

EU grapples to stay united

AFP, Brussels

EU leaders scrambled yesterday to pick up the pieces after an acrimonious summit left their grand European project in tatters, divided on its funding and adrift over its entire future direction.

But most observers agree that few quick fixes are in view after one of the most poisonous meetings of European Union chiefs since the Iraq war split them asunder two years ago.

The sense of crisis, triggered by French and Dutch "no" votes on the constitution barely three weeks ago but radically deepened by the summit, was underlined by comments warning against a "break-up" of the bloc Sunday.

"We need to think together, but debate openly, in a consensual way and without a break-up, on what we want for Europe in five years, 10 years, 30 or 50 years," said French

Europe Minister Catherine Colonna.

The two-day Brussels summit, which broke up amid spectacularly angry words in the early hours of Saturday morning, could have been so different.

Only a month ago it was being billed as a tough but entirely manageable regular meeting aimed at hammering out the 25-nation's budget plans for 2007-2013 period.

But then came the double French and then Dutch ballot blows, effectively ditching overnight a constitution which had been nearly four years in the writing and was meant to prevent decision-making gridlock in the still-expanding bloc.

Last week's summit in theory kept the project alive while putting the ratification process on hold -- but few observers have any illusions about the prospects for reviving the all-but-dead charter.

"People will tell you next that Europe is not in a crisis,"

Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, who holds the EU presidency, said as the summit disintegrated in acrimony.

"It is in a deep crisis." Far from bridging a credibility gap between the European bureaucracy and its citizens, the summit exposed deeply antagonistic visions of the EU future among the leaders themselves.

"During this budgetary debate there were two conceptions of Europe that clashed and will always clash," said Juncker.

"There are those who, in fact without saying it, want the big market and nothing but the big market -- a high-level free trade zone -- and those that want a politically integrated Europe," he said.

"I have felt for a long time this debate would blow up one day."

Britain, which takes over the EU presidency July 1, sneered at the big-Europe vision.

"It is essentially a division between whether you want a European Union that is able to cope with the future or whether you want a European Union that is trapped in the past," British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said.

A resolution to the budget had been blocked, notably by Britain's refusal to bow to demands by the other 24 EU members that it at least freeze a rebate it receives from the EU, worth 5.3 billion euros last year.

But British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who now faces the mammoth task of leading his colleagues for the next six months, denied being isolated at the summit.

The British leader had insisted that negotiations on the EU's budget-consuming farm subsidy system, which favours France, be reopened before he would consider curbing the British rebate.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice shares a laugh with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas at the end of their joint press conference in the West Bank city of Ramallah Saturday. Rice urged Palestinians to do much more to rein in militants as she warned time was running out to coordinate Israel's pullout from the Gaza Strip.

Israel, Palestinians firm on Gaza pullout

Gaza settlers homes to be destroyed, says Rice

AP, REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel and the Palestinian Authority have agreed Jewish settler homes in the Gaza Strip will be destroyed as part of Israel's pullout from the area, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said yesterday.

Rice said that her meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders convinced her that both sides share a commitment to ensuring Israel's withdrawal from Gaza takes place smoothly and peacefully.

Rice spoke at a news conference after two days of meetings with top officials from both sides intended to spur cooperation on the withdrawal. "Israel and the Palestinian

Authority share a commitment to ensure that disengagement happens smoothly without violence," she said.

If the withdrawal from Gaza and four settlements in the northern West Bank can be accomplished in an orderly way it can build trust between the two sides and create better conditions for peace efforts after the pullout.

Both the Israelis and Palestinians agree that the homes in the Gaza Strip settlements will need to be destroyed when Israel pulls out this summer, and they will need to work together to figure out how that will happen, Rice said.

"The parties agree that they

have to work this out in a cooperative way," she said. "The view is that there are better land use possibilities for the Palestinians that can better address their housing needs."

The two sides also agreed to work to ensure that goods and people are able to flow into and out of Gaza after the pullout, she said.

"The United States cannot make the disengagement work, only the Israelis and Palestinians can make the disengagement work," she said.

Rice stressed that the pullout, which will be the first time Israel has withdrawn from land that Palestinians claim for a future state, is a historic step.

