

EU 'to ban' Ivory Coast's Gbagbo

BBC ONLINE
The European Union is set to impose a travel ban on Ivory Coast's incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo over disputed elections, a diplomat has told the BBC.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy had given Mr Gbagbo a deadline of Sunday to step down. Mr Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara both say they won last month's election and have each named cabinet ministers amid a stand-off in the main city Abidjan.

The UN, the West and African leaders all say Mr Ouattara was the victor. There are fears that the dispute could reignite civil war in the world's largest cocoa producer. About 50 people have been killed in recent days, according to UN human rights chief Navi Pillay.

SOUTH KOREA DRILLS North Korea 'will not hit back'

BBC ONLINE
South Korea has held military exercises using live artillery fire on Yeonpyeong island, weeks after the North shelled the island following a similar drill.

Pyongyang labelled the exercise "reckless military provocation" but said it would not retaliate. Intense diplomacy over the weekend ended with the UN Security Council failing to reach an agreement. After the drills, China urged both sides to avoid armed confrontation. "Whatever the differences and disputes relevant parties may have, they can only be addressed through dialogue and negotiation rather than by conflict or war," said foreign ministry official Cui Tiankai. Russia also renewed its calls for both sides to show restraint. Earlier, the US envoy to the UN, Susan Rice, said the drills were "fully consistent with South Korea's legal right to self defence". The South's government has been under

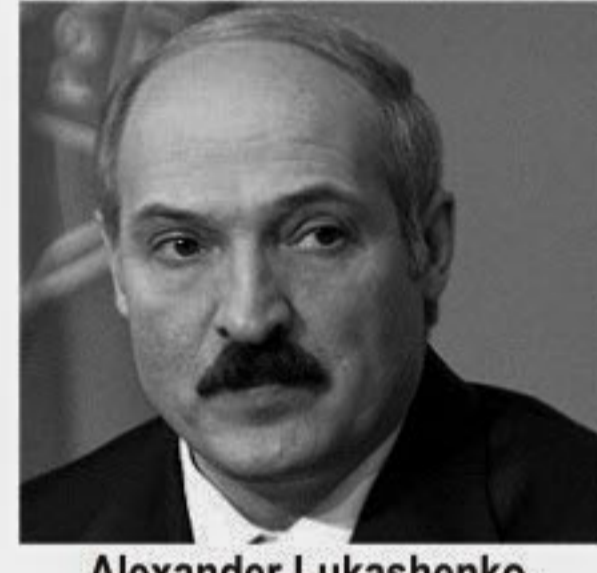
huge domestic pressure to take a tough stance towards Pyongyang, in the wake of the 23 November shelling by the North. Yeonpyeong residents were told to move into air-raid shelters early yesterday - part of regular procedure during military exercises in the area. South Korea's defence ministry said the drills began at 1430 (0530 GMT), after being delayed by thick fog, and ended 90 minutes later. Southern officials have insisted that the artillery guns on Yeonpyeong were aimed south-west, away from North Korea. But the North claimed any ammunition fired would inevitably land in its territorial waters, and warned of an "unpredictable self-defensive blow". For its part, South Korea said it would "immediately and sternly" deal with any North Korean response, according to an officer at the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Meanwhile, North Korea has agreed to permit the return of UN nuclear inspectors as part of a package of measures to ease acute tensions on the peninsula, US troubleshooter Bill Richardson said yesterday.



Activists hold anti-war placards during a candlelight rally denouncing South Korea's live-fire exercise on Yeonpyeong island, in Seoul yesterday.

BELARUS POLLS Scores under arrest in post-poll violence President Lukashenko re-elected

AFP, Minsk
Belarus police yesterday arrested hundreds of protesters including four opposition candidates as they broke up a mass demonstration against the re-election of President Alexander Lukashenko.



Alexander Lukashenko.

Washington. Listening to speeches by five of the candidates condemning the polls, protesters waved Belarussian and EU flags and shouted "For Freedom!", "Down with the Gulag" and "Long Live Belarus". "This was a farce and not an election," candidate Yaroslav Romanchuk told the rally. "The authorities had the chance to extend us a hand but again they did not."

