

Blair mends fences with Chirac on Iraq

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Ian Black and
Helena Smith in Athens

Britain last night urged France and Russia to return to the United Nations security council to forge an agreement on the vexed question of the world body's precise role in post-war Iraq.

Tony Blair used the EU's Athens summit to mend fences with a pragmatic-sounding Jacques Chirac and discuss the next moves with Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general.

The French president announced that the EU would shortly mount an airlift of injured Iraqis — especially children — to hospitals in Europe.

Mr Blair acknowledged European and domestic concerns by saying the UN must be involved in "political and reconstruction matters", not just the humanitarian relief US hawks would prefer.

"I am confident the UN will play an important role," Mr Annan said, "and as we move ahead in the next few weeks I expect that road to become much clearer."

Denmark, the Netherlands and Spain — backers of the US-led attack — suggested that they may send troops to help stabilise Iraq. Italy is dispatching military policemen and relief workers.

Germany's foreign minister, Joschka Fischer, said he saw "a rapprochement" with the US over the UN's role in Iraq. But differences remain.

Greece, current holder of the EU presidency and the summit host, failed to secure a statement on Iraq, which Britain feared would revive

criticism of the military action that split the union.

Pockets of fighting continued in Iraq yesterday, as US troops were accused of firing on civilians in the northern city of Mosul for a second day running.

Powerful evidence of the passions aroused by the war was also seen on the streets of Athens, where violent protests marred the ceremonial entry of 10 new countries to what George Papandreou, Greece's foreign minister, called the "largest, most fascinating peace project in the world".

As the freshly anointed member states signed the 5,000-page treaty of accession in a glittering ceremony beneath the Acropolis, demonstrators hurled petrol bombs at police and abuse at EU leaders who backed the invasion of Iraq — not least Mr Blair.

But the prime minister was unrepentant. "It is an important democratic right that people have in Europe that they can take to the streets," he said. "It is a right that people in Iraq have today, but didn't have for 30 years under Saddam."

"I respect the right of people to take the view that the war was wrong, but I hope they also respect our motives in saying that we acted as we did because we genuinely thought it was best for the Iraqi people and the wider world."

The prime minister held a pre-summit reconciliation session with Germany's chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, in Hanover on Tuesday night, so his encounter with Mr Chirac, leader of the union's anti-war camp, was watched especially closely.

Downing Street officials said the two, meeting for the first time since the Iraq war, shook hands and held a "perfectly amiable" 20-minute conversation.

Later the French president gave out clear signals of pragmatic flexibility. "Issue by issue, we have to find the right balance between the role of the United Nations, which must be the essential role, and the American and British forces present on the ground," said his spokeswoman, Catherine Colonna.

"There are many projects we can work on together and progressively find a way to put the United Nations at the heart of the action."

Diplomats said the issue was now about "sequencing" relations between the military occupation and the Iraqi interim administra- ▶ Page 2

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"We are now widely perceived to have supported a war not of liberation but of imperialism. The most difficult strategic question is how the west can reach accommodation with the Islamic world"

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Jubilation as 10 states sign accession treaty, but demonstrations and divisions over Iraq cast a shadow

EU leaders hail their new frontiers

Ian Black in Athens

Under azure skies and heavy security, united Europe became a reality yesterday when leaders from west and east erased the frontiers of a divided continent in the ancient birthplace of democracy.

Gathered in the shadow of the Acropolis in Athens, heads of government from the 10 incoming member states signed the treaty of accession to the European Union, turning the club of 15 into one of 25 that is still struggling to carve out a world role and rewrite its own rules.

With deep divisions over war in Iraq casting a heavy pall, and thousands of demonstrators trading petrol bombs for police tear gas and lambasting Tony Blair for fighting alongside America, Costas Simitis, the Greek prime minister and summit host, set the tone by hailing a "historic day". He urged members new and old "to look to the future with optimism and creativity."

Mr Blair, busy mending fences over Iraq, referred pointedly to freedom from dictatorship and repression for former communist countries — his subtext unmistakably about Saddam Hussein, not the Iron Curtain.

Yet it was a day when high-flown rhetoric about the EU's biggest ever enlargement drowned out most discordant noises, a time for rapprochement instead of the furious rows of recent months.

