

EU leaders agree on reform treaty

AFP, Brussels

European Union (EU) leaders headed home from the Brussels summit yesterday after reaching a deal on a new treaty, facing calls for referendums in some states and reaction ranging from fury to satisfaction.

EU Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso told a German newspaper that the deal had made it possible "to avoid a crisis."

"Uncertainty about our future treaty cast the show of doubt about our ability to act. These doubts have been removed," he told Bild am Sonntag.

Polish Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, whose country had blocked an agreement until the final stages, claimed victory.

"Poland really won. I have no doubt that during the night the position of Poland inside the EU was considerably strengthened," he told reporters in Warsaw.

But the country's far-right Deputy Prime Minister Roman Giertych lambasted German Chancellor Angela Merkel for threatening to exclude Poland from a EU summit agreement.

"It is a situation in which someone tells someone else 'Haende hoch' politically speaking" Giertych told the Polish news agency PAP, using the German for "hands up".

British prime-minister-in waiting Gordon Brown praised the incumbent Tony Blair for his role at the summit.

Brown was reported to have contacted Blair several times to object to French attempts to water down a commitment to free trade.

Interviewed by the BBC, he praised Blair's "skills" in securing a deal that protected Britain's national interest in key areas such as the Charter of Rights.

"On that basis, like every other treaty that has been negotiated – Nice, Amsterdam, Maastricht – while many other people will call for a referendum, it seems to me that we have met our negotiating position," Brown said.

"Thanks to the negotiating skill of Tony (the four red lines) have been

achieved and I think people when they look at the small print will see that we did what we set out to do, and that was to make sure that in these areas we were properly protected as a country to make our own decisions when we want to do so."

Political parties in Sweden and Denmark, including the far-right Danish People's Party which is part of the governing coalition, called for referendums. In Sweden the demand came from the Greens and former communists.

The major Dutch opposition parties said the Netherlands had not protected its own interests.

Although Dutch Christian Democrat Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende told journalists in Brussels the Netherlands had got most of its demands met, the opposition remained critical.

The euro-sceptical far left Socialist Party (SP), the biggest Dutch opposition bloc with 25 of the 150 seats in parliament, insisted Yesterday that the treaty be put to a referendum.

"I understand that the reference to striving for free and undistorted competition in the EU will be taken out. That would be bad for the Dutch prosperity," Han ten Broeke of the VVD told ANP.

The far-right anti-immigrant and euro-sceptical Freedom Party of Geert Wilders called the deal "a shamefully bad result."

In Portugal which takes over the six-monthly presidency of the EU on July 1 opposition parties on the right and left also demanded a referendum.

Leaders of the Czech Republic's main government party, the right-wing Civic Democrats, praised their leader's success in "turning around moves towards the creation of a European super state and towards European federalism" at the summit.

The Civic Democrats' executive council welcomed summit decisions to dump the idea of a European constitution, maintain the current voting system and allow national parliaments greater powers to supervise EU legislation as a "break-through" in a statement following its meeting yesterday.

Blair meets Pope

AFP, Vatican City

Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair met Pope Benedict XVI in a private audience at the Vatican yesterday, heightening speculation that the outgoing premier may convert to Catholicism.

A Vatican statement said afterwards that they had discussed "particularly delicate subjects", including the Middle East, the future of the European Union and recent unspecified legislation passed in Britain.

It made no mention of any possibility of Blair changing his faith.

The meeting with the pontiff came four days before Blair leaves office after 10 years in power.

Blair was accompanied by his wife Cherie, who is a Catholic and greeted the pope following the private 25-minute talk with her husband.

Blair and the pope were also joined after their discussions by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, the archbishop of Westminster and head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, further fuelling the media speculation about Blair's conversion.

Blair's choice of gift for Benedict also raised eyebrows – a portrait of John Henry Cardinal Newman, a 19th century Anglican prelate who converted to Catholicism. After his visit to the Vatican, Blair had lunch at the British Catholic College in Rome, the first British government leader to do so.

