

G8 agrees on climate goal of halving emissions by 2050

AFP, Heiligendamm

Leaders of the Group of Eight club of wealthy nations agreed Thursday on the goal of halving dangerous greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 in a landmark pact against global warming.

The summit host, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said she was "very, very satisfied" with the agreement but acknowledged that the accord was a compromise that fell short of her hopes for a binding deal.

"Many countries moved on this issue," Merkel said, adding that the accord gave impetus to negotiations beginning in Bali in December to find a successor to the UN-backed Kyoto Protocol on capping greenhouse gases that expires in 2012.

"The very best we could achieve has been achieved," Merkel said.

The chancellor, who holds the G8 presidency, had piled the pressure on President George W. Bush

to bring the United States, as the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, on board a process to keep the planet from overheating.

As member states wrangled over the final text Thursday, Bush took a conciliatory stance, saying the United States was ready to take the leading role in a global bid to fight climate change but that China and India must join in.

"The US will be actively involved, if not taking the lead, in a post-Kyoto framework, a post-Kyoto deal," Bush said after talks with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on the sidelines of the summit.

Blair had said he was holding out hope for a pact on significant emission cuts at the summit that would pave the road to a strong deal at a UN meeting Bali, Indonesia in December as the successor to Kyoto.

"I think there is a very substantial coming together around the need to make sure that we have a substan-

tial reduction in emissions and find the right process and right way to achieve that," he said.

Merkel's aim had been for the world's most industrialised nations to take the lead in setting key benchmarks in the run-up to the UN meeting in Bali.

China, India and other developing countries, which have been invited to participate in the summit, are not required to make targeted emissions cuts under Kyoto -- a weakness Washington has frequently criticised.

The United States, the only G8 country that has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol, has flatly rejected any mandatory targets in a new pact.

Bush surprised many last week by offering a counter-proposal in which the United States and up to 14 other big emitters would agree by the end of next year "a long-term global goal" for reducing greenhouse gases.

Armenia, Azerbaijan edge towards deal

AFP, Baku

A meeting this Saturday of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan is raising hopes that a deal could be reached on a dispute over the volatile territory of Nagorny Karabakh that has long disfigured this region.

The two countries have been locked in a bitter stand-off over the mountain territory for more than a decade, poisoning efforts to bring stability to the strategic South Caucasus region, bordered by Russia, Turkey and Iran.

Having gone to war in the early 1990s, their forces still clash sporadically and any escalation could derail Western efforts to promote a corridor of oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea to Europe.

Russia and Turkey have a close interest. Ankara has closed its borders with Armenia in support of Azerbaijan, while Moscow counts Armenia as its closest ally among the ex-Soviet states on this southern flank.

Now however diplomats are saying that a meeting this weekend in the Russian city of Saint Petersburg between Armenian President Robert Kocharian and his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev could herald a breakthrough.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani lawyers carry posters of suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry as they chant anti-Musharraf slogans during a protest in Karachi yesterday. More than 6,000 Pakistani lawyers and opposition activists protested against tough media curbs imposed by President Pervez Musharraf amid a tense judicial crisis.

Immigration bill in doubt after vote

AP, Washington

A fragile compromise that would legalise millions of unlawful immigrants risks coming unravelled after the Senate voted early Thursday to place a five-year limit on a programme meant to provide US employers with 200,000 temporary foreign workers annually.

The 49-48 vote came two weeks after the Senate, also by a one-vote margin, rejected the same amendment by Sen Byron Dorgan. The North Dakota Democrat says immigrants take many jobs Americans could fill.

The reversal dismayed backers of the immigration bill, which is supported by President Bush but loathed by many conservatives. Business interests and their congressional allies were already angry that the temporary worker programme had been cut in half from its original 400,000-person-a-year target.

A five-year sunset, they said, could knock the legs from the precarious bipartisan coalition aligned with the White House. The Dorgan amendment "is a tremendous problem, but it's correctable," said Sen Arlen Specter, R-Pennsylvania. The coalition will try as early as Thursday to persuade at least one senator to help reverse the outcome yet again, he said.

