

## June 23 Int'l Widows Day

PTI, UN

In order to address the plight of widows worldwide, the UN General Assembly has declared June 23 as International Widows Day.

This rare designation of an international day of recognition by the UN follows independent verification of shocking levels of violence and deprivation faced by hundreds and thousands of widows around the world.

The resolution, approved by the 192 representatives of the Third Committee of the General Assembly, was a passionate personal initiative of Sylvia Bongo Ondimba, the First Lady of Gabon.

UK-based Loomba Foundation had been campaigning for it at the UN for the past several years.

Cherie Blair, wife of the former British Prime Minister, is its president, while Raj Loomba is its founder and chairman.

"Widows are everywhere in the world, yet in many countries, they are nowhere to be seen or heard. They are hidden in the shadows, denied their basic rights and dignity.

This resolution aims to shine a light on these women and their children, and put moral pressure on the guardians of the retrograde traditions that oppress them," said Madame Ondimba.

## New S Korea drills raise border tension

BBC ONLINE

South Korea has said it will hold new large-scale military drills involving ground and air live fire today.

Artillery, jets and about 800 soldiers will take part, the government said, alongside separate naval exercises that began yesterday.

Tension has been high since North Korea shelled the South's Yeonpyeong island last month, killing four South Koreans.

Drills by the South on Monday near Yeonpyeong sparked Northern threats of retaliation that did not materialise.

An army spokesman said today's drill would be held at Pocheon, 20km (12 miles) south of the border - about 50km from central Seoul.

Exercises have been held at Pocheon before, but this would be on an unprecedented scale, the spokesman said.

"The scale of mechanised assets taking place is enormous. When we would normally have 6 K-9 mechanised artillery, we'll have 36.

"We'll have the F-15 jets firing. We'll have choppers. You can say most of the mechanised assets taking part will be firing live ammunition," the spokesman said.

"We will retaliate thoroughly if the North commits another provocative act like the shelling of Yeonpyeong," First Armoured Battalion commander Choo Eun-sik told Yonhap news agency.

"Through this exercise [at Pocheon], we will demonstrate our solid military preparedness," he said.

The BBC's Kevin Kim in Seoul says this is the largest winter live-fire exercise ever conducted on land here.

Separately, a "routine" four-day naval firing exercise has begun off the east coast of South Korea, involving six warships and helicopters.

The North Korean shelling of Yeonpyeong shocked South Koreans.

It sparked the replacement of the country's defence minister and the development of a more active defence and deterrence policy among South Korean planners.

South Korea and the US - with which it has a long military relationship - had already been conducting large-scale military exercises, following the apparent torpedoing of a South Korean warship by the North on 26 March, which killed 46 South Korean sailors.

The pace of military drills has been stepped up in recent weeks, despite frequent denunciations from North Korea and its closest ally China.

Meanwhile on Tuesday, a giant Christmas tree was lit on the southern side of the demilitarized zone, despite concerns in Seoul that North Korea could strike the position.

Efforts to redirect the Korean issue back to the negotiating table have been unsuccessful.

China and the North say it is time to return to the six-nation talks about North Korea's nuclear programmes.

But the US, South Korea and Japan have said they will not return to such talks, which have previously involved rewards for the North if it cuts back on nuclear development.



PHOTO: AFP

French adoptive mother Delphine Lariviere (L) looks yesterday at her daughter, Haitian Erika, upon arrival at Roissy-en-France airport, outside Paris, by a French government-chartered plane carrying from Port-au-Prince 114 Haitian children and their adoptive French families. A total of 318 adopted Haitian children are included in a special programme to bring them to France after disruptions caused by the devastating earthquake that ravaged the impoverished country nearly a year ago.

## Europe airports battle snow backlog

BBC ONLINE

European airports are struggling to help thousands of passengers stranded after severe wintry weather paralysed parts of Europe's transport network.

Freezing temperatures, snow and ice have grounded flights, trapping travellers going home for Christmas.

Airport operators defended their handling of the crisis amid criticism from the European Commission.

Officials at the worst-affected airport, London's Heathrow, rebuffed offers to bring in the UK Army to help.

Since Saturday, when 12.7cm (five inches) of snow fell in just one hour, Heathrow airport - the world's busiest - has cancelled hundreds of flights.

The airport operator BAA said that both runways were now open but warned: "Airlines are currently operating a significantly reduced schedule while they move diverted aircraft and crew back into position."

British Airways said that in line with a directive from BAA, it would operate only a third of its normal flight schedule at Heathrow until 0600GMT today, Reuters reports.

Delays at Heathrow also had a knock-on effect on other northern European airports.

In Ireland, the Dublin Airport Authority said the airport would be closed until at least 0800GMT yesterday, the The Irish Times reports.

In Germany, Frankfurt airport cancelled 550 of almost 1,300 flights on Tuesday because of the bad weather.

Air France said that some 5,000 people spent the night at Paris' Charles de Gaulle airport on Tuesday - 4,000 of whom were trying to fly into London, according to Le Monde.

