

Blair resists attempt to water down refugee zones plan

TONY BLAIR was battling to salvage his plans for an EU crackdown on asylum-seekers last night at the leaders' summit in Greece, after Germany and Sweden resisted Britain's watered-down proposals for refugee protection areas.

Under the latest British plan, several EU countries would launch a pilot scheme by the end of this year setting up "zones of protection" to harbour refugees near their own country. The first trial may be in the Horn of Africa.

In the face of outrage from human rights groups, and fierce opposition from Germany and Sweden, Britain has already backed off an earlier proposal to set up "transit camps" to process asylum-seekers before they entered Europe. But last night Germany, whose constitution and law lays down the right to seek asylum as a core value, still had difficulties with the British ideas and was resisting any proposal to give them status as an EU initiative. Sweden, which has a long tradition of protecting human rights, had legal queries.

Although Britain may get the go-ahead for a pilot scheme with a "coalition" of supportive countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark, its hopes of getting any EU funding remain in doubt.

German government officials expressed "severe doubts" about the plan. One EU diplomat said: "It is hard to

ASYLUM

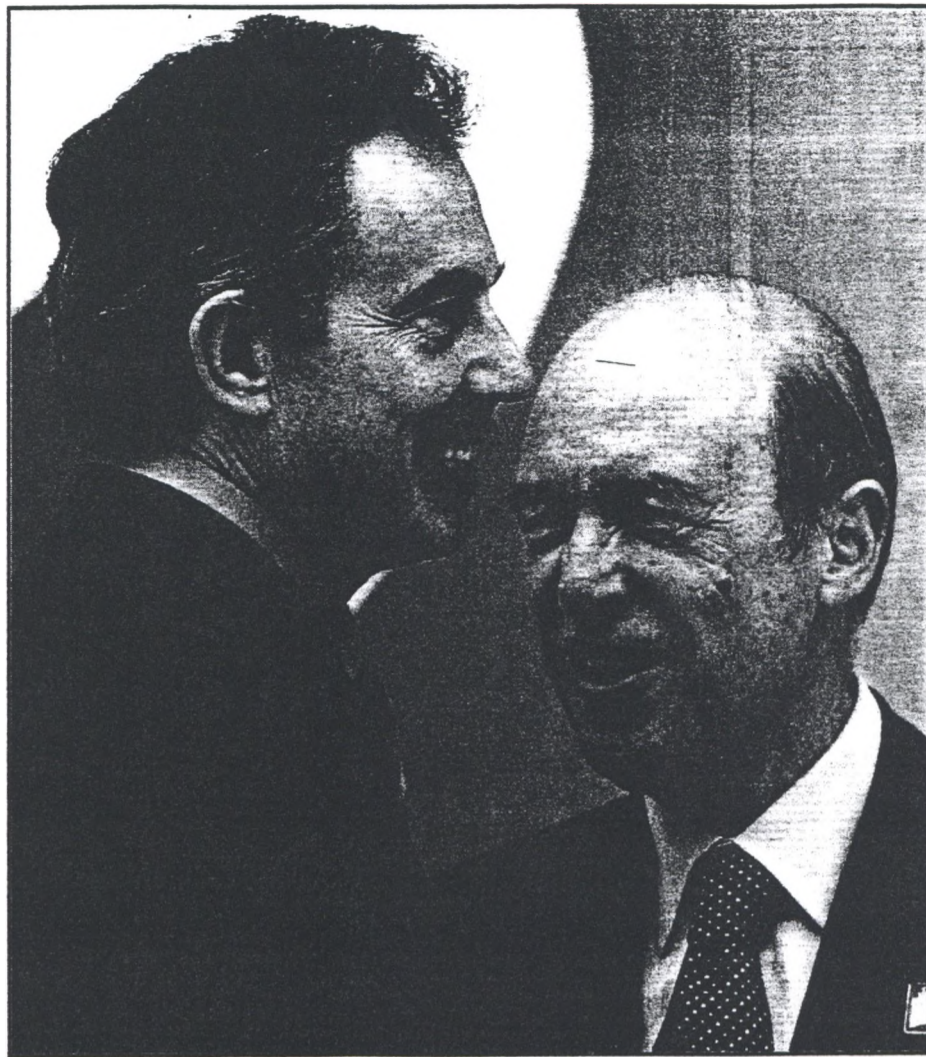
BY ANDREW GRICE AND STEPHEN CASTLE in Porto Carras, Greece

see how this could be agreed as an EU plan. Another added that he "would be very reluctant to see a pilot project financed by the Community".

