Speaker's opportunity

FROM PAGE 1

Speaker Abdul Hamid did what any decent speaker would do when a parliament becomes the playground for abuse and vulgarity. He offered to resign. And we feel he should, if his words are not heeded and if such occurrence should, God forbid, repeat itself. After all he cannot be expected to preside over conduct of MPs that fundamentally denigrates the House, and contributes towards erosion of public respect for it.

We have a lot of respect for our honourable speaker. He is a man of simple taste but strong principles. He is totally unpretentious, and wary of protocol and rituals. He uses a language that is earthly, and is not given to flattery. A lifelong doer, he prefers being at the grassroots where he can directly interact with the masses. He is also genuinely interested in making the parliament functional, and constructively so.

The above introduction is necessary to make our point that while we fully support the tough stance he took last Thursday on conducting the affairs of the House, he was a bit late in doing so. He, in our view, should have taken a far tougher stance earlier, and thus could have prevented the self-denigrating show put on by the MPs on Wednesday.

There were clear signs that the so-called "thanks giving" debate on the president's speech was gradually going out of hand. Insulting remarks on Bangabandhu, and Ziaur Rahman were being made periodically, eliciting equally insulting reactions. Premeditation was clear on several occasions when derogatory remarks about national leaders, totally out of context, were made. Those remarks were made purely to insult and provoke the other side.

The speech, some days ago, by ruling party MP Sheikh Selim, as to whether Ziaur Rahman's grave contained his body, triggered the present spate of invectives, bringing the House into turmoil. The words were slowly but surely getting more bitter and vulgar. We all saw it, and feared the worst, which came last Wednesday.

On the positive side, following the shameful incident, we have seen some important MPs from both sides of the aisle promising to work to hold high the dignity of the House, and welcoming the speaker's tough stand. This we think is an opportunity that Speaker Abdul Hamid should put to full use. As he said it is usual that the opposition will criticise the government and vice versa. But the "key" word is decency. Nobody should cross the boundary of decency.

Now that the speaker has assurance from both sides that such behaviour will be shunned, and has received full support for his tough stance, he should launch a "zero-tolerance" campaign to elevate the level of debates in the House. He should switch off his or her microphone with a reprimand every time an MP deviates from that norm.

We refer to treasury bench MP Fazle Rabbi Mia's comment on Wednesday's incident that many lawmakers do not have copies of the constitution, and the rules of procedure (of the House). "We would not have had to lower our heads in shame before the nation, if they had read the rules of procedure," he said.

We think this is an extremely vital point. The speaker must make such reading mandatory, and the whips of both sides should see to it that their MPs are fully conversant with the House rules. And for that, a separate session of parliamentary parties should be organised immediately. The speaker should ensure that.

The speaker should use the mood of introspection now prevalent among the lawmakers, to make them aware that over the nearly two decades of parliamentary democracy we never really had any substantive debate on any of the subjects that are of urgent concern to the people -- namely population, FDI, urban planning, agriculture, food self-sufficiency, foreign policy, terrorism, and religious extremism.

Only so-called debate on the economy that we have, is during the promulgation of the budget and the annual development plan. Those debates have also become predictable with the treasury bench saying "It is a pro-people budget", and the opposition calling it "anti-people". The budget speeches like that of the "thanks giving" on the president's speech have also become occasions to insult one another, subject leaders of both sides to pedestrian invectives, and generally to create chaos and confusion, which goes in the name of "good debates".

Imagine what history of parliamentary debates we are leaving for posterity, and for the world. Parliamentary debates of Sher-e-Bangla, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, and Bangabandhu are matters of pride for us all. The nine-hour speech by Abul Mansur Ahmad in 1956, critiquing the proposed constitution in the constituent assembly of Pakistan, remains a treasure trove for researchers of political history. Which contemporary politician's parliamentary speech will we want our children to read, if they aspire to become MPs in the future?

Honourable members of the House, please notice that we always refer to you as honourable members. Can we continue to do so unless you behave with honour and dignity? You are very conscious of MPs' "privilege", and often invite the speaker to give rulings against newspapers when you feel we have violated that "privilege". Have not a number of your own colleagues violated that "privilege" in a manner that we would never even think of doing?

This is the moment, and Speaker Hamid must seize it. As the "guardian", "custodian", "mentor", and the "guiding spirit" of Jatiya Sangsad the speaker should now assert his authority, and lead from the front. Both the leaders of the House and of the opposition must come to the speaker's aid at this moment. Without their help the speaker can only go so far. But for real change the two leaders must give him their full support.

