

IRAN DEAL

EU to move on easing sanctions

AFP, Paris

France said yesterday some EU sanctions on Iran could be lifted in December as a landmark nuclear deal reached over the weekend moves forward despite Israeli concern and fury.

Both Iran and the major world powers have welcomed Sunday's deal in Geneva under which Tehran agreed to curb a nuclear programme the West suspects aims to develop an atomic bomb, in return for an easing of sanctions.

But Iran's arch-foe Israel -- an ally of many of the six countries who negotiated the accord, including France and the United States -- blasted the accord as a "historic mistake" and reserved the right to defend itself against any threats made by Tehran.

Speaking on Europe 1 radio, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said EU foreign ministers would gather together in "a few weeks" to discuss lifting some sanctions as part of the deal -- a move he said could take place "in December."

He also sought to reassure Israel about the agreement with Iran, whose supreme leader last week described the Jewish state as a "rabid dog" that was "doomed to collapse."

Fabius said: "You have to understand the context. Iranian authorities sometimes say things that are provocations, including last week.

"We will work so that the security of all the countries in the region, including Israel, be better assured."

Asked about the risk of Israeli strikes on Iran, Fabius responded he thought such as move was unlikely "because no one would understand it" at this point in time.

Tehran has a long history of belligerent statements towards the Jewish state, and Israel -- widely assumed to be the Middle East's sole if undeclared nuclear power -- has repeatedly warned that a nuclear Iran would pose an existential threat, refusing to rule out strikes on Iran's atomic infrastructure.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned the deal will convince Tehran it has a free hand to achieve a breakout nuclear capability and tip the balance of power in the Middle East.

But the so-called P5+1 world powers that negotiated the accord with Iran -- the United States, France, Britain, Russia, and China plus Germany -- say it is a key first step that wards off the threat of military escalation in the volatile Middle East.

Under the deal, which lasts for six months only while a more long-lasting solution is negotiated, Tehran will limit uranium enrichment to low levels that can only be used for civilian energy purposes.

It will also neutralise its existing stockpile of uranium enriched to 20 percent, which is close to weapons-grade and therefore an area of top concern.

In return, the Islamic state will get some \$7 billion (5.2 billion euros) in sanctions relief in its petrochemical, gold and precious metals and auto sectors.

But the raft of international sanctions that have hobbled the Iranian economy remain untouched.

US President Barack Obama also moved to placate Israel, calling Netanyahu Sunday in a bid to reassure him that the accord was temporary and the sanctions relief limited.



Indian social activists take part in a rally on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in Kolkata yesterday. India has become hugely sensitive to gender issues since the fatal gangrape of a student in New Delhi last December stirred nationwide protests about violence to women and prompted calls for profound changes in social attitudes.

PHOTO: AFP

Iraq attacks kill 9

France offers help

AFP, Baghdad

Attacks in Baghdad and north Iraq killed nine people yesterday as France joined the list of countries offering help in combatting a protracted surge in bloodshed months ahead of elections.

The rise in violence has fuelled fears Iraq is on the brink of falling back into the brutal Sunni-Shiite sectarian war that plagued it years ago.

A car bomb targeting a police station in Baghdad's northeastern outskirts killed four policemen, security and medical sources said, while a roadside bomb targeting Sahwa anti-Qaeda militiamen killed one fighter.

Meanwhile, three separate attacks in the capital killed three. In Mosul a bomb attached to a car killed its driver, while police found the body of a woman who was shot dead the previous night near the restive city of Tikrit.

Afghanistan could bring back stoning

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

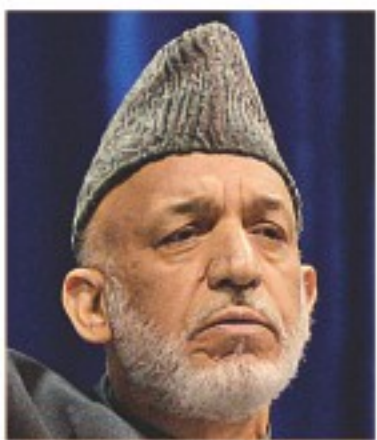
Afghan government officials have proposed reintroducing public stoning as a punishment for adultery, Human Rights Watch said, even though the practice has been denounced both inside and outside the country as one of the most repugnant symbols of the Taliban regime.

The sentence for married adulterers, along with unmarried offenders, appears in a draft revision of the country's penal code being managed by the ministry of justice. Men and women who shall be punished based on the one of the following circumstances to ing punishments: lashing, stoning [to death]," article 21 states. The draft goes on to specify that the stoning should be public, in article 23.

News that the government is contemplating bringing back a much-reviled punishment is unlikely to go down well with the western governments that back Kabul.

"It is absolutely shocking that 12 years after the fall of the Taliban government, the Karzai administration might bring back stoning as a punishment," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

"President Karzai needs to demonstrate at least a basic commitment to human rights and reject this proposal out of hand."



