

Poland takes over EU presidency

AFP, Warsaw

Poland yesterday took the helm of a crisis-struck European Union for a six-month term bound to see more of the debt crisis threatening the eurozone and with it, European integration itself.

"We have taken the presidency at a difficult time. The debt crisis in the eurozone is continuing, and Greece is a prime example," Poland's centre-right Prime Minister Donald Tusk said yesterday, insisting that rebuilding confidence in Europe was the paramount task.

As EU president Poland will shoulder the responsibility of organising meetings of European finance ministers.

Every six months a new country takes over the rotating presidency of the 27-member EU.

NATURAL DISASTERS 279 killed in China in June

AFP, Beijing

China said yesterday that 279 people died in natural disasters in June and another 93 had gone missing, as the country was hit by floods, mudslides and earthquakes.

Summer downpours pummelled large swathes of south and central China last month, triggering the floods and landslides.

Earthquakes also rocked parts of the country, including the northwestern mountainous region of Yushu that had already been hit by a devastating quake in April last year, when nearly 2,700 died and more than 12,000 were injured.

The Ministry of Civil Affairs, which made public the June death toll, said more than two million people had also been evacuated.

Strauss-Kahn released from house arrest

Allies hopes for his Political return

REUTERS, New York

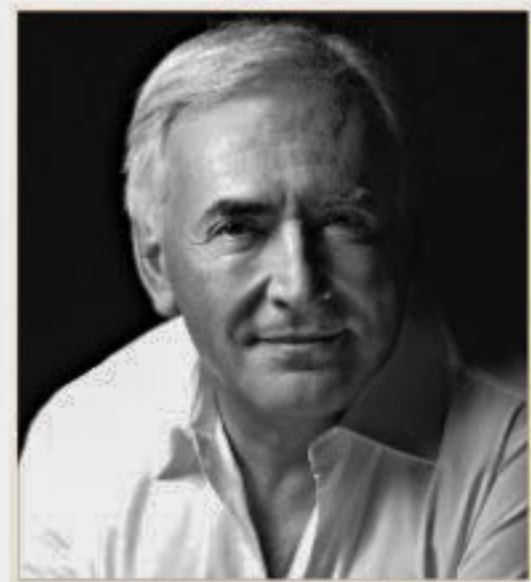
Former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn was released from house arrest yesterday after prosecutors said the hotel maid who accuses him of attempted rape lied to a grand jury and made other false statements.

Strauss-Kahn, 62, still faces charges that he sexually assaulted the woman in New York but questions about her credibility appear to be shifting the case in his favour in a twist that could upend French politics.

The former steward of the global economy smiled as he left court with his wife, Anne Sinclair, at his side.

Until his May 14 arrest, Strauss-Kahn was a strong potential challenger to Conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2012 election.

Jubilant supporters in the French



Strauss-Kahn

Socialist party hoped he might rejoin the presidential race but some analysts saw his chances as too tarnished.

But political analysts said his reputation had been too tarnished for him to be a presidential contender, although he could play an influential political role if cleared.

"I understand that the circumstances of this case have changed substantially and I agree the risk that he would not be here has receded quite a bit," Justice Michael Obus told the court as he released Strauss-Kahn.

"There will be no rush to judgement. The people will continue to investigate and reexamine the matter as appropriate."

Strauss-Kahn, whose house arrest had included electronic monitoring and an armed guard, agreed to return to court as needed, including for a July 18 hearing.

His bail payment of \$1 million (622 thousand pounds) and bond of \$5 million were returned to him but his passport was not, meaning he can travel only within the United States.

Prosecutors found issues with her asylum application, tax return and statements to the grand jury investigating the assault case, court documents showed.

The New York Times quoted law enforcement officials as saying prosecutors found possible links between the accuser and people involved in drug dealing and money laundering.

Morocco votes on curbing king's powers

AFP, Rabat

Moroccans voted yesterday in a referendum on curbing the near absolute powers of King Mohammed VI, who has offered reforms in the wake of nationwide protests.

Faced with demonstrations modelled on the protests that ousted long-serving leaders in Tunisia and Egypt, Mohammed VI announced the referendum last month to devolve some of his powers to the prime minister and parliament of the north African country.

Under a draft constitution voted yesterday, the king would remain head of state, the military, and the Islamic faith in Morocco, but the prime minister, who would have to be chosen from the largest party elected to parliament, would take over as the head of the government.

NEWS IN brief

Chavez admits of cancer treatment

AFP, Caracas



Hugo Chavez

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has admitted to having had a cancerous tumour removed, following weeks of speculation over the leftist firebrand's condition and unprecedented absence from public life.

"Studies confirmed the existence of a tumour with cancerous cells," the 56-year-old leader said Thursday in his first televised address since being rushed to hospital in Cuba on June 10 during a state visit.

In the emotional late night address, broadcast live in Venezuela, Chavez expressed hope for a full recovery and acknowledged a "fundamental error" in neglecting his health for years.

Thousands push for reform in Cairo's Tahrir Square

AFP, Cairo

Protesters converged on Cairo's Tahrir Square yesterday to join camping pro-democracy activists for a demonstration to keep up the pressure on the country's military rulers over the pace of reforms.

Around 5,000 protesters demanded an end to military trials of civilians, the resignation of the interior minister and the speedy and open trials of old regime officials.

