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## Blair to MPs: 'Back me on Iraq or I quit'

BY PA NEWS

● Two ministers resign from Government



Tony Blair, facing the biggest backbench rebellion of his leadership, made an impassioned plea today for MPs to back him on military action against Iraq.

During the all-day emergency debate on Iraq, the Prime Minister implied that if the House voted not to authorise the use of military action to disarm Iraq he would resign. He told MPs that he would "not be party" to turning troops back.

"In this dilemma no choice is perfect, no choice is ideal, but on this decision hangs the fate of many things.

"To retreat now, I believe, would put at hazard all that we hold dearest, turn the UN back into a talking shop, stifle the first steps of progress in the Middle East, leave the Iraqi people to the mercy of events on which we would have relinquished all power to influence for the better.

"Tell our allies that at the very moment of action, at the very moment when they need our determination, that Britain faltered."

Mr Blair spelt out, to loud cheers: "I would not be party to such a course."

Mr Blair's call came after the resignations of John Denham, Home Office Minister, and Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, Health Minister, over the Government's hardline stance on

Iraq.

Clare Short, the International Development Secretary, earlier decided not to join the list of ministerial resignations. Robin Cook, former Leader of the Commons, left the Cabinet yesterday.

British withdrawal would give America "the biggest impulse to unilateralism you can imagine," said Mr Blair. He said that what was at stake would determine the pattern of international politics for the next generation.

Opening the debate, he repeatedly accused President Saddam Hussein of failing to disclose full details of his weapons of mass destruction and said that Britain must act.

Critics of the decision to back the US in taking military action against Saddam Hussein are hoping to muster an even bigger rebellion than last month, when 122 Labour MPs defied the whips.

Earlier today, Ms Short gave her reasons for not resigning from the Government. She said that while she remained "very critical" of the Government's handling of the Iraq crisis, it would be "cowardly" to quit at this stage as it would mean making no contribution to the problems ahead.

"I know I will be heavily criticised for this decision, but we must all do what we think is right in the circumstances we are now in."

Mr Blair told the Commons that he hoped that President Bush would publish his long-awaited "roadmap" for Palestinian statehood today, after the Palestinian Parliament cleared the way for Mahmoud Abbas to be installed as Prime Minister with significant power.

He said that the vote "will determine the way Britain and the world confront the central security threat of the 21st century, the development of the UN, the relationship between Europe and the US, relations within the EU and the way the US engages with the rest of the world."

To Tory cheers, he took a swipe at the Liberal Democrats and their opposition to military action, accusing them of being "unified in opportunism and error".

Iain Duncan Smith, Tory leader, said that his party would vote with the Government at the end of the debate.

He told MPs that Saddam had "the means, mentality and motive" to threaten Britain's national security. "Britain is as much a prime target as anybody else living today in this world," he said.

The vote on the debate is due to take place around 2200GMT