

EU leaders clinch deal on funding Members, candidates voice support for future enlargement

AFP, Copenhagen

European leaders approved Thursday a multi-billion dollar funding package for the EU's expansion to take in 10 new members in 2004, the EU's Danish presidency said.

The deal, which is worth a total of 40.5 billion euros (dollars) over three years or about 25 euros for every citizen of the current 15-member bloc, must still be approved by the candidates themselves.

The EU is set at its two-day summit here to formally invite eight new members from formerly communist eastern Europe plus the Mediterranean islands of Cyprus and Malta to join in May 2004.

Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen has said that the EU was ready to conclude accession negotiations only with candidate states which accepted the package, an improvement of about 1.5 billion dollars on a deal approved in October.

He has warned Poland, the largest of the 10 nations which has been holding out for more generous terms, that a refusal to compromise could delay its membership "perhaps to 2007."

Rasmussen is due to hold talks with Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller early Friday.

The other nations hoping to receive invitations at Copenhagen are the former Soviet bloc states of the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

Meanwhile, the EU's 15 member states and its 10 candidate countries backed Friday the bloc's "irreversible" enlargement process to eventually take in Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, in a joint draft declaration.

"We, the current and acceding member states declare our full support for the continuous, inclusive and irreversible enlargement process," they said in the draft statement titled "One Europe", issued at a two-day EU summit here.

"Depending on further progress in complying with the membership criteria, the objective is to welcome Bulgaria and Romania as new members of the European Union in 2007," the declaration said.

"We also welcome the important decisions taken today concerning the next stage of Turkey's candidature for membership of the European Union."

The EU was set Friday to formally invite the 10 candidates -- Cyprus, the



PHOTO: AFP
German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (L), French President Jacques Chirac (C) and Finnish President Tarja Halonen (R) share a laugh during the EU summit in Copenhagen on Friday. EU Leaders faces a high-stakes showdown Friday with candidate states pressing for last-ditch concessions at a landmark summit aimed at sealing the bloc's historic expansion into Eastern Europe.

Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia -- to join on May 1, 2004.

EU leaders were also to announce that they would make a decision on a date for the start of Turkey's membership talks after a review of its progress on reform in December 2004.

"Our common wish is to make Europe a continent of democracy, freedom, peace and progress," the leaders of all 25 existing and future member states said in the draft declaration.

Iraq dossier full of holes: US Washington wants to deploy 90,000 troops in Turkey for Iraq war

AP, Washington

Iraq's 12,000-page weapons declaration does not account for a number of missing chemical and biological weapons and fails to explain purchases US intelligence believes are related to Saddam Hussein's nuclear program, US officials said.

Iraq used the lengthy document to support its contention disputed by the United States that Saddam's regime possesses none of these weapons of mass destruction, the officials said late Thursday.

The tentative US conclusion that the report is lacking sets the stage for a critical set of decisions by President Bush, who views the weapons declaration as Saddam's last chance to come clean, officials said.

Bush's options include providing American intelligence on suspected weapons programs to UN inspectors or helping the world body attempt to prove that Saddam is lying, which was required under a U.S.-backed UN resolution that also forced inspectors back into Iraq after a four-year lapse, the officials said, speaking only on condition of anonymity.

Bush could also simply seek more information from Iraq, a route White House officials said earlier Thursday the president would not

take.

After a more thorough review of the declaration, the president also could declare that Saddam was in "material breach" of the resolution, and that war was required to disarm him, officials said.

The latter step, favoured by hardliners in the administration, likely would be condemned by US allies who want proof that Saddam is a threat.

Under the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1441, false statements or omissions in the declaration coupled with a failure to comply with inspections would be a "material breach" of Iraq's obligations. Newly admitted weapons inspectors have not publicly accused Iraq of obstructing their efforts.

The Iraqi report largely rehashes old declarations and reports and contains little new information, officials said. It has done nothing to alter the US belief that Iraq possesses chemical and biological weapons and is pursuing nuclear weapons, officials said.

