



Pakistani policemen scuffle with government employees during a protest rally in Lahore yesterday to denounce soaring price hikes in the country. Pakistan raised interest rates on May 22 in a bid to curb soaring inflation.

EU nations okay new rules on expelling illegal immigrants

AFP, Luxembourg

European Union nations approved yesterday tough new rules on expelling visa-overstayers, which could see them banned for five years if they resist, the EU's Slovenian presidency announced.

The agreement was sealed by the 27 EU interior ministers at a meeting in Luxembourg, the presidency said, and is expected to be passed by the European Parliament at its session in Strasbourg between June 16 and 19.

The new measures will oblige authorities in EU nations to choose between issuing residency or other permits to illegal immigrants from outside the bloc or returning them to their countries of origin.

Secret plan to keep Iraq under US control

Bush wants 50 military bases, control of Iraqi airspace and legal immunity for all American soldiers and contractors

THE INDEPENDENT, Undated

A secret deal being negotiated in Baghdad would perpetuate the American military occupation of Iraq indefinitely, regardless of the outcome of the US presidential election in November.

The terms of the impending deal, details of which have been leaked to The Independent, are likely to have an explosive political effect in Iraq. Iraqi officials fear that the accord, under which US troops would occupy permanent bases, conduct military operations, arrest Iraqis and enjoy immunity from Iraqi law,

will destabilise Iraq's position in the Middle East and lay the basis for unending conflict in their country.

But the accord also threatens to provoke a political crisis in the US. President Bush wants to push it through by the end of next month, so he can declare a military victory and claim his 2003 invasion has been vindicated. But by perpetuating the US presence in Iraq, the long-term settlement would undercut pledges by the Democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama, to withdraw US troops if he is elected president in November.

The timing of the agreement would also boost the Republican candidate, John McCain, who has claimed the United States is on the verge of victory in Iraq a victory that he says Obama would throw away by a premature military withdrawal.

America currently has 151,000 troops in Iraq and, even after projected withdrawals next month, troop levels will stand at more than 142,000 10,000 more than when the military "surge" began in January 2007. Under the terms of the new treaty, the Americans would retain the long-term use of more than 50 bases in Iraq. American negotiators

are also demanding immunity from Iraqi law for US troops and contractors, and a free hand to carry out arrests and conduct military activities in Iraq without consulting the Baghdad government.

The precise nature of the American demands has been kept secret until now. The leaks are certain to generate an angry backlash in Iraq. "It is a terrible breach of our sovereignty," said one Iraqi politician, adding that if the security deal was signed it would delegitimise the government in Baghdad which will be seen as an American pawn.

Nepali Maoists make offer to end deadlock

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists said yesterday they were prepared to give up their claim to the first presidency of the newly republican country in order to resolve a post-monarchy political deadlock.

The former rebels, however, said they did not want their main political rivals to have the job.

"We have decided to give up the claim for the presidential post to end the ongoing deadlock but we won't accept presidential candidacies from any other political parties," senior Maoist official Barsha Man Pun told AFP.

"The ceremonial president should be chosen from civil society," Pun said.

Nepal took a historic step last week when a Maoist-dominated constitutional assembly officially ended the world's last Hindu monarchy, but the parties are still wrangling over how they should fill the political void.

The ultra-leftists -- who signed a landmark peace deal in 2006 -- had said their election victory in April polls meant they deserved the prime ministerial and presidential positions in a new government.

But rival parties had said the Maoists should not be allowed to hold both positions as it would give the ex-guerrillas too much power.

Nepal's peace minister rejected the latest Maoist proposal and accused the ex-rebels of trying to establish a dictatorship.

"It is not for the Maoists to decide on the criteria for a president," peace minister Ram Chandra Poudel, a senior member of the Nepali Congress party, told AFP.

"We have acknowledged the Maoists as the biggest party but the way they are behaving shows they want to form a totalitarian government," said Poudel, referring to the fact that the presidency would be a ceremonial role.

Bandh cripples life in Left-ruled states

PTI, New Delhi

Normal life came to a grinding halt in Left-ruled West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura yesterday as the ruling fronts in these states enforced a dawn-to-dusk bandh in protest against the steep hike in petroleum products.

Major roads in Kolkata and Agartala wore a deserted look as vehicles, both private and public, went off the roads in response to the bandh called by the Left parties in power.

However, two-wheelers and private vehicles were seen plying in Thiruvananthapuram, where buses and autorickshaws went off the roads.

