

## US made trade exceptions for Iran

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The US Treasury Department has approved nearly 10,000 exceptions for American companies to do business with Iran over the past decade, despite trade embargoes. The New York Times reported.

The Treasury granted special licenses to the companies so they could sell some types of products in Iran and other countries the US considers terrorist sponsors, the newspaper wrote on Thursday.

Companies such as Kraft Food, Pepsi and some of the largest US banks benefited from the special Treasury permits.

Most licenses were granted under a law allowing trade in humanitarian goods, even if that means selling products as diverse as cigarettes and chewing gum.

Rather, it suggests that the various deals for goods ranging from Louisiana hot sauce to body-building supplements undermine America's moral and diplomatic authority as the leading purveyor of tough sanctions on Iran, North Korea and other nations.



A boy kneels to pray during the Christmas Eve mass at a Catholic church in Beijing yesterday. The Vatican and China have not had formal diplomatic ties since 1951, when the Holy See angered Mao Zedong's Communist government by recognising the Nationalist Chinese regime as the legitimate government of China. PHOTO: AFP

## CHRISTMAS MESSAGE

# God often surprises us: Pope Benedict

BBC ONLINE

God is faithful to his promises but often surprises us by how he fulfills them, the Pope has said in an unusual BBC radio broadcast.

Pope Benedict's Christmas message for the UK was broadcast as the Thought for the Day on Radio 4's Today programme.

He said he prayed for the sick and elderly and "those who are going through any form of hardship".

In his message, he recalled his recent UK visit with "great fondness" and said he was glad to greet listeners again.

"Dear friends from Scotland, England and Wales and indeed every part of the English speaking world, I want you to know that I keep all of you very much in my prayers during this holy season," he said.

It was the first time that the Pontiff has addressed a Christmas message especially for one of the countries he has visited during the year. The National Secular Society has said it was a "bad choice" by the BBC.

Listeners heard him say: "I am glad to have the opportunity to greet you again, and indeed to greet listeners everywhere as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ."

He continued "I pray for your families, for your children, for those who are sick, and for those who are going through any form of hardship at this time."

At the Christmas season, says Pope Benedict, our thoughts recall a moment in history when the Israelites were waiting for the Messiah whom they pictured as a great leader who would restore their freedom.

He added that God "often surprises us" in the way he fulfils his promises.

"The child that was born in Bethlehem did indeed bring liberation, but not only for the people of that time and place - he was to be the saviour of all people throughout the world and throughout history."

It was not a political liberation, achieved through military means, he added, but rather "Christ destroyed death for ever and restored life by means of his shameful death on the cross".

He urged people to ask Jesus Christ to expel any darkness they have in their lives and added: "Let us give thanks to God for his goodness to us, and let us joyfully proclaim to those around us the good news that God offers us freedom from whatever weighs us down; he gives us hope, he brings us life."

## IVORY COAST CRISIS UN backs Ouattara as president

BBC ONLINE

The UN General Assembly has formally recognised Alassane Ouattara as the winner of Ivory Coast's disputed presidential election.

The move came ahead of a meeting of West African heads of state to urge President Laurent Gbagbo to step aside.

Earlier, the region's central bank handed over control of Ivory Coast's accounts to Ouattara.

Correspondents say the moves are increasing the isolation of Gbagbo, who has insisted that he won the vote.

The decision of the Central Bank of West African States could make it difficult for the incumbent president to pay the army.

Violence since disputed election in November has left 173 people dead in Ivory Coast.

A senior UN official said its investigators had also found evidence of extrajudicial executions, more than 90 cases of torture and 500 arrests, as well as abductions, kidnappings, acts of sexual violence, and destruction of property.

The 28 November poll was meant to unite the country after a civil war in 2002 split the world's largest cocoa producer in two.

The country's electoral commission ruled that Ouattara had won, but the Constitutional Council said Gbagbo had been elected, citing vote-rigging in some northern areas.

The UN, which has about 10,000 peacekeepers in the country overseeing the peace process, has backed Ouattara as the winner.

## ROME BLAST Anarchists claim responsibility

REUTERS, Rome

An Italian anarchist group claimed responsibility for parcel bombs on Thursday that wounded two people at the Swiss and Chilean embassies in Rome, a reminder of Europe's home-grown threats at a time of political instability.

A Swiss man was seriously wounded and rushed to hospital. An employee at the Chilean embassy was less seriously hurt. A note was found stuck to his clothing, claiming responsibility for the attack on behalf of the FAI, or Informal Anarchist Federation.

"We have decided to make our voice heard with words and with facts, we will destroy the system of dominance, long live the FAI, long-live Anarchy," said the note, written in Italian, which was released in the evening by the police.

## North Korea nuke test "possible" in new year

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea could carry out a third nuclear test next year to strengthen the credentials of its young leader-in-waiting, Kim Jong-un, a research report from a South Korean Foreign Ministry institute said yesterday.

The report came a day after Pyongyang vowed a nuclear "sacred war," using its nuclear deterrent, after the South vowed to be "merciless" if attacked again and held a major military drill near the border.

