

Obama, Romney race remains nearly tied

AFP, Washington

Three weeks before election day, the White House race between US president Barack Obama and his Republican foe Mitt Romney remains statistically tied, with Obama maintaining just a slight advantage, a new opinion poll found yesterday.

The latest ABC News/Washington Post survey showed that likely voters favoured Obama over Romney by 49 percent to 46 percent, which is within the poll's margin of error.

But Obama was still leading in nine battleground states -- Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia and Wisconsin -- by 51-46 percent.

The mood of the voters slightly improved although most of them remained gloomy. According to the survey, only 42 percent of registered voters said the country was headed in the right direction.

The good news for Obama is that that figure was up by 13 percentage points since late August and, experts say, has reached a level at which an incumbent can survive.

Neither candidate has so far managed to sway the voters toward their economic plan, the survey showed.

Just 51 percent of likely voters expressed confidence the economy will improve under Romney, and 48 percent said the same about Obama.

But the Republican nominee has the class factor to worry about. According to the survey, 57 percent of likely voters believed he would do more as president to favour the wealthy than the middle class. Sixty-eight percent thought Obama had favoured the middle class.



PHOTO: AFP

Philippine government peace negotiator Marvic Leonen, *front right*, and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) chief negotiator Mohagher Iqbal, *front left*, exchange signed documents of a framework agreement for peace at a ceremony at the Malacanang Palace in Manila yesterday as Malaysian peace broker Dato Tengko Abdul Ghafar, *centre front*, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) chief Murad Ebrahim, *back left*, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak, *standing second left*, Philippine President Benigno Aquino, *standing second right*, and peace negotiator Teresita Deles look on.

Philippines govt, Muslim rebels sign historic peace pact

AFP, Manila

Muslim rebels waging a four-decade insurgency in the Philippines signed a historic pact with the government yesterday to end the conflict, but both sides warned the road to peace had only just begun.

President Benigno Aquino and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) chief Murad Ebrahim witnessed the signing of the accord, which aims for a final peace pact by 2016, in a ceremony at the presidential palace in Manila.

"I come in peace and to forge a partnership of peace on the basis of the framework agreement between the MILF and the Philippine government," Ebrahim said in a speech during the ceremony.

Aquino, who has driven the process since assuming office in 2010, also hailed the agreement as a chance to "finally achieve genuine, lasting peace".

Ebrahim became the first MILF chief to visit the presidential palace, signify-

ing the optimism from both sides about finally ending a conflict that has claimed 150,000 lives and the priority Aquino has put on achieving peace.

Under the plan, the 12,000-strong MILF would give up its quest for an independent homeland in the southern region of Mindanao in return for significant power and wealth-sharing in a new autonomous region there.

However the MILF's leadership, the government and independent observers have all warned the path towards peace remains littered with obstacles, and that yesterday's signing does not guarantee an end to the conflict.

Muslim rebel groups have been fighting since the 1970s for full independence or autonomy in Mindanao, which they consider their ancestral homeland from before Spanish Christian colonisation of the country began in the 1500s.

The estimated four to nine million Muslims are now a minority in Mindanao

after years of Catholic immigration, but they remain a majority in some areas. Muslims would be a majority in the planned new autonomous region.

The conflict has left huge areas of Mindanao, a resource-rich and fertile farming region covering the southern third of the Philippines, in deep poverty.

The planned new autonomous region would replace the old one, covering much of the same area but with more powers for self-rule.

The new autonomous region would have its own parliament and ability to tax its residents, while Islamic Shariah law would apply to Muslims in civil cases.

The nation's parliament, dominated by Catholics, will have to approve the laws of the new autonomous region.

The two sides have set 2016 as a deadline because that is when Aquino is required by the constitution to stand down after serving a single six-year term.

Syria-Turkey tensions soar with flight bans

Iran proposes Syria 'transition' under Assad

AFP, Damascus

Turkey has banned Syrian flights from its airspace in a tit-for-tat move, while Iran handed a "detailed proposal" to UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi aimed at ending the conflict between the Syria's army and rebels.

On the ground regime forces pressed their counter-attack against rebels to regain territory lost in northern battlegrounds.

The reciprocal flight bans heightened tensions between neighbours Syria and Turkey days after Ankara confiscated a cargo of what Russia said was radar equipment being flown from Moscow to Damascus.

The moves brought a flurry of diplomacy intended to calm soaring tensions between the neighbours.

A senior official of Iran yesterday proposed to peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi a "transitional period" for Syria ahead of elections to be held under President Bashar al-

Assad's supervision.

