

Asian immigrants win short respite as reforms collapse

AFP, Washington

Asian immigrants have won a short respite as US immigration reforms, which they attacked for giving priority to skills over family ties, collapsed in Congress last week.

But the bigger question over the status of the 1.5 million illegals from Asia remains in limbo.

The immigration reforms championed by US President George W Bush were aimed at giving illegal aliens a path to citizenship but could not gain a simple majority in a procedure vote last week to speed its passage in the Senate.

Many of Bush's Republican party lawmakers and their conservative base complained that the reform package was in effect an amnesty.

They wanted a controversial provision, which would shift some of the emphasis in legalizing the country's 12 million illegal immigrants from family ties toward an applicant's skills and education.

But that was opposed by many Democrats who complained it would

break up families.

"In some sense this failure of the procedural vote gives us a pause in the debate," Deepa Iyer, executive director of the South Asian American Leaders of Tomorrow.

"It is stalled but not over," she was quoted saying in a feedback forum by NewAmerica Media, a US grouping of ethnic news organisations.

Iyer's advocacy group has joined a growing number of Asian American organisations in slamming the proposed legislation for eliminating certain family-based visa categories.

Immigration is the hottest political topic after Iraq in the United States and also a hugely divisive issue.

Asian Americans are also torn by the stalling of the Senate immigration reforms. Though they back efforts to legalize the 1.5 million undocumented Asian immigrants, many cannot accept the proposed family-based immigration limitations, NewAmerica Media said.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian girls inspect the damages of their house following a military operation by Israeli soldiers in Rafah, southern Gaza strip yesterday. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed Sunday to continue to hit Gaza after Palestinian militants carried out the first cross-border raid into Israel in nearly a year.

Sarkozy set for fresh victory in French polls

AFP, Paris

The French headed back to the polls yesterday in parliamentary elections tipped to tighten President Nicolas Sarkozy's grip on power and give him the mandate he needs to push through his ambitious reforms.

Sarkozy's UMP party has been riding high on the president's popularity since he was elected last month vowing to put an end to high unemployment, poor economic growth and social discontent in high-immigration suburbs.

The right-wing party has ruled for the last five years in an unpopular government, but opinion polls predict that thanks to Sarkozy's electoral appeal it will increase its majority and emasculate the already weakened Socialists.

Voting stations opened across France at 8:00 am (0600 GMT) for the first round of voting, with round two to be held next Sunday. They close 12 hours later, with normally reliable result projections due out immediately.

New doubts on Iran's talks with US

Tehran slams G-8 stance on nukes

AP, Tehran

The Iranian Foreign Ministry cast doubt yesterday on whether a second round of US-Iran talks on the situation in Iraq would take place this month, saying no decision had been taken on a second meeting.

On May 28, US and Iranian diplomats met for four hours in Baghdad to discuss security in Iraq. Afterward, Iranian Ambassador Hassan Kazemi Qomi told The Associated Press that the two sides would meet again in less than a month.

On Sunday, however, Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini told reporters that Iran had not agreed to a second round this month.

He said the Iranians were studying the results of the May 28 talks and would decide later whether to continue them.

The talks last month were the first formal, scheduled meeting between Iranian and American officials since the United States

broke diplomatic relations with Iran following the Nov 4, 1979 seizure of the US Embassy by radical students.

Shortly after the May meeting, Iran's senior security official, Ali Larijani, said the US-Iran dialogue could continue only if Americans offer new solutions to the security crisis in Iraq.

Iran considers the presence of US troops in Iraq as a threat to its security and has demanded they leave. Washington, meanwhile, accuses Iran of arming and financing Shia militias fighting American and Iraqi troops in Iraq charges Iran denies.

Meanwhile, Iran has condemned a G-8 warning that it could face more sanctions over its controversial nuclear programme, the country's official Islamic Republic News Agency reported.

Mohamad Ali Hosseini, the spokesman of Iran's foreign ministry, said Iran welcomed diplomatic solutions "to answer questions and possible ambiguities over its peaceful nuclear programme," IRNA said late Saturday.

But Hosseini said the G-8 statement went against what he called the intent of the international community, to work on the nuclear issue through talks and negotiation.

He reiterated that Iran would not accept demands that it suspend uranium enrichment, which can be used both to generate energy and to create a nuclear weapon, before any negotiations.

The Group of Eight industrialised countries said Friday they would "support adopting further measures" if Iran refused to put a halt to its uranium enrichment programme.

The G-8 leaders, at a summit in Germany, said they would back UN Security Council moves on a third set of sanctions against Iran if Tehran failed to suspend the programme.

6 people shot dead in Wisconsin

AFP, Washington

Six people were found shot dead in a resort community in the midwestern US state of Wisconsin, US media reported yesterday.

The grim find was made inside a home in Delavan, a town near Lake Geneva, a close-knit resort community of about 8,000 people not far from Milwaukee, the reports said.

Police found all six bodies inside the home and one young girl, described as between two and three years old, was discovered alive outside, CNN said. The girl was taken to a local hospital and was in "very critical condition."

Police appeared to be treating the case as a possible murder-suicide.

"We have reason to believe the neighborhood is safe," Fox News quoted police chief Timothy O'Neill as saying. "There is not a suspect at large."

Gunfights in Lebanese camp after 15 killed

AFP, Nahr al-Bared, Lebanon

Lebanese soldiers and diehard Islamist militants entrenched in a refugee camp fought gunbattles yesterday after at least 15 people were killed in an operation to storm rebel positions.

