

## Hugo Chavez severs ties with Colombia

BBC ONLINE

Venezuela has broken off diplomatic relations with Colombia and ordered Colombian diplomats to leave the country by tomorrow.

President Hugo Chavez said he had "no choice" after Colombia accused Venezuela of being a haven for guerrillas - a charge he denies. He said that he was acting "out of dignity" in severing ties.

He also ordered the military to be on maximum alert on Venezuela's border with Colombia.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro said the government was also considering suspending flights and cutting commercial ties with Colombia.

President Chavez made his announcement shortly after a meeting of the Organisation of American States (OAS) in Washington, at which Colombia presented videos, maps and photos to back up its claims that Marxist Farc and ELN rebels have bases in Venezuela.

"We have no other choice but, out of dignity,

to totally break our relations with our brother nation of Colombia," Mr Chavez said live on national television yesterday as he hosted a visit by Argentine football coach Diego Maradona.

He said the photographs shown to the OAS could have been faked, and insisted that Venezuela was doing everything possible to stop Colombian rebels crossing the border.

"We do not tolerate the Farc in Venezuela," he said, before calling outgoing Colombian President Alvaro Uribe a "mafia boss", a "madman" and a "criminal".

He suggested Mr Uribe could be seeking a conflict with Venezuela before he left office next month.

"Uribe is even capable of setting up a fake camp in one of the jungles on the Venezuelan side to attack it, bomb it and bring about a war between Colombia and Venezuela," Mr Chavez said.

A US official was quoted by AFP news agency as saying that Venezuela breaking ties with Colombia was not a "proper way" to raise concerns.

## Russia ready to resume Nato ties

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia said yesterday it was ready to restore military cooperation with Nato almost two years after ties were frozen during the 2008 Georgian war, Russian news agencies reported.

"We are ready again to seek together responses to modern challenges and threats to international security, as well as mutually acceptable solutions to the problems that have piled up," Interfax news agency quoted General Nikolai Makarov, chief of the Russian armed forces' general staff, as saying.

He was talking after meeting Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola, Nato's Military Committee chairman, in Moscow.

Ties between Nato and Russia were frozen after Russia sent troops to crush an August 2008 assault by Georgia -- a former Soviet republic that has been promised eventual Nato membership -- on the Russian-backed breakaway region of South Ossetia.

## UNHRC names team to probe Israeli ship raid

REUTERS, Geneva

The UN Human Rights Council appointed a team of international experts yesterday to investigate a raid by Israeli commandos on a Gaza-bound aid flotilla in May.

The fact-finding team comprises three independent experts -- Sir Desmond de Silva (Britain), Karl Hudson-Phillips (Trinidad and Tobago) and Mary Shanthi Dairami (Malaysia) -- a UN statement said.

The 47-member forum voted to set up the inquiry last month to look into what it called violations of international law in Israel's attack in which nine Turkish pro-Palestinian activists were killed.

## North Korea threatens response to naval exercise

IANIS, Hanoi

The spokesman of the North Korean delegation at an Asian security forum said yesterday that Pyongyang would physically respond to planned US-Korean naval exercises.

"The Korean maritime Republic of Korea's (DPKR) position is clear--there will be a physical response against the steps imposed by the United States military," said Ri Tong Il on the sidelines of the Association of South-East Asian Nations' (ASEAN) Regional Forum in Hanoi.

The US and South Korea announced a joint naval drill to start tomorrow, a response to the sinking of a South Korean warship, which Seoul blames on the Stalinist North.

"This is not a defensive training," Ri said, adding that the sophisticated weaponry and the US aircraft carrier involved mean it could not be compared with a military exercise conducted by any other country.

"It is against the sovereignty of the DPRK and the

security of the DPRK," he said. "It is a great threat to the Korean Peninsula and whole to the region of Asia as a whole."

"It is no longer the 19th century with gunboat diplomacy... it is a new century and Asian countries are in need of peace and development and DPRK is also moving to that end," Ri said.

North Korea again rejected responsibility for the March sinking of the Cheonan, in which 46 sailors lost their lives, saying the South was 'trying to dump responsibility' by blaming the North.

"We will never accept that they are trying to hold us accountable," Ri said, adding that findings by an international investigation which point to North Korean involvement had been fabricated, and 'everyone is aware of the conspiracy with the US'.

He said the situation should have been resolved bilaterally and South Korea should not have taken the issue to the UN Security Council, which "deplored" the Cheonan's sinking, but with-

out blaming North Korea.

"The situation on the Korean Peninsula is on the brink of explosion," Ri said, adding that South Korea should apologise for taking that 'unclear issue' to the UN.

North Korea's Central News Agency said in an editorial that the country would respond with 'corpses and graves' if the US 'provokes another war'.

An ASEAN statement is expected to support the Security Council's stance on the Cheonan, call for peaceful resolution of disputes and encourage North Korea to return to multilateral denuclearisation talks.

ASEAN General Secretary Surin Pitsuwan said discussions on the Koreans were 'serious' and 'everybody was satisfied that positions were articulated out clearly, directly and with candour'.

"I think they will continue to talk, that's the best part... Nobody is going to take any violent action against anybody," he said.