Time today is not only to condemn and reprimand, but also to reconstruct and reform. We must turn our parliament into the House of the people's concerns and aspirations, as it was meant to be. Not into a House of insults and vulgarity, as some of the MPs are making it out to be. Honourable speaker, the ball is in your court.

Rab arrests

FROM PAGE 16

said Rab sources.

Bus driver Mohammed Selim, 39, and conductor Abdur Rahim, 25, were arrested in this connection.

Based on their information the elite force also arrested drug peddler Sumon alias Shaheed, 20, at AK Khan Gate area in the city when he came to take the delivery of the consignment from the bus driver.

Deputy Director of Rab-7 ASP Sazzad Hossain told The Daily Star that through Sumon they arrested two more drug peddlers Aslam, 43, and Ishaque, 28 at the city's Love Lane area.

In another drive on Thursday, a team from Rab-7 recovered 96 bottles of Phensidyl from a CNG-run auto-rickshaw at Nagirhat area of Fatikchhari around 8.30pm.

They arrested Akhter Hossain, 28, son of Jebal Hossain and Mamun, 20, son of Lokman Hossain, in this connection.

Meanwhile, three persons were arrested with 216 cans of Heineken beer at Dakkhinpara area in Patenga yesterday afternoon. The arrestees are Nurul Alam, 20, Anwar, 25, and Nayeem, 20.

During primary interrogation the arrestees confessed to their involvement in drug peddling in the area for long, said Rab officials.

BNP leader

FROM PAGE 1

the spot and took him to Jessore General Hospital where on duty doctors declared him dead.

His family members alleged that a local gang lead by Laltu, who was loyal to Awami League, committed the murder.

District BNP leaders and activists brought out a procession in protest of the killing soon after the incident.

Locals said Anaruls two brothers were also killed by the unknown assailants in the past.

Three tanners

FROM PAGE 1

Shakil Ahmed, a worker of the tannery, told The Daily Star, "As soon as drum man Shah Alam and assistant drum man Dulal opened the liming drum, they fell to the ground.

"When Solaiman and I went to see what happened, we too passed out. After a few minutes, I regained my senses," he continued.

Shah Alam and Dulal opened the drum to check the condition of the hides kept there on Thursday night.

"The moment we found the tanning drum empty, we knew where things went wrong," he added.

Mohammad Ali, manager (engineering) of the factory, said rawhides are cleaned with lime in the liming drum and after that, they are soaked in chromium sulphate in the tanning drum.

Administrative Officer Golam Sarwar told The Daily Star, "The liming drum was filled with carbon monoxide when chromium sulphate was poured in it by mistake."

Enamul Huq, officer-in-charge of Hazaribagh Police Station, said the factory authorities have filed an unnatural death case in this connection.

Dialogue

FROM PAGE 16

resolved bilaterally if it adopted a 'reasonable' attitude in dealing with terror elements targeting India.

"Whatever our problems in South Asia, we must learn to talk to each other," Manmohan Singh said. He was replying to the debate on the motion of thanks to President Pratibha Patil's address to both houses of parliament.

"Dialogue is the only way forward," the prime minister said, adding that Pakistan must act against terror for a meaningful dialogue to progress.

Accusing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of spreading disinformation, Manmohan Singh rebutted charges levelled by BJP leader LK Advani that the government was talking to Pakistan under US pressure.

Talks with Pakistan have not been initiated under US pressure, Manmohan Singh clarified.

Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao held talks with her Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir here Feb 25. The talks focused on India's concerns over cross-border terror emanating from the Pakistani territory.

Turning down Pakistan's demand for the resumption of the composite dialogue process, India had made it clear that such a dialogue was possible only after a climate of trust was created and asked Pakistan to act against anti-India terrorists operating from its territory.

PM moves

FROM PAGE 1

The shifting was done amid tight security. A few vehicles were allowed to use the Crescent Lake Road leading up to Gono Bhaban in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar area yesterday.

Prime Minister's Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad confirmed the change of residence.

Sources at the Prime Minister's Office said her staying in Gono Bhaban would cut her commuting time and stop adding to rush-hour traffic jam in Shahbagh, Bangla Motor, Karwan Bazar and Farmgate areas.