The proposed centres would be operated by the EU and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Mr Blair will argue they would allow protection for people in areas where a humanitarian crisis is threatened, and allow them to return to their homes more easily. Failing that, asylum claims could be processed on the spot. That would prevent huge build-ups of would-be migrants within the EU.

EU leaders in Porto Carras were also due to discuss plans to improve information sharing on visa applicants, greater co-operation among border guards and a refugee returns policy. Britain's original plans for transit camps based in the Balkans or Ukraine, were strongly favoured by David Blunkett, the Home Secretary.

But they ran into strong opposition from Germany and Sweden and refugee groups because of the suggestion that asylum-seekers arriving in Britain could be deported to the camps. Other nations also argued that they might become magnets for would-be refugees.



Tony Blair with Constantinos Simitis, Prime Minister of Greece, which holds the EU presidency Reuters

Mr Blair's official spokesman said yesterday: "We are at the discussion stage, rather than the decision stage. But the idea is certainly worth looking at and discussing. Asylum is a global problem and it is appropriate to have long-term global solutions." A British government source admitted: "This is on the back burner for

the time being. Other countries are nervous about anything that smacks of a camp. The word has unfortunate echoes in Germany. But we need to think outside the box on asylum because it is such a big issue." Claude Moraes, a Labour MEP and former director of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, said the original

plan should be scrapped on legal, practical and moral grounds. "Legally, transit centres would break both the spirit and letter of the Geneva Convention on refugees," he said. "In practical terms, the proposal was never going to be viable. And morally, sending asylum-seekers to one large processing centre in Croatia,

Albania or the Ukraine is a recipe for potential chaos and corruption in relation to illegal trafficking." He said the plan for "zones of protection" was far more acceptable because it had the approval of the UNHCR and could potentially provide safe havens for refugees close to their own countries.

Human rights groups say scheme may be unlawful

TONY BLAIR received a last-minute plea yesterday to abandon his plans for "regional protection zones" in the Third World to vet asylum-seekers who want to come to Europe.

In a joint letter to the Prime Minister, to coincide with World Refugee Day, 12 refugee and human rights groups protested the proposal was unlawful, unworlable and could aggravate the asylum problem that is preoccupying politicians.

European leaders began discussing the British initiative last night in Greece. The Home Office insisted there would be no breakthrough at the meeting, where Germany, Sweden and the European Commission will air their reservations.

But, with the backing of many EU nations and of Rued Lubbers, the UN High Commissioner on Refugees, agreement for the plan is likely to be reached by late summer.

Britain's aim is to establish the first zone, on a pilot basis probably in the Horn of Africa to handle people displaced by the turmoil in Somalia and Ethiopia, by the end of the year.

But international leaders face practical and legal headaches before the first barbed wire is put up and the first accommodation blocks constructed. They need to establish whose law will run in the camps, how the human rights of refugees can be guaranteed and how they will be funded.

Details of how claims will be processed, how legal advice will be provided for claimants and whether they will be free to come and go are all still unclear. It is also unclear whether refugees who arrive in the West would be sent to the centres for "processing" or whether the centres would only handle people who claim asylum in their home regions.

The vast majority of the world's refugees do not reach

PROTECTION ZONES

BY NIGEL MORRIS Home Affairs Correspondent

the West but are housed in giant temporary camps near the war zones they are fleeing.

Pakistan is home to Afghans and Kurds from Iran and Iraq; Tanzania hosts people from Rwanda and Burundi escaping the ethnic genocide in their countries; Somalis and Sudanese have been housed in neighbouring Ethiopia; Palestinians have lived for years in Jordan and Lebanon.

The conditions in many of their camps have fallen far short of the standards acceptable to European nations attempting to run their own refugee centres in Third World countries. Refugees in camps in Africa have faced the threat of armed attack, rape and forced conscription into local militias.

Critics of the proposals, including the Refugee Council and Amnesty International, argue such conditions would be certain to breach the European Convention of Human Rights. Special protection would also have to be guaranteed for any torture victims.

However, the critics also point out that to guarantee refugees' safety and comfort could create a perverse "pull factor" encouraging people in poverty-stricken areas to head for the camps.

In their letter to Mr Blair, the refugee groups also warned that moving thousands of asylum-seekers against their would be "logistically difficult and hugely expensive".

Condemning the proposals as "legally problematic, unworlable and prohibitively expensive," they say: "The proposals appear to involve the large-scale and long-term detention of people who appear to have committed no crime."

