

Pressure piles on Blair to quit amid inquiry

AFP, London

Pressure grew on British Prime Minister Tony Blair yesterday to step down soon as a newspaper poll said that most voters want him to resign immediately.

Blair, who has said he will leave office by September, was also told that it was "time to move on" by a respected lawmaker from his Labour Party who wants to be deputy leader on the premier's departure.

The interventions come at the end of a tough week for Blair as officials revealed that he had been questioned for a second time in the "cash for honours" probe threatening to overshadow his final months in power.

A growing chorus of Labour lawmakers now say that Blair's authority is leaching away because of the investigation and claim he is a lame duck after earlier announcing that he would leave office later this year.

An ICM poll for the right-of-centre Sunday Express newspaper found that 56 percent of people thought Blair should quit now while 37 percent back him to stay on.

Support for him to resign straight away also appeared to be increasing among supporters of his governing centre-left party, with 43 percent saying it is time for him to go -- and go now.

The cash-for-honours probe is looking at allegations that political parties illegally offered seats in Britain's unelected upper chamber of parliament, the House of Lords, in return for financial assistance.

340,000 flee floods in Indonesia capital

AFP, Jakarta

Rescuers and volunteers yesterday struggled to help nearly 340,000 Indonesians left homeless by devastating floods, triggered by heavy rains in and around Jakarta, which have killed 20 people.

With more rain forecast, authorities put the capital on high alert and police deployed 12,600 extra personnel equipped with helicopters, inflatable boats and rafts to assist with evacuation efforts across the city.

Many residents escaped their homes on inner tubes, children's inflatable paddling pools and makeshift rafts, or by wading through the floods rather than wait for help to arrive.

Water levels reached rooftops in some areas as rivers and canals that criss-cross the city burst their banks following days of torrential downpours.

"The number of our personnel is enough, but what we are lacking are rubber boats for the evacuation of residents," said Jakarta police spokesman Untung Yoga Ana.

Ana said the floods in the capital and surrounding areas had so far left 20 people dead and one missing.

"The victims died because of disease, cold, electrocution or were swept away by the floods," Ana told the state Antara news agency.

Health ministry officials said 18 were killed and two missing.

At least 122 areas were seriously flooded in the city of 10 million people and the surrounding towns of Tangerang, Depok and Bekasi, Ana said.

Some 339,138 people in Jakarta, Tangerang and Bekasi had left their homes to seek shelter, health ministry official Rustam Pakaya said.

It was a dramatic increase from the 190,000 reported displaced earlier in the day.

Television stations showed footage of inundated areas around the capital, mainly along the Ciliwung, Pesanggrahan and Krukut rivers, with people being evacuated from their roofs or the second floors of their homes.

Helicopters dropped supplies to people stranded in the north of the city.

A key floodgate in East Jakarta could no longer block water flowing in from outside the city, staff there said, causing the city's main canal to burst its banks.

Members of the Indonesian Red Cross and other volunteers were delivering food to thousands of people stranded in their flooded homes, sheltering on roadsides or in public buildings and mosques turned into temporary shelters.

The floods have also forced the closures of several main roads across Jakarta, while at least two hospitals had to move patients to upper floors.

Many train services were cancelled or delayed.

Power and fresh water supplies were also cut to many areas, adding to the misery of people who opted to stay in their flooded homes.

More than 670,000 people were without electricity.

"This weather pattern will continue until at least the end of February," said Edison Gurnung of the Meteorology and Geophysics Agency.

With rain continuing to fall in water catchment areas south of the city, Gurnung said the floods could spread even further.

Residents of Kelapa Gading in North Jakarta -- a vast residential and commercial area inundated in 2002 by floods that killed 40 people -- said the latest disaster was far worse.

"Last time, the water was only knee deep, but yesterday it had already reached my midriff when I left," said 48-year-old Brahmana, who managed to leave his two-storey house with his car when water levels were still low.

"I could stay on the second floor of the house, but there is no food, no electricity, no clean water, and the toilets cannot flush," Brahmana said.

Environment Minister Rachmat Witoelar has blamed the floods on excessive construction on natural drainage areas, Antara reported, but Jakarta governor Sutiyoso said it was a "cyclical natural phenomenon."