Both the PMO and parliament are a little way off her current residence.

The government has assigned Gono Bhaban to Hasina under the security act for family members of the father of the nation.

The law passed by parliament on October 13 last year provides for state security for Bangabandhu's immediate family members.

Jaish man

FROM PAGE 1

"And he (Billal) again started working for Jaish-e-Mohammed for the last three months and have already received Tk 60,000 from Rezwan," said the investigator.

Rezwan who is still being quizzed at the TFI cell said he used to get the money from Zawad.

Billal also said that Zawad was known to him for quite a long time and he talked to Zawad in Pakistan around 100 times over his cellphone, said the interrogator.

Billal earlier told journalists that he was involved in hijacking the Indian plane while Pakistani national Rezwan admitted to have coordinate JeM activities in Bangladesh along with the three other suspected militants.

Suicide attack

FROM PAGE 16

of Pakistani Taliban leader Hakimullah Mehsud and military offensives that have disrupted militant networks.

There have been no mass civilian losses or bombings in major cities since a bombing at a volleyball match killed 101 people on New Year's Day. That was around two weeks before the US drone attack that may have killed Mehsud.

Attacks targeting Shia Muslims killed 76 people in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, in late December and early February.

Pakistan is under huge US pressure to eliminate Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked militants who pose a domestic threat and who infiltrate Afghanistan to attack Western forces.

Pakistan's military claims to have made big gains against Taliban and al-Qaeda strongholds over the past year, launching major offensives in the northwestern district of Swat and the tribal region of South Waziristan.

Washington says militants use Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal belt to plot and stage attacks in Afghanistan, where more than 120,000 Nato and US troops are helping Afghan forces battle the Taliban militia.

Bangladesh beaten

FROM PAGE 1

one could convert those into big scores as they kept losing wickets at regular intervals. The highest 46 runs came from the bat of Aftab Ahmed.

It was a lacklustre performance from the Tigers all around. They were sloppy in fielding, dropped three easy catches, leaked a few more runs than they would have liked in the last ten overs and then gave their wickets away all too easily. However, they might argue that they were not helped by a glaring mistake from the umpire and a very crucial one at that of skipper Shakib Al Hasan.

Opener Craig Kieswetter, who made his debut in Dhaka in the first match, played the anchor role for England, occupying the crease for 47 overs. Captain Alastair Cook, Kevin Pietersen and Paul Collingwood gave him company that laid the foundation for a launch in the slog overs. That slog came from last match's centurion Eoin Morgan and all-rounder Luke Wright. Morgan played a 29-ball 32 while Wright bludgeoned a 13-ball 32 as they plundered 107 runs in the last 10 overs to give Bangladesh a huge job.

The English cause was helped by some sloppy catching efforts by the hosts. Cook survived four runs before he was dismissed; courtesy of slack keeping from Mushfiqur Rahim, while Morgan was dropped twice in the outfield, Shakib had to bear the brunt of misfortune on all three occasions. Shakib got a wicket though conceding 45 runs, and bowling figures were the same for Sohrawardi Shuvo. Left-arm spinner Abdur Razzaq was the most successful bowler with 2 for 40 while speedster Rubel Hossain's dreadful six overs went for 62.

Bangladesh made a stuttering start, losing opener Tamim Iqbal for nought. Tamim slashed hard at one outside his stumps and it flew down thirdman's throat to give debutant Ajmal Shahzad his first wicket in his first international over.

Imrul Kayes looked good and picked up three glorious boundaries before he went chasing a wide delivery from Tim Bresnan only to nick it to the slips.

Aftab, for the first time since returning to Bangladesh fold, showed a lot of resolve and application in his batting. He drove handsomely, pulled to perfection and as he grew in confidence did the delicate scoop to notch up his boundaries. His best shot was probably the uppercut through point with his feet off the ground that he hit against Liam Plunkett. Just as he was looking in the groove, dreadful running between the wickets brought his downfall, four short of what would have been a wonderful half-century.

