

Russia recognises South Ossetia, Abkhaza as independent states

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday formally recognised the Georgian rebel regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states in a startling new challenge to the West.

President Dmitry Medvedev announced the recognition after meeting top ministers and defence chiefs on the Georgia crisis, ignoring warnings from Western powers against the move, which France and Britain immediately condemned.

"I have signed decrees on the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia," Medvedev said in a national television address, standing at a podium flanked by two Russian flags.

"Russia calls on other states to follow its example," he added.

The Russian president said his decision was made "taking into account the freely expressed will of the Ossetian and Abkhaz people" and was in accordance with the United Nations charter and a 1970 declaration on international law.

"This is not an easy choice, but it is the only way to save the lives of people," Medvedev said.

He said Russia had demonstrated "restraint and patience" in its relationship with Georgia and had repeatedly sought to resolve the dispute over the breakaway regions through negotiations.

"But our insistent proposals to the Georgian side to reach an agreement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the renunciation of force remained unanswered."

"Unfortunately, they were ignored

also by Nato and the UN," Medvedev said.

Russia also suspended cooperation with Nato and a visit by the Western military alliance's secretary general Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Russia's ambassador to Nato Dmitry Rogozin said.

Tensions have mounted since Russian forces entered Georgia on August 8 to thwart a Georgian attempt to retake South Ossetia. A ceasefire was brokered but the United States and other Western nations have accused Russia of breaching the accord by keeping tanks and troops in Georgia.

The US embassy in Tbilisi announced that a US navy destroyer carrying humanitarian aid was headed to the Georgian port of Poti, but later said it could no longer confirm the operation.

Anwar wins landslide victory in by-polls

AFP, Permatang Pau

Malaysia's opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim won a "landslide" victory yesterday in a by-election to return him to parliament, and said he was on track to oust a weakened government.

The vote in his home state of Penang cemented a stunning comeback for Anwar, who was sacked as deputy premier a decade ago and jailed on sodomy and corruption charges widely seen as politically motivated.

"We declare victory, the margin is very huge," said Tian Chua, information chief of Anwar's Keadilan party which leads a three-member opposition alliance.

"I think it's a landslide victory," he said, adding that Anwar's share of the vote could rise as high as 70 percent.

The official tally showed Anwar had won 27,977 votes, against 13,426 for his opponent from the Barisan Nasional coalition, which has dominated Malaysian politics for half a century.

Settlements unhelpful to peace talks: Rice

AP, Jerusalem

With hopes fading for brokering an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal by year's end, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice offered few signs of progress Tuesday, saying only that talks are "serious" and again chiding Israel for continuing settlement construction.

Speaking alongside her Israeli counterpart, Rice said she was "heartened" that talks launched at a US-sponsored peace conference late last year were "serious and intensive." At the time, the sides said they hoped to reach a final peace deal before President Bush leaves office in January.

Rice is on her seventh trip to the region since talks were relaunched. While Israel and the Palestinians say all key issues have been under discussion, there has been no word on agreements or breakthroughs.



PHOTO: AFP

Michelle Obama, wife of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama greets supporters at the Democratic National Convention 2008 at the Pepsi Centre in Denver, Colorado on Monday. The Democrats formally opened their convention to crown Barack Obama as the first black presidential election nominee.

Hillary nudges supporters towards Obama at DNC

AP, Denver

Hillary Rodham Clinton, formally abandoning her presidential dream for now, is urging her supporters in a fractured Democratic Party to do the same and line up behind the man who wrested the nomination from her grasp.

A year ago, Clinton was the front-runner, ahead of Barack Obama and the rest of the crowded Democratic field. Tuesday, with a prime-time address before the Democratic convention, she is effectively playing middlewoman passing a torch from her husband, the 42nd president, to Obama, who wants to succeed him as the next Democratic president.

But not without some Clinton-style political dealmaking and drama.

The Clinton and Obama camps agreed to limit Wednesday's divisive nominating process for presi-

dent, allowing some states to cast votes for both Obama and Clinton before ending the roll call in an acclamation for the Illinois senator.

In one scenario, Clinton herself would cut off the voting and urge the unanimous nomination of Obama, according to Democratic officials involved in the negotiations. They discussed the deal on condition of anonymity while final details were being worked out.

