

## French vote threatens EU role on world stage

AFP, Brussels

The EU vowed yesterday to press ahead with boosting its role on the world stage despite the turmoil unleashed by France's rejection of its constitution, but analysts say its diplomatic muscle could well suffer.

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana, speaking a day after the stunning French referendum, said the vote does not affect how he will run the 25-nation bloc's foreign policy.

"Life continues. The EU will continue to be an actor," he told reporters, a day after French voters dealt a stunning "No" to the constitution, which aims to prevent decision-making gridlock in the expanding bloc.

"The EU has been an actor before even we started to talk about a constitution. We'll continue to work 24 hours (a day) with the same energy that we've done before," he

said.

Critics have suggested that the French "no" could plunge the 25-nation bloc into a prolonged period of introspection on its future direction, threatening to cloud its focus on foreign policy issues.

Analyst Mark Leonard of the London-based Centre for European Reform said the uncertainty over those plans will weigh heavily on the bloc's political influence.

"The EU is going to spend a lot of time and energy working out how to get out of this crisis, which will distract the leaders from the really big foreign policy questions, such as Iran, dealing with China and the US," he said.

The EU constitution, signed in Rome last October, notably proposes creating a long-term presidency to replace the current musical-chairs leadership and an EU foreign minister to give the bloc a single voice to the outside world.

The new foreign minister will

replace two current jobs: Solana's and that of EU external relations commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

It has been widely expected that Solana would become EU foreign minister once the constitution was ratified. Some have suggested that the EU could decide to create the job anyway, despite the ratification crisis.

The EU, which expanded from 15 to 25 nations last year, has long pledged to boost its diplomatic muscle, including notably in the Middle East where it has long been the biggest aid donor to the Palestinian side.

A standoff with Iran over its nuclear plans is the most high-profile diplomatic challenge facing the EU, and the United States — which suspects Tehran of wanting to build nuclear bombs — will be watching closely.

Leonard likened the situation to the early 1990s, when the EU was

accused of failing to engage decisively to stop a series of Balkan wars, in particular because it was battling over the Maastricht Treaty and EU monetary union.

"There will be a similar thing where a lot of time and energy gets eaten up with these sort of internal questions ... and that will frustrate I think particularly the Americans," he said.

Solana said EU leaders will now have to consult on how to react.

"The new situation arising as a result of the vote in France as well as the repercussions thereof will need to be analysed in a calm and lucid manner," he said.

But in the meantime the EU appears seriously weakened at a crossroads in its half-century long history.

"The French 'no' is of course a blow to European integration and the strengthening of the European Union," said Martin Schulz, Socialist head in the European Parliament.



The "no" vote supporters celebrate Sunday night in Paris following the French referendum on the European Union's constitution. About 55 percent French voters rejected the EU's first ever constitution in the national referendum.

## EU in disarray awaits knockout Dutch blow

AFP, The Hague

The EU scrambled yesterday to pick up the pieces after a devastating French "no" to its new constitution — while bracing for a Dutch vote that could deal a killer blow to its long-cherished integration blueprint.

European Union leaders called for a "pause for reflection", as opinion polls showed that Dutch voters will probably emulate those in France, who voted by some 55 percent to 45 percent on Sunday to reject the constitutional treaty.

The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, said it accepted the decision of the French people but appeared ready to weather this week's storm and wait for the bloc's leaders to meet in mid-June to discuss what went wrong.

"It's important to analyse what happened in France, it's important to understand the message, it's important to understand it in all its detail," said commission spokeswoman Françoise Le Bail.

"It's impossible to draw any conclusions at the moment before there has been a discussion amongst all the partners at the European council."

## FM's of India, Russia, China to hold talks

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh will travel to Vladivostok this week for talks to boost trade and regional cooperation between India, Russia and China, the government said yesterday.