Corruption in schools, universities cost billions: Unesco

AFP, Paris

Corruption and fraud in schools and universities worldwide is costing billions of dollars and compromising the future of youth, a report released by Unesco in Paris says.

In some countries, up to 80 percent of funds earmarked for education, excluding salaries, are funnelled by corrupt officials, according to the report titled: "Corrupt schools, corrupt universities: What can be done."

The study quoted surveys showing that ghost teachers on school payrolls represent five percent of expenditures for salaries in Honduras and 15 percent in Papua New Guinea.

Corruption in higher education takes the form of bogus degrees, accreditation fraud and fake universities, according to the report that was published on Wednesday.

The number of fake universities

on the Internet offering bogus degrees has increased from 200 to 800 between 2000 and 2004, according to the report.

"Such widespread corruption not only costs societies billions of dollars, it also seriously undermines the vital effort to provide education for all," said Koichiro Matsuura, director general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco).

"It prevents poorer parents from sending their children to school, robs schools and pupils of equipment, lowers teaching standards and thus education standards generally, and comprises the future of our youth."

Bribe-taking is singled out as a particular problem that is tolerated in many countries, including Cambodia where the government has tacitly acknowledged that it could not keep its teachers and professors without the payments.

Climate change wreaks havoc on Asian water resources

AFP, Washington

Asia is expected to face a serious shortage of fresh water due to climate change, with more than one billion people forecast to be hit by the crisis, a US State Department report warned Wednesday. Melting glaciers in the Himalayas -- which contain the largest store of water outside the polar ice caps, and feed seven great Asian rivers -- may lead to increased flooding in the short term and reduced water supply in the long term, the report said.

"Reduced freshwater availability in Asia could affect more than one billion people by the mid-century," said the department's annual report on safe water and sanitation strategy in developing countries.

The report to the US Congress added that "increased floods and changes in coastal water tempera-

tures could result in greater morbidity and mortality due to diarrhoeal disease."

Globally, the report said, by 2020, 75-250 million people are expected to be under increased "water stress" due to long-term climate shifts and population growth.

Moreover, yields from rain-fed agriculture could shrink by up to 50 percent.

The report contains US efforts to help provide affordable and equitable access to safe water and sanitation in developing countries.

Over the past year, US government agencies committed more than 844 million dollars in official development assistance for water, sanitation, and related activities around the world, the report said.

Lebanese troops pounds Islamists

AFP, Nahr al-Bared

Lebanese army tanks and helicopters pounded Islamist militiamen besieged in a Palestinian refugee camp on Thursday after a night of violent clashes, AFP correspondents said.

The latest bombardments broke a brief two-hour lull in the fighting between troops surrounding the Nahr al-Bared camp in northern Lebanon and gunmen from the shadowy al-Qaeda inspired Fatah al-Islam group holed up inside.

Military helicopters opened fire with heavy weapons and tanks fired shells on the impoverished camp, where the militants have been fighting the army since May 20 in the deadliest peacetime clashes in Lebanon in decades.

The unrest in Nahr al-Bared and briefly in the neighbouring Mediterranean port city of Tripoli and around another Palestinian refugee camp in the south of the country has claimed a total of 108 lives.

