



French President Jacques Chirac signs an autograph after voting for the French referendum on the EU constitution yesterday in Sarraon, centre of France. A divided France began voting on the European Union's first-ever constitution in a historic referendum crucial to the future of EU integration, with final opinion polls suggesting the treaty would be rejected.

EU holds its breath as France votes

AFP, Brussels

The European Union faced being plunged into an unprecedented crisis yesterday as France voted on its controversial constitution, threatening what EU leaders warn may be a "catastrophe" for the expanding bloc.

EU leaders warn that a "no" vote risks wiping out at a stroke the fruit of three years of delicate negotiations, designed to prevent decision-making gridlock as the EU grows at the fastest rate in its half-century history.

While the bloc's political chiefs insist a "yes" victory is still possible, opinion polls have consistently indicated that the French will become the first to vote against the treaty.

"If the 'no' wins it in France Sunday, it will be a catastrophe," said Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, who currently holds the 25-nation bloc's rotating presidency.

Like other EU leaders, he has

been anxious to show there is no easy alternative to the constitution, insisting that there is no back-up plan if the French turn down the treaty.

There may be an element of strategy in their doom-laden warnings. But most analysts agree the EU would face an unprecedented situation if a major founding nation gets cold feet about greater political integration with other Europeans.

Although they disagree over what the outcome will be, a long period of debilitating introspection is widely expected.

The treaty was designed to streamline decision-making to avoid deadlock after the EU's historic enlargement last year to take in 10 mostly former Communist eastern European countries.

It also aims to boost the international profile of the EU with a president and foreign minister.

But many French opponents of the charter have seized on it for being too free-market friendly and

not doing enough to protect France's generous and costly social welfare model.

Whatever way the vote goes, the referendum in France, which is followed three days later by another in the Netherlands, has raised the EU's profile among citizens.

"The French campaign has shown the usefulness of referenda in terms of raising awareness amongst the citizens," said Marco Incerti of the Centre for European Policy Studies.

"But it's raising awareness of the existence of the treaty, not so much its content," he lamented.

The campaigns for and against the constitution were filling the "information deficit" the EU has long-suffered from in the face of broad indifference and incomprehension to what happens in Brussels, he added.

Israel okays release of 400 Palestinians

PA recruits 5,000 security forces

AP, Jerusalem/ Ramallah

Israel's Cabinet yesterday approved the release of 400 Palestinian prisoners, a long-overdue gesture Israel had agreed to as part of a Middle East truce package.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told the Cabinet that the prisoner release would strengthen Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and "the moderate forces in the Palestinian Authority." Sharon's appeal meshed with recent US efforts to shore up Abbas in the face of severe challenges from Palestinian militants.

The ministers voted 18-3 to approve the release. A ministerial panel will now meet to compile a list of those eligible to be freed. No one directly involved in deadly attacks on Israelis would be released, but Israel might be more flexible than in the past and free prisoners who haven't completed two-thirds of their terms, a government official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of his position.

The Palestinians want Israel to consult them on which prisoners to release.

"This is not enough," Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said. He also asked that Israel resume handing over West Bank cities to Palestinian control immediately, as it pledged to do as part of the February truce package.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority has put out a call for 5,000 new security forces to secure the coastal Gaza Strip area that Israel is to evacuate this summer, an Interior Ministry spokesman said Saturday.

But although there are fears Palestinian militants will fire on Israeli targets during and after the pullout, the new recruits won't be armed, because of Israeli restrictions on the number of guns Palestinian security forces can carry, said the spokesman, Tawfiq Abu Khousa.

Chandrika vows aid deal with Tigers

Clinton pushes for tsunami accord

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga Sunday vowed to share foreign aid with Tamil rebels a day after former US president Bill Clinton urged local politicians to support the controversial move.

Kumaratunga was "very committed" to establishing the proposed "joint administrative machinery," her office said in a statement Sunday following her talks here with Clinton Saturday.

"The president said this was not a part of the peace process, but that she believed it would help move the stalled peace process forward."

Norwegian-brokered peace talks remain on hold since April 2003.

Kumaratunga is facing opposition to any deal with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from her own coalition partner, the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, which has threatened to quit.

"The president referred to the resistance to it from some members of the ruling alliance, apprehensions of the (minority) Muslim community and the silence maintained by the main opposition party," Kumaratunga's office said.

Clinton, who visited Sri Lanka as UN special envoy for tsunami relief work, wrapped up his brief tour on Saturday by urging the island's political parties to support Kumaratunga's moves.

Diplomats said Clinton's public remarks put more pressure on the Colombo government to press ahead with the proposed deal that Kumaratunga promised international aid donors two weeks ago but has yet to deliver.

Officials in Kumaratunga's office said she was likely to discuss her plans at a rally later Sunday although there were no immediate signs of an announcement about finalising the deal.

'Injured Zarqawi has fled Iraq for surgery'

REUTERS, AFP, London/ Tehran

al-Qaeda's leader in Iraq Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had fled the country after being seriously injured in a US missile attack, a British newspaper reported yesterday, quoting a senior commander of the Iraqi insurgency.

Al-Zarqawi has shrapnel lodged in his chest and may have been moved to Iran, The Sunday Times newspaper reported, adding his supporters may try to move him on to another country for an operation.

The paper quoted an unnamed insurgency commander as saying the Jordanian-born militant was wounded three weeks ago when a US missile hit his convoy near the northwestern Iraqi city of al Qaim.

"Shrapnel went in between the right shoulder and his chest, ripped it open and is still stuck there," the commander said, adding a second piece of shrapnel penetrated Zarqawi's chest but exited from his back.

"There was concern about spinal injuries," the commander said. "But his ability to move eliminated that fear."

MEDIA WATCHDOG WAN SAYS Press freedom under siege in many states

AFP, Seoul

Press freedom is deteriorating worldwide and freedom of expression is under siege in many countries, the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) said yesterday ahead of Asia's largest-ever gathering of media executives.

"The press is simply muzzled in many countries," said a report from the WAN Board, meeting on the eve of the 58th World Newspaper Congress and the World Editors Forum.

"Attacks on journalists are common. Too many killers of journalists remain free."

"A total of 38 journalists have been killed since November 2004. Hundreds more have been arrested, assaulted and harassed."

The report said that in the past six months, the Philippines and Iraq

were the most deadly places for the media, with a total of 19 journalists killed in both places.

The report also targeted autocratic regimes throughout the world which repress freedom of expression.

"The suffocation of independent media continues unabated in countries throughout the world," said the report.

"The governments of Nepal, Cuba, Belarus, Turkmenistan, Eritrea, China and Zimbabwe, to name only a few of the worst offenders, have refused to surrender their monopoly on information, finding more and more audacious mechanisms to maintain their vice-like grip on media."

Investigative journalists challenging some of those regimes told the congress, at a Sunday discussion, of the risks and sometimes fatal dangers of their work.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan journalists wear black face paint as they participate in a march near the Sri Lankan Parliament yesterday protesting the killing of Tamil Editor Sivaram Dharmeratnam (46), last month. Journalists are demanding action to bring the killers and perpetrators to justice.