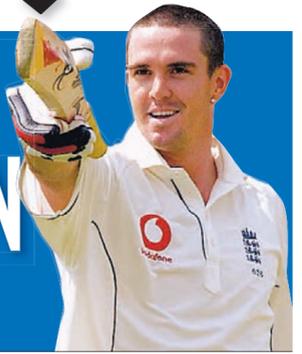


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Monday, May 15, 2006 No 46,946 65p

## MoD cost cuts 'will put troops in peril'

By Thomas Harding and Graeme Wilson

THE lives of troops will be put at risk if the Ministry of Defence goes ahead with plans to refurbish a fleet of vintage helicopters as a cost-cutting measure, defence sources said yesterday.

Servicemen, already concerned after the shooting down of a Lynx in Basra last week, said that if 30 Sea King helicopters were taken out of mothballs their low speed and poor performance in the desert heat would make them "sitting ducks".

A shortfall in the number of troop transport helicopters has led to defence chiefs proposing to bring former Royal Navy anti-submarine Sea Kings out of storage for use in Iraq and Afghanistan. The move has prompted a mili-

### Soldiers die in Basra

Two soldiers were killed and another badly wounded when their convoy was hit by a roadside bomb in Basra, bringing to seven the number of British servicemen killed in Iraq in a week. Page 13

tary engineer working on the helicopter programme to condemn the cost-cutting measure that would "severely endanger the lives of my colleagues".

"Why is it that the MoD insists on putting costs of equipment above its duty of care to the service personnel they ought to be providing the best kit to?" the source said.

"Compounding the catastrophe is that its maximum speed at its maximum height is a mere 50 knots - in other words they will be sitting ducks." He added that the "hot and high" performance of the Sea King was "woeful".

While the Sea Kings are generally regarded as robust by troops, their age and poor hot weather performance have led to several being grounded in Iraq.

Liam Fox, the shadow defence

secretary, who has previously criticised the lack of troop transport being sent to Afghanistan for the three-year deployment, said: "This could seriously impact upon the ability of British forces to operate in such a hostile environment where travelling by road is so dangerous."

"It would be very worrying if following recent events in Iraq we were to put helicopters back into service that could pose a threat to the safety of our troops."

Concern over the military's plans comes amid repeated warnings by commanders that the 3,300 British troops deploying to southern Afghanistan face a torrid time at the hands of Taliban insurgents.

The troops, who are providing security for a reconstruction programme in volatile Helmand province, face the constant threat of attack and have already been the target of a suicide bombing, in which two soldiers were injured.

Powerful warlords, heavily-armed drug traffickers and the resurgent forces of the deposed Taliban regime, with weapons including rockets at their disposal, all have the British forces in their sights.

Taliban and al-Qa'eda propagandists are attempting to bolster their ranks with a recruitment campaign in Pakistan for "martyrs" prepared to kill British soldiers across the Afghan border.

The Conservatives see the proposals as the latest evidence of the financial squeeze on the armed forces under Labour.

The defence budget has fallen from £34.6 billion in 1999-2000 to £31 billion in 2004-05 in real terms, putting pressure on the armed forces at a time when senior officers are issuing warnings about overstretch.

The Army's current strength is 101,000, about 10,000 less than when Labour came to power. The situation is even worse in the Navy, where the number of sailors has fallen from 46,000 to less than 36,000, while the RAF has seen personnel numbers drop from

Continued on Page 4

Editorial Comment: Page 17

## Samuel is a world first



Dr Mandy Baum cradles her son Samuel, whose birth was the world's first after screening for a devastating genetic disorder. The research was done in Britain but the parents had to go to Brussels for treatment Page 3

## Tory support grows but North-South divide widens

By Philip Johnston Home Affairs Editor

A WIDENING North-South divide has been exposed by a YouGov poll for *The Daily Telegraph* that shows the Tories are piling up votes in London and the Home Counties while failing to make any significant inroads north of the Trent.

The poll showed the Tories overall on 37 per cent of the vote and Labour on 31 per cent, a reflection of the recent troubles facing the Government on many fronts.

But the details of the survey indicate that while the South is turning to the Conservatives in a big way, the North remains resistant to the fresh appeal of David Cameron's party.

In London - where the Tories won a handful of boroughs at the elections on May 4 and are again the largest party - the poll measures their support at almost 47 per cent, compared to Labour's 22 per cent, an astonishing reversal of fortunes for Tony Blair in the capital.

Labour is faring almost as badly elsewhere in the South, with support from just a quarter of voters.

