

Athens must do more to stay in Eurozone

France piles pressure on debt-ridden Greece

AFP, Paris

French President Francois Hollande yesterday said after talks with the Greek prime minister that crisis-wracked Greece must stay in the eurozone but first needed to prove it is determined to slash its budget deficit.

"Greece is in the eurozone and Greece must stay in the eurozone," Hollande said at a joint press conference with Antonis Samaras at the Elysee palace.

"But it still has to demonstrate the credibility of its programme and the willingness of its leaders to go the whole way, while doing it in a way that is bearable for the population," he said.

Samaras was in Paris on the second leg of a trip to try to win more time for his country to meet a deadline to slash billions of euros (dollars) from its budget.

He kicked off the two-day trip on Friday in Berlin with his troubled country's future in the 17-nation eurozone in the balance as its cash reserves dry up and a new injection of European funds hangs by a thread.

Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel offered him a ray of hope at their meeting, stressing she wanted debt-burdened Greece to stay in the eurozone.

Hollande had the same message, and he echoed the German leader by saying that the European Union would wait for a report due in October before deciding on any additional help for the country.

That report on Greece's progress in implementing the reforms will be drawn up by auditors sent by the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank.

As part of a 130-billion-euro (\$161-billion) bailout package from the EU and the IMF, Greece has committed to sweeping reforms and some 11.5 billion euros of cuts in 2013 and 2014.

But amid reports that the budgetary hole is actually closer to 14 billion euros and a recession now in its fifth year, Samaras is thought to want a two-year extension to make the cuts.

Samaras pledged Friday to stick to all of Greece's promises to its international creditors and said that he was not asking for more bailout money, but just "breathing space" to implement the spending cuts and reforms.



Fire is seen after an explosion at Amuay oil refinery in Punto Fijo, Venezuela yesterday. A large gas explosion shook Venezuela's biggest refinery, the 645,000-barrels-per-day facility, killing 19 people before dawn, officials said. Officials said the blast was caused by a gas leak and that it had damaged nearby homes along with the refinery complex.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Syria launches fresh assaults to crush rebellion

New UN envoy 'scared' by task as violence kills 62

AFP, Aleppo

Syrian army forces launched arrest raids and clashed with rebels in the southwestern belt of Damascus yesterday in what activists say is a renewed bid to crush the insurgency in the capital "once and for all".

Combat helicopters and tanks also fired on rebel-held areas in the battered northern city of Aleppo, activists and an AFP journalist said, as the government pressed on with its campaign against fighters seeking to topple President Bashar al-Assad.

The fresh violence erupted a day after new international envoy Lakhdar Brahimi admitted he was "scared" of the enormity of the task he faces to try to end the escalating conflict, now in its 18th month.

Brahimi, who takes over formally from former UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan next month, held talks with UN leaders on Friday, saying the Syrian people "will be our first masters".

"We will consider their interests above and before anyone else. We will try to help as much as we can, we will not spare any effort," added Brahimi, a veteran Algerian diplomat who brokered a 1989 accord that ended Lebanon's civil war.

The head of the UN observer team, General Babacar Gaye, left Damascus yesterday after the mission officially ended in the face of the intensifying violence and Security Council divisions.

Damascus said this week it was ready to work with Brahimi and voiced hope he could pave the way for "national dialogue" while also suggesting it was ready to discuss Assad's exit as part of any negotiated solution.

On the ground, troops fired mortar rounds at several areas on the southern outskirts of Damascus following a week

of ferocious attacks on rebel positions, intended to deal a crushing blow to insurgents in the capital, activists said.

In the town of Daraya, just south of Damascus, 15 people were killed in the attacks including three children and two women, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, adding to a death toll of over 100 people in the past four days.

The army claimed to have retaken most of Damascus in late July after some two weeks of intense fighting across the capital's southern belt.

Most rebel Free Syrian Army fighters were forced out into the nearby countryside, but have since then resumed some hit-and-run operations, according to activists.

The Observatory said Friday that August was already the deadliest single month of the conflict with more than 4,000 people killed, from an overall death toll of around 24,500.

Fresh clashes erupt in Assam

Five killed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Five persons were killed in a fresh bout of ethnic violence in Assam's Chirang district, breaking a lull of a few days.

The five persons were stabbed to death at around 5:30 pm at Chaoudharipara at Bijni in the district, Assam Inspector General of Police (Law and Order) L R Bishnoi told the media.

With this, the total number of those killed in clashes between Bodos and migrant Muslim settlers in Chirang, Kokrajhar and some other areas rose to 85 since last month. Additional security forces were rushed to the spot and the area sealed, Bishnoi said.

Obama, Romney locked in close race

IANS, Washington

President Barack Obama and his Republican challenger Mitt Romney remain locked closely in the race for the White House, according to two new polls released ahead of the Republican presidential convention starting on Monday.

A CNN/ORC International poll released on Friday found Obama attracted 49 percent of likely voters to Romney's 47 percent, within the poll's margin of error.

