

S Korea elects first woman president

AFP, Seoul

South Korea elected its first female president yesterday, handing a slim but historic victory to conservative ruling party candidate Park Geun-Hye, daughter of the country's former military ruler.

As leader of Asia's fourth-largest economy, Park, 60, will face numerous challenges, handling a belligerent North Korea, a slowing economy and soaring welfare costs in one of the world's most rapidly ageing societies.

With 85 percent of the national vote counted, Park had an insurmountable lead of 51.6 percent to 48 percent over her liberal rival, Moon Jae-In of the main opposition party.

The election was largely fought on domestic economic issues, with both candidates offering similar policies as they went in search of centrist voters beyond their conservative and liberal bases.

Park had pushed a message of "eco-

conomic democratisation" -- a campaign buzzword about reducing the social disparities thrown up by rapid economic development -- and promised to create new jobs and increase welfare spending.

She also signalled a willingness to resume the humanitarian aid to Pyongyang suspended by current President Lee Myung-Bak.

To some extent yesterday's election was seen as a referendum on the legacy of Park's father, Park Chung-Hee.

He was shot dead by his spy chief in 1979. Park's mother had been killed five years earlier by a pro-North Korea gunman aiming for her father.

Park, 60, never married and has no children -- a fact that makes her popular with voters tired of corruption scandals surrounding their first families.

A female president will be a huge change for a country that the World Economic Forum recently ranked 108th out of 135 countries in terms of gender equality -- one place below the United Arab Emirates and just above Kuwait.



Supporters of South Korea's presidential candidate Park Geun-Hye react as they celebrate victory outside the party's office in Seoul yesterday. Inset, Park Geun-Hye.

PHOTO: AFP

Obama is Time's person of the yr

AFP, New York

Time magazine yesterday named the recently re-elected US President Barack Obama as its person of the year for 2012 -- the second time it has accorded him this honor.

Obama now not only has a reelection as America's first black president and a Nobel peace prize under his belt, but he beat fancied runners-up, including brave Pakistani girls' rights activist Malala Yousafzai, to be enshrined again as Time's dominant personality of the year.

The venerable American news magazine put Obama on its cover, striking a thoughtful, statuesque pose, and said he deserved the accolade as "the symbol and in some ways the architect of this new America."

The magazine lauded Obama's campaigning prowess, noting he was the first president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt to win more than 50 percent of the vote in two straight elections and the first president since 1940 to be re-elected despite a jobless rate above 7.5 percent.

Obama beat Republican Mitt Romney soundly in November's election to win a second four year term, despite presiding over a chronic economic slump.

"In 2012, he found and forged a new majority, turned weakness into opportunity and sought, amid great adversity, to create a more perfect union," said Time, which had named Obama person of the year back in 2008 when he became America's first black president.

The others considered for the weekly magazine's traditional annual honor were Apple CEO Tim Cook, atomic scientist Fabiola Gianotti, and Egypt's post-revolutionary President Mohamed Morsi.

But Obama swept to the head of the pack as because of what Time said was his ability to grasp the demographic and social changes shifting the United States.

"The truth is," Obama told Time, "that we have steadily become a more diverse and tolerant country that embraces people's differences and respects people who are not like us. That's a profoundly good thing. That's one of the strengths of America."



Disasters cost \$140b in 2012: Report

AFP, Zurich

Natural and man-made disasters around the world this year, including Superstorm Sandy, will cost at least \$140 billion (106 billion euros), according to a study published by Swiss insurance group Swiss Re yesterday.

The insurance industry will cover about \$65 billion of all losses from such catastrophes, the study showed, ticking in above the average for the past 10 years.

It nevertheless marked a significant drop from 2011, when massive earthquakes and flooding forced insurers to dish out more than \$120 billion to cover disaster-related losses.

Natural catastrophes alone this year will lead to more than 11,000 deaths and \$60 billion in insured claims, Swiss Re said in a statement.

But after two years when natural disasters such as the devastating Haiti earthquake and Pakistan floods were largely concentrated in Asia Pacific and South America, "2012 is dominated by large, weather-related losses in the US," it added.

5000 NEW SETTLER HOMES

Palestinians may go to ICC

AFP, Ramallah

Israel's plans for new settler homes are accelerating Palestinian moves to appeal to the Hague court over Jewish settlement policy, a senior official told AFP yesterday.

"The intensification of settlement activity and all the Israeli actions, from killings to arrests, are pushing us to accelerate our recourse to the International Criminal Court," said Palestinian negotiator Mohammed Shtayyeh.

His remarks were made as Israel was in the process of pushing through plans for more than 5,000 new settler homes in annexed east Jerusalem, with hundreds more to be approved in the West Bank next week.

With their new-found rank of non-member observer state at the United

Nations, the Palestinians could potentially have access to the ICC in The Hague, sparking fears they could sue Israeli officials for war crimes -- particularly over settlement building.

Shortly after winning the UN upgrade on November 29, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said he had no plans to immediately approach the tribunal which would only be possible after the Palestinians first sign and ratify the Rome Statute.

Earlier, an Israeli committee gave final approval to plans for 2,610 new homes in Givat HaMatos, an as yet unbuilt area of annexed east Jerusalem in what will be the city's first new settlement neighbourhood in 12 years.

And on Monday, Israel okayed another 1,500 homes elsewhere in

the city's eastern sector.

Shtayyeh said the recent spate of approvals was not linked to the UN bid, but part of "an electoral campaign for the rightwing government" of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ahead of a general election on January 22.

