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## New separate summit on Afghanistan risks EU split

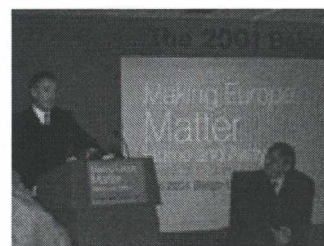
European leaders on Sunday night reaffirmed their support for the war in Afghanistan after a controversial mini-summit meeting held at short notice in London, at the invitation of British prime minister Tony Blair after his trips to the Middle East and ahead of a visit to Washington next week. Mr Blair invited for dinner the leaders of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium and Netherlands and sparked anger from un-invited countries, which fear a *directoire* of the big countries taking the lead in foreign affairs.

After the meeting, a spokesperson for the British prime minister office said "there was absolute solidarity" with the military, diplomatic and humanitarian strategy carried on by the US-led coalition in Afghanistan, according to BBC. Dutch prime minister Wim Kok commented, after the meeting, that the military action cannot be an aim in itself: "it is a means," he said, in parallel, political and diplomatic efforts are necessary to prepare the "after-taliban" Afghanistan. French president Jacques Chirac also said that "we reaffirmed our solidarity with the Americans while taking into account that the essential military action is not the only way to fight international terrorism," reports BBC.

Tony Blair had initially invited only the German chancellor Gerhard Schröder, and the leaders of France, president Jacques Chirac and prime minister Lionel Jospin, but then confusingly invitations had been extended to the Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi and to Spanish prime minister Jose Maria Aznar, and finally the Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt, current president in office of the European Council, and late in the afternoon also to the Dutch prime minister Wim Kok. The EU's representative for foreign and security policy, Mr Javier Solana, has also been invited to attend the dinner.

A previous separate summit between leaders of the France, Germany and the UK ahead of the Ghent Summit, on October 19, had sparked angry criticism from the other EU members and from the president of the European Commission Romano Prodi, and consequently the British prime minister decided to extend the list of invitations in order to include other countries that proposed military support to the United States, to avoid criticism that the meeting only involved "the big three." Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt, who was only invited late Sunday afternoon, was about to decline the invitation, but he eventually decided to participate "after consultation of the non-invited member states," according to a source close to the Belgian Presidency of the EU, quoted by Yahoo France. "We estimated that under the present circumstances, not going to London could spark a crisis in the EU that we could not afford," according to the source.

The mini-summit raised concerns in some smaller EU countries capitals worried about the way EU policy is being coordinated, with separate meetings between the big countries. Officials in Lisbon made angry comments that "initiatives of this type do not contribute to



*British prime minister Tony Blair had initially invited only Gerhard Schröder, Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin for a working dinner on Sunday, but then confusingly invitations had been extended to the prime ministers of Italy, Spain, Belgium and Netherlands, in a bid to avoid that the meeting is seen as a gathering of the big three. (Photo: EUobserver.com)*

the anti-terrorist coalition nor to European unity," according to a Portuguese cabinet source quoted by a Portuguese news agency. "Summits of this kind must not set a precedent for the European Union," said the source.

However, the British prime minister's office justified the list of invitations saying that only leaders of countries directly concerned with the actions in Afghanistan were involved in the meeting, and qualified the discussions as "useful." Tony Blair briefed his colleagues on his tour of the Middle East last week and discussed his future trip to Washington, next Wednesday. Moreover, chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who had just returned from talks with Russian president Vladimir Putin, after a tour to the Central Asia, informed his counterparts on his trips, while president Jacques Chirac discussed his forthcoming visit to Washington, next week.

The seven EU leaders also discussed about the peace process in the Middle East, and stressed that Israeli and Palestinian leaders "need to return to the negotiating table immediately" and that a Palestinian state has to be created "as quickly as possible," reports BBC.

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