

**PROJECT ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE
MUSLIM WORLD**

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This week report dwells much on Yahoo/AP/Reuters News. The report remains a compilation of strategic political, economic, socio-cultural and Geo-strategic issues around North America/Canada, Western Europe, Latin America/Southern Europe, Southeast Europe and Oceania. It obviously begins with a summary of the whole report, a breakdown of easily comprehensible short notes.

Headlines

USA/Canada

- Obama to vow greenhouse emissions cuts in Denmark
- Can President Obama save Copenhagen talks?
- Obama will unveil Afghan troops move at West Point
- Will talk of Afghan 'off-ramps' prompt Taliban to hang tough?
- Despite pact, few blacks at Coast Guard school
- More anti-gay, religious-motivated crimes reported
- US to drop shooting case against Blackwater guard
- Levin: May be more troubling e-mails from Hasan
- Canada generals deny ignoring Afghan abuse warning

Western Europe

- Ex-MI6 boss attacks govt over Afghan war
- Officials say Iraq not UK's main worry before war
- UK to hold public inquiry into alleged Iraq abuse
- UK: NATO to offer 5,000 troops for Afghanistan
- UK official: Obama's delay hurts our Afghan case
- Govt wants Israeli proposal to help revive peace talks
- EU commission chief unveils nominees for new team
- Soul-searching debates on the French identity
- Unnatural selection? Thieves swiped Darwin's notes
- IAEA chief: Iran must accept nuclear proposal

Latin America

- Honduras Supreme Court backs Zelaya ouster
- Honduras vote to sideline president, enshrine coup
- Iran's leader makes inroads in Latin America
- Chavez calls Israel "murderous" U.S. arm
- St. Vincent contemplates cutting ties with queen

Southeast Europe

Oceania

- Asylum-seekers riot at Australia detention centre
- Australian blames Scientology for brother's death

- Opposition backs Australian carbon reduction bill

Summary

USA/Canada

Political Issue

African-American leaders in the U.S are seriously concerned over the number of African-Americans in the U.S. Coast Guard. The U.S. Coast Guard and the NAACP signed a voluntary agreement to work together to boost the number of African-Americans at its 1,000-cadet service academy but African-American graduates yet to increase as expected. Meanwhile one of the leaders of the African-American stated the Coast Guard has just not paid attention to it, it is not antipathy or animosity toward it.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

. According to appropriate agencies in the U.S, crimes underlined by racial, religious and sexual orientation hatred is increasing. The FBI indicates that the availability of the data for such report lies in the proliferation of agencies doing similar task. Meanwhile reporting racial, religious and sexual orientation hatred crimes varies, while some states take reporting seriously, less reporting comes from others.

Much expected ruling on American Blackwater guards charged for killing 17 Iraqis has been made but welcomed with mixed reactions. The guards might soon be going home acquitted. A U.S court dropped the charges against the guards and such might irk many expectant Iraqis waiting for justice.

Maj. Hasan's killing continues to make talk as military and civilian officials look into what prompted the killing. Of recent, e-mail contact between Hasan and Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical American-born cleric were intercepted but according to the FBI nothing worrisome were seen in the mails. Meanwhile the U.S Congress hopes to reenergise law that prohibits membership or participation in "organizations that espouse supremacist causes," or discriminate based on race, religion or other factors or advocate force or violence. Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich says he finds it uneasy to call Hasan a terrorist even if others fail.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

It is politically sensitive and no doubt economically disturbing. Tackling the menace of global warming and coming to term with a realistic agreement on climate change makes world leaders contemplative. The U.S leadership are very much wary that reducing gas emission by 17% might though be good for the environment but its economic implication is equally worrisome. Hence attending the forthcoming climate change Copenhagen summit might not be that productive, the Senate is reluctant but the

White House is ready to show U.S commitment to the world towards controlling gas emission.

Geostrategic Issues

The U.S involvement in the Afghan war has been quite perturbing on domestic and foreign level. Americans according to poll are no more supportive of the war and believe it does not worth fighting any longer. American allies in NATO are also disturbed as the Obama administration is yet to fashion out a clear cut policy thus holding them on suspense. However there is indication that the administration might be surging it troops in Afghanistan by 50% as part of similar strategy employed in abating the Iraq conflict.

Troops increase in Afghanistan stands as another worrisome domestic issue for the government, the liberal Democrats already are lining up against it, such surging cost up to \$75 billion a year. Meanwhile Obama has also indicated to end the eight years war during his presidency, a plan seen as unclear owing to many factors within and outside Afghanistan.

The conservative Canadian government is facing criticism as Canadian military officials in Afghanistan were reported warned of abuse before handing over suspected Afghan Taliban to their government for torture. The government claimed no wrong was done and the military officials have also denying any wrong doing. The leak to the incident came up amid growing disapproval of the Afghan war.

Western Europe

Political Issue

Although the EU has just elected its president and foreign policy supreme, yet there are more portfolios to be filled within the European parliament headed by European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso. Most of the EU members are now lobbying for credible position in the parliament. Nonetheless, the right has taken more seats in the parliament during the last EU parliamentary election, an edge over the left and green.

Richard Dearlove, former chief of the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) when Britain first sent troops to Afghanistan accuses the government of squeezing the defence military budget for approximately eight years, thus leaving the forces under-resourced.

Such criticism is of course unhealthy for the Brown's Labour government facing serious challenge come next election and amid the public hearing of ex-PM Tony Blair on Iraq war. Britons like their counterparts in Canada, United States and some European states find the Afghan war unworthy to continue.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

The question of who stand to be called a Frenchman is becoming a public debate. Many are participating in the government inspired programme of identifying the identity of a Frenchman. Such identity dilemma takes spotlight owing to the growing vocal voice of native and immigrant French citizens. The latter accuses the mainstream society of discrimination while the former sees many of the immigrants as non-conformist. In addition to that was the recent President Sarkozy's remark that France will not accommodate veil Muslim women if at all they must live in France. This obviously questions the French's liberty and equality motto carried all through the French revolution.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

The recent announcement by the Israeli government to halt housing construction is supported by the British government but the latter is asking that such development should lead to renewing negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians. Meanwhile the latter denounce the halt as nothing new and cannot be benchmark for peace talk.

Public hearing on the role of the British government under ex-PM Tony Blair continues to show that British involvement in the Iraq war lack concrete intelligence and was more of blind support for Bush intention to attack Iraq rather than actual threat in Iraq. William Ehrman, the Foreign Office's director of international security from 2000 to 2002, said in terms of destructive arsenal and according to the available intelligence to the then British government. Iran, North Korea and Libya were rather more threatening than Iraq,

The IAEA wants Iran to comply with international concession, instead of engaging in nuclear confrontation, Iranians should rather indulge in nuclear cooperation. The recent tough IAEA's decision involving China and Russia seen as Iran's soft partners brings forth a new dimension to West-Iran nuclear issue.

The UK and other NATO allies have shown desire to surge troops in Afghanistan in a bid to contain the conflict. Meanwhile, UK defense secretary said his country is worried upon the delay by Washington to make a decisive Afghanistan policy.

Latin America

Political Issue

Ousted Honduras President Manuel Zelaya is now having a dimmer dream of returning to power as the Honduras Supreme Court rejects his reinstatement. Thus Roberto Micheletti will continue with his interim government pending the time the on-going election result is out. Time will have to judge if the court decision will sway Congress' decision to decide if Zelaya can be reinstated. The possibility that the country will bust into instability is more likely as Zelaya seen as supporter of the poor and against the elites is now off-show. More disturbing, the U.S has agreed to support the election

which earlier rejected to acknowledge, doing so will be a positive nod to the coup that ousted a democratically elected president.

Diplomatic muscle between Iran and Israel is not flexed in their neighbourhood but in Latin America as both countries try to hold on to more friends and supporters in the region. Israeli President Shimon Peres and Ahmadinejad's visit Latin America explains better the situation. Ahmadinejad has found comrade in Hugo Chavez as both condemned Israel and the U.S. Amid international pressure on Iran nuclear programme, Venezuela believes no-one can deprive Iranians of their right.

Untying the tie between the British Crown and the Caribbean nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is underway. It takes 2/3 majority to make the island a republic. The governing Unity Labour Party and the opposition agree the islands should become a republic, but members of the opposition New Democratic Party are encouraging voters to reject the referendum that will break the island from its colonial ties.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Oceania

Political Issue

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Immigrants' decision to settle in Australia drives the Australian government to tighten up is border. Instead of settling asylum seekers on mainland Australia, they are rather placed in camp in Christmas Island controlled by the Australian government. Sri Lankan and Afghan asylum seekers are reported fighting in the camp because the government is ultimately granting Afghans refugee status and resettling them in Australia.

Australian Scientology church is facing criticism for being a criminal organization. Sen. Nick Xenophon made a hearing before the Senate accusing the church of many ill doing which the church has refuted. Some affected former members and victims of crime allegedly committed by the church have added more strength to Xenophon's last Senate hearing. Xenophon wants the government to strip Scientology of church and free-tax status, and should be as labelled criminal organization.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

The Australian government like its U.S counterpart want to reduce gas emission but there appears to be opposition from the legislature for economic reason. Meanwhile Australia believes that other climate polluters must also make significant effort if there must be change.

Geostrategic Issues

Report Detail

USA/Canada

WASHINGTON – Putting his prestige on the line, President Barack Obama will personally commit the U.S. to a goal of substantially cutting greenhouse gases at next month's Copenhagen climate summit. He will insist America is ready to tackle global warming despite resistance in Congress over higher costs for businesses and homeowners. Obama will attend the start of the conference Dec. 9 before heading to Oslo to accept the Nobel Peace Prize. He will "put on the table" a U.S. commitment to cut emissions by 17 percent over the next decade, on the way to reducing heat-trapping pollution by 80 percent by mid-century, the White House said. Cutting U.S. carbon dioxide emissions by one-sixth in just a decade would increase the cost of energy as electric utilities pay for capturing carbon dioxide at coal burning power plants or switch to more expensive alternatives. The price of gasoline likely would increase, and more fuel efficient automobiles — or hybrids that run on gasoline and electricity — likely would be more expensive. Still, there is widespread disagreement over the cost to consumers. Obama's promise of greenhouse emissions cuts will require Congress to pass complex climate legislation that the administration says will include an array of measures to ease the price impact. The bills before Congress, for example, would have the government provide polluters free emissions allowances in the early years of the transition from fossil fuels, as well as direct payments to many consumers facing high costs.

And, supporters of emission reductions say, there would be clear long-term health and environmental benefits from shifting the a clean-energy economy. Carol Browner, Obama's assistant for energy and climate change, on Wednesday a cited a Congressional Budget Office study that said there would be \$173-a-year estimated cost to the average household by 2020 if greenhouse gases were cut by 17 percent by then from 2005 levels. But the CBO analysis also said that if the cost-blunting measures in the legislation were not taken into account, the cost to households could jump to \$890 per household. Other studies conducted by pro-industry groups have put the average household costs at \$900 to more than \$3,000 a year, although many of those studies do not take into account new energy conservation efforts and assume a more pessimistic view of new technology development that could bring actual consumer costs down. But slashing carbon dioxide emissions also could save millions of lives, mostly by reducing preventable deaths from heart and lung diseases, according to studies published this week in the British medical journal *The Lancet*. None of the studies — either those cited by the administration or

those singled out by critics — attempt to gauge a "no-action" scenario that many scientists say will have significant economic costs as well.

