



Thousands rally for new constitution in Taiwan

AFP, Taipei

Vice President Annette Lu called for a new start and a new identity for Taiwan yesterday as tens of thousands of pro-independence supporters marched in this southern port city to push for a new constitution.

"We will hold referendums through rational, peaceful and democratic ways to give people the right to decide on the country's public policies, including the introduction of a new constitution," Lu told the rally of more than 100,000 people.

However, the vice president stopped short of advocating independence for the island, which China considers part of its territory to be reunified by force if necessary.

"Taiwan does not belong to China. It belongs to all Taiwanese, it belongs to the world," Lu said before leading a four-kilometer (2.5-mile) march.

PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of pro-Taiwan independent activists display a banner on the streets calling for a new constitution in Kaohsiung yesterday. Vice President Annette Lu called for a new start and new identity for Taiwan as tens of thousands of pro-independence supporters marched in this southern port city pushing for a new constitution and introduction of referendums.

UN suspends operations in 4 Afghan provinces

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations has suspended operations in four southern Afghan provinces due to increasing violence and concerns that aid workers could be seen by local militants as targets, a top UN official has announced.

UN Undersecretary General for Peacekeeping Operations Jean-Marie Guehenno told the UN Security Council Friday the decision had been made because many of the fundamental causes of insecurity in Afghanistan "remain unresolved."

Guehenno said the insecurity came from extremist attacks, factionalised government ministries and the weakening of the political compact that supports the provisional government.

"Many fundamental, structural

causes of insecurity remain unresolved," Guehenno noted, even as the final and most important stages of the Afghan internal peace process move ahead.

He cited a tank battle between two rival Afghan factions earlier this month, but said "the primary source of insecurity remains terrorist attacks and continued sizable cross-border infiltration by suspected Taliban, al-Qaeda and Hizb-i-Islami insurgents."

According to Guehenno, every border district in the country except one has been labeled "high risk" by the UN security coordinator.

The announcement coincided with a report by Afghan state television that 10 civilians, including five women and two children, had been killed in a "terrorist" ambush in northern Afghanistan.

UN peacekeeping staff have

noted that attacks against government, military and humanitarian personnel are "steadily increasing," especially against Afghans working with international organizations, the UN undersecretary general pointed out.

Such attacks, he said, "seriously jeopardize the safety of personnel and limit the ability to conduct reconstruction and political activities."

"The trend towards targeting civilians supportive of the central government and peace process supports the view that the UN must also be seen as a target," Guehenno said.

The undersecretary general pointed to "worrying signs" that the political compact that helps support the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, "may be weakening."

He added that further reforms are needed in national security

ministries and all other government ministries, which remain influenced by factional and ethnic interests.

"Over the past few weeks, the division between those that would turn the corner of Afghanistan's past, and those that would preserve their entitlement appear to have deepened," Guehenno stressed.

Donors have pledged more than four billion dollars in aid over five years but as much as six billion dollars annually could be needed to get the country back on its feet, according to UN officials.

The Security Council, which last week authorized international peacekeepers to deploy outside the capital Kabul in a bid to help restore order, is expected to send a fact-finding mission to Afghanistan next week for a first-hand look at the situation.

Malaysia for good ties with all countries: Mahathir

BERNAMA, Port Moresby

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad ended his last official visit overseas as premier with a firm declaration of Malaysia's stand to have good relations with all countries irrespective of whether they are small or developed nations.

"What we want is more friends and we will be safer with more friends around."

"Close relations are very important for a trading nation like Malaysia... if we do not have close relations it will be difficult for us to find new markets and also to obtain supplies from the various countries," he said.

Dr Mahathir said this to the Malaysian press corps that had been accompanying him on his official visits to Timor Leste and Papua New Guinea since Wednesday. This is his last overseas trip as Prime Minister before stepping down on Friday.

46 trapped miners being rescued in Russia

REUTERS, Novoshakhtinsk, Russia

Rescue teams in southern Russia have brought to the surface 15 of the 46 coal miners trapped in a shaft inundated by floodwaters, but 13 men were still missing, officials said yesterday.

