

Climate deal clinched, but thorny task remains

AFP, Brussels

European Union leaders clinched a landmark climate change accord on Friday but postponed the thorny task of setting mandatory renewable energy goals for individual member states.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, said the agreement reached at a summit in Brussels would usher in a new era in the fight against global warming.

Merkel said she felt "no little satisfaction that today we are able to go for such ambitious and credible targets" and she challenged other countries to follow the EU's lead.

The accord's overarching achievement is to commit the 27-country EU to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide by 20 percent by 2020, compared to 1990 levels.

As part of that, it obliges member countries to make renewable energies, such as solar and wind power, the source of 20 percent of the total energy consumption across the

bloc by 2020. The current level is just 6-7 percent.

There was also a political commitment that eco-friendly biofuels, made from plants, should make up 10 percent of total vehicle fuel in Europe by 2020.

"These are a set of ground-breaking, bold ambitious targets for the European Union," said British Prime Minister Tony Blair. "It gives Europe a very clear leadership position on this crucial issue facing the world."

The talks had broken up overnight with divisions over setting a "binding" target for the use of renewables, but the leaders agreed a compromise that accords member states some flexibility.

Countries like Poland and the Czech Republic depend heavily on carbon energy sources like coal and had complained that the renewable target was overly ambitious and prohibitively expensive.

To bring those states on board, the agreement stressed that "differentiated national overall targets" would be set, taking into account

the potential of each member state.

Merkel said the pact gave her a mandate to press major world polluters, as the EU would offer to reduce emissions by an additional 10 percent if countries took commensurate measures.

"We are going into negotiations offering 30 percent if international partners are prepared to go along with that, so it is a genuine offer in what is an extremely important topic for the whole of humanity," she said.

She will have a chance to show off the EU accord to other world leaders, including US President George Bush, at a G8 summit in Germany in June.

But tough questions remain to be answered in Brussels.

The European Commission must work out how much of the renewable energy burden each state will have to bear; a cumbersome, deeply technical and controversial task that it hopes to complete in the autumn.

"It will be a huge job, huge job from a legal and a technical point of view," acknowledged European

Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso.

The accord represents a minor victory for France by having nuclear power -- which meets some 40 percent of its total energy needs -- recognised as one way to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

The agreement noted the Commission's assessment of the contribution of nuclear energy in "meeting the growing concerns about safety of energy supply and carbon dioxide emissions reductions."

However, it also highlighted safety concerns, stating that "nuclear safety and security" should be "paramount in the decision-making process."

Despite the celebrations, Green groups called the 20 percent target for carbon emissions reduction inadequate and argued that the 30 percent level was the bare minimum required.

Saddam hanging judge seeking British asylum

Al-Jazeera reports

AFP, Dubai

The Iraqi judge who sentenced Saddam Hussein to death for crimes against humanity has fled to Britain where he is seeking political asylum, the Arabic news channel Al-Jazeera reported Friday.

Presiding judge Rauf Rasheed Abdel Rahman has applied for asylum for both himself and his family in the past few days, the Doha-based channel said citing a British official it did not name.

Al-Jazeera's London correspondent said Abdel Rahman had been in Britain since December on a tourist visa.

A spokeswoman for Britain's interior ministry declined to comment on the case.

"We won't comment on individual cases. We won't confirm or deny whether someone has claimed asylum in the UK," she said.

Saddam was executed on December 30 after being sentenced to death on November 5 for crimes against humanity in the murder of 148 Shiite civilians from the town of Dujail, north of Baghdad, in the 1980s.



PHOTO: AFP

US pop star Michael Jackson waves to Japanese fans as he walks to a helicopter at a heliport in Tokyo yesterday. Jackson showed up for a party in Tokyo Thursday where several hundred fans paid 400,000 yen (3,400 USD) a ticket for an exclusive dinner and a snapshot with the music legend.

Thousands in Uruguay protest Bush visit

AFP, Montevideo

More than 6,000 people took to the streets Friday in a march against the visit of US President George W. Bush, which turned violent as demonstrators smashed the windows of a McDonald's restaurant.

The labor union federation PIT-CNT and other groups organized the march, in Uruguay, Bush's second stop on a five-country goodwill tour meant to support democracy and foster trade.