Rahim, the man who had a big hand in that misfortune, batted with aplomb and hurried into his 40s before falling to a diving catch at deep midwicket. With the top four batsmen gone and 160 runs yet to get in 24 overs, Bangladesh pinned all their hopes on their skipper. And he was giving all the indications that he meant business as he kept rotating the strike, going at a run-a-ball. With Graeme Swann the only specialist spinner in the side, Cook resorted to Pietersen's part time spin to bring him success. And Pietersen brought him vital success by removing Shakib for which the former should be grateful to the umpire as the ball pitched way outside the off-stump and never headed for it. With Shakib gone at 162, Bangladesh's hopes of a victory were all but gone. The rest of the batting buckled fast under the pressure of the mounting required rate. Mahmudullah Riyad and Naeem Islam got a few runs too but nothing to rekindle the flickering flame. And Bangladesh's elusive one-day victory over England in one-day internationals remains so, at least for the next three months.

2 schoolboys

FROM PAGE 1

the school.

Police seized the truck but the driver managed to flee.

A case was filed in this connection.

A correspondent from Madaripur said Shah Alam was run over when he went to the municipality area to purchase books.

Govt starts job

FROM PAGE 1

areas include mostly the greater Rangpur and Aila-hit southern districts.

Fewer people will be selected from the areas where 21 to 39 percent people live below the poverty line, while the least from the areas where the percentage is between 2 and 20.

They will be engaged in canal digging, dam and road construction, making educational and religious institute and cyclone shelter premises higher, preparing organic fertiliser or other projects recommended by ministries concerned for rural development.

During last October-November, the first phase of the EGP was implemented in 11 Aila-hit southern districts and five Monga-prone northern districts that involved Tk 177 crore. The wage during that time was fixed at Tk 100 each day, which has been now increased to Tk 120.

The caretaker government, in 2008-09 fiscal year, introduced a 100-day employment-creating scheme of Tk 2,000 crore where 20 lakh labourers were registered. A total of Tk 920 crore was spent implementing the first phase of the programme.

Though the programme benefited the poor it could not contribute to the improvement of rural infrastructure, said Food and Disaster Management Minister Abdur Razzaque, adding that this was the reason why the second phase of the programme was cancelled and a new programme had been designed.

"There will be one monitor for each project and each project director will have to have a bank account. Money for five days will be transferred to his/her account," said an official.

After every five-day review, the money for the next five days will be transferred, he said, adding that this is to ensure transparency of the programme.

Sirajganj power

FROM PAGE 1

22-year-levelised power tariff of US 2.78 cents per kilowatt-hour.

This tariff offer is at par with the AES Meghnaghat project, which is considered having one of the world's lowest tariff.

The price offer, equivalent to only Tk 1.94 per unit, pleased the authorities as all recent power-tariff offers in different tenders have hovered between Tk 2.6 and Tk 14.

A top PDB official notes, "If they can deliver power from this plant at this price, this will be simply be very positive for us."

"We believe the on-going global recession provides a window of opportunity for Bangladesh and also to Summit to be able to implement this project at such low tariff," said Summit chief Aziz Khan.

Aziz implies that the machinery cost for power plants has decreased due to the recession. But some experts say machinery price had gone down in 2007-08 but prices are soaring again.

As a single bidder, Summit had won a bid to build this plant when the tender process was completed in November, 2003. The-then cabinet purchase committee had approved it in March, 2004.

But the-then prime minister Khaleda Zia had cancelled the bid in mid 2004. After that the Power Cell of the power ministry had re-tendered this project but failed to bag any practical offer in the last six years.

In this context, Summit expressed to the prime minister its interest to revive the project in the light of the cancelled bid. When it was forwarded to the PDB, the power board sought some clarifications and Summit gave its explanations.

Summit's proposal outlines a few changes. The first change is changing the power plant configuration to 350-450MW instead of the 450MW.

Regarding this, the PDB observed that when the first tender was floated, there was no power plant at Sirajganj. Presently a tender has been floated to set up a 150MW plant there. In this context, PDB opined that Summit's proposal of 350MW plant could be accepted. This would not affect the power tariff as it is calculated on the basis of per kilowatt-hour, not on the total power production capacity.

Summit also proposed to change some machinery configuration. The PDB noted that risk of changing this configuration was on Summit. If such change affected power generation, Summit would be liable to pay compensation. At the same time, the new configuration was more energy efficient and it would save gas.

UZ chairmen

FROM PAGE 16

They said a human chain will be formed in every district of the country at 11:00am on March 15 while they will form a human chain in front of the National Press Club at 11:00am on March 30. The same day, they will submit a memorandum to the prime minister.

Convener of the parishad advocate Abdul Mazid read out a written statement at the conference.

He said bureaucrats are working against building a strong upazila parishad.