While in Sweden, Scandinavian airline SAS said flights to London's Heathrow were the most problematic.

"It is the absolute worst there," SAS spokeswoman Elisabeth Manzi told The Local.

## Russia slams UK expulsion of diplomat

BBC ONLINE

Russia says the UK's decision to send home a diplomat from its London embassy over espionage concerns is "groundless" and an "unfriendly step".

On Tuesday, the UK's Foreign Office said it requested the move on 10 December due to "evidence of activities by the Russian intelligence services against UK interests".

Russia then made a similar request about a UK diplomat six days later.

Its foreign ministry has now said it was forced to respond in the same way.

It published a statement on its website, saying: "The British side has recently taken an unfriendly action, having without any grounds - declared a member of the diplomatic staff of our embassy in London persona non grata."

## New Start nuke arms treaty 'headed for ratification'

BBC ONLINE

The New Start nuclear treaty between the US and Russia has cleared a key procedural hurdle in the US Senate and now looks set to be ratified.

Senators voted to end debate on the issue, clearing the way for a final vote on the treaty, set for yesterday.

Ratification would be a victory for President Barack Obama and the Democrats, who have pushed hard for it.

Some Republican senators oppose the treaty on a variety of grounds, though Mr Obama has called it crucial.

"We are on the brink of writing the next chapter in the 40-year history of wrestling with the threat of nuclear weapons," Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman John Kerry, a Democrat, said after the vote.

The 67 votes in favour of the parliamentary motion to end debate puts the treaty above the threshold needed for ratification at the final ballot, and Mr Kerry said he expected as many as 70 votes.

"In our nation's security interest we need a

New Start treaty now," Republican Richard Lugar told reporters, dismissing the calls from others in his party to hold more hearings next year.

The New Start treaty would trim US and Russian arsenals to 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads - a cut of about 30% from a limit set eight years ago. It would also allow each side visually to inspect the other's nuclear arsenal to verify how many warheads a missile carries.

The previous missile treaty expired more than a year ago, and Mr Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the New Start pact in April.

For the treaty to take effect, it needs the votes of two-thirds of the US Senate, or 67 if all 100 senators are present.

Top Republicans, including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, John McCain and Jon Kyl, have said they oppose the treaty.

They and other Republicans have lodged several procedural complaints, including an objection to Democratic efforts to hold a vote before the end of the year, and say they oppose non-binding provisions they say would hinder US development of missile defence technology.

## Spain votes for tough smoking ban

BBC ONLINE

Spanish lawmakers have voted to approve a tough new anti-smoking law, meaning that from 2 January, bars and restaurants will be no-smoking zones.

Smokers will also not be allowed to light up on television broadcasts, near hospitals or in school playgrounds.

The bill, proposed by PM Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and his governing Socialist Party, was passed in the lower house by 189 votes to 154.

Bar and cafe owners fear the law will adversely affect business.

Spain was once famed for its smoke-filled bars, corner cafes and restaurants, but the new law tightens restrictions introduced in 2006 by forbidding smoking in any enclosed public space.



PHOTO: AFP

A participant prepares to fire a replica of a howitzer canon made of bamboo during the annual Kanyong Kawayan Festival (Bamboo Canon Festival) in Kidapawan City, in the Philippine's southern island of Mindanao yesterday, as part of the local government's campaign to discourage people of using deadly firecrackers during the Christmas season.

## IVORY COAST CRISIS Gbagbo 'ready' for talks with rival

AFP, ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The disputed president of Cote d'Ivoire, Laurent Gbagbo, has said that he is ready to talk to rival Alassane Ouattara, who was recognised by the UN and other international observers as the winner of Nov 28 presidential runoff poll.

The incumbent president has also invited a panel from the African Union and other countries, including China, Russia and the European Union, to re-examine the results of the polls, though he has vowed to stay on as president.

Meanwhile, the World Bank has frozen financing to the Ivory Coast which is in the grip of a presidential stand-off, bank president Robert Zoellick said yesterday, following talks with French President Nicolas Sarkozy, reports AFP.

Gbagbo's demand that the UN and French peacekeeping forces leave the country remains in place, and on Tuesday he said that "the international community has declared war on Ivory Coast".

However, the UN Security Council has defied this and on Monday extended the mandate for the force - known as UNOCI - for six more months.

Meanwhile, Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, has urged French citizens to leave the country if they had the means to do so.

Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-general, has said that forces loyal to Gbagbo have tried to blockade the UN mission in Abidjan, the Cote d'Ivoire's commercial hub, and that the country faces a "real risk" of returning to civil war.

Ban made the comments on Tuesday when briefing the UN General Assembly, and called on member states to prepare supplies to help the mission.

UN peacekeepers are guarding the headquarters of Ouattara at the Golf Hotel in Abidjan.

The pro-Gbagbo Constitutional Council overturned results certified by the UN mission that made Ouattara the winner of the poll.