Blair, an Anglican in a country that has never had a Catholic premier, has triggered intense interest about his personal and professional plans for the future after he hands over the reins of power to finance minister Gordon Brown on Wednesday.

The Times reported yesterday that Blair said the question of his becoming a Catholic had not been entirely "resolved".

"I don't want to talk about it. It's difficult with some of these things," he told the London newspaper.

"Things aren't always as resolved as they might be."

Unnamed sources in London and Rome dismissed the rumours Blair would use the Vatican trip to convert, saying he wanted to speak to the pope about spreading harmony between Christianity, Islam and Judaism, The Times reported. It was his third visit to the Vatican, and his second with the current pope.

A spokesman for Blair said last week he would discuss "as he has in the past" not only interfaith questions but also world issues such as peace in the Middle East.

Before going into their private talks Saturday, Blair and Pope Benedict greeted each other and talked about the European Union summit, which Blair had attended before coming to the Vatican.

"I heard it was a success," the pope said to Blair, who confirmed that the talks on an outline for a new EU treaty had ended in accord.

The reference in the Vatican statement to British legislation was thought to refer to a law obliging adoption agencies to accept applications from homosexual couples, which upset the Catholic Church.

Talk of conversion during his decade in power has dogged Blair, who reportedly regularly attends Catholic mass with his family at Chequers, the country retreat of British prime ministers north-west of London.

Despite much speculation about his religious beliefs, Blair has rarely commented on the issue, with his press spokesman Alistair Campbell once telling reporters: "We don't do God."

The Daily Telegraph, quoting Church sources and friends of the prime minister, said Friday Blair may announce his conversion soon after meeting the pope, while also noting that his views on abortion, stem cell research and other moral issues are at odds with traditional Catholic teachings.

The Vatican also opposed the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq in which London was Washington's main ally.

The newspaper suggested that Blair may have been reluctant to convert during his tenure in office for fear of a potential conflict with his role in appointing Anglican bishops.

He may have also been wary of doing so while playing a key mediating role in the Northern Ireland peace process between the province's Catholic and Protestant communities.

A first class magistrate of the Khagrachari district administration, Ahmed Kabir, also acknowledged the fact that hill cutting is going on, and told The Daily Star that they already visited the area of Sabujbagh and filed a case in connection with the hill cutting accusing Mizan as the prime culprit.

Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) Tareq Ahmed said, "Our position is very clear, for saving the environment we take necessary actions against hill cutters."

Cutting of hills is a common sight even beyond Sabujbagh, in the areas of Shalban, Comilla Tila, Khagrapur, T&T Building, New Police Line, Panch Mile, DC Hills, Jail Hills, Roads and Highway Rest House Hills, Boalkhali, Tetultala, and No 1 Kadamtali. Besides, hill cutting is also going on in full swing in all the eight upazilas of the district.

Local environmental activists filed several general diaries with police stations in connection with illegal hill cutting, but the administration has yet to take any effective step to protect the hills.

"We have already filed four more cases and arrested two men for hill cutting," said first class magistrate Arun Kumar Mondol adding, "We have started a mobile court also to stop hill cutting."

Monindra Lal Tripura, chairman of Khagrachhari Hill District Council said the council approved the project of building a new road considering the communication problem the local residents face, but Wadud had no influence on their decision.

Insurgency-linked violence killed more than 4,400 Afghans last year, the bulk of them rebels but including about 1,000 civilians, according to Human Rights Watch.

The group's primary concern is the bill's new emphasis on education and professional skills rather than family ties as a basis for granting immigrants residency status.

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3 DCC commissioners

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A high official of the department said observing Diba Enterprise's violation of the DCC rules, the department recommended cancelling its contract. "But while there was no action from the DCC authorities, ward commissioners Kayum and Latif threatened the department officials for making such recommendation," the official said requesting anonymity.

