

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 Gierlach 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 noch' politically speaking," Gierlach 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

Blair meets Pope

AFP, Vatican City

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 Democratic 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 AFP.

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 "breakthrough" in a statement following its meeting yesterday.

Hasina, dissidents

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leader present at the meeting quoted her as saying.

On the memorandum of understanding with Khelafat Majlis, she tried to defend herself by saying the deal no longer exists. But, most of the leaders, who are against her mode of presidency, were not satisfied with her explanations, and expressed their sorrow.

Amir Hossain Amu, who is leading the recent move for "reform", at a post meeting press conference categorically said he differed with the views of Hasina, on issues like deal with Khelafat Majlis and her taking a tough stance against the caretaker government.

HASINA FOR REFORMS

Hasina asked her party leaders to pass intra-party reform proposals before the central working committee and council of the party for final approval, and not to her.

"If the proposals are placed to me, it would mean recognising absolute power of the party president," she said.

Claiming that she is a strong advocate for reforms in the party, she said necessary reforms would be made through discussion.

Hasina was talking to reporters after placing wreath at the portrait of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in front of Bangabandhu Memorial Museum at Dhamondi in the early morning to mark the 58th founding anniversary of the AL.

Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Amir Hossain Amu, Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta, Motia Chowdhury and Mukul Bose, among others, were present on the occasion.

Later, she held a meeting with the party colleagues for one and a half hours.

Criticising the comments by an influential party presidium member on the agreement between AL and Khelafat Majlis (which was cancelled later), Hasina said, "The situation in Bangladesh could not be understood from Singapore" (the leader is back from Singapore a few days ago).

Defending herself Hasina said, "Khelafat Majlis came to us promising a secular policy. And the deal no longer exists."

In reply to questions, she said, "It is only AL which takes decisions on any issue after discussions by the party working committee."

About the party's source of funds, she said, "Awami League does not need to demand money from anybody. Its well-wishers donate funds voluntarily, and that is the strength of the party."

The former prime minister said, "Only AL will be able to bring economic freedom of the people, to control price hike to end their sufferings... and lead this country to its desired destination."

Alleging that a certain quarter is plotting against the party but it is ready to face any such obstacles, AL is a people's party and it cannot be destroyed," she asserted.

Hasina urged her party workers not to get disappointed, saying, "The sun lurking behind the cloud."

Asked about the remarks by a party presidium member on her proposal for age limit of politicians, the AL chief said, "I have given my opinion. It will be discussed... we have to see if it is accepted... if not, we will finalise the decision after discussion with all."

She mentioned that earlier she wanted elections by June but many of the party leaders disagreed with that. So, she didn't proceed further.

She alleged that attempts are being made to brand AL leaders as thieves like BNP leaders who stole crores of taka and amassed wealth through corruption in the last five years of their rule. Time has come to evaluate

ate everything... what the people got during eight and half years of Awami League rule since 1971 and during the remaining period," she said.

Replying to a query, Hasina said Khelafat Majlis had entered into an agreement to join the AL-led grand alliance by accepting secularism. "But we scrapped the agreement later through discussion as people didn't take it positively."

The AL chief along with her party leaders offered munajat after placing wreaths at the portrait of Bangabandhu. They also observed one minutes silence.

POLICE INTERVENTION

After talking to reporters, Hasina proceeded to enter the museum but police prevented them from following her.

Police allowed them to enter the museum only after Hasina vowed not to enter it without her party colleagues.

At one stage, she told Amu, "You are known as supporter of reforms... why police bars you?"

Asked about this later, a smiling Amu said, "If our leader (Hasina) would not have intervened, we would not be allowed to enter the museum. So, you talk with her."

BRIEFING BY AMU

At a crowded briefing at his Eskaton residence later, Amu said there is no dispute or controversy within AL on the reforms issue.

"We have no contradiction with the party president regarding reforms in the party," said Amu, known to lead a group of influential presidium members who are preparing reform proposals.

They did not say anything in their proposals for removal of Sheikh Hasina from the post of party chief, he added.

Amu however took a swipe at Hasina for the agreement with Khelafat Majlis and some of her speeches against the caretaker government when she was abroad.

He also criticised her remark that the political situation in Bangladesh cannot be understood from Singapore. "I wonder if one can understand politics back home while staying in America and UK (where Hasina made various remarks on it)."

About discussions with the party chief yesterday, Amu said, "What I am talking about for the last two days, I again discussed those matters with her... We discussed joint leadership of the party and how to run it in a more democratic way."

Amu informed reporters that he differed with the views of his party chief regarding agreement with Khelafat Majlis and some of her speech against the present caretaker government. "Amu said,

"We did not accept her (Hasina) explanation about agreement with Khelafat Majlis and some of her speech against the present caretaker government."

He claimed that leaders from home and abroad congratulated him on his recent comments on reforms.

On election, he said it should be held after reforms are brought in the party.

About the 'minus-two' formula, Amu said, he is not aware of this.

AL leaders Prof Abu Sayeed, Mahmudur Rahman Manna, and KM Jahangir have been tasked to work on reforms, he added.

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 Khoa 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 major 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 Bashir 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 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 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.

Talks 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 its 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.

In his last months in office, Blair has steadfastly defended Britain's role in Iraq against mounting public opposition while listing efforts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a top priority.

2 die in US-run Iraq jail

AFP, Baghdad

Two detainees held at US-run prisons in Iraq were reported dead yesterday by the US military, including one who was wounded in a mortar attack on his jail earlier this month.

A detainee died on Friday at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq from cardiac arrest, the military said, after being wounded in a June 9 mortar attack on the prison.

Seven more detainees were killed in that attack and another 68 wounded.

Of the some 19,000 Iraqis held in US-run facilities, 13,000 are held in Camp Bucca near the southern port of Basra.

Another detainee also died of cardiac arrest on Thursday during a routine medical transfer from Camp Cropper, on the outskirts of Baghdad to Camp Bucca.

Most of the detainees in US and Iraqi prisons are held without formal charges.

They alleged that the then lawmaker had the OC transferred after the OC failed to impose section 144 on me to impose section 144, he said, adding, "The situation would have gone beyond control had I carried out his orders."

Sources in the Upazila Nirbahi Officer's Office of Anwara upazila alleged that Akhter Nabi, a local BNP leader loyal to Sarwar, used to supervise all behind the scene acts on behalf of Sarwar, especially the transfers and appointments of police personnel and other government officials there.

"Through protecting Sarwar's interest, Nabi became a very rich rich man from nothing," the sources added.

Sources in Anwara Police Station said OC Mahbub was summoned in front of Sarwar and was threatened at least 50 times in that small period of time for not carrying out his orders.

They alleged that the then lawmaker had the OC transferred after the OC failed to impose section 144 on me to impose section 144 but I refused to do it finding no justification to do so," Mahbub told The Daily Star yesterday over telephone when asked about the incident.

"Hundreds of people had already gathered for the rally at CUFL when

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-Shikat, 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 policemen, and 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 Amara, according to police.

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 Kachukhitis?" he added.

All 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.