

Russia praises US on nuke pact

BBC ONLINE
Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev has welcomed US ratification of a landmark treaty to cut nuclear arsenals and says he hopes Russia's parliament will ratify it too.
The US Congress approved the New Start treaty on Wednesday, when reluctant Republicans were won over.
The Speaker of Russia's State Duma (lower house), Boris Gryzlov, said MPs might approve the pact today.
Under the deal, Russia and the US will cut deployed nuclear warheads by 30%.
President Medvedev hopes that the Duma and the upper house, the Federation Council, "will be ready to consider and ratify that document", a Kremlin spokeswoman said.
US President Barack Obama and Mr Medvedev had "agreed to synchronise the ratification process", Natalya Timakova added.
Russia's upper house will not approve it before the new year. Mr Gryzlov said the Russian parliament would first check that the US Senate's ratification motion had not changed the text of the agreement.
Earlier, President Obama said the treaty was the most important such deal in almost 20 years.
The Senate approved it by 71 votes to 26 after months of wrangling.
"This is the most significant arms control agreement in nearly two decades and it will make us safer and reduce our nuclear arsenals along with Russia," Mr Obama said.
He said the vote also showed that the US political process was not doomed to "endless gridlock".

"The strong bi-partisan vote in the Senate sends a powerful signal to the world that Republicans and Democrats stand together on behalf of our security," he said.
Thirteen Republican Senators voted with the Democrats during Wednesday's vote.
However top Republicans, including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, John McCain and Jon Kyl, had opposed ratification saying the treaty could compromise security and the US missile defence strategy.
Correspondents say the ratification will be seen as a foreign policy success for Mr Obama.
He has argued that ratification of New Start is vital to US national security and made the agreement a key plank of the president's much-heralded "re-set" of relations with Russia.
After the vote, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in a statement: "A responsible partnership between the world's two largest nuclear powers that limits our nuclear arsenals while maintaining strategic stability is imperative to promoting global security."
The New Start treaty, which will replace its lapsed predecessor, Start (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), was signed by the two presidents in April 2010.
It trims US and Russian nuclear arsenals to 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads - a cut of about 30% from a limit set eight years ago.
The treaty would also allow each side visually to inspect the other's nuclear capability, with the aim of verifying how many warheads each missile carries.
A previous inspection regime - part of the old Start treaty - expired a year ago.



This undated picture released by North Korea's Central News Agency on December 22 and distributed by Tokyo's Korean News Service yesterday shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-il (C) visiting a construction site of the Huichon power station in Chagang Province. North Korea has declared a public holiday to mark the birthday of leader Kim Jong-il's youngest son, a report said yesterday, as the regime grooms him to take over power from his father.

North Korea 'ready for holy war'

BBC ONLINE
North Korea's armed forces minister has said his country is ready for a "holy war" using the nuclear deterrent.
Kim Yong-chun said live-fire exercises conducted by South Korea near the border were a preparation for war with the North.
The drill is one of the largest in South Korea's history, involving tanks, helicopters and fighter planes.
Tension has been high since North Korea shelled the South's Yeonpyeong island last month, killing four South Koreans.
South Korean President Lee Myung-bak has promised immediate retaliation to any further Northern attack.
The South Korean army acknowledged that the drill was aimed to display its firepower.
Although the South has conducted 47 military drills this year, this is the largest winter live-fire exercise ever conducted on land.
The North earlier branded Seoul's exercises "war-mongering" but until now had not threatened the South with any retaliation.

Taliban leader killed in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar
Pakistani security officials said yesterday that a Taliban militant commander had been killed in a gunfight with government troops in the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan.
"Asmatullah Bhetani was killed in a gunfight with security forces in South Waziristan on the night between December 7 and 8," a senior security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.
Another official confirmed Bhetani's death, saying there had been a reward of 10 million rupees (120,000 dollars) for his arrest.
He was killed in Sararogha, a militant stronghold in South Waziristan, where Pakistan carried out a major offensive to crush the Taliban's headquarters last year, the official said.
Bhetani was educated at a madrassa in the northwestern town of Dera Ismail Khan, before opening a seminary himself and teaching, the official said.

Indian govt offers corruption debate to break deadlock

AFP, New Delhi
The Indian government has offered to hold a special corruption debate with opposition lawmakers to break a deadlock that meant no legislation was passed in all of the last parliamentary session.
Opposition MPs forced adjournments on every day of the winter session to demand a cross-party probe into a telecoms scandal, in which mobile phone licences were allegedly sold off in 2008 for a small fraction of their value.
"If they (the opposition) assure that there will be a debate, I am ready to call a special session of parliament before the budget session so that this issue is debated," Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee said late Wednesday.
Mukherjee asked the main opposition BJP to agree to the debate in parliament and "not destroy the institution itself".
But the BJP, which is keen to highlight a massive scandal that could have cost the treasury 40 billion dollars, said it stuck by its demands.
The party accuses Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who has maintained a reputation for honesty amid India's murky political world, of failing to act over the scandal concerning the sale of second-generation (2G) mobile licences.
But the government has constantly refused calls for a cross-party probe, saying other independent investigations are underway, and parliament could again be deadlocked when it reconvenes for its budget session in February.

Iraq arrests 93 in anti-Qaeda sweep

AFP, Baghdad
Iraqi forces have arrested 93 suspects, including 60 wanted men, in a crackdown on Al-Qaeda in Anbar province, defence ministry spokesman Major General Mohammed al-Askari said yesterday.
"A large military operation targeting Al-Qaeda and sleeper cells was launched overnight" Tuesday in Anbar, western Iraq, Askari said.
"Ninety-three suspects were arrested, including 60 wanted men," he said, adding that ammunition had been discovered as well.
The operation was jointly launched by the army, police, pro-government tribal forces and members of the Sahwa, or anti-Qaeda militia, Askari said.
The aim of the operation is to "secure Baghdad and not give any opportunity for Al-Qaeda to carry out terrorist actions, by arresting its members," and to "achieve security and stability in all Iraq," he said.

Int'l atomic watchdog wants to visit suspect nuke sites in Myanmar

AFP, Vienna
The UN atomic watchdog has asked Myanmar to be allowed to visit a number of suspect nuclear sites and facilities, a source close to the agency said yesterday.
The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) "has sent an official letter to Myanmar requesting access" to the sites, the source told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.
The source was not aware whether any response had been received as yet.
Last week, the Wall Street Journal reported that the IAEA's safeguards department, which has already sought details in recent months from the Southeast Asian country about a purported nuclear drive, had sent a letter to the ruling military junta.
The watchdog's request for information comes at a time when the United States and some Asian countries have expressed heightened concern about military -- and possible nuclear -- collaboration between Myanmar and North Korea.
Washington has suspected for years that Myanmar has a secret nuclear programme with the support of Pyongyang.
According to recent diplomatic cables leaked by the anti-secrecy website WikiLeaks, witnesses have reported suspicious activity as far back as 2004, with dockworkers and foreign businessmen saying they had seen evidence of alleged secret nuclear and missile weapons sites being built deep in the Myanmar jungle.
The IAEA had decided to seek more information as the concerns were serious enough to warrant a request for access, the source said.
According to the Wall Street Journal, Myanmar could face a tough international reaction if it rejects the IAEA request for audits of the purported nuclear sites.
Nevertheless, officials and experts have expressed uncertainty over the country's atomic intentions, the newspaper added.
A large portion of the equipment said to have been sought by Myanmar has non-nuclear uses, and defectors might have exaggerated the nation's nuclear ambitions for political reasons, it quoted proliferation analysts and former IAEA staffers as saying.

173 killed in Ivory Coast clashes: UN

BBC ONLINE
Post-election violence has claimed 173 lives in Ivory Coast, the UN says, as international pressure mounts for Laurent Gbagbo to quit the presidency.
The UN says it is exploring ways to strengthen the UN presence in Ivory Coast, where Mr Gbagbo's forces are in a tense stand-off with supporters of his rival, Alassane Ouattara.
Liberian mercenaries are helping Mr Gbagbo's troops, the UN has confirmed.
The UN and world powers have recognised Mr Ouattara as the new president.
The UN Human Rights Commission is meeting in Geneva to discuss the crisis. It says 173 people have been killed in the past week and nearly 500 arrested in Ivory Coast.



Workers in Santa Claus (R) and reindeer costumes (back L) clean windows outside of a 31-metre-high building at the Odaiba shopping mall on Tokyo's waterfront yesterday.

Kenya MPs vote to pull out of ICC

BBC ONLINE
Kenyan MPs have voted overwhelmingly for the country to pull out of the treaty which created the International Criminal Court in The Hague.
The move comes a week after the ICC prosecutor named six Kenyans he accuses of being behind post-election violence.
The prosecutor's list included senior politicians and civil servants.
The MPs do not have the power to effect any immediate change in relation to the ICC but they have sent a message to government to start withdrawing.
Some 1,200 people died and more than 500,000 fled their homes in the violence following the disputed election in December 2007.
It ended when President Mwai Kibaki and his rival Raila Odinga agreed to share power, with Mr Odinga becoming prime minister.
In the peace deal they signed it was agreed perpetrators would face justice in Kenya or at the ICC in The Hague.
The BBC's Will Ross in the capital, Nairobi, says if the government backs the MPs' call it would take at least a year for Kenya to formally withdraw from the ICC but active cases would not be halted.
The naming of the six suspects sent a thunderbolt right to the heart of Kenyan politics, he says.
On the list was Uhuru Kenyatta, the deputy prime minister and son of the country's first president, Jomo Kenyatta.
Also included were other senior politicians - allies of both the president and prime minister - and the former head of the police force.
During the late-night session, the MPs decried the ICC as a colonial, anti-African court and said that Kenya was surrendering its sovereignty.