As the showdown entered its fourth week, an army officer at the scene said the high casualties were suffered in clashes on Saturday that were often at close quarters and accompanied by heavy artillery fire from the militia.

The army, which has encircled Nahr al-Bared, tried to push into the Palestinian refugee camp in north Lebanon and overrun positions held by Fatah al-Islam militants, which has snipers posted on rooftops.

"Nine soldiers in total were killed in the clashes yesterday as the army advanced on Fatah al-Islam positions inside the camp," the

Lebanese army's spokesman said, updating an earlier toll.

Six troops were killed on Saturday and the other three died of their injuries on Sunday, he said. Almost 40 other soldiers were wounded.

Shahine Shahine, spokesman for Fatah al-Islam, told AFP by telephone from inside the battered refugee camp that four of its fighters were killed and another six wounded.

Two Palestinian civilians, whose bodies were evacuated on Sunday, also died in the shelling of the mostly-deserted camp, rescue workers said.

"The soldiers were victims of booby-trapped bomb blasts and grenades thrown at them by Fatah al-Islam," as they tried to storm the militia's positions on the northeastern outskirts of the camp, said an army commander.

The soldiers were "fighting from high-rise to high-rise but encountering fierce resistance from the extremists who have booby-trapped the buildings," the commander said.

The known death toll since the fighting broke out on May 20 in Nahr al-Bared and the nearby port city of Tripoli has now risen to 121, including 56 Lebanese army soldiers and about 50 Islamists.

Lebanese authorities say the fighting was sparked by raids on Fatah al-Islam hideouts in Tripoli following a bank robbery, after which the militants attacked army posts.

Shahine said the shelling on Saturday had been cover for a ground assault but that the attack had been repulsed.

Daughter of Brunei sultan weds

AFP, Bandar Seri Begawan

Diamonds sparkled and cannons boomed yesterday as a daughter of one of the world's longest-reigning monarchs, the Sultan of Brunei, wed a civil servant in a lavish traditional ceremony.

Thousands of people braved a blistering midday sun to greet the daughter of Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah and her smiling husband as they cruised through town in a gold Rolls-Royce after the wedding ceremony at the 1,700-room palace.

More than 2,000 guests, including Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Najib Razak, witnessed the wedding of Princess Majeedah Nuurul Bulqiah, 31, and Pengiran Khairul Khalil, 32, beneath 12 crystal chandeliers in the throne room.



PHOTO: AFP

Newly-wedded royal couple Pengiran Khairul Khalil (L) and Princess Majeedah Nuurul Bulqiah (L) sit together during the commencement of their wedding ceremony at the Nurul Iman Palace in Bandar Seri Begawan yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters march in front of the Coliseum during a demonstration against US President George W Bush planned by pacifist movements, anti-globalisation and far-left parties in Rome on Saturday. US President George W Bush is greeted by two separate demonstrations in Rome as the far left of Italy's ruling centre-left coalition seeks to distance itself from more hardline anti-US campaigners.

Israeli jets pound militant targets

AP, Gaza City

Israeli aircraft fired on militant targets in Gaza City in predawn airstrikes yesterday, hours after Palestinian gunmen breached Israel's heavily fortified Gaza border and tried to capture an Israeli soldier.

Fighting between rival Palestinian militant groups, meanwhile, spread in the southern Gaza Strip, further weakening a shaky truce forged in the face of punishing Israeli air assaults.

The attack on the frontier post Saturday was the first incursion into Israel from Gaza since militants killed two soldiers and seized a third nearly a year ago. The captured soldier, Cpl Gilad Shalit, remains missing.

The military said troops shot dead one of the gunmen involved in the attack Saturday, but no soldiers were harmed. Palestinians said three other militants escaped back to Gaza.

Islamic Jihad and the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, a violent offshoot of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah movement, claimed responsibility.

Abu Ahmed, a spokesman for Islamic Jihad, said the raiders meant to snatch a soldier but the attempt was foiled by Israeli helicopter gunships called in as reinforcements.

"The aim of the operation was to withdraw with the soldier in captivity," he said. "But the participation of Israeli helicopters prevented that."

The dead raider belonged to Islamic Jihad, he said.

The Israeli military struck back Sunday, firing missiles at a building used by Islamic Jihad officials and an arms workshop run by Fatah fighters, it said.

Palestinian security officials reported two injured in a third strike near another Islamic Jihad office, but the military said there had been only two air attacks.

Militants broke through the Israeli border at a point 15 miles north of the location of last year's raid. That raid and the capture of Shalit touched off a five-month Israeli military incursion in which hundreds of Palestinian militants and civilians were killed.

Israeli troops pulled out after a Nov. 26 truce was called, but that cease-fire collapsed last month under a hail of Palestinian rocket fire on southern Israel, which in turn triggered dozens of Israeli air strikes.

More than 60 Palestinians, most of them militants, and two Israeli civilians have been killed since the clashes resumed.

Deadly storms hit Australian city 'like a quake'

AFP, Sydney

Rescue workers urged thousands of people to evacuate their homes yesterday after deadly storms lashed Australia's east coast, leaving parts of one city looking like an earthquake had struck, officials said.

The death toll rose to nine when police found the body of a man who died after he was swept into a storm-water drain on a flooded road.

Authorities earlier found the body of a man who died when his car was swept off a highway into a swollen creek.

His wife and three young children, aged two, three and nine, and who were travelling with him, also died when the road collapsed underneath them, but their bodies had been found earlier.