blair, the road to Iraq started with 9/11. The British leader said Wednesday in an interview with The Associated Press that the attacks on US soil fundamentally changed "the balance of risk" in the world, sharing President Bush's view that the tragedy had made a robust show of force an urgent priority.

The attacks, he said, made it necessary to "draw a line in the sand here, and the country to do it with was Iraq because they were in breach of UN resolutions going back over many years."

Sitting on a stone terrace overlooking the garden of his Downing Street residence, Blair reflected on how Sept. 11 convinced him of the need for a new approach to the threat of international terror.

"9/11 changed the whole picture for me, it changed the politics of how we dealt with the threat," he said.

He said his actions were based on personal conviction not in the hope of any quid pro quo on other issues, such as climate control, Africa aid, or the Middle East, as some have suggested.

"As I always say to people, my support for America is not based on, you know, 'You give us support on this, and you get that in return,'" he said. "I should only do what is right for Britain, and the president should only do what is right for America."

Despite his strong linkage of the Iraq campaign to the Sept. 11 attacks, Blair denied that the decision to go to war had been fixed long before it was carried out. He said the so-called "Downing Street memos," which suggest the Bush administration had made up its mind to invade by 2002, painted a distorted picture.

"People say the decision was already taken. The decision was not already taken," he said.

According to the minutes of the meeting where the leaked memos were taken, Sir Richard Dearlove, then chief of Britain's intelligence service, said the White House viewed military action against Saddam Hussein as inevitable following the Sept. 11 attacks.

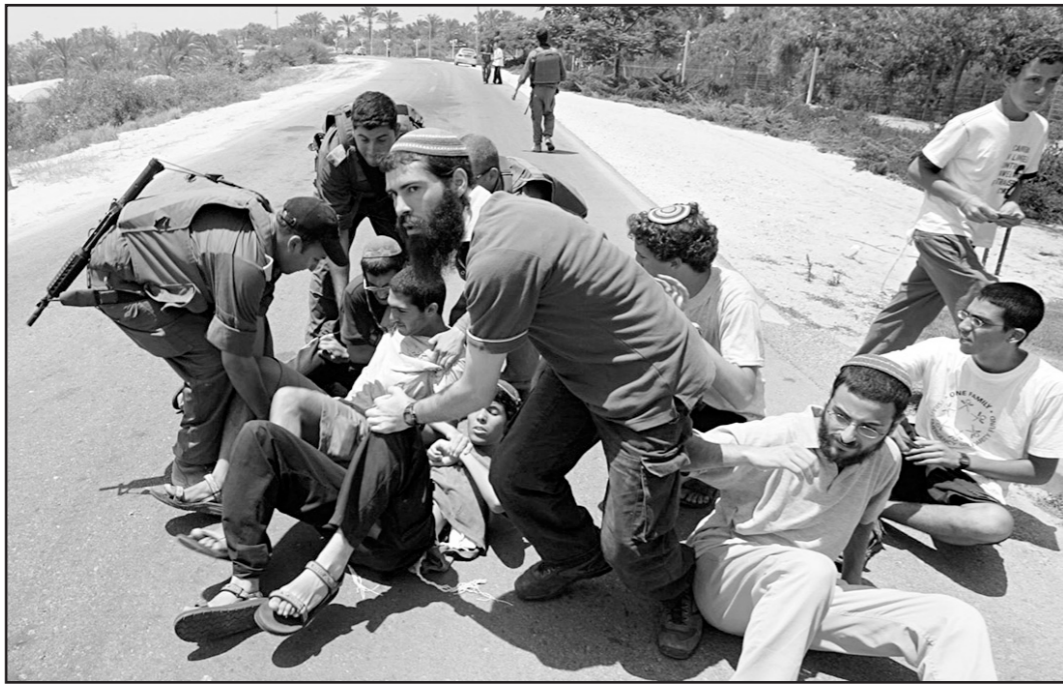


PHOTO: AFP

Israeli troops remove Jewish settler youths by force yesterday from a road they tried to block, leading to Palm Beach Hotel where dozens of right-wing Israelis have set up base in a bid to thwart the Gaza pullout plan that is to begin in mid-August, in the Gush Katif settlements bloc in the southern Gaza Strip.