## Al-Qaeda group plots poisoning US food

AFP, Washington

The same Al-Qaeda-linked group that attempted to send bombs on cargo planes earlier this year considered putting poison in food served at US hotels and restaurants, US media reported.

US intelligence officials told CNN on Tuesday that the Yemen-based Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) were considering poisoning food supplies with the deadly chemicals ricin and cyanide.

The Department of Homeland Security however also emphasized the threat was akin to the plots discussed in numerous online jihadist publications, where militants and their sympathizers routinely consider ways to attack western interests.

"We're talking months, not weeks (ago), that this came into the threat stream," an official told CNN.

An anonymous source in the US intelligence community told CBS News earlier this week that the threat was "credible."

## New Zealand releases UFO document files

BBC ONLINE

New Zealand's military has released hundreds of documents detailing claims of sightings of unidentified flying objects (UFOs).

The files, dating from 1954 to 2009, include drawings of flying saucers and alleged samples of alien writing.

The files include details of New Zealand's most famous UFO sighting when strange lights were filmed off the South Island town of Kaikoura in 1978.

An official report from the time said natural phenomenon could explain it.

Although the incident made international headlines at the time, the military report suggested it could be lights from boats reflected in clouds or an unusual view of the planet Venus.

Following the release of the files, New Zealand Air Force spokesman Kavea Tamariki said the military did not have the resources to investigate UFO sightings and would not be commenting on the documents' contents.

"We have just been a collection point for the information. We don't investigate or make reports, we haven't substantiated anything in them," he told the Dominion Post newspaper.

The reports have been released under freedom of information laws after officials removed names and other identifying material.

The files - which run to about 2,000 pages - include accounts by members of the public, military personnel and commercial airline pilots describing close encounters, mostly involving moving lights in the sky.

All the original documents on which the reports were based are to remain sealed in the national archive.

## Web attacks target human rights sites

BBC ONLINE

Human rights groups and campaigners are being hit hard by huge web attacks launched by those opposed to their views, finds research.

Many web-based campaigning groups are being knocked offline for weeks by the attacks, it found.

The researchers expect the tempo of attacks to increase as the tools and techniques become more widespread.

It urged human rights groups and independent media groups to beef up their defences to avoid falling victim.

The research by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University tried to get a sense of how often human rights groups and independent media organisations are hit by what is known as Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks.

DDoS attacks try to knock a site offline by overwhelming it with data.

In the 12 months between August 2009 and September 2010 the research found evidence of 140 attacks against more than 280 different sites. The report acknowledged that these were likely to be the most high profile attacks and that many more had probably gone unreported.

"These attacks do seem to be increasingly common," said Ethan Zuckerman, one of the authors of the report.

While some attacks were triggered by specific incidents such as elections others had no obvious cause, he said.

The report cites a sustained DDoS attack on Novaya Gazeta, the website of Russia's most liberal independent newspaper.

Deputy executive editor Sergey Sokolov is not certain who attacked his website but suspects government-sponsored Kremlin Youth organisations.

The report finds that DDoS is increasingly being used as a political tool and as a form of protest.

Attacks that recruit participants in so-called volunteer DDoS are proving popular.

## BUDGET CUT Sweden to shut five embassies

AFP, Stockholm

Sweden said yesterday it would shut its embassies in Argentina, Belgium, Vietnam, Malaysia and Angola because of budgetary cuts imposed on the minority government by the opposition in parliament.

"This painful decision is a consequence of the recent decision of the Riksdag to cut funding to the Government Offices by 300 million Swedish kronor (33.4 million euros, 43.7 million dollars)," Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said in a statement.

Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt's centre-right government was re-elected with two seats short of a majority in September.

Early this month, it narrowly lost a vote imposing a funding cut to government offices, defeated by the leftwing opposition and the far-right Sweden Democrats which entered parliament for the first time in September.

It was the first time Reinfeldt's four-party coalition lost a vote in parliament since the election.

## Italian students to protest against education reforms

BBC ONLINE

Students are gathering in Rome for demonstrations ahead of a Senate vote on controversial education reforms.

Police have sealed off the area around parliament after last week's violent protests when Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi survived a no-confidence motion.

The education minister says reforms will save billions of euros and create a more merit-based system.

Critics say universities are already severely under-funded. Thousands of students have gathered in Rome and several marches are expected, although the routes are being kept secret.

The reforms will cut the number of university courses, reduce funding for grants, increase the role of the private sector and limit the duration of rectorships.

The BBC's David Willey in Rome says there is excessive power in the hands of ageing professors and teachers.

But while many agree that reforms of the education sector might be needed, there has been criticism of the swingeing cuts, thought to total around 9bn euros (£8bn, \$12bn).

Italy spends less than 5% of its Gross Domestic Product on education - lower than many developed countries.

But the cuts are part of wider austerity measures that the government is introducing in order to reduce its public debt.



PHOTO: AFP

A demonstrator wears a mask depicting the face of the WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange as he takes part in a demonstration to protest against universities low and cuts, in downtown Rome yesterday.