



Blair says he'll resign within a year

AP, REUTERS, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair reluctantly promised Thursday to resign within a year, hoping that revealing a general time frame for his departure will appease critics who are calling for him to step down.

"I would have preferred to do this in my own way," Blair said. He refused to set a specific departure date, but said the annual Labour Party conference this month would be his last. The next conference is scheduled for September 2007.

Blair's popularity has tumbled in opinion polls after government scandals over sleaze and mismanagement were compounded by controversy over the wars in Iraq and Lebanon. Some former supporters urgently want a change at the top.

Blair's spokesman said the prime minister was aware of public concerns and would make a statement on his future later on Thursday to reflect what Environment Minister David Miliband said earlier this week.

Bush admits CIA runs secret prisons

AP, Washington

President Bush on Wednesday acknowledged for the first time that the CIA runs secret prisons overseas and said tough interrogation forced terrorist leaders to reveal plots to attack the United States and its allies.

Bush said 14 suspects including the mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks and architects of the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole and the US Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania had been turned over to the Defence Department and moved to the US detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for trial.

"This programme has been, and remains, one of the most vital tools

in our war against the terrorists," Bush said.

"Were it not for this programme, our intelligence community believes that al-Qaeda and its allies would have succeeded in launching another attack against the American homeland."

Releasing information declassified just hours earlier, Bush said the capture of one terrorist just months after the Sept. 11 attacks had led to the capture of another and then another, and had revealed planning for attacks using airplanes, car bombs and anthrax.

Nearing the fifth anniversary of Sept. 11, Bush pressed Congress to quickly pass administration-drafted legislation authorizing the use of

military commissions for trials of terror suspects. Legislation is needed because the Supreme Court in June said the administration's plan for trying detainees in military tribunals violated US and international law.

The president's speech, his third in a recent series about the war on terror, gave him an opportunity to shore up his administration's credentials on national security two months before congressional elections at a time when Americans are growing weary of the war in Iraq.

Democrats, hoping to make the elections a referendum on Bush's policies in Iraq and the war on terror, urged anew that Defence Secretary

Donald H. Rumsfeld be made to step down. They argued that the White House has mishandled the war, mismanaged the detainee system and failed to prosecute terrorists.

"For five years, Democrats have stood ready to work with the president and the Republican Congress to establish sound procedures to bring terrorists to justice," said Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev. "Unfortunately, President Bush ignored the advice of our uniformed military and set up a flawed system that failed to prosecute a single terrorist and was ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court."



PHOTO: AFP

A Unifil truck drives past Israeli tanks taking position in the southern Lebanese village of Marwahin near the Israeli border yesterday. Israeli troops are preparing to withdraw from three more positions in south Lebanon yesterday as part of the UN-brokered ceasefire that ended the war with Hezbollah.

Arab League wants UN to relaunch ME peace

AFP, Cairo

The Arab League on Wednesday called on the United Nations Security Council to find a new mechanism to relaunch the Middle East peace process, during a meeting of foreign ministers in Cairo.

The 22-member body decided in a final statement to ask for a "new mechanism" to break the impasse in the peace process and urged the Security Council to meet later this month on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Earlier, Bahraini Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa said the League would call on the UN Security Council "to review the peace process ... and to find a new and effective mechanism to activate it, based on Security Council decisions and the Arab peace initiative."

Tempers fray as Iraqi MPs talk federalism

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's parliament abruptly adjourned yesterday after several Shia lawmakers tried to force debate on the divisive issue of federalism, which Sunnis fear could lead to the breakup of the oil-rich country.

Saleh al-Mutlaq of the Sunni National Dialogue Front said afterwards that parliamentary security guards had been summoned into the debating chamber amid fears that lawmakers' heated exchanges could turn violent.

The parliament faces a deadline in the coming weeks for determining

how regions can win autonomy under a federal constitution passed last October despite opposition from the once-dominant Sunni minority.

There is some debate on exactly when the deadline should be considered to fall.

Officials in the dominant Shia Alliance bloc said on Wednesday they had completed a draft of their proposal for a mechanism by which provinces could form autonomous regions.

Sunnis, concentrated in Iraq's resource-poor central and western provinces, are opposed to such a move, fearing it would seal their

political doom by giving Shias in the south and Kurds in the north an unfair share of Iraq's oil.

Shia lawmakers tried to force discussion and a vote on their proposal during Thursday's sometimes rowdy session, but the speaker of parliament, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, a Sunni, angrily cut them off, saying he had not received the proposal.

"This is an insult to me," he told lawmakers. "This proposal should have been submitted ... two days ago. I just heard about it today."

Democrats debate censure of Rumsfeld

AFP, Washington

The US Senate debated Wednesday a Democrat-sponsored measure calling on President George W. Bush to sack Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, as ruling Republicans rallied around the embattled defence chief.

Conservative Senator Judd Gregg, speaking on the Senate floor, accused Democrats of mounting a "viciously partisan and overtly political" assault on Rumsfeld, and called the manoeuvre "a stalking horse for an attack on the policies in Iraq."

But the top Senate Democrat, Harry Reid, said the time has come to rethink US Iraq policy, starting with replacing the Pentagon's top civilian, and not necessarily stopping there.

"No matter how the lily is gilded, it's clear that we need new oversight," US Senator Hillary Clinton.

US ups pressure on China, Russia over Iran

'It is now essential to slap sanctions on Iran'

AFP, Washington

The United States Wednesday said it expected China and Russia to conquer qualms over imposing UN sanctions on Iran, warning the prospect of its foe going nuclear was "intolerable."

Robert Joseph, US under secretary of state for arms control and international security, said he believed a vote on sanctions could come as early this month.

The latest US call for sanctions came days after Iran ignored an August 31 deadline to stop uranium enrichment, and on the eve of talks in Berlin among the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany.

President George W Bush on Tuesday branded Iran's leaders "tyrants" and said they must not be allowed to get nuclear weapons,

"the tools of mass murder."

"It is now essential that we move to adopt sanctions against Iran," Joseph told foreign reporters in Washington.

"A nuclear-armed Iran is intolerable -- not just to the United States but to the entire international community," he said.

"As the president said, now there must be costs, there must be costs imposed on Iran."

Joseph also said he expected China and Russia to support sanctions, despite signs they were reluctant to punish Tehran.

"I think China, like Russia and the other states that voted for the resolution, will support what is called for in the resolution," he said, referring to UN Resolution 1696, which threatened sanctions if Iran missed the deadline.

"The fundamental bargain has been struck."

Russia said earlier it still had reservations about imposing sanctions against Iran, but was considering the issue in the context of its desire to halt the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

"Whether we use (sanctions) or not has still to be decided, since any economic measures must be commensurate with real threats to international security," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was quoted as saying by ITAR-TASS.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was defiant in talks in Tehran with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan at the weekend, saying he was prepared to negotiate on Iran's nuclear programme but would not accept a suspension of enrichment first.