Sources also said Khoka extended the leasing period of Diba Enterprise up to September 2007 on the basis of recommendation from Kayum.

The DCC last year asked Diba Enterprise to build 150 shops—each measuring 24 square feet (sqft)—to rehabilitate hawkers. The shops were built under the supervision of the three ward commissioners violating the DCC specification—some shops measuring 35sqft, some 40sqft and some even 126sqft.

The DCC mayor approved the shops in three phases—on August 20 and September 19 last year and on April 4 this year—following recommendations from Kayum.

A high official of the DCC's Traffic Engineering Department said according to rules the design has to be submitted before constructing any structure but Diba Enterprise did not bother to follow that rule.

"We are supposed to blacklist any firm for such practice but we could not do anything in this case," he said.

The shops were built at a cost of Tk 12 lakh and were sold for Tk 75 lakh.

Sources said owners of at least 100 illegal shops used to give money to the three ward commissioners and the amount would be Tk 70,000 a month.

Diba Enterprise owner Abul Bashar did not dare to file even a general diary (GD). He said, "My life was under threat at that time. They [the three ward commissioners] used to threaten me quite often over telephone. They also demanded Tk 2 lakh from my representative whom I gave the charge of the terminal on February 16, 2007."

Habibur Rahman, who is now in charge of the terminal on behalf of Diba Enterprise, said he had to pay the due electric bills of Tk 12 lakh and

now has to pay daily taxes of Tk 47 thousand to the DCC.

"When I first stepped into the terminal, I had to pay Tk 2 lakh to the extortionists. The men of the three ward commissioners later demanded Tk 3 lakh more and I informed the Rab of this," he said.

The Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested Motiur Rahman Babul and Kayum's nephew Kamrul Huda from the spot on May 30 this year when they came to take the money.

Boy dies

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handing over the ten persons to police.

The duty officer of Katrul PS said conditions of two of the ten were grave, so they sent the two to DMCH. Jamal died at 1:30am.

The other injured is Kajal, 19, who was picked up by the army men on Friday from a pick-up van in Mirpur-14 when he was sleeping. DMCH sources said Kajal was admitted unconscious and did not regain sense as of 8:30pm yesterday.

The others having minor injuries were sent to court.

Jamal's uncle Ali Azam quoted the night guards near the tea stall as saying that some army persons picked Jamal from the shop at 4:00am without showing any cause and took him to some place near Garrison area in the cantonment. Ali Azam had left the tea stall for home at 11:30pm on Thursday.

As the family members searched for the boy at the army check post at Garrison at 9:00am on Friday, the military asked them to come at 5:00pm.

"His [Jamal's] little chest bore signs of a lot of kicks," said Azam. "How could he be involved in the theft since he does not even know where Kachukhetis?" he added.

Ali Azam demanded fair investigation into the incident and punishment to the persons responsible.

When Inter-Services Public Relations office was contacted, its Director Lt Col Kazi Md Kabirul Islam expressed their ignorance of the incident.

Hill cutting

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found that labourers were cutting hills for building the Tk 10 lakh road.

A labourer, who was busy cutting a hill, said they were cutting the hill Blair had attended before coming to the Vatican.

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8 more US troops

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the military said.

The latest fatalities took the military's losses in Iraq to 3,545 since the March 2003 invasion, according to an AFP count based on Pentagon figures.

Earlier a group of armed men stormed a minibus and shot dead six men after dragging them out of the vehicle near the Iraqi Shia holy city of Karbala yesterday, a local official and a medic said.

The bus was ambushed in the town of Al-Shikar, west of Karbala, the official said on condition of anonymity, adding that a woman passenger in the bus was released before the men were gunned down.

"The men were dragged out of the bus, while the woman travelling with them was allowed to go. The six men were later shot dead," said the official, a member of the municipal council of the nearby town of Al-Thamur.