"We proposed a halt to the violence and a truce, stopping supplying weapons and backing for armed terrorist groups and a national dialogue between the opposition and government," Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian told Arabic-language Al-Alam television.

Earlier, UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday called for a ceasefire in Syria during the upcoming four-day Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, as the revolt entered its 20th month with a death toll of more than 33,000.

The number of Syrians fleeing the conflict in their homeland and seeking refuge in Turkey now exceeds 100,000, a Turkish disas-ter agency said.

Meanwhile, an Armenian plane ordered to land in Turkey for security checks while en route to Aleppo was allowed to resume its flight yesterday after nothing suspicious was found.

Mastermind of 9/11 back in US court

AFP, Us Naval Base, Cuba

Hearings for the self-proclaimed September 11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and his co-defendants got under way yesterday at the special tribunal known as military commissions at Guantanamo Bay ahead of their trial.

Mohammed and four alleged co-plotters face the death penalty if convicted for the attacks on the United States 11 years ago that left 2,976 people dead.

With prosecutors refusing to reveal information deemed classified and holding parts of the debates behind closed doors, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) rights group and 14 media groups have urged complete transparency.

US PRESIDENTIAL POLLS 2012

In second debate, can Obama bounce back?

AFP, Williamsburg, Virginia

Time and again, when seeming distracted and stumbling, President Barack Obama has pulled himself out of the political mire. His supporters now wonder whether he has it in him again.

Obama needs to shake out of a political funk and block resurgent Republican foe Mitt Romney when they meet today in their second debate just 21 days before the election.

In their first clash, nearly two weeks ago, Obama mystified Democrats with a limp defense of his White House term and failed to frame a compelling vision of why he deserves a second.

Avoiding Romney's eye and lacking fire, Obama dismayed supporters with one of the weakest showings since the first televised presidential debate in 1960.

Obama, guarding presidential dignity, will not be as brash, but is under pressure to show



more stomach for the fight against an opponent enjoying his best streak of the campaign.

The town hall style format of today's debate at Hofstra University, New York, may help, requiring him to interact with an audience and by extension viewers at home.

Michael Kramer, professor of communication studies at St Mary's College, Indiana, said Obama must stress eye contact, after spending much of the Denver debate glancing down at his notes.

"He needs to make sure he is talking right to the people asking the questions and really engaging them and being more dynamic ... he needs more energy in his voice," Kramer said.

But Obama must also be careful not to over compensate by being too aggressive, Kramer said.

Republicans are already laying groundwork for such a slip.



PHOTO: AFP

Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond and British Prime Minister David Cameron shake hands after signing an agreement to hold a referendum on Scottish independence at St Andrew's House in Edinburgh, Scotland yesterday.

India seeks Aussie's uranium

AFP, New Delhi

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard arrived in New Delhi yesterday for a state visit that will include talks about selling uranium to energy-hungry India.

Australia has agreed to consider the sale even though India has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and Gillard and Prime Manmohan Singh are slated to announce preliminary negotiations over a civil nuclear deal.

"They will discuss this matter and make some progress, but the whole process will take some time," an Indian government official said on condition of anonymity.

An Australian official confirmed the agenda, saying that an announcement was likely on how safeguards would be guaranteed.

SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE Cameron, Salmond strike referendum deal

REUTERS, Edinburgh

Scotland yesterday set up a historic independence referendum after its leader signed an agreement with Britain's prime minister finalising arrangements for a vote, which could lead to the demise of its three-centuries-old union with England.

Scotland's drive for sovereignty, led by its nationalist leader Alex Salmond, echoes separatist moves by other European regions such as Catalonia and Flanders at a time when a crisis-hit European Union is undergoing deep changes to its identity.

Signed in the Scottish capital Edinburgh, the deal will allow Scotland to decide in a 2014 referendum whether it should become an independent country or stay within the United Kingdom.

Nationalists have timed the vote to coincide with the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn when Scottish forces led by Robert the Bruce defeated English invaders.

Prime Minister David Cameron opposes Scotland's push, arguing that Britain is stronger together. But London agrees it is up to Scotland to decide its future for itself in a vote.

Following months of negotiations, both sides have made major concessions to pave the way for the final accord.

"The agreement will see Scotland take an important step towards independence, and the means to create a fairer and more prosperous Scotland," Salmond said ahead of the meeting. "I look forward to working positively for a yes vote in 2014."

