

## International

# Tony Blair: Putin can't use Iraq as justification for Ukraine

## Blair rejects notion that Putin profited by defying a weakened West

**LONDON:** Former UK prime minister Tony Blair is by turns pensive and defiant as he reflects on the upcoming anniversaries of two events that arguably defined the best and worst of his decade in power. Monday marks 20 years since Blair joined US president George W. Bush in launching an invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, without a UN mandate and in defiance of some of the biggest demonstrations ever seen in Britain. For its many critics, the war was exposed as a reckless misadventure when no weapons of mass destruction were found, and hampered the West's ability to stand up to the rise of autocrats in Russia and China.

But Blair rejects the notion that Russian President Vladimir Putin profited by defying a weakened West with his own aggression against Ukraine, starting in 2014 and extending to last year's full invasion. "If he didn't use that excuse (Iraq), he'd use another excuse." Britain's most successful Labour leader, who is now 69, said in an interview with AFP and fellow European news agencies ANSA, DPA and EFE.

Saddam, Blair noted, had initiated two regional wars, defied multiple UN resolutions and launched a chemical attack on his own people. Ukraine in con-

trast has a democratic government and posed no threat to its neighbours when Putin invaded.

"At least you could say we were removing a despot and trying to introduce democracy," Blair said, speaking at the offices of his Tony Blair Institute for Global Change in central London. "Now you can argue about all the consequences and so on. His (Putin's) intervention in the Middle East (in Syria) was to prop up a despot and refuse a democracy. So we should treat all that propaganda with the lack of respect it deserves."

### Northern Ireland

Fallout from the Iraq war arguably hampered Blair's own efforts as an international envoy to negotiate peace between Zionist entity and the Palestinians, after he left office in 2007. Through his institute, Blair maintains offices in the region and says he is "still very passionate" about promoting peace in the Middle East, even if it appears "pretty distant right now".

But while there can be no settlement in Ukraine until Russia recognises that "aggression is wrong", he says the Palestinians could draw lessons from the undis-

puted high point of his tenure: peace in Northern Ireland.

Under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, pro-Irish militants agreed to lay down their arms and pro-UK unionists agreed to share power, after three decades of sectarian strife had left some 3,500 people dead.

Blair, then Irish premier Bertie Ahern and an envoy of US president Bill Clinton spent three days and nights negotiating the final stretch before the agreement was signed on April 10, 1998. The territory is mired in renewed political gridlock today.

But a recent deal between Britain and the European Union to regulate post-Brexit trade in Northern Ireland has cleared the way for US President Joe Biden to visit for the agreement's 25th anniversary. Reflecting on the shift in strategy by the pro-Irish militants, from the bullet to the ballot box, Blair said "it's something I often say to the Palestinians: you should learn from what they did". "They shifted strategy and look at the result," he added, denying he was biased towards Zionist entity but merely recognising the reality of how to negotiate peace. "There are lots of things contested and untested," he added, dwelling on his tumultuous time in 10 Downing Street from 1997 to 2007.



**LONDON:** Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair speaks during an interview in central London on March 17, 2023. — AFP

"I suppose the one uncontested thing is probably the Good Friday Agreement. "The thing had more or less collapsed when I came to Belfast and we had to re-write it and agree it... it's probably been the only really successful peace process of the last period of time, in the last 25 years." — AFP

## Pope greets refugees helped through Christian 'corridors'

**VATICAN CITY:** Pope Francis on Saturday greeted thousands of refugees brought to Europe by Christian charities, recognising their difficult journeys and hailing their desire to "live free from fear and insecurity". At the Paul VI hall in the Vatican, the 86-year-old pontiff also thanked those who helped the refugees settle into their new lives, saying that "welcome is the first step towards peace".

