

Seven leaders in Europe urge unity on Iraq war

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Seven European leaders today sought to rally an uncertain continent behind a possible US-led attack on Iraq with a joint public appeal for unity.

The declaration, initiated by José-Maria Aznar of Spain and whose signatories include Tony Blair of Britain and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, is published in 12 European newspapers and urges Europeans to unite with Americans to force Saddam Hussein, Iraqi president, to give up his weapons of mass destruction.

But the move also highlights growing divisions in Europe over Iraq. France and Germany, two European states to have expressed the strongest reservations about US policy, have not signed the appeal.

Alongside Messrs Aznar, Berlusconi and Blair, the declaration

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is signed by Portugal's José Manuel Durão Barroso, Anders Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark, Poland's Leszek Miller and Hungary's Peter Medgyessy.

The appeal brings together western and eastern Europe in an effort to emphasise the continent's unity following critical comments last week by Donald Rumsfeld, the US defence secretary, who contrasted the support that the US had from "new" Europe in the east, with opposition in "old" western Europe.

Mr Rumsfeld was commenting on criticism of the US position from France and Germany.



Patriot missiles are loaded in Germany ahead of delivery to Israel for air defence in a possible war against Iraq AP

Today's statement tries to demonstrate that Washington has allies across the continent.

Mr Blair yesterday faced his most serious clash yet on Iraq with MPs from his Labour party in a sign of growing anger in parliament and the country over the prospect of supporting US military action.

The declaration urges Europeans to stand by the US at a time of great danger to international peace. It says Europe and

the US have common values of democracy and freedom.

The prime ministers urge the UN Security Council to ensure that its resolutions are upheld or risk losing its credibility. They warn Mr Hussein that this is his last chance to disarm peacefully.

The statement came as Turkey, a staunch opponent of any war, moved troops to the east of the country in a sign that it may have accepted that conflict is inevitable. Nato also agreed to

prepare militarily for ways of defending Turkey if Iraq threatened an attack.

● Colin Powell, US secretary of state, said the US would help Mr Hussein find a place to go into exile if he left the country. "If he were to leave the country and take some of his family members with him and others in the leading elite... we would I'm sure try to help find a place for them to go... That certainly would be one way to avoid war."