Lukashenko was elected for a fourth term on Sunday with 79.67 percent of the vote, the BELTA state news agency cited the electoral commission as saying. The number of demonstrators against the disputed polls swelled to tens of thousands at a rally in central Minsk, AFP correspondents reported. Some of the protesters tried to storm government buildings and smash the glass doors. But a reinforced contingent of anti-riot police descended on Independence Square, taking hundreds into waiting police vans. AFP correspondents, one of whom was arrested, saw several protesters beaten with truncheons. The nine opposition candidates had earlier alleged fraud and summoned a mass protest in defiance of warnings from Lukashenko -- once condemned as Europe's last dictator by

An initial group of protesters had massed in the capital's main Oktyabrskaya Square and then marched on Independence Square, where several smashed the doors of the government building and election headquarters. "This is where Belarus received its independence in 1991 and today this is where Lukashenko's dictatorship will fall," opposition candidate Andrei Sannikov told the swelling crowd. Teams of anti-riot police however repelled the demonstrators, forming a human chain to prevent them from moving further and keeping them several metres away from the government building.

Iraqi PM delays unveiling new govt

BBC ONLINE
Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Maliki is due to unveil a partial list of cabinet ministers, his spokesman says, amid reports of ongoing disputes among Iraq's rival political factions.

It is the latest setback in efforts to form a unity government in Iraq, nine months after parliamentary elections. Ali Dabbagh said Mr Maliki would announce "half the new government" at a parliament session later yesterday. The cabinet must be in place by Saturday, under Iraq's constitution. There are 37 posts in all, and dividing up portfolios among Iraq's diverse and often mutually antagonistic factions has been the focus of the past month's political wrangling. The new cabinet is expected to include all the major factions, including the Kurds, Shia and Sunni Arabs. Each of the prime minister's nominations will still have to be approved by the Iraqi parliament.

Assange pushes back at 'hi-tech terrorist' charge

AFP, Madrid
Wikileaks founder Julian Assange pushed back yesterday after US Vice President Joe Biden blasted him as a dangerous "hi-tech terrorist." The 39-year-old Australian also told the Spanish daily El Pais that he was in "a condition of high-tech arrest" although he was released on bail by a British court last week while he fights extradition to Sweden, where he is wanted for questioning over allegations of sex crimes.

Asked whether he thought Assange was a hi-tech terrorist or a whistleblower akin to those who released the Pentagon papers -- a series of top-secret documents revealing US military policy in Vietnam -- Biden said Sunday: "I would argue that it's closer to being hi-tech terrorist." And he said the US Justice Department was mulling how to take legal action against the Australian. But Assange responded by noting that "terrorism is defined as the use of violence for political purposes." "Biden's administration continues to take offense at our organisation and the press with a violent or political objective, so who are the terrorists?" he said. Assange has enraged Washington by obtaining a cache of some 250,000 US diplomatic cables and slowly releasing the documents through his whistleblowing website, often causing huge embarrassment in world capitals. He complained to El Pais that he was "in a condition of high-tech arrest." "That is I have electronic jewellery which means if I leave the house outside of curfew times then an alarm will go off. It is very Orwellian," he said. Assange said he was also required to report to a police station once a day, which means he cannot stray far from his house.

Latest Leaks

China pays Nepal police to catch Tibet refugees

AFP, Kathmandu
China pays Nepalese police to arrest Tibetan refugees as they cross over the border to escape persecution, according to US embassy cables released by WikiLeaks. One cable, sent by an unnamed officer at the New Delhi embassy in February, quoted a source saying that China "rewards (Nepali forces) by providing financial incentives to officers who hand over Tibetans attempting to exit China." "Beijing has asked Kathmandu to step up patrols... and make it more difficult for Tibetans to enter Nepal," one of the embassy's sources said in a cable released Sunday. A spokesman for the Nepalese police in Kathmandu denied the allegations, calling them "baseless." "We arrest those who enter Nepal illegally and hand them over to Nepal's immigration authority," the spokesman told AFP. Thousands of Tibetans used to make the difficult and dangerous journey to Nepal every year, fleeing political and religious repression in China. They have previously been given safe passage through Nepal under an informal agreement between the government and the UN refugee agency put in place in 1989, when Nepal stopped giving them refugee status. Lobsang Choedak, a spokesman for the Tibetan movement in exile based in north India, confirmed that the number of refugees had declined drastically since the Tibet unrest in 2008, but would not comment on the bribery allegations.

