

PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama greets members after speaking at a rally celebrating the passage and signing into law of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act health insurance reform bill at the Interior Department in Washington on Tuesday.

## Obama inks historic health reforms into law

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama signed into law historic, sweeping reforms Tuesday that lay out healthcare coverage for almost every American and realise the dreams of generations of past US leaders.

"Today, after almost a century of trying, today after a year of debate, today, after all the votes have been tallied, health insurance reform becomes law in the United States of America," Obama said.

"The bill I'm signing will set in motion reforms that generations of Americans have fought for and marched for and hungered to see," he told a jubilant, packed audience at a White House signing ceremony.

Delighted lawmakers and guests cheered as Obama made good on his campaign vow to overhaul America's embattled health care system, enacting a huge shift in US policy and the biggest social legislation in over four decades.

Meanwhile, the Senate began debate on a package of fixes sent by the House, with dozens of amendments to be proposed. Among the changes are cancelling special agreements benefiting states like Nebraska and plans to fill the "donut hole" of Medicare health coverage for the elderly.

The House of Representatives narrowly approved the legislation that is now US law by 219-212 late Sunday, using the Democratic

majority to muscle the measure through a united Republican opposition.

The 940-billion-dollar overhaul will extend coverage to some 32 million Americans who currently have none, ensuring 95 percent of under-65 US citizens and legal residents will have health insurance.

The historic signing came a century after president Theodore Roosevelt first called for a national approach to US health care, and after past leaders such as Bill Clinton tried and failed to reform the creaky, costly system.

For the first time ever, almost all Americans will be required to buy insurance or face fines. Among other key reforms, the new law bans insurance companies from denying coverage to people with pre-existing conditions, from dropping clients who get sick or from setting lifetime caps.

"You've made history," Vice President Joe Biden told a beaming Obama. "Mr President, you've done what generations of not just ordinary, but great men and women have attempted to do."

"You have turned, Mr President, the right of every American to have access to decent health care into reality for the first time in American history."

In the ceremonial East Room, where president Lyndon Johnson signed the civil rights bill into law in 1964, a party atmosphere prevailed as euphoric Democrats gathered to witness the act, sharing hugs and slapping palms.

## UK kicks out Israeli diplomat in fake passport row

Tel Aviv braces for more expulsions

AFP, London/Jerusalem

Britain has kicked out an Israeli diplomat over the "intolerable" use of fake British passports in the killing of a Hamas chief, in a sharp escalation of tension over the murder.

Israel, which had hoped a row over the use of forged passports in the killing of a top Hamas militant in Dubai was over, now fears other countries will follow Britain's lead in expelling diplomats.

Australia, France, Germany and Ireland are all investigating the suspected theft of the identities of their nationals in the January murder of Hamas commander Mahmud al-Mabhuh and have yet to announce their conclusions.

Britain was unequivocal about its own findings on Tuesday as it announced the expulsion of an Israeli diplomat from London.

"There are compelling reasons to believe that Israel was responsible for the misuse of the British passports," Foreign Secretary David Miliband told parliament.

"Given that this was a very sophisticated operation in which high-quality forgeries were made, the government judges it is highly likely that the forgeries

were made by a state intelligence service," Miliband said.

"The government takes this matter extremely seriously. Such misuse of British passports is intolerable."

"I've asked that a member of the embassy of Israel be withdrawn from the UK as a result of this affair and this is taking place."

Miliband declined to identify the diplomat who was being expelled but British and Israeli media said he worked for Israel's Mossad intelligence agency, which has been widely accused of Mabhuh's murder.

The Times and Telegraph newspapers said he was the agency's London station chief. Israeli public radio said the Mossad would "soon" replace the expelled agent.

Miliband said he met his Israeli counterpart Avigdor Lieberman in Brussels on Monday and asked for a formal pledge that in future "the state of Israel would never be party to the misuse of British passports in such a way."

Lieberman took issue with Britain's findings and said he was "very disappointed" by the diplomat's expulsion, but said he wanted to maintain cordial relations with London.

"No proof of Israeli involvement in this affair has been provided to us,"

Lieberman said in a statement released late on Tuesday.