This aerial photo taken yesterday from a helicopter shows a downtown street and its surrounding residential neighbourhood under flood waters in Jakarta.

Fresh clashes in Gaza despite truce

Israel prepares for incursion

AFP, REUTERS, Gaza City/Jerusalem

Armed clashes flared again in the Gaza Strip yesterday as leaders of rival Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas struggled to enforce a ceasefire in the violence-wrecked territory.

Sporadic bursts of gunfire and occasional explosions echoed across the city centre's deserted streets and shuttered shops as residents hunkered down in their homes.

Leaders of the warring parties met in Gaza City in a bid to bolster the unravelling ceasefire.

Before dawn, two mortar rounds slammed into the headquarters of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's elite presidential guard, just 100 metres (yards) from his seafront offices, a security source said.

Mortar shells and grenades were also fired at the nearby campus of the Al Azhar University, controlled by Abbas's Fatah faction.

But there were signs that the violence was easing as the rivals began withdrawing their militants from the streets overnight, as stipulated by the ceasefire agreed on Friday by Abbas and exiled Hamas leader Khaled Meshal.

The fighting was more subdued than in previous days, when 28 Palestinians were killed and around 260 wounded in some of the fiercest clashes since the Islamist Hamas routed Fatah in parliament

tary elections early last year.

As Abbas and Meshal prepared for crisis talks in the Muslim holy city of Makkah on Tuesday, hosted by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said he remained confident the two could still strike a national unity deal despite the fighting.

"We are working towards a national unity government. It is about to be finished, unless there are any surprises," Mubarak said after talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Cairo on Saturday.

Fatah and Hamas have tried in vain for months to form a broad coalition acceptable to Western donors, who imposed a crippling aid freeze on the Palestinian Authority when the Islamist-led government took power last March.

Representatives of the two sides met in Gaza on Saturday to renew their commitment to the truce -- the second attempt at a ceasefire in a week.

Meanwhile, Israel has stepped up preparations for a possible military incursion into Gaza over concerns that fighting between Palestinian factions may lead to renewed attacks on Israel, a newspaper reported yesterday.

The Haaretz daily quoted senior military sources as saying that such a raid was not an immediate possibility but part of a contingency plan in case the violence escalated further.



Iraqis inspect destruction early yesterday at the site where a suicide bomber blew up Saturday his Mercedes truck in central Baghdad's Al-Sadr City. At least 135 people were killed and 305 wounded in the second deadliest attack since the US-led invasion of 2003.

Bush offers Democrats olive branch on Iraq war

AFP, Washington

After US intelligence painted a grim picture of George W. Bush's plan for Iraq and as a congressional rebuke loomed, the US president sought bipartisan help from Democrats on bringing the war to an end.

Gone was Bush's insistence upon being "the decider" on Iraq policy as he addressed Democrats of the House of Representatives, which like the Senate, is under Democratic control largely thanks to voter impatience with Bush's highly unpopular wartime performance.

"I put out a plan that has caused a lot of debate on Iraq," Bush said of his war strategy, about which doubts were raised by a stark review of the war situation in a report from Washington's 16 intelligence agencies on Friday.

"I listened to many members here. I listened to members of my own party. I listened to the military and came up with a plan that I genuinely believe has the best chance of succeeding," he told Democrats meeting in Williamsburg, Virginia, south of Washington, on Saturday.

Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told the crowd: "The

choice is bipartisanship or stalemate," The Washington Post reported Sunday.

And she told lawmakers that "if it appears likely that Bush wants to take the country to war against Iran, the House would take up a bill to deny him the authority to do so," the Post quoted Pelosi spokesman Brendan Daly as saying.

Bush however made no mention of the centerpiece of his new war plan: the addition of 21,500 new troops to US forces in Iraq.

Most Democrats and even some members of Bush's Republican Party appear poised to adopt a non-binding resolution next week opposing the troop "surge."

Last week Senator Arlen Specter, a Republican, reminded the president that "he is not the sole decider" on war policy.

Bush spoke in Williamsburg a day after the issue of the new official National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq. In the parts of the report released to the public, Iraq was described as on the brink of chaos and facing more sectarian upheaval and institutional collapse if US forces withdraw soon.

