

EU budget talks collapse

AFP, Brussels

The first round in two weeks of tough talks on the European Union budget collapsed Friday after austerity-minded states refused to plug a 2012 budget shortfall in funds destined for Europe's needy.

Friday's talks had been scheduled to approve a budget for 2013 but instead snagged straight off on an 8.9-billion-euro (\$11.3-billion) hole in this year's spending, according to figures provided by the European Commission.

Approval for the massive EU budget must be agreed between the 27 member states and the European Parliament, but MEP Alain Lamassoure, who heads the assembly's budget committee, said: "The council (of ministers) were unable to negotiate so the negotiations were suspended."



Syrian nationals cross the border between the Syrian town of Ras al-Ain and Turkey's Sanliurfa province town of Ceylanpinar yesterday. The UN said more than 11,000 Syrians had fled into neighbouring countries in 24 hours. Inset, a boy collects bullet cartridges after hard clashes between Syrian army and opposition fighters in Ras al-Ain yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

CIA chief Petraeus resigns over affair

REUTERS, Washington

CIA Director David Petraeus resigned as head of the leading US spy agency on Friday, saying he had engaged in an extramarital affair and acknowledging he "showed extremely poor judgment."

In a letter to the CIA workforce, Petraeus, 60, said he met with President Barack Obama at the White House on Thursday and asked "to be allowed, for personal reasons, to resign from my position."

"After being married for 37 years, I showed extremely poor judgment by engaging in an extramarital affair," he wrote. "Such behaviour is unacceptable, both as a husband and as the leader of an organization such as ours."

Obama, who was re-elected to a second term on Tuesday, said in a statement he had accepted Petraeus' resignation, praising him for his work at the Central Intelligence Agency and for leading US troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Obama said Michael Morell, the agency's long-time deputy director, would serve as acting CIA chief. Morell is a leading candidate to be Petraeus' permanent successor, sources said.

The woman with whom the former CIA director had the affair is Paula Broadwell, according to a person familiar with the matter. She is an author who wrote a biography of Petraeus titled "All In."

Attempts to reach Broadwell were unsuccessful. There was no answer at the door of her house in the affluent Charlotte, North Carolina, neighbourhood of Dilworth.

Much about the sudden and dramatic turn of events remained unknown Friday evening, including how long the affair had gone on and what prompted Petraeus to resign now, just days after the 2012 presidential election.

There were indications, however, that the affair was first uncovered a few months ago during an investigation by the FBI. A US national security source said the FBI had stumbled across evidence of Petraeus' affair during an apparently unrelated investigation of news leaks.

Obama wins Florida

AP, Florida

US President Barack Obama was declared the winner of Florida's 29 electoral votes yesterday, ending a four-day count with a razor-thin margin that narrowly avoided an automatic recount that would have brought back memories of 2000.

No matter the outcome, Obama had already clinched reelection and now has 332 electoral votes to Romney's 206.

The Florida Secretary of State's Office said that with almost 100 percent of the vote counted, Obama led Republican challenger Mitt Romney 50 percent to 49.1 percent, a difference of about 74,000 votes. That was over the half-percent margin where a computer recount would have been automatically ordered unless Romney had waived it.

There is a Nov 16 deadline for overseas and military ballots, but under Florida law, recounts are based on Saturday's results. Only a handful of overseas and military ballots are believed to remain outstanding.

It's normal for election supervisors in Florida and other states to spend days after any election counting absentee, provisional, military and overseas ballots. Usually, though, the election has already been called on election night or soon after because the winner's margin is beyond reach.

On election night this year, it was difficult for officials - and the media - to call the presidential race here, in part because the margin was so close and the voting stretched into the evening.

In Miami-Dade, for instance, so many people were in line at 7 pm in certain precincts that some people didn't vote until after midnight.

Opposition elects leader but remains divided

Blasts kill 20 in Syria army base; thousands flee violence

AFP, Damascus

Days of foreign-backed efforts to reorganise Syria's opposition gained a little till yesterday despite selecting a leader as fighting raged through out the country.

Opposition talks in the Qatari capital Doha were to see the Syrian National Council vying to keep its leading role in the face of US- and Arab-backed proposals to form a new government-in-waiting that could win deeper support.

The final talks among a wide range of dissident factions kicked off under a cloud of SNC reservations, with one senior official from the bloc saying an agreement was unlikely.

Forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad meanwhile suffered a new

blow, as two car bombs tore through an officers' club in the southern city of Daraa.

The blasts struck minutes apart in the back garden of the club, killing at least 20 soldiers and possibly many more, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a key watchdog, said.

In Doha, the SNC -- once regarded as the leading representative of the opposition but now derided in Washington as dominated by out-of-touch exiles -- was due to give its delayed response on Saturday to proposals for a new broader-based body.

The SNC had asked for two postponements while it elected its own new leadership amid strong resistance among some members to what they see as the group's sidelining in the new US-backed structure.

The group chose a Christian, George Sabra, as its new leader in a move seen as a response to criticism that Islamists play too dominant a role, but a major activist network inside Syria, the Local Coordination Committees, announced it was quitting the bloc in protest at its position on the unity talks.

The 10-member transitional government would be elected by a new 60-member umbrella group drawn from civilian activists and rebel fighters inside Syria as well as the exiles who have dominated the SNC.