Bullied S Korean soldier runs amok, kills 8 comrades

REUTERS, Seoul

A South Korean soldier who suffered bullying took his revenge on Sunday, hurling a handgrenade among sleeping comrades and then opening fire on them, killing eight, the Defence Ministry said.

The private, identified by his surname "Kim," fired 40 shots from his rifle after throwing the grenade at his guard post in Yonchon, about 60km north of the capital Seoul, a ministry spokesman said.

It was the highest number of deaths suffered by the South Korean army since 2000, Yonhap news agency said.

"Private Kim, who had suffered verbal violence and molesting from his senior, threw the grenade when he entered his barracks after overnight duty," Chang Suk-kyu, a chief spokesman for the ministry, told a briefing.

Seoul sees breakthrough from talks with Kim

REUTERS, Seoul

Last week's meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and a South Korean minister was a "breakthrough" and added momentum to the diplomatic process for Pyongyang to give up nuclear weapons, a senior official in Seoul said yesterday.

During Friday's meeting with the South's Unification Minister Chung Dong-young, Kim said his country was willing to end its year-long boycott of stalled six-party nuclear talks and return to the negotiating table in July.

"The meeting made a positive breakthrough in inter-Korea relationships," the South's Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon was quoted as saying by his spokesman.

Lebanese vote in final phase

REUTERS, Tripoli

Voters flocked to the polls in northern Lebanon yesterday in the final phase of the country's election, with a Muslim-led anti-Syrian coalition seeking to clinch a clear majority in the next parliament.

The ballot, staggered by region over four weekends, is the first in Lebanon with no Syrian military presence in three decades after Damascus pulled its troops out in April.

The northern Lebanon vote, in which more than 100 candidates are fighting for the remaining 28 parliamentary seats, will decide whether the 128-seat assembly has an anti-Syrian majority or the first time since the 1975-1990 civil war.

Rafsanjani allies seek unity for run-off vote

REUTERS, Tehran

Iranian reformists urged their dejected supporters to rally behind pragmatic cleric Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani to prevent his surprise hard-line challenger Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from winning a presidential run-off.

"We should use our full force to defend Rafsanjani. We should form an anti-fascist front," said Hamid Reza Jalalipour, a leader of the reformist Islamic Iran Participation Front.

Similarly, backers of Tehran ex-mayor Ahmadinejad urged conservatives to unite in support of the man who stunned Iran by almost overhauling elder statesman Rafsanjani

in Friday's first-round vote.

The hard-line Siyaset-e-Ruz newspaper said conservatives could have won outright if they had settled on one candidate. "However it is not late now and there is just one step to victory ... Unity must be at the top of our agenda," it said.

Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad, with about one fifth of the vote each, just pulled clear of their five rivals in a poll damned by Washington as a travesty of the democracy Iranians yearned for.

"I just don't see the Iranian elections as being a serious attempt to move Iran closer to a democratic future," Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told Fox News television in Jerusalem.

She criticized the legitimacy of the electoral process, in which unelected clerics barred most of the 1,000 presidential hopefuls, including all the women, from standing.

Those defects prompted some Iranian reformists, including Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, to boycott the poll.

"As long as they (the clerical establishment) decide for people and tell people whom to vote for by qualifying and disqualifying candidates, I will not vote," she told Reuters.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei hailed the 63 percent turnout as a slap to "ignorant enemy" President Bush.

Reformers cry foul over Iranian election

AFP, Tehran

The shock presidential election showing by Tehran's right-wing Mayor Mahmood Ahmadinejad was the result of an elaborate plot to rig the polls, defeated reformist contenders claimed Saturday.

"There has been bizarre interference. Money has changed hands," the centrist-reformist cleric and former parliament speaker Mehdi Karoubi told reporters in an unprecedented allegation.

"They can go and file a lawsuit against me, but I will give all the names of the people in power in my defence," he said defiantly.

His claim came as Ahmadinejad, an austere hardliner, bucked predictions and was placed second out of the seven candidates who stood in Friday's election. He will go into a run-off next Friday against moderate conservative cleric Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Malaysia tightens security for OIC meetings

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Thousands of police will guard finance ministers and business leaders from the Islamic world who are gathering in Malaysia for a range of meetings this week, officials said yesterday.

