

Sri Lanka bowed to international pressure and announced plans to close the internment camps that are home to more than ...

Catherine Ashton: International woman of mystery. Ashton is Europe's new foreign policy ...

WASHINGTON (AFP) — Shuttle Atlantis astronauts on Saturday completed the second of their mission's three spacewalks to ...

The Iraq inquiry will start hearing evidence in open session on Tuesday, and it will almost certainly lead to fireworks. Let us hope the media cover it properly; five months ago, there was a sharp debate on Iraq in the Commons which the media ignored.

"Anyone with information" has been invited to get in touch, which includes serving officials and military. Some officials resigned because they disagreed with the war, but most stayed on. But there is plenty of evidence, including leaked documents, to show there was strong opposition to the war, and for good reasons. As a retired diplomat myself, I hope my former colleagues will not be shy.

The situation in Iraq is still horrible. More than 400 people died in violent incidents last month; more than 1,400 were wounded. Millions of Iraqis are still displaced, inside Iraq or in Syria, Jordan or elsewhere, with little prospect of their returning home. Water and electricity are limping along, the vital oil industry will take years to rebuild. British troops sent to train the Iraqi security forces were in Kuwait through the summer marking time, while the Iraqi government quibbled about their legal status.

We've had umpteen Iraq inquiries already, but this one should be different. Its terms of reference are open. Previous inquiries concentrated on the non-existent weapons of mass destruction, the misuse of intelligence to make the case for war, the "dodgy dossier" and so on. But there are plenty of other questions, starting with the big one: was this a war of aggression and therefore a war crime? There were two views about its legality, and the then attorney general seems to have held both of them.

What about the alleged links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda? — it seems there were no such links. What happened to the civil planning for after the fighting? — according to Clare Short, who was a member of the Cabinet, there "were preparations that were then all junked, because of the hubris and deceit that went into preparing for war".

Were the arguments for and against war ever assessed by the FCO, and was formal advice submitted to the then secretary of state, the

Oliver Miles: The key question – is Blair a war criminal?



A British soldier on patrol in Iraq earlier this year

Cabinet and the prime minister? Here is Clare Short again: "All the Cabinet meetings were little chats: they were never a proper consideration of all the options." Is it true that the Iraq experts invited to No 10 in November 2002 (two of whom also took part in the seminar organized by the inquiry on 5 November) decided not to tell Tony Blair whether they thought an invasion was wise or not because they thought he wouldn't listen? We have heard a lot recently about the freedom of experts to give advice which is unpalatable to the Government, so why the self-censorship?

We need to know more about the exchanges between George Bush and Tony Blair. According to Colin Powell, the then U.S. secretary of state, he and Jack Straw sometimes tried to get Blair to hold Bush back. "Jack and I would get him all pumped up about an issue. And he'd be ready to say, 'Look here, George'. But as soon as he saw the president he would lose all his steam."

Can this be true?

When Bush tried to persuade President Chirac to go to war, Bush compared Saddam Hussein with Gog and Magog, obscure legendary figures named in the book of Ezekiel as enemies of the people of Israel. This sounds like a joke, but seems to be true. Chirac was baffled and his staff consulted a professor of theology who spilt the beans. Blair told his Iraq experts that Saddam was "uniquely evil"; the inquiry should ask him whether Bush mentioned Gog and Magog to him, or he to Bush.

The Prime Minister's choice of the members of the committee has been criticized. None is a military man, Sir John Chilcot was a member of the Hutton inquiry and has been closely involved with the security services, Baroness Prashar has no relevant experience, Sir Roderic Lyne was a serving ambassador at the time of the war, and so on.

Rather less attention has been paid to the curious appointment of two historians (which seems a lot, out of a total of five), both strong supporters of Tony Blair and/or the Iraq war. In December 2004 Sir Martin Gilbert, while pointing out that the "war on terror" was not a third world war, wrote that Bush and Blair "may well, with the passage of time and the opening of the archives, join the ranks of Roosevelt and Churchill" — an eccentric opinion that would seem to rule him out as a member of the committee. Sir Lawrence Freedman is the reputed architect of the "Blair doctrine" of humanitarian intervention, which was invoked in Kosovo and Afghanistan as well as Iraq.

Both Gilbert and Freedman are Jewish, and Gilbert at least has a record of active support for Zionism. Such facts are not usually mentioned in the mainstream British and American media, but The Jewish Chronicle and the Israeli media have no such inhibitions, and the Arabic media both in London and in the region are usually not far behind.

