

Battles for US Senate seats fierce, costly

AP, Annapolis

A Maryland Republican contender for the US Senate is fast outpacing the fundraising of his Democratic challengers in a state that usually leans toward Democrats.

In Montana, incumbent GOP Sen. Conrad Burns' re-election effort is drawing record contributions. But in Minnesota, the Republican vying to replace an open Senate seat has for the first time in the race slipped below his Democratic rival's fundraising pace.

In Connecticut, the campaign for Ned Lamont, the Democratic challenger to Sen. Joe Lieberman, said it has raised and spent \$1.9 million in the last two months over half of it the candidate's own money.

The campaign was left with

\$276,976 on hand at the end of the most recent reporting period that ended June 30. Lamont, a Greenwich millionaire, received \$829,936 from nearly 15,000 people and contributed \$1.1 million to his campaign himself.

Lieberman's earlier filing showed he has nearly \$4.3 million cash on hand and raised \$1.3 million during the two-month period.

The deadline for submitting the latest financial reports was Saturday.

As the front-runner for the Republican nomination, Maryland Lt. Gov. Michael Steele has the full backing of state and national GOP leaders. Help from President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney on down helped Steele overcome Rep. Benjamin Cardin's early lead.

UN sanctions on North Korea a clear message for Iran, says US

AFP, New York

The UN Security Council's unanimous adoption Saturday of a resolution condemning North Korea's missile launches will help send a powerful message to Iran, the US ambassador to the United Nations said.

"I think Iran should take a look at this resolution and see that we've got a unanimous Security Council with all five permanent members," Ambassador John Bolton told reporters.

The resolution, adopted after intense negotiations, imposes weapons-related sanctions on North Korea and demands that Pyongyang

suspend all activities related to its ballistic missile programme.

With a resolution now in place, the focus will switch next week to Iran, with the United States hoping for swift action on a draft resolution that would make a halt to Iran's uranium enrichment mandatory.

Bolton said the fact that the Security Council had managed to maintain its unity over North Korea and pass the first resolution on Pyongyang since 1993 sent a "very, very important signal to any would-be proliferators," including Iran.

His French counterpart Jean-Marc de La Sabliere, the president of the council for July, concurred.

4 villagers killed in Kashmir violence

AFP, Srinagar

Four villagers were killed and eight others injured in the latest separatist-related violence in Indian Kashmir, police said yesterday.

Two of them -- Mohammed Shafi, 50, and Mohammed Nawaz, 30, -- were killed when suspected rebels stormed into two houses in southern Rajouri district late Saturday and shot them dead.

"We are investigating why the two were targeted by militants," a police spokesman said.

Another Muslim villager, a mentally disturbed person was shot dead allegedly by the army as he moved into an ambush laid for the militants.

A villager wounded in a grenade explosion on Saturday in the eastern Ganderbal district died in hospital yesterday, a police spokesman said.

Taliban could exploit Afghan hunger as drought hits crops

REUTERS, Kabul

Millions of Afghans are facing hunger after drought destroyed much of the wheat crop, and a resurgent Taliban are likely to take advantage of the misery to bolster their insurgency, Afghan and foreign officials said.

The spring rains failed in many parts of the country this year just as the government and international military forces are struggling with the bloodiest phase of Taliban violence since 2001.

Afghanistan's harvest of rain-fed wheat is about half what it was last year and up to 2.4 million more Afghans are facing hunger as a result, agriculture and aid officials said.

Afghanistan had been expecting a cereals deficit of 500,000 tonnes this year but the shortfall has more

than doubled. "There is a deficit of 1.2 million tonnes this year regarding the cereal crop," an Agriculture Ministry official said on Sunday.

"The weather has hit 50 to 70 percent of the rain-fed crop," said the official, who declined to be identified.

Overall wheat production is expected to be 3.71 million tonnes this year compared with 4.27 million tonnes last year, he said. The rain-fed harvest is usually 1.6 million tonnes but is expected to be only 800,000 tonnes.

Afghanistan saw several years of serious drought up to 2005. Now villagers in parts of the country are saying "the drought is back and the Taliban are back," another official said.

Poverty is already a factor contributing to the revitalised Taliban and hunger is bound to compound

the problem. "It's very serious ... they can make use of it," the ministry official said of the Taliban.

The insurgency means aid agencies cannot reach parts of the south and east where the Taliban have infiltrated and are looking for support.

"There are many villages where, because development agencies can't operate normally in conditions of insurgency, people don't have enough to eat," a diplomat said.

"If the Taliban arrive with a little cash, that can be enough to induce people to join."

The UN World Food Programme says there were already about 6.5 million Afghans facing hunger, either seasonally or long-term. The drought has added another 2.4 million people.

Malaysia to warn people of dangers of marrying illegal immigrants

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A controversial Malaysian volunteer force is to warn people of the dangers of marrying illegal immigrants as the government initiates a crack-down on them, a senior official said.

The parliamentary secretary for the Home Affairs Ministry, Abdul Rahman Ibrahim, said members of the People's Volunteer Corps, or RELA, were suited for the role because of their familiarity with their own neighbourhoods.

"Some of these foreigners marry the locals just to enjoy the privileges in this country and would abandon their local spouse when they return home," he was quoted as saying late Saturday by the state Bernama news agency.

Abdul Rahman, who did not say how RELA would carry out the task, said members of parliament and state lawmakers would also be appointed to the volunteer squad to help curb the "marriages of convenience."

RELA, a uniformed task force, which assists security officials in raids on illegal immigrants among other duties, has been criticised by rights groups for its excessive use of force.

Malaysia on Friday announced plans to arrest and deport up to one million people in its latest crack-down on illegal immigrants.

Hundreds of officials will be involved in the operation targeting factories hiring immigrants, and foreigners conducting business illegally.

Abdul Rahman said the large-scale operations to track down the illegal immigrants would be conducted in stages to ensure the country's 16 detention centres would not be overcrowded.

Malaysia has launched several crackdowns since 1992 on illegal workers, most of whom come from impoverished parts of South Asia -- especially Indonesia.

But each one has led to a labour shortage followed by a new wave of illegal immigration -- a pattern, which was apparent after a large blitz last year.

Ex-Labour leader urges Blair to quit

AFP, London

A former deputy leader of the British Labour Party yesterday urged Prime Minister Tony Blair to quit at the party's conference in September.

"The prime minister ought not to announce he's going at the party conference - he ought to go at the party conference," (Lord) Roy Hattersley, deputy leader from 1983 to 1992, said in an interview to be aired on a Sunday television programme.

"Then he should say that the time has come to pass the torch on to somebody else and thank the party for what they've done," he added.