

Brown meets Pope in the Vatican

Chancellor Gordon Brown has met Pope Benedict XVI in Rome, while promoting a scheme to provide life-saving vaccines to children in the developing world.

Finance ministers involved in the £750m fund to boost research met the Pope in a private meeting at the Vatican.

Mr Brown gave the Pope a book of sermons by his father, a Church of Scotland minister.

He also repeated an invitation given by Tony Blair, who met the Pope last year, to visit the UK.

The Pope urged Mr Brown, along with finance ministers from Italy, Canada, Norway and Ghana, World Bank chief Paul Wolfowitz and Queen Rania of Jordan, to tackle world poverty and the growing divide between rich and poor.

Prodi talks

Later Mr Brown, who is widely expected to succeed Mr Blair as prime minister later this year, will hold talks with Italian prime minister Romano Prodi at his official residence, the Palazzo Chigi.

The chancellor is in Rome to launch a £750m fund to encourage drug companies to develop vaccines for pneumococcal disease, which kills 1.6 million people - including one million children under five - each year.

The fund, set up with Italy, Norway and Canada, aims to encourage drug companies to develop drugs needed in the developing world.

" We can...ensure that the many will not be denied the medical advances available to the few "

Gordon Brown

It is the first example of an Advanced Market Commitment (AMC) - a new financial instrument designed to boost the development of vaccines in the developing world.

At present research is concentrated on diseases affecting richer countries, where companies are guaranteed a lucrative market for effective treatments.

Mr Brown said: "The advanced market mechanism we launch today means that - instead of high costs, low volume drug production as in the past - we can have high volume, low cost production of drugs in the future and ensure that the many will not be denied the medical advances available to the few."

Child deaths

Pneumococcal disease was chosen because it is the leading cause of child pneumonia deaths, as

well as many childhood meningitis deaths.

It is intended that future AMCs will provide funding for developing countries to acquire vaccines against malaria and other fatal diseases.

Mr Brown's meeting with the Pope follows a clash between the British government and the Roman Catholic Church over plans to force adoption agencies to handle requests from gay couples.

Catholic agencies have now been offered a transitional period to adjust, but the row is thought to have strained the loyalties of Labour's traditional working-class Catholic vote.

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