

Blair slams Brown in memo

AFP, London

Former British prime minister Tony Blair sharply criticised his successor Gordon Brown in a memo, accusing him of having "disused our own record", according to the Mail on Sunday.

The report comes with Brown and his ruling Labour Party languishing in the opinion polls, having suffered defeats in three by-elections in as many months, as observers predict the premier has until the party's annual conference in September to launch a fightback.

In the memo, which the weekly said was written last autumn, Blair attacked what he described as a "lamentable confusion of tactics and strategy."

"We disused our own record," he apparently wrote.

"Instead of saying we are building on the achievements, confronting new challenges, we joined in the attack on our own ten years -- a fatal mistake. We junked the TB (Tony Blair) policy agenda but had nothing to put in its place."

Iran aims to reinforce nuclear rights

Says Ahmadinejad

AP, AFP, Tehran

Iran will not give up "a single iota of its nuclear rights," the country's president said Saturday, rebuffing an informal deadline to stop expanding uranium enrichment or face more sanctions.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made the remarks during discussions with Syrian President Bashar Assad, who arrived in Tehran Saturday for a two-day visit, the Iranian president's official Web site said.

Assad is in Tehran to discuss Iran's controversial uranium enrichment following a request from French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Tehran was given an informal two-week deadline, set July 19 by the UN Security Council's five permanent members plus

Germany, to stop expanding uranium enrichment at least temporarily in exchange for their commitment to stop seeking new UN sanctions.

Ahmadinejad's stance signalled both a failure of Assad's mission and a rejection of the deadline, although his comments indicated he was not ruling out international talks on Iran's nuclear programme.

While stating that the Iranian nation "will not give up a single iota of its nuclear rights," he also said any participation in international talks on the nuclear issue would be aimed at reinforcing those rights.

Ahmadinejad on Sunday told visiting Syrian president and staunch regional ally Bashar al-Assad that Tehran is serious about finding a practical solution to the nuclear crisis.

"We are serious in talks and we

want the talks to be based on the law so it will bear practical results. We hope that other sides are serious too," Ahmadinejad told Assad in remarks broadcast live on state-run television.

Assad, who has been seeking a more prominent Mideast role for Syria, promised Sarkozy during a visit to France in July to try to persuade Iran to offer proof to the West that it isn't developing nuclear weapons.

Syria is Iran's closest Arab ally the two countries have had close relations since 1980, when Syria sided with Persian Iran against Iraq in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war.

Iran's claims that it only wants nuclear technology for the production of energy have failed to quell Western suspicions that it is seeking a pathway to an atomic bomb.

Meanwhile in Brussels, a

European Union official said Saturday that the office of EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana had not yet received an answer from Iran, but expected a reply "in the coming days" after the weekend deadline.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, said EU nations and diplomats are not too concerned about Tehran's adherence to the exact deadline but are keen for Iran to come back with a concrete reply that could form the basis of further negotiations.

Germany's Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier urged Iran to stop playing for time and deliver a "clear answer" to the latest initiative. "Stop dallying," Steinmeier was quoted as saying in an interview with the weekly Der Spiegel that was released Saturday.



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (R) speaks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (C) and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (L) during a meeting in Tehran yesterday. Assad wrapped up a two-day visit to Syria's staunch regional ally Iran Sunday where he discussed Iran's nuclear policies and other matters of mutual interest.



Palestinian Hamas security forces and members of Hamas' armed militant wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, crowd a street during clashes with the pro-Fatah Helis clan in the Shujwa neighbourhood of Gaza city on Saturday. Nine Palestinians were killed and dozens hurt in street battles between forces of the rival Islamist Hamas and Fatah movements in Gaza City, prompting Israel to sound an alert.

Fleeing Fatah men return to Gaza after Abbas request

AFP, Gaza City

Israel began returning Fatah members who had fled deadly clashes in the Gaza Strip to the territory yesterday following a request by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas, Israeli security officials said.

Abbas had asked Israel to allow some 180 people to leave Gaza after nine people were killed in clashes on Saturday with Hamas-run security forces in the deadliest internal fighting since the Islamists seized power in June 2007.