Mazid, also chairman of Saturia upazila parishad in Manikganj, said they have not yet been assigned any work since the upazila election around 14 months back, and the government failed to make a guideline in this regard so far.

The Oikya Parishad has been trying to draw the government's attention through different programmes aiming to strengthen the local governments to ensure their proper service to people but failed to do so, he added.

Their other demands include balanced distribution of funds for different tiers of local government under specific guidelines, immediate reformation of Zila Parishad by enacting a law and withdrawal of all the circulars issued by different ministries in contravention of the constitution and Upazila Parishad Act 2009.

UP chairmen Ataur Rahman, Afzal Hossain and Amirul Islam, among others, attended the press conference.

JS body

FROM PAGE 16

Mohammad Shah Alam MP is scheduled to visit the areas affected in the arson and to have talks with the victims from 9:45am to 1:30pm today.

The team will later hold a meeting with local civil society leaders including journalists at Khagrachhari circuit house to exchange views.

The other members of the committee are ABM Fazle Karim Chowdhury MP of Chittagong, Ethin Rakhain of Cox's Bazar, Mohammad Abdur Rahman Badi of Cox's Bazar, KM Khalid of Mymensingh, Gias Uddin Ahmad of Mymensingh, Dipankar Talukder of Rangamati, Jatindra Lal Tripura of Khagrachhari, Bir Bahadur of Bandarban and BNP lawmaker Barrister Moudud Ahmed.

At least two ethnic people were killed in an open fire by security personnel during February 19 Bagaihat clash in Rangamati while another Bangalee man was killed in clash between Bangalee and ethnic people on February 23. At lest 550 houses were burnt to ashes in the two places of CHT during the violence.

Jubo League

FROM PAGE 1

after the incident.

He added all of them had assured him of taking necessary steps but did nothing.

Ferdous said Majid had been claiming ownership of the house and the land for last several months.

AL district acting president Mokbul Hossain told The Daily Star that the matter was between the upazila chairman and the Jubo League leader and Awami League is not involved. But the way the house was claimed is not acceptable, he added.

Water Resources Minister Ramesh Chandra Sen said he had ordered police to take action on the issue.

6 houses

FROM PAGE 1

behind the incident," Basirul Haque Bhuiyan, UNO of Baghaichhari upazila, said yesterday.

He added the administration was looking into the matter.

"We were trying to bring indigenous people back to their home after the recent arson attacks and they too have started to return. But they got into panic following the Thursday night's incident," Sudarshan Chakma, upazila chairman of Baghaichhari, yesterday told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, a list of some 500 families affected in the recent hill violence was prepared to distribute around Tk 20 lakh among them from the government funds.

Some 390 families received Tk 1000 cash and 20kg of rice last week and one bundle of corrugated iron sheet each on Wednesday from the government.

3 powerful

FROM PAGE 16

another measuring 6.6 in magnitude.

Buildings already damaged in the disaster collapsed, although Onemi's initial report said Friday's quakes caused no injuries or serious damage.

The strong tremors came just as United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was due to begin a two-day visit to assess the damage and relief needs in the quake zone.

He was also scheduled to meet with President Michelle Bachelet, who has called for a period of national mourning as discrepancies emerged over a death toll potentially lower than official figures.

As rescue dogs combed the fetid coastline, where emergency personnel believe huge waves swept hundreds to their deaths, the government said three days of mourning would be observed from Sunday in honour of the quake victims.

Friday's 6.8 temblor hit at 8:47 am (1147 GMT), at a depth of 30 kilometers (19 miles), just 30 kilometers from Chile's second-largest city Concepcion, already badly damaged by Saturday's disaster, according to the US Geological Survey (USGS).

The follow-up aftershock of magnitude 6.6 struck at 8:51 am (1151 GMT) some 41 kilometres (25 miles) from Concepcion.

The USGS did not issue an alert for a destructive widespread tsunami, but said authorities should be on the lookout for possible localized tsunamis within 100 kilometres (62 miles) of the earthquake epicentre.

The official death toll stands at 802, but Bachelet, touring the heart of the disaster zone for the first time Thursday, said it included some 200 people who should be listed as missing but were prematurely added to the death toll.

Bachelet, who called for the national flag to be hung from each house during the mourning period, predicted it could take up to four years for the South American nation to fully recover from its worst quake in half a century.

The stench of death was everywhere as she arrived in Concepcion to inspect the massive aid operation struggling to get food and water to ravaged areas.