He said that one of the victims was fellow council member Karim Abdul Ridha.

A medic in the Karbala general hospital confirmed the attack.

In the northern town of Samarra, armed men attacked a police station and killed two policemen, injured another two policeman and five civilians, a local police officer and a medic said.

One gunman, allegedly an Arab foreign fighter, was killed in the clashes.

In southeastern Baghdad a civilian was killed and five others wounded in a roadside bomb blast, a medic said.

And former member of executed dictator Saddam Hussein's Baath party was shot dead in the southern city of Amarra, according to police.

80 Taliban

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in the adjoining province of Uruzgan when a battle erupted after troops were shot at with multiple rockets.

The coalition also announced it had detained 20 militants early Saturday in an operation against al-Qaeda militants in Ghazni province.

At one compound fighters had fired rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns at the soldiers, who returned fire and killed the assailants, a statement said.

The Taliban's insurgency has steadily intensified since it was launched, despite the efforts of thousands of foreign troops helping the Afghan security forces.

The interior ministry announced that Afghan and foreign security forces had killed more than 1,500 insurgents in about 80 operations across Afghanistan since March.

About 530 more, including 23 would-be suicide bombers, were captured, it said in a statement.

But insurgent attacks have also increased, with regular suicide and roadside bombings claimed by the militants that have killed scores of civilians.

In a new incident, a district governor said six Afghan civilians driving trucks supplying goods to foreign military bases were killed Friday by Taliban in the southern province of Helmand.

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\$100m WB loan

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government's new Non-Government Teachers' Registration and Certification Authority, to remove favouritism and eliminate unqualified teachers from the system.

Evicted hawkers

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a shop on the footpath at Gulistan and earn Tk 6,000 a month.

But over the last five months, his monthly earnings have plummeted to Tk 1,000 when his house rent is Tk 1,300. His wife teaches Arabic to children at the shanties and earns about Tk 1,000. They have two boys, one going to school. But as Solaiman could not afford anymore, his son had to drop out.

Solaiman has to pay Tk 10 for carrying goods from his house in Keraniganj to Gulistan while one kg rice costs him at least Tk 23.

"The amount I earn is not enough even to buy the rice my family needs," said Solaiman adding that the nature of the job itself requires them to be on the wayside.

"With my current income, I cannot even buy enough food for my little daughter," said Sayeed whose income dropped to Tk 2,000 per month from Tk 9,000. He had a makeshift shop at Gulistan before eviction.

Oftentimes, the hawkers have to count Tk 10 to Tk 100 in bribe for police and linesmen. Their sufferings reach peak when it rains as they cannot go out.

After dislodging hawkers from footpaths across the capital on January 17, the caretaker administration set several sites as holiday markets. Those include Dilkusha, Gulistan, Matsya Bhaban, Manik Mia Avenue, Motijheel Ideal, Panthapath, New Market, Adabar and Palashi intersections.

A large number of the city hawkers cannot run business in the holiday markets due to space constraints. Those based in one area do not want to go to a market in another area as it requires higher transportation cost.

Bush vows permanent ban on future illegal immigrants

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush promised yesterday to permanently bar future illegal immigrants from the United States as he renewed his push for immigration reform, a centerpiece of his domestic agenda.

A revised reform package was reintroduced in the Senate this past week after its predecessor failed on June 7 to garner enough votes to cut off debate and move for final passage.

The collapse of the first proposal has prompted a personal intervention by the president, who went to Capitol Hill to plead for giving the bill a second chance.

But while he has succeeded in putting the proposal back on the Senate agenda, the legislation is facing strong opposition from both Republicans and Democrats, who argue that granting legal status to an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants will only encourage more people to sneak across the poorly guarded border.

In his weekly radio address, Bush sought to address these concerns, revealing for the first time that under the revised proposal, people crossing a US border illegally will not only be deported, but never allowed to enter the United States again.

