

Anger over secret Blair war talks

Private meeting with Chirac and Schröder provokes row

Ian Black in Brussels and Michael White
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European tensions over the war on terrorism burst to the surface yesterday with a row over talks between Tony Blair and his French and German colleagues before today's full EU summit in Belgium.

The French president, Jacques Chirac, has asked Mr Blair and Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, to discuss Afghanistan and future military moves in private for an hour before the official one-day summit starts in Ghent.

Downing Street was quick to insist that the request for an informal meeting was understandable since the trio are the only EU states that have been asked by the US to provide military assistance in the conflict. Britain is the only one that has done so.

"Every state will be able to contribute to the discussion over dinner," said one official. The imminent arrival of euro notes and coins on January 1 and the wider economic implications of the terrorism crisis are also scheduled to be discussed.

But Italy, the fourth big EU member, as well as the European commission - led by the former Italian prime minister, Romano Prodi - immediately took umbrage. As EU leaders seek to present a united front over the retaliatory air strikes for the attacks on America mounting unease is developing over civilian casualties.

It is still mostly expressed in private. But Mr Prodi was visibly angry at his Brussels news conference yesterday and said it was "a shame" that the big three should meet alone.

Mr Prodi's insistence that the EU stands solidly behind the US and that much has been done to step up the fight against terrorism since September 11 was backed by senior ministers in London. "Solidarity is much stronger than it was at this stage of the Kosovo crisis," said one.

But Brussels is in tetchy mood after repeated suggestions that the crisis shows that the European Union's long-running attempts to forge common foreign and security policies have been set back or rendered irrelevant by the US- British military action.

The EU's low profile during the crisis has been remarked on and today's trilateral may reawaken fears expressed at the Nice EU summit that the EU "biggs" are seeking to dictate the union's agenda at the expense of the "smalls." Whitehall rejects such talk, although it was careful to say that the meeting had been Mr Chirac's idea.

Mr Prodi was not placated. "Wherever the commission has a prerogative, that is where Europe is," he said as aides grumbled about an "exclusive club" undermining the unity of the 15-member union.

British officials played down the row, arguing that it is natural for the UK, France and Germany to hold a private meeting because of the US request for military support. "There is no real role for anyone else," one said in Brussels.

Belgium, current holder of the EU presidency and the host of today's summit, was criticised by foreign ministers on Wednesday for its unambitious proposals on the Afghan crisis.

Guy Verhofstadt, the Belgian prime minister, insisted that long-planned talks on the euro and the future of Europe be discussed before the terrorism crisis.

Germany's foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, dismissed suggestions that Germany was trying to raise its national profile in global diplomacy at the expense of the EU. "This has got nothing to do with Germany striving for great power status," he told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung. "We are doing our bit, bound up in Europe and that is what our allies expect. No more and no less."

One senior British minister yesterday said: "The focus of debate [in the EU] has moved from institution building to how we connect with people and deliver on what affects their lives."

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