The North, which carried out nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009, has yet to show it has a deliverable weapon as part of its plutonium arms program, but a third test would raise tensions further on the divided peninsula and rattle global markets.

South Korean media reported earlier this month that the North was digging a tunnel in preparation for a nuclear test.

"There is a possibility of North Korea carrying out its third nuclear test to seek improvement in its nuclear weapons production capability, keep the military ten-

sion high and promote Kim Jong-un's status as the next leader," the report said, referring to ailing Kim Jong-il's youngest son.

"Tension between the two Koreas will remain high with chances of additional North Korean attacks on the South staying high," the Foreign Ministry-run Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security said.

Tension on the peninsula is at its highest since the 1950-53 Korean War, after a deadly naval clash in March and the North's artillery attack on a South Korean island last month which killed four people. The two Koreas are technically still at war as their civil conflict ended in a truce, not a treaty.

The North's KCNA news agency, which regularly threatens total destruction of the rich capitalist South, yesterday lay the blame on Washington and called South Korea one of its "shockbrigades."

"The U.S. is entirely to blame for the alarming developments on the peninsula this year as it used the peninsula for realizing its strategy to dominate East Asia," KCNA said in a commentary.

## Mumbai manhunt for 'four LeT militants'

BBC ONLINE

Police are scouring Mumbai for four Pakistani alleged militants believed to have entered the city to carry out an attack, a top police official said.

There was credible information at least four men belonging to the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) militant group were in the city, said the police commissioner.

Police have released computer images of the four suspects, set up checkpoints and placed extra officers on patrol.

India blames LeT for the 2008 attacks in Mumbai which killed 166 people.

Roads were closed yesterday in and around the luxury Taj Mahal Palace hotel - the focus of the deadly siege two years ago - and armed police were patrolling at high-profile sites, including consulates.

Joint police commissioner Himanshu Roy told a news conference on Thursday evening: "The four men are planning violent attacks that are going to cause destruction."

"The four have recently arrived in Mumbai. We believe the threat is serious," he added.

Indian police issued a similar warning in September about a possible attack by two Islamist militants in the city, which is India's financial capital, but nothing happened and no arrests were made.



Pakistani security personnel are seen at the site of a bomb blast in Quetta yesterday. A bicycle bomb exploded in the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta, killing a policeman and wounding four others, police said. PHOTO: AFP

## Russian parliament backs US nuke treaty

AFP, Moscow

Russia's lower house of parliament yesterday gave initial backing to a historic treaty with the US to slash the nuclear arsenals of the Cold War foes but warned final ratification would drag into next year.

The Russian lower house, the State Duma, voted with 350 in favour and 58 against for the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) signed by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and US President Barack Obama in April.

But hopes ratification could be wrapped up by the end of the year after the US Senate's approval Wednesday were dashed when top Russian officials voiced unease at additions made by US lawmakers to their own ratification resolution.

Konstantin Kosachev, the head of the foreign affairs committee of the State Duma, said that the snag meant the parliament's ratification would now require two further readings that would now not take place until next year.

Lavrov told the debate before the vote that Moscow was "absolutely not in agreement" with an addition made by the US Senate that rejects a link between missile defence and strategic arms.

"This is an arbitrary interpretation of the principles of international law. The agreement, like any other, is a single whole," he said.

The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) restricts the former Cold War foes to a maximum of 1,550 deployed warheads each, a cut of about 30 percent from a limit set in 2002, and 800 launchers and bombers.

The US Senate on Wednesday approved the treaty after a months-long political battle, putting the ball firmly in the court of the Russian legislature to respond.

But prior to approving the treaty, US lawmakers attached non-binding amendments calling on Washington to deploy a missile defence system, modernise its nuclear arsenal and seek talks with Russia on curbing tactical nuclear weapons.

"We have no right to leave these interpretations without a response," said Kosachev. "They contradict the entire sense of the treaty."

## Darfur rebels clash with Sudan army

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Darfur rebels clashed with Sudanese government troops, three days after announcing they had resumed ceasefire negotiations, rebel sources told Al Jazeera.

Thursday's fighting was the latest setback for international mediators who have struggled to secure any lasting accord in more than seven years of fighting.

A JEM spokesman in Doha, Qatar confirmed the fighting reports and said they captured "many" government soldiers and seized vehicles during the clashes.

The rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) said government forces attacked them and fighters from other rebel forces near Dar al Salaam, 56km south of El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur.

Ahmed Tugo, the Justice and Equality Movement's chief negotiator who is involved in peace talks with Sudan in Doha, told Al Jazeera that the Sudanese army started the new clashes.

## Assange's accusers are WikiLeaks fans Says lawyer

AP, Stockholm



Julian Assange

The two Swedish women accusing Julian Assange of sex crimes are not pawns of the CIA nor do they hunger for revenge or money they just seek justice for a violation of their "sexual integrity," their lawyer says.

Claes Borgstrom, a self-professed feminist who used to be Sweden's ombudsman for gender equality, told The Associated Press he finds it "very upsetting" that Assange, his lawyers and some supporters are suggesting the case is a smear campaign against WikiLeaks, the secret-spilling website Assange founded.