"This is testing us as a nation once again. Chile will get back on its feet. What has happened to us is terrible, of colossal dimensions," Bachelet said as she talked with relief workers.

Thousands of Chilean troops sent to central and southern regions have largely managed to quell the looting that erupted in the wake of the disaster.

In the small coastal town of Constitucion, vans, cars and small trucks flying the Chilean flag sped around loaded with supplies.

In low-lying coastal area, more and more people fled for higher ground despite government reassurances.

"I want to go home, but my little girls won't go back," said Andrea Luna Casanova, with her two young daughters by her side.

"They cry whenever we mention it. They were terrified by the quake. We live on the seventh floor and it just shook and shook."

Exporters get

FROM PAGE 16

register of Joint Stock companies and Firms.

"Now one can register his or her company online, which takes only four hours to complete the total procedure," he said adding: "Entrepreneurs have to apply online and pay fees that he or she can pay directly to bank or through credit cards, and it's done."

Meanwhile, the country's businessmen are now able to query about their imported goods that is on the way to Chittagong port from across the world.

"This became possible from the moment the Chittagong Port was automated. Now one can check the cargo status, including the services that the port provides for the cargo and also electronic invoices," said Salimullah Khan, project manager of Container Terminal Management System of Chittagong Port.

Besides, National Board of Revenue has also taken initiatives for online Tax Identification Numbers (TIN) and VAT registration by the beginning of the next fiscal year.

A total of 51 public service providing agencies, including all ministries and departments, are showcasing their services and initiatives at the fair.

Services range from providing e-health services to the areas hit by cyclone or water surge.

Information centres at union level that helps grassroots people to avail access to government forms, passport and visa information, government notices, birth and death registration and citizenship certificates were also on the display.

A seminar on Implementing ICT Policy 2009 to Achieve Digital Bangladesh was held yesterday at the fair.

Speakers at the seminar stressed the need for using ICT as a tool of reducing poverty and enhancing the country's economic growth.

Yeafesh Osman, state minister for science and ICT, and Habibullah N Karim, president of Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS), spoke among others at the seminar.

British PM Brown

FROM PAGE 16

hugely divisive in Britain.

Much of the blame for war has been laid on Blair, who appeared at the inquiry in January, but Brown is facing damaging allegations that he failed to properly fund the armed forces for the conflict.

Witnesses to the inquiry, including the defence minister at the time, Geoff Hoon, have said money was tight and a former chief of the defence staff also alleged lives were lost because Brown ignored pleas for funding.

General Charles Guthrie, who led the armed forces from 1997 to 2001, told Friday's edition of The Times: "Not fully funding the army in the way they had asked... undoubtedly cost the lives of soldiers."

The families of soldiers killed in combat have already demanded to know why the government did not equip troops with more helicopters and more robust vehicles which could resist roadside bombs.

However, Brown said he had told Blair in June 2002 that there would be no "financial restraint that prevented us doing what was best for the military" and nor did he turn down any subsequent requests for equipment.

"I said that every single request that was made for military equipment had to be met, and every request was met," the prime minister said.

"And at any point military commanders were able to ask for equipment that they needed and I know of no occasion when they were turned down for it."

He did admit "regret" for failing to better plan for the reconstruction of Iraq after the invasion, but laid some of the blame for this on the United States who had not given the issue "the priority that it deserved".

Outside, a small group of protestors brandished a blood-soaked cheque for 8.5 billion pounds (12.8 billion dollars, 9.4 billion euros), the estimated cost of the war that they said could have been spent on schools and hospitals.

"I think he (Brown) is politically as responsible as Tony Blair for the war, as he had the possibility of stopping it," Andrew Burgin, spokesman for the Stop the War lobby group, which organised the protest, told AFP.

Brown admitted he was not at some key meetings Blair held in the year before war, but rejected the panel's suggestion that this was strange given his position as a likely future premier.

"I did not feel at any point that I lacked the information that was necessary, that I was denied any information that was required," he said.

"But my role in this was not to second-guess military decisions or options, my role was not to intervene in what were very important diplomatic negotiations... my role in this was first of all as chancellor of the exchequer (finance minister) to make sure that the funding was there for what we had to do".

However, he gave his backing for the role played by Blair, his principal and often bitter rival within the Labour Party, saying: "Everything that Mr Blair did during this period he did properly."