US press should fear being targeted Says Assange

AFP, Washington
WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has said that a US government effort to prosecute him should serve as a warning to journalists in the United States.
Assange, in an interview with the MSNBC television network on Wednesday, said there has been a "quite deliberate attempt to split off our organization from the First Amendment protections that are afforded to all publishers."
The WikiLeaks founder said he considers himself a journalist and "we all have to stick together to resist this sort of reinterpretation of the First Amendment," which guarantees the right to free speech.
"We have seen these statements, that The New York Times is, you know, also being looked at in terms of whether they have engaged in what they call 'conspiracy to commit espionage,'" he said.
"If they want to push the line that when a newspaperman talks to someone in the government about looking for things relating to potential abuses, that that is a conspiracy to commit espionage, then that's going to take out all the good government journalism that occurs in the United States," he said.
Assange added that if the "Washington authorities target us and destroy us" other journalists should be worried because "they're going to be next."
Assange rejected US Vice President Joe Biden's description of him as a "high-tech terrorist" and condemned calls for his assassination.
"The definition of terrorism is a group that uses violence or the threat of violence for political ends," he said. "Now, no one in our four-year publishing history, covering over 120 countries, has ever been physically harmed as a result of what we have done."
"Whoever the terrorists are here, it's not us," Assange said. "But we see constant threats from people... calling for my assassination, calling for the illegal kidnapping of my staff."
"Whatever the message does that send about the rule of law in the United States?" he said. "I mean, if we are to have a civil society, you cannot have senior people making calls on national TV to go around the judiciary and illegally murder people -- that is incitement to commit murder."

SYDNEY ARMY BASE ATTACK Trio found guilty of plotting

BBC ONLINE
Three men have been found guilty of plotting a suicide attack on an army base in the Australian city of Sydney.
A Melbourne court found them guilty of conspiring to commit a terrorist act. Two other defendants were acquitted.
The five men, all Australian citizens of Somali or Lebanese origin, were arrested in Melbourne in August 2009. They were accused of targeting Sydney's Holsworthy military base.
Police said the attack would have been the worst in Australian history.
The trial began in September and the jury deliberated for more than five days before returning guilty verdicts against Wissam Mahmoud Fattal, 34, Saney Edow Awyts, 27, and Nayef El Sayed, 26.
The prosecution said the plot had been hatched between February and August last year, when the five were arrested in a swoop involving hundreds of police.
Officials said the men, some of whom had links to Somali-based militant groups, were motivated by a belief that Islam was under attack from the West.
They were planning to send a group of men armed with automatic rifles into the base and to keep on shooting until they were killed, prosecutors said.

Bomb blasts in Swiss, Chilean embassies in Rome 2 officials injured

AFP, Rome
Parcel bomb blasts in the Chilean and Swiss embassies in Rome injured two staffers yesterday, officials said, as Italian prosecutors opened an inquiry for a suspected "attack with terrorist aims."
Checks are currently under way in all the embassies in Rome after the blasts and the city's mayor said emergency services were on alert.
"This is a wave of terrorism against the embassies. It's more worrying than a single attack," Gianni Alemanno told reporters.
"International lines of inquiry are being followed," Alemanno said, without giving further details.
The Corriere della Sera newspaper quoted investigators as saying that one of the main lines of inquiry was on "anarchist circles of the ecoterrorist movement."
Another possibility mentioned by investigators is that the Swiss embassy attack "was organised by insurgent anarchist groups," the newspaper reported.
The Swiss mail worker who opened the first package was seriously wounded, while the Chilean embassy staffer is not reported to be badly injured.
"A device hidden inside a package exploded in the embassy, at midday (1100 GMT)," the Swiss embassy said in a statement.
"The postal worker's hands were injured and he was immediately taken to hospital," it added.
The embassy said there had been no claim of responsibility.
Reports said the injured man was a 53-year-old Swiss national and he risks the amputation of one or both his hands but his life is not in danger.
Police, firemen and bomb disposal experts could be seen on the Swiss embassy grounds, located north of Rome's city centre.
Emergency services were also at the Chilean embassy near Villa Borghese.
The ANSA news agency reported that a third unexploded bomb was later found at the Ukrainian embassy, but a police spokesman told AFP it was a false alarm.
"We express full solidarity with the Swiss ambassador and all diplomatic staff, targeted by a deplorable act of violence that merits the firmest condemnation," Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said in a statement.



Assange Le Monde 'Man of the Year'

AFP, Paris
WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has been named "Man of the Year" by France's Le Monde newspaper, one of the five publications to cooperate with the whistleblowing website on its latest release of leaked documents.
The newspaper names Assange in a weekly supplement magazine due to appear today.
Visitors to the newspaper's website voted in favour of Assange with 56 percent backing him for the honour, compared to 22 percent for jailed Chinese dissident and Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and 6.9 percent for American Facebook President Mark Zuckerberg.
Time magazine last week pronounced Zuckerberg its "Person of the Year."

BUYER-SELLER MEET CUM EXHIBITION on Indian footwear components & accessories. 25th December 2010, 9 am to 6 pm & 26th December 2010, 1 pm to 8 pm. Council for Leather Exports (India) and Indian Footwear Components Manufacturers Association.