The report, being analysed at the CIA and elsewhere, does not account for quantities of chemical and biological agents that were missing when UN inspectors were expelled from Iraq in 1998, officials

said. Hundreds of mustard gas shells, for example, remain unaccounted for, officials said.

It also does not explain a number of Iraqi acquisitions that the United States suspects are related to Saddam's nuclear program, officials said. This includes the purchase of uranium in Africa, as well as purchases in Western countries of high-tech equipment that could be used in a uranium enrichment program, officials said. Enriched uranium or plutonium is a necessary requirement for a nuclear weapon.

White House and CIA officials refused comment on the assessment, first reported by The New York Times in Friday editions. However, Bush himself told ABC News his gut feeling about Saddam was that "he is a man who deceives, denies."

The United States and Russia turned in their preliminary assessments Thursday to chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix and ElBaradei Mohamed of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Three other permanent members of the UN Security Council Britain, France and China are supposed to provide their assessments as well by Friday.

AFP said: The United States wants to place 90,000 soldiers in Turkey and have use of six airfields

and two ports for any military action against Iraq, former prime minister Bulent Ecevit said in Friday's press.

Ecevit, in an interview with the Hurriyet daily, said Ankara had received the request before last month's election which knocked him out of office but did not give its close NATO ally a response.

"We told them we would study the request," Ecevit told the paper. He added that the head of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which won the elections, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had suggested a referendum on the US request.

Ecevit said US officials would like to open a "northern front" for any campaign against Iraq, where the United States has said it wants to topple President Saddam Hussein from power.

The paper said Washington wants use of airfields at Incirlik -- already used for US and British patrols of Iraq's northern no-fly zone -- as well as Diyarbakir, Batman, Mus, Konya and Corlu.

Around 2,000 US troops are stationed at Incirlik but the total number of US forces in the country is not known.

Germany, France to expel illegal immigrants

AFP, Paris

France and Germany plan to jointly expel illegal immigrants from their territories and are negotiating a new bilateral immigration accord, their interior ministers announced Thursday after meeting in Paris.

Nicolas Sarkozy of France and Otto Schily of Germany "decided to organise together the expulsion of groups of clandestine immigrants," a statement said, adding that both sides were discussing a new bilateral arrangement on how to deal with illegal immigrants already on their territory.

India spent \$ 1.5 billion during crisis: Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

India spent nearly \$1.5 billion in its military standoff with Pakistan but achieved nothing, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf claimed on Thursday.

"India has wasted 80 billion rupees on the escalation, as it could not achieve its objectives," Musharraf claimed at a function in the northwestern city of Attock.

US reinforces Indian alliance on anniversary of parliament attack

AFP, New Delhi

The United States reinforced Friday its alliance with India in the fight against terrorism, as Indian lawmakers gathered at a fortress-like parliament to observe the first anniversary of a deadly attack on the complex.

US ambassador to India Robert D. Blackwill joined Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and other Indian politicians to pay tribute at a memorial for those gunned down by militants exactly a year ago.

