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British spies said getting new director

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LONDON — MI6, Britain's secret foreign intelligence service, was reported yesterday by London's two leading Sunday newspapers to have a new director, effectively bringing overseas spying politically in line with counter-intelligence MI5 and under the tighter control of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

The new director of MI6 is said to be Christopher Keith Curwen, 56, a long-time member of the organization who has held posts in the Far East, Geneva and Washington, according to the London Sunday Times and The Observer.

Unlike the CIA, Britain is traditionally highly secretive about the leaders of its intelligence operations, never announcing appointments. But Washington intelligence sources said that Mr. Curwen was appointed to the post six months ago. The newspapers' reports were vague about the reasons for the leadership change and Mr. Curwen's MI6 background.

But the person said to be behind his appointment — replacing Sir Colin Figures, 60, who became head of the agency in early 1982 and will now help coordinate intelligence gathering from 10 Downing Street — was reported to be Sir

Antony Duff, director-general of MI5 and a close adviser to Mrs. Thatcher.

Mr. Duff, 65, a former diplomat and intelligence specialist at the prime minister's office, was brought in to "clean up" the domestic counter-intelligence service after a number of embarrassing intelligence disasters in recent years.

These included the revelations about long-term Soviet spies Anthony Blunt and Geoffrey Prime, and more recently the case of Michael Bettaney, the troubled mid-level MI5 officer who tried, unsuccessfully, to pass secrets to the Russians.

Sources told The Washington Times that Mrs. Thatcher has for some time not been happy with the work of MI6 — the 1982 Falkland Islands crisis has been partly blamed on faulty British intelligence from Argentina — and she has been under steady U.S. pressure to improve both services.

Mrs. Thatcher is not thought to have blamed Mr. Figures for MI6's Falklands failures (he had only just been appointed) but, according to the Sunday Times, she was persuaded by the MI5's new director that Mr. Curwen would be a good, loyal replacement, even at the expense of other, perhaps better-qualified candidates.

Mr. Curwen is a Cambridge University graduate and army officer who was mentioned in dispatches for outstanding courage in jungle warfare against communist guerrillas in Malaya in the early 1950s. Adventurous, tough and well-regarded, he was said to have joined the diplomatic service in 1952, specializing in the Far East and based in Bangkok, Vientiane (Laos) and Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia).