

Defiant US lawmakers pass Armenia 'genocide' bill

Turkey warns of breakdown in ties

AP, AP, Washington/Ankara

Turkey has furiously recalled its ambassador after US lawmakers voted to brand as "genocide" the killing of Armenians by Ottoman forces during World War I.

Despite strong opposition from Turkey and the White House, the House Foreign Affairs Committee passed the symbolic resolution on Thursday, albeit by the slimmest 23-22 margin, and set the stage for a full vote in the House of Representatives.

The Turkish government, which had sent its own lawmakers to Washington to lobby US congressmen and warned of serious repercussions over the vote, responded by recalling ambassador Namik Tan to Ankara for consultations.

"We condemn this resolution which accuses the Turkish nation of a crime it has not committed," it said in a statement.

Turkey's foreign minister is warning of a breakdown in ties with the US after a

congressional committee approved a resolution branding the World War I-era killing of Armenians genocide.

Ahmet Davutoglu said Friday the Obama administration had not sufficiently put its weight behind efforts to block the vote. He called on the administration to prevent the measure from coming to the full House.

President Abdullah Gul also expressed his anger, saying the resolution had "no value in the eyes of the Turkish people" and warning it would deal a blow to fledgling efforts to end decades of hostility between Turkey and Armenia.

"Turkey will not be responsible for the negative ramifications that this vote may have in every field," he stressed.

The non-binding resolution calls on President Barack Obama to ensure that US foreign policy reflects an understanding of the "genocide" and to label the mass killings as such in his annual statement on the issue.

Armenians say up to 1.5 million of

their kin were killed during World War I by their Ottoman rulers as the empire was falling apart, a claim supported by several other countries.

Turkey argues 300,000 to 500,000 Armenians and at least as many Turks died in what was a civil strife when Armenians rose up for independence and sided with invading Russian troops.

The United States has traditionally condemned the 1915-1918 killings, but refrained from calling them a "genocide," anxious not to strain relations with Turkey, a Nato member and a key Muslim majority ally in the Middle East.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had urged the committee not to press ahead with the vote for fear it might harm reconciliation moves between Armenia and Turkey and said she hoped the bid would progress no further.

"We do not believe the full Congress will or should act on that resolution," Hillary told reporters in Costa Rica.



Turkish nationalists chant slogans to protest against the US in Istanbul yesterday. A group of Turkish nationalists gathered after US lawmakers voted to brand as "genocide" the killing of Armenians by Ottoman forces during World War I.



Palestinian stone throwers run from stun grenades fired by Israeli border police at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, one of Islam's holiest sites, during clashes yesterday.

Israeli cops battle Muslims at Al-Aqsa mosque

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli police stormed Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque compound -- one of Islam's holiest sites -- yesterday after protesters threw stones following the main weekly prayers, police and witnesses said.

Police fired tear gas and threw stun grenades in an attempt to disperse the protesters.

"Our officers entered the compound after volleys of stones were thrown at Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall, below the mosque compound," Jerusalem police spokesman Shmulik Ben Ruby told AFP.

An AFP photographer at the site reported seeing 10 Palestinians and five police officers injured in the clashes.

Western support grows for Israeli-Palestinian talks

AFP, Paris

Western countries have welcomed a decision by Arab foreign ministers to back indirect Israeli-Palestinian talks aimed at putting the long-stalled Middle East peace process back on track.

Washington has been struggling for months to coax the Israelis and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table after talks were suspended in the wake of Israel's devastating war on Gaza launched in December 2008.

The Palestinians have refused to meet directly with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu without a complete freeze of Jewish settlement growth in the occupied territories.

Britain's Foreign Secretary David Miliband was the latest to put his weight behind indirect talks, an initiative pushed by the United States as a way of breaking the deadlock.

"It is the right time for both sides to show the courage, commitment and compromise necessary to bring a lasting peace for... the people of the region," Miliband said on Thursday.

"These talks must begin soon and deal directly with the difficult issues at the core of this conflict," he added, calling for "tangible momentum within months" of negotiations starting.

Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos said the Israeli-Palestinian talks would be one of the key issues at the half-yearly meeting of EU foreign ministers in Cordoba on Friday and Saturday.

The Middle East was up for discussion "at a critical time when we want to step up the European contribution to the efforts of the new American government," said Moratinos, whose country holds the six-monthly EU presidency.