"This union represents our common determination to put

an end to centuries of conflict and to transcend former divisions on our continent," said the summit declaration. "Accession is a new contract between our peoples and not merely a treaty between states."

Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, compared the event to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. "With this step, the union is finally overcoming the division of the European continent into east and west," he said.

Central Athens was deserted save for a huge police presence, but the flags of all 25 countries fluttered over the Stoa of Attalos, the colonnaded monument at the foot of the Acropolis.

Perfect spring weather and olive and almond trees swaying faintly in the breeze provided a lovely backdrop as leaders stuck to their allotted three minutes to extol the virtues of European unity.

It was not a time to remember the long years of negotiations and brinkmanship over terms of entry — on issues ranging from financial services to farm subsidies — nor for anticipating the referendums that lie ahead in some member states, as well as the new intake, where euroscepticism is already rising.

Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Slovakia, and the three Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, all former communist countries, have struggled for more than a decade to transform themselves into fully fledged market economies and democ-

racies and meet the EU's rigorous standards.

For Cyprus and Malta, former British colonies, the path to membership has been less painful. But Cyprus remains divided, pending an elusive peace settlement between its Greek and Turkish communities.

The accession of the 10 next May will add 75 million people to the EU's population, bringing it to 450 million. It will transform the union beyond recognition.

Politically this enlargement spells an end of the dominance of the old Franco-German alliance and catapults Poland into the top six. It means that big countries will be outnumbered by small ones.

Things will change economically too, with the wealth of the newcomers ranging from 29% of the EU average in Lithuania to 85% in Cyprus. Eventually, all will join the eurozone. But expansion will boost the EU's gross domestic product by only 0.5%.

The convention on the future of Europe, run by the former French president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, will finish its work by June so that new treaty talks can start in September. This means the treaty governing an EU of 25 will be signed in Rome in about a year's time.

The EU may still be deeply unpopular — in Britain and elsewhere. But the summit was a reminder of how much of a magnet it still is to those aspiring to join.

As eight east European countries gathered beneath the Acropolis to sign their EU



Italy's prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, and Spain's Jose Maria Aznar before the summit Photograph: Georgi Licovski/EPA

Bias alleged over rules on minority rights

Ian Traynor
East Europe correspondent

Brussels has been acting hypocritically by pressing incoming members from eastern Europe to adopt minority protection rules which do not apply in several western European Union countries, a study concluded yesterday.

As eight east European countries gathered beneath the Acropolis to sign their EU

accession treaties ahead of membership next year, the Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) accused the EU of applying double standards to the newcomers.

Under pressure from Brussels, all the newcomers, bar Latvia, have ratified a Council of Europe convention on protecting minorities, while five EU states including Greece, yesterday's summit host, have not.

The charge that the east Europeans are being held to stiffer criteria than EU members when negotiating their entry was also levelled a few months ago, when a year-long study of the accession process found that Brussels was insisting on tougher anti-corruption rules in eastern Europe.

Another Council of Europe convention on tackling corruption had been ratified by all the east European candi-

dates, while the convention applied in only three of the 15 current member countries.

The European commission was demanding "anti-corruption policies from candidate states that it is unable to enforce on member states", the Budapest-based Open Society Institute concluded.

There was "a justified perception that candidate countries are being held to different standards from those that cur-

rently obtain within the EU". France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and Greece have not ratified the minority rights convention.

"These states continue to fail to embrace pluralism and to protect minorities," MRGI charged.

"In EU countries there continues to be intolerance and prejudice towards immigrants, asylum seekers and ethnic minorities such as the Roma."

The people decide

● In favour of joining European Union

Malta (voted March 8)
Population: 380,000
In favour: 53%
Slovenia (March 23)
Population: 2 million
In favour: 88%
Hungary (April 12)
Population: 10 million
In favour: 84%

● Deciding this year

Lithuania (votes May 10-11)
Population: 3.7 million
In favour: 84%
Slovakia (May 16-17)
Population: 5.4 million
In favour: 75%
Poland (June 8)
Population: 38 million
In favour: 73%
Czech Republic (June 15-16)
Population: 10.3 million
In favour: 66%
Estonia (September 14)
Population: 1.4 million
In favour: 55%
Latvia (September 20)
Population: 2.4 million
In favour: 55%

● Still waiting

Cyprus (no referendum plans)
Population: 650,000
In favour: 75%