



Fidel Castro turns 84

AFP, Havana

A reinvigorated Fidel Castro marked his 84th birthday Friday after a recent return to the Cuban spotlight, insisting he remained true to the ideals of the revolution that brought him to power half a century ago.

"I have not changed," Castro wrote in an article published in state-run media. "I will be faithful to the principles and ethics that I have practiced since I became a revolutionary."

In Caracas, leftist president and Castro admirer Hugo Chavez effusively congratulated his hero.

"You are and always will be a luminous example... of commitment to the revolutionary struggle, Fidel. Congratulations comrade!" Chavez wrote on his Twitter account.

Castro handed presidential power to his younger brother Raul in 2006 after undergoing gastrointestinal surgery. The transition became permanent in 2008, although Fidel Castro remains head of the Cuban Communist Party.

For years after his operation, Fidel hardly made so much as a public appearance, but in the last three weeks he has popped up in at least eight public events, culminating this week with the ailing father of the revolution appearing in his trademark olive green fatigues to give a speech before the country's National Assembly.

Castro's birthday celebration is the thrust of a cultural program called "With Fidel, for Peace," which includes a series of concerts, book readings, and art activities.

The government did not include the birthday on its official revolutionary calendar, but acknowledged that the event was being marked by youth organizations and cultural groups, most of which are closely overseen by Havana authorities.

Obama backs NY 'Ground Zero mosque'

BBC ONLINE

US President Barack Obama has staunchly defended controversial plans to build a mosque near Ground Zero in New York.

Opponents have protested against the construction of an Islamic cultural centre and mosque several hundred feet away from the site of the Twin Towers.

Mr Obama acknowledged "sensitivities" surround the 9/11 site, but said Muslims have the same right to practise their religion "as anyone else".

"Our commitment to religious freedom must be unshakable," Mr Obama said.

Since a New York developer announced plans to build a 13-storey Islamic community centre and mosque about two blocks from the former World Trade Center site, prominent Republican politicians and a host of conservative pundits have attacked the project.

Some relatives of people killed in the terror attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 are also opposed to the plan.

In a speech at a White House dinner celebrating Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, Mr Obama waded into the row, saying:

"We must all recognise and respect the sensitivities surrounding the development of lower Manhattan, Ground Zero is, indeed, hallowed ground. But let me be clear, as a citizen, and as president, I believe that Muslims have the same right to practise their religion as anyone else in this country."

"That includes the right to build a place of worship and a community centre on private property in lower Manhattan, in accordance with local laws and ordinances."

5 cops, one anti-Qaeda fighter killed in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Two policemen were shot dead and their bodies set ablaze at a Baghdad checkpoint while three of their colleagues and an anti-Qaeda fighter were also killed, security officials said yesterday.

Insurgents shot the two policemen as they sat in their car in eastern Baghdad, the capital's security leaders said, and then set it on fire, while three others were killed by silenced pistols at a checkpoint in the west of the city.

Baghdad Operations Command blamed the attacks on negligence on the part of local forces, and said unit commanders would have to explain their mistakes, but did not give details on possible disciplinary measures to be taken.

"We will hold accountable the chiefs of the security units in the areas where the attacks took place, due to the negligence of their members," it said in a statement.

China to mourn victims of floods, mudslides

BBC ONLINE

China is to hold a national day of mourning today for those who have died in mudslides in the northwest, as the death toll rose to 1,239 people.

Chinese flags across the country and embassies worldwide will be lowered to half-mast and public entertainment suspended, state media reported.

Teams are continuing to recover bodies in Gansu province in the wake of Saturday's landslides in Zhouqu county.

Another 505 people remain missing and thousands are in temporary shelters.

Chinese health authorities say that hygiene and safety for those left homeless is a priority, as concerns mount over a lack of clean drinking water.

Following a decision by China's cabinet to declare a day of mourning, the Ministry of Culture issued a circular ruling that films, karaoke and online entertainment be suspended on Sunday, according to Xinhua news

agency.

In Zhouqu, soldiers are trying to remove debris from the Bailing River amid fears that more rain could cause it to overflow, causing more chaos for a town that is already one third underwater.

Heavy rain has been sweeping across central and western China for most of the week, with more rain forecast for Zhouqu county in the next few days.

