

Britain's finance minister heads to India

AFP, London

Britain's finance minister Gordon Brown was set to leave for India yesterday for a three-day tour that will be watched closely at home as he edges towards becoming the country's next prime minister.

The chancellor of the exchequer and his ally, Trade and Industry Secretary Alistair Darling, were to depart for the sub-continent Tuesday lunchtime (1300-1400 GMT) with senior British political reporters in tow.

Although the trip is mainly focused on strengthening bilateral trade links, analysts see Brown's visit as key to preparing the ground for and gaining experience before his expected promotion to the top job later this year.

Brown -- best known for his careful stewardship of the British economy -- is widely seen as the man most likely to take over when Prime Minister Tony Blair leaves office within the next nine months.

In recent weeks, he has strayed beyond his Treasury department brief in a series of high-profile appearances and speeches, to demonstrate his grip on wider policy issues and win over public opinion.

They have ranged from domestic issues like education and health to foreign policy, in particular Britain's controversial presence in Iraq, to give a flavour of his future premiership.

Brown and Darling -- who is himself being tipped to take over the post of finance minister -- are being accompanied to Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore by more than 150 business leaders from more than 80 British companies.

Hundreds of angry tribesmen held a rally yesterday to protest against a Pakistani air strike on a remote town near the Afghan border, saying the dead were all innocent labourers.

Some 600 people gathered in Tank, a small town near the South Waziristan region, where the military said earlier Tuesday it had destroyed three suspected Al-Qaeda hideouts occupied by 25 to 30 local and foreign militants.

The protesters, including elders from the local Mahsud tribe, religious scholars and elected representatives, blocked traffic and chanted slogans against Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and his US counterpart George W Bush, witnesses said.

"The attack was unjust, it killed innocent people," tribal leader Dilawar Khan told the rally.

He said the bombing had killed eight people and left several others wounded.

Earlier, military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP most of the 25 to 30 "foreign terrorists" and their local facilitators were believed to have been killed in the attack on the Zamazola town near the Afghan border.

The tribal leader however insisted there were no foreigners present and the victims were all "local labourers who were cutting trees when the raid was conducted."



A fisherman catches fish in Karnaphuli river in a different style. He is waiting for the catch after tying his net to pontoons at Kalurghat in Chittagong. The picture was taken yesterday.

UN and Europe condemn hanging of Saddam aides

AFP, Paris

UN and European leaders roundly condemned the hanging of two of Saddam Hussein's aides in Iraq, with even the United States questioning the manner of the execution that left one of the men decapitated.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon deplored the fact that the executions went ahead despite international appeals for clemency.

"He (Ban) regrets that despite pleas from himself and the high commissioner for human rights (Louise Arbour) to spare the lives of the two co-defendants, they were both executed," UN spokeswoman Michele Montas told a press briefing.

On January 6 the new UN secretary general had urged the Iraqi government to suspend the planned executions.

Saddam's half-brother and former intelligence chief, Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, and the former head of Iraq's Revolutionary Court, Awad Ahmed al-Bandar, were executed early on Monday in Baghdad.

UN human rights chief Arbour sharply criticised the executions, saying they could hamper the long-term search for justice in Iraq.

"I am opposed to capital punishment under all circumstances," she said in a statement.

"In this particular case, not only is the penalty irremediable, it may also make it more difficult to have a complete judicial accounting of other, equally horrendous, crimes committed

in Iraq," she added.

The United States, while recognising Iraq's sovereign right to dispense justice as it sees fit, regretted the fashion in which the aides were executed, following Iraq's confirmation that the head of Saddam's half-brother had been ripped from his body during the hanging.

"We were disappointed there was not greater dignity given to the accused under these circumstances," said US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Britain, the staunchest US-ally over the war in Iraq, restated its opposition to the death penalty but said justice had taken its course.

"Ultimately, this was a decision for the sovereign government," a Foreign

Office spokesman in London told AFP.

Prime Minister Tony Blair's official spokesman gave the same line, saying: "Iraq is a sovereign government and therefore has a right under international law to decide its own policy on the death penalty."

Saddam's execution on December 30, before which he was taunted by Shiite guards and observers, drew criticism worldwide for the way it was handled by the Iraqi authorities.

Grisly images of the execution and Saddam's body recorded on a mobile phone and posted on the Internet only served to fuel the sense of outrage.

European Commission president Jose Manuel Barroso and Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi, both of whom had condemned Saddam's hanging, were equally blunt in denouncing the execution of his aides.