Israel seals off Gaza settlements

AFP, Neve Dekalim

Israel sealed off its settlements in the Gaza Strip Thursday in an effort to prevent an influx of more ultra-nationalist youths who are trying to halt the pullout from the territory.

The order to declare a closed military zone, signed by Gaza area commander General Dan Harel, means that only residents, workers in essential services and journalists will be allowed to enter the 21 settlements due to be dismantled from August.

"Updated information exists regarding additional groups of Israelis that are moving towards the Gaza Strip in an attempt to provide backup for the rioters and further inflame the situation," an army spokesman said.

"A further escalation of this

course of action taken by radical elements may have grave effects on the region."

The move follows general outrage over the tactics of radical youths, who have been amassing inside the main Gush Katif settlement bloc.

A Palestinian teenager was left critically ill after being attacked by a mob of Israelis on Wednesday who had earlier taken over a three-storey building in a Palestinian village.

"The attack on the Palestinian teenager is a barbaric, wild and heartless act," Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told Thursday's Yediot Aharonot newspaper as 16-year-old Khaled el-Astal lay seriously ill in hospital.

"What is happening in front of our eyes is not a battle over disengage-

ment from Gaza, but a battle over the image of the state," he added. "This is not a situation I will allow to continue. The situation is not lost, and we will win."

Astal was attacked by the same youths who had also taken over a house in the Palestinian village of Mawassi, which lies inside Gush Katif.

Security forces later stormed the house, making around 40 arrests, after Sharon had given instructions to use an iron fist to tackle extremist opponents of his disengagement plan.

Televised footage of the violence, which also captured some of those holed-up in the house pelted soldiers with stones and yoghurt, has appalled many Israelis and was seen as a major own goal to the settlers' cause.

We have enough evidence to try Darfur criminals

ICC tell UN

AFP, United Nations

The International Criminal Court (ICC) has told the UN Security Council it has enough evidence of widespread killing, rape and destruction in Sudan's Darfur region to warrant bringing suspects to trial.

"Crimes include the killing of thousands of civilians, the widespread destruction and looting of villages, leading to the displacement of approximately 1.9 million civilians," said Luis Moreno Ocampo, the first ICC prosecutor ever to address the council.

In his comments Wednesday, he also noted evidence of widespread rape and sexual assault in Darfur.

Between 180,000 and 300,000 people have been killed in Darfur since an uprising by rebels in early 2003 prompted a scorched-earth campaign by "janjaweed" militias, widely believed to be backed by the government in Khartoum.

Ship carrying tsunami aid hijacked

AFP, Mogadishu

Gunmen have hijacked a UN-chartered ship carrying food for tsunami victims off Somalia and demanding a ransom of half-a-million dollars, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the ship's owners said Thursday.

The freighter hauling 850 tonnes of Japanese and German food aid was seized by unidentified pirates on Monday between Harardhere and Hobyo, about 300 kilometers north-east of Mogadishu, they said, adding that the demand for 500,000 dollars in ransom was received on Tuesday.

"They called us on the 28th and demanded a ransom of a half a million US dollars," said Karim

Kudrathi of the Motaku Shipping Agency in the Kenyan port of Mombasa which owns the vessel.

"We have totally refused and are engaging our negotiators," he told AFP.

The WFP appealed for the immediate release of the ship, its 10-member crew and the food aid and urged "local authorities and community elders to intervene in this regard."

"It is against international humanitarian law to hinder the passage of humanitarian assistance and there is no justification for hijacking," the WFP said in a statement.