Vladimir Chub, governor of the Rostov-on-Don region told reporters outside the mine: "We have contact with most of them but 13 are still missing."

A Reuters reporter saw eight of the 15 miners taken from the shaft at the Novoshakhtinsk colliery. A small lift capable of carrying no more than three people was being used to hoist miners to safety.

A fleet of ambulances waited at the surface of the shaft and distraught relatives gathered around to see loved ones brought safely above ground.

As one group of miners emerged

from the shaft, a small child shouted "Father, Father!" from the middle of the crowd.

The latest information dampened hopes raised by earlier news reports which said rescuers had made contact with all 46 miners trapped since Thursday evening 800 meters (2,500 feet) below ground by surging waters from an underground lake.

Contact was established with the miners some 36 hours after floodwaters from an underground lake poured into the Zapadnaya-Kapitalnaya shaft, knocking out power.

Interfax news agency, reporting from the colliery before the 15 miners were brought above ground, said the trapped workers were in two groups but were communicating with each other -- one made up of 33 miners, the other of 13.

The size of the "inspector's lift" --

designed to hold two or three people -- being deployed to raise the men to the surface meant that only a few miners could be brought above ground every half hour.

Lev Stroyakovsky, head of Rostovugol, the company that rents the shaft, said, "Rescue efforts are proceeding very slowly because of the damage that the shaft has sustained. We can only pull out three or four people at a time."

"I'm sure that within three or four hours we will have pulled them all out. But the fate of 13 miners remains unclear."

Teams from the Emergencies Ministry, one of Russia's most revered institutions for handling disasters, were at the site, and some 100 rescue workers were estimated to be underground.



PHOTO: AFP

Relatives of the trapped miners wait outside Zapadnaya coal mine in Novoshakhtinsk, southern Russia Friday. Rescuers began drilling passages to a flooded coal mine in southern Russia in a frantic attempt to save 46 miners trapped for more than a day by freezing water.

Vajpayee urged to declare truce in Kashmir

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, Jammu

Favouring resumption of talks between India and Pakistan without any pre-conditions, the National Conference today urged Atal Behari Vajpayee to declare a Ramadan ceasefire to set the stage for a meaningful dialogue with all separatists.

"Kashmir is a problem between India and Pakistan and most of the militants present in J&K are foreigners. So dealing with the external dimension is very important. We appeal to the Centre to begin a dialogue with Pakistan without pre-conditions," said NC president Omar Abdullah.

Addressing a press conference in Srinagar today, Abdullah, said that a couple of years ago, Vajpayee had declared a truce on the eve of Ramzan. This time also the Centre has set a process in motion and now time has come for Vajpayee again to announce a Ramadan ceasefire. This, he said, would lend more credibility to the process and set the stage for future talks with the separatists.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean protestors carry placards during an anti-US and war demonstrations in Seoul yesterday. Some 2,000 South Korean people demanded the government drop plans for the dispatch of South Korean troops to Iraq.

Russia's richest man charged with fraud

REUTERS, Moscow

Secret police have snatched Russia's richest man, YUKOS oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky, from his jet in Siberia and hauled him before a Moscow court, charged with massive fraud and tax evasion.

After months of pre-election arm-wrestling with President Vladimir Putin's Kremlin, the move seemed calculated to demonstrate who was boss to the fabulously wealthy "oligarchs" who control post-Soviet Russia's natural resources and industry.

A spokeswoman for the General Prosecutor's office, who said the oil magnate was grabbed on the tarmac at Novosibirsk after failing to appear for questioning in Moscow on Friday, said he was flown back to the capital and charged on seven counts.

Russia's "\$11-billion (6.5 billion pound)-man" has been embroiled in months of conflict with the Kremlin ahead of parliamentary elections in December and Putin's expected bid

for re-election in March. Prosecutors said the case involved an "unprecedented" level of fraud and tax evasion amounting to some \$1 billion.