All five members have outstanding reputations and records, but it is a pity that, if and when the inquiry is accused of a whitewash, such handy ammunition will be available. Membership should not only be balanced; it should be seen to be balanced.

Tony Blair's responsibility for the Iraq war was a strike against him as a candidate for the role of president of the European Council. Perhaps the launch of the inquiry helped to kill the idea off. No European democratic institution has entertained the idea of electing someone under the shadow of a war crime charge since Kurt Waldheim became President of Austria in 1986.

Oliver Miles is a former British ambassador to Libya

(Source: independent.co.uk)

School run security for West Bank children

Israeli authorities are being urged to do more to protect to Bedouin villagers in the West Bank after a series of attacks by Israeli settlers.



Military protection for Palestinian children on their way to and from school has been ordered by the Israeli Knesset after attacks by settlers near the settlement of Ma'on and outpost of Havat Ma'on.

But Palestinians say their children are still in danger.

The soldiers do not always turn up and they only escort the children some of the way, leaving them exposed to the risk of further attacks.

Sky News has acquired footage of masked settlers, armed with an iron bar and slingshot, approaching villagers in the vicinity of the two settlements.

The Palestinian filming the incident shouts at others as they and their livestock come under a hail of stones.

Settlers have closed the main route through the area with a fence and Palestinians are forced to use far longer alternative routes but they are still at risk of harassment.

Last week, two female volunteers — one Italian the other American — were attacked and robbed by settlers as they escorted a Palestinian couple with three small children near Havat Ma'on.

Laura Ciaghi told Sky News they were set upon by five settlers who assaulted the father of the family while his children screamed in fear.

Ms Ciaghi and her colleague were pushed to the ground and their camcorders were taken by their attackers.

"This incident is the consequence of years and years of attacks on Palestinians and internationals that authorities did nothing about," she said.

The settlers are aware that there is total impunity.

"It is not a question of there just being a few bad apples. They are well covered and supported."

The Israeli police are investigating this latest incident.

The military says its school-run escort occasionally does not turn up for operational reasons but declined to comment on the failure to prevent years of settler attacks on Palestinians in the area.

(Source: sky.com)

Israeli planes strike targets in Gaza: medics

GAZA STRIP (Reuters) — Israeli planes carried out air strikes against targets in the Gaza Strip on Sunday, injuring five Palestinians, Palestinian medical workers said.

An army spokesman said one of the strikes, which occurred hours after a rocket fired from the Hamas-run enclave landed in Israel, had targeted a factory in Gaza used to make weapons.

Mubarak: Israel ruining chance for peace

Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak harshly criticized Israel Saturday while speaking before the Egyptian parliament.

President Mubarak said that Israel's policies destroy any chance for peace with the Palestinians. The Egyptian leader urged Israel to join the United States' and Arab countries' efforts to end the conflict.

"I will use words that are not open to interpretation; Israel is destroying the opportunity for peace, with its plans to populate Jerusalem (Beit-ul-Moqaddas) with Jews and excavate around the al-Aqsa mosque," he said.

His statements came a day before his scheduled meeting with Israeli President Shimon Peres on Sunday.



MUBARAK

"I say to the Israeli leadership — you are placing new obstacles in the way of peace, calling to recognize Israel as a Jewish state, and putting off the issue of Jerusalem (Beit-ul-Moqaddas) by offering negotiations for a temporary Palestinian state."

"I call on the leaders of Israel: Stop your actions in the West Bank and remove the blockade on the (Gaza) Strip. Enough with your stubbornness and manipulations — accept the calls for peace."

Mubarak also called on the Palestinians to reconcile their differences, adding that Egypt will not give in to further extensions and will not agree to endlessly drag on its mediation efforts.

(Source: ynetnews.com)

Lebanese forces fire at Israeli drone

BEIRUT (AFP) — Lebanese anti-aircraft guns opened fire on Saturday on an Israeli drone that entered Lebanese airspace in the south of the country, the military said in a statement.

"A surveillance drone of the Israeli enemy" overflew "the area of Bint Jbeil at medium altitude" in the morning, the statement said.

"Army anti-aircraft batteries opened fire on the drone, forcing it to gain altitude before leaving Lebanese airspace."

The country's military reports almost daily on airspace violations by Israeli aircraft, but does not normally open fire at them.

The United Nations considers Israeli air incursions into Lebanon to be a violation of Security Council Resolution 1701.

"To the best of my knowledge, there's probably no other country in the world — probably, I may be wrong — which is subject to such an intrusive regime of aerial surveillance," UN special envoy

for Lebanon Michael Williams said this month.