President Barack Obama's decision to drop in on the international climate conference in Copenhagen next month lends some star power to an event that's lost much of its luster — but at considerable risk for Obama himself. “This could be one hell of a global game changer with big reverberations here at home,” said Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), the lead sponsor of climate change legislation in the Senate. “The fact that the president will attend the Copenhagen talks underscores that the administration is putting its money where its mouth is, putting the president's prestige on the line.” And therein lies the problem for Obama. The upside potential for his visit is limited; expectations for the conference have dropped dramatically over the past few weeks, with nearly universal acknowledgment that the talks are very likely to result in a only limited political agreement, rather than in a legally binding treaty on global warming.

But the downside is significant. Obama has come home from Copenhagen empty-handed once before — when he flew in to lobby for Chicago's pitch for the 2016 Olympics, only to watch the International Olympic Committee reject his hometown's bid in the first round of its voting. Another failure on the international stage could bring another round of embarrassment and set back efforts to get climate change legislation through the Senate.

The timing of the trip suggests that the White House is fully aware of the peril — and is doing what it can to minimize the risk while also avoiding a no-show that would signal to the world, and a Senate already reluctant to pass a climate bill, that the White House was not serious about one of its top agenda items. More than 65 world leaders plan to attend the negotiations next month, including French President Nicolas Sarkozy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Most will come for a special world-leaders session held near the end of the two-week conference. Typically, major decisions at international climate forums come during the last weekend of the conference. Obama plans to go in the middle of the first week — timing that allows him to show an American commitment to curbing greenhouse gases but puts him at a distance if negotiators have failed to reach agreement by the end of the conference.

Some environmentalists say the timing of the visit makes it little more than symbolic. “Attending the talks on Dec. 9th amounts to nothing more than President Obama taking a photo opportunity on his way to pick up the Nobel Peace Prize,” said Kyle Ash, climate policy adviser for Greenpeace. Other environmentalists say Obama should return later in the talks if necessary to get a deal. “If his presence during the latter days of the COP becomes necessary to secure the right commitments, we hope the president will be willing to return to Copenhagen with the rest of the world's leaders during the final stages of the negotiations,” said Keya Chatterjee, director of the United States Climate Change Program at the World Wildlife Fund.

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama plans to announce a redrawn battle plan for Afghanistan, including what the military says could be a roughly 50 percent increase in U.S. forces, in a national address Tuesday night from the U.S. Military Academy. Although military and administration officials cautioned that Obama has not settled on a final figure, the military is planning for an increase of up to 35,000 troops

begin next year. Military officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they are not authorized to discuss the president's plans. The additional forces would come atop a record 71,000 U.S. troops in the country now and would represent the largest expansion since the war began eight years ago. Obama will be speaking to a war-weary American public, with the Army's storied academy at West Point, N.Y., as a backdrop and cadets entering the service most stretched by two wars on hand. Polls show support for the war has dropped significantly since Obama took office, with a majority now saying both that they oppose the war and that it is not worth fighting. Congressional Democrats may be an even tougher sell. The administration is deploying two Cabinet officials and the nation's highest-ranking military officer to explain the new Afghanistan plan in Capitol Hill hearings to begin Wednesday.

The president promised this week to "finish the job" begun eight years ago, and press secretary Robert Gibbs said Wednesday the announcement would include an exit strategy. But the surge in troops would be Obama's second since taking office, and liberal Democrats already are lining up against it, in part because of the also-surging cost — up to \$75 billion a year. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, are expected to appear before the Senate Armed Services and House Foreign Affairs committees on Wednesday. On Thursday, they would go before the Senate Foreign Relations and House Armed Services committees.

Congressional Democrats, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., have been blunt in saying Congress has little stomach for a large troop increase and flagging confidence in the U.S.-backed Afghan government the war effort is meant to support. Pelosi and about 17 other congressional leaders from both parties were invited to the White House for a meeting with Obama late Tuesday before he goes to the military academy in New York. Congressional Republicans, in particular, are more eager for the testimony that is likely to come the following week. War commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal and the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, are likely to appear on Capitol Hill on Dec. 8 or 9, officials said.

Obama approved 21,000 additional troops for Afghanistan last spring, in what he said at the time was a wholesale rethinking of U.S. strategy for a war he said his predecessor had neglected. That brought U.S. troop force to an expected 68,000 by the end of this year. The actual figure is slightly higher now because of overlap between troops entering and leaving the country on regular rotations. The new troops Obama is expected to add would probably not begin to arrive until February or March.

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama will unveil his long-awaited Afghanistan strategy in a prime-time address from West Point, N.Y., on Dec. 1, the White House said Wednesday, but the administration's advance remarks have sparked concern that talk of an eventual U.S. withdrawal will encourage Islamist insurgents to persevere. During the speech, "The president will want to walk through his decision-making process and give people a sense of the importance of our efforts, but reiterate for them that . . . (he) does not see this as an open-ended engagement," said White House spokesman Robert Gibbs. "Our time there will be limited, and I think that's important for people to understand." In a sign that the insurgents may think they can outlast the U.S. and its allies, hours after Obama on Tuesday declared that he intended to end the war during his

presidency, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar ruled out a political settlement and said his Islamist movement would "gain strength with the passage of time." In a statement posted on a Taliban -run Web site, he also urged Afghans to join the fight against the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan. "The foreigners have occupied the land of the Afghans by . . . might and savagery. If they want (a) solution of the issue, they should put an end to the occupation of Afghanistan ," said Omar, who's thought to be based in neighboring Pakistan . "The invading Americans want mujahedeen to surrender under the pretext of negotiation. This is something impossible."

Besides a military buildup, officials have said, Obama's plan contains "off-ramps," points starting in June at which Obama could decide to continue the flow of additional troops, halt the deployments and adopt a more limited strategy or "begin looking very quickly at exiting" the country, depending on political and military progress. A former senior U.S. military commander in Afghanistan said that the success of Obama's plan will depend on whether the insurgents, ordinary Afghans and the country's neighbors see it as a declaration of resolve or a plan to end the U.S. military engagement in the country, now in its ninth year. "If this is simply the Americans sketching out a road map for their departure, then it's game over," said the former senior U.S. commander, who requested that he not be further identified so he could speak more freely. "We are sending an awful lot of mixed signals at best." Stephen Biddle , a defense policy expert at the Council on Foreign Relations who's advised Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal , the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan , said that Obama appears to be trying to give the military enough additional troops without jeopardizing congressional funding from his own party

WASHINGTON – Eight years after the U.S. Coast Guard and the NAACP signed a voluntary agreement to work together to boost the number of African-Americans at its 1,000-cadet service academy, the annual enrollment and graduation figures for blacks remain in single digits. Seven blacks graduated from the academy based in New London, Conn., in the spring of 2001, the year the agreement was signed. The same number graduated from the Class of 2006, the first class for which blacks were recruited under the agreement. Subsequently, there were seven black graduates in 2007, five in 2008 and four in 2009. That makes 23 graduates in four years under the agreement, including the academy's first black female valedictorian. In the four previous years the number was 33. Leading lawmakers have grown increasingly upset with results even as they repeatedly are told the Guard is working hard to improve diversity in a service where only 311 of its 6,787 commissioned officers are black, with only one black admiral.

"The Coast Guard has just not paid attention to it. It is not antipathy or animosity toward it," said Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn., chairman of the House Transportation Committee. "I think we're moving in the right direction and got the Coast Guard's attention and we're not going to let up."

Under a House bill, sponsored by Oberstar and Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., the Coast Guard subcommittee chairman, members of Congress would nominate candidates for the academy. All the other service academies have long used congressional nominations.

On a 385-11 vote last month, the House advanced the legislation to the Senate. The Coast Guard Academy historically has taken pride in viewing itself merit-based and choosing its applicants without regard to their geographical distribution among the states.

Cummings, a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, expects black enrollment to grow with congressional involvement, at least in part because the House typically has about 40 black lawmakers who would be effective recruiters in largely black congressional districts. The Coast Guard's position on the bill has been rather subdued.

WASHINGTON – Reports of hate crimes against gays and religious groups increased sharply in 2008, according to FBI data released Monday. Overall, the number of reported hate crime incidents increased about 2 percent. These same figures show a nearly 11 percent increase in hate crime offenses based on sexual orientation, and a nearly 9 percent increase in hate crime offenses based on religion. The largest category, racially motivated hate crimes, fell less than 1 percent. Joe Solmonese, president of Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay civil rights group, called the numbers unacceptable and said they showed the need for the expanded federal hate crimes law signed last month by President Barack Obama. Among all categories of hate crimes, roughly a third are vandalism or property damage. About 30 percent involve intimidation of some kind, and another 30 percent were physical attacks. The FBI does not compare year-to-year trends in hate crimes, saying the number of agencies reporting changes too much. In fact, the bureau cautioned that the increase reported Monday might well be due to more agencies tracking such incidents. Brian Levin, director for the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University-San Bernardino, warned that the national numbers may be misleading because some states — like California, New Jersey, and Ohio — are good at reporting hate crimes while others — Georgia, Hawaii, Mississippi and Pennsylvania — are not. "The quality of the data is so variable and in some instances so bad that it makes trend analysis extraordinarily difficult, if not impossible," said Levin. "Generally, states that have effective data collection also have effective training and procedures to address these crimes."

In 2008, 2,145 different agencies reported hate crimes incidents, while the year before 2,025 agencies did this reporting.

In total, there were 7,783 hate crimes reported to the FBI last year, and seven murders were categorized as hate crimes. The FBI data is based on information law enforcement agencies voluntarily report to the bureau. Half of all hate crimes are motivated by race, according to the FBI. One out of every five is driven by religious bias, and one out of every six is based on sexual orientation bias. The Anti-Defamation League said Monday's figures — the highest total for hate crimes since 2001 — show a need for a new national initiative to combat bias crimes. Less than a month ago, Obama signed a bill expanding those covered by the federal law against hate crimes. Previously, the law had protected those attacked on the basis of race, color, religion or national origin

WASHINGTON – The Justice Department intends to drop manslaughter and weapons charges against one of the Blackwater Worldwide security guards involved in a deadly 2007 Baghdad shooting, prosecutors said in court documents Friday.

The shooting in busy Nisoor Square left 17 Iraqis dead and inflamed anti-American sentiment abroad. It touched off a string of investigations that ultimately led the State Department to cancel the company's lucrative contract to guard diplomats in Iraq.

Iraqis have said they're watching closely to see how the U.S. judicial system handles the five men accused of unleashing an unprovoked attack on civilians with machine guns and

grenades. A one-paragraph notice filed Friday says only that prosecutors have asked that the case against Nicholas Slatten of Sparta, Tenn., be dropped. The government's detailed request to the court was filed with the judge and with the defendant, but was not made public. Prosecutors filed the request in a way that allows them to file new charges against Slatten later. There is no indication in the documents whether they intend to. Justice Department spokesman Dean Boyd said Friday he could not say whether new charges would be filed.

Slatten's attorney, Thomas Connolly, said he could not comment on the court documents but said Slatten has maintained his innocence all along. Slatten was an Army sniper who served two tours in Iraq before joining Blackwater.

The request could be a bad sign for the government. After the shootings, some guards spoke to investigators under the promise of immunity. Prosecutors have been arguing behind closed doors that the immunity deal did not taint the case. The judge is considering that issue now. Jury selection in the trial is scheduled to begin Jan. 25.

Five guards, all military veterans, face charges. Prosecutors say the shooting was unprovoked but Blackwater says its convoy was ambushed. A sixth pleaded guilty, turned on his former colleagues, and pleaded guilty to killing one Iraqi and wounding another.