"These (decisions) are the death announcement for the two-state solution," he said.

Last week, Shtayyeh said a Palestinian legal team was looking into which international bodies to join, including the ICC and the International Court of Justice, warning that Israel's actions were "pushing" them down that route faster than they had wanted.

Some 200,000 Israelis live in settlement neighbourhoods of east Jerusalem with another 340,000 in the rest of the occupied West Bank.

Mexico prison clash kills 17

AFP, Durango

Eleven prisoners and six guards were killed Tuesday in armed clashes at a prison in northern Mexico that erupted when inmates attempted a jailbreak, state security officials said.

The fighting broke out as wardens were "thwarting the inmates' attempted prison break" in the city of Gomez Palacio, the public security office in Durango state said in a statement.

Troops deployed to the prison eventually put a stop to the attempted jailbreak and regained control of the facility.

US SCHOOL MASSACRE Biden to head panel on gun violence

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama yesterday appointed Vice President Joe Biden to lead a government panel tasked with formulating a response to gun violence after last week's school massacre.

The New York Times and the Washington Post cited White House officials as saying that Obama would formally name Biden to head the panel at a press conference.

The panel will explore possible new gun legislation to rein in the sale of assault rifles and high-capacity magazines, but will also look at mental health policies and violence in popular culture.

Obama vowed to take action against gun violence when he spoke at a memorial on Sunday for the 26 victims -- including 20 young children -- killed in the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut.

On Tuesday the president backed a new bid to revive an assault weapons ban and other new gun laws, as traumatized US politicians wrestled with the aftermath of the worst in a series of mass shootings over the last two years.

The massacre shocked the country, and may have shifted the political debate on firearms in US society after years of gun lobby ascendancy.

But once outrage from the Newtown massacre fades, prospects for any new law remain uncertain and pressure will mount from various lobby groups.



Joe Biden

US boy, 11, brings gun to class

AFP, Los Angeles

An 11-year-old boy has been charged with possessing a deadly weapon after bringing a gun to school, claiming he was worried about a massacre like Connecticut's, a schools' spokesman said Tuesday.

The boy brought a .22 caliber handgun into class Monday at the West Kearns Elementary School in the Salt Lake City suburb of Kearns, Utah, and allegedly threatened classmates with it before being reported.

"He is alleging that he brought the weapon to protect himself and his friends from a Connecticut-style incident," Granite School District spokesman Ben Horsley told AFP.

The boy was spotted by schoolmates.

The gun was found in the boy's backpack in a classroom. It was not loaded, but the boy did have ammunition.

BENGHAZI ATTACK

Probe slams 'grossly inadequate' security

AFP, Washington

A long-awaited inquiry into a deadly militant attack on the US mission in the Libyan city of Benghazi late Tuesday slammed State Department security arrangements there as "grossly inadequate."

But the months-long probe also found there had been "no immediate, specific" intelligence of a threat against the mission, which was overrun on September 11 by dozens of heavily armed militants who killed four Americans.

"Systemic failures and leadership and management deficiencies at senior levels within two bureaus of the State Department resulted in a Special Mission security posture that was inadequate for Benghazi and grossly inadequate to deal with the attack that took place," the report said.

The Accountability Review Board (ARB) also concluded "there was no protest prior to the attacks, which were unanticipated in their scale and intensity."

The attacks, in which the consulate and a nearby annex were targeted, have become fiercely politicized, with Republicans skewering the administration for security failings as well as a possible cover-up over al-Qaeda's role.

The US envoy to the United Nations, Susan Rice, came under relentless Republican fire for saying days after the assault that, according to the best intelligence, it was triggered by a "spontaneous" protest outside the mission.

Rice has since been forced to pull out of the running to replace US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who steps down early in 2013.

In the unclassified section of their report, the five-strong board said they believed every effort had been made to rescue ambassador Chris Stevens, who died in the attack -- the first US envoy killed on duty in three decades.

Hillary said she accepted "every one" of the 29 recommendations made by the ARB, which has spent the last three months investigating the events.

Hillary also backed the report's findings urging Congress to support moves to realign the department's 2013 budget request to help reinforce its diplomatic outposts, in her letter provided to journalists.

The New York Times reported the State Department is asking Congress to transfer \$1.3 billion from contingency funds that had been allocated to Iraq for preventing future attacks.

Doomsday fear closes Argentina mountaintop

AFP, Buenos Aires

As mountaintops go, this one is for meditating. And the odd UFO sighting. But now it is closing for a few days to avert a mass suicide by folks girding for the world's end.

That doomsday is indeed upon us -- with Christmas just around the corner, heaven forbid -- is one gloomy interpretation of a Mayan India calendar.

To wit, December 21 marks the end of a 5,200-year cycle on the Mayan "Long Count" calendar. It's a cause for celebration for many in Mexico and Central America, but spells doomsday for some believers.

In Argentina's central Cordova province, fallout will be felt at a mountain called Uritorco, which was sacred for indigenous peoples when their numbers were still large in Argentina.

Authorities will shut down access to it from December 20 to 22 because an appeal has gone out on Facebook for people to climb the hill December 21 and commit "massive spiritual suicide," said Gustavo Sez, mayor of the nearby town of Capilla del Monte. That name means chapel on a hill.

"It was a decision taken by consensus, to pre-empt any distortion of the Mayan prophecy," he said.

The peak is about 2,000 meters (6,600 feet) high and located in a tourist area 750 kilometers (470 miles) north of Buenos Aires.

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