Syria peace conference set for January 22

AFP, Geneva

Syrian government and opposition negotiators will meet for the first time since start of the country's 32 month-old war in Geneva from January 22, the UN announced yesterday.

UN leader Ban Ki-moon called the landmark conference "a mission of hope" to end the civil war.

But he stressed to both sides that the aiming of the meeting will be to carry out a declaration adopted by the major powers in June 2012 calling for a transitional government.

The conference will be a followup to a meeting held in Geneva in June 2012 when the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France and other key states agreed a call for a transitional government.

EU disapproves Russia pressuring Ukraine

AFP, Brussels

The EU yesterday sharply criticised Russian pressure on Ukraine to drop a landmark cooperation accord with the bloc, due to have been signed this week, and said the deal was still "on the table."

"It is up to Ukraine to freely decide what kind of engagement (it seeks) with the EU," European Union President Herman Van Rompuy and European Commission head Jose Manuel Barroso said.

"We strongly disapprove of the Russian position and actions in this respect," a joint statement said, adding that closer ties with former Soviet states in Eastern Europe "do not come at the expense" of EU relations with other countries there.

Last week, Kiev unexpectedly announced it was halting all preparations to sign the Association Agreement, seen as a first step toward EU membership that would have marked a historic break by Ukraine from Moscow.

The decision came after the Ukraine parliament failed to adopt legislation that would have freed jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko, a key EU political condition for Ukraine to sign the agreement.

The government cited "national security" but the suspicion was that it had caved into pressure from Moscow.

Haiyan creates need for US-Philippine military accord

AFP, Manila

The swift US humanitarian response to the devastation of Super Typhoon Haiyan highlights the need to expand America's military presence in the Philippines, Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario said yesterday.

He said a proposed agreement to strengthen the US military presence, which was being negotiated as the storm struck on November 8, would allow for the easier delivery of relief aid by US forces in the future.

"I think the typhoon demonstrates the need for this framework," Albert told reporters after meeting a US congressional delegation.

"It accentuates one of the main purposes of this framework, which is to make humanitarian assistance and disaster relief and response one of the major aspects of this agreement."

The proposed deal would allow more US troops, aircraft and ships to pass through the Philippines at a time when Washington is refocusing its attention on Asia.

It had also been seen as a counterweight to Chinese moves in the South China Sea, where Beijing has territorial disputes with US ally Manila.

Despite months of talks, the Philippine and US governments have failed to sign the agreement due to some differences in their respective positions.

LONDON 'SLAVERY' CASE

Suspect was '70s communist activist

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The 73-year-old man arrested on suspicion of holding three women captive in a south London flat for 30 years is a one-time Communist party activist who was well known within far-left circles in London during the mid- and late 1970s as the leader of a separatist party-cum-commune.

Aravindan Balakrishnan, known as Comrade Bala, had been a senior member of the Communist party of England (Marxist-Leninist) -- a member of the party's central committee -- but according to a history of the movement he split from the party in 1974.

His new organisation, described as "characterised by the ultra-left posturing and Mao worship", was called the Workers' Institute of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought. But the group is not thought to have been active since the 1970s -- before one of the women, now aged 30, was born.

Local sources said the woman arrested last week was his wife Chanda Balakrishnan, aged 67, a fellow activist.

They were arrested on suspicion of holding three women captive in a cult-type arrangement at a series of addresses in south London, including most recently at Peckford Place.

Tehelka 'victim' journo resigns

TNN, New Delhi

Tehelka journalist who accused editor Tarun Tejpal of sexual assault resigned from the organization yesterday, according to Times Now.

According to reports, the woman journalist in her resignation letter has said that the organization has failed her.

Earlier yesterday, Tarun Tejpal moved to the Delhi high court seeking anticipatory bail in the sexual assault case lodged against him in Goa.

Justice GS Sistani, will hear the matter today.

Tejpal, in his petition, has also sought transit bail to approach the appropriate court in Goa.

The issue came into the limelight when an email by the woman alleging sexual assault was made public and Tejpal announced on November 19 that he was "recusing" from his job for six months.

Japan-China row over China air zone

AFP, Tokyo

China and Japan raised the temperature in a territorial dispute yesterday with both sides summoning the other's ambassador over Beijing's declaration of an air defence zone, a move Tokyo called "profoundly dangerous".

The diplomatic scuffle came after Washington said it would stand by Japan in any military clash over the Senkaku Islands, which Beijing claims as the Diaoyus, and as Seoul and Taipei voiced their disquiet at China's weekend announcement.

"I am strongly concerned as it is a profoundly dangerous act that may cause unintended consequences," Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told parliament.

"Japan will ask China to restrain itself while we continue cooperating with the international community," he said.

The comments are the first from the premier on the issue since Beijing on Saturday said it had established an Air Defence Identification Zone.