"I have the same position I had over the execution of Saddam Hussein," Prodi said. "Italy is against the death penalty."

Barroso added: "We are in principle against the death penalty. Man does not have the right to take the life of another man."

Capital punishment is outlawed in all European Union countries, but it is widely practiced in two of the UN Security Council's five permanent members -- China and the United States.

Iraq's neighbour Jordan said it hoped that the executions would not undermine the reconciliation process in Iraq.

Human rights group Amnesty International said the hangings only served to underline the brutal and inhuman nature of capital punishment.

"Saddam Hussein and his aides should certainly have been held to account for the horrific human rights crimes committed by his government," said Amnesty official Malcolm Smart.

"But this should have been through a fair trial process and without recourse to the death penalty," which was a "brutal violation of the right to life," Smart said.

And he added: "Reports that Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti had his head severed during the hanging only emphasise the brutality of this already cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment."



Job seekers wait in a long queue for their turn outside the pro-vice chancellor's office at Rajshahi University yesterday. The selection board interviewed them for recruitment in different posts.

World's response to children with AIDS 'tragically insufficient': UN

AFP, Geneva

Millions of children remain at risk from HIV/AIDS and the world's response to their plight remains "tragically insufficient", a UN report said yesterday.

The report by UNAIDS, the

Kabul hails US recognition of militant havens in Pakistan

AFP, Kabul

US assertions that Taliban and Al-Qaeda fighters are operating out of safe havens in Pakistan vindicate Kabul's position and boost its chances of uprooting terrorism, Afghanistan said yesterday.

The remarks by US intelligence chief John Negroponte and others "prove Afghanistan's position in regards (to) the fight on terrorism," a spokesman for President Hamid Karzai told a media briefing.

"We are glad that the position of the international community, in particular the United States, on the war on terror becomes more clear every passing day," Karim Rahimi said.

The United States launched the "war on terror" with the operation that drove the Taliban out of government in late 2001 for sheltering the Al-Qaeda network behind the September 11 attacks that year.

Afghanistan has become a key battlefield for the war, with more than 40,000 foreign troops here fighting militants. But it has long said the insurgency must be cut off at its roots, which it alleges are in Pakistan.

Rahimi said comments by Negroponte and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who has said similar things, were bringing this goal closer.

"The president of Afghanistan has constantly emphasised over the past several years the need for targeting the roots of terrorism. We are getting closer to this goal, I think," Rahimi said.

Once "the roots of terrorists are dried up, there'll be no need to fight them elsewhere," he said.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates was in Afghanistan Tuesday to meet with Karzai and top military officials to determine the best way to tackle the resurgent Taliban.

As Gates started his meetings in the Afghan capital, Pakistan announced its helicopter gunships had destroyed three suspected Al-Qaeda hideouts early Tuesday in a tribal region bordering Afghanistan, killing up to 30 militants.

Afghanistan suffered its most violent year in 2006 as the Taliban made a bloody comeback, attacking Western military and Afghan targets almost every day.

The attacks, which included nearly 140 Iraq-style suicide bombings, killed 4,000 people, most of them rebel fighters.

Karzai has bitterly accused elements in the government of Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf of playing a part in the Taliban's efforts and, relations between the two governments have been strained by the upsurge in attacks.

UN's children's fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organisation (WHO) was released on the first anniversary of the "Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS" programme, which set targets to deal with AIDS in children.

It said there are some signs that attitudes and policies are starting to change.

About 2.3 million children under 15 are infected with HIV, 15.2 million children under 18 have lost one or both parents to AIDS, and millions more have been made vulnerable, according to the report.

"In the year since (the programme was launched), the world's response to protect and support AIDS-affected children remains tragically insufficient. But in important and positive ways, that is beginning to change," it said.

The agencies estimate that 30 billion dollars (23 billion euros) are required to address the "four P's" of their strategy: preventing

mother-to-child transmission of HIV; providing paediatric treatment; preventing infection among adolescents and young people; and protecting and supporting children affected by HIV/AIDS.

The programme is aiming to offer appropriate services to 80 percent of HIV-infected mothers by 2010, as well as antiretroviral treatment or antibiotic treatment to 80 percent of children in need.

It is targeting a 25 percent cut in the percentage of young people living with HIV within three years.

"Over the past year, there has been a broad, growing recognition of the need to intensify and accelerate action towards universal access to comprehensive prevention, treatment, care and support," the report said.

It called on more governments to follow the example of Britain, Ireland and the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, and to earmark at least 10 percent of their AIDS funding for children and adolescents.

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