In a letter to London's Sunday Times newspaper, the three former US military leaders said attacking

Ex-US commanders warn against Iran attack

Tehran vows to defy UN nuclear resolution

REUTERS, AFP, London

Three former senior US military officials warn that any military action against Iran would have "disastrous consequences" and urged Washington to hold immediate and unconditional talks with Tehran.

The Bush administration has increased the regularity and vehemence of its accusations against Iran, prompting speculation it could be laying the ground for military attack against the Islamic state.

Washington has also sent a second aircraft carrier to the Gulf, a move seen as a warning to Iran, which the United States accuses of seeking atomic arms and fueling instability in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. Iran denies the charges.

In a letter to London's Sunday Times newspaper, the three former US military leaders said attacking

Iran "would have disastrous consequences for security in the region, coalition forces in Iraq and would further exacerbate regional and global tensions," they wrote.

"The current crisis must be resolved through diplomacy," they said.

The letter was signed by retired army Lieutenant General Robert Gard, a former military assistant to Defence Secretary Robert McNamara, retired US Marine Corps General Joseph Hoar, a former commander in chief of US Central Command; and retired Navy Vice Admiral Jack Shanahan, a former director of the Centre for Defence Information.

They urged the US government to "engage immediately in direct talks with the government of Iran without preconditions."

"There is time available to talk, we must ensure that we use it," they said.

The three men have joined previous petitions calling on the Bush administration to change course in its policy on Iran.

Washington broke ties with Iran in 1980. It has offered to hold direct talks with Iran but only once Tehran halts its drive to produce nuclear fuel through uranium enrichment.

Meanwhile, Iran yesterday vowed to defy a UN resolution calling for a freeze to its controversial nuclear work but promised to open up its disputed uranium enrichment facility in Natanz to the media.

"We believe this resolution has legal and executive problems, we will not implement it, as we have said before," the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation Gholamreza Aghazadeh said, quoted by semi-official Mehr news agency.

Iraq-Syria relations strained anew

AFP, Baghdad

Relations between Baghdad and Damascus that were restored just three months ago are already under strain amid allegations Syria is sheltering Iraqi fugitives but being "hostile" to genuine refugees.

Amid a quickening bombing campaign against Baghdad commercial districts that on Saturday saw 130 people killed in the second deadliest attack since the 2003 invasion, Iraqi leaders are voicing growing frustration with what they see as Syria's failure to stem the flow of militants across the border.

Syria has imposed restrictions on Iraqi refugees, suspended flights by the national carrier Iraqi Airways and welcomed Sunni cleric Hareth al-Dari, who is wanted by authorities in Baghdad.

After Saturday's massive truck bomb in a Baghdad market, Iraqi

government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh declared that half of the violence gripping the country was the work of outsiders infiltrating from Syria.

"I confirm that 50 percent of murders and bombings are by Arab extremists coming from Syria," Dabbagh said.

"They come from Syria, we have evidence to prove it. We have already proved it to our brothers in Syria."

"We want to tell all Arabs now that those who call themselves Mujahideen come from Syria, and murder our oppressed population."

Syria reacted angrily to Dabbagh's comments describing them as "contrary to reality and aimed at harming relations between Iraq and Syria that Damascus wants to strengthen and develop."

Colombian coalmine blast kills 32

AP, Sardinata

An explosion tore through a makeshift coal mine in remote northeast Colombia on Saturday, killing 32 miners, a civil defence official said.

Rescue crews had located the bodies buried more than 1,300 feet below ground but were unable to safely remove them, said Yesid Arias, who was helping to coordinate the operation.

Officials had previously reported that three miners were dead and 28 were missing at the mine in the remote hamlet of San Roque, 255 miles northeast of Bogota.

"We have orders to work through the night and recover the bodies as quickly as possible, but unfortunately there's still plenty of trapped methane gas that's making it unsafe for work crews to stay underground for any extended period of time," Arias said.



Denise Anderson looks at the remains of her mobile home Saturday following a tornado in Lady Lake, Florida. Anderson and her husband took shelter in their bathtub during the storm.