

UKRAINE crisis

EU approves new sanctions on Russia

AFP, Brussels

The European Union agreed to a new wave of sanctions against Russia on Monday, but said their entry into force would take a few days, giving time to recent peace moves by Moscow.

"Depending on the situation on the ground, the EU stands ready to review the agreed sanctions in whole or in part," said Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council in a statement, after a last-minute meeting of EU envoys in Brussels.

Russia has warned West against new sanctions and threatened to block its airspace if new sanctions are added.

European capitals were supposed to give formal approval early on Monday to the sanctions -- which include limiting access to financial markets by Russian oil giants -- but had failed to do so after falling short of an unanimous agreement on the measures.

The delay came as some of the EU's member states in eastern Europe -- still dependent on Russian trade and energy ties -- were uneasy at ratcheting up the sanctions.

But after more than three hours of last-minute talks, a breakthrough was achieved.

As is practice with EU sanctions, the decision and exact content of the measures will only be revealed once they are published in the official journal, a process that can take several days.

When EU officials agreed the new sanctions package Friday, Van Rompuy and European Commission head Jose Manuel Barroso had left open the possibility they could be lifted quickly if the ceasefire held, setting the stage for further peace efforts.



An Indian Kashmiri man crosses over flood waters with the use of a rope in Srinagar, yesterday. Bewildered families packed into makeshift relief centres after fleeing floods in India and Pakistan that have now claimed more than 400 lives.

PHOTO: AFP

Greenhouse gases hit new high: UN

AFP, Geneva

Surging levels of carbon dioxide sent greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to a new record in 2013, while oceans, which absorb the emissions, have become more acidic than ever, the UN said yesterday.

Concentrations of carbon dioxide (CO2), methane and nitrous oxide all broke fresh records in 2013, said the report. Global concentrations of CO2, the main culprit in global warming, soared to 396 parts per million last year, or 142 percent of pre-industrial levels -- defined as before 1750.

That marked a hike of 2.9 parts per million between 2012 and 2013 alone -- the largest annual increase in 30 years, according to the Greenhouse Gas Bulletin.

The report came ahead of a September 23 summit called by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to try to build momentum for change ahead of talks in Paris next year aimed at forging a historic climate deal that will take effect in 2020.

The UN is seeking to limit global warming to two degrees Celsius over pre-Industrial Revolution levels, but scientists say current emission trends could hike temperatures to more than twice that level by century's end.

FLOODS IN INDIA, PAKISTAN

Death toll tops 400

Thousands still stranded despite fanatic rescue efforts

AFP, Srinagar

Emergency workers yesterday battled to reach hundreds of thousands of people marooned by floods in India and Pakistan that have claimed more than 400 lives, as anger grew over the speed of the rescue effort.

The army said it was airlifting boats to the worst-hit areas of Indian Kashmir, where whole villages have been submerged and an estimated 400,000 people are stranded in the region's worst flooding for half a century.

"The situation in Kashmir Valley is still very grim, it is quite critical," said Rajesh Kumar, police Inspector General of the Jammu region in India's Jammu and Kashmir state.

"I don't know how many exactly, but there are many stuck in neck-deep water and need help as soon as possible," he told AFP.

But with large parts of the state -- including the capital Srinagar -- underwater,

rescuers were struggling to find enough vessels to ferry stranded people to safety.

The home ministry said over 260 boats have been deployed, while the army said 100 were being airlifted from New Delhi.

Indian authorities said the death toll from the floods was around 200 people. Some 400,000 people remain stranded mainly in Srinagar and south Kashmir, the Press trust of India news agency quoted local officials as saying.

Some water and electricity lines have been restored in areas that were less severely affected, officials there said.

In neighbouring Pakistan the number of dead stood at 231, with most killed in Punjab province, an official said.

Thousands of troops, police and other emergency personnel have been deployed in both countries to deliver drinking water, blankets and other relief supplies.

BJP dubs Mamata as 'queen of graft'

TNN, Kolkata

Taking cue from party president Amit Shah, BJP vice-president Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi on Monday launched into a scathing attack on West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee, saying the "daughter of revolution has become queen of corruption" and that Saradha will be Trinamool Congress's Waterloo.

Apprehending a re-run of the 2014 Lok Sabha election in Bengal that was marred by allegations of booth capturing, rigging, anarchy and hooliganism, Naqvi met state chief electoral officer Sunil Gupta and demanded that the "biased local police" shouldn't be placed within 100 metres of polling stations during the September 13 bypolls.