A 2,800-strong police team will provide round-the-clock security for delegates to the annual meeting of governors of the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), Kuala Lumpur police chief Mustafa Abdullah told Bernama news agency.

"Ours is a double focus, to take care of delegates' safety and ensure Arab tourists coming to Malaysia are safe. We do not want any untoward incidents," he was quoted as saying.

US air raids kill up to 20 Taliban in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

United States warplanes killed 15 to 20 suspected Taliban rebels in southern Afghanistan in the latest attack in a renewed wave of violence to hit the country, the US military said yesterday.

The rebels were killed when US-led troops came under small arms and rocket fire from militants and called in aircraft and attack helicopters in the province of Helmand, the military said in a statement.

"US aircraft and attack helicopters engaged the enemy. Initial battle-damage assessments indi-

cate 15 to 20 enemies died," it added.

A vehicle belonging to the attackers was also damaged in the attack, the statement said.

The statement said no US-led coalition soldiers were injured in the fighting in Grishk, a district in insurgency-wracked Helmand province, which has been hit by a renewed surge of violence by militants in recent months.

In southeastern Afghanistan, a suspected roadside bomb tore through a UN car carrying Afghan electoral workers, damaging the vehicle but causing no casualties,

police said Sunday.

None of the five passengers on board the UN-marked vehicle were wounded when the bomb was detonated by a remote control device in Ali Shir area of Khost province, Mohammad Ayoob, police commander of the province said.

A day earlier suspected Taliban militants ambushed and killed a judge and two other officials in an ambush as they returned home from a dinner in the Nad Ali district to Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand.

Anti-junta protests mark Suu Kyi's birthday

REUTERS, Bangkok

Opponents of Myanmar's military junta marked the 60th birthday of detained democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday with solemn protests across Asia, including a 500-strong gathering in the capital of the former Burma.

In Washington, President Bush added his voice to the worldwide chorus of those demanding Yangon's generals release the Nobel Laureate from house arrest, and honour the results of 1990 elections they lost by a landslide.

Given the isolation and intransigence of those in charge of the former British colony, which has been under military rule for more than four decades, making noises and gestures from afar is just about all the junta's opponents can do.

"I send my best wishes to Aung San Suu Kyi for her 60th birthday,"

Bush said in a statement echoing the thoughts of other leaders and Nobel Laureates, including South African archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader.

"Her strength, courage, and personal sacrifice in standing up for the oppressed people of Burma have inspired those who stand for freedom," Bush said.

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan was among those appealing yet again for the release of Suu Kyi, who has spent nine of the last 16 years behind bars or under house arrest. Her latest stretch of detention began in May 2003.

In Myanmar's leafy capital Yangon, where roadblocks around Suu Kyi's lakeside home keep away everybody except for her doctor, around 500 people met at the dilapidated headquarters of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party.

Aid may help resurrect Lankan peace talks

REUTERS, Kilinochchi

Sri Lanka's plan to share \$3.0 billion in international tsunami aid with the Tamil Tigers could help jumpstart peace talks that broke down two years ago and left the island's two-decade civil war in limbo, the rebels say.

But the government -- which senior officials say will formalise the aid-sharing pact in days -- must also agree to discuss the Tigers' long-standing demands for interim self-rule in the north and east, S.P. Thamilselvan, the leader of the rebels' political wing, told Reuters.

"Most certainly we welcome such a gesture from the government to sign (the joint mechanism)," Thamilselvan said in a weekend interview in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) northern stronghold of Kilinochchi.

"But having said that, just sign-

ing the agreement is not going to pave the way for peace talks. Implementation is the most important aspect," he added.

"Immediately after implementation, if sincere action is taken, well and good, it will open the way for the peace process."

His comments were in stark contrast to rebel warnings earlier this month that government delays in signing the aid pact, which is still pending nearly six months after the tsunami hit, risked plunging the island into a "very serious and dangerous" situation.

Resumption of peace talks would be the most significant step in Sri Lanka's protracted peace process since talks broke down in 2003, just a year after the warring sides agreed to a ceasefire.