In the North, however - an area comprising the North East, the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside - the picture is almost reversed. There, Labour has 40 per cent support and the Tories under 30 per cent.

Although the Conservatives

did well in the English local elections earlier this month, half of all the seats they gained were in London and they failed to regain even a toehold in places such as Newcastle and Manchester.

Labour's continued success in the North and Scotland means the country's political geography is tilted in its favour. The six-point Tory lead in the YouGov poll, if sustained, would not be enough to form a government and might give them only a few more MPs than Labour. To win an overall majority in the Commons they need an 11-point lead over Labour, whereas Mr Blair needed only a two-point advantage to triumph last year.

The growing chasm between North and South could have severe constitutional consequences if Labour manages either to hold on to power or remain the largest party in Westminster despite a resurgent Tory party piling up far more votes but winning fewer seats.

The situation is already precarious. At the last election Labour won a 66-seat majority in parliament with the support of only 21.6 per cent of the eligible electorate - or 9.6 million out of 44.4 million.

In terms of votes actually cast for Labour, this was the lowest total of any post-1945 election with the exception of 1983, when the party almost

Continued on Page 2

Home Front: Page 16

## Markets braced for turbulent week

By Ambrose Evans-Pritchard

FINANCIAL markets are preparing for a turbulent week after a triple slide in global bonds, stocks and the US dollar sent jitters through the global system in recent days.

The FTSE-100 index was a major victim of fast-spreading concern, suffering its worst one-day drop in three years on Friday with a 129.9 points fall.

The downturn comes after a rush by Britain's small investors to join the equity boom, the time-honoured sign of a market reaching a peak.

Much of the money has gone into emerging markets, which suffered the brunt of

the sell-off last week. Stocks and bonds fell sharply in Turkey, eastern Europe and most of Latin America.

Better informed, boardroom directors have been cashing in profits, selling £566 million of shares in the last three months, almost three times the amount of shares purchased.

Fears of a dollar crash have intensified after the US Federal Reserve signalled last week that it may have reached the end of monetary tightening after raising interest rates to five per cent.

Foreign flight from the US bond market has led to a sharp rise in bond yields, raising the cost of mortgages and corporate borrowing. Analysts have begun muttering about a US recession.

Business: Page B1

## Digest

### New recruit to bowler hat brigade

A familiar figure was seen marching through London complete with bowler hat, dark suit, regimental tie and furred umbrella before attending an open-air service in Hyde Park. P5

### Blair rethink

Tony Blair has admitted that he may have to amend Labour's flagship human rights laws as fears grow that they have become a charter for criminals. P4

### Drought spreads

Millions more homes could be hit by hosepipe restrictions this summer as the drought spreads from the South East. P10

### Thousands flee volcano

Thousands of villagers fled the fertile slopes of an Indonesian volcano after authorities on the island of Java said an eruption was imminent. P15



### SPORT

#### Chelsea signing

Chelsea will unveil Michael Ballack, the Germany captain, as the club's first signing of the summer. S13-15

#### Jayawardene century

Mahela Jayawardene, the Sri Lanka captain, scored a century as his team defied England at Lord's. S13-15

### BUSINESS

#### Prescott plan attacked

John Prescott's "£60,000 home" challenge "will do little to deal with the housing affordability crisis". B3

## A forecast that is not to be sneezed at

By Catriona Davies

FOR hayfever sufferers it may seem the whole summer is one long irritation, but there will be one particularly bad moment, according to an allergy specialist.

At 6.02pm on Monday, May 29, the country's 12 million hayfever sufferers could be letting out a collective sneeze.

Dr Adrian Morris, medical director of the Surrey Allergy Clinic and adviser to Boots, pinpointed the moment based on predictions about pollen levels, when most people will spend time outside and when they start to take medication.

This year is expected to be the worst summer for three years for hayfever because of the long, cold winter, followed suddenly by warm weather and some rain.

Dr Morris said that although

the pollen count was traditionally highest in June, many sufferers got caught out in late May because they did not start to take medication until their symptoms appeared.

May 29 is a Bank Holiday Monday when many people spend a long time outdoors.

Dr Morris calculated 6.02pm to be the worst time because it will be three hours before sunset when the pollen released into the atmosphere in the morning is returning to the ground.

Late May is the crossover between the birch pollen season, which begins in March, and the grass pollen season, which lasts to the end of June.

Britain has the highest level of grass pollen in the world and birch pollen is increasing because of the growing popularity of the tree, said Dr Morris.

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