"Under this bill, those caught crossing illegally will be permanently barred from returning to the United States on a work or tourist visa," the president stated.

He went on to assure Americans the new bill puts border enforcement first.

The measure contains 4.4 billion dollars to help the US Border Patrol hire more agents, build additional fencing, purchase infrared cameras and other technologies that help intercept illegal aliens.

"Only after these enforcement tools are in place will certain other parts of the bill go into effect," Bush said.

These "other parts" include a guest worker program that illegal immigrants currently in the United States would be able to join by applying for a renewable "Z" visa and paying fines.

Program participants will be allowed to eventually seek permanent residency and citizenship, although only after returning to their countries of origin.

Bush said that only those passing a background check, holding jobs, maintaining a clean criminal record and capable of mastering English will qualify for a "Z" visa.

But he insisted that lawmakers must take action now, before the situation at the southern border gets out of control.

"We have an obligation to solve problems that have been piling up for decades," said the president. "The status quo is unacceptable."

The revamped grand bargain, however, is generating as much criticism as its defunct one.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association, which theoretically stands to benefit from legalization of 12 million people, called the bill "unworkable in its current form" and promised to "vigorously" lobby against it.

The group's primary concern is the bill's new emphasis on education and professional skills rather than family ties as a basis for granting immigrants residency status.

Conservative Republicans insist that many of the arguments currently used by Bush were already used by president Ronald Reagan in 1986, when he pushed through Congress

Lebanon unrest

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The dead include 79 soldiers -- more than twice the number of Lebanese troops killed during last summer's 34-day Israeli onslaught against the Shiite Hezbollah movement.

Fatah al-Islam casualties are unknown, but at least 51 militants are believed to have been killed.

In a statement sent to AFP yesterday the army warned against "elements of the terrorist network."

"They must not be permitted refuge among the civilians in the camp, allowing them to continue their aggression against our soldiers," it said, adding that it would "respond energetically to sources of fire."

The military urged "the camp's population to take a courageous stand so it does not fall victim to these criminals who have only one choice -- to surrender and be brought to justice."

The latest clashes came a day after an Arab League delegation admitted failure in its latest bid to reconcile Lebanon's deeply divided Western-backed and pro-Syrian political camps.

Artillery pounded the Islamists as the army sought to end a siege that has lasted nearly five weeks. Extremists entrenched inside the warren-like camp responded with automatic fire, an AFP correspondent said.

The brutal standoff continued despite Defence Minister Elias Murr saying on Thursday that the onslaught against Sunni Muslim fighters of the Al-Qaeda-inspired Fatah al-Islam group "has ended."

Fires burned inside Nahr al-Bared and a pall of smoke hung over the southern part of the camp's single-storey buildings and narrow

streets into which the remaining militants have withdrawn.

Their original stronghold in the "new camp" -- a high-rise spillover to the north from the original refugee camp whose boundaries were set by the United Nations in 1948 -- is now a wasteland of shattered concrete.

Some 2,000 residents of the camp's pre-battle population of 31,000 are still inside Nahr Al-Bared, with those who fled now dispersed among other Palestinian camps around the country, mostly at nearby Beddawi.

Sheikh Mustafa Dawood, who leads Palestinian clerics trying to broker a ceasefire, entered the camp on Friday and met militant spokesman Shahin Shahin who expressed a desire to honour a unilateral truce "in the hope of reaching a happy outcome."

But Dawood told AFP that Shahin also said "if there is shooting at us we will be forced to respond."

On the political front, an Arab League delegation has left Lebanon's pro- and anti-Syrian camps to the negotiating table to seek an end to a festering seven-month political crisis.

"Some ideas and theses proposed today hindered the possibility of reaching an official understanding" between the anti-Syrian parliamentary majority and the pro-Syrian opposition, league chief Amr Mussa told reporters.

He was ready to resume mediation "if things progress," he said.