The Left Fronts in all the three states had yesterday given call for a 12-hour bandh to protest against the increase in prices of petrol by Rs five a litre, diesel by Rs 3 and LPG cylinders by Rs 50.

Illinois scandal threatens US presidential race

AP, Chicago

A day after Barack Obama sealed the Democratic nomination for president, a corruption scandal involving a fundraiser who once bankrolled his campaign resurfaced to slightly dampen the festivities.

Chicago businessman Antoin "Tony" Rezeko, 52, was convicted Wednesday of fraud, money laundering and aiding and abetting bribery in a plot to squeeze illegal payoffs out of firms hoping to do business with the state.

Republicans are already capitalising on Rezeko's ties to Obama, even though the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee is accused of no wrongdoing and his name was barely mentioned at trial.

"Today's verdict and Obama's friendship with Rezeko raises serious questions about whether he has the judgment to serve as president," Robert M. "Mike" Duncan, chairman of the Republican National Committee, said in a statement. Rezeko's \$8 million bond was

revoked and he was taken into federal custody after the verdict in the nine-week trial that exposed a corrupt culture of payoffs and campaign finance abuses plaguing Illinois politics.

US Attorney Patrick J. Fitzgerald said the verdict represented "an antidote to the poison of corruption" that trial testimony alleged included the fixing of state boards that controlled a \$40 billion pension fund and made major decisions about million-dollar hospital construction.

The trial included explosive testimony about all-night drug parties involving the government's star witness and allegations that Gov. Rod Blagojevich personally discussed a state job for a campaign contributor.

Rezeko has known Obama since he entered politics, raised money for his Illinois campaigns and was involved in a 2005 real estate deal with him. Obama has donated \$150,000 in Rezeko-related contributions to charity.



Pakistani lawyers and political parties activists shout slogans as they march during an anti-Musharraf protest rally in Lahore yesterday for the reinstatement of Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and others judges. Pakistani lawyers have decided to step up their campaign for the reinstatement of judges deposed by President Pervez Musharraf last year.

Myanmar exchanging food for labour Says Amnesty

AP, Yangon

Myanmar's military regime has forced cyclone survivors to do manual labor in exchange for food and stepped up a campaign to evict displaced citizens from aid shelters, an international human rights group said yesterday.

London-based Amnesty International also said authorities in several cyclone-hit areas continue to divert aid despite the junta's pledge to crack down on the problem weeks ago.

"Unless human rights safeguards are observed, tens of thousands of people remain at risk," Amnesty said in a report released Thursday. "Respect for human rights must be at the centre of the relief effort."

More than a month after the storm, many people in stricken areas still have not received any aid and the military regime continues to impose constraints on international rescue efforts, human rights groups say.



Activists of India's opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) shout anti-government slogans during protest against a government hike in fuel prices in Mumbai yesterday. India's government faced angry protests nationwide after it hiked fuel prices, with general strikes organised by its communist allies paralysing three states.

US puts India, China on watch list over human trafficking

PTI, New York

The United States has placed India and China on watch list for not doing enough to fight human trafficking and claimed that part of the enormous economic growth in the developing countries is being fuelled by bonded labour.

The Indian government does not fully comply with the minimum standards for elimination of trafficking, it said but conceded that New Delhi is making "significant efforts" to fight bonded labour.

A new report released by the State Department showed yesterday that the most dismal record is of the US' Persian Gulf friends including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman who complete with Iran, North Korea and Myanmar for failure to stop human

trafficking or take action against traffickers.

Equally dismal was the record of Sudan, Syria, Myanmar, Cuba, Fiji, Moldova and Papua New Guinea, according to grading done by the annual report.

Pakistan and Sri Lanka were somewhat better off as they were placed countries that do take steps to fight it -- Tier 2, second of the three categories in which the countries have been divided.

In India, the report said, clothing and brick making are two major booming industries in which forced labour, debt bondage and hazardous conditions are common. Bracketed with India in clothing sector are Bangladesh, Jordan and Malaysia. Similar conditions exist in shrimp industry in Thailand, it says. For brick making, India and China were bracketed.

Palestinian factions eye deal after yr-long split

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas yesterday appeared headed toward reconciliation talks one year after the Islamists seized power in Gaza causing a political and territorial split.

The US-backed Abbas on Wednesday unexpectedly called for talks with Hamas, which ousted his Fatah party from power in the Gaza Strip in June 2007 after deadly factional fighting.

