

Blair may announce his departure plans today

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair faced a grilling from lawmakers over his departure plans yesterday, as he prepares to announce his resignation after 10 years in power.

Blair is widely expected to announce his timetable for departure today, paving the way to hand power to his ally-turned-bitter-foe, finance minister, Gordon Brown by the start of July, according to reports.

Some sources say he could inform Queen Elizabeth II of his plans as early as Wednesday, before revealing them publicly after a regular cabinet meeting this morning.

A Downing Street spokeswoman told AFP she could not comment on reports that Blair was to meet the queen Wednesday and referred questions about the prime minister's itinerary for Thursday to the Labour Party.

A Labour Party spokesman told AFP that it was "business as usual" Wednesday and nothing had been finalised for Thursday, despite media claims Blair could make an announcement in his Sedgfield constituency in northeast England.

While the exact timetable is being kept strictly under wraps, lawmakers were expected to try to tease out some details at the weekly



Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the House of Commons at midday (1100 GMT).

According to the mass-market Sun, known to have good sources

in Downing Street, Blair will make "an emotional resignation speech," firing the starting gun on a seven-week contest for the Labour party leadership.

He is also expected to publicly endorse Brown for the first time as his successor, although insiders say he could delay this move until Friday, the newspaper said.

The widely expected announcement will come two days after Blair oversaw the restoration of power-sharing in Northern Ireland -- a key achievement -- but also following a poll drubbing last week when his party lost power in

Scotland.

The 54-year-old, who led his Labour party to a third straight election victory in 2005, had originally intended to stay in office until the next election, which has to be held by 2010.

But he was forced to agree to retire mid-term after a political coup last year widely blamed on Brown, who was said to be angry that Blair had not handed him the keys to 10 Downing Street earlier.

The at-times poisonous relationship between the two was underlined on Wednesday by a report that, shortly after the 2005 election, Blair planned to split up Brown's Treasury fiefdom.

Blair only decided against the move -- which could have seen Brown switched from the chancellorship to become foreign secretary -- because polling showed voters turned off by splits in the Labour party, said the Guardian daily.

Brown, who lacks Blair's media-savvy charisma, is almost certain to be elected as his successor as Labour party leader, after senior level ministers said they would not stand in recent weeks.

Under the British political system, the leader of the biggest party in the lower chamber House of Commons is automatically prime minister.

India tests missile

AFP, Bhubaneswar

India yesterday successfully tested a nuclear-capable ballistic missile from a site in the eastern state of Orissa, defence sources said.

The test of the Prithvi-1 (Earth 1) surface-to-surface missile took place at Chandipur-on-sea, about 200 kilometers northeast of Orissa's state capital Bhubaneswar.

The 8.5-metre-long missile -- which can carry a one-tonne conventional or nuclear warhead -- can travel 150 kilometres in five minutes and has a range of up to 250 kilometres.

It is designed for battlefield use against troops or armoured formations.

An official at the government's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) told AFP on condition of anonymity that the test was "part of a continued effort to improve the indigenously-developed missile."

Gunmen seize US oil workers in Nigeria

AFP, Lagos

Gunmen seized four foreign oil workers, including at least three Americans, in Nigeria adding to a list of dozens of foreigners abducted in recent weeks, officials said.

The four men were on a vessel off the oil-rich southern coast which was attacked late Tuesday by gunmen on six small boats, an industry source said. Nigerian military personnel fought the attackers but could not stop the abductions.

The attack came shortly after three oil pipelines were blown up in the Niger Delta.

A US diplomat said three Americans were definitely among those seized and the nationality of the fourth was being checked with a possibility he may be Canadian.

Femi Odumabo, a spokesman for Chevron, the oil US company for whom the attacked vessel was subcontracted, told AFP the four seized men were all US nationals.

A military spokesman said four Americans were taken hostage at a location known as Okam in Oloro in southern Delta State.

"Some navy ratings were wounded during a gun duel with the attackers," the spokesman, a major, who asked not to be named, told AFP by telephone from his base in the port city of Warri.

He said security agents were intensifying efforts to track down the militants.

"We are yet to identify the group responsible for this attack. But I can assure you that everything is being done to track them down," he added.

The seized men work for Global Industries. The company's vessel was some 10 kilometres off the Nigerian coast at the time of the attack.



A soldier guards while voters queue up to cast their ballots at a polling station in Baukau in East Timor yesterday.

Peaceful vote in E Timor raises hopes

AFP, Dili

East Timor held a peaceful election for president yesterday, bolstering hopes that months of deadly political turmoil in one of the world's newest countries could be near an end.