The Japanese- and German-donated rice on board was donated in response to a WFP appeal for

assistance for some 28,000 Somalis affected by the December 26, 2004 tsunami that devastated countries around the Indian Ocean.

The ship, the St Vincent and the Grenadines-registered MV Semlow, had been on its way from Mombasa to Bossaso in Somalia's northeast Puntland region when it fell afoul of the pirates in waters deemed highly unsafe by international maritime agencies.

Both the International Maritime Board (IMB), a division of the International Chamber of Commerce, and the United States have in recent months issued increasingly dire alerts about threats to shipping off the Somali coast.

White House endorses US intelligence changes

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush approved dozens of changes at US spy agencies on Wednesday to better combat weapons of mass destruction, including creating a new center and moving FBI counterterrorism and intelligence operations into a new unit.

Acting in the face of sharp criticism since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Bush signed off on 70 of 74 recommendations from a special presidential commission and gave US authorities new powers to freeze assets of companies believed to be helping North Korea, Iran and Syria pursue nuclear, biological and chemical arms.

'Iran leader linked to 1979 hostage crisis'

REUTERS, Washington

Three Americans held hostage in the 1979 takeover of the US Embassy in Tehran remember Iran's president-elect as a key player in the seizure, The Washington Times reported on Thursday.

In interviews with the newspaper, the former hostages recalled Iran's ultra-conservative President-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad interrogating captives, the report said.

"As soon as I saw his picture in the paper, I knew that was the bastard," retired Army Col. Charles Scott, 73, a former hostage, told the newspaper.

"He was one of the top two or three leaders," said Scott, of Jonesboro, Georgia. "The new president of Iran is a terrorist."

Another former hostage, retired Navy Capt. Donald Sharer remembered Ahmadinejad as "a hard-liner, a cruel individual," the newspaper reported.

"I know he was an interrogator,"

said Sharer, 64, of Bedford, Iowa. He told the Times that he was once questioned by Ahmadinejad but did not recall the subject of the interrogation.

Kevin Hermening of Mosinee,

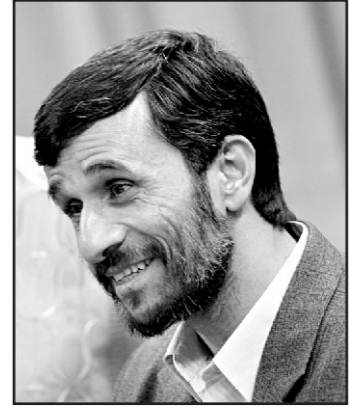


PHOTO: AFP

Iran's president-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at an official programme in Tehran yesterday.

Wisconsin, a 20-year-old Marine security guard when the embassy was stormed, told the paper that he had contact with Ahmadinejad right after the takeover.

"He was involved in interrogating me the day we were taken captive," Hermening was quoted as saying. He said interrogators sought the combinations for "safes and other things that were locked."

Ahmadinejad, who won Iran's presidential election by a landslide last week, was a 23-year-old university student at the time of the takeover in November 1979 and was a founding member of the radical student group that organized the storming of the US Embassy compound, the Times said.

Ahmadinejad's office has denied he helped storm the embassy but did not comment on whether the president-elect had other duties during the 444-day hostage ordeal, it said.

Iraq calls on Islamic states for support

12 more die in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's foreign minister called on Islamic nations to support Baghdad in the fight against insurgents, who killed at least a dozen more people, as

President George W. Bush pledged US troops would stay on in Iraq.

And the Iraqi court tasked with trying ousted leader Saddam Hussein and his aides on Wednesday released recent video footage of associates of the former dictator being interrogated.

At least 12 Iraqis died and 19 were wounded Wednesday, including four who were killed when mortar rounds slammed into their homes in the northwestern town of Tal Afar while they slept.

But a Turkish businessman held by militants in Iraq since January was freed, a senior Turkish diplomat said.