'Brown's military funding failure cost British lives'

AFP, London

Gordon Brown's failure to properly fund the military as finance minister cost soldiers' lives in Iraq and Afghanistan, a former British armed forces chief said Friday, a newspaper reported.

The accusation piled fresh pressure on Brown, now British prime minister, hours ahead of his appearance at a public inquiry into the Iraq war, where he is expected to be challenged over allegations he cut military funding.

"Not fully funding the army in the way they had asked... undoubtedly cost the lives of soldiers," General Charles Ronald Llewelyn Guthrie told the Times newspaper.

"He should be asked why he was so unsympathetic towards defence and so sympathetic to other departments," said Guthrie, who led the armed forces from 1997 to 2001.

The attack comes amid growing criticism of Brown's role during the 2003 US-led invasion and will heighten fears in his administration the hearing could damage the ruling Labour Party as the general election approaches.

In his testimony to the inquiry in January, the defence secretary at the time, Geoff Hoon, said his ministry had lacked funds for years before the war.

Much of the funding criticisms have focused on the use of lightly armoured Snatch Land Rovers in Iraq and Afghanistan, lambasted by critics who claim they were unable to withstand roadside bombs used by insurgents in both conflicts.

Susan Smith, whose son died in Iraq in 2005 in one of the vehicles, also accused Brown Friday of having failed to protect British forces.

Iraqis begin voting in Syria, other countries

AP, Damascus

Iraqis living abroad began casting ballots in their homeland's crucial parliamentary elections yesterday, the second for a full parliamentary term since the 2003 US-led invasion ousted Saddam Hussein.

Hundreds stood in lines at stations in Syria, home to the largest Iraqi expatriate community, and voting was also being held in neighbouring Jordan and more than a dozen other countries around the world, from Australia to the United States.

The United Nations refugee agency estimates that around 2 million Iraqis are living abroad the majority of whom fled violence following the 2003 US-led invasion.

Iraq's Sunni Arab minority has been particularly attentive to the out-of-country voting, especially in neighbouring Syria and Jordan in

the belief that many of the potential voters there are Sunnis who fled the sectarian violence. Sunnis are hoping a strong turnout among their community will counterbalance what many expect will be a strong vote among the Shia majority for their own religious parties.

Voting abroad will be held for three days, while in Iraq most voters go to the polls on Sunday, choosing a 325-seat legislature. The largest bloc in parliament will try to put together a government to lead Iraq for four key years as US troops withdraw.

Among the first to vote at Damascus' Arab Cultural Centre, one of 23 stations around the country, was Samir al-Abdali, a 56-year-old refugee who said he voted for Iraqiya, a secular list that includes both Shias and Sunnis. Among its leaders are Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi and former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shia.

Ships freed from Baltic Sea ice nightmare

AFP, Stockholm

Icebreakers have freed dozens of ships from thick ice in the Baltic Sea, officials said yesterday, ending the ordeal of thousands of passengers and crew stranded in freezing conditions off the Swedish coast.

"There are no more ships stuck in the ice," Ann Ericsson of the Swedish Maritime Administration's ice breaker unit, told AFP.

A number of vessels, including several large passenger ferries shuttling as many as 1,000 passengers each between Sweden, Finland and Estonia, became stuck Thursday just outside the Stockholm archipelago, where freezing winds had pushed thick ice towards the coast.

"We have not slept much," Lena, a passenger on the Amorella ferry that broke free from the ice early Friday, told Swedish public radio.

"We've been interested in watching all the ice breakers and helicopters work."

Two small ice breakers on Thursday failed to free the Amorella and several other smaller ferries, which had been forced to wait for the larger Ymer ice breaker to sail down from the Bay of Bothnia in the north.



Handout photo shows the Regal Star (L), a cargo ship being assisted by an icebreaker after it became stuck in the ice in the Baltic Sea. Around 50 ships, including large ferries that had been trapped, some for several days, in thick ice in the Baltic Sea were freed Friday morning, Swedish maritime authorities said.



Iraqi men wave their national flag as they ride at the back of a truck during an election campaign rally in Baghdad yesterday. Politicians spent the last day of campaigning as more than a million Iraqis living abroad began voting in an election that could turn the page on years of deadly sectarian strife.

