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Sent: Wednesday, September 23, 2009 10:29 PM
To: H
Subject: The Telegraph front page tomorrow am... see my memo/email on N.I. Sid

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Barack Obama rebuffs Gordon Brown as 'special relationship' sinks to new low

Gordon Brown has been snubbed repeatedly by Barack Obama during his trip to the United States, as the fall-out from the release of the Lockerbie bomber appeared to have left "the special relationship" at its lowest ebb for nearly 20 years.

By Andrew Porter, Political Editor in New York
Published: 11:49PM BST 23 Sep 2009

British officials made five attempts to secure official talks with the US President and even agreed to a policy change in an attempt to land a joint appearance between the two leaders, said diplomatic sources. But the White House rebuffed the offers and Mr Brown, who had hoped to increase his popularity by appearing on his own with Mr Obama, had to settle instead for a snatched conversation with the President in a New York kitchen.

The setbacks led to fears that relations between Downing Street and the White House were at their lowest point since John Major's frosty dealings with Bill Clinton.

It was disclosed earlier this week that Mr Brown would not hold bilateral talks with Mr Obama, despite the President hosting individual meetings with the leaders of Japan, China and Russia. Downing Street claimed that this was not unusual.

However, a British diplomat told *The Daily Telegraph* that the White House's refusal to meet Mr Brown had been a serious embarrassment for the Prime Minister.

"It is wrong for people to say that we have been relaxed about the way things have gone," the source said.

"There were five attempts to set up a meeting and none have come off."

The most striking example of Downing Street's desperation to engineer a meeting was a change of policy on supplying swine flu vaccines to Africa. It aimed to match America's commitment and was announced last week. As a result, it had been hoped that Mr Obama would agree to a joint press conference, according to a senior source. However, the meeting never happened.

The White House said that Mr Brown and Mr Obama would chair a meeting tonight about Pakistan, and would "spend all day Friday together." However, Friday's meeting in Pittsburgh involves the full G20 group of world leaders.

The release of the Lockerbie bomber, Abdelbaset Ali Mohamed al Megrahi, appears to have been behind the new chill in relations between Washington and London.

Mr Obama expressed his dismay at the release in a telephone call with the Prime Minister earlier this month.

Downing Street's original account of the conversation failed to refer to the President's anger.

Mr Brown has maintained that freeing the Libyan was a matter entirely for the Scottish executive.

Nearly 200 Americans died when Pan Am flight 103 was blown up over Scotland in 1988. Yesterday, families of victims protested at the UN in New York where Mr Brown and Libya's leader, Col Muammar Gaddafi, made speeches.

Last night Downing Street played down suggestions of a rift with the White House and pointed to an informal discussion that Mr Brown had with Mr Obama after a climate change dinner at the UN on Tuesday night. The 15-minute "walk and chat" took place in a kitchen of the UN headquarters as both men left the building in Manhattan.

No 10 maintained that there was nothing unusual in the Prime Minister not holding a separate "bilateral" meeting with the President. There was little doubt that Mr Brown would have relished a high profile meeting with Mr Obama.

In a speech to the United Nations, Mr Obama said the world must "move in a new direction" and "embrace20a new era of engagement". That was seen as a sign that the President was more likely to place emphasis on relations with a wide range of countries rather than rely on old alliances. Mr Brown's increasingly poor relationship with the White House contrasts sharply with that of his predecessor Tony Blair, who enjoyed close friendships with both Mr Clinton and George W Bush.

John Major's Tory government had difficulty with Mr Clinton, however, because of claims that Mr Major had tried to help George Bush Snr's re-election campaign in 1992 by allowing researchers to dig into Mr Clinton's student past at Oxford – something Sir John has always denied.

Mr Brown, whose plans for a lunchtime speech to the United Nations were derailed after Col Gaddafi spoke for 96 minutes, faced attacks on several fronts yesterday.

Kathy Tedeschi and Sue Kosmowski, Americans who lost husbands in the Lockerbie bombing, travelled to New York to protest outside the UN headquarters. They claimed that Mr Brown had put trade interests ahead of justice for victims families.

The Prime Minister was also accused of trying to appease Iran by ignoring the suppression of opposition in order to safeguard talks on its nuclear programme.

Shirin Ebadi, Iran's only Nobel Peace Prize winner, said the West cared more about its own security than human rights.

Mr Brown was criticised for failing to stay at a dinner where he was honoured as Statesman of the Year. Guests paid \$1,000 to attend the function attended by, among others, Henry Kissinger and the pop star Bono.