"He's been spreading false rumors that he knows are untrue. It's reckless against these two women," Borgstrom said by phone Thursday. "They, too, are supporters of WikiLeaks. They support its work."

Assange denies the allegations of sexual misconduct, which his lawyers say stem from a dispute over "consensual but unprotected sex." He has not been charged.

The lawyer said Assange had every right to reject the women's sex claims but says Assange is, in essence, accusing them of breaking the law by suggesting they are driven by ulterior motives.

"There is no truth to this whatsoever," he added.

British newspaper The Times recently quoted Assange as saying there is "very suggestive evidence" the two women were motivated by revenge, money and police pressure. When the investigation started after the August incidents, Assange said he had been warned about "dirty tricks" from the Pentagon, though he later said he wasn't pointing fingers at anyone.

At the time, WikiLeaks had deeply angered U.S. officials by publishing tens of thousands of secret U.S. military documents on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, memos that the U.S. said could have put the lives of informants at risk.

## CHOLERA FEARS Haiti mobs lynch voodoo priests

BBC ONLINE

Voodoo priests in Haiti are being lynched by mobs who blame them for spreading cholera, the country's government has said.

At least 45 people have been lynched in recent weeks as Haiti continues to be ravaged by a cholera epidemic.

Haiti's communications minister has made an appeal for the lynchings to end and called for a campaign to ensure people understand how cholera spreads.

More than 2,500 Haitians have died from the water-borne disease since October.

Another 121,000 people have been treated for symptoms of cholera, with at least 63,500 admitted to hospital, figures show.

The outbreak has also prompted angry protests aimed at the United Nations, whose Nepalese peacekeepers have been suspected of introducing cholera to Haiti.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has announced an investigation into the reports, although the UN initially denied the suggestion.

Officials counted 40 people killed - mostly voodoo priests - killed in one region of Haiti, the AFP news agency reported, with five others killed elsewhere.

## Ecuador bus plunge kills 32

AFP, Quito

At least 32 people died when a bus packed with passengers travelling over the Christmas holiday plunged into a ravine in southwest Ecuador yesterday, police said.

Another 32 were injured in the accident, according to local police chief Major Diego Iniguez, adding that the death toll could climb further as six people were still trapped under the wreckage.

Iniguez told a local television station that the accident near the town of El Carmen in the Manabí province appeared to have been caused by "a mechanical problem."

Fog and rain may have also been factors in the bus crash, according to a member of the Red Cross, who said several children were on board.

## Europe allies 'nutty' Says British minister

AFP, London

Britain's coalition government faced fresh trouble from a newspaper sting yesterday over a minister's comments describing the leading Conservative party's European allies as "nutty".

The remarks by Foreign Office minister Jeremy Browne, a member of the Liberal Democrat party which is the junior partner in the coalition, come after another Lib Dem's minister's unguarded comments about Rupert Murdoch.

The Daily Telegraph quoted Browne as telling an undercover reporter posing as a constituent that the Conservatives' "very harsh" immigration policy was "driven by quite a lot of uncharitable instincts."

Browne said foreign diplomats were pleased that Lib Dems had ensured the coalition was "far more amenable and civilised" towards the European Union than the eurosceptic Conservatives would have been on their own.

Asked about Prime Minister David Cameron's decision to ally his party with some nationalist parties in Europe, he said: "They (the parties) are quite nutty and that's an embarrassment to them."

The Conservatives broke away in 2009 from the main centre-right grouping in Europe to join the a group of coalition of small nationalist parties, some whom have faced accusations of anti-Semitism.

Browne's comments are the latest to expose the tensions in the coalition, which came to power after a general election in May.

## Wildlife at an alarming risk

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Poor data, minimal funding and lax enforcement are undermining the fight to protect endangered species, raising the risks from the spread of pests and diseases, according to a new study.

Destruction of habitats, over-hunting and climate change have already driven the extinction rate for plants and animals to the highest level since the dinosaurs were wiped out 65 million years ago, the United Nations said yesterday.

More than a fifth of all mammals and nearly a third of all amphibians are threatened and at risk of extinction, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature's benchmark Red List of Threatened Species.

The study, conducted by scientists from the National University of Singapore and Britain's Oxford Brookes University, said the main UN convention governing trade in endangered species needed urgent reform and a boost in support from member states.

This was crucial to prevent more species from being wiped out by trade but

also to prevent the spread of infectious diseases and invasive species into new areas where they can threaten crops and livelihoods.

Key issues were lax enforcement and a lack of data on species being collected and traded, allowing governments either to make poor conservation decisions or corrupt officials to turn a blind eye to illicit trade.

"Data collection at all levels depends on proper species identification, which remains a leading challenge," the scientists, including Jacob Phelps and Edward Webb of the Department of Biological Sciences at the National University of Singapore, say in the latest issue of the US journal Science.

"Wildlife trade studies are surprisingly few and far between," Phelps said. "For many species - not only tigers and rhinoceros, but hardwood trees, primates and birds sold as pets and medicinal plants - wildlife trade remains a leading threat."

The authors called for an overhaul of the UN's 35-year-old Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), which regulates the trade of nearly 34,000 species.