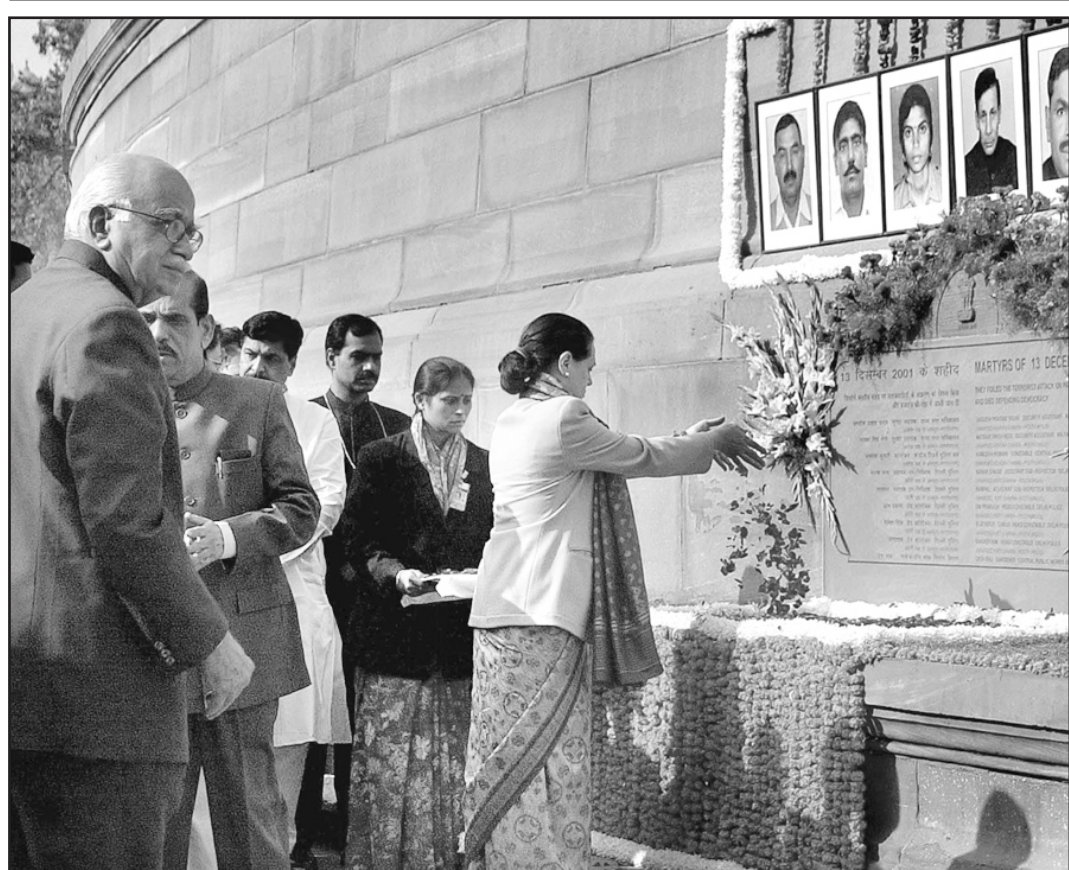


PHOTO: AFP
India's main opposition leader and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi (R) throws flower petals in front of the portraits of security personnel killed during the December 13, 2001 attack on Indian parliament while Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani (L) looks on during a ceremony at the Parliament House in New Delhi on Friday.

Indo-Pak troop pullback to complete within 4 months

AFP, Karachi

The last of the Pakistani and Indian troops who were sent a year ago to their common borders will be pulled back within four months, Pakistani Defence Secretary Hamid Nawaz said Friday.

"Withdrawal of troops (by Pakistan and India) is on schedule and I expect complete withdrawal will be accomplished within the next three to four months," Nawaz told reporters in the port city of Karachi.

India and Pakistan deployed about one million troops to their common borders after an attack exactly a year ago Friday on India's parliament, which New Delhi said was carried out by Pakistan-backed Islamic militants.

The two countries announced in October that they would pull troops back from their forward positions, after intense diplomacy led by the United States and Britain.

"I am optimistic that both the sides (after the withdrawal of troops) will take positive and effective steps to gradually return to the normal relationships," said Nawaz, a retired lieutenant general.

India and Pakistan both have nuclear weapons and have fought three full-fledged wars since independence from Britain in 1947, two of them over divided and hotly disputed Kashmir.

During the military standoff, India withdrew its high commissioner (ambassador) from Islamabad and later asked Pakistan's envoy to

leave New Delhi.

India also banned Pakistani aircraft from flying over its territory but lifted the restriction in June after acknowledging a reduction in the number of militants crossing into its side of Kashmir. Road and rail links between the two countries also remain closed.

However Nawaz said Pakistan would not lift its ban on Indian aircraft flying into its airspace.