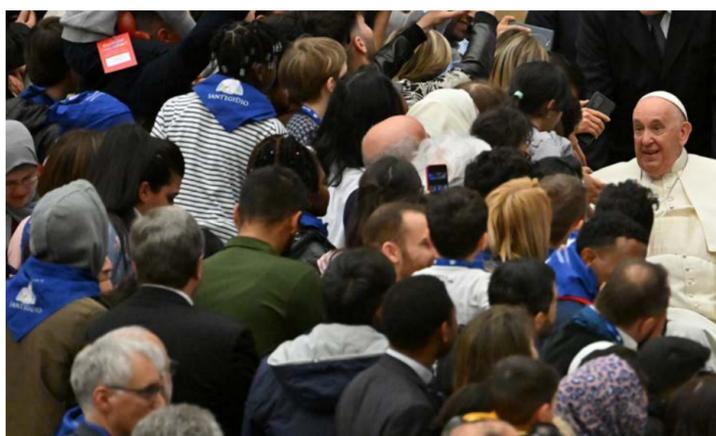
The audience included many of the 6,000 people who have been helped to Europe through "humanitarian corridors" run by Christian groups since 2016. The scheme, initiated by the Catholic Sant'Egidio community in Italy and later extended to France and Belgium, involves people from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, South Sudan, Libya and Ukraine among others.

"I am happy to meet so many refugees and their families... each of you deserves attention for the hard history that you have lived," Francis told them. "You have shown a firm will to live free from fear and insecurity."

He paid particular tribute to those who survived grim conditions in detention camps in Libya, the preferred departure point for many of the tens of thousands of people who try to cross the Mediterranean into Europe each year.

### Limited routes

The humanitarian corridors were set up to provide an alternative to the deadly sea crossing, where more than 26,000 people have lost their lives since 2014, according to the United Nations. Saturday's event comes just weeks after a migrant boat was shipwrecked off the southern coast of Italy,



**VATICAN CITY:** Pope Francis meets with attendees during an audience to refugees who arrived under humanitarian corridors programme, on March 18, 2023 at Paul-VI hall in the Vatican. — AFP

leaving at least 87 people dead. In a copy of his speech issued by the Vatican, the pope referenced the disaster, saying "everything possible needs to be done to ensure that it will not be repeated". He delivered to the audience, however, a much shorter version and did not mention the shipwreck.

Many migrants and asylum seekers turn to leaky, overcrowded boats because legal routes to Europe are limited. The number of asylum claims in Europe in 2022 reached levels last seen during the 2015-2016 refugee crisis, when more than a million came to the continent. But the issue of who should take responsibility for the arrivals is a cause of major tension between member states.

### 'A dream'

Under the corridor scheme, the European governments involved agree to issue visas, which the charities then use to bring over the most vulnerable—whether victims

of persecution, families with children, the elderly or infirm.

When the refugees arrive, the charities provide them with housing, language and skills training, and help them apply for asylum. The first humanitarian corridor opened was through Lebanon, with Italy offering visas to 1,000 Syrians who had fled there.

A Syrian woman named Anna spoke at Saturday's event, describing her family's journey from Aleppo to Lebanon and then Italy. The scheme "seemed a dream, the possibility of living in peace", she said, before being greeted by the pope.

Francis said the corridors aimed to ensure "life, salvation and then dignity". About 5,000 of the refugees brought in since 2016 are in Italy, where the Italian Federation of Evangelical Churches and the Waldensian Church are also involved. Another 600 went to France, according to Sant'Egidio. — AFP

## Key Saied adviser quits as Tunisia interior minister

**TUNIS:** Tunisian interior minister Taoufik Charfeddine, a close aide of President Kais Saied, announced Friday he had resigned to spend more time with his three children following the death of his wife last year. Charfeddine, 54, who had held his post since October 2021, told reporters he wished to thank the president for "his understanding and for allowing me to be relieved of my duties".

"The time has come for me to dedicate myself to this responsibility she left me," he said. Replacing Charfeddine as interior minister is Kamal Feki, governor of Tunis since 2021 and also part of Saied's inner circle. A former lawyer, Charfeddine was a key figure in the election campaign that propelled the previously little-known Saied to the presidency in 2019.

After Saied froze parliament and sacked the then-government in a dramatic July 2021 move against the sole democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring uprisings, Charfeddine became a close adviser. As the president pushed through sweeping changes to the country's political system, concentrating near-total power in his office, Charfeddine was one of the most outspoken defenders of Saied's power grab.