The case against the remaining four guards is set for trial in February. Prosecutors were aggressive in their charges, using an anti-machine gun law to attach 30-year mandatory prison sentences to the case. And though authorities can't say for sure exactly which guards shot which victims, all five guards are charged with 14 counts of manslaughter. So far, most of the case has played out behind closed doors. Defense attorneys have argued the FBI improperly built their case using information gathered under the promise of immunity. Investigators say they were careful to build their case only on material gathered independent of the immunity deals.

The trial likely will hinge on whether the Blackwater guards were provoked. Iraqi witnesses say Blackwater fired the only shots. Some members of the Blackwater convoy said they saw gunfire. Others said they didn't. Radio logs of the shooting indicate the guards were fired on.

WASHINGTON – There may be additional e-mails that could have tipped off law enforcement or military officials to the Fort Hood shooter before he went on his deadly rampage, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee said Friday. The U.S. government intercepted at least 18 e-mails between Hasan and Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical American-born cleric. They were passed along to two Joint Terrorism Task Force cells led by the FBI, but a senior defense official said no one at the Defense Department knew about the messages until after the shootings. The official spoke on condition of anonymity in order to discuss intelligence procedures.

Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., said after a briefing from Pentagon and Army officials that his committee will investigate how those and other e-mails involving the alleged shooter, Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan, were handled and why the U.S. military was not made aware of them before the Nov. 5 shooting. Levin said his committee is focused on determining whether the Defense Department's representative on the terrorism task force acted appropriately and effectively. Levin also said he considers Hasan's shooting spree, which killed 13 and wounded more than 30, an act of terrorism. "There are some who are reluctant to call it terrorism but there is significant evidence that is. I'm not at all uneasy

saying it sure looks like that," he said. He said his committee will also look into whether military members have the ability to report suspicious behavior evinced by colleagues. FBI and military officials have provided differing versions of why Hasan's critical e-mails to al-Awlaki and others did not reach Army investigators before the shooting.

FBI officials have said a military investigator on the task force saw the e-mails and looked up Hasan's record, but finding nothing particularly worrisome, the investigator neither sought nor got permission to pass the e-mails on to other military officials. But the senior defense official has countered that the rules of the task force prevented that military representative from passing the records on without approval from other members of the task force.

Sen. Joe Lieberman, chairman of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, said it appears there was enough information available to law enforcement, the military and intelligence agencies to raise alarm bells about Hasan but no one connected the dots.

"Had it been gathered on one desk, someone might have said 'Nidal Malik Hasan is dangerous,'" Lieberman, a Connecticut independent, told reporters after the briefing.

The Pentagon may reconsider rules governing participation in extremist organizations that some lawmakers say appear outdated and too narrow in light of the shooting rampage at the Army base in Texas. Lieberman said Congress may recommend such a review, and a Pentagon spokesman said Friday that the rules could be among the policies scrutinized by a wide-ranging inquiry aimed at preventing another similar attack.

The Pentagon wrote regulations on "dissident and protest activities" in response to soldier participation in skinhead and other racially motivated hate groups. The current rules were written in 1996 and last updated in 2003. The rules prohibit membership or participation in "organizations that espouse supremacist causes," seek to discriminate based on race, religion or other factors or advocate force or violence. Commanders can investigate and can discipline or fire people who "actively participate in such groups."

The rules also cover the distribution and possession of "printed materials," and gatherings held outside military posts. The language appears to loosely cover some of the activity law enforcement sources have ascribed to Hasan. But it is geared toward racially motivated groups and toward preventing public espousal of hateful ideology, such as attendance at a rally or the recruitment of new members. The language also applies most directly to materials and communication in the pre-Internet age.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates announced the 45-day probe on Thursday, the same day that retired Army Gen. John Keane told Congress that the existing rules will probably need revision to cover activity of "Islamic extremists." Any revision would have to be done carefully to avoid First Amendment violations on the free exercise of speech and religion.

OTTAWA (Reuters) – Two former Canadian military commanders denied accusations on Wednesday that they had ignored warnings that Afghan authorities might torture and abuse detainees handed over to them. The two also said they had moved to tighten monitoring of prisoners once credible reports of abuse finally arrived. The Conservative government has come under heavy pressure following allegations by a senior diplomat that Canadians had handed over Afghan detainees even after hearing his warnings of abuse -- a war crime if true.

Diplomat Richard Colvin testified last week that he had sent 17 reports to senior officials in the defense and foreign ministries in 2006 and 2007 about the chances of abuse and said he thought most, if not all, of those handed over had been tortured by Afghan officials. But retired Lieutenant-General Michel Gauthier, who at the time was responsible for deploying Canadian troops abroad, said Colvin had not specifically mentioned the torture risk in his reports until June 2007. Gauthier told a special House of Commons committee on Afghanistan that although he could not recall having read any of Colvin's reports at the time, he had looked at them recently. "I can very safely say there is nothing in any of these 2006 reports that caused any of the subject matter experts on my staff, nor by extension me, to be alerted to either the fact of torture or of a very high risk of torture. Nothing," Gauthier said. "Moreover, there was nothing in these documents that would have caused me to speak to the chief of defense staff, nor for him to speak with our minister." The government is refusing to release Colvin's reports in the grounds of national security. Canada has 2,700 soldiers in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar on a combat mission that is due to end in 2011. Troops began transferring detainees to Afghan authorities in late 2005. Eventually, faced with newspaper stories and other allegations of abuse in early 2007, the Canadian military temporarily suspended transfers. Ottawa signed a deal with Kabul in May that year to increase protection for detainees.

Western Europe

LONDON (AFP) – A former head of MI6 criticised Prime Minister Gordon Brown's government over its funding for and handling of the Afghan mission. Richard Dearlove, chief of the Secret Intelligence Service when Britain first sent troops to Afghanistan in 2001, said the Treasury has long been "squeezing" the defence budget, leaving the military under-resourced. "Our armed forces have been under-resourced. This is a basic fact from which there really is no escape," Dearlove said in a lecture. "The Treasury has been squeezing the defence budget for approximately eight years," said Dearlove, MI6 chief from 1999 to 2004. The comments were made in a speech to academics at Gresham College in London, an audio copy of which was obtained by ITV television news. Brown has been under mounting pressure over Britain's role in the conflict amid rising troop deaths and criticism over adequate resources and equipment for frontline soldiers, based mainly in violent, southern Helmand province.

With public support falling and facing a general election by mid next year, Brown has in recent weeks strongly defended Britain's strategy in Afghanistan, as well as flagging a timeline for handover to Afghan security forces. A Downing Street spokesman rejected the criticism, saying funding increased from 2.5 billion pounds in 2008-09 to 3.5 billion pounds in 2009-10. "We have consistently increased funding for the mission in Afghanistan year by year in recent years," he said. Dearlove said Britain's national security was a reason for the war against Taliban insurgents, but the government had, until recently, failed to properly explain the conflict to voters. "Until recently, our political leadership has failed to explain satisfactorily why we are at war," he said. "Their advocacy of the policy has, I think, been half-hearted. "Maybe now we see a change in that advocacy with a more confident position being taken. But the reason for change looks rather more like political damage limitation, than vigorous belief in the policy." Britain has 9,000 troops in Afghanistan, and has offered to send 500 more.

LONDON – Iran and Libya, not Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime, were Britain's main security concerns before the invasion of Iraq, Foreign Office officials testified Wednesday at an inquiry probing Britain's role in the war. William Ehrman, the Foreign Office's director of international security from 2000 to 2002, said "in terms of nuclear and missiles, I think Iran, North Korea and Libya were probably of greater concern than Iraq." The inquiry, billed as the most sweeping look yet at the conflict, was in its second day of hearing public evidence. It is examining Britain's involvement in Iraq, beginning with the run-up to the 2003 invasion and concluding in July 2009.

The Iraq war, which left 179 British soldiers dead, was deeply unpopular in Britain. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair is to be called to testify before the inquiry, which is headed by retired civil servant John Chilcot. The panel isn't expected to report before the end of next year, and won't establish criminal or civil liability. Tim Dowse, the Foreign Office's head of counter-proliferation between 2001 to 2003, agreed with Ehrman, telling the panel that Iraq "wasn't top of the list." "In terms of my concerns on coming into the job in 2001, I would say we put Libya and Iran ahead of Iraq," he said.

Dowse said while Saddam had supported Palestinian groups, his government's contact with al-Qaida-linked groups was sporadic. "There had been nothing that looked like a relationship between the Iraqis and al-Qaida," he said. "In fact, after 9/11, we concluded that Iraq actually stepped further back. They did not want to be associated with al-Qaida. They weren't natural allies." Ehrman also said they had found no evidence that Saddam had provided terrorist groups with material for chemical or biological weapons.

The United States and Britain, its main ally, launched the war to deny Saddam weapons of mass destruction, but it later turned out he did not have any. A government dossier published in September 2002 said Iraq could deploy some chemical and biological arms within 45 minutes. But just days before troops began moving into Iraq, Ehrman said Britain received an intelligence report which said Saddam's chemical weapons might be unusable. "We did, at the very end, I think on the 10th of March, get a report that chemical weapons might have remained disassembled and Saddam hadn't yet ordered their assembly," Ehrman said. "And there was also a suggestion that Iraq might lack warheads capable of effective dispersal of agents."

LONDON – Britain's defense ministry says it will formally order a public inquiry this week into the alleged abuse and killing of Iraqi civilians by British soldiers. The ministry says Defense Secretary Bob Ainsworth will make a written statement to lawmakers Wednesday ordering a study into a battle near the southern Iraq town of Majar al-Kabir in May 2004. Lawyers allege British soldiers may have tortured and executed up to 20 Iraqis after the battle — the most serious allegations of abuse made against British forces. The British military denies the accusations, and says the dead were insurgents killed in a gun battle after ambushing British troops. Lawyers say they expected the inquiry to begin late next year. It will likely be led by a retired judge.

LONDON – British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said Wednesday that several NATO nations will jointly offer 5,000 more troops for Afghanistan, as London and Washington push allies to take on a greater share of the war burden.

Brown wrote to NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen to confirm that many of 10 other nations consulted by British officials in recent weeks have pledged to send

reinforcements. "Following these meetings and contacts, I am now optimistic that a majority of these countries will indeed make available increased numbers of troops, and more police trainers and civilian support," Brown wrote in his letter.

So far, Slovakia has offered 250 extra soldiers, Georgia has pledged between 700 and 1,000 soldiers, and South Korea has said it would send "several hundred" to protect its reconstruction teams.

The United States, Britain, Canada and the Netherlands have long grumbled that many NATO partners — chiefly Germany and France — have failed to take on a fair share of combat duties. The U.S. has pressed NATO and other allies for between 5,000 and 7,000 additional non-U.S. troops. Canadian and Dutch, however, troops are both scheduled to begin pulling out of Afghanistan. Brown plans to send 500 more British troops — not included in the 5,000 figure — soon after President Barack Obama announces his plans for reinforcements, scheduled for Tuesday. The U.K. currently has 9,000 troops in Afghanistan. There are currently 68,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, a record. NATO and other allies collectively have an additional 36,000 troops in the country. The British leader has not named the other countries who have agreed to provide more personnel. His spokesman Simon Lewis said it was for allies to announce their own plans, but denied claims that Brown is being overly optimistic. "I believe that next week we will see the American government and the rest of NATO coming together in a strategy that will mean we will have the forces that are necessary," Brown told lawmakers at the House of Commons. In Brussels, NATO spokesman James Appathurai said some allies plan to delay their decisions on further troop pledges until after an international conference on the future of Afghanistan, tentatively scheduled for January.