US doubts on Mideast peace

AFP, Paris
Fresh leaks of diplomatic cables from 2009 by online whistleblower Wikileaks yesterday showed US doubts over Israel's commitment to the Middle East peace process due to disagreement over Israeli settlements. A US cable from November 2009, published online by Wikileaks and by French newspaper Le Monde, said Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu wanted to negotiate with Palestinian Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas, known as Abu Mazen. But it added: "It remains unclear to us how far Netanyahu is prepared to go." He "is interested in taking steps to strengthen Abu Mazen, but he will not agree to the total freeze on Israeli construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem that Abu Mazen insists is a requirement" for negotiations, it said. Direct talks between Israel and the Palestinians, the first for nearly two years, began in Washington on September 2. But Abbas suspended them after Israel refused to renew a partial ban on construction of settlements on Palestinian land. "There is too wide a gap between the maximum offer any Israeli prime minister could make and the minimum terms any Palestinian leader could accept and survive" politically, said the cable from the US embassy in Tel Aviv. Another US cable newly published by Wikileaks said that a French official quoted Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak as saying there was a "secret accord" between Israel and the United States "to continue the 'natural growth' of Israeli settlements in the West Bank." It gave no further details of the alleged accord. A third cable showed that Israeli intelligence shared US suspicions that executed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussain had weapons of mass destruction, which prompted the United States to invade Iraq in 2003.

Yemen nuclear material was unsecured

AP, Cairo
A storage facility housing Yemen's radioactive material was unsecured for up to a week after its lone guard was removed and its surveillance camera was broken, a secret U.S. State Department cable released by WikiLeaks revealed yesterday.

The message, dated Jan. 9, relates the worries of a Yemeni official, whose name was removed, about the unguarded state of a National Atomic Energy Commission facility. He pushes the U.S. embassy to urge his own government to secure the material. "Very little now stands between the bad guys and Yemen's nuclear material," the official is quoted as saying in the cable, which appeared on the website of the British Guardian newspaper.

Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country, hosts a particularly active branch of Al-Qaida that has not only repeatedly attacked the Yemeni government but attempted several attacks against the U.S. including last year's failed plot to blow up an airliner in Detroit on Christmas. On Jan. 7, Yemeni Foreign Abu Bakr al-Qirbi told the ambassador that "no radioactive material was currently stored in Sanaa and that all 'radioactive waste' was shipped to Syria." According to the cable, the radioactive material was used by local universities for agricultural research, Sanaa hospital and by international oil companies. The facility's lone guard was removed on Dec. 30, 2009, reported the cable and its single closed circuit TV camera had been broken for the last six months. The cable said the embassy would push senior Yemeni officials to provide an accounting of its radioactive materials and ensure storage facilities were secure.



Fire and Rescue department personnel inspect the wreckage of a crashed tourist bus at Cameron Highland northern state of Perak yesterday. Twenty-eight people, mostly Thai tourists, were killed when their double-decker bus crashed on a highway after a trip to the Cameron Highlands, in Malaysia's worst-ever coach accident.

AUSTRALIA REFUGEE BOAT DISASTER 48 believed dead

AFP, Sydney
Australia yesterday called off the search for bodies from last week's horrific asylum-seeker shipwreck, as the prime minister said about 48 people had died and warned the exact toll may never be known.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard said the "best estimate" was that around 90 people were on the wooden fishing boat which shattered on rocks at remote Christmas Island last Wednesday in a storm, as helpless residents looked on. Only 42 people were rescued before the search for survivors was called off late Friday. "We may never know the precise number but the advice to me is that the best estimate at present is that there were around 90 people on the boat," Gillard told reporters, quoting police figures. "That does mean of course that we are still not able to account for around 18 people." Thirty bodies were retrieved after the accident, including a number of babies and children, before the search was terminated yesterday on "advice from experienced police divers that no further bodies would be found," Customs told AFP. It is the worst disaster involving an asylum-seeker boat bound for Australia since the sinking of the SIEV-X off Indonesia in 2001, when all 353 on board died. Gillard said it may never be known "absolutely, certainly, how many people were on the boat," with authorities relying on accounts of