Workers clean up mud left by floods on the banks of the Yangtze River in Chongqing yesterday. China, already reeling from deadly floods, braced on July 23 for a potential new deluge on the Yangtze downstream from the huge Three Gorges Dam as its reservoir's level hit a high for the year.

PHOTO: AFP

## France aids Mauritanian army raid

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

France provided technical and logistical support to a recent Mauritanian military operation against al-Qaeda's North African wing, the French defence ministry has said.

"The terrorist group targeted by the Mauritanian army is the one that executed a British hostage a year ago and has refused to give proof of life or engage in negotiations to release our compatriot Michel Germaneau," the ministry said yesterday.

"(We) confirm that the French army gave technical and logistical support to a Mauritania operation to prevent an attack by AQIM against Mauritania," the ministry statement said, using the acronym for al-Qaeda's North African section.

Mauritanian officials said that troops attacked an al-Qaeda-linked group in the border region of northern Mali and Mauritania to free an elderly French hostage facing execution but did not find him.

The raid was held "in coordination with friendly countries," the source said, adding that the 78-year-old hostage, Michel Germaneau, an aid worker kidnapped on April 19, was not found.

Spain's El Pais daily quoted diplomatic sources as saying that French special forces had participated in the dawn attack after locating the base with US help.

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) set a July 27 deadline for killing Germaneau, unless its demands for a prisoner swap were met.

AQIM gave France 15 days from July 12 to arrange an exchange and said French President Nicolas Sarkozy would be responsible for the life of Germaneau, a retired engineer who had worked in the Algerian oil sector.

## India develops world's cheapest "laptop" at \$35

REUTERS, New Delhi

India has come up with the world's cheapest "laptop," a touch-screen computing device that costs \$35.

Human Resource Development Minister Kapil Sibal this week unveiled the low-cost computing device that is designed for students, saying his department had started talks with global manufacturers to start mass production.

"We have reached a (developmental) stage that today, the motherboard, its chip, the processing, connectivity, all of them cumulatively cost around \$35, including memory, display, everything," he told a news conference.

Sibal said the Linux based computing device was expected to be introduced to higher education institutions from 2011 but the aim was to drop the price further to \$20 and ultimately to \$10.

The device was developed by research teams at the Indian Institute of Technology and the Indian Institute of Science.

## Thousands gather for Thai "red" rally before vote

REUTERS, Bangkok

Supporters of Thailand's main opposition party rallied in Bangkok yesterday in the first big political gathering since a deadly military crackdown on anti-government protesters two months ago.

At least 4,000 massed at a theme park ahead of a pivotal Bangkok by-election in a defiant show of support for a detained "red shirt" protest leader representing the Puea Thai Party, the movement's powerful parliamentary arm.

Supporters dressed in red braved the rain to rally in spite of a state of emergency in place across a quarter of the country since fierce fighting, arson and deadly riots in May that marked the worst political violence in Thailand's modern history.

The gathering was the latest sign of rebellion by "red shirt" supporters who have been driven underground by a draconian emergency decree that has allowed swathes of arrests without charge, bans on public gatherings and broad media censorship. Illegal demonstrations by "red shirts" have taken place at the upscale Rachaprasong intersection they had occupied in downtown Bangkok to draw attention to the 90 people who died and 2,000 who were wounded during the clashes between soldiers and protesters in April and May.

**DETAINED CANDIDATE**

The government allowed the campaign rally to take place to ensure fair play ahead of Sunday's vote, although the Puea Thai candidate, Korkaew Pikulthong, remained in detention.

"For the liberty of the people, the equality of

the public, democracy in Thailand and for the world to know that Thai people hate injustice, vote number four -- Korkaew," a party member said on stage, reading a hand-written letter by Korkaew.

Korkaew is one of 12 senior "red shirt" figures being held on terror charges having been denied bail. Others have fled into hiding, some pledging to turn themselves in when the state of emergency is lifted.

Both Puea Thai and the "red shirts" are believed to be led by Thaksin Shinawatra, the self-exiled, graft-convicted former billionaire premier ousted in a 2006 coup by the royalist, pro-establishment army.

He has been accused by the government of ordering the riots and bankrolling protests that shut down Bangkok's commercial heart for seven weeks in pursuit of immediate elections.

While not expected to win the by-election in Bangkok, a traditional stronghold of the incumbent Democrat Party, Korkaew's campaign highlights the resilience of the pro-Thaksin movement and the deepening social and political divisions that have plagued Southeast Asia's second-biggest economy for five years.

The "red shirts" have said they will not return to the streets any time soon, but many of their supporters say they are ready to resume protests if called upon.

They are hoping to ride a wave of public discontent and feelings of injustice and disenfranchisement to ensure Puea Thai win the next election and power is returned to another pro-Thaksin populist party.

## China, India should open wallets for AIDS war: Global Fund

AFP, Vienna

China, India and other fast-growing economies should start to contribute to the world's war chest to fight AIDS, the head of the Global Fund said yesterday as the 18th world AIDS conference wound down.