Water in India's famed Goa 'unfit for bathing'

AFP, Panaji

Scientists warned yesterday that water off the famed beaches of the Indian holiday state of Goa was unfit for bathing and fishing due to high levels of bacteria from untreated sewage.

The National Institute of Oceanography, which is based in the former Portuguese colony, said the level of faecal coliform bacteria off the coast of Goa and in its rivers was higher than the international benchmark.

Tourism officials expressed alarm at the findings, given the state's dependence on foreign visitors.

Philippines enforces Smoking ban in capital

AFP, Manila

Hundreds of people were fined as a smoking ban in public places went into force in the Philippines' sprawling capital yesterday.

Manila government "environment enforcers" wearing mint-green Polo T-shirts fanned out across the city of 12 million people to start handing out penalties of 500 pesos (\$11.50), following a month-long trial period.



Britain's Prince William and his wife Catherine the Duchess of Cambridge pay their respects during a wreath laying ceremony at the National War Memorial in Ottawa, Canada, June 30, 2011, the first stop on their nine-day tour of Canada, kicking off their first official foreign trip as husband and wife.

PHOTO: AFP

Security forces kill 11 civilians across Syria

Hillary says time running out for Assad

HAAP, Nicosia

Security forces killed 11 civilians, including a mother and her daughter as more than half a million people took to the streets across the country yesterday to demand the departure of Bashar al-Assad, activists said.

Nine of the dead were protesters taking part in anti-regime demonstrations in Syria, where more than half a million people took to the streets after weekly Muslim prayers.

"Six people, including a woman, were killed when the security forces opened fire to disperse protests in several neighbourhoods of Homs," in central Syria, a rights activist said.

"Two others were killed in the Qadam neighbourhood of Damascus while one was

killed in Daraya," outside the capital, he said.

The other two victims, a mother and daughter, were killed in the town of Al-Bara in the northwestern province of Idlib.

Before yesterday's protests, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton criticised the Assad regime's incoherence in authorising an opposition meeting while stifling dissent.

"Allowing one meeting of the opposition in Damascus is not sufficient," she told reporters on a visit to Lithuania.

"I'm just hurt by recent reports of continuing violence on the border and in Aleppo," Clinton said.

"It is absolutely clear that the Syrian government is running out of time. There isn't any question about that."

Many nations failing on UN hunger goal

AFP, Rome

Many poor countries will fail to meet a UN goal of halving world hunger by 2015, the UN food agency's newly-elected Brazilian chief told AFP yesterday in one of his first interviews since being nominated.

"Many poor countries will not be able to reach the target," Jose Graziano Da Silva said, referring to the aim of reducing the world's hungry to around 400 million people from the current level of around 925 million people.

"Eradicating hunger by 2015 will not be possible," he said. "What is missing are two things: the resources and international cooperation to support these countries which are among the most vulnerable because they are incapable of reaching the targets on their own," he added.

Graziano was elected on Sunday by FAO member states becoming the first Latin American leader of the Rome-based agency which is tasked with fighting global hunger.

Graziano, a former food security minister credited with helping reduce hunger in Brazil, formally takes over at FAO on January 1, 2012.

Panetta takes charge as Pentagon chief

Petraeus to lead CIA

AFP, Washington

Incoming US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, who takes the helm at the Pentagon yesterday, is determined to avoid gutting the US military despite the prospect of difficult budget decisions.

Panetta, 73, who is stepping down as head of the CIA, is due to take over at 8:45 am (1245 GMT) from Robert Gates, who is retiring after more than four years on the job supervising troubled wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Panetta assumes office against the backdrop of mounting calls to rein in government spending, including the country's massive defence budget.

Meanwhile, the US Senate on Thursday overwhelmingly confirmed General David Petraeus, who won wide acclaim as commander of war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, to head the Central Intelligence Agency.

Lawmakers voted 94-0 to approve the nomination of Petraeus to succeed outgoing CIA director Leon Panetta.



Leon Panetta David Petraeus

UN peacekeepers brought cholera to Haiti: Study

AFP, Washington

UN peacekeepers from Nepal brought the strain of cholera to Haiti responsible for an epidemic that has killed 5,500 people, according to a study published by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The study is the first to establish a direct link between the arrival of the Nepalese UN battalion near the small town of Mirebalais and the cholera epidemic that erupted in mid-October 2010.

On Thursday in New York, UN acting deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said the agency was "aware of the report and as with other prior reports, we will study its findings diligently."

The research, led by a group of French doctors, appeared in the CDC's July issue of "Emerging Infectious Diseases."

The cholera outbreak's long-suspected

connection to the Nepalese troops provoked bloody anti-UN riots in the country in November that led to two deaths.

Cholera is rare in Haiti -- last year's outbreak was the first in more than a century -- and came as a surprise to country health officials.

According to the study, sewage from the UN camp poured into the Meille River, which greatly accelerated the spread of the disease. The Meille, in turn, flowed into Haiti's longest and most important river, the Artibonite.

A UN report written by four international experts and released in May said the source of the epidemic was "debatable" but that the United Nations "worldwide" must change the way it handles peacekeepers' health.

Since the outbreak began, Haiti's Ministry of Health has recorded 5,506 deaths and 363,117 diagnosed cholera cases.

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