EU states agree new Iran sanctions

Khamenei says West plotting to disrupt 'calmness'

AFP, Luxembourg

European Union foreign ministers yesterday adopted tough new financial and trade sanctions against Iran aimed at forcing a breakthrough in stalled talks on Tehran's contested nuclear programme.

The new package of sanctions targets EU dealings with Iran's banks, as well as trade and gas imports. Details on those targeted will be released Tuesday but a government minister is on the new blacklist, diplomats said.

Citing "serious and deepening concerns" over Iran's nuclear drive, a statement approved by the ministers said the EU had "agreed additional restrictive measures in the financial, trade, energy and transport sectors".

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton earlier said it was "very, very important that Iran is sent a very strong signal from this European Union foreign affairs council that we want to see a negotiated agreement."

Previous sanctions, in particular a biting oil embargo that came into effect in July, are "quite



clearly having an effect," she told reporters.

Ashton, who represents global powers in talks with Iran on its nuclear programme, said the sanctions aimed "to persuade Iran to come to the table." Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday said before the EU decision that Iran's enemies are seeking to disrupt the "calmness" in the country through economic confrontation.

The fiery speech comes as the European Union is about to ratchet up sanctions against Iran over its disputed nuclear drive and as an oil embargo by the United States and EU begins to impact on the Islamic republic's economy.

"I am asking officials in the judiciary, executive and legislative branches to be watchful so the ill wishers (Western powers) are not able to disrupt the calmness in the country with their plots," Khamenei said his address, which was broadcast live on television.

Khamenei urged Iranian officials to focus on economic issues that the "enemies" want to use to weaken Iran.

NEWS IN brief

Libya elects new PM

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's General National Congress (GNC) elected Ali Zeidan, a long-time opponent of deposed dictator Mummer Gaddafi, as prime minister on Sunday, the assembly's chief said.

"Ali Zeidan is elected prime minister and is asked to propose a cabinet within two weeks," Mohammed Megaryef, president of the national assembly, said in remarks broadcast on television.

Benefitting from the backing of the liberal coalition in the 200-seat assembly, Zeidan won 93 of the votes cast, trumping the 85 garnered by the only other candidate, local government minister Mohammed al-Hrari.

3 kids killed in Nato attack

AFP, Kandahar

A Nato air strike killed three children while it was targeting Taliban insurgents planting mines on a road in southern Afghanistan, Afghan officials yesterday said.

Nato's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) confirmed an air strike in Helmand province's Nawa district on Sunday, saying that three insurgents died and it was investigating reports that children were also killed.

"Two Taliban mine-planters were identified and targeted by ISAF from the air and killed," district police chief Ahmad Shah Khan told AFP.

"Three children, two boys and a girl, who were nearby

Indian navy chopper crash kills 3

TNN, Panaji

A Chetak helicopter of the Indian Navy crashed near the naval airfield at Dabolim yesterday. According to reports three people have been killed in the crash, which took place during a routine sortie.

The chopper was flying from Mumbai to Bangalore and had stopped at Dabolim airport for refuelling.

Speaking to TOI, Navy Public Relation Officer (PRO) Commander P K Prabhala confirmed the crash.

"Navy Chetak helicopter has crashed," Prabhala said. However, the Navy has not confirmed the news about casualties in the crash.

The helicopter caught fire soon after the crash said police sources.

Cambodia's ex-king dies

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodia's revered ex-king Norodom Sihanouk, whose life mirrored his country's turbulent past, died in China yesterday, sparking nationwide mourning that will see his body lie in state for three months.

Sihanouk, who had been a frequent visitor to Beijing where he received most of his medical treatment, died of a heart attack aged 89, according to his longtime personal assistant Prince Sisowath Thomico.

"King Sihanouk did not belong to his family, he belonged to Cambodia and to history," he told AFP of the former monarch who abruptly quit the throne in October 2004, citing old age and health problems.

"It's painful. I am full of sorrow," he said.

Sihanouk, whose decades at the centre of Cambodian life encompassed long periods of exile and bloody conflicts including the Khmer Rouge

Myanmar bars OIC office opening

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar's president blocked a world Islamic body from opening an office in the country, an official yesterday said, bowing to rallies against its efforts to help Muslims in unrest-hit Rakhine state.

"The president will not allow an OIC office because it is not in accordance with the people's desires," said an official from Myanmar leader Thein Sein's office, after thousands of monks held the latest protests against the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in two major cities on Monday.

The official, who asked not to be named, declined to comment on an agreement signed with the OIC, the top world Muslim body, which confirmed to AFP last week that it had obtained the green light to open



Ali Zeidan



Sihanouk