But some Clinton delegates said they were not interested in a compromise, raising the prospect of floor demonstrations that would underscore the split between Obama and Clinton Democrats.

"I don't care what she says," said Mary Boergers, a Maryland delegate who wants to cast a vote for Clinton.

"There is no doubt in anyone's mind that this is Barack Obama's convention," Clinton told report-

ers. And yet, she said, some of her delegates "feel an obligation to the people who sent them here" and would vote for her.

As part of the deal, Obama and Clinton activists teamed up and circulated three petitions on the convention floor Monday night supporting Clinton, Obama and vice presidential candidate Joe Biden. Each needed 300 signatures.

Clinton said she wouldn't tell her backers how to vote, but she told them she would cast her own vote for Obama. "We were not all on the same side as Democrats, but we are now," she said.

The lineup for the second day of the convention features 11 governors and prominent House and Senate leaders. The convention's keynote address will be given by former Virginia Gov. Mark Warner, a former supporter of Hillary Clinton's.

Plot to kill Obama uncovered

Four detained

AFP, Denver

Four people have been arrested in Denver amid fears of a plot to kill Democratic White House hopeful Barack Obama, a local report said Monday.

Denver-based CBS34 said one of the men arrested had told authorities they were "going to shoot Obama from a high vantage point using ... a rifle ... sighted at 750 yards (meters)."

The shooting was supposed to happen on Thursday when Obama will accept the nomination as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate for the November elections at the 75,000-seat Invesco stadium, the television station reported.

One man was arrested on Sunday after police found two high-powered rifles in a rented pick-up truck he was driving, it added.

Suicide blast kills 25 Iraqi police recruits

AFP, Baquba

A suicide bomber yesterday rushed into a crowd of police recruits in central Iraq and detonated his explosives-laden vest, killing at least 25 people and wounding 40, the local police chiefs said.

Lieutenant Colonel Ahmed Khalifa said the attack targeted a crowd of young Iraqis at a police recruiting center in Jalawla, 150km north of Baghdad.

Most of those killed had been waiting to join the police, he added. Earlier, officials said a man wearing an explosives-laden vest arrived by car and was stopped by police. He then leapt from the car and ran into the crowd where he detonated his bomb.

Jalawla is in Diyala province, considered to be one of the country's most dangerous.

It sees regular attacks by al-Qaeda-linked groups targeting Sahwa or "Awakening" units of Sunni former fighters who have turned against the jihadists and are now financed by the American military.



PHOTO: AFP

A column of cars with citizens of Tskhinvali parade as they celebrate recognition of South Ossetian independence by Russian Federation yesterday. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev announced the move which brought people firing guns onto the streets of the South Ossetian capital, but United States, Britain and France immediately condemned the move.

Iraqi leader insists on US pullout deadline

Govt rejects legal immunity for American troops

AP, Baghdad

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki dug in his heels Monday on the future of the US military in Iraq, insisting that all foreign soldiers leave the country by a specific date in 2011 and rejecting legal immunity for American troops.

Despite the tough words, al-Maliki's aides insisted a compromise could be found on the two main stumbling blocks to an accord governing the US military presence in Iraq after a United Nations mandate expires at the end of the year.

Last week, US and Iraqi officials said the two sides agreed tentatively to a schedule that includes a broad pullout of combat troops by the end of

2011 with the possibility that a residual US force might stay behind to continue training and advising Iraqi security services.

But al-Maliki's remarks indicated his government was not satisfied with that arrangement and wants all foreign troops gone by the end of 2011.

That cast doubt on whether an agreement is near and suggested al-Maliki is playing to a domestic audience frustrated by the war and eager for an end to the foreign military presence.

"There can be no treaty or agreement except on the basis of Iraq's full sovereignty," al-Maliki told a gathering of Shia tribal sheiks. He said an accord must be based on the principle

that "no foreign soldier remains in Iraq after a specific deadline, not an open timeframe."

Al-Maliki said the US and Iraq had already agreed on a full withdrawal of all foreign troops by the end of 2011 an interpretation that the White House challenged. Until then, the US would not conduct military operations "without the approval" of the Iraqi government, al-Maliki said.