With four other governments still poised to announce the findings of their own inquiries, a senior Israeli official said there would be no tit-for-tat expulsion of a British diplomat.

"We have no intention of expelling a British diplomat in response to London's decision," the official told AFP, adding that the priority was to "calm things down."

Israel's Maariv daily said that Israeli officials were concerned about the intelligence and security implications of a widening diplomatic spat.

"Officials in Jerusalem fear that the severe step taken by the UK... will also prompt further countries whose citizens' identities were used in the operation -- Ireland, Australia, Germany and France -- to do the same," the paper said.

"There is further concern that the severe step taken by the British government could negatively impact its security ties with Israel and the particularly close cooperation between the two intelligence organisations -- the Mossad and Britain's MI6."

The Australian government said it would not be rushed into action over the suspected use of forged Australian passports.

## Bird flu remains a threat: WHO

AFP, Manila

Bird flu outbreaks that have killed seven people in several countries so far this year show the virus remains a threat to humans, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday.

"The newly confirmed human and poultry cases of avian influenza this year are a reminder that the virus poses a real and continuous threat to human health," the WHO said in a statement.

One danger is that bird flu, also known as H5N1, may mutate, warned Takeshia Sakai, the WHO's regional adviser for communicable diseases.

"The influenza virus is unpredictable," Sakai said. "There is a constant risk that the H5N1 virus will combine with another strain of influenza."

So far this year, authorities monitored 21 human cases of bird flu from Egypt, Vietnam and Indonesia, including seven deaths, the organisation said.

## Iran forcing us to impose sanctions: French FM

AFP, Paris

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said Tuesday there was "no other choice" but to impose fresh sanctions on Iran as its nuclear programme is suspect.

"The defiant attitude adopted by the Iranian government now leaves us no other choice: we have to seek new sanctions," Kouchner told the French Senate.

"We will continue to seek dialogue but what responses have we got so far? Nothing tangible," he said, adding that Tehran's nuclear programme did not have "credible" civilian goals as claimed by the Islamic Republic.

France, the United States and others are stepping up efforts to rally support for fresh United Nations sanctions on Iran, which key world powers suspect is trying to make a nuclear weapon.

Tehran insists its uranium-enrichment activities are aimed at generating power for civilian use.

Kouchner said Iran had increased the range

of its missiles, was not cooperating sufficiently with the UN nuclear watchdog and had spurned "all our offers of dialogue and cooperation."

The minister also hit out at North Korea, which alarmed the world last year by test-firing a series of missiles after walking out of disarmament talks with global powers, including the United States, Japan and South Korea.

He said Pyongyang "not only threatens regional peace and stability" but also "exports ... insecurity ... especially in the Near and Middle East."

Countries making up the so-called "P5-plus-1" trying to rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions -- the five veto-wielding UN Security Council members Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States; plus Germany -- have become increasingly alarmed at Tehran's intransigence.

A UN Security Council vote on a resolution increasing economic sanctions against Iran's leadership and Revolutionary Guard is expected within weeks.

## Climate change puts Australian reef on 'knife edge'

AFP, Sydney

The world's southernmost coral reef is on a "knife-edge" after warmer seas blamed on climate change bleached large parts of it for the first time, an Australian scientist warned yesterday.

Peter Harrison, who has been monitoring the world heritage-listed Lord Howe Island since 1993, said a two degrees Celsius (four Fahrenheit) rise in sea temperatures had drained much of the reef of its distinctive colours.

"We're hoping the vast majority of these corals will be able to recover, but at the moment this whole system is on a knife-edge and we don't know what's going to happen," Harrison told AFP.

Harrison, whose Southern Cross University team surveyed the reef about 600 kilometres (370 miles) east of Sydney this month, said the unusually warm water had travelled down from tropical seas around Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

He blamed the warmer seas on climate change and said the reef could face "an even more severe event" in the future.