The Ministry of Civil Affairs says at least 45,000 people have evacuated their homes.

Survivors are now living in tents, which are drenched through, pitched on unstable slopes.

Some cases of dysentery were reported by state media.

The government has brought in mobile water purification units, able to provide clean water for 30,000 people, according to China News Service.

Sichuan province to the south has also been affected, with 38 people still missing, after rains spread, triggering landslides.



PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama salutes as he boards Marine One with First Lady Michelle Obama and their daughter Sasha yesterday at the White House in Washington. Obama is travelling to Florida's Gulf Coast this weekend for a family trip intended to show solidarity with the struggling region in the wake of a massive oil spill.

US Muslims concerned over Eid; Sept/11 anniversary overlap

AFP, New York

US Muslim groups have urged law enforcement agencies to be on guard during Eid al-Fitr, the end-of-Ramadan holiday, which this year coincides with the anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, officials said Friday.

A spokeswoman for the Los Angeles-based Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), an advocacy group, said local and federal agencies across the country were being asked to remain vigilant during the Eid celebrations.

MPAC communications director Edina Lekovic said the warning came because of what she called a "heightened climate of Islamophobia" in recent months, citing protests against plans to build an Islamic centre and mosque in Manhattan, not far from the site of Ground Zero.

"We're seeing consistent cases of protests taking place in front of some of mosques organized largely by Islamophobic groups," Lekovic told AFP.

"At this stage it's a precaution because there are many mosque leaders around the country who are understandably concerned for their congregations and want to be sure that they're taking preventative measures and that law enforcement is on standby if, God forbid, there are any issues that need to be dealt with."

Lekovic emphasized that Ramadan and Eid festivals in the United States usually passed without incident.

"By and large, Ramadan and the Eid holidays are peacefully celebrated by Muslims and ignored by the public," she said.

However the furore over the Ground Zero mosque and cases including a Florida church that has announced plans to hold "International Burn a Koran Day" on September 11 have triggered concerns of possible hate crimes.

Australian PM takes lead in vote

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard said next Saturday's vote would be one of the "closest, tightest races" in the country's history as she took the lead in neck-and-neck polls.

Gillard, Australia's first female leader, gained four points to lead Tony Abbott's conservative Liberal/National coalition 53 percent to 47 percent heading into the campaign's crucial final week.

The latest Nielsen poll of 1,356 voters showed a three-point gain for flame-haired Gillard in the preferred prime minister stakes 52 percent to Abbott's 38 percent.

A separate Newspoll in the must-win states of Queensland and New South Wales (NSW), and Gillard's home state of Victoria, showed the prime minister was on track to scrape into government.

"Possible gains in Victoria would mean Labor could govern in its own right by the narrowest of margins," said The Australian newspaper, where the Newspoll was published.

Critically, Gillard looked to hold onto the bellwether electorate of Eden-Monaro, just outside the capital Canberra, according to Newspoll.

Every government, which has won office since 1972, has taken the seat.

The former lawyer performed strongly in the campaign's fourth week -- the period during which the surveys were conducted -- rating well

on two popular TV programmes and attracting a flurry of bets on Labor to win the election.

But she warned it was still anyone's race.

"I think we are heading towards one of the closest, tightest races in Australia's history," Gillard said.

"It's going to be a nail-biter of a Saturday night. I think this is going to be one of the closest races the nation has ever seen."

Gillard has led Australia for just seven weeks, ascending to the top job in June after the ruling Labor party axed elected prime minister Kevin Rudd in a popularity coup prompted by his slipping popularity.

She announced a carbon trading scheme for Australia's farmers Saturday in a bid to shore up her climate credentials, which were left in tatters after she said she would consult a "citizens' assembly" on global warming policy.

Rudd tried to pass an emissions trading scheme through parliament, but opted to shelve it after it was blocked twice in the upper house by a conservative/green bloc.

Gillard supports a carbon tax but says consensus for strong action has been shattered and she must rebuild her mandate in the community.

If re-elected, Gillard said her government would spend 46 million dollars (42 million US) on a carbon-trading scheme for farmers, with credits to flow from sustainable practices such as tree-planting or changes to tilling and fertilising land.

