



Andy Murray backs 'yes'
AFP, London

Scottish tennis ace Andy Murray on Thursday appeared to lend his support to independence on polling day and condemned negative tactics by the "No" camp in a tweet that quickly went viral. "Huge day for Scotland today! 'No' campaign negativity last few days totally swayed my view on it. Excited to see the outcome. Let's do this!" read the tweet on his account @andy_murray. Glasgow-born Murray, 27, who is Britain's number one tennis player and won Wimbledon last year, does not live in Scotland and therefore cannot vote himself.

Obama calls for 'united' Britain

AFP, Washington

On the eve of Scotland's historic independence referendum, US President Barack Obama issued a plea for Washington's key ally Britain to remain "strong, robust and united." American officials have been careful to avoid accusations of interference by insisting that the vote is a choice for the Scottish people, but have made it clear they would prefer Britain not to split. The countries of England and Scotland have been ruled together as the United Kingdom since 1707, while the territory that was to become the United States split from their empire in 1776.

Catalans drive to Scotland to back 'yes'

AFP, Glasgow

A group of Catalan firefighters arrived in Glasgow yesterday to lend their support to a "Yes" vote in Scotland's independence referendum in a convoy. "We live in a dictatorship and we want to vote like in Scotland," Pep Pladeveya from Girona in northeast Spain told AFP in the square. Hundreds of thousands of Catalans fired up by Scotland's referendum rallied last week in Barcelona's streets in red and yellow shirts, forming a giant "V" to demand a vote.



Voters walk past campaign posters outside a polling station in Edinburgh yesterday, during Scotland's independence referendum.

PHOTO: AFP

UK press on Scottish 'D-Day' 'Nessie' says 'NO'!

AFP, London

Britain's newspapers yesterday declared a "day of destiny" in dramatic front pages streaked with blue, white and red as Scotland votes on whether to split from the United Kingdom. On a front page covered with the Union Jack flag, which may have to be altered if Scotland chooses to become independent, The Times called Thursday "D-Day for the Union".

"The break-up of Great Britain and Northern Ireland may be imminent," the 230-year-old London based broadsheet wrote in an editorial. "Something priceless is lost by dividing, something precious cultural and intangible as well as something drily economic and rawly political... we urge Scots of all persuasion to vote 'no' to independence - and to do so with great national pride."

Only one major newspaper has backed independence - Glasgow's Sunday Herald, which on its last edition before the vote chose a front page mosaic of hundreds of "Yes" voter selfies forming a Scottish blue and white Saltire flag.

The Guardian's yesterday front page showed an aerial picture of Scotland with sea submerging the other parts of the UK.

"Day of destiny. Scotland's 4,285,323 voters have 15 hours to

decide their country's fate," read the front page of the newspaper, which urged Scots to reject independence and help "reforge our union" together.

The Scotsman also put "Day of destiny" as its headline but chose an accompanying picture of a referendum polling station. Record numbers are expected to vote.

The front pages of several newspapers were rich with symbolism.

"Yes or no. Today Scotland starts with a blank page" was The Scottish Sun's headline, over a blank front page with images of hands holding pens, ready to write.

The Daily Mirror showed a man holding up a white and red union jack, missing the blue colour that represents Scotland in the flag.

"Our day of destiny" the newspaper wrote. "Don't leave us this way... Don't let the sun set on our 307 years together. Vote No today & keep Britain truly GREAT."

Meanwhile, the Scottish Daily Mail showed the Saltire and Union Jack tied together in a knot.

The Independent's front page referred to the centuries the countries had been united since the 1707 Acts of Union, with a headline "The 307-year itch".

AFP, London

As Scots vote for or against independence, the Loch Ness monster's thoughts remain typically shrouded in mystery and there are fears he may have already made up his mind.

"Nessie" has given locals in northern Scotland the heebie-jeebies for centuries, but there was mild panic when a recent photograph appeared to show the aquatic giant frolicking at Lake Windermere in northern England's Lake District, 210 miles from its home, Loch Ness.

The Daily Mail presented the photograph last week as proof that the reclusive and long-time Scottish resident was voting with his flippers in a "blow for the 'Yes' vote" as it was spotted out of Scotland ahead of the vote.

Though the authenticity of the photographs can be questioned, Nessie's neutrality has been called into question by another photo showing it forming the word "NO" with its tail. The Daily Mirror said the photos had delivered an "unlikely boost" to the "No" campaign.

SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE VOTE

Democracy at its best

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Scotland has been divided over its referendum for independence. The final hours of campaigning ahead of the referendum have been marked by anger and recrimination.