LONDON – British defense secretary Bob Ainsworth says the United States' delay in deciding how many reinforcements to send to Afghanistan has harmed his country's ability to rally public support for the war. Ainsworth told the House of Commons defense committee Tuesday that the "period of hiatus" President Barack Obama had taken on Afghanistan was one of the things that "have mitigated against our ability to show progress" there. Public skepticism in Britain has hardened as increasing numbers of troops have been killed. Some 235 U.K. troops have died in Afghanistan since 2001. Since mid-September, Obama has held 10 meetings of his Afghanistan strategy review. The White House says Obama will announce his decision within days.

LONDON (AFP) – The government said Wednesday it wants Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's proposal for a temporary halt in settlement building to help resume Middle East peace talks. Foreign Secretary David Miliband said Britain has "strongly and consistently" supported a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with Jerusalem as a shared capital. "Britain wants today's announcement by Israel to become a step towards resuming meaningful negotiations to achieve this vision," said Miliband in a statement. "Britain continues to call for a full settlement freeze in the West Bank and East Jerusalem," he said, adding that London "will do all it can to support US efforts to relaunch negotiations." "Negotiations are the only way for the Israelis and Palestinians to achieve a comprehensive, just, and secure peace," he said.

The Palestinians want a complete halt to settlement-building as a condition for resuming talks with Israel, but Netanyahu's right-leaning government has accepted only a partial

halt. Netanyahu's office said the prime minister now is asking his government to approve a 10-month moratorium on new building permits for Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. Washington, which for months has tried in vain to get Israel and the Palestinians to agree to relaunch their peace talks, praised the offer.

BRUSSELS (AFP) – European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso announced the nominations for his new team Wednesday, with conservatives to the fore and more women members than the outgoing EU executive. "I am pleased to have received nominations from all member states. Now it is my job to allocate the right portfolios to the right people," Barroso said. "I look forward to presenting a strong commission team to the European parliament," which will vet all the commissioners in January. Barroso recently secured a second five-year term at the head of the EU executive, which helps draw up and police European law. He now has to distribute the policy portfolios under pressure from national capitals for plum posts, particularly in the economic and financial sphere. "There is always pressure, but at the end of the day it's up to me to take the overall responsibility," Barroso said recently, and political horse-trading has been going on behind the scenes for some time. Each EU nation will be allotted one commissioner. Barroso's new team. So far only Portugal and Britain know what they will get, with former Portuguese PM Barroso satisfying the former and British peer Catherine Ashton being handed the EU's new foreign policy supremo post last week, a position which will makes her a commission vice-president.

Dutch Prime Minister Peter Balkenende did his lobbying out in the open on Tuesday, letting it be known that the Netherlands candidate Neelie Kroes, the current EU competition commissioner, should take up a new technology post. The biggest EU nation, Germany, has nominated Guenther Oettinger, head of the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg. France has named former minister Michel Barnier, currently a Euro MP. Sweden, which holds the rotating EU presidency till the end of the year, has named Europe minister Cecilia Malmstroem who has become a familiar figure in the corridors of Brussels. Bulgaria has put forward its serving foreign minister, though Rumiana Jeleva has only held the post since the summer. Of the 27 national nominees, 13 (including Barroso) come from the conservative wing, along with eight liberals and six socialists, despite the fact that the latter are the second largest group in the European parliament.

PARIS – What does it mean to be French? That's the thorny question the government is putting to its people in what's being billed as a "Great Debate" — set against a backdrop of smoldering unrest in immigrant-heavy suburbs, a movement to ban full Muslim veils, and questions over whether France's essential identity is vanishing in a complex world. The question may seem straightforward but it is laden with paradox. France is a country that has one of the highest proportions of immigrants in Europe and endures recurrent tensions over religion — yet champions the notion of a consensual "Frenchness," anchored in secularism. The country prides itself on enshrining liberty, equality, fraternity — yet faces constant claims of injustice, mainly from Arab and black minorities, many of them French citizens, which saw thousands of their youths rampage through housing projects in 2005. "We're in a real denial of reality. Our world is cracking silently," said Jean-Pierre Door, a mayor who spoke Wednesday at the first debate hosted at the Immigration Ministry. He said the dialogue is breaking long-held taboos.

This government-ordered soul-searching over the French identity is an effort to clarify and reaffirm the nation's values, which President Nicolas Sarkozy says have been "forgotten and sometimes denied."

All French citizens are in principle invited to participate in the series of meetings organized by the government across the country, lasting through Jan. 31.

France's immigration minister, Eric Besson, launched the Great Debate earlier this month with a Web site where citizens can write about what they think it means to be French. More than 32,000 contributions were posted in the first two weeks, according to the ministry. Wednesday's debate gathered about 60 people from in and around Montargis south of Paris, officials, business leaders, members of associations, teachers and parents, in a cramped meeting room. A historic town known to Joan of Arc and King Francois I, Montargis now welcomes immigrants from the Middle East, Africa and beyond.

LONDON – British authorities say they're searching for a leather-bound notebook Charles Darwin used in developing his theory of natural selection. English Heritage made the appeal Tuesday — the 150th anniversary of the publication of Darwin's "On the Origin of Species." English Heritage says thieves stole the notes in the 1970s or 1980s. Darwin used the journal on a 1835 visit to the Galapagos Islands. It contains handwritten notes later developed into Darwin's book, the basis for the modern understanding of evolution. A rare first edition of "Origin of Species" sold Tuesday at auction for 103,250 pounds (\$172,000). London's Christie's auction house said it had languished for years on a toilet bookshelf. This year marked the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth.

VIENNA – The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency urged Iran on Wednesday to endorse a plan that would strip it of most of its enriched uranium, saying Tehran could not defuse fears about its nuclear program with proposals that included keeping the material. IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei's comments were his firmest public rejection to date of Iranian attempts to modify a proposal that would involve shipping out around 70 percent of its enriched stockpile and returning it in the form of fuel rods for its Tehran research reactor. While Iran has offered several counterproposals — buying the rods from abroad or exchanging its enriched uranium in small batches — all have in common Tehran's rejection of exporting most of its enriched uranium.

Iran now has enough enriched uranium for up to two nuclear weapons. If stripped of 70 percent of that material, its ability to make such arms would be delayed for at least a year. Tehran insists it wants to enrich only to power an envisaged nuclear reactor network. But fears that it could instead turn to making fissile highly enriched uranium for warheads have resulted in U.N. Security Council demands that it freeze enrichment — and three sets of U.N. sanctions, shrugged off by Tehran. "You need the material (out) from Iran to defuse the crisis and open the space for negotiations," ElBaradei told reporters. "Keeping the material in Iran will not lead to that." His comments dovetailed with the view of six powers endorsing the plan — the U.S., Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany.

Those same nations planned to mount a new challenge to Tehran this week in the form of a resolution to a 35-nation IAEA board meeting criticizing it for ignoring U.N. Security Council and IAEA board demands and continuing to build its enrichment program — sometimes clandestinely. Two diplomats who demanded anonymity because their information was confidential said that by Wednesday, the eve of the board's opening

session, close to two-thirds of board members had expressed support for the resolution in private meetings. Impatience with Iran has been fueled by Tehran's September revelation that it had secretly been building a new enrichment facility. In a possible pre-emptive move, Iran notified the IAEA in a confidential letter only days before the leaders of the U.S. Britain and France went public with the clandestine project.

Latin America

TEGUCIGALPA (Reuters) – Honduras' Supreme Court ruled on Wednesday that ousted President Manuel Zelaya cannot legally return to office, dimming the possibility of his reinstatement after a June coup, court sources said. The Court did not release the full text of its non-binding ruling, but a court source and a lawyer close to the proceedings said it closely follows earlier decisions upholding Zelaya's ouster after he moved to change the constitution. On June 28, soldiers removed Zelaya from office and sent him into exile on orders from the Supreme Court. The Congress swore in Roberto Micheletti to head the new government, but the world denounced the move and refused to recognize the interim government.

The Court's opinion will be passed to lawmakers as part of a U.S.-backed deal between both sides that calls on Congress to decide whether or not Zelaya can be reinstated. The opinion may sway Congress' December 2 vote against Zelaya, who snuck back into the country in September and is camped out inside the Brazilian embassy. Honduran soldiers have surrounded the embassy. Zelaya pulled out of the U.S.-brokered deal earlier this month and says he will refuse to return to power. Honduras will hold a presidential election on Sunday that was scheduled long before the coup. Neither Zelaya nor Micheletti is running and the United States sees the vote as a possible solution to the stalemate.

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras – Sunday's election will likely accomplish what the plotters of a coup set out to do five months ago: end the political career of leftist President Manuel Zelaya and replace him with a more moderate leader from Honduras' establishment. And Washington, which had vowed not to recognize the elections unless Zelaya was reinstated, now appears to have decided it has few options but to do exactly that. "In the end, the coup won," said Heather Beckman, a Latin America analyst with the New York-based Eurasia Group. "It was a bad thing and it shouldn't have happened, but in the end there wasn't anything anyone could do." Millions of poor Hondurans drew hope from Zelaya's left-leaning policies in a nation long ruled by a wealthy elite. But they now have no presidential candidate to represent them; the only one who backed Zelaya dropped out of the race last month with little support, saying his participation would condone the coup. The leading candidates belong to the two main parties that voted overwhelmingly in Congress to support Zelaya's ouster — including the one that got him elected before turning against him.

Zelaya, flown into exile by soldiers on June 28, slipped back into the country three months later and has since been holed up at the Brazilian Embassy. His term ends in January, and the constitution bars him from running again. At first, President Barack Obama strongly condemned the coup, the first in Central America in more than two decades, and said the United States wouldn't recognize any elections conducted under the

coup-installed government. But his administration, eager to restore development aid and anti-drug cooperation with its old ally, has more recently signaled it will support the new government. Arturo Valenzuela, the U.S. assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs, said Monday that the United States would "turn to international observers from civil society, and our own observations to determine whether or not these elections meet international standards."

CARACAS, Venezuela – Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sought to expand Tehran's influence in Latin America and deepen his alliance with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez on Wednesday in a visit that gave him a platform to defend his country's nuclear program. Both leaders roundly denounced U.S. "imperialism," and Chavez also called Israel "a murderous arm of the Yankee empire." Chavez rebuked Israeli President Shimon Peres for his recent prediction that the people of Venezuela and Iran will soon make their leaders disappear. "What the president of Israel said, we take it as a threat," Chavez said, standing beside Ahmadinejad outside the presidential palace.

Ahmadinejad's visit triggered small protests and was condemned by Chavez opponents and Venezuela's Jewish community. Students protested outside a Caracas hotel where Ahmadinejad was thought to be staying, and another group outside the Iranian Embassy shouted, "We don't want him, go away!" Chavez welcomed Ahmadinejad saying both countries are withstanding threats from "the same empire" — the United States. Ahmadinejad praised Chavez saying he is "withstanding the aggressions of imperialism like a mountain," and that the countries are like two soldiers in the same battle trench. Chavez's enthusiastic embrace of Iran has made Venezuela a gateway for the Iranian government to make diplomatic inroads in Latin America. Venezuela was the final leg of the Iranian leader's three-country goodwill tour of Latin America, after stops in Brazil and Bolivia.

Iran has already helped Venezuela set up factories that assemble cars, tractors and bicycles, and Iranian businesses have built public housing complexes under contracts with Venezuela. The two leaders watched by video conference as one Iranian-built housing complex was inaugurated. They also watched as an office was opened for Venezuela-Iran development fund, started up with an initial \$200 million put up in equal shares by the two countries. The governments aim to eventually put \$1 billion into the fund to pay for development projects, both in Venezuela and in allied countries. The governments signed a dozen accords, including agreements for Iran to help in electrical projects, vaccine production for livestock, rice farming and the construction of more public housing. Venezuela's leading opposition parties accused Chavez of developing a "dangerous alliance" by growing close to Ahmadinejad, citing concerns about the nuclear program and the Iranian president's record on women's rights, crackdowns on dissent and his denials of the Holocaust.