Marchers waved posters with Bush's image, his mouth stained with blood, and the word "Killer" and "Yes to Mercosur, no to Imperialism," before some used stones and branches to smash the McDonald's windows.

Mercosur is the regional common market of South America to which Uruguay belongs.

The restaurant that was attacked is just blocks from the hotel Bush where will be lodged in Montevideo.

US-based McDonald's has become a symbol of globalization, though it usually stresses local branches have local franchise owners.

Two journalists were injured covering the demonstrations, authorities said.



PHOTO: AFP

A student carries a sticker depicting US President George W. Bush as Adolf Hitler at a rally in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Bush Friday started a tour of Latin America against the backdrop of violent protests.

Media tycoon Black to face fraud trial

AFP, Chicago

Deposed media baron Lord Conrad Black is finally going to have his day in criminal court to protest accusations that he treated his vast newspaper empire like a personal fiefdom which he raided for both massive bonuses and petty cash.

Jury selection begins Wednesday in Chicago in a fraud trial which has all the trappings of past corporate scandals with betrayal and a bit of quasi-espionage thrown in for added spice.

There is a videotape of Black loading 13 boxes of documents into his chauffeur-driven car after the US Securities and Exchange Commission notified him that his dealings were under investigation.

There are the accusations that Black used company funds to pay for his wife's birthday party, handbags, exercise equipment, opera tickets, a vacation in Bora Bora and the refurbishment of a Rolls Royce.

There is the long-time friend and associate, former chief financial officer and Chicago Sun-Times chief David Radler, who turned government snitch in exchange for a 29-month jail sentence and a 250,000-dollar fine.

While the dollar value of the alleged fraud is relatively small -- Black and his associates are accused of helping themselves to more than 80 million dollars, a pittance compared to the billions lost when fraud caused the collapse of energy giant Enron -- the trial will

be closely watched because of the buzz surrounding Black.

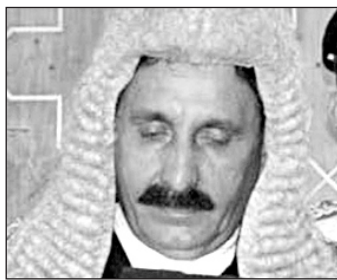
The son of a wealthy brewery executive, Black's massive media empire once spanned the globe and included such prestigious titles as the London Daily Telegraph, Jerusalem Post and Chicago Sun Times along with hundreds of regional papers.

Black's willingness to flaunt his wealth and privilege, his conservative views and his buccaneer business acumen alienated his more self-effacing fellow Canadians long before he renounced his citizenship in order to become a British Lord in 2000.

His troubles began after Hollinger International, the US-based holding company which controlled the empire, began divesting its Canadian and US publications.

Black and his associates wrote non-compete clauses into the sales agreements which granted them massive tax-free bonuses while protecting the new owners from having Hollinger launch new publications to compete with the ones it had just sold.

Shareholders began to complain about the bonuses in 2002 as Hollinger posted massive losses but Black remained defiant, telling one shareholder to sell his shares and "get out" if he had a problem with the way things were being run.



Pak CJ fired for 'misconduct'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf Friday sacked the country's chief justice on charges of misconduct and misuse of authority, the information minister said.

Musharraf has now referred the case of chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry to Pakistan's top judicial accountability body, the supreme judicial council, Information Minister Mohammad Ali Durrani told AFP.

"It is confirmed. The president has taken the action after numerous complaints and having personally heard the chief justice. He has acted under the constitutional requirement," Durrani said.

"The president has sent the reference to the supreme judicial council on charges of misconduct and misuse of authority," he said.

An official statement said Musharraf had appointed Javed Iqbal, another senior judge, as acting chief justice.

Chaudhry, 58, who was appointed chief justice in June 2005, was the subject of a legal petition alleging that he obtained for his son a position in the police service despite a lack of proper qualifications.

Violent crime on increase in major US cities

AFP, Washington

Violent crime is on the rise in big cities across America with some experiencing a triple-digit jump in homicides and other violence since 2004, according to a report released Friday.

The report by the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), a Washington-based law enforcement think tank, said the murder rate in 56 large metropolitan areas, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston and Detroit, has jumped overall by 10 percent between 2004 and 2006.

