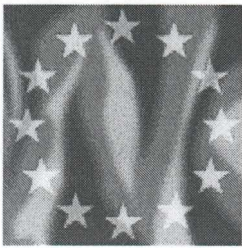


## europe

**'Big three' mini-summit threatens to open EU rift**

By Judy Dempsey in Brussels and Brian Groom in London

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Dissent within the ranks of the European Union has broken out after Romano Prodi, Commission president, criticised plans for a separate "mini-summit" on Friday by Britain, France and Germany to discuss the US-led attacks on Afghanistan.

Tony Blair, UK prime minister, Jacques Chirac, French president, and Gerhard Schröder, German chancellor, will discuss military issues as well as co-operation with the US as it continues its bombing raids on Afghanistan and its

fight against terrorism.

The restricted summit, to be held ahead of a full EU heads of state summit later today in Ghent, has upset Mr Prodi, as well as several of the smaller EU member states. They feel they have been sidelined since the September 11 attacks on the US.

At a news conference on Thursday in Brussels, Mr Prodi said it was "just an initiative which has been taken. And it's a shame that some countries are going to be attending and some not".

Mr Blair's official spokesman hit back at Mr Prodi's criticism of the mini-summit, and denied it meant the EU would not be acting as a whole. "There is no doubt that Europe is speaking with one voice. There has been a remarkable degree of solidarity."

He said Mr Chirac had requested the meeting, which was justified because Britain, France and Germany were the EU countries offering the US military assistance. Other members could discuss the issues at the main meeting and over dinner.

He also said Mr Blair and Guy Verhofstat, Belgian prime minister, were "at one in their analysis" when they spoke by phone yesterday.

In Paris, Mr Chirac's spokeswoman said: "The president considered that it was useful and necessary for these three countries to consult at the highest level on the international situations following the September 11 attacks and in particular on the situation in Afghanistan."

Even so, it has left a sour taste among some of the smaller EU countries which have seen power and influence slip back to the largest countries since September 11. "With the big powers in the driving seat, they will surely shape the direction of the summit," said an EU diplomat.

But in a speech to the Bundestag on Thursday, Mr Schröder said it was necessary for the EU to define a common security policy if it was to have any influence on the international scene.

Silvio Berlusconi, Italian prime minister, has not been invited to this "exclusive club" either, even though he offered George W. Bush, US president, military co-operation earlier this week. "The Italians are very miffed," said an EU diplomat.

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