CARACAS (Reuters) – Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez used a visit by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Wednesday to brand Israel as a murderous agent of Washington. Chavez and Ahmadinejad, on the last leg of a tour of three left-leaning South American nations, hugged, held hands, and praised each other as fellow revolutionaries. The Venezuelan singled out a comment by Israeli President Shimon Peres during a visit this month to South America that his and Ahmadinejad's days in

power may be numbered. "We know what the state of Israel stands for -- a murderous arm of the Yankee empire," Chavez told joint news conference. "What the president of Israel said, we take as a threat." Chavez broke relations with Israel this year. He won praise in the Muslim world after branding an Israeli military offensive in the Gaza Strip as genocide. His fierce speeches against Israel are taken by some supporters as a green light for anti-Semitism and walls in Caracas are often daubed with anti-Jewish slogans. Ahmadinejad denies the Holocaust and has called for Israel to be wiped off the map. OPEC members Venezuela and Iran have grown much closer in recent years. Chavez supports Ahmadinejad's controversial nuclear program, while Iran is helping Venezuela map uranium deposits. The two leaders signed a raft of business and industrial agreements relating to 129 joint projects that Chavez said ranged from assembling bikes and producing car-parts, to processing milk and building houses.

KINGSTOWN, St. Vincent – Voters in the Caribbean nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines decide Wednesday whether to break their ties with Britain's monarchy, even as Queen Elizabeth II is making a rare visit to the region. A two-thirds majority in the referendum is needed to adopt a proposed constitution that would replace the charter in place since independence from Britain in 1979. If the charter is approved, St. Vincent and the Grenadines would join other Caribbean nations that have enacted new constitutions in recent months, including the Dominican Republic and the Cayman Islands. The proposed constitution would remove the British monarch as the head of state and create a president nominated by the two political parties. Among other changes, it would establish a new court of appeals to replace Britain's Privy Council, which is now the highest court of appeal for the island nation.

Both the governing Unity Labor Party and the opposition agree the islands should become a republic. But members of the opposition New Democratic Party are encouraging voters to reject the charter because they say it does not sufficiently reduce the powers of the prime minister, and they want the president to be elected by voters, not selected by Parliament. The country would remain a member of the Commonwealth, the organization of Britain its former colonies. Queen Elizabeth, who visited Bermuda on Tuesday, is in the region to attend a Commonwealth summit in Trinidad on Thursday. Elections supervisor Sylvia Findlay told local media there are 97,000 registered voters, but the list contains an undetermined number of people who have died or moved away. Monitors from the 15-nation Caribbean Community trade bloc, the Organization of American States and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States planned to observe the referendum.

Southeast Europe

Oceania

SYDNEY (AFP) – Australia moved to tighten security at its main immigration centre on Monday after a riot by 150 asylum-seekers, reportedly wielding pool cues, broomsticks and tree branches, left 37 wounded. Immigration Minister Chris Evans said security would be increased to prevent a repeat of Saturday's mass brawl between Afghan and Sri Lankan detainees in the remote Christmas Island centre, far off Australia's

northwest. Australian Federal Police were investigating the matter, in which three inmates were seriously hurt and flown to Perth for treatment, and would charge those responsible if they could identify them, he said. "Clearly though, security at the centre will be tightened to ensure we don't have any incidents like this again," Evans told parliament on Monday. The violence followed the arrival of scores more asylum-seekers on rickety people-smuggling boats in recent weeks, and the repatriation of some Sri Lankans after they were found not to be refugees.

Evans said some Sri Lankans had become concerned they would also be sent home and tensions could have arisen because most Afghans held at the centre are ultimately given refugee status and resettled in Australia. "That may well have been at the heart of some of the tensions in the centre," Evans told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation earlier. "But essentially we have had a fight between some detainees which got out of hand and until there is a full police investigation, we are only really speculating as (to) what the real causes were." More than 40 boats carrying more than 2,000 asylum-seekers, mostly from Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Iraq, have arrived in Australian waters this year. As of Monday, 1,138 were detained at facilities on Christmas Island, which recently moved to increase its capacity by installing temporary beds in a recreation area and shipping in portable buildings. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said inmates who took part in the riot risked being refused residency in Australia. "If a detainee on Christmas Island has committed a serious offence this will be taken into consideration as part of the assessment as to whether or not they are granted a visa," he told parliament. In August, the government was harshly criticised for tough security measures on Christmas Island, including electrified razor-wire fences and caged walkways, when a parliamentary committee called them "excessive and inhumane".

CANBERRA, Australia – A man who blames the Church of Scientology for his brother's suicide added his voice Monday to calls for an Australia Senate inquiry into the religion. Belfast-born Stephen McBride, 35, flew from the west coast city of Perth to Canberra on Monday to support a senator's call for an inquiry into the church.

The Senate could vote as early as Tuesday on Sen. Nick Xenophon's motion to hold a wide-reaching inquiry into the church that was founded in 1953 by the late U.S. science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. McBride, an Irish-Australian dual citizen, accused the church of driving his younger brother Edward McBride to suicide in 2007 after he spent 25,000 Australian dollars (\$23,000) on courses to become a counselor.

"It's hard to describe the anger that my family and myself feel about the church's conduct before and after my brother's death," McBride told reporters in Parliament House.

A state coroner found last month that Edward McBride, a 30-year-old army commando who was born a Roman Catholic, received 19 phone calls and text messages from Australian members of the church in the three days before he deliberately electrocuted himself at a power station in the east coast city of Brisbane. He was a trained electrician.

"I believe the bombardment of 19 telephone messages backed him into a corner and he just had no room to breathe," Stephen McBride said.

Coroner John Lock also found that Scientologists had a file on McBride that "may have recorded personal information relevant to Mr. McBride's state of mind at the time of his death." The file was sent from Sydney to the United States and "despite formal requests, was not produced to the inquest," Lock said. "There is no doubt that police

investigators were interested in obtaining the contents of the auditing file," Lock said, adding that the church was legally entitled to withhold it.

Lock is withholding his final report on the death until after a military inquiry is completed. Xenophon last week called for a Senator inquiry, outlining allegations of five former members of the church including coerced abortions, torture, illegal imprisonment and embezzlement. He told the Senate that the church is not a religion but a "criminal organization" that should be stripped of its tax-free status.

Scientology's Australian president, the Rev. Vicki Dunstan, said Monday that her church fully cooperated with the coroner's inquiry and provided non-privileged documents.

CANBERRA, Australia – Australia's opposition leader Tuesday pledged his party's support for contentious legislation proposed by the government aimed at curbing the country's greenhouse gas emissions. Australia is one of the world's worst carbon dioxide polluters per capita because of its heavy reliance on its abundant coal reserves. As the driest continent after Antarctica, it is also considered one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change. Malcolm Turnbull said his Liberal Party senators and senior lawmakers agreed during a seven-hour meeting to support the Labor Party government's bill in a Senate vote this week. While some Liberal senators have said they will refuse, Turnbull said Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's government was assured seven Liberal votes needed to pass the legislation in the 76-seat Senate would be received. "I am confident ... the legislation will be passed," Turnbull told reporters.

The Senate rejected similar legislation in a vote in August with only Labor's 32 senators supporting it. The government responded by amending the package through five weeks of intensive negotiations with the Liberals. The government on Tuesday released details of that compromise deal that increases financial assistance to major polluters including electricity generators and ensures that farmers are not taxed for the methane produced by livestock. The government plan would institute a tax on industries' carbon emissions starting in 2011 and limit Australia's overall pollution. The government wants to slash Australia's emissions by up to 25 percent below 2000 levels by 2020 if the United Nations can agree on tough global targets at a Copenhagen summit in December. Rudd said he wants the legislation passed as an example to the world before he attends the Copenhagen summit. "The world is also watching what happens here," Rudd told reporters. "Global momentum toward an outcome on climate change, we're all part of that." The minor opposition Greens party was critical that the proposed deal doubled to AU\$1.5 billion (\$1.4 billion) the amount of compensation paid to the coal industry, which is Australia's main export.

BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

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Argentina

Headlines

Geo-strategic/Political/Social News

- Argentina Wheat Farmers Urge More Funds to Stop Locust Swarms
- Argentina forces dirty war orphans to provide DNA
- Abbas begins official visit to Argentina
- Abbas: Obama doing nothing for peace process; Brazil holds hope
- Argentinean envoy calls for better trade ties with Pakistan

Economic News

- Update 1-Argentine Q3 jobless rate rises to 9.1 percent

Brazil

Geo-strategic/Political/Social News

- Peace in Mideast depends on establishing Palestinian state: Brazil president
- Ahmadinejad welcomes Brazil's nuclear support
- Abbas prods Brazil to help end Iran support for Hamas
- Chinese artists perform folk dance in Brazil
- Ahmadinejad Blames US Media for Distortions and Invites Brazil to Joint Nuclear Effort
- Brazil's Lula Hints Palestine May Sign Trade Accord with Mercosur
- Ahmadinejad heads to Brazil, Venezuela
- Ahmadinejad leaves for visit to Africa, Latin America
- 1,000 Brazilians protest against Iranian president
- Ahmadi-Nejad tests Brazilian diplomacy
- Lula takes risk in welcoming Ahmadinejad to Brazil
- Lula Plunges Into Middle East With Ahmadinejad Talks (Update1)
- Brazil-Iran: New Boost to South-South Diplomacy
- US, Israel don't have the courage to attack Iran: Ahmadinejad
- Brazil Opposition Calls Ahmadinejad Pathetic Character
- Good economic performance makes Brazilian president more popular
- Opposition retains lead in Brazil's 2010 election poll
- China's top political advisor meets Brazilian Senate president on ties, cooperation
- Honduran court: Zelaya shouldn't be restored
- Brazil holds Amazon summit
- Brazil says won't recognize new Honduran government

Mexico

Social News

- Skeptics doubt Mexican data on military abuses
- Thousands back Mexico's Obrador
- UNDP announces initiative to promote gender equality in Mexico

- Union says Mexican utility shut down to benefit multinationals
- Calderon: Gangs were 'taking over Mexico'

Health News

- Mexico expects New Year's peak in H1N1 flu

Report Summary/Argentina

The farmers of Argentina are urging the government to take a swift measure to eliminate locust which is destroying country's wheat. Argentina was world's fourth largest wheat producer in 2008 which is decreased this year due to an insect which is harming the country's wheat. Argentinean government has agreed to spend 15 million pesos (\$3.95 million) in the country to save the field. But in spite of it, a lot of field will be destroyed this year.

The Congress of Argentina has approved a law that the DNA test will be done with the victims of "dirty war" which continued from 1976-1983. This test will help finding the children of the parents who lost their children in that war. Many of the children were lost in that war as almost 500 which were adopted by army persons as they were ruling that time and by DNA test they could be able to go to their parents.

The Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas is paying a visit to Argentina and his visit is just after the visit of Israeli president Peres. Abbas will meet his Argentinean counterpart and both of the leaders are going to talk on the peaceful solution of Palestine and increase their relationships in trade. Abbas said it is hard to negotiate with Israel till the time it do not stop war completely. He blamed US president Obama that he is not playing an role to solve the conflicts in Middle East but Brazilian president is playing and he can play a better role to solve the regional issues.

