

Russian deal disrupts Ukraine parliament

MPs throw eggs, smoke bombs

AFP, Kiev

Fighting broke out and smoke bombs were thrown as Ukraine's parliament erupted into chaos as it ratified a bitterly controversial deal with Russia extending the lease of a key naval base yesterday.

The scuffles broke out after eggs were thrown at the speaker of the Verkhovna Rada, Volodymyr Lytvyn, who then took cover behind two black umbrellas held by aides.

The first smoke bomb was then thrown from an unknown source and the chamber filled with smoke, making it difficult to watch proceedings. Some deputies covered their noses or put on masks as alarms sounded.

A second smoke bomb was thrown shortly afterwards, creating thicker smoke in the chamber as deputies nonetheless continued their rancorous debate, an AFP correspondent in the chamber reported.

The deputies in the notoriously fractious parliament were taking part in a session debating a controversial deal last week to extend the lease on Russia's Black Sea Fleet naval base in Crimea until at least 2042.

The deal signed last week by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his Ukrainian counterpart Viktor Yanukovich had been slammed by the pro-Western Ukrainian opposition as a historic surrender of sovereignty.

Deputies also started fighting over a massive Ukrainian flag in the middle of the chamber, twisting and distorting the yellow and blue banner as smoke continued to billow in the chamber.

Amid the chaos, some deputies tried to push on with their business as if nothing extraordinary was taking place, with speakers taking to the floor.

With some lawmakers shouting "Shame, Shame!", the parliament ratified the pact with 236 lawmakers voting in favour of ratifying the deal in the 450 seat chamber.

Thousands of pro-Western supporters meanwhile protested outside parliament over the decision, shouting "Death to Traitors" and "Crimea is Ours".

Amid a heavy security presence, supporters of Yanukovich held a counter rally brandishing banners with slogans like "Ukraine and Russia: Strategic Partners."



A smoke bomb is thrown during a parliament sitting in Kiev yesterday. Fighting broke out and smoke bombs and eggs were thrown on when Ukraine's parliament erupted into chaos as it ratified a bitterly controversial deal with Russia extending the lease of a key naval base. In the inset, security personnel protected with umbrellas Speaker of Ukraine's parliament Volodymyr Lytvyn.



ME PEACE TALKS

Abbas hopes for 'positive' Arab response

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas has said he hopes for a "positive response" when he presents US proposals for renewed negotiations with Israel to Arab foreign ministers next week.

"The discussions are still ongoing" with US special envoy George Mitchell, who was in the region over the weekend, Abbas told Israel's Channel 2 television in an interview broadcast Monday night.

"We will submit everything that has been presented to us to the Arab Follow-up Committee on the first of next month and we hope there will be a positive response," he said, referring to the group of foreign ministers.

Washington has for months been pressing Israel and the Palestinians to renew peace talks last suspended after the December 2008 outbreak of the Gaza war, but the Palestinians have demanded that Israel first freeze all settlement activity, including in occupied and annexed east Jerusalem.

Abbas reluctantly agreed to indirect talks after receiving backing from the Arab committee.



UN should not leave

Says Karzai's brother

AP, Kandahar

The powerful half brother of President Hamid Karzai urged the international aid community yesterday not to pull out of the troubled southern city of Kandahar, where the security situation is deteriorating.

The United Nations said Monday it was scaling back its operations in Kandahar, relocating several foreign employees to Kabul and telling more than 200 Afghan U.N. workers to stay home.

Thai Red Shirts disrupt city rail

Protesters to sue govt over accusation of overthrowing royals

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's anti-government Red Shirts threw tyres onto elevated city rail tracks yesterday in a bid to thwart a feared military crackdown as the government talked tough against the protesters.

The Reds said they would turn up the heat on Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva as they beefed up their defences, planning an appeal Wednesday to persuade more people to join their mass rally in the capital.

Thailand's "Red Shirt" protest leaders yesterday said they would sue the government for accusing them of attempting to overthrow the kingdom's revered monarchy.

Thai authorities on Monday handed out diagrams to reporters that detailed an alleged network of conspirators working to undermine the royals, including core leaders of the anti-government Red

Shirts and two former prime ministers.

Strict legal provisions in Thai law can land anyone guilty of insulting the royal institution with up to 15 years in prison.

Soldiers with guns were guarding the capital, which is under a state of emergency and has been rocked by the worst political unrest for almost two decades, with 26 people killed and almost 1,000 injured this month.

The government said it would not tolerate roadblocks set up by the protesters -- who have been staging weeks of rolling rallies to campaign for immediate elections -- to prevent troop reinforcements heading to the capital.

"The government has intensified measures against protesters because they have created a situation of unrest by setting up checkpoints which violate other people's rights," Deputy Prime Minister Suthap Thaugsuban told reporters.

Scotland eyes independence

AFP, Falkirk

Scotland's ruling party hopes next week's general election will boost its hopes of full Scottish independence -- which could be put to a referendum as early as this year.

First Minister Alex Salmond wants his Scottish National Party (SNP) to nearly treble its number of Westminster MPs from seven to 20, and says doing so would help him score concessions in a possible hung parliament.

"Hopefully the general election level of support will enable us to galvanise our argument, get that referendum bill through and let the Scottish people have a say over their own future," said Salmond ahead of next Thursday's ballots.

Many in the main British parties are also reluctant to work with a man they have nicknamed "Alex In Wonderland".