"Yesterday evening Abu Mazen (Abbas) and (Palestinian prime minister Salam) Fayyad made a request for Israel to allow them to cross into Israel and then to hospitals and the West Bank," a senior Israeli official told AFP.

"Shortly afterwards (Israeli Defence Minister Ehud) Barak was contacted again by Abbas who asked him to allow all of them to return to Gaza," the official said on

condition of anonymity.

Another security official said the decision was taken by Abbas following "assurances given from a foreign party" -- a reference to Egypt which has brokered indirect negotiations between the rival Palestinian factions.

At least 22 people who were evacuated from Gaza and hospitalised for wounds inflicted in the fighting were expected to remain in Israel until they recover.

Spokesmen for Abbas could not be reached for comment, and neither Hamas nor Israeli officials would confirm how many out of the more than 180 who fled had been sent back.

The scores of Fatah supporters had fled Gaza on Saturday through the Nahal Oz crossing after clashes between Hamas-run security forces and the pro-Fatah Helis clan, killing nine people and wounding more than 90.

The clashes followed a week in

which the Islamist movement cracked down on its rivals in Abbas's Fatah party, detaining upwards of 300 people.

Tensions have been high in the impoverished coastal strip of 1.5 million people since Hamas blamed Fatah for a beachside bombing more than a week ago that killed five senior Hamas militants and a little girl.

On Saturday Hamas accused members of the Helis clan over the attack.

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said on Sunday Hamas-run security forces had received "dozens" of Fatah members sent back and were investigating them, insisting that the arrests were not political but connected to the bombing.

"Those who are accused of breaking the law will be investigated and if they are found to be guilty will be brought to justice. Those who are proved innocent will be released," Abu Zuhri told AFP.

4 Qaeda leaders killed in Afghanistan

AP, AFP, Cairo/Dubai

al-Qaeda has posted a statement on the Internet saying four of its Afghanistan commanders have been killed, including an explosives expert wanted by the US.

al-Qaeda has confirmed that a top expert on chemical and biological weapons whose killing was reported by Pakistan has died, an Islamist militant website said in a statement on Sunday.

Washington posted a \$5 million reward for Abu Khabab al-Masri. He is accused of training terrorists to use poison and explosives. He is also believed to have trained suicide bombers who killed 17 American sailors on the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000.

Sunday's statement says al-Masri "left behind other experts who were trained by him." It did not give details of how he and three other men died.

The statement is dated July 30 and signed by al-Qaeda's top Afghanistan leader, Mustafa Abu

al-Yazid. It appears on a militant Web site frequently used by the terror group.

Its authenticity could not be independently confirmed.

Pakistani officials had said that a July 28 missile strike in the South Waziristan tribal area killed Abu Khabab al-Masri, an Egyptian militant whose full name is Midhat Mursi al-Sayid Umar.

Residents said the strike was carried out by a pilotless US drone.

Pakistan's Taliban movement on Saturday denied a US television report that al-Qaeda's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri may have been wounded or killed in the same attack.

al-Qaeda's statement, dated July 30 and posted on an Internet site regularly used by Islamist militants, did not say how Abu Khabab al-Masri died. But it said he had sought "martyrdom" and repeatedly urged his command to assign him to carry out a "martyrdom-seeking (suicide) operation."

Top Syrian general assassinated

AFP, Beirut

Arab media reported yesterday that a brigadier general thought to be the Syrian regime's liaison with Hezbollah in Lebanon has been assassinated.

The reports came almost six months after the killing in a Damascus car bomb of top Hezbollah military commander Imad Mughnieh, which the Shia militant group blamed on Israel.

The Saudi-owned pan-Arab daily Al-Hayat on Sunday quoted "informed sources" in London as saying that a senior Syrian officer had been found dead.

"The circumstances of the incident are not clear," the London-based paper said in its report, which said the sources suggested that the slain officer had been "in charge of sensitive files and closely linked to the Syrian top brass."

Al-Bawaba, an Arab news website, named the officer as Mohammed Sleiman and said he was "Syria's liaison officer with Lebanon's Hezbollah movement."