The Argentina's economy is decreasing continuously and people are losing their jobs in this year. The economists argued that it is just due to the overestimate of Argentina's economy in its industrial sector by the leaders. They are hoping to increase its economy more than its capacity just to gain their political purposes. But true side is this that the Argentina, which is the third largest economy of South America is falling now continuously.

The Argentinean ambassador to Pakistan said that both Argentina and Pakistan can come out of recession by mutual cooperation. He was addressing in Rawalpindi Chamber of Commerce with the chamber's president Kashif. The RCCI president also showed his willingness to increase trade relationships with Argentina. He said RCCI will organize an industrial expo in the Argentinean capital of Buenos Aires soon.

Report Summary/Brazil

The Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas recently visited Brazil where he met his Brazilian counterpart Lula de Silva and signed several agreements in the field of trade, tourism and sports. Palestinian president said Obama is not playing a role to solve Palestinian issue and Middle East conflicts but Brazil should play an important role in solving the Israel-Palestine issue as it has good relationships in the region. Brazilian

president said Israel should go back from West Bank in Palestine and till the time Palestine is not become independent, the conflict cannot be solve in the region.

The president of Iran, Mahmud Ahmadinijad visited Brazil last week along with 200 businessmen of Iran, where he met his Brazilian counterpart to discuss several issues of mutual interests. Brazilian government is backing Iran's nuclear program as if it is for energy uses which is welcomed by Iran. He blamed US media to reporting the issue one sided. Ahmadinijad was scheduled to visit Brasilia University for a press conference and then paid a visit to the Congress of Brazil. He signed some agreements with the government of Brazil to increase trade relations. Brazilian president Lula de Silva is also scheduled to visit Tehran in 2010.it is considered that Brazil's behavior towards Iran may lose its global influence and prestige. Iranian president said if the Brazilian and Iranian people become united on Israel's aggressive behavior and attack on Ghazan innocent people, it will be a mutual desire. Ahmadinijad will move towards Venezuela and then Bolivia for visit. He is alleged from international community to increase relations with left wing governments.

Almost 1,000 people protested in Rio de Jeneiro in Brazil against the Iranian president Ahmadinijad due to his aggressive behavior against western powers. They were arguing that Brazil is the supporter of peace in the world while Iran is opposite of Brazil's policies in this matter. But on the other hand Ahmadinijad said both US and Israel do not dare to attack on Iran but threats. They have not so power that they could attack on Iran. Brazilian president is not only criticized by international community to hosting his Iranian counterpart but also domestically. São Paulo state governor José Serra criticized President Lula by hosting an aggressive Iranian president. José Serra is the candidate of Brazil's next presidential elections and according to a poll he is having the support of 35% Brazilians for the seat. Governor José Serra elongs to the Social Democrat party, PSDB of Brazil.

Palestinian president Abbas said to Brazilian president de Silva that he should tell Iran not to support HAMAS, a radical group of Palestine. He alleged Iran to support HAMAS financially and he said if Brazil stops Iran not to do so, he will not do so. So to promote peace in the region he should talk to Iran and de Silva said that Iran can play a major role in promoting peace in the Middle East. Lula said to the two local radio stations that United Nations should be the mediator in solving the Middle Eastern conflicts, not the U.S. should do. It is said that the Palestinian president may sign an agreement with Mercosur to strengthen its economic ties in the region as Israel, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are already in relations with it.

Chinese community in Brazil celebrated their 60th anniversary and presented their folk dance. Their outstanding performance in folks was appreciated by Brazilian people and they were keen interested to see such as programs in future as well. People expressed their feelings in words and some of them considered such as occasions to bring two nations near to each other.

According to the CNT/Sensus survey, President Lula's importance is more than his predecessor Cardoso. This survey was held from 2,000 Brazilian citizens in 24 states of Brazil between Nov. 16 and 20. A total of 76 percent of Brazilians considered the Lula administration better, while 10 percent preferred the Cardoso administration. Other 11.1 percent considered the two administrations equal. Lula's performance is seen to bring Brazil out of international financial crises and to introduce Brazil as an global power. The

survey report shows that the Governor Serra attained 31.8 percent of the voting intentions for next year's presidential elections while the current president Lula's handpicked candidate, Chief of Staff Dilma Rousseff from the Workers' Party (PT), garnered only 21.7 percent votes.

China's top political advisor Jia Qinglin visited Brazil and met with Brazilian Federal Senate President Jose Sarney to increase their mutual cooperation in trade. He is on the tour of Philippines, Peru and Ecuador then he came to Brazil. He said China has become Brazil's largest trading partner and both of the countries are working for their people and he said both of the countries have closer coordination in the international level. Both countries are jointly working in the fields of energy, finance and infrastructure.

The Supreme Court of Honduras announced Zelaya's act of rewriting the constitution was an illegal act which is a crime. The Supreme Court ordered not to restore Zelaya into power again. The spokesman of Supreme Court said that by holding a referendum, constitution cannot be changed so this is a crime according to the act. Due to the referendum president Zelaya was taken charge of the government by a coup and later he was sent outside the country on gun point. Now president Zelaya is residing in the Brazilian embassy in Honduras. Brazilian officials announced not to recognize the Honduras elections which are going to hold on Nov. 29 because that are being hold under a coup which suspended the elected president of Honduras.

The talks on Amazon are going to be held at Manaus, the capital of Brazil's Amazonas state on this Thursday and eight countries are expected to participate in it. The leaders still attending are Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the host; Bharrat Jagdeo of Guyana; and Nicolas Sarkozy, representing the overseas territory of French Guiana. The main objective of the meeting is to protect the world's largest rainforest in the run-up to the UN climate summit in Copenhagen next month.

Report Summary/Mexico

According to the Mexican military officials, only three soldiers are found involve in abusing human rights during the three years war against drugs in Mexico. Since the time Mexican president Carlderón has charged his office, he has started a war against the drug cartels with the back of U.S government and deployed 4,000 military troops in the streets of Mexico. Drug cartels of Mexico are very powerful cartels which could not be control by the government and now they are given weapons and financial support by the U.S government to tackle them. But now the military forces are found killing of civilians of Mexico and torturing them. Human Rights Watch raised its voice against the behavior of military personnel towards the citizens of Mexico and then the military officials said just three military personnel are found involve in it. The government received almost 2,000 complaints of homicide, kidnappings, torturing and extortions from its civilians from last 3 years.

Thousands of Mexicans showed their strength in the favor of Lopez Obrador who is the mayor of Mexico City. He belongs to a left wing party and considered him the new president of Mexico in 2012 elections because he claims 2.3 million voters of Mexico have signed for his support and wants to see him next president of Mexico.

Mexican president Felipe Carlderón said that the drug cartels were prevailing on whole Mexico but since the time he started operation against them many of the cartels

have been countered down and even many notorious members of the cartels have been caught by them. He said in some states like Tijuana, or Michoacan the government is clearly imposing the government's writ and in some regions like Ciudad Juarez the cartels are fighting with each other. He was optimistic to crush the cartels by force and imposing the writ of the government as a whole.

The health minister of Mexico said that the A/H1N1 influenza spread faster in the country in the driest and coldest season in previous December and earlier January. According to the ministry of the health, it has taken the lives of almost 610 and 65,000 people in the country have been infected of it. Mexico has received 865,000 vaccine doses which are being used for health workers and pregnant women first.

Detailed Report/Argentina

Nov. 20 (Bloomberg) -- Argentine wheat farmers in the biggest producing province are urging the government to boost funds to fight an imminent locust plague that threatens about a fourth of the country's crop.

The 15 million pesos (\$3.95 million) the government agreed to give Buenos Aires province is less than half the 40 million pesos needed to eradicate the locusts, said Pablo Cornago, a regional manager of the Argentine Agrarian Federation. Cornago took part in the meeting where funds were pledged yesterday.

"Because there was not enough cash last year to fumigate correctly, the problem is even bigger this year," Cornago, 48, said in a phone interview from Buenos Aires today. "If we don't have enough money this year, the problem will grow again next year."

About 750,000 hectares (1.85 million acres) of wheat crops in the Buenos Aires province may be harmed by locust swarms if a fumigation campaign is not put in place within 10 days, Carlos Cadavid, agriculture director of the Buenos Aires province, said on Nov. 18. The country's wheat growers pared sowing to 2.8 million hectares this year, the least on record, after the outlook for drought and export curbs discouraged planting.

Argentina, the world's fourth-largest exporter of wheat in 2008, is set to rank eighth in the year through June 2010 after the worst drought in a century harmed crops in the past season, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture data.

Locusts thrive in dry weather and must be thoroughly eliminated to avoid reappearance in subsequent summers, Cornago said. A total of two million hectares including wheat and sunflower crops and cattle-grazing land may be hurt by the locust swarms this year, he said.

Buenos Aires, Argentina (AP) -- Valuing truth over the right to privacy, Argentina's Congress has authorized the forced extraction of DNA from people who may have been born to political prisoners slain a quarter-century ago - even when they don't want to know their birth parents.

Human rights activists hope the new law will help find about 400 people stolen as babies, many from women who were kidnapped and gave birth inside clandestine torture centers during the 1976-1983 dictatorship. Thousands of leftists disappeared in what became known as the "dirty war" against political dissent.

Others see the new law as unacceptable government intrusion, legalizing the violation of a person's very identity. And as written, it could have much broader implications, enabling DNA to be sought from anyone whenever a judge determines the evidence to be "absolutely necessary."

Children of the "disappeared" were often given to military or police families considered loyal to the military government. Some have grown up not even knowing they were adopted until activists or judges announced efforts to obtain their DNA.

The project of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, close allies of President Cristina Fernandez, was approved by a 58-1 vote of the Senate on Wednesday. Since it has already passed in the lower house, it will become law once it is published in Argentina's official bulletin.

Recovering their grandchildren has been a priority for the group since they first began demonstrating in front of the presidential palace in 1977, carrying pictures of their disappeared relatives.

DNA technology has helped them identify 98 of 500 children they believe were born in prison or kidnapped as infants.

Using survivors' testimony, documents from birth families and adoption records, they have persuaded some judges to seek DNA from suspected victims of the "dirty war." But courts have sometimes ruled that a child's right to privacy outweighs a grandmother's right to know.

The new law legalizes the extraction of "minimal amounts of blood, saliva, skin, hair or other biological samples" to determine identity. If a person refuses to provide a sample, a judge can issue a warrant for genetic material from a hairbrush, toothbrush, clothing or other objects.

"It's an absolute invasion of the right to biological privacy," constitutional lawyer Gregorio Badeni told The Associated Press. "No one has the right to know what I have inside my body. That belongs only to me. I can give it up voluntarily, but no one can obligate me to deliver it."

Estela de Carlotto, who heads the grandmothers group, disagrees.

By allowing officials to extract DNA from personal effects, the law "doesn't violate in any way the body or the privacy," she said. "It will surely help discover the identity of the grandchildren we have been searching for for so many years."

Elisa Carrio, a leading political rival of the president, suggests another motivation: targeting Ernestina Herrera de Noble, the director of Grupo Clarin, Argentina's dominant media group and an opponent of Fernandez and her husband, a former president.

The grandmothers group believes two babies Herrera adopted in 1976 were stolen from women who gave birth in prison before being killed. For years, their efforts to resolve the case have been stymied because Herrera's adoptive children - now in their 30s - have refused to submit to blood or saliva tests.

The Argentine law may be unprecedented in requiring tests of people who aren't suspected of crimes, said Marcy Darnovsky, associate executive director for the Center for Genetics and Society in Berkeley, Calif.