The orderly queues at polling stations across the former Portuguese colony were in sharp contrast to the violence of the past year, which saw foreign peacekeepers sent in to quiet the unrest.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Jose Ramos-Horta was seen as the favourite ahead of the ruling party's Francisco "Lu-Olo" Guterres after the two men came out on top in last month's first round of voting.

The United Nations said vote counting could take one to two days and both candidates, who accused each other of bribing voters, said they were confident of victory.

"Whatever the outcome, I will win," said Ramos-Horta, who won the Nobel Prize for his role in popularising the Timorese struggle for independence from neighbouring Indonesia after it invaded in 1975.

Guterres, a former resistance fighter and current leader of the ruling Fretilin party that Ramos-Horta founded and later left, echoed his words: "I am confident that I will be the winner."

The presidency is a largely ceremonial position but could have an influence in helping to guide the nation out of more than a year of troubles marked by unrest last year that left 37 people dead and more than 100,000 displaced.

A split between rival factions of the military spiralled into street violence that led officials including outgoing President Xanana Gusmao to appeal for international troops and police to come in and restore order.

Sarkozy lashed for lux vacation

AFP, Paris

France's new right wing leader Nicolas Sarkozy hit an immediate political controversy yesterday over a luxury holiday taken on a yacht belonging to a billionaire friend.

Sarkozy was said to be preparing his new government on the three day holiday in Malta, while at home demonstrators staged a third night of sporadic violence against his election triumph.

The president elect flew to Malta with his wife Cecilia and their 10-year-old son Louis on Monday to relax after his weekend election triumph over the Socialist Segolene Royal.

The British-registered 60-metre (200-foot) yacht belongs to billionaire tycoon Vincent Bolloré and the holiday quickly drew flak from political opponents who saw in it bad taste.

"It is normal that a future president gets his holidays sponsored by rich people who have everything to gain from the favours of power," asked Socialist deputy Jean-Marie LeGuen.

"What causes a problem is the style of the holiday, the fact that he is on the boat of a rich businessman and we don't know today if the Republic is assuring the cost of the trip," said Socialist Party leader Francois Hollande.

Sarkozy's Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) defended his action however.

Jean-Pierre Raffarin, a former right wing prime minister, said Sarkozy deserved the holiday and that he only starts work on May 16 when he takes over from President Jacques Chirac.

"After five difficult years, Nicolas Sarkozy owed three days of exceptional happiness to his family before five years of labour to the exclusive service of the French people," Raffarin said on French radio.

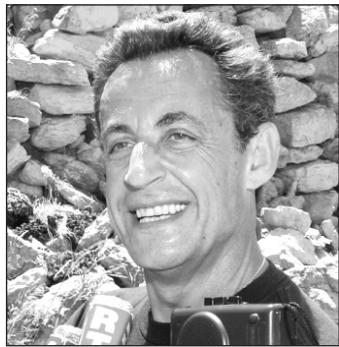
French newspapers noted what one called Sarkozy's "immoderate taste for super luxury."

"A way of showing-off money that recalls Silvio Berlusconi," the billionaire former Italian prime minister who never let office hinder his high-flying lifestyle, concluded La Republique des Pyrenees.

Sarkozy, the son of a Hungarian immigrant who won Sunday's election with a promises of a radical reform programme, was due to return to France later Wednesday and take part in an event on Thursday with Chirac.

Demonstrators opposed to the new French president meanwhile staged a third night of violence which was on a much smaller scale than the two previous nights.

Police battled small groups of what were described as extreme left wing activists in Paris and Lyon on Tuesday night. One office of Sarkozy's ruling party in a Lyon suburb was set on fire.



'Pak suspended judge a symbol of defiance against military rule'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's top judge has become a symbol of popular defiance to military rule due to his vocal support for judicial independence after his suspension by President Pervez Musharraf, analysts said.

Tens of thousands of people have demonstrated in support of Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry since Musharraf, the head of the army, suspended him on March 9 on misconduct charges.

"This man represents the aspirations of the people and gives them an outlet for pent-up emotions against the establishment," said I.A. Rehman, a senior figure from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, a private organisation.

"Judges have been dismissed in the past by military rulers in Pakistan, but there has never been such a movement," he said.

A crowd of more than 20,000 people greeted Chaudhry over the weekend in the eastern city of Lahore, applauding him thunderously when he said that "the era of dictatorship is over."

The popular sentiment crystallising around the judge is viewed as the most serious threat to Musharraf's rule since the general seized power in a coup in October 1999.