Saied's office regularly released video footage of the two men's meetings in the presidential palace. During the wave of arrests that accompanied Saied's power grab,

Charfeddine held news conferences to defend the incarceration of opposition politicians.

When the vice president of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, the largest in parliament before its dissolution by Saied, went on hunger strike to protest his detention, Charfeddine alleged that terrorism fears had forced the security forces to respond. "There were fears of acts of terrorism targeting the country's security and we had to act," the minister said last year of the arrest of Noureddine Bhiri, a former justice minister.

Last month, Charfeddine was by Saied's side as Tunisia faced an international outcry over a tirade by the president against illegal migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. "There is no question of allowing anyone in an illegal situation to stay in Tunisia," the president said in one of his videotaped meetings with the minister.

"I will not allow the institutions of the state to be undermined or the demographic composition of Tunisia to be changed." The president's speech two nights previously had triggered a wave of violence against African migrants and prompted several West African countries to organise repatriation flights for fearful nationals.

On March 8, more than 30 Tunisian non-governmental organisations demanded an apology from Charfeddine after he branded as "traitors" the president's many critics in the private sector, the media and trade unions.

They accused him of using the "language of threat and intimidation" to "sow division" among Tunisians as part of a "dangerous populist discourse that foreshadows a police state" like the one overthrown in the country's 2011 uprising. — AFP

## US leadership role in Middle...

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and assistance on their civilian nuclear program in exchange for recognizing the Zionist entity.

Meanwhile, Biden's hopes to break some ice with Iran by restoring the 2015 deal that limited its nuclear program - abandoned by predecessor president Donald Trump - have gone nowhere. Instead, Tehran has moved further away, supporting Russia in its war on Ukraine. The turmoil in the Zionist entity is another headache. Despite repeated calls from US officials for de-escalation, including a visit by Blinken to Jerusalem and Ramallah in late January, the violence between Zionists and Palestinians has worsened.

Much is being driven by a deep rift in Zionist politics, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's

move to weaken the country's supreme court. Day after day, US officials condemn inflammatory actions, while reiterating "unwavering" support for the Zionist entity and commitment to the "two-state solution". Yet that has had no impact on the increasingly hard-line government of longtime ally Netanyahu.

But pressure is mounting on the Biden administration. Around one hundred Democratic lawmakers recently wrote Biden expressing concerns about the direction of Netanyahu's government and urged the US leader to use all diplomatic tools possible to prevent it from "further damaging the nation's democratic institutions". "In this fragile and combustible moment, consistent and sustained US diplomatic leadership is critical," they told Biden.

But with US elections looming next year, the White House's latitude "is going to be very limited" in its ability to impact Zionist politics and the Palestinian issue, said Ryan. The Zionists "are much more confident now, especially post-Abraham Accords, in their ability to act as they please," he said. — AFP

Daniels. Cohen was sentenced to three years in prison in 2018 on federal charges related to the payment. He pleaded guilty but said he had been carrying out Trump's orders. Daniels herself met with prosecutors on Wednesday and "agreed to make herself available as a witness, or for further inquiry if needed", according to her lawyer Charles Brewster.

Trump has also received an invitation to testify, which legal experts say is a sign that an indictment is near. The payment to Daniels, if not properly accounted for, could result in a misdemeanor charge related to falsifying of business records. That might be raised to a felony if the false accounting was intended to cover up a second crime, such as a campaign finance violation, The New York Times has reported.

Trump is facing several criminal probes at state and federal level over possible wrongdoing before, during and after his term in office that threaten his new run at the White House. In Georgia, a prosecutor is investigating Trump and his allies' efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss in the southern state. The grand jury in that case has recommended multiple indictments, the forewoman revealed last month. The former president is also the subject of a federal probe into his handling of classified documents as well as his possible involvement in the January 6, 2021, assault on the US Capitol. — AFP

## Int'l war crimes court issues...

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placed in institutions and foster homes. ICC prosecutor Karim Khan told AFP that Putin was now liable for arrest if he set foot in any of the court's more than 120 member states. He said the arrest warrants were "based upon forensic evidence, scrutiny and what's been said by those two individuals".

