

Italy's new govt begins life in climate of crisis

REUTERS, Rome

New Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta seeks the backing of parliament in a confidence vote yesterday, facing severe political and economic problems that will test the solidity of his broad coalition government in the months ahead.

Letta is due to speak in parliament at 3:00pm before the lower house confidence vote in the evening, where he will be backed by his center-left Democratic Party and former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's center-right People of Freedom.

A Senate confidence vote will follow, probably on Tuesday.

Sunday's swearing in of Letta's cabinet was overshadowed by the shooting of two policemen outside the prime minister's office in Rome. Nevertheless, financial market reaction to the end of months of political stalemate was positive with bond yields falling and shares rising.

Italy's cost of borrowing dropped to its lowest level since October 2010 at an auction of medium and long term bonds on Monday.



People gather at the scene of an explosion in the Mazzeh district of the Syrian capital Damascus yesterday, which is believed to have targeted the prime minister's convoy. Syrian Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi escaped an assassination bid, surviving a blast that targeted his convoy in Damascus, Syrian state television reported.

PHOTO: AFP

US lawmakers press Obama to take action on Syria

Syria prime minister survives bomb attack

REUTERS, Washington

Republican senators on Sunday pressed US President Barack Obama to intervene in Syria's civil war, saying America could attack Syrian air bases with missiles but should not send in ground troops, reports Reuters.

Pressure is mounting on the White House to do more to help Syrian rebels fighting against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, which the Obama administration last week said had probably used chemical arms in the conflict.

Neutralizing the government forces' air advantage over the rebels

"could turn the tide of battle pretty quickly," Republican Senator Lindsey Graham told CBS's "Face the Nation."

"One way you can stop the Syrian air force from flying is to bomb the Syrian air bases with cruise missiles," the South Carolina senator said.

Graham said international action was needed to bring the conflict to a close but "You don't need boots on the ground from the US point of view."

More than 70,000 people have died in Syria's two-year-old civil war. So far, the United States has limited its involvement to providing non-lethal aid to rebels.

Meanwhile, Syrian Prime Minister

Wael al-Halki survived a bomb attack on his convoy in Damascus yesterday, state media and activists said, as rebels struck in the heart of President Bashar al-Assad's capital.

The explosion shook the Mezze neighborhood shortly after 9:00am sending a plume of thick black smoke into the sky, Internet footage posted by opposition activists showed.

The Britain-based Syria Observatory for Human Rights, which has a network of sources across Syria, said one person accompanying the prime minister had been killed. State television reported casualties, but gave no details.

Pyongyang glitters but rest still dark

AP, Pyongyang, North Korea

The heart of this city, once famous for its Dickensian darkness, now pulsates with neon.

Glossy construction downtown has altered the Pyongyang skyline. Inside supermarkets where shop-girls wear French designer labels, people with money can buy Italian wine, Swiss chocolates, kiwifruit imported from New Zealand and fresh-baked croissants. They can get facials, lie in tanning booths, play a round of mini golf or sip cappuccinos and cocktails while listening to classical music.



More than a million people are using cell phones. Computer shops can't keep up with demand for North Korea's locally distributed tablet computer, popularly known here as "iPads." A shiny new cancer institute features a \$900,000 X-ray machine imported from Europe.

Pyongyang has long been a city apart from the rest of North Korea, a showcase capital dubbed a "socialist fairyland" by state media.

A year after leader Kim Jong Un promised in a speech to bring an end to the "era of belt-tightening" and economic hardship in North Korea, the gap between the haves and have-nots has only grown with Pyongyang's transformation.

NEWS IN brief

Suicide bombs kill 8 in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

A suicide bomber killed at least eight people and wounded 45 others when he rammed his motorcycle into a bus in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar yesterday, police said.

Two staff at the Afghan consulate were among those killed in the attack, which police said targeted a top civil servant who heads the city's administration.

Greece to cut 15,000 jobs

AFP, Athens

The Greek parliament has voted to adopt a law that provides for the dismissal of 15,000 civil servants as part of austerity measures imposed by the country's international creditors.

After heated debate, 168 deputies voted for the bill yesterday, with 123 voting against and one abstaining.

Car bombs kill 18 in Iraqi province

REUTERS, Baghdad

Car bombs in busy Shia Muslim areas of southern Iraq killed at least 18 people on Monday, medics and police sources said, taking the week's death toll to nearly 200 as sectarian violence intensifies.

Militant attacks have increased as the civil war in neighboring Syria puts further strains on fragile Sunni-Shia relations, and tensions are at their highest since US troops left Iraq more than a year ago.

40 hurt in blast in Prague

AFP, Prague

A powerful blast ripped through a multi-storey building in Prague's historic centre yesterday, injuring about 40 people, rescuers said, adding that some people may be buried in the rubble.

Police have sealed off the area popular with tourists and evacuated about 220 people from several nearby buildings, Prague police spokesman Tomas Hulan told the public Czech TV.

Climbers, guides fight on Everest

BBC ONLINE

Police in Nepal are investigating an alleged fight between two famous European climbers and their Nepalese mountain guides on Mount Everest.

Switzerland's Ueli Steck and Simone Moro from Italy were nearing Camp Three at 7,470m when the incident occurred.

Suu Kyi's 'rule of law' mantra a distant hope

AFP, Yangon

It is Aung San Suu Kyi's mantra for embedding democratic reform, but for many who endured Myanmar's authoritarian and deeply corrupt former junta the "rule of law" remains a distant hope.