PM draws his lines in the sand before debate starts on EU draft treaty

TONY BLAIR has ordered Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary, to adopt a more flexible negotiating strategy in the talks over a new constitution for the European Union.

The Prime Minister wants the Government to focus on a handful of "red line" issues - such as retaining the veto on tax, social security and defence - rather than entering the negotiations with a long list of amendments to the draft treaty drawn up by a convention chaired by the former president of France Valéry Giscard d'Es-

CONSTITUTION

BY ANDREW GRICE AND STEPHEN CASTLE

taing. His proposals will be presented to today's summit of EU leaders in Greece, with several countries, including Germany, expected to demand that the text is not watered down to accommodate Britain.

Heads of government will agree a start of this autumn for an inter-governmental conference (IGC) of member states to finalise the blueprint, with the

treaty likely to be agreed next spring.

The change of tactics by Mr Blair is expected to result in Britain dropping objections to plans by the convention to appoint a Foreign Minister, and for the UK to agree to extend the use of qualified majority voting on issues outside its "red line" areas.

The Foreign Office argues that the EU's founding fathers avoided labels such as "minister" because they would give the impression the Union was becoming a superstate. But a

Downing Street source said yesterday: "Whether we like it or not, the media will call the new foreign chief the EU's Foreign Minister, so it's not worth having a big row about it."

The source added: "There is no point in entering the IGC with a shopping list of 125 amendments. If we do, then we won't win anything. It will be much better to concentrate on about six key areas that really matter."

Some Blair advisers believe the tougher stance favoured by the Foreign Office could un-

wittingly play into the hands of Eurosceptics in Britain. "If we attack the convention's proposals all the time, we are sending more negative messages about the EU," said one Blair aide. "We need to present a more balanced picture, or we will just reinforce people's prejudices about Europe."

During this morning's summit debate, the EU member states will welcome M Giscard's blueprint as a basis for discussion. But already sharp differences are emerging. Joschka Fischer, the German

Foreign Minister, has asked for the draft to be accepted in full.

Although France has some problems with the document, Catherine Colonna, the spokeswoman for President Jacques Chirac, backed the German approach, describing the convention's work as "of great quality" and a "qualitative leap". There was "no question of starting from scratch," she added.

The proposal to appoint a new president or chairman of the European Council has been

attacked by Austria and Finland and is viewed with hostility by other small states. Poland, which will join the EU next year, and Spain are resisting proposals that would weaken voting rights and France is opposed to ending its national veto in two areas: audio-visual services and decisions on the Common Agricultural Policy. Meanwhile, Jean-Claude Juncker, the pro-integration Prime Minister of Luxembourg, has said he is "profoundly disappointed" with the draft.



Jack Straw: Will stick to 'red line' issues in debate

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EU seeks multilateral strategy to combat global terror threat

WMD
BY STEPHEN CASTLE

THE EUROPEAN Union moved to back American concerns over terrorism and weapons of mass destruction last night, but called for an "effective multilateral system" to combat growing global threats.

EU foreign ministers were discussing a security strategy compiled by Javier Solana, their foreign policy chief, as a summit of leaders prepared to send a tough message to Iran over its nuclear programme.

The Solana document, released before an EU-US summit next week, describes weapons of mass destruction as "the single most important threat to peace and security", adding: "The most frightening scenario is one in which terrorist groups acquire weapons of mass destruction."

The draft, entitled *A Secure Europe in a Better World*, says the EU - which next year will expand to 25 states with 450 million people and one quarter of the world's economic output - has no choice but to play a bigger role on the global stage.

Mr Solana's paper also called for greater co-operation among EU states, pointing out that, together, the member nations have more than 45,000 diplomats.

But while it called for those countries to boost military capacities and pool defence resources, it contained no call for the use of force and did not offer a judgement on US ideas of pre-emptive strikes.

Javier Solana: Presented security paper to summit

Significantly, the document also referred to global problems such as poverty, bad governance, the abuse of power and corruption.

Downing Street welcomed Mr Solana's paper, with Mr Blair's spokesman saying: "This places strong emphasis on effective multilateralism, and says that the transatlantic relationship is irreplaceable."

"Tomorrow, EU leaders are expected to send a warning to Iran to sign a protocol to an international agreement that would open up the country to tough inspections of its nuclear programme."

This week, EU foreign ministers warned that, without progress on this issue, there was no chance of a trade deal between the EU and Iran. But whether the heads of state would go beyond that statement to impose a deadline on Iran to sign the protocol was unclear.

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