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BAGHDAD (Reuters) - Washington's closest ally in Iraq was horrified by the beheading of a British hostage there and Prime Minister Tony Blair urged Britons not to let it undermine their support for continued involvement in the country.

Blair's government, which for three weeks refused to bargain with Kenneth Bigley's kidnappers even after they killed his two American colleagues, revealed that it had opened secret contacts with them in the days before his death on Thursday.

But on Friday a Reuters journalist saw a video in Baghdad in which the 62-year-old construction engineer made a final despairing plea for his life before militants suspected of fostering ties to al Qaeda severed his head with a knife.

British and Iraqi officials denied that Bigley died after a failed attempt to rescue him somewhere in rebel-held Sunni Muslim territory west or south of Baghdad but declined comment on a report from a Western security source that he was killed after making an attempt to escape with help from an insider.

"I feel a strong sense, as I hope others do, that the actions of these people whether in Iraq or elsewhere should not prevail over people like Kenneth Bigley, who after all, only wanted to make Iraq and the world a better place," Blair said.