"We will not lift the ban for Indian aircraft unless the situation is normalised," Nawaz said.

"We will open our airspace only when our (diplomatic) mission is reopened in India and our planes are allowed to fly to Indian destinations."

N Korea ratchets up tension Pyongyang demands US apology

AFP, Pyongyang

North Korea brushed aside international warnings Friday and forged ahead with a plan to revive a frozen nuclear programme while accusing Washington of piracy over the seizure of a missile shipment.

Ratcheting up tensions a notch, North Korea told inspectors from the international nuclear watchdog to remove cameras and seals that have kept its plutonium producing nuclear facilities mothballed for eight years.

The demand in a letter to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) served to underline the North's determination to abandon an arms pact that has helped guarantee security in the region since 1994.

The move was seen in Seoul as a desperate bid from a bankrupt nation in the grip of a serious energy and food crisis to bring the United States to the negotiating table.

But Washington branded the move "regrettable" and warned that Pyongyang's gambit would fail.

Washington, which has described

North Korea as the world's worst proliferator of missiles and a member of an "axis of evil," is clearly not going to play ball, said an expert at the Unification Ministry which handles North Korean affairs here.

"Basically, North Korea wants to renegotiate its whole relationship with Washington and is using the nuclear issue to force the United States to engage. Washington won't budge on that," he said.

"What is certain is that this crisis is not going to end any time soon."

The North Korean announcement was the latest development in a two month nuclear confrontation and was coupled with a Pyongyang protest over the seizure of a ship earlier this week off the Arabian peninsula.

The ship and its cargo of 15 Scud missiles were seized and then released after Yemen said the shipment was destined for its military.

The seizure was piracy that "wantonly violated the routine trade between countries," North Korea's foreign ministry said.

The confrontation stems from US

revelations in October that North Korea had admitted to running a nuclear programme based on enriched uranium, in breach of the 1994 Agreed Framework accord with Washington.

AP adds: North Korea demanded an apology Friday from the United States for what it described as "piracy" in the seizure of a ship carrying missiles to Yemen.

A day earlier, North Korea declared that it would revive a nuclear power plant that the United States and its allies suspect was being used to develop nuclear weapons before it was frozen in 1994.

The two conflicts threatened to disrupt cross-border railway construction and other prominent projects aimed at reconciling North Korea and South Korea, a US ally. Also at stake were two modern nuclear reactors that a US-led consortium agreed to build in North Korea in exchange for the suspension of the nuclear program that it now plans to revive.



PHOTO: AFP
A young protester waves the Palestinian flag from a sculpture on Sankt Hans Square in central Copenhagen, as 500 to 1,000 people marched through the Danish Capital in a peaceful demonstration against Israel on the first day of the Copenhagen EU summit on Thursday.

Iran denies having secret nuke plans

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran Friday brushed off US concern that it may be developing a secret nuclear weapons program and said international inspectors were welcome to visit any facilities they suspected.

"We don't have any hidden atomic activities. All our nuclear activities are for non-military fields," government spokesman Abdollah Ramazanzadeh told reporters on the sidelines of a political conference.

Islamists, PPP join forces in Sindh

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's Islamist alliance said Friday it had allied with former premier Benazir Bhutto's party in the southern province of Sindh to challenge a coalition headed by supporters of President Pervez Musharraf.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) alliance of religious parties, which made major gains in October polls, said it had joined forces with Benazir's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the largest single bloc in the Sindh assembly, and would contest together Monday for the province's top post of chief minister.

Senior US diplomat in Nepal to talk security

AFP, Kathmandu

The United States' most senior South Asian envoy, Christina Rocca, was in Nepal Friday on a three-day visit to discuss the kingdom's bloody Maoist insurgency and other security issues, state-run radio said.

Rocca, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, will meet King Gyanendra, Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand, other senior politicians and the heads of the army and police, according to the radio.

Gujarat polls set for a photo finish

AFP, Ahmedabad

The results of assembly elections in India's troubled western state of Gujarat looks set for a photo finish, observers said Friday, while the ruling Hindu nationalists dismissed exit polls showing them set to lose a raft of seats.