On the other hand, the first poll released by Fox News showed Romney one point ahead with 45 percent to Obama's 44 percent.

In the CNN poll Obama led, 52 to 43, among a broader pool of registered voters including those less likely to vote -- consistent



with CNN's last poll in early August.

Historically, polls of likely voters tend to show slightly more favourable numbers for Republicans.

"This explains why the margin between President Obama and Mitt Romney is smaller among likely voters," CNN polling director Keating Holland explained.

More than a third of registered Republicans -- 35 percent -- said they were extremely enthusiastic about the election, compared to 29 percent of registered Democrats.

The challenge for Romney at his convention, which starts on Monday in Tampa, Florida, is to boost his favourable ratings and re-establish the Republican brand nationwide, CNN said.

According to a Fox News poll of likely voters, Romney has the edge among white Evangelical Christians (70-18 percent), white voters (53-36 percent), married voters (51-38 percent), men (48-40 percent) and seniors (50-41 percent).

Obama has the advantage among black voters (86-6 percent), women (48-42 percent), lower income households (53-35 percent), young voters (48-39 percent) and unmarried voters (55-34 percent).

3 French cops wounded in fresh unrest

AFP, Paris

France suffered a fresh outbreak of urban unrest early yesterday that saw three officers wounded when police came under attack by a crowd firing shotguns and lobbing petrol bombs.

Two of the officers were wounded by shotgun pellets and the third by a firework used as a rocket in the incident that began late Friday in the Grigny suburb of Paris, police said.

The unrest began after a police unit broke up a fight between around 20 people. The officers were set upon as they returned to their vehicles by a crowd, some of whom fired shotguns and threw petrol bombs.

Riot police were rushed to the area and used tear gas to disperse the crowd, police said.

The incident in Grigny came two weeks after rioting in the northern city of Amiens left 17 police officers wounded.

The unrest there has helped place crime and security at the top of the political agenda in France.

The new Socialist government has promised to reverse a decline in police numbers with special attention given to marginalised urban areas which have periodically erupted into violence over the last decade.

No plans yet to restore Iran ties: Egypt

AFP, Cairo

Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi has no immediate plans to restore ties with Iran, his spokesman said in comments published yesterday ahead of a landmark visit to Tehran later this month for a Non-Aligned Movement summit.

"The matter (of restoring diplomatic ties) is out of the question at this stage," Yasser Ali told the Saudi-owned newspaper Al-Sharq Al-Awsat in an interview also carried by Egyptian media.

Morsi will spend only four hours in Tehran on August 30, long enough to hand over the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement to the Islamic republic, Egypt's state-owned Al-Ahram newspaper reported.

The Egyptian president will stop in Tehran on his way back from a 36-hour visit to China, Al-Ahram added.

Tehran severed diplomatic ties with Cairo in 1980 after the Islamic revolution in Iran, to protest Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel and its hosting of the deposed shah.



Supporters of Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi clash with a protester opposed to him during a demonstration in Tahrir Square in central Cairo on Friday. Several hundred protesters rallied against the Islamist president in the Egyptian capital yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US court rejects graphic cigarette warnings

AFP, Washington

A US court on Friday shot down orders to slap graphic anti-tobacco messages on cigarette packs, saying the government overstepped its authority by trying to "browbeat" smokers into quitting.

In line with campaigns in several other nations, the United States planned from September 22 to require images on cigarette packs including a man smoking through a hole in his throat and a body with chest staples on an autopsy table.

In a 2-1 decision, the US Court of Appeals in Washington said that the images planned on cigarette packs were not necessarily false but they went beyond "pure attempts to convey information to consumers."

"They are unabashed attempts to evoke emotion (and perhaps embarrassment) and browbeat consumers into quitting," Judge Janice Rogers Brown, who was appointed by former president George W. Bush, wrote for the majority.

She also said that the US Food and Drug Administration "has not provided a shred of evidence" that graphic warnings directly reduced rates of smoking.

Tobacco companies had filed suit against the federal agency, saying that the cigarette labels violated the US Constitution's First Amendment which prohibits any law that restricts freedom of speech.

Friday's ruling came nine days after global tobacco firms lost a similar case in Australia, where the High Court upheld laws requiring that tobacco products be sold in drab, uniform packaging with graphic health warnings.

Other nations that place pictorial warnings on tobacco products include Brazil, Britain, Canada, India, Iran, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand.

Sudan rebels, army clash in oil state

REUTERS, Khartoum

Rebels clashed with Sudanese government forces in the oil-producing border state of South Kordofan during an Islamic holiday this week, both sides said, each claiming victory over the other.

Sudan's regions bordering newly-independent South Sudan have been convulsed by conflict since last year, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes, according to the United Nations.

The rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement North (SPLM-N) said it fought off government "forces and militias" that attacked a village near the Abu Kershola settlement in South Kordofan's northeast on Wednesday. Fighting also reported on Thursday and Friday in the al-Murib area, the rebels said in a statement.



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