It said he was killed by a sniper in the northwest Syrian town of Tartus and would be buried in his hometown of Driekesh on Sunday.

The Lebanese anti-Syrian daily al-Mustaqbal quoted a Syrian news site as saying Sleiman was the head of security at the presidential palace in Damascus and President Bashar al-Assad's "right-hand man."

The paper made no mention of Hezbollah in its report.

A Hezbollah official told AFP in Lebanon that he did not know Mohammed Sleiman and had not heard about any killing.

Israel has denied the Hezbollah charge that it was behind the assassination of Mughnieh in the Syrian capital on February 12.

20 killed in Mogadishu bomb carnage

AFP, Mogadishu

A roadside bomb caused carnage in Somalia yesterday with a group of women sweeping a Mogadishu street "torn to pieces" amid a body count of at least 20 civilians, according to witnesses and medics.

"They were cleaning the street when this huge explosion rocked the entire neighbourhood. I counted 15 bodies, most of them are women who were torn to pieces," eyewitness Hasan Abdi Mohamed said.

Mohamed said the explosion -- one of the deadliest to hit civilians in the restive Somali capital in weeks -- wounded around 40 people.

Local residents rushed to help the injured, with another witness, Ali Hasan Adan also counting about 15 dead.

"There is blood everywhere, dead and wounded people strewn across the street," Adan said.

"This is a tragedy, I have never

seen such carnage. From what I can see, they are all women who were cleaning the area."

At the city's main Madina hospital, Doctor Dahir Mohamed Mohamoud told AFP that five of those brought in died of their injuries, bringing the death toll to at least 20.

"We received 47 civilians who were injured in the blast and so far five have died in the hospital; three of them women," said Mohamoud, one of the hospital's directors.

"It's the largest number of civilians we have received from one incident in weeks," he added.

At the hospital, Shamsi Mumin discovered that her sister was one of the victims of the explosion.

"My sister leaves three orphans behind. She had been doing this kind of work for three months but now she has lost everything, she has lost her life," she said, sobbing.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the explosion

but headline Islamist groups have routinely targeted military convoys in the area with roadside bombs.

Ethiopian troops came to the rescue of Somalia's embattled and internationally-backed transitional government in late 2006, ousting an Islamist militia that had briefly controlled large parts of the country.

Islamist insurgents have since waged a deadly guerrilla war against government targets, Ethiopian forces and African Union peacekeepers.

Civilians have borne the brunt of the fighting, with international rights groups and aid agencies saying that at least 6,000 have been killed and hundreds of thousands displaced over the past year alone.

The Horn of Africa nation has been plagued by civil fighting and defied more than a dozen peace initiatives since the 1991 overthrow of former president Mohamed Siad Barre led to chaos.



Fires engulf a village in the Mediterranean province of Antalya on Saturday in Turkey. The fire, which broke out on August 1 and was fanned by strong winds, destroyed part of the village of Karatas, burning down about 60 houses, Environment Minister Veysel Eroglu said.

Obama accuses McCain camp of cynicism

AP, Orlando

Republican candidate John McCain's presidential campaign is cynical, not racist, in its efforts to distract voters from real issues, Democratic rival Barack Obama said Saturday.

"In no way do I think that John McCain's campaign was being racist," Obama said in his first meeting with reporters since predicting that McCain and other Republicans would try to scare voters because Obama looks unlike "all those other presidents on the dollar bills" most of them older white men.

"I think they're cynical," he said. "And I think they want to distract people from talking about the real issues."

Obama spent a second day in Florida to speak to the National Urban League, the predominantly black group McCain had addressed a day earlier. The Illinois senator offered a fiery defence of his push to bolster the nation's schools and dismissed what he called McCain's "slim record on education."

Obama also used Florida, a state both sides see as central to victory in November as the setting for a shift in policy on offshore oil drilling. While still opposed to expanding oil exploration and development on American coastlines, he said he could reach compromise on the issue if drilling initiatives were part of a broad programme aimed at energy independence.



US Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama addresses a townhall meeting at Brevard Community College in Titusville, Florida near the Kennedy Space Centre.