Amid the rallying cries and emotional pleas - with both Gordon Brown and David Cameron given strong speeches - there has been poison, pure and simple.

The Labour leader, Ed Miliband, has been jostled and heckled; Alistair Darling, the leader of the Better Together campaign, has been "menaced"; thousands of Nationalists demonstrated outside the BBC's headquarters in Glasgow on Sunday and hundreds of campaign boards have been daubed with offensive graffiti or destroyed. And there has been a lot of fib telling, too. All very regrettable, but the Scottish referendum campaign is the democratic process at its most intense.

Indeed if Scotland votes for independence, it will have been British democracy's last great show. Britain has been a joint English and Scottish venture since the Act of Union in 1707.

Indeed the 1707 agreement itself was fully 'democratic' by the standards of the day. Neither country had been conquered; it was an agreement freely entered into. The negotiations took place between commissioners representing the parliaments of the two countries. Then both parliaments passed the necessary legislation.

One way of illustrating that democracy has been an Anglo-Scottish achievement is to look at the backgrounds of successive prime ministers. Since 1707 there have been twelve premiers who were either Scots-born or of Scottish extraction - Bute, Aberdeen, Gladstone, Rosebery, Balfour,



Campbell-Bannerman, Bonar Law, Ramsay MacDonald, Macmillan, Alec Douglas-Home, Blair and Brown.

Again the process of dissolving the union, if that is what is decided, would have started with acts of parliament. The Scottish draft Referendum bill was even made subject to consultation when it was published in February 2010, a process not copied in Westminster. Then the UK Government drafted an Order in Council granting the Scottish parliament the necessary powers to hold an independence referendum. The draft Order was approved by resolutions of both Houses of parliament. In the Scottish parliament the relevant bill was passed in November 2013. In other words the campaign for independence has been an entirely legal process.

The result is that the turnout of voters is likely to be remarkably high. Already the number of those registered stands at an all-time record: nearly 97 per cent (4.29 million) of the total population aged 16 and over. Moreover, some 90 per cent of those polled in recent surveys indicated that they're 'absolutely certain' that they'll be voting. And this high proportion of likely voters scarcely varies between age groups or between occupational classes. If that is not democracy at its finest, I don't know what is.

For this reason, the way the Scottish referendum has been conducted will be enormously influential around the world, whatever its outcome. If the process can be carried out legally, more or less peacefully and with maximum participation by the citizens concerned, as it has been in Scotland, why should not the Catalans, or the Basques, or the Bretons or the Corsicans, or the Flemings or even the Venetians with their proud history as an independent republic, also put their hopes to the test?

France to air strike jihadists in Iraq

US House okays aid to Syria rebels

AFP, Baghdad

France yesterday said that it will follow the United States in launching air strikes against the Islamic State group in Iraq.

The French move came as Washington was set to approve plans to train and arm Syrian rebels in the fight against IS, which has gained more ground in recent days.

President Francois Hollande underlined that there would be no French air strikes against IS targets in Syria like those that his US counterpart Barack Obama authorised last week.

"I decided to respond to the request of the Iraqi authorities to offer aerial support," Hollande told reporters.

"We will not go further than that. There will be no ground troops and we will only intervene in Iraq."

The US has carried out 174 air strikes against IS in Iraq since early August, and Obama last week authorised their expansion to neighbouring Syria.

France began reconnaissance flights over Iraq on Monday from a base in the United Arab Emirates. Britain too has conducted surveillance flights but has so far held back from launching strikes.

The US Senate was expected to back a plan, approved by the House of Representatives on Wednesday, to train and equip anti-jihadist rebels in Syria, a key part of Obama's strategy against IS.

Who exactly will benefit from the programme is unclear, as the rebels battling President Bashar al-Assad lack a clear command structure and range from secular nationalists to al-Qaeda-backed extremists.

Meanwhile, local activists said IS jihadists in a Syrian stronghold near Iraq have abandoned some bases and redeployed their forces and armour from other positions, with the US military poised to strike.

The Islamic State group (IS) has "started to empty out many of their bases and positions in Deir Ezzor province," said Abu Osama, an activist from the eastern region mostly under jihadist control.

In Syria, IS fighters were closing in on the country's third-largest Kurdish town of Ain al-Arab, or Kobane, on the Turkish border, cutting off its Kurdish militia defenders, a monitoring group said.

The town is one of three Kurdish majority districts where Kurdish nationalists have proclaimed self-rule and its capture would give the jihadists control of a large swathe of the Turkish border.

