

Blair warns Iran not to interfere in Iraq

10 killed in Baghdad car bombing

AFP, London/ Baghdad

Britain Prime Minister Tony Blair warned Iran not to interfere in Iraq yesterday after underlining suspicion that explosives used to kill British troops there may have come from the Islamic republic.

In a joint news conference with visiting Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, Blair also warned Tehran that London would not be intimidated about querying Iran's nuclear weapons ambitions.

His comments came as Iran's foreign ministry rejected accusations by a senior British official on Wednesday that the country's elite Revolutionary Guard had supplied weapons technology to insurgents in Iraq.

Blair backed-up the claim, but noted it was just a suspicion for now.

"What is clear is that there have been new explosive devices used not just against British troops but elsewhere in Iraq," he told reporters.

"The particular nature of those devices led us either to Iranian elements or to Hezbollah," Blair said.

"However, we can't be sure of this at the present time."

Blair said British troops would stay in Iraq, which is preparing to hold a referendum next week on a new constitution, for as long as requested.

He reiterated that British and US-led troops were authorised to be in the war-scarred nation under a United Nations mandate following the invasion to topple Saddam Hussein.

"There is no justification for Iran or any other country interfering in Iraq," the British leader said.

"Neither will we be subject to any

intimidation in raising the necessary and right issues to do with the nuclear weapons obligations of Iran under the atomic energy agency treaty," he warned.

Blair said discussions about the problem had been continuing for several months.

As for Iraq itself, Blair told Talabani that British troops would remain until the Iraqi government asked them to leave.

"We intend to stay with you for as long as you need us and as long as you want us," he said. Britain contributes some 8,000 troops to the US-led military coalition there.

For his part, the Iraqi president said an early pullout by the multinational forces would be "catastrophic".

"Your commitment to the cause of democracy in Iraq in training our

security forces will help us stand on our feet and run on our own two feet," he said.

Talabani acknowledged that Baghdad ultimately wanted to see an end to the presence of coalition forces but only when the country was ready.

Meanwhile, ten people were killed in a car bombing near the oil ministry in Baghdad in one of a spate of attacks yesterday, adding to fears of spiralling violence in the run-up to the October 15 referendum on Iraq's new constitution.

The bombings and shootings came a day after a bomb attack in the town of Hilla south of Baghdad that killed 25 people as Shia Muslims gathered for prayers at the end of their first day of the holy month of Ramadan.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi man retrieves yesterday holy Qurans from a Shia mosque that was targeted by a suicide car bomb in the city of Hilla, south of Baghdad. At least 25 people were killed and 87 wounded on Wednesday in the attack as worshippers gathered for prayers at the end of their first day of Ramadan.

First unofficial Afghan polls results released

AP, AFP, Kabul

Election authorities announced yesterday the first few unofficial results in Afghanistan's parliamentary election. Officials said they were excluding nearly 300 polling stations from the vote count because of fraud.

The joint UN-Afghan election body declared provisional winners from national and provincial assembly seats in two of the country's 34 provinces and said most of the other results from the Sept. 18 poll would be released in the coming week.

Final, certified results are expected by late October.

Peter Erben, the chief electoral officer, said that fraud had been detected so far at 299 polling stations about one percent of the total nationwide but no clear evidence had been found to implicate any candidates.

War-scarred Afghanistan took another step yesterday towards forming its first parliament in more than three decades when the first provisional results from last month's landmark vote were released.



PHOTO: AFP

The Agua Escondida village, in Guatemala, shows the destructive effect of the passage of Tropical Storm Stan Wednesday. Tropical Storm Stan only briefly reached hurricane strength, but killed at least 160 people in Central America and Mexico and relentless rains on Wednesday fuelled fears of further devastation.

‘Laden to surface after new attack on US soil’

Mullah Omar still in Afghanistan

AFP, AP, Washington/ Quetta

Osama bin Laden is expected to remain in hiding until he stages another attack on the United States, an ex-CIA expert who had tracked the terror mastermind for two decades warned in an interview.

"As soon as he hits us in the United States again we'll see how important he is in the Islamic world," Michael Scheuer, the former head of the "bin Laden unit" at the CIA, told AFP in an interview.

Despite his low profile, bin Laden remains powerful, Scheuer said, shrugging off reports that the al-Qaeda chief was isolated and his communication network shattered due to a relentless hunt for him.

"We mistake quiet for defeat or irrelevance. And all quiet is disquiet," said Scheuer, a fierce critic of the Bush administration and its "War on Terror" policy since he left the CIA in November last year.

Scheuer said that bin Laden's right-

hand-man Ayman al-Zawahiri, who last appeared on a video aired 10 days before the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, seemed to have temporarily taken over the al-Qaeda leadership apparently for the boss to prepare for another US strike.

Meanwhile, a detained Taliban spokesman has told his interrogators that the militia's fugitive chief, Mullah Mohammed Omar, is hiding in Afghanistan and is in contact with top commanders, an intelligence official said Wednesday.

"So far, he has told interrogators that Mullah Omar is alive, he is in Afghanistan and he remains in contact with senior aides by satellite phone," said the Pakistani intelligence official, who was involved in the raid to arrest Latifi in Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because of the secretive nature of his job.

India, France sign \$3b sub purchase deal

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday signed a deal with France in New Delhi for the purchase of six Franco-Spanish Scorpene submarines worth 2.4 billion euros (three billion dollars).

The contract, which France had been lobbying hard to win, involves the vessels being assembled in India's financial city of Mumbai as part of a technology transfer arrangement.

"According to the agreement, India will build the Scorpene submarines at the state-owned Mazagaon docks in Mumbai under transfer of technology from France," an Indian defence ministry statement said.

"The first submarine will be ready for induction ... within seven years of signing of the contract. The remaining five will be delivered at intervals of one year each thereafter."

The formal signing came less than a month after French President Jacques Chirac announced in Paris that India had agreed to buy the six Scorpene submarines for its navy as well as 43 Airbus passenger aircraft, worth 1.8 billion euros, for state-run Indian Airlines.

Ex-Marine slams US brutality in Iraq

AFP, Paris

US military training has created troops so desensitised to violence that battle-ground brutality in Iraq is rampant -- and has helped fuel the bloody insurgency seen there today, a new book released Thursday in France by a former Marine says.

Jimmy Massey, a former staff sergeant, told AFP that the daily attacks now doled out to US-led forces and Iraqi civilians are "because of the brutality that the Iraqi people saw at the start of the invasion."

In his book, "Kill! Kill! Kill!", he says he and other Marines in his unit killed dozens of unarmed Iraqi civilians because of an exaggerated sense of threat, and that they often experienced sexual-type thrills doing so.

The book was being released first in France -- and in French -- because, he said, "I didn't find an American publisher."

The French journalist who helped

him write the work, Natasha Saulnier, said she believed the US companies were reluctant to touch the book because its "controversial" nature threatened commercial interests and the US public's image of their fighting forces.

Massey, who left Iraq in May 2003 shortly after US President George W. Bush declared "mission accomplished", wrote the book after being discharged from the Marines with a diagnosed case of post-trauma stress syndrome.

"It's been a healing experience," he said. "It's allowed me to close a lot of chapters and answer a lot of questions."

In the book, he claims he and a group of Marines were near Baghdad when a group of 10 Iraqi men started to protest near them, yelling out anti-US slogans. At the sound of a gunshot, he said he and his men fired on the group, killing most of them, only to find out later that none of them was armed.