Large forensic DNA databases in Britain and the U.S. have generated controversy because they include people who have been arrested but not convicted or, in some cases, even charged. Pilot projects in Britain, the U.S. and France that used DNA tests to confirm family ties of asylum seekers also have raised ethical concerns.

The Argentine law has created a furor among some rights advocates.

"If an adult doesn't want to know his origins, you have to respect it," said Julio Strassera, a former prosecutor who put top military leaders on trial.

Some who have recovered their identities welcome the law, saying it removes a heavy burden from people who suspect they might have been stolen at birth.

"The state cannot leave in the hands of a young person, raised by a member of the military, manipulated by guilt, the decision of whether or not to learn his true identity," said Horacio Pietragalla, who learned in 2003 that he was taken as a baby from his biological mother, Liliana Corti.

Under the new law, the state "tells you the truth. After that, you have to decide what you want to do with that truth," he said.

In the past, DNA findings have sometimes been made public against an orphan's wishes, either because a judge announced it or because the biological family released the information. The new law provides no guarantee of privacy either.

Pietragalla has reconnected with his biological family, but others want nothing to do with their blood relatives.

Among them is Evelyn Vazquez, who refused in 2001 to submit to a blood test, hoping to prevent DNA results from being used against her adoptive father, former Navy officer Policarpo Vazquez, who faced charges of child theft during the military dictatorship. The Supreme Court upheld her refusal at the time, citing her right to privacy.

In 1999, Vazquez had admitted that he and his wife had adopted her when the baby was offered to them without documents in 1978, though he said he did not know if her biological parents had been kidnapped and killed.

As part of the continuing investigation, a federal judge ordered a search of Evelyn Vazquez's personal effects last year and DNA from her toothbrush and underwear finally proved that her parents were armed Montoneros militants killed in 1977.

The Argentine government estimates about 13,000 people died in the crackdown on dissent. The grandmothers put the toll closer to 30,000.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas began an official visit to Argentina Sunday that includes a meeting with President Cristina Kirchner to discuss the Middle East, just days after a visit by Israeli President Shimon Peres.

"President Abbas' visit brings the opportunity of exchanging views on the Middle East situation, the state of Palestinian-Israeli talks and the possibility of Argentina cooperating in the region," Argentina's Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

During her meeting with Peres last week, Kirchner said her government was in favor of a peace agreement in the Middle East that included the creation of a Palestinian state and the right of Israel to live safely within its borders.

Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations were suspended since the Gaza war at the turn of the year amid deep disagreement on the thorny issue of Jewish settlements on occupied Palestinian land.

The Palestinian Authority has refused a recent Israeli proposal to restart peace talks without a complete freeze of settlement activity, a Palestinian official told AFP on Sunday.

Abbas is accompanied on his two-day visit to Argentina by his foreign minister Riad Al-Maliki and Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat.

The Palestinian leader will meet Monday with Kirchner and later attend a lunch at the foreign ministry.

Tuesday, Abbas is expected to meet with Argentina's top lawmakers at the Congress, visit the Islamic Center and give a speech at the Argentine Council of International Relations.

Abbas and Peres also visited neighboring Brazil these past two weeks. During his visit, Abbas called on Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to play a greater role in international efforts to reach an agreement on Middle East peace.

Buenos Aires - Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas complained that US President Barack Obama "is doing nothing for the peace process" in the Middle East so far. "For now he is doing nothing, but he has invited us to revive the peace process. I hope that in the future he can play a more important role," Abbas said in an interview published Tuesday by the Argentine daily Clarin.

Instead, Abbas again called upon Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to take a more active role as mediator in the Middle East.

"He can do it, because he has good relations with the two parties in the conflict and I think he can help," said Abbas, who has visited with Lula in recent days, along with separate visits from Israeli President Shimon Peres and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Abbas expressed the hope that "the United States (will) put pressure on the Israelis to abide by international law, so that the roadmap can be implemented."

The "roadmap" refers to the years-old plan for Middle East peace put forth by the international quartet - Russia, the European Union, the United Nations and the US.

Abbas, who was in Argentina Tuesday, said he was pleased with the results of his ongoing South American tour, which initially took him to Brazil and was also to include a stay in Chile.

"President Lula can now take on a mediating role because he has ties of trust with the two parties in the conflict. Besides, he also has a good relationship with the US government. Brazil can play that role," Abbas stressed.

He anticipated, however, that the Palestinians will not make any more concessions than they have already made.

"We accepted to have only 22 per cent of Palestine, and that is the biggest concession. And we also accepted that Israel had 78 per cent. So, what kind of concessions are they expecting from us?" he said.

"Now we are ready to announce our independence if the Israelis will allow us to," he said.

Abbas said, however, that independence would not be declared unilaterally.

Buenos Aires, Nov 23 (Reuters) - Argentina's unemployment rate rose to 9.1 percent in the third quarter from 7.8 percent a year earlier, the government said on Friday, as a slowing economy pushed up joblessness.

The jobless rate rose when compared to the second quarter when unemployment stood at 8.8 percent, the government said.

Some analysts say Argentina's unemployment is slightly higher than the government reports, although they point out job losses in many sectors have probably moderated recently.

Economic analysts accuse Argentina's government of publishing overly optimistic data on industrial production, economic growth and unemployment for political gain since the global slowdown started to hit Latin America's No.3 economy.

Argentina's inflation data has been discredited for more than two years.

The government has said it has saved thousands of jobs through salary subsidies at factories that agreed to no layoffs despite the global economic slowdown.

President Cristina Fernandez has made saving jobs a top priority after the country's economy started to slow last year.

The government has cut its 2009 economic forecast to 0.5 percent. The economy expanded at least 7.0 percent in each of the last six years.

Analysts in a recent central bank poll BCRA31 saw third-quarter unemployment at 8.9 percent.

Rawalpindi: Pakistan and Argentina can come out of the current economic recession with mutual understanding and cooperation, Argentine Ambassador to Pakistan Rodolfo J Martine said on Monday.

According to a statement, the envoy stated this while addressing the business community during his visit to the Rawalpindi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (RCCI).

He said Argentina would assist Pakistan in exploring new markets and promote Pakistani products in Argentinean markets.

"It is the need of the hour to explore more markets and products that should be introduced in the global markets," Martine said, ensuring full cooperation in encouraging Pakistani products in his country and across the globe.

Speaking on the occasion, RCCI President Kashif Shabbir said the current trade volume between Pakistan and Argentina was \$276.1 million, in which imports from Argentina valued at \$52.4 million and exports at \$223.7 million. He said the trade figures between the countries were low and substantial measures should be taken to step up trade. He told the Argentinean envoy that in collaboration with other chambers in the country, the RCCI had planned to organize a three-day industrial expo in the Argentinean capital, Buenos Aires, in March 2010.

Detailed Report/Brazil

Brasilia, Nov. 20 (Xinhua) -- Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said Friday after meeting the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) President Mahmoud Abbas that peace in Middle East depends on establishing a Palestinian state.

"Fair and lasting peace in the region depends on establishing a prosperous, cohesive and unfettered Palestinian state," Lula emphasized.

Both leaders held a work meeting at noon Friday in Salvador de Bahia in northeast Brazil, one week after the visit of Israeli President Shimon Peres, who met Lula da Silva in Brasilia. They had discussed the Brazilian government's offer to participate as a mediator in Middle East peace negotiation.

In speech after the meeting with Abbas, Lula da Silva recalled that in his country there is a large community of Arab origin that lives at peace with the Jewish community. He also informed that Brazil will organize an economic conference on the Palestinian Diaspora as a contribution to develop the Arab nation.

Da Silva said the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank should be frozen, the borders of a future Palestinian state preserved, and Palestinian citizens should have more freedom of movement in the occupied territories.

"The humanitarian situation in Gaza is unsustainable, human dignity can no longer be ignored," he said.

At the same time, the Brazilian president suggested that PNA "continue to seek the unity of its people in an environment of democratic coexistence," and condemned those who promote conflict based on "immutable dogmas."

Brazil, stated Lula, will support their participation in the peace process with concrete contributions that support the development of Palestine, as it has been doing in recent years.

Da Silva also said that every country in the world should set as priority the issue of peace in Middle East.

"I am sure that people from Israel want peace, that Palestinian people want peace, Iranian people, Syrian people, American people, Brazilian. If everyone wants peace, it is not possible to continue the conflict. People who do not want peace are minority, and, I would say, sectarian," he said.

Abbas, meanwhile, praised the Brazilian government's decision to participate actively in the negotiations for peace.

"We welcome you to play this role; you have international respect and admiration. We need your support and the world can benefit from it," Abbas said.

The Palestinian said Brazil could use its vast experience in the cohabitation of different peoples "without regarding color, sex or religion."

The leaders also signed during the meeting a memorandum of understanding for technical cooperation in the areas of agriculture, sports, elections, media, urban and social development, health and education, among others.

The Palestinian leader will leave for Porto Alegre, southern Brazil, where he will meet Saturday with representatives of the Palestinian community.

Then, Abbas will travel to Argentina and Chile, where he will be greeted by Presidents Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and Michelle Bachelet.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad defended closer ties with Brazil yesterday, hinting at bilateral nuclear co-operation ahead of a state visit.

Ahmadinejad stressed the "need for co-operation between the two countries in various fields," according to a statement distributed here by the Iranian embassy.

"While there is an unfair polemic in Western countries against Iran's peaceful nuclear program, the people of Brazil side with the Iranian people."

Pointing to Brazil's own nuclear program, Ahmadinejad said Brazilians "understand that a few arrogant powers... are trying to prevent other nations from having access to advanced science."

Ahmadinejad arrives in Brazil on Monday for a busy day-long visit that includes a meeting with President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, signing bilateral trade deals, a visit to Congress, a press conference and a speech at a Brasilia university, according to the embassy.

It will be the first visit by an Iranian president to Brazil, and Ahmadinejad's third round of talks with Lula, who is scheduled to visit Tehran in early 2010.

Israel, whose conservative government considers Ahmadinejad-ruled Iran an existential threat, has already blasted Brazil's "mistake" in hosting the firebrand leader.

Brazil has backed Iran's nuclear development program, as long as it serves peaceful, civilian uses. Lula said in September that he was against sanctions on Iran, preferring instead diplomacy.

His stance contrasts with the US, its Western allies and Israel, which charge that Tehran is seeking to develop a nuclear bomb under the cover of its suspect nuclear program.

World powers are engaged in long-running efforts to persuade Iran to curb its nuclear ambitions but in the latest setback, Tehran has rejected a proposed nuclear fuel deal.

The Iranian leader called for Brasilia's co-operation on Middle East concerns, as Brazil seeks to boost its international profile to match its growing economic heft.

"If the Brazilian people and the Iranian people are united on issues such as the Zionist regime's cruel attack on the defenseless people of Gaza, this will show a mutual desire" for peace, Ahmadinejad said.

He was referring to the 22-day Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip that ended in January, killing some 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis.

Ahmadinejad's stop in Brazil, part of a broader Latin American tour to boost its influence in the region, comes just over a week after Lula hosted Israeli President Shimon Peres.

Ahmadinejad will visit Bolivia on Tuesday to reinforce co-operation between the energy-rich allies as Tehran seeks growing influence in the region, Bolivian officials said.

After a working lunch, Ahmadinejad and his Bolivian counterpart Evo Morales will travel to El Alto, a city just outside the capital La Paz, where they will unveil a worksite funded by Iran, according to a foreign ministry statement.

The official agenda of the eight-hour visit also includes a private meeting between the leaders, who will sign bilateral agreements and hold a press conference.

The Iranian leader will arrive in Bolivia, which sits on South America's second largest gas reserves, as part of a Latin American tour that also includes stops in Brazil and Venezuela.

