

World News

EU leaders hail new charter as a 'gigantic step to integration'

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IN PORTO CARRAS

EUROPEAN leaders hailed the European Union's draft constitution yesterday as a "gigantic step" in integration that would offer peace and stability to 450 million citizens for generations to come.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the head of the drafting convention, called the text a "great leap forward" after handing leather-bound copies to prime ministers at the Aegean summit near Thessaloniki.

Brushing aside complaints from arch-federalists that he had gone too far to please the British, he said majority voting would be more than doubled, abolishing the national veto in 47 more areas of policy.

His claim that the document would mean momentous change to the EU contrasted with claims by Tony Blair and British ministers who insist it will lead to no significant transfer of power to the EU and is merely a "tidying up exercise" to

make Europe more efficient. Last night it also emerged that officials on the European Convention, which will continue its work until mid-July, are to table plans for a fully-fledged foreign ministry in Brussels.

The summit, in a hotel on the shores of the Aegean, was marred by demonstrations as 8,500 anti-globalisation protesters clashed with riot police.

The text creates a full-time European president, foreign minister, and public prosecutor, as well as a finance chief for the euro-zone.

It doubles the powers of the European parliament, and prohibits national parliaments from legislating in most areas - including justice, social policy, economic cohesion, energy, transport, and the environment - unless Brussels chooses not to act.

It gives the EU "legal personality" with sole authority to negotiate most treaties, and incorporates the Charter of Fundamental Rights under the full jurisdiction of the European Court. The European Commission



Picture: EPA

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the head of the drafting convention for the new constitution, at the summit yesterday

takes the lead role in justice policy and economic management.

Romano Prodi, European Commission president, also called the text a "gigantic leap forward". "Europe can now play its role on the world stage thanks to its legal personality," he said.

Mr Blair said the document was a

basis for further negotiations but insisted that Britain would not accept the erosion of the veto over defence, tax, foreign policy or border controls. "What we want is a Europe of nations, not a federal super-state," he said.

The French president Jacques Chirac praised it as the "best possible

synthesis" of the widely differing views, adding that it required no more than minor tinkering before the final approval by EU governments next spring. Germany insisted that the historic text should be ratified virtually unchanged. Smaller states feared a concentration of power among larger countries.