White House spokesman Tony Fratto said negotiations with the Iraqis were continuing and repeated the US position that the withdrawal must be linked to conditions in Iraq a clear difference with al-Maliki's interpretation of what had been agreed.

Thai PM vows action as protesters besiege state offices

AFP, Bangkok

Thousands of Thai protesters stormed a state-run TV station and the seat of government on Tuesday, in what Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej said was an effort to provoke another coup.

More than 30,000 protesters demanding his resignation seized the television station, invaded the grounds of Government House and besieged at least three ministries in their efforts to cripple Samak's administration.

Samak, who was elected in December and formed his coalition government in February, warned that his patience was running out.

"They want bloodshed in the country, they want the military to come out and stage a coup again," he

said at a press conference.

"I will not resign, I will stay to protect this country," he added.

Samak said police would surround the seat of government -- where most of the protesters who rallied throughout the day have camped out -- and not let any supplies or people in until all the protesters left.

"Police will take decisive action against the protesters ... government restraint is almost over," he said, but added that force would not be used and the government's approach would be "soft and gentle."

"I ask all the protesters who have been blockading or occupying government offices that you still have a chance to withdraw and go back to your homes."



PHOTO: AFP

Anti-government protesters break barricades during their entry into Government House in Bangkok yesterday. Thousands of Thai protesters seized a state-run TV station and surrounded government buildings in their campaign to force premier Samak Sundaravej from office and cripple his administration.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Pak coalition collapse a bad omen for war on terror

DPA, Islamabad

The collapse of Pakistan's ruling alliance has come as a disappointment for many Pakistanis longing for political stability, but it might also be a bad omen for Western allies who want to see the country focus on its fight against Islamic extremists.

"The fight against militancy cannot be won without a comprehensive political strategy devised through a debate in the Parliament, where the parties with a wide spectrum of popular support come together to own it," said Mehmood Shah, former security chief in the country's tribal region, which is the hub of a rising Islamic militancy.

That opportunity is lost with the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) pulling out of the coalition, and the Parliament will now be turned into a ring where the two major parties will wrestle for power instead of tackling the security issues," he said.

Insurgents who have found safe haven in the remote tribal areas near the border with Afghanistan have stepped up their campaign of violence in recent weeks. Two suicide bombers blew themselves up Friday at a high-security military-run weapons factory, 30 kilometres north-west of Islamabad, killing about 80 employees.

Three days later, they targeted a police station in North-West Frontier Province with a suicide car bombing, killing at least 10 people, including four police officers.

Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a militant umbrella organization, accepted responsibility for the attacks.

More than 4,000 people have perished in suicide bombings and other attacks on government forces, security installations and political rallies in 2007 and the first eight months of 2008.

The TTP also provides fighters shelter and training facilities for cross-border attacks in Afghanistan, where the Taliban have killed more than 188 Nato soldiers, including 101 US troops, since the start of this year.

Pakistan's government on Monday banned the TTP and three other pro-Taliban groups in a move that was unlikely to have much effect on the operations of the rebel organizations.

"The insurgents have shown that they can strike anywhere on their will and cause the sort of damage and destruction they want," said retired general and political commentator Talat Masood. "It makes the writ of the government almost nonexistent."

Unfortunately, Pakistan's political leaders continue to bicker in the face of such a big threat, he said.

The split between the right-wing PML-N and left-wing Pakistan People's Party (PPP) came barely one week after they managed to oust their common foe, former president Pervez Musharraf, a key US ally.

But they wrangled in the following days over the reinstatement of judges ousted by Musharraf, who resigned, and the nomination of the PPP's Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of slain former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, for the presidency.

Some Western diplomats based in Islamabad welcomed the development since the chasm cleared the way for a new purely liberal and secular alliance, led by the PPP, which they believe would be more committed to fighting militants.

The new coalition includes the secular, ethnic Muttahida Qaumi Movement and the nationalist Awami National Party (ANP), which is known for its communist inclinations and anti-religious stance. The ANP defeated Islamic parties in February 18 elections in the restive North-West Frontier Province.

On the other hand, Nawaz Sharif, head of the PML-N and a former prime minister, is viewed as a conservative leader who has repeatedly criticized US policies in public during election rallies early this year and continued the onslaught while in the coalition government.

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