He believes Bengal is in the "cusp of change". "Trinamool is now being dominated by corrupt forces. There are visible indications for change. The daughter of revolution has become the queen of corruption within three years. Saradha will be the Waterloo for Trinamool," Naqvi said.

He alleged that Mamata's concern isn't for the locals here, but for Bangladeshi infiltrators. "We have asked EC to give special emphasis on illegal Bangladeshi infiltrators, who enjoy Trinamool patronage and vote for it," added Naqvi.

Despite Mamata winning 34 seats in the state, BJP gained surprisingly 17 percent of the votes, causing a panic button in TMC. During the election campaign, she has openly attacked Narendra Modi, thinking no party will achieve clear majority. The involvement of key figures of TMC in the massive Saradha scandal, a multi-tier ponzi scheme that engulfed Rs 2460 crore from more than 1.7 million investors, has piled more pressure on her.



Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond (C) poses for pictures with pro-independence supporters and European citizens to celebrate European citizenship and Scotland's continued EU membership with a Yes vote in Edinburgh, Scotland, yesterday. Britain's three main political parties yesterday united to promise greater powers for Scotland if it rejects independence in next week's referendum, in a last-ditch attempt to head off growing separatist support.

PHOTO: AFP

Modi to meet Obama on Sept 29-30

China leader to visit India next week

AFP, Washington

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for years barred from visiting the United States, will meet President Barack Obama in two days of eagerly awaited White House talks at the end of the month.

The meetings, on September 29 and 30, will take place on Modi's first visit to



Washington since he led his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to a crushing victory in May's elections.

Modi was told in 2005 by the administration of president George W Bush that he would be refused a visa to visit the United States, after being accused of not intervening to stop riots by Hindu extremists against minority Muslims when he was chief minister of Gujarat state.

"The two leaders will discuss a range of issues of mutual interest in order to expand and deepen the US-India strategic partnership," said a White House statement.

"They will discuss ways to accelerate economic growth, bolster security cooperation, and collaborate in activities that bring long-term benefits to both countries and the world."

Obama and Modi will also discuss regional issues, including in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. US Secretary of State John Kerry and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel have already traveled to India to meet the new prime minister.

Meanwhile, China's President Xi Jinping will make his first state visit to India next week, officials said yesterday, as Beijing sought to allay fears it is encircling its neighbour.

Xi's four-nation trip begins this Thursday in the central Asian state of Tajikistan, before going on to the South Asian island states of the Maldives and Sri Lanka, culminating in India, the Chinese foreign ministry said on its website.

It did not give specific dates but said the tour would finish on September 19.

AU peace troops raped Somalis: HRW

AFP, Nairobi

Internationally-funded African Union troops in war-torn and impoverished Somalia have gang raped women and girls as young as 12 and traded food aid for sex, Human Rights Watch said in a report Monday.

"Some of the women who were raped said that the soldiers gave them food or money afterwards in an apparent attempt to frame the assault as transactional sex," the report said.

The AU force AMISOM said the allegations would be investigated but argued they were "isolated" incidents and called the report "unbalanced and unfair".

The vulnerable women largely came from camps in the capital Mogadishu, having fled rural Somalia during a devastating famine in 2011.

Al-Qaeda's battle to survive

AGENCIES

Al-Qaeda's launch of a new branch in its heartland of South Asia masks the "desperation" of the world's former terror bogeyman as it finds itself eclipsed by the savagery and slickness of the Islamic State, analysts say.

Operational setbacks such as the killing of Osama bin Laden have contributed to its decline as fighters have drifted to the potent new banner of the IS in the Middle East.

Al-Qaeda was founded in the late 1980s by bin Laden during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and is inextricably linked to the South Asian region, but now estimates put the number of its fighters in Pakistan's tribal areas in the low thousands. IS grew from al-Qaeda's Iraq offshoot but the parent network formally cutties in February this year.

With its territorial gains and social media propaganda operation, IS has charged up on al-Qaeda like a nimble start-up company challenging a staid old multinational.

According to Amir Rana, a leading militant expert in Pakistan, al-Qaeda's need to rebrand stems from a desire to head off the competition.

"This shows their desperation -- they are losing control of their affiliates in this region and in other parts of the world," he said.

Amid a country-wide alert in India over an al-Qaeda threat, a top US counter-terrorism expert has said there is no evidence of the

terror outfit's presence in the country.