The exiled opposition National Coalition warned of "the danger of a massacre" in the area, where Kurdish militia have put up dogged resistance to the jihadists.

The US estimates that IS has 20,000 to 31,000 fighters, including many foreigners, and there are concerns that returning jihadists could

carry out attacks in Western countries.

Australia said it had detained 15 people in connection with a plot to behead random civilians, in the country's largest ever counter-terrorism raids.

IS smaller global threat than Qaeda But analysts at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) warned against overestimating the IS threat, saying that al-Qaeda's global network was still the bigger danger worldwide.

"Despite its spectacular acts of violence, including against Westerners, (IS's) short- and medium-term objectives appear to be local and transnational rather than global," the London-based think-tank said.

Analyst Emile Hokayem told a news conference: "We shouldn't exaggerate its potency. It is a very serious security threat to the region -- as a global threat it's still limited."

Homeless Gazans in endless wait

AFP, Khuzaa

With much of Gaza in ruins, reconstruction cannot come soon enough for thousands of homeless like Mohammed al-Najjar, a once-proud house owner whose family now huddles in a portable cabin.

A new UN-brokered deal has set the stage for private companies to help rebuild after a seven-week conflict that left 100,000 people with nowhere to live.

Until now Israel's eight-year blockade of Gaza has meant that few building materials are flowing into the Palestinian territory, making reconstruction a near-impossible task.

"This so-called temporary arrangement is beginning to look permanent," 60-year-old Najjar sighed.

"I'm scared that the blockade will never be lifted, and the Israelis won't let any construction material in," he said after fighting which killed more than 2,140 Palestinians and 73 on the

Israeli side.

His new abode in Khuzaa near the southern city of Khan Yunis is essentially just a portacabin with two rooms, a bathroom and a kitchenette where he lives with at least six relatives. Although it is a small space, they are luckier than many to have somewhere to call their own, with most of the homeless now in cramped UN schools and shelters.

About 18,000 homes were destroyed or severely damaged in the fighting in July and August.

In total, an estimated five percent of the territory's entire housing stock was left uninhabitable, according to UN figures.

Israel's blockade on Gaza, in place since 2006, includes a ban on most construction materials including steel, cement and concrete for they could be used to build fortifications or tunnels.

"If the restrictions on (importing) building materials do not change, we

will need 10 years to rebuild Gaza," said Adnan Abu Hasna, a spokesman for the UN's Palestinian refugee agency.

Under the terms of the ceasefire, Israel agreed to ease import restrictions on building materials, but so far there has been little sign of change, Palestinian officials say.

Suheila Mohammedin, her husband and 45 of their children and grand-children live in a tent pitched on the ruins of their home in the battered Shejaiya district in eastern Gaza City.

"It took us 10 years to build our home, and our children will never get to use it," she said, staring at the rubble of her former house.

"I might die without seeing it rebuilt."

Yet even if the blockade is totally lifted, it will take at least five years and \$7.8 billion to rebuild Gaza, according to the Ramallah-based Palestinian Economic Council for Development and Reconstruction.



Chinese President Xi Jinping (C) and his wife Peng Liyuan (R) bow their heads as they pay tribute at the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial in the Indian capital New Delhi, yesterday. Story on page 16.

PHOTO: AFP

Americans' trust in news media plummets

AFP, Washington

Confidence in the US news media is at an all-time low, a Gallup survey revealed Wednesday, with most Americans complaining the media is too conservative or too liberal.

The survey showed just 40 percent of respondents felt confident in the news media's ability to report "fully, accurately, and fairly," matching results of the 2012 questionnaire.

The latest poll shows bias is a key issue for Americans and the news media.

Some 44 percent said the media sector as a whole was "too liberal," a slight decline from the 48 peak in 2010.

Meanwhile, 19 percent described the media as "too conservative," a jump from 13 percent a year earlier.

Only 34 percent said the media are "just about right" in terms of their balance.

"Though a sizable percentage of Americans continue to have a great deal of trust in the media, Americans' overall trust in the Fourth Estate continues to be significantly lower now than it was 10 to 15 years ago," Gallup said.

Declining trust in the news media comes amid a backdrop of lower confidence in many public institutions. Recent Gallup surveys have shown low levels of confidence in Congress, the presidency and public schools, for example.

Until a decade ago, a majority of Americans said they trusted the news media. The sharpest drop came in 2004, during former president George W Bush's re-election season, when trust fell from 53 percent to 44 percent.