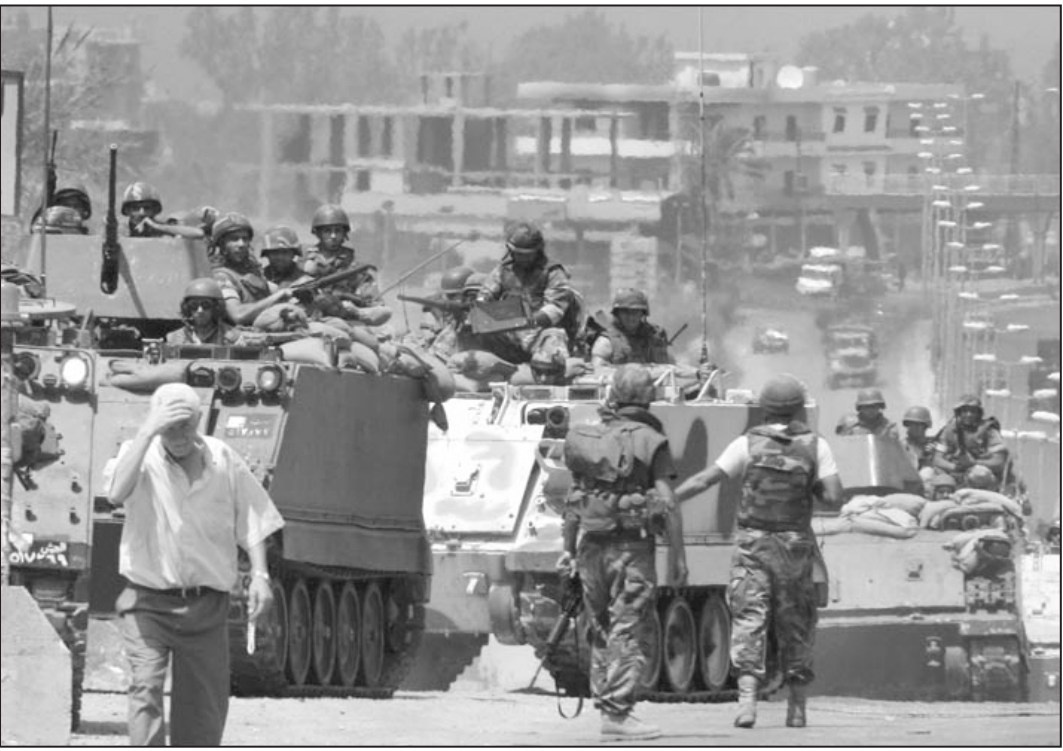


PHOTO: AFP

Lebanese soldiers secure the surroundings of the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared in northern Lebanon Wednesday. Gunbattles flared around the camp early Wednesday on the 18th day of a deadly standoff between Islamist gunmen and the army, amid reports some militants are surrendering.



PHOTO: AFP

Heavy winds hit the shores of the Omani capital Muscat yesterday. At least 15 people have been killed in Oman by Cyclone Gonu, police said Thursday as the most violent tropical storm to hit the Gulf region in three decades bearing down on neighbouring Iran.

Asian govts urged to do more to combat human trafficking

AFP, Manila

Asian governments need to do more to combat people trafficking as children are increasingly victims of the illicit multi-billion dollar global trade, an international forum was told yesterday.

Despite national laws and international conventions against the crime, enforcement has been largely lacking, Bruce Reed, regional representative of the International Organisation for Migration, told the Combating Trafficking forum in Manila.

"Trafficking in persons has become a serious challenge to governments and policy makers in the region," he said.

"Cases of trafficking are reported daily and no country is immune from the phenomenon," he said.

Reed told the forum that while many victims were trafficked within Asia there was an "increasing trend" of them being shipped to Europe and Africa.

Many of the victims are trafficked

for sexual or labour exploitation, while others end up begging or forced into marriage.

Others end up being trafficked for organ harvesting.

The profile of the victims too has been constantly changing, he said.

"Victims are becoming younger. Children are increasingly caught up in the process and Southeast Asia is particularly characterised by high rates of child migration," Reed said, although he admitted that statistics were difficult to come by.

Poverty at home has also led to a dramatic increase in international migration, with 30 million Asians living outside their countries and in environments where they were vulnerable to abuse, Reed said.

Governments however have failed to change their migration policies that often remain "rigid and inflexible."

The lack of legal migration channels creates opportunities for illegal recruiters or intermediaries.

Anders Lisborg, the International Labour Organisation's (ILO)

programme officer for trafficking and child labour, said human trafficking was closely linked to forced labour, which could have been addressed by international conventions.

"Trafficking is often possible because of a lack of application and enforcement of such labour standards -- both in countries of origin and destination," he said.

A study published by the Filipino advocacy group Visayan Forum Foundation, which also cited ILO figures, said there were at least 12.3 million people worldwide trapped in conditions of forced labour and slavery.

The majority of them are exploited by private businesses while some 2.5 million are victims of trafficking.

Every year, private enterprises earn some 44.3 billion dollars from forced labour, with some 31.6 billion dollars coming from trafficking operations, the study said.