Prosecutors made clear on Saturday the charges were brought against the 40-year-old Khodorkovsky both as an individual and as head of YUKOS. Russia's biggest oil firm, it recently engineered a merger with smaller rival Sibneft. U.S. oil major Exxon Mobil is said to be interested in taking a stake.

He was later driven from the prosecutor's office to a court for a ruling on whether he could be kept in detention.

The former KGB agent, whom supporters hail for bringing order to the lawless nation that emerged from the rubble of Communism, is expected to stroll to victory despite criticism that he has suppressed media and other democratic freedoms.

Britain, Australia warn of terror attack in KSA

REUTERS, London

Britain has dramatically raised its warning to travelers not to go to Saudi Arabia, saying terror attacks may be imminent.

"We advise British nationals against all but essential travel to Saudi Arabia. We believe that terrorists may be in the final phases of planning attacks," the Foreign Office said in a new warning issued on Friday.

The previous warning had said simply that attacks against Westerners were "likely."

Australia also said it had new information that terrorists might be close to carrying out new attacks in Saudi Arabia.

The Australian Foreign Affairs and Trade Department said on Saturday that the level of its warning against non-essential travel to the country was unchanged.

But it said in new guidance issued on Thursday "There is new information suggesting that further

terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia may be in the final stages of planning."

The warnings followed an admission from Saudi Arabia that it had arrested nearly 600 people in a crackdown on militants since suspected al-Qaeda suicide bombers struck Riyadh in May.

The conservative kingdom, birthplace of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, has faced intense pressure to crush al-Qaeda cells since the September 11, 2001, hijacked-plane attacks on the United States in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis.

It intensified its efforts against the network after the May 12 bombings in Riyadh which killed 35 people, including nine Americans, and analysts say it has sharply stepped up cooperation with Washington.

In the latest crackdown, Saudi Arabia said on Monday it had arrested Islamic militants and seized large amounts of weapons and explosives, including bomb-belts used by suicide bombers.

Saudi Arabia has also tightened up monitoring of charities which have been accused of channelling funds to militant groups worldwide, shutting down some overseas branches of domestic charity groups.

The human rights pressure group Amnesty International accused the Saudi authorities on Friday of arresting without cause 250 people at a peaceful demonstration in Riyadh on October 14.

"The Saudi Arabian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release all people held solely for the non-violent expression of their conscientiously held beliefs," it said in a statement.

"The protest took place while a human rights conference organized by the Saudi Arabian Red Crescent was taking place in Riyadh. Contrary to what was announced by the Saudi Arabian authorities then, Amnesty International was not invited to attend the conference," it added.

US Senate leaders at odds over Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

The top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee said on Friday the Republican chairman was trying to lay all the blame for flaws in pre-war intelligence about Iraq solely on the doorstep of US spy agencies without looking at any White House role.

The push by the senior Democrat, Sen. John Rockefeller of West Virginia, for a broader inquiry has been rebuffed by the Republican chairman, Sen. Pat Roberts of Kansas.

"It is my belief ... that what he wants to do is to put all of this, lay all of this off on the intelligence community and never get to any other branches of government, in particular the White House and associated high and visible government agencies," Rockefeller told reporters.

Pre-war intelligence on Iraq has become a highly charged political issue leading up to next year's presidential elections, with Democrats trying to paint the Republican White House as possibly distorting intelligence in its eagerness to gather support for the war against Iraq.

Sons of Diana accuse ex-butler of betrayal

AFP, London

The two sons of Britain's Princess Diana launched an unprecedented attack on her former butler, accusing him of a "cold and overt betrayal" of their mother in his new book.

Princes William, 21, and Harry, 19, said that Diana, who died in a 1997 car crash in Paris, would have been mortified at a string of revelations by her ex-butler Paul Burrell.

William, the grandson of Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, speaking on behalf of himself and his brother, appealed to Burrell to end his revelations.

In a statement, unprecedented in its strength of feeling, William said: "We cannot believe that Paul, who was entrusted with so much, could abuse his position in such a cold and overt betrayal."