Singh leaves Tuesday for the meeting on Thursday with his Russian and Chinese counterparts, Sergei Lavrov and Li Zhaoxing, the Press Trust of India news agency said quoting a government official.

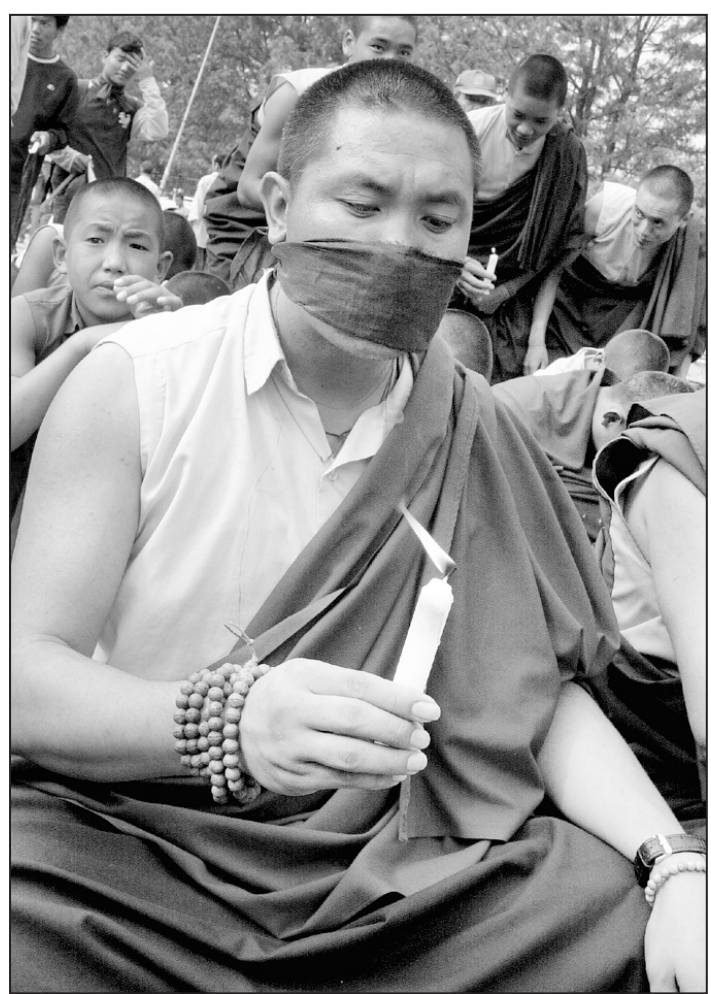
"This is the first time that they are getting together specially for a trilateral meeting," the official told PTI.

"The trilateral engagement is not aimed at creating any power bloc... or to target any country. They will discuss ways of building on convergence," the official told PTI, adding energy, trade and regional cooperation would top the agenda.

The three foreign ministers would also discuss regional and international issues including proposals to reform the United Nations through an expanded Security Council.

India says both China and Russia support its bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat.

Japan, India, Brazil and Germany are all bidding to win prestigious permanent seats, arguing the current lineup is outdated as it was founded in the wake of World War II and rewarded the victors.



Nepalese monks with their mouths covered by black cloth hold candles during a sit-in rally in front of the office of the powerful Royal Commission for Corruption Control (RCCC) in Kathmandu yesterday. Over 1,500 men, women and monks from the Sherpa community protested against charges brought by the RCCC on Jit Tsering Lama, the contractor of the multi-million dollar Melamchi water project.

## Fears grow for ME truce after Israeli raid in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Fears were growing for a shaky Middle East truce yesterday after two Palestinian sisters are wounded by a rocket fired from an Israeli drone pursuing Islamic Jihad militants in the Gaza Strip.

It was the second such aerial attack in the occupied territory in two weeks, with Israel repeatedly accusing Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas of failing to crack down on militants, putting serious pressure on a de facto truce.

The violence comes ahead of Israel's planned withdrawal of troops and settlers from the Gaza Strip starting in August after almost four decades of occupation.