survivors to try and establish how many people are still missing and their identities. She said the increased toll "is obviously very very grim news and I am sure that Australians are today continuing to reflect on this tragedy." Survivors say the vessel was packed with Iranians, Iraqis and Kurds when it foundered on a rocky outcrop at Christmas Island, the site of Australia's main immigration detention centre and some 2,600 kilometres from the mainland. The grim task of identifying the victims was underway at the hospital morgue yesterday. Police have interviewed three Indonesian crewmen rescued after the crash and expect to lay charges, though they have declined to comment on whether these will include manslaughter. One survivor whose husband and young son are missing told the West Australian newspaper the crew cut the boat's engine as it approached the island's rugged coast, assuring passengers the navy would come to their rescue. Turning people-smuggling boats back at sea was government policy under the conservative administration of John Howard, prompting incidents where the vessels were sabotaged to ensure passengers were taken onshore in Australia. Police say there was nothing to indicate the doomed boat had been sabotaged. The centre-left Labor party wound back the harshest aspects of Howard's refugee policy, but legal experts said killing engine power in Australian waters was likely still a "habit" of people smugglers to spark a rescue.

Spain to push forward on pension reform

AFP, Madrid
The Spanish government intends to raise the retirement age and change the calculation method of pensions as part of an overhaul aimed at reducing the public deficit, Labour Minister Valeriano Gomez said yesterday. "The best way to extend the length of working life is to push back the age of retirement to 67. Those who wish to retire at 65 can do so, but in this case they must accept a reduction in their pension," the minister said. The state now uses a worker's last 15 years of earnings as a base for calculating the amount of pension benefits but Gomez said "we must go from 15 to 20 years, without abandoning the possibility of raising it bit by bit to 25 years." "The goal is for the majority of one's career to be taken into account when their pension is calculated," he added. As people tend to earn more money at the end

of their careers, extending the period that is taken into account when calculating their pension will lead to a lower base and lower benefits. Last week the ruling Socialists and the conservative opposition agreed to extend the number of years of earnings that are used to calculate a pension but an exact time frame was not decided. Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's government has promised a radical change to pensions in early 2011 to trim the public deficit and soothe the market fears that Spain could be trapped in a European debt quagmire that has swamped Greece and Ireland. Gomez said there would be exceptions to the higher age of retirement for those with "hard jobs" or for people who have contributed to the system for "36 or 37 years". Zapatero reiterated his commitment to the reforms on the sidelines of a European Union summit on Friday, and his cabinet is expected to approve the measures on January 28.

Somali pirates hijack UAE ship

AFP, Brussels
Somali pirates hijacked a cargo vessel from the United Arab Emirates yesterday after firing small arms and rocket-propelled grenades at the ship, Europe's anti-piracy mission said. The Oma was seized in the Indian Ocean around 400 nautical miles northeast of the Seychelles archipelago, the European Union naval force said. "The attack was launched from two attack skiffs, with pirates firing small arms and rocket-propelled grenades at the merchant vessel," the EU Navfor mission said in a statement. At least four pirates boarded the ship after stopping it, the statement said.

Mass hanging of 11 Sunni rebels in Iran

AFP, Tehran
Iran yesterday hanged 11 members of the Sunni militant group Jundallah which claimed last week's devastating suicide bombing of a Shiite mourning procession, a judiciary official said. "This morning 11 members of those belonging to (Jundallah), who in recent months were involved in terrorist attacks in the province ... have been hanged in Zahedan jail," Sistan-Baluchestan provincial justice department head Ebrahim Hamidi told state news agency IRNA. Shadowy Sunni militant group Jundallah (Army of God) has claimed several deadly attacks in Sistan-Baluchestan, of which Zahedan is the capital and which borders Afghanistan and Pakistan, including a December 15 suicide bombing in the city of Chabahar that killed 39 people and wounded dozens. Hamidi said those hanged were identified and arrested by Iranian security and intelligence forces. "These corrupt and Mohareb (waging war against God) elements ... went through all the legal and religious procedures of receiving a fair and public trial," he said. Hamidi said they were charged with "corruption on earth, fighting against God and the Prophet and confronting the sacred regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran." Under Iranian penal code these crimes are punishable by death.