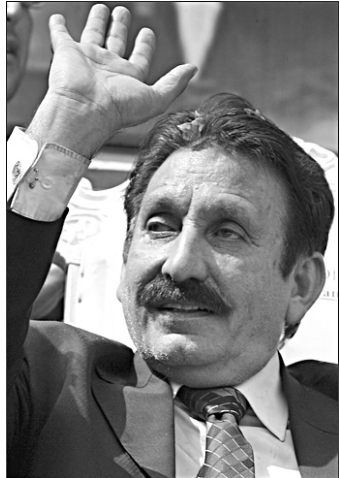
"Musharraf has lost more ground since he took action against the chief justice and the events since then would show he can never retrieve that space," political commentator Najam Sethi told AFP.

Opposition parties have also thrown their weight behind a campaign launched by lawyers against what they describe as Musharraf's desire to subjugate the judiciary.

The government has responded by denouncing Chaudhry for transforming from a judge into a politician.

His 20-month tenure as chief justice was marked by bold decisions, such as overturning a deal to sell a state-run steel mill and admonishing the authorities over the "disappearance" of scores of people in the "War on Terror."

"Justice Chaudhry was proactive in taking up issues which related to the people, like the forced kidnapping of scores of people allegedly by intelligence agencies," Rehman said.



Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry

Eight more killed in restive Thai south

AFP, Narathiwat

Suspected separatist insurgents have killed eight people in Thailand's restive south, including four soldiers caught in a bomb blast, police said yesterday.

At least four soldiers on patrol in an army vehicle were killed yesterday afternoon when insurgents remotely detonated a roadside bomb 300 metres from a school in Narathiwat province.

Rescue workers and police were unable to reach the scene immediately to assess the damage and number of injured, as the insurgents had thrown spikes onto the road to prevent access, police said.

Earlier yesterday, a 39-year-old Muslim villager was killed in a drive-by shooting in Yala province, police said, while in nearby Pattani a 51-year-old Buddhist hospital worker was shot dead in a similar attack.

On Tuesday afternoon, police found the bodies of a Muslim couple in their mid-30s in their house in Yala province. They had died from bullet wounds.

Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont announced Wednesday that he would lead a delegation of ministers to the Muslim-majority south this weekend in the latest bid to quell escalating unrest.

More than 2,100 people have been killed in separatist violence in the provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat since January 2004, and violence is growing despite peace-building moves by the government.

Surayud will head to the area on Sunday for a one-day visit with his two deputy prime ministers and seven cabinet ministers.

He said he wanted to give cabinet members first-hand experience of the unrest in the region bordering Malaysia, where they will meet military and civilian officials in Pattani and Yala.

Truck bomb kills 14 in Kurdish capital

AFP, Arbil

A powerful bomb exploded yesterday in Iraq's normally peaceful Kurdish capital of Arbil, killing at least 14 in a rare attack in a region usually sheltered from the country's turmoil.

The attack came as US Vice President Dick Cheney began an unannounced visit to Baghdad to urge Iraqi leaders to speed a process of national reconciliation.

The Arbil blast tore a two meter deep hole into the facade of the autonomous northern region's interior ministry, scattering the bodies of dead and injured outside the heavily guarded building.

Kurdistan's health minister, Zirian Abdelrahman, said 19 were people killed, although his colleague at the interior ministry later gave a lower toll.

"It was a truck bomb carrying cleaning products that targeted our ministry and killed 14 people and wounded 87, including government employees," regional interior minister Karim Sinajri told journalists shortly after the attack.

The blast site was a scene of chaos as rescue workers rushed to evacuate the wounded. Few panes of glass were left intact in nearby buildings and children's shoes lay scattered in the rubble.

"We cannot accuse anyone specific but, as we know, terrorists did this," added Sinajri. "Our ministry was attacked because it does such a good job fighting terrorism."

Suspicion fell immediately on Ansar al-Sunna, an extremist Islamist group that grew out of the Kurdish Ansar al-Islam movement and is active in northern parts of the country.

Four held over 2005 London bombings

AFP, London

British anti-terror police yesterday arrested four more people in connection with the July 2005 London suicide bombings.

The three men and one woman were arrested on suspicion of the commission, preparation, or instigation of acts of terrorism under the Terrorism Act 2000, police said in a statement.

Two men, aged 30 and 34, and a 29-year-old woman were arrested in West Yorkshire, northern England. Five houses around the city of Leeds were being searched: two in the Beeston suburb, two in the town of Dewsbury and one in the town of Batley.

A 22-year-old man was arrested in the West Midlands in central England. Two flats were being searched in Birmingham, Britain's second city.

Armed officers were not used in the arrests.

The suspects were taken to a central London police station where they will be interviewed in custody by officers from the Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command.

"This was a pre-planned, intelligence-led operation," a police spokesman said.

Three people were arrested in March over the July 7, 2005 bombings, which killed 52 people and the four suicide bombers.

The bombings were followed exactly two weeks later by a failed alleged multiple suicide attack.