Palestinian medical sources said the two victims, sisters aged 19 and 32, were in a serious condition following the late Sunday attack near the sprawling Jabaliya refugee

camp in the northern Gaza Strip.

An Israeli military source said the attack targeted two rocket launchers on the outskirts of Jabaliya, which two Palestinian militants were preparing to activate from a distance.

A spokesman for the armed wing of Islamic Jihad said militants fired two shells at a Jewish settlement in the area before the Israeli drone fired three rockets in their direction and the activists managed to escape.

Israeli military sources confirmed none of the militants was wounded and said they were unaware others were in the vicinity when the drone fired.

"The object of the raid was to prevent rocket fire and apart from those two men, who were not hurt in the attack, no one else appeared to be in the area," said the Israeli military source.

On May 18, Israel launched its first air strike against Palestinian militants since armed groups began observing a de facto truce in January, killing a militant from the Islamist movement Hamas.

Before and after that attack, Palestinian militants launched a barrage of rocket strikes, putting the increasingly fragile truce in jeopardy.

Abbas — who has faced down a gauntlet of Israeli criticism for not using force to crush militants — said the time had come for Hamas to renounce violence and enter into dialogue with his ruling Fatah party.

Some Fatah officials have accused Hamas of partly engineering the recent spike in violence in Gaza as part of a dispute with Fatah over local elections earlier this month and parliamentary polls scheduled for July.

## Asia leading newspaper renaissance: WAN

AFP, Seoul

Worldwide newspaper sales edged up by more than two percent in 2004 while advertising revenue recorded significant gains, the World Association of Newspapers said yesterday.

In its report on trends in the newspaper industry, the WAN said 395 million copies of newspapers were sold daily in 2004 and read by an estimated one billion people worldwide.

China, India and Japan were the world's biggest newspaper markets in 2004 and China overtook Japan as the country with the highest number of publications in the world.

Three-quarters of the world's 100 best selling daily newspapers were now published in Asia where sales were up 4.1 percent for the year.

The figures, from WAN's annual survey of press trends, were released to more than 1,300 publishers, editors and other senior newspaper executives from 81 countries attending the World Newspaper Congress and the

World Editors Forum, Asia's biggest ever media gathering, which opened here Monday.

Worldwide newspaper circulation grew 2.1 percent, the number of daily titles was up two percent and advertising revenue rose 5.3 percent, its biggest jump in four years, the WAN report said.

"It has been an extraordinarily positive 12 months for the global newspaper industry," said Timothy Balding, director general of the Paris-based WAN.

"Newspapers are clearly undergoing a renaissance through new products, new formats, new titles, new editorial approaches, better distribution and better marketing."

Despite a tough business environment the advertising pie had expanded, generating more revenue for newspapers, even though the portion of the pie going to the print media was gradually eroding, from 30.5 percent in 2003 to 30.1 percent in 2004.

Revenue grew 29 percent in China last year, more than double the growth in 2003, and 116 percent over five years. It was up 3.93

percent in the world's biggest advertising market, the United States, more than double last year's increase, which reversed two years of decline.

While revenue was up, newspapers continued to lose readers in many traditional strongholds, including Europe, though the drop was less sharp than in previous years.

But Balding said reports of the demise of print newspapers with the advent of the Internet and digital media were premature.

"Well over one billion people on planet earth are reading our publications, an impressive figure, I think," he said.

Opening the annual media gathering, WAN acting president Gavin O'Reilly stressed the need to combat attacks on press freedom worldwide.

Press freedom deteriorated worldwide and freedom of expression was under siege in many countries in 2004, the WAN said in its annual press freedom report.

"The press is simply muzzled in many countries," said the report.

## Low turnout mars Hariri son's polls win in Beirut

REUTERS, Beirut

Low turnout in Beirut polls marred a sweeping victory for the son of slain ex-prime minister Rafik al-Hariri in Lebanon's first parliamentary election in three decades with no Syrian troops in the country.