"The 24-month trend toward increasing violence is disturbing news, because the United States enjoyed astonishing declines in crime during the mid- to late-1990s, followed by a leveling-off in the early 2000s," Chuck Wexler, executive director of PERF, said in a statement.

He warned that a recent summit on violent crime held by law enforcement officials from across the country concluded that there was a "gathering storm" of increasing violence in America.

Among the major cities that

have recorded an increase in murders between 2004 and 2006 are Chicago, Illinois (up 3.8 percent), Houston, Texas (up 11.9 percent), and Miami, Florida (up 42.6 percent).

The cities of Newark, New Jersey, and Orlando, Florida, meanwhile recorded their highest number of murders ever in 2006 -- 105 in Newark and 49 in Orlando.

The city of Boston, in Massachusetts, saw an 11-year high in homicides in 2006 with 75 people murdered.

Several cities experienced a triple-digit jump in homicides, including Charleston, South Carolina (130 percent higher), Fairfax County in Virginia (up 111 percent) and Orlando (up 188 percent).

The PERF statistics confirm similar figures released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in December.

That data showed a rise in violent crime with 32,840 murders recorded in the US in 2004-2005, and 818,592 robberies reported.

Chirac bids bye to politics today

AFP, Paris

President Jacques Chirac is expected to announce today that he will retire after more than 40 years at the top in French politics.

The 74 year-old leader is to reveal in an address to the nation on radio and television whether he will stand in the presidential election to be held in six weeks.

The content of his declaration has been kept secret by the Elysee palace, but the near universal consensus was that he will explain why he has decided not to seek an unprecedented third mandate.

With official nominations for the race due by next Friday, Chirac has kept open till the last moment the option of running again -- despite polls that show he would have no chance of winning again.

But in recent weeks he has given several hints that he intends to step down, telling a television interviewer last month that "there is life after politics" and that he hopes to serve France "in another capacity".

The president has also hosted three international meetings on issues known to be close to his heart

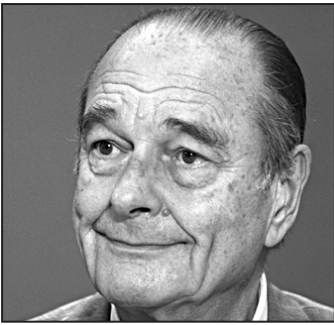
-- Lebanon, the environment and French-African relations -- and this week he attended what was widely seen as his farewell EU summit.

If there was little suspense about Chirac's decision, speculation centred on whether he will use the broadcast to endorse the right-wing candidate for the presidency Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, a former protege who heads the ruling Union for a Popular Movement (UMP).

Sarkozy, 52, has a narrow lead in the polls over the socialist Segolene Royal but now faces a new challenge from the centrist candidate Francois Bayrou, head of the Union for French Democracy (UDF), whose ratings have surged in the last month.

Chirac and Sarkozy -- whose relations have long been tense -- had talks last week, and Sarkozy said he was informed what the president plans to say in his broadcast.

Speaking on France 2 television, the UMP leader said Chirac's public backing "would have a certain weight among some French people who are still uncertain (how to vote)". However party insiders said



they do not expect the president to make an explicit statement of support.

would be a "a very important moment of political history".

According to Overseas Minister Francois Baroin, "the French feel tenderly towards him. Even if they want to turn the page, they still like him."

Bayrou, who served as education minister under Chirac from 1995 to 1997, said that "on foreign policy he was an honorable voice, and a great voice at the moments when France needed one" -- a clear reference to Chirac's defiance of the United States over Iraq.

On domestic affairs, Bayrou said Chirac "was constantly concerned by the need not to tear the French people apart" -- an intentional jibe at Sarkozy, who is accused of abandoning Chirac's consensual political approach.

Chirac began his political career in 1962 as an advisor to prime minister Georges Pompidou, and had his first cabinet post in 1967. He served twice as prime minister, 18 years as mayor of Paris and two consecutive mandates as president.

Hurley's 'big fat wedding' ends on sour note

AFP, Jodhpur

British actress Elizabeth Hurley and her Indian husband Arun Nayar left this desert town yesterday after their "Big Fat Indian Wedding" ended with tussles between journalists and police.