Meanwhile, the UN said more than 11,000 Syrians had fled into neighbouring countries in 24 hours, including 9,000 into Turkey, bringing to more than 408,000 the number of registered Syrian refugees in the region.



People carry Turkish flags and portraits of Turkey's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as they gather at his mausoleum during a ceremony marking the 74th anniversary of his death in Ankara yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Drought destroyed Maya civilization!

AFP, Washington

A long catastrophic drought led to the collapse of Maya culture, a new study said Thursday, confirming a controversial hypothesis linking its demise to climate change.

The study, published in Friday's issue of the journal "Science," involved an international team of researchers. "The rise and fall of Mayan civilization is an example of a sophisticated civilization failing to adapt successfully to climate change," said James Baldini of Britain's Durham University.

"Periods of high rainfall increased the productivity of Maya agricultural systems and led to a population boom and resource overexploitation."

The progressively drier climate that followed led to the depletion of resources, which in turn sparked political destabilization and war, he noted in a statement.

Then, "after years of hardship, a nearly century-long drought from 1020 sealed the fate of the Classic Maya," Baldini added.

CHINA CONGRESS MEET Young reporter puts officials on the spot

AFP, Beijing

Chinese officials accustomed to the tame questions of a compliant state press were caught out by a plucky 11-year-old reporter during the country's sensitive Communist Party congress.

Sun Luyuan, a Beijing sixth-grade student, on Friday shook up one of the tightly-controlled party meetings on the congress's sidelines with a question that put officials on the spot over China's miserable food-safety record.

Noting that a steady stream of scandals and health scares involving tainted or unsafe food products had particularly affected students, leaving many sickened in various incidents, Sun asked why China can't clean up its act.

"I love snacks, but I don't dare to eat snacks now because we see so many reports these days of problems with food



products," Sun asked high-level officials during a congress delegate meeting, according to state-run China News Service.

During the meeting at Beijing's cavernous Great Hall of the People, Sun, who works for the Chinese Teenager News, continued

by asking "why are these kinds of food products available for purchase?"

"As many primary and middle school students eat our lunches at school, what can you do to put us at ease over food safety?" she asked.

Ma Kai, a top official in China's cabinet who presided over Friday's meeting, passed the question to Education Minister Yuan Guiren, the China News Service said.

Yuan offered a stock official response pledging the government was addressing the situation and putting proper safety measures in place, a line repeated for years even as the scandals have persisted.

BBC in crisis after new sex abuse row

AFP, London

The BBC yesterday admitted it faced a "crisis of trust" after being forced to apologise for wrongly implicating a politician in child sex abuse, just weeks after the Jimmy Savile scandal broke.

The British public broadcaster suspended all investigations by its flagship current affairs programme Newsnight after it alleged that a senior Conservative party figure repeatedly abused a teenage resident of a children's home in the 1970s.

Although the Newsnight programme did not identify the politician in last week's report, former Conservative treasurer Alistair McAlpine was widely named on social networking sites as the alleged perpetrator.

McAlpine publicly denied the claims on Friday -- and hours later his accuser, Steve Messham, a former resident of the Bryn Estyn children's home in Wales, said McAlpine was not his abuser and had been a victim of mistaken identity.

Closing Friday's edition of the programme, anchor Eddie Mair summed up the grim mood with the sign-off: "Newsnight will be back on Monday. Probably."

Entwistle admitted the damage the latest row had caused the corporation as it came on the heels of allegations that Savile, one of the BBC's top presenters before his death last year, sexually abused hundreds of children over a 40-year period.

Chopper crash kills 17 Turkish troops

REUTERS, Diyarbakir

Seventeen Turkish soldiers were killed yesterday when their helicopter crashed in southeastern Turkey due to bad weather conditions, the area's governor said.

The Sikorsky helicopter crashed on Herekol mountain, in the Pervari area of Siirt province, Siirt Governor Ahmet Aydin said. The victims were members of the country's gendarmerie special forces and there were no survivors on board, he said.

The Turkish military has been carrying out operations on the mountain in recent months against separatist groups.

Turkish jets and helicopters have pounded PKK positions along the border with Iraq and Iran for three days, killing 42 militants, Hakkari's governor said late on Friday.

SANDY AFTERMATH New Jersey set to restore power

CNN ONLINE

After his state's coastline took the brunt of Superstorm Sandy, New Jersey Gov Chris Christie said Friday that he expects power to be almost fully restored statewide by yesterday night.

"Life will be back -- for most of New Jersey -- to normal Sunday," he told reporters.

More than 175,000 households in the Garden State are still in the dark, and homes with saltwater electrical damage will have to be inspected by electricians before having their power restored.

Christie's comments came after a tour of the Jersey shore, where Superstorm Sandy ravaged homes and business.

Still in the dark, frustration mounts in New York neighborhood.

To the north, some 20,000 households across New York City and Westchester County remained without power. Another 150,000 homes in Long Island and harder-hit areas of Queens, such as Rockaway Peninsula, were also in the dark after the double blow of Sandy and this week's nor'easter.

But in an attempt to deal with persistently long gas lines, New York police started enforcing a new alternating fuel ration system on Friday.



David Petraeus