Meanwhile, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, at a meeting in Yemen, called on Islamic states to show greater understanding of the horror of the violence rocking his country and to take an unambiguous stance in the war on insurgents.

In footage taken Sunday, two cousins of Saddam, former gover-

nors of Babylon and Missan provinces, were shown, while Tareq Aziz, the well-known deputy prime minister in Saddam's regime, was also shown.

Aziz, who was one of Saddam's best-known faces abroad, said that Saddam had personally ordered the suppression of the Shiite uprising in 1991 without reference to top aides.

US troops, meanwhile, staged a dawn raid west of Baghdad, detaining a Sunni tribal leader close to headline clerics, but later released him.

North of Baghdad, the coffins of Iraq's oldest member of parliament, Dhari al-Fayadh, 87, and his son Hassan were paraded through the streets of their hometown by a packed crowd that beat their breasts and waved guns in the air.

The Al-Qaeda-linked group headed by Iraq's most wanted man, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing that killed them Tuesday, in an Internet statement whose authenticity could not be verified.

Such attacks prompted the US State Department Wednesday to reissue a strong warning against travel to Iraq, highlighting the dangers of using roads or civilian aircraft in the insurgency-racked country.

Spanish MPs approve gay marriage

AFP, Madrid

Spanish deputies have approved a controversial new law allowing gay couples to marry and adopt children, which has deeply divided this predominantly Roman Catholic country.

Spain, which has around four million homosexuals according to gay associations, thus becomes Europe's third nation to legalise same-sex marriage after the Netherlands and Belgium, and the fourth in the world after Canada, which passed its law on Tuesday.

Deputies approved the text on Thursday by a majority of 187 votes out of 350, with 147 voting against.

The bill put up by the Socialist government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, gives gay unions the same adoption rights as heterosexuals. It will now become law in around a month's time.

"We are not the first country to adopt such a law and I am sure we will not be the last," Zapatero declared.

"It is true that (homosexuals) are only a minority but their triumph is a triumph for everybody, their victory makes us all better, makes our society better," he told the house.

The legislation has been bitterly

opposed by conservatives in the influential Roman Catholic Church and the rightwing opposition Popular Party.

An estimated half a million people, including many bishops, priests and nuns, turned out to demonstrate against the new law last weekend in central Madrid, while almost as many attended a rally which the gay community billed as a counter-protest.

Saturday's event was organised by the Forum for the Family, Spain's association of pro-Catholic pressure groups, which on Wednesday handed in a petition with 600,000 signatures against the legislation on the eve of its examination in parliament.

Anti-gay marriage groups had already previously collected half a million signatures opposing the bill when it was approved on its first reading in April.

However polls have showed that around three-quarters of the electorate in fact support the government's liberal agenda and that even if most Spaniards describe themselves as Roman Catholics, they see the church as out of touch with popular feeling.

World's oldest person celebrates 115th birthday

REUTERS, Amsterdam

A Dutch woman who swears by a daily helping of herring for a healthy life celebrated her 115th birthday on Wednesday as the oldest living person on record.

Hendrikje van Andel-Schipper, a former needlework teacher, was born in 1890, the year Sioux Indians were massacred by the US military at the Battle of Wounded Knee.

The passionate soccer fan celebrated her birthday in a nursing home in the northern Dutch town of Hoogeveen.

"She eats a piece of herring every day because it's good for the health," said Johan Beijering, director of the Westerkim nursing home. "She is still mentally full of vitality."

The daughter of a headmaster, Van Andel-Schipper was born in the town of Smilde in the northern Netherlands on June 29, 1890.

Also known as Hennie, she married a tax inspector in the 1930s and was forced to sell her jewellery to buy food during the German occupation in World War Two.



PHOTO: AFP

A protester spits on a burning portrait of Philippine President Gloria Arroyo during a demonstration in Manila yesterday. Thousands of protesters marched in key points around Manila to demand Arroyo's ouster amid vote fraud allegation.