

Monday 10 February afternoon government press briefing

PRESS BRIEFING: 3.45PM MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2003

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IRAQ

Asked whether the Prime Minister was planning to attend the EU Special Summit next week, the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman (PMOS) said that as he understood it, the Greek Presidency was still consulting other EU members and colleagues about the proposal. As far as he was aware, a final decision had not yet been taken. Asked the Government's view of the idea, the PMOS said that it depended on what the Summit was for. We would talk to the Presidency and find out what agenda they had in mind. Pressed as to whether the Prime Minister would attend given Chancellor Schroeder had indicated that he was intending to go, the PMOS said that he was not going to pre-empt the final decision of the Presidency. We were perfectly relaxed about it. Put to him that it would be inconceivable for the Prime Minister not to attend if every other EU leader did, the PMOS said that he was not suggesting otherwise. He was simply making the point that the Presidency had yet to make a final decision as to whether to hold the Summit or not. Questioned as to whether the British Government had been consulted by the Greek Presidency about the Summit, the PMOS said that consultations were ongoing at official level about the matter. Asked if he thought it possible that the UK was 'being left out of the loop', the PMOS said no. He pointed out that people had been saying over the last few weeks that we were isolated within Europe - and then, lo and behold, ten days ago there were eight European signatories to a letter. The idea that we were out on a limb in Europe was obviously very wrong. Clearly there was a debate on this matter, and we were playing a part in that. Our position was clear. We were sticking to the fundamental requisites of Resolution 1441. Asked to confirm that the Prime Minister did not regret being one of the signatories to the letter, the PMOS said that nothing he nor anyone had said about it would suggest otherwise. In our opinion, no one should be afraid to state their point of view.

Put to him that we appeared to be in danger of looking like we were not taking this 'crisis' seriously, the PMOS said that nothing he had said could be interpreted as such. We accepted that there was a debate going forward within Europe in which we had been engaged intricately, putting forward our point of view at each and every opportunity. No one could accuse us of not taking things seriously. The point was that it was not helpful for journalists to push us into making premature judgements.

Asked if we remained of the view that there was no Franco-German plan, the PMOS said that no formal plan had been presented to us. Until that happened, we were unable to respond. Put to him that there was a plan - because it was being reported in the newspapers, the PMOS said that there was no Franco-German plan of which we had been formally notified. We were therefore unable to comment on something we were not even certain existed. Put to him by the Guardian that the US had not been to war 'formally' since 1941 and yet the bombs still fell, the PMOS said that the two situations were not comparable. He repeated that we did not have a Franco-German plan on which to comment.

Asked for a reaction to the idea of sending in UN troops to back up an increased number of weapons inspectors, the PMOS noted that there appeared to be some confusion about this suggestion. One wire report from Germany had stated that it wasn't even part of the proposal. Asked for the Government's view of the idea, the PMOS said that, as Hans Blix