Asteroid wiped out the dinosaurs

AFP, Washington

Dinosaurs were wiped out by a huge asteroid that smashed into Earth 65 million years ago with the force of a billion atomic bombs, scientists said Thursday, hoping to lay an age-old debate to rest once and for all.

The definitive verdict came from an international panel of experts who reviewed 20 years' worth of evidence about what caused the Cretaceous-Tertiary (KT) extinction that wiped out more than half the species on the planet.

They determined it was a massive asteroid, measuring around 15km (nine miles) wide, which smashed into what is today Chicxulub in Mexico.

The event marked a pivotal point in history because it cleared the way for mammals to become the dominant species on Earth.

"The asteroid is believed to have hit Earth with a force one billion times more powerful than the atomic bomb at Hiroshima," the researchers said in a report published in the journal Science.

Quake rebuilding could take years, says Chile

AP, Dichato

Chile's president says it will take three years to rebuild the region wracked by an earthquake and tsunami, something all too clear to the people cleaning up this splintered tourist town.

Dichato is nestled between pine-forested hills and a lovely sheltered bay where colourful fishing boats served coastal communities and export companies. Its population of 4,000 triples each January and February with tourists many were in town when disaster struck and residents count on that brief summer vacation for much of their income.

The quake and tsunami killed at least 19 people in Dichato and smashed neat wooden houses and small hotels into huge splinter piles. The surge ruined most other buildings in

town, which stank Thursday with decomposing fish. One fishing boat marooned far inland was full of rotting octopus.

President Michelle Bachelet said Thursday that she is confident "Chile will rise" from the devastation but not as fast as some might want.

She said it could take at least three years to bring the region back.

"It's going to be it's going to be very hard moving ahead," she told ADN radio.

Bachelet's government had made a difference in Dichato, building 130 neat mustard-yellow duplexes in a public housing project that just opened in September and providing 60 million pesos \$120,000 to restore the facades of businesses along main street, said Mabel Gomez, president of the local chamber of commerce.

Cyber-terrorism a real and growing threat: FBI

AFP, San Francisco

Terrorists, crooks and nation states are ramping up cyberattacks that are eating away at data, cash and security in the United States, the head of the FBI said Thursday.

"The risks are right at our doorsteps and in some cases they are in the house," Federal Bureau of Investigation chief Robert Mueller said in a speech at an RSA Conference of computer security professionals here.

"Working together we can find the people taking shots at us and stop those attacks."

Mueller was the third high-ranking federal official in as many days to urge private industry cyber warriors to join forces with the US government to battle spies, terrorists and crooks plaguing the Internet.

"As you well know, a cyberattack could have the same impact as a well-placed bomb," Mueller said.

"In the past ten years, al-Qaeda's online presence has become as potent as its in-world presence."

al-Qaeda uses for the Internet range from recruiting and inciting to posting ways to make bio-weapons and forming social-networks for aspiring terrorists, according to Mueller.

BNP uncertain about taking part

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EC earlier hinted that the by-poll might be held in the first week of May.

Besides Bhola, the BNP chairperson has also planned to visit all divisional headquarters and some important districts soon to whip up an anti-government campaign.

The party leaders, however, said the law and order is deteriorating day by day in Bhola-3 and many of their local leaders and activists were forced to leave the area due to attacks from the ruling party cadres and even law enforcers.

When asked about the chairperson's visit to the area, Hafiz said his party leaders are suffering political persecution by the ruling party cadres on the one hand and facing cases

filed by police on the other.

Rejecting the allegation, Jasim, whose parliamentary membership was cancelled by the court on Wednesday, told reporters that it is BNP men who were behind the worsening law and order in the area.

Preferring not to be named some local Awami League leaders said when Sheikh Hasina visited Bhola in 2003 as the leader of the opposition, cadres of the then ruling BNP didn't let her get off the car at Lalmoan, an upazila under Bhola-3 constituency.

Interestingly the BNP leaders now fear for the security of their chairperson in the same constituency.

Speaker Abdul Hamid on February 10 informed the parliament about the Bhola-3

seat being vacant. Earlier on February 7, 2010, the commission in a gazette notification declared that the seat fell vacant as Jasim lost his parliamentary membership.

The High Court on February 26, 2009 cancelled the parliamentary membership of Jasim for providing false information to the authorities prior to the election. The Appellate Division on October 18 last year upheld the HC verdict.