Official results released yesterday showed Saad al-Hariri's slate grabbing all 19 seats in the capital in Sunday's first stage of the staggered election to the 128-member assembly. Only 28 percent of the 420,000 eligible voters turned out.

Many people in Beirut stayed away because Hariri's victory was a foregone conclusion, with nine of the 19 seats falling unopposed to his bloc even before the vote.

Though he is a political newcomer, the win makes Hariri, 35, a strong contender to lead the next

government and pursue the political and economic policies of his billionaire businessman father, who was assassinated in Beirut on Feb. 14.

Hariri has avoided saying publicly if he wants the post.

Among major challenges facing Lebanon are redefining ties with Syria, international demands to disarm Shia Muslim Hizbollah guerrillas and tackling a debt of \$34 billion.

The vote follows two political earthquakes in Lebanon — Hariri's killing in a bomb blast many Lebanese blamed on Damascus, and the end of Syria's 29-year troop presence.

Results announced by Interior Minister Hassan al-Sabaa showed Hariri, a Sunni Muslim, won 39,500 of 42,000 votes cast in his constituency, the highest number in any of the 10 contested seats in the mainly Sunni Lebanese capital.

## Militants fire rocket at Nato base

### 5 Afghans killed by landmine

AFP, Kabul

A bicycle bomb targeting a Nato-led vehicle exploded yesterday near Kabul, wounding at least seven Afghans, hours after a rocket was fired at the peacekeeping force's headquarters in the capital, officials said.

The twin attacks, which caused no casualties among members of the 8,300-strong International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, highlighted the deteriorating security situation in Kabul.

The remote-controlled bomb was set on a bicycle left on the side of the main road from Kabul to the eastern city of Jalalabad and detonated at about 9:30am (0500 GMT),

district police chief Mohammed Akbar told AFP.

"Seven people were injured, some of them seriously: four were in a taxi passing by, three were pedestrians," Akbar said. "The taxi driver was seriously injured and was taken to hospital."

Meanwhile, a minibus hit an old landmine left over from Afghanistan's war-shattered past, killing five people and wounding another, police said yesterday.

The incident happened on Saturday near the town of Khash Rod in remote western Nimroz province, which borders both Pakistan and Iran, provincial deputy police chief Haji Nafas Khan told AFP.

## Advani embarks on week-long trip to Pakistan

BBC ONLINE

The leader of India's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party, LK Advani, has left the Indian capital Delhi for a week-long visit to Pakistan.

Advani said he considered his visit "to be a part of the happy process of steadily increasing people-to-people contacts between India and Pakistan".

He will meet President Pervez Musharraf, PM Shaukat Aziz and Foreign Minister Khurshid Mohammed Kasuri.

India and Pakistan embarked on a peace process in January last year.

The opposition leader will travel to Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi, the city of his birth.

Ahead of his visit, Advani met Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to be briefed on the progress of the dialogue between the two countries.

## EU experts join Aceh peace talks

AFP, Helsinki

Security issues and foreign monitoring were on the table as European Union observers yesterday joined Indonesian government officials and Aceh separatists on their fifth day of peace talks in Helsinki, mediators said.

"The delegation of the Indonesian Government and the representatives of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) are to discuss security issues in general and monitoring of a potential agreement in particular," the Crisis Management Initiative, CMI, which is hosting the talks, said in a statement.

Finnish president and career diplomat Martti Ahtisaari, who like in three previous rounds of negotiations this year is mediating the ongoing talks, "met in the morning the EU experts acting as observers at the talks on Monday", CMI added.



Poso-Central Sulawesi's people who live in Jakarta hold a protest rally yesterday against the bomb attacks by terrorists. Two bombs exploded in a busy market place in the predominantly Christian town of Tentena early Saturday killing 20 people.