

Ukraine willing to sign deal: EU

Protestors hold firm as US mulls sanctions; Putin for Customs Union

AFP, Brussels, Kiev

EU foreign affairs head Catherine Ashton said Thursday that Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovych "intends" to sign an EU association accord, having ditched it only last month under Russian pressure.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian demonstrators celebrated holding three weeks of protests yesterday over the government's decision to reject a historic EU deal, as the United States threatened sanctions after a failed police raid on the protest barricades.

On the other hand Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said Ukraine is still welcome but not obliged to work with Russia on its post-Soviet Customs Union, seen as a potential counterweight to the European Union. But, the EU has said it cannot sign a free-trade agreement with Ukraine if the ex-Soviet country became a member of the Customs Union.

President Viktor Yanukovych -- whose refusal to sign an integration deal with the EU sparked the first protests on November 21 -- promised at talks with EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton he would sign the pact, she said.

But Yanukovych remained under immense pressure after riot police Wednesday failed to shift thousands of demonstrators from Independence Square in a raid that drew international condemnation.

Ashton met the president and opposition leaders in the hope of finding a way out of the deepening crisis over the former Soviet country's future.

"What he talked about were the short term economic issues that the country faces," Ashton said of her talks with Yanukovych. The opposition led by several key figures rejected an offer of talks before Yanukovych dismissed his



A woman cries after paying her respect to Nelson Mandela as he lies in state at the Union Buildings in Pretoria, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Tradition to take centre stage in Qunu

AFP, Qunu

Traditional Xhosa rites, including the slaughtering of an ox, will accompany Nelson Mandela's burial in his boyhood home of Qunu on Sunday, clan leaders say.

Following a formal state send-off in the capital Pretoria, tradition will take centre stage in a ceremony to be attended by global leaders and specially invited guests.

Overseen by male elders of his clan, the burial will take place inside the family's expansive estate.

The slaughtering of an animal -- a ritual performed through various milestones of a person's life -- will form a crucial part of the event. An ox will be slaughtered in the morning of the burial, to accompany the spirit of the deceased.

During the ceremony, Mandela will be referred to as Dalibhunga -- the name given to him at the age of 16 after undergoing the initiation to adulthood. Xhosa mourners will wear traditional Xhosa regalia, with blue and white beaded head gear and necklaces.



Pope named Time's person of the year

AFP, New York

Time magazine named Pope Francis its person of the year on Wednesday, hailing the head of the Catholic Church as a new voice of global conscience since taking office in March.

The 76-year-old, who rose from modest beginnings and has been praised for his down-to-earth approach, is the first non-European pope in nearly 1,300 years, the first Latin American head of the Church and a leading voice for the dispossessed.

He has taken on leadership of a 1.2-billion-strong Church beset by scandal and signs of deep internal dysfunction, but there are signs his popularity is revitalizing it.

Time's runner-up was NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, who has been granted asylum in Russia and with whom Time published an exclusive interview Wednesday conducted over email.

In third place was US gay rights activist Edith Windsor.

In fourth place was Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for managing not only to survive but turn the tide of the civil war his way.

Ex-Thai PM indicted for murder

AFP, Bangkok

Former Thai prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva was indicted for murder yesterday in connection with a deadly military crackdown on mass opposition protests in Bangkok three years ago, prosecutors said.

Some observers doubt British-born Abhisit will go to prison given his links to the Thai elite, and see the case as part of the country's political brinksmanship.

Abhisit denied the charges and was freed after posting bail of 1.8 million baht (\$56,000), his lawyer Bandit Siripan said after the closed-door hearing.

"The pre-trial hearing is expected on March 24 next year," he said.

Under Abhisit's government, more than 90 people died and nearly 1,900 were wounded in street clashes in the capital in 2010 between mostly unarmed pro-Thaksin "Red Shirt" demonstrators and security forces firing live rounds.

A small group of Red Shirts shouted "Murderer!" as the Democrat Party leader arrived at court, without speaking to waiting media. There were about 10 Abhisit supporters outside the building, some holding bunches of flowers.

Thailand has seen several bouts of political turmoil since Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in 2006, with rival protests sometimes resulting in bloody unrest.

Prosecutors have accused Abhisit and his former deputy Suthep Thaugsuban of issuing orders that resulted in murder and attempted murder by the security forces.

PM calls for dialogue

DPA, Bangkok

Thailand's caretaker Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra yesterday called on all sectors of society to meet this weekend to find a way out of the country's political crisis.

Yingluck invited representatives of political parties, the civil service, the business community, academics and journalists to meet at the Queen Sirikit Convention Centre in the capital on Sunday "to find the best way out for Thailand," in reference to ongoing street protests against her government.

The hastily called meeting would also discuss political reforms for the post-election period, she said.

The anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), headed by protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban, immediately rejected Yingluck's proposed talks.

PDRC spokesman Akanat Promphan said the movement wanted to push through reforms prior to the polls, not after them.

Earlier yesterday protesters cut off the electricity supply to Government House, the seat of the administration, pro-opposition Blue Sky TV

reported. They reportedly scaled a fence to enter the compound where they removed some barbed wire from the inner perimeter before retreating.

Government House was abandoned by the cabinet on Monday when more than 100,000 protesters surrounded the compound, leading to Yingluck dissolving parliament and scheduling new polls for February 2.

Despite the house dissolution, Suthep has continued the protest, with the broader goal of ridding politics of the influence of fugitive former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's brother.

Suthep said he wants to install an appointed premier and an interim "People's Council." The military top brass turned down Suthep's offer of a meeting to explain his demands, considering such a meeting too dangerous in the current political climate, the Bangkok Post reported yesterday.

"This time we (the military) are between a lot of people on two sides," army commander-in-chief General Prayuth Chan-Ocha was quoted as saying.

"If you cannot clean up (the stalemate) first, it's very dangerous," he said. "We must be patient and keep calm and do everything carefully." Observers

THAILAND CRISIS



Activists of Jamaat-e-Islami Pakistan protest against the execution of Bangladeshi Islamist leader Quader Mollah in Islamabad, yesterday. Bangladesh hanged Quader Mollah, known as the "Butcher of Mirpur", making him the first person to be put to death for massacres committed during the country's bloody 1971 war of independence.

PHOTO: AFP



One in three kids have no birth certificate

AFP, United Nations

One in three children worldwide cannot have their existence legally verified with a birth certificate since their birth was not registered, UNICEF warned Wednesday.

Almost 230 million youngsters under the age of five have no birth certificate, which puts them at a disadvantage for procedural matters and leaves them more vulnerable to abuse.

"Birth registration is more than just a right. It's how societies first recognize and acknowledge a child's identity and existence," said deputy UNICEF executive director Geeta Rao Gupta.

"Birth registration is also key to guaranteeing that children are not forgotten, denied their rights or hidden from the progress of their nations," she said.

So "we recommend a registration system that is free, universal in coverage and confidential."

When natural disasters separate parents and children, reuniting families is much tougher when birth certificates are lacking, the UN agency stressed.

The missing Marxist

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

He was in his late teens and still some years away from entering the Jesuit Order. She was in her mid-30s, a revolutionary and a feminist far ahead of her time. They met around 1953 or 1954 in the most unlikely of places -- a laboratory where she worked as a pharmaceutical biochemist and he as an apprentice chemical technician. The two could not have been more dissimilar. Yet they cemented a unique friendship that bridged decades as well as deep political and religious chasms.

The woman was Esther Careaga, a non-believer who, because of her Marxist ideals, disappeared under Argentina's dictatorship in 1977. The man was Jorge Bergoglio, who became Pope Francis in March this year.

Careaga had arrived in Buenos Aires as a political exile from neighbouring Paraguay a few years before meeting Bergoglio. She had been a fiery socialist orator and the founder of Paraguay's first feminist movement in the 1940s. "She toured the towns in the countryside of Paraguay pleading for people's rights in general, but especially the rights of women," says her daughter Ana María Careaga.

Careaga was one of thousands of people who "disappeared" between 1976 and 1983, a bloody spree that stopped only after Argentina entered into a losing war with Britain in 1982 over the Falkland Islands.

Shortly before she disappeared, Careaga called Bergoglio, asking him to come and administer the last rites to a dying relative. This struck her old friend as

unusual because the Careagas were not a religious family.

Arriving at Careaga's house, Bergoglio discovered that Careaga was being careful because she didn't want to reveal the truth over the phone. "My parents had a large library of political books -- books on Marxism and philosophy -- and she asked him to hold them in safekeeping," says Ana María. Bravely, Bergoglio did so, even though being found with such literature would have meant death back then.

Later it transpired that Careaga had been taken to the ESMA Navy School of Mechanics -- which doubled as a detention centre -- where she was brutally tortured, and then flown to her watery death, along with two other Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and two French nuns who helped them.

Luis Bianco -- the son of Maria Bianco, one of the other mothers buried alongside Careaga -- was chosen by the victims' relatives to ask Bergoglio, ordained Archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998, for permission to bury their remains in the gardens of the Church of the Holy Cross from where they had been kidnapped.

Bergoglio seemed hesitant. He was puzzled, asking why they should be buried at the church instead of in a cemetery. "I touched his knee," says Bianco. "I told him that one of the mothers was Careaga."

Bergoglio shook with emotion. "Careaga was a good friend and a great woman and I am sure your mother was the same," he said.

Within a week permission was granted for Careaga and the other mothers to be buried there.



Pope Francis in 1966

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