The zone covers the Tokyo-controlled Senkaku islands, where ships and aircraft from the two countries already shadow each other in a potentially dangerous confrontation.

Tokyo called in Beijing's ambassador to demand a rollback of the plan which it said would "interfere with freedom of flight over the high seas", but reportedly received short shrift from Cheng Yonghua, who said Tokyo should retract its "unreasonable demand".



HONDURAS ELECTION

Two candidates claim victory

AFP, Tegucigalpa

Both leading presidential candidates in crime-racked Honduras declared victory late Sunday, setting the stage for a possible round of street protests and violence in one of the world's deadliest countries.

With more than half the votes counted, conservative Juan Orlando Hernandez was ahead with 34 percent against 29 percent for leftist Xiomara Castro.

Juan said that he would contact all other presidential candidates so that "we can all work together" for the benefit of Honduras.

Xiomara however had already declared victory, claiming that her leftist Libre Party won a "resounding victory."

Juan and Xiomara are vying to succeed President Porfirio Lobo, who was elected after the coup in a controversial election boycotted by Manuel's leftist allies.

Libya army, jihadists in deadly Benghazi battle

AFP, Benghazi

Jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia yesterday attacked Libyan special forces in the eastern city of Benghazi, sparking a battle in which nine people were killed and dozens wounded, officials said.

Military governor Colonel Abdullah al-Saïdi declared a "state of alert" and ordered all soldiers to report for duty at their barracks, in what was the first such confrontation between the army and Libya's heavily-armed top jihadist group.

As the government warned that the army was a "red line" not to be crossed, Interior Minister Seddik Abdelkarim announced in Tripoli a casualty toll of nine dead and 49 wounded.

The number of casualties on the jihadists' side was not immediately known as they were being treated in a clinic run by Ansar al-Islam.

"A violent clash has been taking place for several hours between our forces and an Ansar al-Sharia cell," Colonel Milud al-Zwei, spokesman for Libya's special forces, told AFP.

Sri Lanka bans remembrance of Tamil Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military yesterday announced a ban on commemorations of the island's defeated Tamil Tiger rebels following reports that sections of the ethnic Tamil minority were planning to hold events.

The military said any event was banned because the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was still a proscribed organisation, four years after the army defeated the group to end a decades-long separatist war.

Small and low-key ceremonies are usually held at this time every year to commemorate rebels killed during the conflict, a so-called "heroes' week" that coincides with the anniversary of the death of the first rebel.

Local media have reported that more organised events were planned this year in the island's former northern war zone after the main Tamil party won local elections there in September.

"Promoting and propagating separatist ideology within Sri Lanka directly or indirectly, even by using media freedom, and attempting to commemorate or glorify terrorists that belonged to a proscribed organisation would be illegal," the military spokesman said in a statement.

The week also coincides with the anniversary of the birth of LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, who was killed in 2009 in the final bloody offensive against the rebels in the northeastern district of Mullaitivu.



Pakistan's senior minister and lawmaker for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Sirajul Haq (2nd L) shouts slogans after handing over a memorandum to US consular official Christopher Allan Bacon (R) outside the consulate in Peshawar yesterday, to protest against US drone strikes in Pakistan.

PHOTO: AFP

ODDLY enough

World's longest flight stopped

AFP, Singapore

The world's longest nonstop commercial flight ended without fanfare yesterday after Singapore Airlines flew its last nearly 19-hour service from New York.

Flight SQ 21 landed early yesterday in Changi Airport, bringing an end to a nine-year run.

Analysts said the rise in fuel prices since 2004, when the 15,335-kilometre service was launched to cater to business travellers, made it economically unsustainable.

The cancellation of the service was first announced a year ago.

NEWSIN brief

Thai protesters occupy finance ministry

AFP, Bangkok

Thai opposition demonstrators yesterday stormed the finance ministry and threatened to seize more government buildings in a dramatic escalation of their efforts to topple embattled Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

The turmoil has raised fears of a fresh bout of street violence in a country that has been convulsed by several episodes of political unrest since royalist generals overthrew Thaksin in a coup in 2006.

German anger over spying taken seriously

AFP, Berlin

The United States is taking a German outcry over revelations of American spying on Europeans seriously, a US lawmaker has said, ahead of his visit to Berlin yesterday to soothe frazzled ties.

Congressman Gregory Meeks told Handelsblatt business daily that US-German relations were "of enormous importance" and must be stronger and closer still.

Indian couple guilty in sensational double murder trial

AFP, Guwahati

An Indian court yesterday found a prosperous dentist couple guilty of slitting the throats of their teenage daughter and a servant in a murder trial that has obsessed India for five years.

Rajesh and Nupur Talwar were convicted of killing Aarushi, 14, and 45-year-old Nepalese employee Hemraj Banjade supposedly using a dental scalpel at their home in an affluent New Delhi suburb in 2008.