Speaking amid deepening concern about donations from western countries, Michel Kazatchkine said a looming funding gap could be bridged by innovative financing but also -- for the first time -- help from emerging giants.

Until now, these countries have been recipients of AIDS funds, not donors.

But, Kazatchkine argued, the time was ripe for them to make at least a first step towards providing financial help.

"I believe that in a globalising world, in a world where countries like China are joining, and want to join, world governance, at a time when the G8 is becoming the G20, it is right for these countries to take up a share of the burden," he told AFP in an interview.

Kazatchkine, executive director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria, said he had already flown to Beijing to press his case.

"The Chinese told me they would think about it," he said. A trip to Delhi is scheduled for next month, he added. Kazatchkine has also been lobbying the petrodollar-flush economies of the Gulf.

His discreet campaign comes ahead of a meeting in October where the Global Fund will beat the drum for up to 20 billion dollars, from 2011 to 2013, to fight the three diseases on its roster.

He cautioned, though, that he did not expect huge contributions from countries still struggling to rise out of poverty. Such a thing was "very far off."

"Let's not forget that in terms of GNP per head, China ranks in the hundreds in the world league table. I don't say it is a poor country, I would call it a country with poor people."

Kazatchkine urged traditional donors to maintain support and explore innovative financing, such as a micro-tax on foreign exchange transactions, to raise precious

cash.

"I think it is not impossible, as far as Europe is concerned, to have a tax on euro transactions. But I am hearing that certain finance ministers want this tax to be used as a buffer for future bank crises, rather than go towards development aid."

New figures have pointed to a worrying slump in funds for the 29-year offensive against AIDS in the wake of the banking crisis.

After a six-year run of double-digit increases, western donors cut back in funding last year to 7.6 billion dollars after 7.7 billion dollars in 2008, according to an analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation and UNAIDS.

The cutback left a funding gap for low- and middle-income economies of at least seven billion dollars compared to needs of 23.6 billion dollars.

For 2010 -- a year for which the G8 has pledged universal access to AIDS drugs -- 25 billion dollars must be found. So far, there is a shortfall of 11.3 billion, according to a report in the US journal Science.

The Global Fund has currently allocated 964 million dollars for AIDS, for India, the Fund's current allocation is 995 million dollars, two-thirds of which will go to AIDS.

A precedent for switching to donor status was set in 2006 by Russia. Surging a rise in income from energy exports, Moscow said it would reimburse 270 million dollars in Global Fund grants for activities in Russia.

More than 33 million people have the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS. Around 5.2 million badly-infected poor people have access to the drugs that turn HIV to a manageable, if chronic, disease, but this is between a third and a half of those who need the therapy.

Kazatchkine said without funds, a dark future loomed for those waiting to grasp the lifeline.

"When they arrive at AIDS clinics, they will have to be told, 'Put your name on the waiting list. As soon as we get the drugs, we'll get back to you.' But when that day comes around, they will already be dead."



PHOTO: AFP

Kosovo Albanians look at their friends making a graffiti on the New Born monument in the town of Pristina yesterday. Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia in February 2008 did not violate international law, judges at the UN's highest court said on July 22, 2010.

## IFIC officials boycott test

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Mohammad Lutfar Rahman, chairman of IFIC Bank, told The Daily Star that no employees would be fired. The test was for evaluating the skills of employees, he said.

"Outside ruined the scheduled test. We will take it later in Dhaka," he said. IFIC was established in 1983 and before that it was a joint venture finance company of public and private sectors since 1976.

The government still has 32.75 percent stake in the bank. Sponsor directors own 11.42 percent and the rest is owned by the public. The bank has 87 branches and SME service centres across the country and employs nearly 3,000 people.

According to officials at

different levels in the bank, the board of directors and particularly the chairman decided to recruit new people replacing present employees.

They said the chairman accordingly appointed a consulting firm to evaluate the skills and performance of the employees.

"It has created a bad impression of us to our family members. The test raises questions about our abilities," said an official of the bank in Chittagong Zone.

"There was no evaluation of the employees in the last 27 years. We don't know who has what qualities," said the chairman. "We can't even promote people without proper evaluation," he said. He said earlier two

attempts of evaluation by

previous boards were also foiled.

"This is a first generation private bank, but runs poorer than a third generation bank," he claimed.

The chairman vowed to take the test again. He said evaluation at the top levels have been completed. Yesterday's test was for the last four levels of employees.

However, the bank's human resources development programme contradicts somewhat to the chairman's statement about the employees' abilities and the bank's performance.

According to the website of the bank, it has an academy, the oldest of the kind in Bangladesh. It is an in-house training centre equipped with a professional library, modern train-

ing aids and professional faculty.

About the academy the bank said: During its 23 years of existence, the academy has not only conducted courses, workshops and seminars as required by the bank, but it also organised training programmes for banks of the Maldives, Nepal and Oman International Exchange LLC. In addition, the academy has also the credit of organising the system for the Bank of Maldives.

At the end of 2009, the total asset of the bank was valued at Tk 6,290 crore, which was Tk 4,573 crore a year ago.

A share of IFIC Bank was traded in the Dhaka Stock Exchange on Thursday at Tk 1,106.