

UK PM targets Ethiopia at summit

By Peter Biles
BBC southern Africa correspondent

The UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has said he wants to see Ethiopia resolve its internal problems and continue on a democratic path.

He was speaking at the end of a summit of centre-left leaders from across the world in South Africa.

It was also attended by the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Meles Zenawi.

This comes after a political crackdown in Ethiopia late last year and the arrest of thousands of opposition supporters.

The seven centre-left government leaders met at a game reserve deep in the African bush near the South African city of Pretoria to discuss their shared political agenda.

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But at a news conference, Mr Blair found himself sitting alongside his Ethiopian counterpart, Mr Zenawi, who has been facing strong international criticism over his handling of the political unrest and violence that followed disputed elections.

'Real issues'

The two leaders used to be close allies. But last month, Britain suspended direct aid amid concerns about Ethiopia's commitment to human rights.

On Sunday, Mr Blair said he had been concerned about what he called "real issues".

"The government won the election, there was then a reaction to it, there was then, perhaps, if I can say this without being too undiplomatic, an over reaction to that, which often happens," said Mr Blair.

"We have to try and resolve the situation, the human rights issues, but do so - and I want to do so - in a way that supports Ethiopia."

Mr Zenawi said if there had been flaws, Ethiopia would learn from its mistakes and move on. He respected Britain's decision to withhold government aid.

The leaders at this summit in South Africa also discussed the need for progress in trade negotiations.

Mr Blair said a failure on the world trade round would be a devastating blow to the poorest countries, as well to emerging and developed nations.

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