"It is not only deeply painful for the two of us but also for everyone else affected, and it would mortify our mother if she were alive today and, if we might say so, we feel we are more able to speak for our mother than Paul."

"We ask Paul please to bring these revelations to an end."

Curfew in Baghdad to be lifted today

AP, Baghdad

Coalition authorities yesterday announced plans to lift the curfew and reopen a major bridge in Baghdad to ease conditions for Iraqis ahead of Ramadan, despite continued violence.

Meanwhile, Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said he was hopeful that American troops would get more money to train Iraqis to assume a greater role in security as they fight resistance forces.

"These young Iraqis are stepping forward to fight for their country along with us," Wolfowitz told reporters at a US garrison here in Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit. "It is a wonderful success story that speaks volumes."

Wolfowitz, who wraps up a three-day tour of Iraq today, spoke while visiting an island on the Tigris River, across from the complex of Saddam's palaces in Tikrit, 120 miles north of Baghdad. The compound serves as the main base for US troops in this Saddam stronghold.

The area is part of the "Sunni Triangle," a hotbed of anti-American

sentiment and the scene of increased daily attacks against US troops. The military blames a wide specter of Saddam's supporters, militants, radical fundamentalists and the notorious Fedayeen militia for the attacks.

Separately, officials said Saturday that the coalition-backed police chief of the southern Iraqi city of Amarah was shot to death as he left a mosque after prayers.

Brig. Hamid Hadi Hassan al-Abe was leaving the al-Hussein mosque after Friday prayers when he was gunned down by assailants firing from several locations, police Maj. Kathim Mohsen Hamadi said.

The attackers escaped, Hamadi said. Several hundred men, many of them armed with rifles and pistols, turned out Saturday for the funeral service of al-Abe, who will be buried in the Shiite holy city of Najaf.

Hamadi said al-Abe had a good relationship with British occupation authorities, who are responsible for this city about 75 miles north of Basra.

Iraqis who work with the US-led coalition have been targeted by insurgents, but Amarah is populated primarily by Shiite Muslims, who

have been generally more accepting of the occupation because of their suffering under former Sunni-dominated regime.

"We can't accuse anyone right now," Hamadi said. "We face many problems here, mostly tribal problems."

The city council in Baghdad, a city of 5 million people, said the curfew would be lifted at 4 a.m. Sunday. In a separate statement, authorities said they would reopen the 14th of July Bridge later Saturday.

"The curfew can be lifted due to the reduction in the crime rate in the city and the overall improvement in the security situation," the city council statement said. "Despite some highly publicized attacks by terrorists and supporters of the former regime, the overall security situation in Baghdad has improved."

The lifting of the curfew also was timed for the start of Ramadan, which may start Sunday. Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, begins with the sighting of a new moon and lasts for four weeks.



PHOTO: AFP

This US Air Force handout photo taken on October 22 shows a Lockheed Martin F/A-22 sitting on the parking ramp at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. The F/A-22 Raptor is a new breed of super-fighter for the 21st century and is the first production aircraft with the ability to supercruise, flying at supersonic speeds without the use of afterburners. Designed and built with reliability and maintainability in mind, the F/A-22 offers new capability to deploy and fight on day one. Twice as reliable and capable as its predecessors, it will allow the Air Force to get to the fight faster, stay longer and fly more missions than any conventional fighter aircraft.

Geomagnetic storm hits Earth

REUTERS, Denver

The Earth's magnetic field was bombarded with extra energy from the Sun on Friday when a geomagnetic storm sent charged particles that affected electric utilities, airline communications and satellite navigation systems.

"We predicted it would be a mid-level storm, a G-3, and that's where it is," said Joe Kunches, chief of space weather operations at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Space Environment Center in Boulder, Colorado.

The storm started around 11 a.m. eastern time and is expected to last through the weekend, Kunches said.

Electric utilities and other high-technology users were notified about the storm and no serious problems have been reported.

"We've heard from the power grid operators. They're doing OK, but they're seeing the effects of the storm in their data," Kunches said. In a G-3 storm, power systems may need to correct voltage.