Hamas, which both Israel and the United States consider a terrorist organisation, welcomed the call. The head of the Islamist government in Gaza, Ismail Haniya, was to respond formally in a televised speech later on Thursday.

Abbas wants the talks to be based on a Yemeni-brokered reconciliation deal which Hamas and Fatah reached in March but failed to implement amid disagreements over its conditions.

Abbas had insisted the talks could only start after a return to the political status quo that existed before Hamas seized Gaza -- a condition the Islamists rejected.

The Palestinian president made no mention of this condition in a speech on Wednesday and tactfully refrained from referring to the Hamas takeover as a "coup," referring instead to "divisions."

The appeal by president Abbas differs from those he had made previously which contained condi-

tions that prevented any dialogue," Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri said.

He noted that the Abbas proposal came at a time when peace talks between the Palestinians and Israel -- which Hamas opposes -- have made no progress despite both sides' stated intention of reaching a deal this year.

"There is no doubt the appeal by president Abbas is linked to the failure of the negotiations and the fact that national (Palestinian) unity is essential in order to confront Israel," Abu Zuhri said.

Al-Quds, the main Palestinian newspaper, agreed.

"The appeal for national dialogue by president Abbas is no coincidence in these hard times for the Palestinian cause," Al-Quds said, citing an increase in Jewish settlement activity in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and the lack of tangible progress in peace negotiations.

In Wednesday's address marking the 41st anniversary of the 1967 war that ended with the occupation of Palestinian territories, including east Jerusalem, Abbas had harsh words for Israel.

"Peace and security... cannot be attained through swords of occupation or bulldozers of settlements. The Israeli decisions to annex Jerusalem and build settlements in the city and in the West Bank, along with the separation Apartheid wall, are void and null," he said.

Five 9/11 defendants appear at hearing

AFP, Us Naval Base At Guantanamo Bay

Five alleged co-conspirators in the September 11, 2001 attacks appeared before a US military tribunal here yesterday, some of them being seen publicly for the first time in years.

All dressed in white, the five, including the alleged mastermind of the attacks, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, were seated at a table with their military defence team.

The hearing was due to start at 9:00 am (1300 GMT) with the five to be read the charges against them, but the military prosecutors said there was a delay to the proceedings.

Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, considered the brains of the attacks, Ramzi Binalshibh, Ali Abd al-Aziz Ali, Wallid bin Attash and Mustapha al-Hawsawi face the death penalty if convicted by the military commission on the US base on Cuba.

Charges against them include conspiracy, murder, attacking civilians, intentionally causing serious bodily injury, destruction of property, terrorism, and material support for terrorism.

A village of tents has been set up on an old landing strip to accommodate the journalists and other visitors who have travelled to Cuba for the hearing, part of a 12-million dollar investment to turn this into "Camp Justice."

US backs talks with some Afghan rebels 10 more Taliban killed in fighting

AFP, AP, Kabul

The US ambassador in Kabul said yesterday that Washington backed the Afghan government's efforts to reconcile with Taliban and other rebels without power-sharing or ceding control of certain areas.

Attacks by coalition and Afghan forces have killed more than 10 Taliban in Afghanistan.

Faridullah Khan, deputy provincial police chief of the southern province of Zabul, says nine Taliban were killed in airstrikes after militants launched an early morning attack on an army convoy.

Khan says two Afghan army vehicles were damaged in the Thursday morning fight and that six Taliban motorbikes and several rocket-propelled grenades were discovered after the battle.

Elsewhere, the US-led coalition said in a statement that "several militants" were killed and five detained on Wednesday during an operation in Helmand province that targeted a Taliban leader associated with the murder of government officials.

There is mounting debate in Afghan political circles and media about peace talks with militants, notably former prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of

the radical Hezb-i-Islami faction.

The United States supported Kabul's peace talks with rebels who were not guilty of the "most serious crimes" and willing to accept the government and rule of law, ambassador William Wood told reporters.

However, he added: "We don't believe and I don't think the government itself has any interest in allowing anybody to shoot his way into preferred status, either (or) a share of power or control (of) a locality or anything like that."

He would not comment on reports that Hekmatyar, who has a multi-million-dollar US bounty on his head, was already in talks with government and opposition officials.

"But with the exception of al-Qaeda and those closely associated with al-Qaeda, we think this is completely an issue for Afghanistan," he said.

The ambassador said there were "signs" of fracturing within the Taliban, including rapid changes in their chain of command and distancing between factions.

"I think that there are large segments of the Taliban who are genuinely unhappy with the turn toward terrorism of the larger organisation," he said.

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