

French strikes cost \$560 million per day

AP, Paris

France's massive strikes are costing the national economy up to euro400 million (\$562 million) each day, the French finance minister said yesterday, as work-

ers continued to block ports, oil refineries and trash incineration plants to protest a plan to raise the retirement age to 62.

France's 12 refineries remained shut down Monday after nearly two weeks of protests despite raids last week by riot police that forced some to open access to fuel stocks. At ports in Marseille and Le Havre, dozens of tankers are still anchored offshore, waiting to unload.

Nearly 10,000 tons of garbage have been piling up in southern Marseille and its suburbs, and a garbage incineration plant outside Paris was shut down by strikers who huddled around a campfire and barbecue grills outside.

With French life expectancy increasing and the country's debt soaring, French President Nicolas Sarkozy insists that the retirement age must be raised to save the pension system. Unions, mean-

while, see retirement at 60 as a cherished and hard-won right.

The Senate voted 177-153 on Friday to pass the pension reform, following its approval in the lower house. On Monday, a group of lawmakers from the upper and

The strikes have hit a wide swath of the economy and life in France, sporadically in some cases like at schools and post offices. A national train strike that started Oct. 12 has been tapering off, but oil refinery workers, who control the crucial energy sector, have been striking steadily for about two weeks.

French Minister Christine Lagarde said on Europe-1 radio that it was difficult to put a daily price tag on the strikes, but she estimated it between euro200 million and euro400 million. Beyond that, the strikes are damaging France's image, she said.

Lagarde said foreign news stations were constantly playing clips of the French protests.

"The territory's attractiveness is put into question when you see images like

that," she said. The demonstrations against the retirement reform have brought millions into the streets, and polls have shown that a vast majority of French people support the strikers. Meanwhile, the conservative Sarkozy's popularity is plummeting.



Tanker trucks are blocked by strikers protesting against plans to raise France's retirement age from 60 to 62, on their way to an oil depot at Fos-sur-Mer, the biggest in the south of yesterday. The pensions reform bill was approved by the Senate on October 22.

lower houses were trying to agree on the definitive version of the bill so there can be a final vote by both chambers later this week.

The bill's passage through parliament has not deterred unions, which have already announced two new nationwide protests for Thursday and Nov 6.

S Korea sends flood aid to North Korea

AFP, Seoul

South Korea is sending the first dispatch of relief supplies including 5,000 tons of rice to North Korea yesterday, after it was battered by torrential rain this summer, officials said.

Two ships carrying rice and instant noodles were to depart South Korean ports for the northeastern Chinese port of Dandong on the border with North Korea, the South's unification ministry said.

The aid will be delivered later from Dandong to the North's border city of Sinuiju, it said.

South Korea has promised to send a 10 billion won (8.3 million dollars) aid package including rice, instant noodles, cement and other emergency supplies.

Monday's shipment marks the South's first government-financed rice aid to its impoverished neighbour since a conservative government took office in Seoul in early 2008.

Cross-border relations have been icy since Seoul accused Pyongyang of torpedoing a South Korean warship in March with the loss of 46 lives.

The North denies responsibility but has made some peace gestures. This weekend the two sides will resume reunions of families separated by war 60 years ago.

US under pressure on WikiLeaks allegations

AFP, London

Washington came under increasing pressure to investigate allegations in the leaked Iraq war documents published by WikiLeaks, which Britain's deputy premier called "shocking".

Governments and human rights organisations alike put the focus on answers to the allegations made against US, allied and Iraqi troops as the whistleblowing website released 400,000 classified US military documents.

The flood of material from 2004 to 2009 offers a grim snapshot of the conflict, especially of the abuse of Iraqi civilians by Iraqi security forces.

The heavily redacted logs appear to show that the US military turned a blind eye to evidence of torture and abuse of civilians by the Iraqi authorities.

WikiLeaks claim the documents reveal around 15,000 more civilian deaths than were previously known about.

British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg called the allegations "extremely serious" and said people would be wanting to hear "what the answer is".

"We can bemoan how these leaks occurred but I think the nature of the allegations made are extraordinarily serious. They are distressing to read about," he told BBC television.

"I'm assuming the US administration will want to provide its own answer."

"Anything that suggests that basic rules of war and conflict and of engagement have been broken, or that torture has in any way been condoned, are extremely serious and need to be looked at."

"People will want to hear what the answer is to what are very, very serious allegations of a

nature which I think everybody will find quite shocking."

There was no immediate reaction from the Barack Obama administration to the calls for an investigation, and little eagerness among Republicans to delve into the low points of a war that came to define the administration of George W. Bush.

Representative Pete Hoekstra, the ranking Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, said the document release "open up old wounds."

"If there is information about criminal activity, follow it up. If there is a systemic problem, follow it up," he said on Fox television. "But let's not create controversy where there isn't any. There are enough problems in Iraq without going back over that ground."

Australia joined Iraq war allies Britain and the United States in saying that the leaks could put troops' lives at risk.

Australian Defence Minister Stephen Smith vowed a "painstaking" review of the documents.

Denmark's military also said it would study the documents amid reports that the classified files reveal wrongdoing by Danish soldiers.

"We want to see the documents for ourselves and compare them to our own information," Danish Defence Command spokesman Torben Kjedsen told AFP.

According to Danish media, the documents reveal how Danish troops had handed over 62 prisoners to Iraqi authorities, despite warnings they would likely face abusive treatment.

The files published Friday contain graphic accounts of torture, civilian killings and Iran's hand in the Iraq war, documenting years of bloodshed and suffering following the 2003 US-led invasion to oust dictator Saddam Hussein.

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US MIDTERM POLLS Tea Party funded by BP, other climate polluters. GUARDIAN ONLINE. BP and several other big European companies are funding the midterm election campaigns of Tea Party favourites who deny the existence of global warming or oppose Barack Obama's energy agenda, the Guardian has learned.

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