Truck bombing kills 12 in Baghdad

AP, Baghdad

A truck bomb exploded during rush hour yesterday on a busy commercial street in northern Baghdad, killing at least 12 people and wounding about two dozen, Iraqi police and health officials said.

The explosives-packed small truck blew up some 200 yards away from a passport office in a Sunni Arab district, a police officer said. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

At least two women were among the dead, the officer said. The wounded included four women and three policemen, he added. Health authorities confirmed the casualties.

It was the first major bombing in Baghdad since last Monday, when three suicide bombers killed more than 30 people and wounded hundreds during a Shia religious procession.

Sunday's attack came just hours before Iraq's parliament is scheduled to convene a special session aimed at defusing tension over Kurdish demands to incorporate

the oil-rich Kirkuk area into their autonomous region in Iraq's north.

The dispute over Kirkuk and its vast oil wealth has blocked passage of legislation providing for provincial elections this year, a major US goal aimed at reconciling Iraq's rival ethnic and religious communities.

More than 1,000 Sunni Arabs and Turkomen rallied Saturday against Kurdish demands in the town of Hawija, near Kirkuk. Tension is high, after a suicide bomb attack killed 25 people last week during a Kurdish protest.

"I hope they can reach a solution that fits all parties and prevents the situation from deteriorating further," said Yelman Ayad, a 59-year-old Turkomen who sells spare car parts in Kirkuk.

"The mistakes of politicians brought us to this stage. Our social fabric was torn up in Kirkuk, and this is very dangerous for all of Iraq," Ayad said.

Serwan Ahmed, a 35-year-old Kurd, also called on the lawmakers to reach consensus. "They have to settle all their differences, otherwise it will lead to a crisis in all Iraqi cities," he said.

Last month, Iraq's parliament approved legislation to hold elections for local councils in all 18 provinces, including Tamim, where Kirkuk is located.

The measure said seats on the ruling council in the Kirkuk area should be divided equally among Kurds, Turkomen and Arabs. It would also transfer security responsibilities in Kirkuk to mostly Arab military units brought from central and southern Iraq instead of those already there an apparent move against Kurdish troops heavily deployed in the area.

But Kurds and their allies, who currently hold a majority on the council, oppose the power-sharing formula. Iraq's three-member presidential council rejected the measure and sent it back to parliament after President Jalal Talabani a Kurd opposed it.

Saied Saleh al-Jabouri, a 26-year-old Sunni Arab who owns a supermarket in Kirkuk, criticised the step.

"It was a democratic process, why did they reject it?" he asked. "We (Arabs) are against any new resolution that could affect our presence in this city."

US to work hard to push India's case at NSG

PTI, Vienna/Washington

Keen to put the Indo-US nuclear deal on fast track, the US is poised for a diplomatic override to ensure there are no hurdles at the Nuclear Suppliers Group after the atomic safeguards pact faced some reservations at the IAEA before being cleared.

The White House also showed signs of keeping the momentum when it urged the 45-member NSG to act quickly in granting India-specific exemption saying the administration expects to submit the deal to Congress later this year.

The potential difficulties at the meeting of the NSG whose waiver is required to help India resume nuclear trade was on the horizon when Ireland, Austria, Japan and even Brazil pointedly declared that their going along with the consensus does not mean they would sit quiet when the nuclear cartel discusses India's case. The NSG meeting is likely to be held in Vienna around August 21.

US Ambassador to the IAEA

Gregory L Schulte said Washington would keep up the momentum as there was still "a lot of work" to be done and "issues" addressed.

"We still have a lot of work to do. There are issues that we will have to address. We have to move forward to the NSG. We are going to keep this momentum up," Schulte said.

Atomic Energy Commission chief Anil Kakodkar also acknowledged there were potential challenges at the NSG.

Hoping that the US will "deliver" in securing for India "clean and unconditional exemption" from the NSG, Kakodkar said "in international affairs, we have to wait till it happens on the ground level." While vowing to "vigorously" obtain an India-specific exception in the NSG and clearance from the US Congress, the Bush administration has said it will submit the 123 Agreement in the Congress and "seek rapid action in a short time remaining" in the Congressional calendar.