US death toll nears 3,500 in Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Iraq's seemingly inexhaustible corps of terror bombers struck across the country again yesterday, from a restaurant in Baghdad's teeming Sadr City, to a police station levelled by a blast near the Syrian border. At least 15 people were reported killed.

The new blows against Iraqi government authority came as US military casualties rose toward a four-year death toll of 3,500, with 22 dead reported for the first six days of June, almost double that of June 2006.

The US military reported four US soldiers were killed in separate incidents Tuesday and Wednesday roadside bombings in eastern Baghdad and near Beiji, north of the capital, and an explosion and enemy gunfire in Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad. That lifted the US death toll in four years of war to 3,498. And it raised the average rate of US troops deaths to about four per day in June, compared with two a day in June 2006.

I wish to rule India one day: Mayawati

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Lucknow

After creating history by becoming chief minister of the country's largest state for the fourth time, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati has set new goals for herself - to rule India some day and build a "caste-less society".

"My aspiration to rise in life has brought me here today. I must confess I do look forward to occupying the highest chair in the country, one day," Mayawati, 51, said in her first exclusive interview to the print media.

While she is on one hand busy establishing her credentials as an administrator in a new mould, she also has her eyes set on the 2009 general election. "I have started preparing my own blueprint for much larger participation of BSP in the next Lok Sabha elections than ever before," she said in the 50-minute interview conducted at her private residence.



PHOTO: AFP

Arab-Americans join hands to form a human chain as a sign of Arabic unity during a rally in front of Dearborn City Hall Wednesday in Dearborn, Michigan. Lebanese, Palestinian and Iraqi Americans from different religious, social, and community organisations participated in the event designed to show their concern for increased divisions in the Arab and Muslim world. The metro Detroit area has the largest Arab-American population concentration in the US.

Time not ripe for talks with Syria: US, Israel

AFP, Washington

The United States and Israel said after high-level talks here Wednesday that the time might not be ripe for the Jewish state to resume peace talks with arch-rival Syria.

Washington insists that Syria is not playing a "constructive role" in the Middle East while Israel wants critical peace talks with the Palestinians to be given top priority, officials said.

"I don't think you're going to find many indications of Syria showing the rest of the world that they are interested in playing a constructive, positive role in trying to bring about a more peaceful, secure region," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters.

McCormack accused Syria of continuing to support terrorist groups in Lebanon and in the Palestinian territories. He also cited Damascus links to Iran, both of which Washington calls "state

sponsors of terrorism."

He spoke after a meeting Wednesday between US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Transport Minister Shaul Mofaz, a former defence minister and army chief, ahead of a "strategic" bilateral dialogue between the two allies on Thursday.

It also comes ahead of a meeting on June 19 between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and US President George W. Bush in Washington.

About a month ago, Rice held an unprecedented meeting with her Syrian counterpart Walid Mualem but emphasized later that Damascus needed to close its Iraq border to foreign fighters and to crack down on Palestinian extremists if it wanted to thaw frosty ties with Washington.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert also has for the moment rejected overtures by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to

restart peace talks, saying Damascus first had to stop supporting militant groups like Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas.

Mofaz told reporters after talks with Rice that Israel wanted to give greater priority to building peace with the Palestinians than the Syrians.

"Our first priority should be Palestinian discussions," he said repeatedly when asked whether peace efforts would be revived with Syria.

It was reported in the Israeli media that Mofaz believed that "the time has come to launch a secret channel with Syria" in order to defuse mounting tensions in the region.

Mofaz's Washington trip was also intended to "verify what Syria's objectives would be in eventual peace talks with Israel," a press report had said.



Malaysian PM to remarry

AP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's prime minister said Wednesday he is in love again and will remarry this week, although his affection for his late wife remains strong.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 67, said he and Jeanne Abdullah, 53, will be married Saturday at the prime minister's official residence. Only close relatives will attend.

Abdullah's wife of 40 years, Endon Mahmood, died of breast cancer in 2005, and the prime minister captured the hearts of many when he broke down in tears during her funeral.

He said that he has known Jeanne, a "simple and friendly person," for about 20 years, and that they developed feelings for each other a year ago.

"My love for Endon remains as strong as ever, but I have fallen in love with this one," Abdullah said. "Jeanne also loved Endon."