Flashpoint issues such as land grabbing have intensified fears that the country's anaemic legal structures are failing to protect the poor and vulnerable despite sweeping reforms.

Rights groups also say impunity for recent outbreaks of communal unrest -- and alleged army abuses in ethnic conflicts -- have shown the law is struggling to keep pace with tumultuous political, social and economic change.

"We are still fighting for a fair system that applies to everybody... the law must be king," said Khin Maung Win, a former political prisoner who was jailed for three years in 2002 for distributing anti-state leaflets while he was a law student.

Now secretary of advocacy group the Myanmar Legal Aid Network, he told AFP that his country's legal system remains arbitrary, unprofessional and corrupt.

"We have had a bad history," he said. "In order to move on, ordinary people now must be entitled to legal rights and be involved in the process of change."

During the ulcerous junta era, experts say secret and summary jail terms were commonplace, deaths and disappearances blamed on the state went unpunished and courts were in cahoots with vested interests, including the brutal army rulers who milked the country's wealth.

Judges could be easily bought or cowed by powerful businessmen and politicians, while prosecutors and police wielded unconstrained power.



Cricket legend and chairman of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) or Movement for Justice party, Imran Khan addresses supporters during a general election campaign meeting in Murree yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

CIA gave millions to Karzai

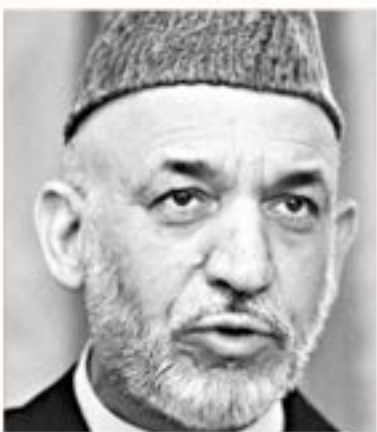
Seeks influence; says New York Times

REUTERS

Tens of millions of US dollars in cash were delivered by the CIA in suitcases, backpacks and plastic shopping bags to the office of Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai for more than a decade, the New York Times says, citing current and former advisers to the Afghan leader.

The so-called "ghost money" was meant to buy influence for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) but instead fuelled corruption and empowered warlords, undermining Washington's exit strategy from Afghanistan, the newspaper quoted US officials as saying.

"The biggest source of corruption in



Afghanistan", one American official said, "was the United States."

The CIA declined to comment on the report and the U.S. State Department did not immediately comment. The New York Times did not publish any comment from Karzai or his office.

"We called it 'ghost money'," Khalil Roman, who served as Karzai's chief of staff from 2002 until 2005, told the New York Times. "It came in secret and it left in secret."

There was no evidence that Karzai personally received any of the money, Afghan officials told the newspaper. The cash was handled by his National Security Council, it added.

Huffington Post to launch German edition

AFP, Berlin

News website The Huffington Post will launch a German edition this year, the US-based company and its media partner Tomorrow Focus, part of the Burda publishing group, said yesterday.

A newsroom staffed with German journalists will be set up in the southern city of Munich in the coming months, and the site for Germany, Austria and Switzerland is set to go live later this year, both companies said.

Palestinian Christians urge Pope to oppose wall

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian Christians near Bethlehem yesterday urged Pope Francis to speak up against an Israeli decision to build its controversial separation barrier on a route they say would cut off their community.

"We cry to your Holiness with a feeling of despair and urgency in order to keep alive our hope that justice and peace is still possible," said an open letter from the Christians of Beit Jala, a town near the West Bank city of Bethlehem.

"The Israeli military occupation that has already started building the 'famous wall' annexing Palestinian land... (is) separating Bethlehem as well as other regions from Jerusalem and our holy places," it said.

The letter came as Israel's President Shimon Peres was due to arrive in Italy on a three-day visit during which he would meet Pope Francis.

Chinese join rush to live on Mars

600 apply for Dutch project

PTI, Beijing

Over 600 Chinese have applied to join an ambitious Dutch aerospace project that plans to send humans on a one-way trip to Mars for permanent settlement.

The Dutch project, while triggering enthusiasm to explore outer space, is also under fire with the trip being viewed by some as a suicide mission, with applicants being shipped to a planet that is uninhabitable by

humans.

The project, Mars One, is being launched by a Dutch non-profit organisation, and is scheduled to take four humans to the Red Planet in 2023.

In the first three days after it was launched this week, over 20,000 people from all over the world submitted their applications online, with more than 600 coming from China, state-run China Daily reported.



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BOSTON BOMBINGS Suspects mother insists sons are innocent

AP, Boston

The angry and grieving mother of the Boston Marathon bombing suspects insists that her sons are innocent and that she's no terrorist.

But Zubeidat Tsarnaeva is drawing increased attention after federal officials say Russian authorities intercepted her phone calls, including one in which she vaguely discussed jihad with her elder son. In another, she was recorded talking to someone in southern Russia who is under FBI investigation in an unrelated case, US officials said.

In photos of her as a younger woman, Tsarnaeva wears a low-cut blouse and has her hair teased like a 1980s rock star. After she arrived in the US from Russia in 2002, she went to beauty school and did facials at a suburban day spa.

But in recent years, people noticed a change. She began wearing a hijab and cited conspiracy theories about 9/11 being a plot against Muslims.



Zubeidat Tsarnaeva