At least 10 journalists suffered cuts and bruises as police and security guards clashed Friday with paparazzi trying to snap the marathon event, dubbed the "Big Fat Indian Wedding" by local media, an AFP photographer said.

"The great wedding ends in chaos," the Hindustan Times daily newspaper declared in a headline yesterday.

The dust-up came outside the ancient sheer-walled Meherangarh, literally "Majestic Fort," where the couple held a lavish wedding feast following their traditional Hindu marriage at the hilltop Umaid Bhawan Palace hotel in Jodhpur.

"The security guards and police were punching and shoving the journalists. At least 10 (journalists) suffered bruises and cuts," said AFP photographer R. Raveendran, who was nursing a bleeding thumb.

"The police and security people were also roughing up locals, who started shouting 'Go home Liz,'" Raveendran said. Afterwards, a security representative of the couple apologised to the journalists, he said.

Exclusive media rights were sold to British celebrity magazine Hello! for a sum reported to cover the seven-figure cost of the nuptials, which capped three days of non-stop partying in the desert state of Rajasthan.

"Famous for being famous, Liz and Nayar let paparazzi down," said The Indian Express in a headline, complaining about the lack of media access to the event.

The couple, who had married in civil ceremony at an English castle on March 3, walked around a



PHOTO: AFP

Indian businessman Arun Nayar (R) walks with his wife Elizabeth Hurley and her son Damian as they arrive at Jodhpur Airport yesterday for boarding an aeroplane for Mumbai.

sacred wedding fire at the palace amid the chanting of Vedic hymns by five priests.

But the couple were only able to take four turns around the fire instead of the customary seven because their clothes kept getting entangled, according to The Times of India.

Nayar, wearing an off-white traditional Rajasthani suit, rode to the ceremony on a horse. A pair of camels, bedecked with tassels and copper bells were part of the procession as musicians serenaded the couple with clarinets.

Hurley was dressed in a sari designed by top Indian designer Rohit Bal. She had her hands painted in intricate henna designs and was wearing gold ornaments.

The couple, who held a set of pre-wedding parties in Mumbai,

India's financial and entertainment capital, headed back to the city for another round of parties.

"The couple and their guests partied well until 3.30 am and after a lazy morning they lunched and flew off to Mumbai," said a hotel employee, who did not wish to be named.

The couple and their guests, numbering around 250, had flown into this city of palaces aboard seven chartered flights.

Back at the Umaid Bhavan Palace hotel, staff were looking forward to some rest, the Hindustan Times reported.

"It's been a very tiring time," Sanjay Umanshakar, the hotel's general manager was quoted as saying.

Palestinian unity govt deadline extended

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas has extended by two weeks the deadline for prime minister designate Ismail Haniya to form a unity government, a government spokesman said yesterday.

"Prime minister Ismail Haniya asked Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in a phone call yesterday to extend the deadline to form a unity government... and the president agreed to allow two additional weeks to the prime minister designate," the spokesman of the outgoing Hamas-dominated government, Ghazi Hamad, said.

Parents of slain children attack 'House of Horrors'

AFP, Noida

Parents of almost 20 children allegedly raped and killed inside a stylish bungalow tried to fire-bomb the dwelling dubbed the "House of Horrors", police said yesterday.

The protesters on Friday hurled gasoline-soaked rags at the shuttered home of main accused Moninder Singh Pandher in the New Delhi suburb of Noida and set fire to its entrance, officials deployed at the site said.

"The fire was immediately put out as a fire truck was positioned there and the crowd was then dispersed,"

a Noida police spokeswoman said a day after the two hours of rioting.

She said that dozens of parents were on their way to meet Noida police chief Rajiv Sabharwal but en route they attacked businessman Pandher's home, where the remains of at least 21 people, mostly children, have been found.

The victims belonged to the nearby to Nithari village.

The murders, the most macabre in India in decades, came to light in December when Noida police recovered skulls, bones and other body parts from sewage drains near Pandher's bungalow.

Pandher and his servant Surender Koli face 21 counts of abduction, rape and murder of children as young as three years of age.

Police say Koli has confessed to having abducted children from Nithari then killing them in his employer's home and disposing of the remains.

He has also reportedly admitted to cannibalism and necrophilia during lie detector tests.

Nithari residents say as many as 40 children have disappeared since 2004.