

Eight leaders rally 'new' Europe to America's side

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EIGHT European leaders today call on the continent to stand united with America in the battle to disarm Iraq, while warning the UN that its credibility is on the line.

In a calculated rebuff to France and Germany — denounced by America last week as "old Europe" — the leaders of Britain, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Hungary, Poland, Denmark and the Czech Republic have combined to make an unprecedented plea in *The Times* for unity and cohesion. They say the transatlantic relationship must not become a casualty of President Saddam Hussein's threats to world security.

"Our strength lies in unity," they argue, adding that Monday's UN weapons inspectors' report confirmed Saddam's long-established pattern of "deception, denial and non-compliance".

The appeal, contained in a joint article published on page 24, gives Tony Blair and President Bush an important boost as they prepare for their summit at Camp David tomorrow.

But it also lays bare Europe's divisions. The words reflect the anger of some coun-



tries at the misgivings voiced by President Chirac and Gerhard Schröder and at what they consider to be their presumption to speak for Europe.

The joint appeal was suggested by José María Aznar of Spain, whom Mr Blair will meet in Madrid today. His office produced a draft article which other leaders read, amended and signed.

Señor Aznar, Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, Mr Blair, José Manuel Barroso of Portugal, Peter Medgyessy of Hungary, Leszek Miller of Poland, Anders Fogh Rasmussen of Denmark and President Havel of the Czech Republic say that the Iraqi regime and its weapons are a clear threat to world security that has been explicitly recognised by the UN.

In what appears to be a reminder to M Chirac and Herr Schroder, they say that "we Europeans" had reiterated backing for Resolution 1441 and the wish to pursue the UN route at both the Prague Nato summit and the Copenhagen European Council. In doing so, they sent an unequivocal message that they would rid the world of the danger posed by Saddam's deadly weapons.

"We must remain united in insisting that his regime is disarmed," they write. "The solidarity, cohesion and determination of the international community are our best hope of achieving this peacefully."

They say the resolution is Saddam's last chance to disarm peacefully and tell the Security Council that its task is to preserve international peace and security. To do so it must maintain its credibility by ensuring full compliance with its resolutions.

"We cannot allow a dictator systematically to violate these

resolutions. If they are not complied with, the Security Council will lose its credibility and world peace will suffer as a result. We are confident the Security Council will face up to its responsibilities."

The article is likely to infuriate France and Germany, which are already seething over Donald Rumsfeld's description of them as "old Europe". Asked about the mood in Europe last week, the US Defence Secretary said: "You are thinking of Europe as Germany and France. I don't. I think that's old Europe. If you look at the entire Europe today the centre of gravity is shifting to the east. Germany has been a problem and France has been a problem. But you look at vast numbers of other countries in Europe. They are not with France and Germany on this. They are with the United States."

Europe's divisions were further underscored at Nato yesterday when France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg blocked an American proposal to send Patriot missiles and surveillance aircraft to Turkey to protect it from a possible Iraqi attack. The four argued that moves to protect Turkey would be inappropriate while diplomatic efforts to avoid conflict with Iraq continued.

The article is also an important show of support for Mr Blair at a time when he is under increasing domestic pressure. Yesterday he lost patience with Labour MPs heckling him in the Commons over Iraq and told them bluntly that North Korea was next on his list for action.

When a Labour MP shouted "Who's next?" at him, he retorted that after Iraq, "yes, through the UN we have to confront North Korea about its nuclear programme." Another MP barked "Where does it stop?" bringing the response: "We stop when the threat to our country is fully and properly dealt with."

Mr Blair also said for the first time that Britain had evidence linking Iraq to al-Qaeda, following up the warning in Mr Bush's State of the Union address that Iraq might secretly be arming terror groups.

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