Resolution 1701 brought an end to the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah based in southern Lebanon, although the accord has failed to seal a permanent ceasefire.

It mainly insists on the strict embargo on providing arms to Lebanese militias, while also affirming the Beirut government's sovereignty across the whole country.

Kingdom important force for stability in region: Berlusconi

JEDDAH (Arab News) — Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, on a two-day visit to Jeddah, described Saudi Arabia as an important force for stability in the region. Europe, he said, appreciated the Kingdom's political and economic role in the region.

Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah held talks on Saturday night with Premier Berlusconi on major regional and international issues. Berlusconi, who arrived here early Saturday along with a contingent of media persons from some 20 Italian organizations, met with Second Deputy Premier and Minister of Interior Prince Naif and Minister of Finance Ibrahim Al-Assaf during the day. He also had a meeting with members of Jeddah's Italian community at the city's Italian Cultural Center.

At a press conference in the afternoon, the Italian premier said he had wide-ranging talks with the two ministers. The fluctuating oil prices as well as regional issues especially Somalia, Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan figured at the talks.

As members of the G20, both Italy and the Kingdom are against instability in commodity prices — oil and also food. Both are against speculation in oil prices.

Berlusconi said a trade mission comprising Italian businessmen from both small and medium enterprises would visit the Kingdom in due course. "We also have our oil ... it's called entrepreneurs," said Berlusconi.



Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah with Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi before their meeting in Jeddah on Saturday. (SPA)

A spokesman for the Italian Embassy said the Kingdom is an important strategic partner of Italy. Both are striving to find solutions to the crises in the Middle East and are confronting challenges facing the world community in this politically and economically intricate juncture.

"The visit represents the excellent and steadily growing relationship between Italy and Saudi Arabia and the talks are aimed at further boosting existing bilateral cooperation in the spirit of the close friendship which has produced fruitful exchanges in various fields," the spokesman said.

Berlusconi's tour comes within a month of the visit of Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini for the 10th session of the Saudi-Italian Joint Commission.

The agreement to avoid double taxation will further cement bilateral economic ties and increase mutual investments between the two countries. It comes into effect on Jan. 1, 2010.

Lamberto Dini, head of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the Italian Senate, visited Riyadh in February and held talks with Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal, Al-Assaf and a number of members of the Shura Council. Stivania Kracksi, Italian deputy minister of foreign affairs, also visited the Kingdom in March and had talks with Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Nizar Madani, Minister of Culture and Information Abdul Aziz Khoja and Minister of Commerce and Industry Abdullah Zainal Alireza.

Gaza water unfit for human consumption: Palestinians

GAZA CITY (AFP) — Water in the Gaza Strip is so salty that it is unfit for human consumption, a Palestinian official in charge of water supplies inside the besieged coastal territory said on Saturday.



Palestinians fill bottles and containers with water at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) headquarters in Khan Yunis refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip in October 2009. Water in the Gaza Strip is so salty that it is unfit for human consumption, a Palestinian official in charge of water supplies inside the besieged coastal territory said. (AFP/File/Said Khatib)

"The water is no longer fit for human consumption, with analysis and international studies showing that just 10 percent of water in the Gaza Strip is usable... threatening the lives of Palestinians," Munzir Shiblak warned.

He called in a statement for "the necessary measures to be taken to end the problem of salinity in Gaza water supplies, a problem that is getting worse."

Shiblak called the water situation "critical."

He said the amount taken from underground aquifers last year to supply 1.5 million people with drinking water and for agriculture was 160 million cubic meters, but that natural replenishment was 80-90 million cubic meters.

"The ground water deficit rose to more than 80 million cubic meters last year, and if this situation continues reserves could collapse in the next few years," Shiblak said.

In September the UN Environment Program also said Gaza's underground water supplies are "in danger of collapse" following years of overuse and the devastating war Israel waged in the territory at the turn of the year.

"Unless the trend is reversed now, damage could take centuries to reverse. Since the aquifer is a continuum with Israel and Egypt, such action must be coordinated with these countries," UNEP said in a report.

The sewage system has been particularly hard-hit, as Israel does not allow the import of virtually any pipes or other metal equipment that it fears could be used by Palestinian resistance fighters to make improvised rockets.

UNEP estimated that restoring the aquifer beneath Gaza could require 1.5 billion dollars (a billion euros) over 20 years, including the construction of desalination plants to ease the pressure on underground sources.

The report said over-extraction was causing seawater to seep into the freshwater aquifer, sending salinity levels above the 250 milligrams per liter considered safe by the World Health Organization.