The opposition Congress Party, meanwhile, said it was upbeat about its chances of grabbing power in the 182-seat assembly.

Gujarat saw 63 percent of its 32.8 million registered voters cast their ballots in 25 districts in state polls on Thursday held against a backdrop of a bloody violence since February that has left some 2,000 dead, mainly Muslims.

The sectarian Hindu-Muslim clashes were triggered after a mob, believed to be Muslims, set fire to a train carrying Hindu activists, killing 58.

According to an exit poll commissioned by Zee TV, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was poised to control around 101 seats, down from the 117 it won in 1998.

The poll showed Congress would win around 70 seats, up from

the 53 it snared in the 1998 vote.

In a separate exit poll Aaj Tak television network said the BJP would pick up between 93 and 109 seats while the Congress would take between 72 and 88.

The Talim-Zee poll, which covered more than 9,000 voters in 31 constituencies, predicted that the BJP would get more than 57 percent of the vote against 34 percent for the Congress.

Congress state leader Shankersinh Vaghela said his party would sweep the polls in north, central and Saurashtra (northwest) regions of Gujarat, which would give the party a two-third majority.

"We are confident of a two-third majority in this election. This time we have been able to make inroads into the Saurashtra region, which has been a BJP bastion. We will also make some gains in North Gujarat," said Vaghela.

Vaghela had predicted that the Congress victory would be driven by votes from the "disillusioned" working middle class government employees and small businessmen affected by the riots.

Israel, Palestinians on edge as death toll mounts

Peace hinges on 'transforming' PA leadership: Powell

AFP, Bethlehem

A Palestinian militant was shot dead by Israeli troops Friday near Bethlehem, a day after the Intifada surged again with two Israeli soldiers killed in nearby Hebron and seven Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The renewed tension in the southern West Bank further dimmed hopes of seeing the curfew lifted in Bethlehem, after a senior military official said Friday that the threat of Palestinian attacks was still too high to redeploy.

"The army is not considering a withdrawal from Bethlehem because of the continuing threat of attacks," he told army radio, quashing the prospect which had arisen after Israeli President Moshe Katsav's meeting Thursday with Pope John Paul II.

A statement issued by the Vatican said the Israeli president promised the army would redeploy away from the traditional birthplace of Jesus Christ "if there were warnings of terror operations".

But violence continued in the area Friday morning, when Israeli troops shot dead a militant from the hardline Islamic group Hamas who resisted arrest, Palestinian security sources said.

Three other militants from the Islamic Jihad group were arrested in the operation and the house where they were hiding in the village of Thabra was demolished by the army, the sources added.

A few kilometres (miles) south Thursday night, Palestinian gunmen shot dead a male and a female

soldier guarding a settlement outpost not far from the scene of a roadside ambush that killed 12 Israelis last month as they headed to pray at a shrine revered by Jews and Muslims alike.

The army said Thursday it had demoted several officers over that ambush.

On Friday morning, three houses used during Thursday night's attack -- which had not yet been claimed by any group -- were bulldozed, and two more were also demolished in neighbouring villages.

An Israeli foreign ministry spokesman accused Palestinian groups of "trying to ignite the region" by targeting the flashpoint city of Hebron, where headline settlers live in an enclave in the Palestinian city.

But violence also continued relentlessly in the Gaza Strip, where seven Palestinians were killed Thursday.

Meanwhile, transforming Palestinian leadership was the cornerstone for Middle East peace, Secretary of State Colin Powell said Thursday, reinforcing the US administration's desire for a fresh leader to replace Yasser Arafat.

"This peace will require from the Palestinians a new and different leadership, new institutions and an end to terror and violence," Powell said in a speech at the conservative Heritage Foundation think tank here, unveiling Washington's US-Middle East Partnership Initiative.

"We have to find transforming leadership within the Palestinian community," he urged.