



ANALYSIS: Blair gives backing to 'fortress' Genoa

TONY Blair gave his full backing to the security clampdown imposed on Genoa yesterday, despite complaints that the heavy-handed tactics of the Italian authorities have turned the G8 summit venue into a fortress.

The Prime Minister will fly into a city under siege today as the Italian hosts try to prevent the annual meeting of the world's most industrialised countries from being disrupted by the violence that marred the European Union summit in Gothenburg last month and the world trade talks in Seattle last year.

Surface-to-air missiles have been installed at the Christopher Columbus airport to protect the incoming world leaders from terrorist attack, while all of the visitors, bar President George Bush, will stay on the cruise ship *European Vision*, moored in the harbour, because of security fears on the mainland.

More than 15,000 soldiers and police have been deployed to enforce a restricted "red zone" around the Palazzo Ducale, where the two-day meeting will take place, in order to prevent disruption from protesters.

Hundreds of labourers have toiled for days to seal off the waterfront area behind 16-foot barricades of concrete and steel, turning the historic city centre into a virtual ghost town.

About 30,000 residents have been issued with passes to enter and leave through a handful of designated checkpoints, although many businesses within the exclusion area have closed down.

With at least 100,000 environmental and anti-capitalist demonstrators expected to converge on Genoa over the next two days, Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian prime minister, has been anxious to show his country's best face to the world.

This has resulted in a £150million facelift to smarten up the city, including painted façades to cover run-down buildings on the route the leaders' cavalcades will take from the airport and a ban on hanging underwear on urban washing lines.

The excessive security has angered residents, destroyed traders' hopes that the summit would bring extra business to the city and generated a wave of public sympathy for the protesters.

The mayor, Giuseppe Pericu, has pledged to lead his Left Democrat party in a march alongside the protesters, but it is unclear how close they will be able to get to the summit.

The city authorities have closed the airport and main railway stations, restricted motorway access and cleared the port area of all non-official shipping.

As a gesture to the demonstrators, free accommodation is being provided at sports grounds and stadiums in the suburbs, but tension has been rising since a parcel bomb exploded at Genoa police station on Monday, injuring a policeman, and was followed by a series of explosive devices across the country.

The Italian authorities insisted these were isolated incidents, though television stations reported yesterday that tension on the streets was "palpable" after representatives of the demonstrators signalled they were preparing an all-out assault to breach the "red zone".

The Prime Minister memorably described the protesters who disrupted the EU summit in Sweden as part of "an anarchist travelling circus". His official spokesman yesterday backed any steps necessary to prevent Genoa being similarly hijacked by demonstrators intent on "mayhem and

destruction".

He said: "It is not unreasonable, given their record of form, that the Italian authorities feel they have to take the steps they are taking. No-one would like more to get out and about in Genoa to speak to local people and have free access to different parts of the city than the Prime Minister."

The spokesman added that Mr Blair would "defend to the hilt" the democratic rights of legitimate protesters, citing the effective demonstrations against third world debt that took place when Britain hosted the G8 summit in Birmingham shortly after Labour came to power, but defended taking "extreme" precautions against the activities of "a mindless yob element".

The Prime Minister told the Cabinet it was ironic the international institutions which were set up to promote world trade and tackle the global challenges of poverty and the environment should now be the targets of the greatest criticism.

"The protesters are opposing the very organisations that can provide the solutions," Mr Blair said, urging ministers to make the argument "aggressively" for a further liberalisation of world trade.

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[top](#) | [back](#)