HUNG PARLIAMENT ISSUE

Nick Clegg under fire

AFP, London

The leader of Britain's newly buoyant Liberal Democrats was accused of arrogance yesterday as he struggled to clarify what he would do if his party holds the balance of power after elections next week.

Nick Clegg has come under growing pressure to say whether he would work with either of the two bigger parties -- Prime Minister Gordon Brown's ruling Labour or the Conservatives -- if the Lib Dems emerge as kingmakers after May 6 polls.

But opposition parties accuse him of presumptuously trying to dictate terms ahead of the general election and commentators say his stance risks confusing voters.

Business Secretary Peter Mandelson accused Clegg of "over-reaching himself" in comments seen as specifying who exactly he might work with if, as polls suggest, his party ends up holding the balance of power.

"That appeared to many to be slightly arrogant," Mandelson said, warning that voters who "flirted" with Clegg might wake up in bed with Conservative leader David Cameron.

"Worse still, you could find yourselves waking up with George Osborne, William Hague, or heaven forbid, Eric Pickles. That is a life I think you would live to regret," Mandelson added, referring to other senior Conservatives.

After years as the third party in British politics, Clegg's centrist Liberal Democrats have surged to a close second in most opinion polls after his strong showing in Britain's first-ever televised election leaders' debates.

Israel demotes 2 officers over Palestinians' deaths

AFP, Jerusalem

Two senior Israeli officers were reprimanded and a sergeant demoted over the killing of four Palestinians during clashes in the West Bank in March, the military said yesterday.

"The investigation shows that the incident could have ended differently and with better results and seemingly could have avoided causing harm to civilians," the statement said.

Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi summoned two regional commanders and reprimanded them for the conduct of the forces under their command in the West Bank in two separate incidents, it said.

Pak forces kill six key Taliban leaders

ANI, Islamabad

At least six key Taliban commanders were killed in two different encounters with security forces in the Swat Valley, Pakistani security officials have said.

A huge cache of arms and ammunition was also recovered during the raid on extremist hideouts in the region.

The first encounter took place in Kanju town of Kabal teshil in which four wanted Taliban commanders were killed, while two leading extremist commanders were killed in a search operation in Elam area of Barikot teshil, The Daily Times reports.

Chief Prosecutor of the International Warcrimes Tribunal in Hague, Serge Brammertz (R) is accompanied by Hatidza Mehmedovic (L), survivor of the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica, as he arrives at memorial cemetery in Potocari near Srebrenica yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Panetta unveils blueprint of CIA's future

THE INDIAN EXPRESS ONLINE

CIA Director Leon Panetta has unveiled a new blueprint for the American intelligence agency's future aimed at maintaining a strong global presence, through measures that include a plan to boost its foreign language capabilities.

"We govern either by leadership or by crisis. Leadership means making tough choices and planning ahead."

"That's why we're taking a hard look at future challenges, and what we want our agency to look like five years from now. It's our responsibility to get out in front of any problems, and CIA 2015 will help us do that," Panetta said in his message to the CIA staff.

Outlining CIA 2015's three pillars, he said

the first would be investing in people.

The CIA will recruit, train, and retain a highly talented and diverse workforce with the strengths to tackle any mission that arises.

"Bolstering the Agency's foreign language capabilities is essential to that objective. The plan doubles the number of clandestine officers and triples the number of analysts enrolled in language training," he said.

The CIA will enhance its use of more flexible and innovative deployments overseas, including new approaches to cover, paving the way for even better intelligence collection.

More co-location of analysts and operators at home and abroad is expected to enrich the information provided to policymakers and lead to better operational success in the field, he said.

Former US President Bush to publish memoir

ANI, Washington

Former US President George W. Bush will admit to his "flaws and mistakes" in a forthcoming memoir.

According to The Telegraph, the memoir will focus on 14 key decisions.

According to Crown Publishing, Decision Points, will offer "gripping, never-before-heard detail" about key events such as the disputed 2000 election, the September 11 attacks and the launch of the war on Iraq.

Aided by a former White House speech-writer Chris Michel, Bush will also reveal his decisions on the financial crisis, Hurricane Katrina, Afghanistan and Iran, as well as discussing his battle with alcohol, his discovery of faith and family relationships.

UN urges legal action against Somalia pirates

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council yesterday unanimously adopted a Russian-drafted resolution urging all states to toughen legislation aimed at prosecuting and jailing pirates caught off Somalia.

The 15-member body appealed to all states, including those in the Horn of Africa, "to criminalize piracy under their domestic law and favourably consider the prosecution of suspected, and imprisonment of convicted pirates" arrested off the coast of Somalia.

The text also asked UN chief Ban Ki-moon to present to the council within three months a report outlining various options of a stronger international legal system to deal with acts of piracy and armed robbery at sea off Somalia.

Options should focus on creating special domestic chambers, possibly with international components, a regional tribunal or an international tribunal and corresponding jailing arrangements.

Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin hailed the adoption of what he called "an important anti-piracy initiative" that sends "an important political message that the international community is determined to combat" the scourge and ensure that suspected pirates are effectively prosecuted.

Moscow has been concerned by reports that coastal zone countries such as Kenya decided to stop prosecution of suspected Somali pirates because of the heavy strain on their overpopulated prisons and congested courts.

An international armada of warships has patrolled an area in the north of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden for more than a year in a bid to curb piracy.

But countries which have captured pirates have often had difficulty bringing them to justice because of legal technicalities.

Monday, the European Union offered support to Kenya and the Seychelles to continue to judge and jail suspected Somali pirates, as Nairobi moves to cancel agreements on their prosecution.

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