"The idea that Ayman al-Zawahiri is going to open a branch of al-Qaeda in India is just crazy. Yes, there are some jihadi elements in India, but there's no evidence that al-Qaeda has a presence in the country," Peter Bergen, known for his insight into operations of al-Qaeda in South Asia, told CNN's Fareed Zakaria in an interview on Saturday.

"It's an attempt by Zawahiri to have people like us discuss him, because he's been out of the limelight for so long, it's all been about ISIS in Iraq and Syria and al-Qaeda is very conscious that they're yesterday's story," he said.

Appearing on the same programme, Husain Haqqani, the former Pak ambassador to US, said, "I think that Zawahiri's attempt to talk about India is essentially to try and get the hard line elements among Pakistani jihadis and even within the Pakistani intelligence service to think about al-Qaeda as a potential ally. That's his play."

While al-Qaeda and IS appear to be at odds, Rana said that ultimately the outcome could be a rejuvenated global Islamist struggle -- likening the move to a corporate restructuring.

"When militant groups transform, they get new recruits and bring in new affiliates -- it helps create momentum with their organisation. Broadening their ideological perspective gives a new birth, a new life to terror movements."

FIGHT AGAINST IS

US to rally ME, Arab allies

AFP, Baghdad

Washington kickstarted its efforts to form a broad coalition against jihadists in Iraq and Syria yesterday with Secretary of State John Kerry headed to the region to rally US allies.

Regional heavyweight Saudi Arabia is to host talks on Thursday between Kerry and ministers from 10 Arab states plus Turkey on joint action against the Islamic State group.

Kerry's arrival in the region on Wednesday will coincide with a keenly awaited speech by President Barack Obama in which he has promised to set out a strategy to defeat the jihadists who have unleashed a wave of atrocities that have shocked the world.

Washington has been buoyed in its diplomatic offensive by the formation of a new government in Baghdad that it hopes will be more acceptable to both Iraq's disenchanted Sunni Arab minority and Sunni governments around the region.

The Iraqi army's campaign to claw back the territory it lost in the Sunni Arab heartland north and west of Baghdad in June -- and US efforts to engage Sunni governments in the fightback -- have been complicated by the sectarian politics of the region.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states had deeply strained relations with the Shia-led government in Baghdad, with each side blaming the other for the advance of the jihadists.

But after months of wrangling, Iraq's new Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi finally formed a government on Monday that Washington said had "the potential to unite all of Iraq's diverse communities."

Kerry described the new government as a "major milestone" in efforts to woo the Sunni Arab minority away from IS after the divisive rule of Abadi's predecessor Nuri al-Maliki.

The talks in the Saudi port city of Jeddah tomorrow will be attended by the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and the six Gulf Arab states as well as Iraq.

Kerry has pledged to build "the broadest possible coalition of partners around the globe to confront, degrade and ultimately defeat (IS)."

"Almost every single country has a role to play in eliminating this (IS) threat and the evil that it represents," the US top diplomat said.

Notable by their absence from Jeddah will be the Syrian government -- facing a three and a half year uprising backed by many of the participants -- and its regional ally Iran.

Obama has so far held back from authorising strikes on IS in Syria but he has promised a comprehensive strategy against the group on both sides of the border in the policy speech he is to deliver today.

Shia Iran -- alongside the United States, the key outside power in Iraq -- said it hoped the change of government in Baghdad would help turn the tide against IS.

NEWSIN brief

Taliban attack Pak navy dockyard

AFP, Karachi

Taliban militants attacked a Karachi naval dockyard in a weekend raid which left a Pakistani officer and two insurgents dead, officials said yesterday. An officer and six sailors were also wounded in the attack early Saturday on the high security facility, a navy spokesman said, adding that four attackers had been captured alive.

Ebola infections set to soar in Liberia: WHO

AFP, Monrovia

The World Health Organization warned Monday that Liberia is set to see a huge spike in infections from the Ebola epidemic ravaging west Africa, with thousands of new cases imminent. The UN agency said the country, worst-hit in the outbreak with almost 1,100 deaths, faced "many thousands" of new infections in the next three weeks.

Modi-Sharif may meet in New York

IANIS, New Delhi

India on Monday did not rule out a meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on the sidelines of UN general assembly session later this month. External affairs minister Sushma Swaraj saying the government will respond according to the situation that develops.

UN Syria envoy arrives in Damascus

AFP, Damascus

Staffan de Mistura, the new United Nations envoy on the Syrian crisis, arrived in Damascus yesterday for his first visit since being appointed to the post. De Mistura's predecessor, veteran Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, resigned in May after the failure of the second round of Geneva talks in January and February.