Gunmen kill 16 in Pakistan attacks

AFP, Quetta

Gunmen shot dead 16 people in two separate incidents in insurgency-hit southwest Pakistan, officials said yesterday.

The first incident took place in Aab-e-Gum area, 75 kilometres (47 miles) south-east of Quetta, the capital of oil and gas rich Baluchistan province, on Friday night.

"A group of 30-35 gunmen stopped the bus in Aab-e-Gum area, offloaded passengers at gunpoint and shot dead 10 of them," top provincial home department official Akbar Hussain Durrani told AFP.

He said the bus was travelling to Quetta from the eastern city of Lahore and all those killed in the attack were Punjabi-speaking people.

A senior local official in Aab-e-Gum area, Ismail Kurd, confirmed the incident and casualties.

In another incident, two men riding a motorbike killed six people in Quetta city on Saturday, senior police official Hamid Shakeel told AFP.

No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Violence has recently surged in Baluchistan which borders both Afghanistan and Iran.

Hillary prods Netanyahu on ME peace talks

REUTERS, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about issues blocking direct peace talks with the Palestinians as the Obama administration boosted pressure for talks to begin, the State Department said on Friday.

Hillary telephoned Netanyahu on Thursday evening, and also discussed the issue with the foreign ministers of Jordan and Egypt, State Department spokesman PJ Crowley said.

"We continued to discuss with the parties the basis for the launch of direct negotiations," he said.

Hillary's calls followed a trip to the region by US Mideast negotiator George Mitchell this week in which he sought to overcome final barriers to direct negotiations, which US President Barack Obama hopes to see launched in coming weeks.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas indicated on Monday he could go to direct talks, provided they were based on a March 19 statement by the "Quartet" of Mideast peace mediators -- the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations.

But Israeli newspapers said Netanyahu told Mitchell on Wednesday he wanted talks to start immediately without any such "precondition" -- dimming hopes for an imminent breakthrough.

"We believe they are committed. It is just a matter of working through a few details. They are important, but we are very, very close," one senior US administration official said, speaking on condition he was not named.

US officials have said they are working with other Quartet representatives on a possible statement, which EU High Representative Catherine Ashton said, in a letter seen by Reuters, would be issued early next week if both parties agree to move forward to direct talks.

China widens hormone-tainted milk powder checks

REUTERS, Shanghai

China is expanding an investigation into reports of hormone-tainted milk powder by testing a range of infant milk powders and breast milk, state media said yesterday, the latest food scare to hit the country.

The Ministry of Health launched the probe following complaints that tainted milk powder had caused baby girls to show signs of premature sexual development.

The Ministry said it would test baby-formula maker Synutra International as well as other brands to compare the level of estrogen in dairy products, the People's Daily reported on its website. (www.people.com.cn).

"In order to guarantee that the milk powder tests are safe and reliable, this time the Ministry of Health has chosen Beijing and Shanghai to test the products."



PHOTO: AFP

Women hold their children during a rally after people from the Roma community were expelled from a building yesterday in Montreuil, east of Paris. French authorities have torn down more than 40 camps housing since announcing a crackdown on the minorities two weeks



Embassy of the Republic of Iraq, Dhaka NOTICE

The Embassy of Iraq presents its compliments to all Bangladeshi nationals and would like to inform that, the embassy is dazed to know that there are a few people in Bangladesh involved in wicked practice, which is affecting our brotherly ties with your country.

Recently the Embassy has received various complaints about a number of recruiting license holders and medical centers pursuing poor citizens to carry out medical checkup at their centers and selling forged visa to work in Iraq, faking that they are enlisted by the embassy of Iraq. And these medical centers are heard to be fixing appointments and introducing someone as Iraqi Ambassador/Consul, Embassy staff and cheating people, bagging money from poor people. Besides that, a few well reputed citizens in the society are also heard to be using business cards with the Iraqi national emblem without any permission from the Embassy, telling people that they are authorized by the embassy to mediate.

The only contact address is:

Embassy of the Republic of Iraq, House-16, Dutabash Road, Baridhara Diplomatic Zone.

Tel: 9886632, Fax: 8824597, E-mail: iraq_embdac@yahoo.com.

*** Embassy has no mobile phones for official purposes.

C-1216