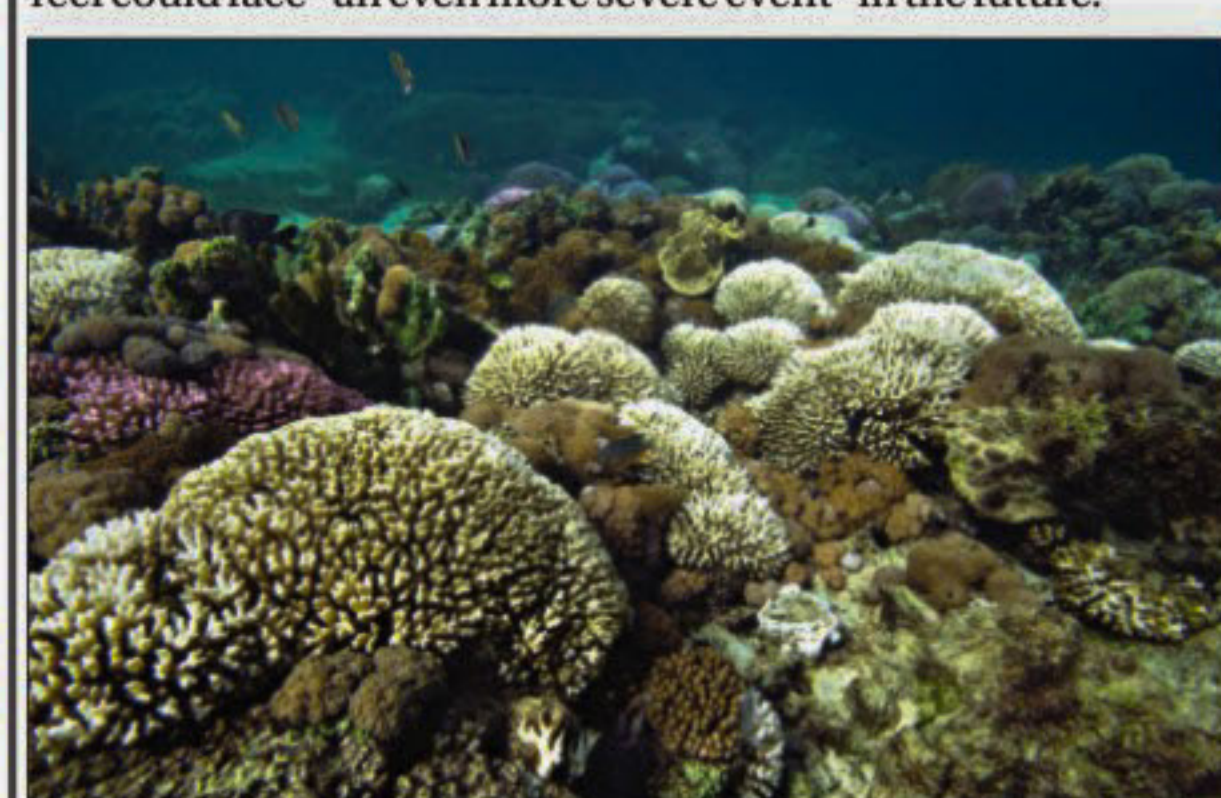


PHOTO: AFP

This undated Southern Cross University handout photo received on March 24, 2010 shows moderate bleaching to coral in the Lord Howe Island Lagoon.

## Cosmos has billions more stars than thought

AFP, Paris

Astronomers may have underestimated the tally of galaxies in some parts of the Universe by as much as 90 percent, according to a study reported on Wednesday in Nature, the weekly British science journal.

Surveys of the cosmos are based on a signature of ultraviolet light that turns out to be a poor indicator of what's out there, its authors say.

In the case of very distant, old galaxies, the telltale light may not reach Earth as it is blocked by interstellar clouds of dust and gas -- and, as a result, these galaxies are missed by the map-makers.

"Astronomers always knew they were missing some fraction of the galaxies... but for the first time we now have a measurement. The number of missed galaxies is substantial," said Matthew Hayes of the University of Geneva's observatory, who led the investigation.

Hayes' team used the world's most advanced optical instrument -- Europe's Very Large Telescope (VLT) in Chile, which has four 8.2-metre (26.65-foot) behemoths -- to carry out the experiment.

They turned two of the giants towards a well-studied area of deep space called the GOODS-South field.

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