"The evidence we presented focused on crimes against children. Children are the most vulnerable part of our society," said Khan. The ICC said judges found there were "reasonable grounds" to suspect Putin's criminal responsibility and grant Khan's application for the warrants, which were made back on February 22. ICC President Piotr Hofmanski said the execution of the warrants "depends on international cooperation".

During a meeting with Putin in mid-February, Lvo-

va-Belova said she adopted a 15-year-old child from the devastated Ukrainian port city of Mariupol. "Now I know what it means to be a mother of a child from Donbas - it is a difficult job but we love each other, that is for sure," she told Putin. She added that "we evacuated children's homes into safe areas, arranged rehabilitation and prosthetics for them and provided them with targeted humanitarian assistance."

The arrest warrant for Putin, a sitting head of state of a UN Security Council member, is an unprecedented step for the ICC. Set up in 2002, the ICC is a court of last resort for the world's worst crimes, when countries cannot or will not prosecute suspects. Prosecutor Khan launched an investigation into alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Ukraine just days after Russia's invasion.

Khan recently posted pictures from a visit to Ukraine alongside empty cots in an empty children's care home, and said that investigating alleged child abduction was a "priority". "It's poignant," he said. "One sees empty cribs and empty beds juxtaposed with paintings by those children on the walls." — AFP

## Trump expects 'arrest', calls...

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That would also send political shock waves as Trump tries to secure the Republican nomination for the 2024 presidential election. Trump's lawyer told CNBC on Friday evening that his client would surrender to face criminal charges if he was indicted.

Trump has denied having an affair with Daniels and has dismissed the investigation as politically motivated. In his Truth Social post, written in capital letters, Trump referred to "illegal leaks from a corrupt & highly political Manhattan district attorneys office" and said the investigation was "based on an old & fully debunked (by numerous other prosecutors!) fairytale."

Facebook and YouTube, where Trump has millions of followers, benched him days after a mob of his supporters stormed Congress on Jan 6, 2021, arguing that his posts incited unrest. A grand jury in New York, a citizen panel which examines evidence presented by prosecutors to decide if a charge is warranted, has been hearing from witnesses in Trump's case.

On Monday, they heard from Trump's former lawyer and fixer Michael Cohen, who made the payment to

## Finland on course to...

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But the bids still needed to be ratified by all 30 of the alliance members' parliaments - a process that got hung up once it reached Turkey and Hungary. Friday's breakthrough followed months of tense negotiations between Ankara and the Nordic neighbors that threatened to collapse several times. Erdogan told Finnish President Sauli Niinisto that Helsinki had shown a strong commitment to addressing Ankara's security concerns.

"We decided to start the protocol of Finland's accession to NATO in our parliament," Erdogan told reporters after the talks. Erdogan added that he "hoped" that parliament will approve the application before Turkey's crucial general election in May. The Turkish parliament is expected to end its current session in mid-April.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg welcomed Turkey's decision while stressing the importance of Sweden also joining "as soon as possible". "The most important thing is that both Finland and Sweden become full members of NATO quickly, not whether they join at exactly the same time," Stoltenberg said.

The White House echoed the NATO chief's position.

National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said the United States urged Hungary to conclude its ratification process both for Sweden and Finland "without delay". And France's foreign ministry called Turkey's announcement about Finland "an important signal" while reiterating support for Sweden's bid as well.

Erdogan had accused the Nordic neighbors of breaking the terms of a separate deal they reached in June 2022 under which Turkey agreed to approve the bids. Turkey has sought the extradition of dozens of Kurdish and other suspects it accuses of ties to outlawed militants and a failed 2016 coup attempt. Erdogan's demands became more urgent as he neared a May election in which he will need a strong turnout from nationalist supporters to extend his two-decade rule.

The Turkish leader voiced particular displeasure with Sweden - a country with a larger Kurdish diaspora and a longer history of disputes with Ankara. Finland and Sweden had initially resisted the idea of breaking up their bids. But Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson - who made NATO membership a priority after assuming office in October - acknowledged on Tuesday that the likelihood of Finland joining the bloc on its own had "increased". The Finnish president called Erdogan's decision Friday "very important for the whole of Finland". But he added: "Finland's application is not complete without Sweden." — AFP