La Paz and Tehran established relations in September 2007 when Ahmadinejad made an official trip to Bolivia to sign trade and energy accords, including one to support the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes "within the framework of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty" (NPT).

Their growing ties have raised concerns in Washington and Israel.

The Jewish state suspects that the leftist governments in Bolivia and Venezuela are supplying uranium for Iran's nuclear program, a charge Tehran denies.

The Morales administration, which broke its diplomatic ties with Israel in January over its offensive in the Gaza Strip, says it does not currently mine uranium.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas wants Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to convince Iran to put an end to its support for the radical Palestinian movement Hamas.

"Iran supports Hamas with money. Hamas' decisions are in the hands of Tehran," Abbas said Friday in an interview with the Brazilian daily Folha de Sao Paulo.

Abbas' remarks were clearly aimed at Lula's next Middle East visitor on Monday, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"I hope [Lula] can tell [Ahmadinejad] a few things about everything that is happening in the Middle East. I think the president will," Abbas was quoted as saying.

For Abbas, problems among Palestinians are "a pretext that helps reinforce Israel's argument that they do not know who their partners are" on the Palestinian side when it comes to talks.

"I do not think that the Israelis have caused [division among Palestinians], but they encourage it and keep it up for their own benefit," he explained.

Abbas said he would like Brazil - which also hosted Israeli President Shimon Peres last week - to get involved in talks for peace in the Middle East.

"We believe that Brazil should play a role in the peace process, and we will ask it to take the opportunity to take on the role. I know [Brazil] is respected by the Israelis and the Arabs, and by the Palestinians in particular," Abbas said.

"Brazil, as an important country, and President Lula, as a respected leader, can play an important role. There are many ways of taking action for peace," he added.

Silva on Friday joined his Palestinian counterpart in calling on Israel to stop building new settlements in areas claimed by Palestinians.

Silva said the expansion of Israeli settlements should be frozen and Palestinian borders of the future guaranteed.

Silva spoke after a meeting with Palestinian Authority chief Mahmoud Abbas, who also plans to visit Argentina and Chile.

Silva also recently told two local radio stations that the United Nations should coordinate Middle East negotiations - not the U.S., which he said is one of those responsible for the crisis.

President Shimon Peres made an official visit to Brazil earlier this week, where he called Richard Goldstone, who authored the United Nations report accusing Israel of perpetrating war crimes in its Gaza offensive earlier the year, a man devoid of any real sense of justice who is intent on harming Israel.

"Goldstone is a small man, devoid of any sense of justice, a technocrat with no real understanding of jurisprudence," Peres told his Brazilian counterpart, adding that the South African jurist "was on a one-sided mission to hurt Israel."

Peres also urged Syrian President Assad to engage in direct peace talks with Israel without delay.

"I am calling on President Assad to join us in direct and immediate negotiations, without mediators, without conditions, without postponements," Peres said in an address to Brazil's parliament.

Regarding the Palestinian track, Peres told legislators that Israel recognizes the Palestinians' right to an independent state and is prepared to make painful concessions to make that happen.

Brasilia, Nov. 20 (Xinhua) -- The Artistic Group of China's Hebei Communication Institute presented a performance of Chinese folk dance here Thursday night to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. About 500 people watched the show organized by the Confucius Institute in Brasilia University (UnB) and the Chinese university.

The Confucius Institute, a school dedicated to popularizing the Chinese language and culture abroad, was opened in August 2009 and is the 267th one in the world.

"I enjoyed it a lot. It is an opportunity to get to know the Chinese culture. We seldom have opportunities like this," said Samanta Possi, a 22-year-old International Relations student at UnB.

"I wish more people could have watched this amazing spectacle," said another student named Fernando Neves.

According to Ana Flavia Granja, UnB's international affairs advisor, there is an increasing number of people interested in learning Chinese.

"I would say that it is due to the political and economic importance of China nowadays. And also because many people are interested in Chinese medicine, gastronomy and martial arts," she said.

Pedro Borges, a 24-year-old Accountancy student at UnB, has been studying Chinese at the university for six months.

"I study Chinese because I am interested in the Chinese culture," he said.

Borges was enchanted with the dance performance which showed China's rich cultural diversity.

It has been the first time for the artistic group to perform in Brazil. They will also perform in Argentina and Chile.

Just before his arrival in Brazil, which should happen this Sunday, November 22, the president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, wrote a piece in which he calls "unfair" the controversy around Teheran's nuclear program reiterating that the Iranian effort has only peaceful goals. "A few arrogant powers," he says, "try to prevent other nations from accessing advanced sciences."

For the Iranian leader, who should stay only one day in Brazil, both Brazilians and Iranians play "important and deserved" roles in the world's governance. He says he would like to see more cooperation among the world's governments. And he blamed capitalism for poverty, crime and violence:

"The spread of poverty throughout the world due to economic policies based in the capitalistic thinking of accumulation of weapons of mass destruction and the stockpiling of atomic weapons in countries that defend human rights generates crime and violence."

On the Gaza Strip conflict, Ahmadinejad asked Brazil to condemn attacks in that region, which would represent the mutual desire of two countries for peace and against oppression and injustice.

The Iranian leader sees Brazil and Iran as two very close nations with a large potential in areas like agriculture, cattle breeding, industry and tourism. He proposes that Brazilian and Iranian businessmen establish "safe and reliable" partnerships in a climate of balanced economic relationship.

"All these similarities have roots in a tender spirit and in a very close culture between both peoples. This mutual interest trumps the geographical distance," he stressed.

Ahmadinejad praised cultural sectors like literature and cinema in Brazil and Iran but chastised the work of the press especially the American media. He mentioned what he called a "kind of media monopoly" in the United States and said that this was making it hard for the world to know Iran's reality and potential.

"Iran is a territory in which for thousands of years several races, important religions and several languages live together peacefully and cordially," he stated.

Talking to the TV news show Jornal da Globo, Ahmadinejad commented on his friendship with president Lula and thanked the Brazilian leader for backing him up during the elections when other chiefs of state were skeptical about the election's results after suspicions of fraud were raised against his candidacy.

The Iranian president suggested that Brasília and Teheran should work closer together in the field of atomic energy. Up to now Brazil has refused to join Iran in the area of developing nuclear energy.

According to Globo TV, Ahmadinejad's aides although very careful about formal details on how the interviewer would appear didn't impose any restriction on the questions

asked. The president requested however to be allowed to directly address the Brazilian people. He used the opportunity to say:

"I would like to say hi to the lovely Brazilian people. We love Brazilians, we love all the nations around the world, especially nations that look for stability, justice and that were subjected to oppression and injustice in the past. Many of Brazil's values are our values. I pray to the All Powerful for health, prosperity, happiness and well-being for all."

On the holocaust: "The question that we raise is very clear. I made two challenges, I had two clear questions. The first question was: 'If the holocaust happened, where did it happen?' It happened in Europe of course. Everybody knows that. If it happened, it happened in Europe. The second question: 'What does this have to do with the Palestinian people?' Why these people should pay for this? Why should they give away the Palestinians land because of crimes committed in Europe?"

Does he think Brazil should abandon its defense of a two-state arrangement in the Middle East?

"We are not going to interfere in Brazil's decision. Brazil is an independent country. We have our arguments. And we share our arguments with Brazilian friends, but the relationship between both countries will not be affected by this matter."

When asked about homosexuality he smiled before stating:

"I do not expect all people in the world to agree with my opinions. People have different views. But we think homosexuality is against nature. If homosexuality spreads out I think mankind is going to cease. It is the wrong way. It is perverted. All the divine prophecies condemn this way. This is only going to cause a series of physical and social illnesses."

Ahmadinejad was told by William Waack, the interviewer, that his declarations about the Holocaust and Israel were unacceptable to Lula and the vast majority of the Brazilian people.

American Representative Eliot Engel, a Democrat from New York and co-chairman of a caucus interested in improving US-Brazil relations, criticized president Lula for receiving Ahmadinejad.

"This is a gross mistake for a respected president of a respected country," he said, adding: "To elevate Ahmadinejad, when he represses his own people, denies the Holocaust, says he'll wipe Israel off the map - it shows Brazil isn't ready to be taken seriously as a world player."

Palestine might sign a trade agreement with the Mercosur. The possibility was mentioned by Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva this Friday, November 20, after a meeting with the president of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), Mahmoud Abbas.

The Palestinian leader is on a visit to Brazil since Thursday and met with Lula, on Friday morning, at Museu da Misericórdia, in Salvador, the capital of Bahia.

During a press conference, Lula spoke of the long-standing relations that Brazil sustains with the Middle East and the Arab world, particularly with the Palestinians.

"An eventual free trade agreement between the Mercosur and Palestine is going to strengthen our ties," said the president, without providing further detail. The Mercosur has already set up similar agreements with Israel, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

He listed other steps that Brazil has taken for establishing closer ties with the Arab world and Palestine, such as opening a representative office in Ramallah, in the West Bank, the

Summit of South American-Arab Countries, which already had two editions, and the creation of the chair of ambassador extraordinary to the Middle East.

"Our flow of trade with the Arab countries has increased fourfold since 2002," added Lula. Brazilian exports to the region alone have gone from US\$ 2.6 billion in 2002 to US\$ 9.8 billion last year. Brazilian imports from the region have risen from US\$ 2.2 billion to US\$ 10.4 billion.

During the meeting held this Friday, a technical agreement was also signed between Palestine and Brazil. The Brazilian and Palestinian foreign ministers, Celso Amorim and Riad Malki, traveled to Salvador alongside the presidents and signed the deal, which should enable and facilitate cooperation between Palestine and Brazil.

"As a matter of fact, by means of donations that it has made, Brazil is already engaged in technical cooperation with Palestine, but this will enable us to cooperate further in agriculture, education and sports," said Amorim. After the presidential meeting, the two foreign ministers met to discuss the matter.

Brazil donated US\$ 10 million to the Palestinians in 2007, which are being used in different projects, mostly social ones, and it also donated US\$ 10 million in March this year for the rebuilding of the Gaza Strip.

"It was the largest contribution given by a non-Islamic developing country," said president Lula. The Brazilian head of state had already met with Abbas on Thursday, during dinner offered by the governor of the state of Bahia, Jacques Wagner.

Tehran - Faced with mounting pressure over his country's atomic ambitions, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visits Brazil on Monday in a bid to boost ties with Latin America's biggest economy and a rare backer of Tehran's nuclear program. Since coming to power in 2005, Ahmadinejad has sought to form bonds with leftist south American leaders, and enjoys "brotherly ties" with fiercely anti-US Hugo Chavez, president of Brazil's neighbor, Venezuela.

His five-day trip will also take in Venezuela as well as another left-leaning South American country, Bolivia.

On the way home, Ahmadinejad will stop off in the West African countries of Senegal and Gambia.

The Islamic republic's influence in arch-foe the United States' back yard has unnerved Washington and its key Middle Eastern ally Israel amid speculation Venezuela and Bolivia might be providing uranium to Iran for its controversial nuclear program.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has backed Iran's nuclear development program as long as it is peaceful, as Brazil seeks to up its diplomatic profile by playing a mediating role in the Middle East.

Lula, who hosted Israeli President Shimon Peres earlier this month, is firmly against sanctions on Iran over its nuclear defiance and has called for diplomacy and talks.

Israel accuses Iran of seeking atomic bombs and along with the United States has never ruled out a military option to thwart the nuclear drive. Iran denies it seeks atomic weapons.

At the moment, the West is still hoping to receive a positive response from Iran on a UN-brokered nuclear deal aimed at allaying their fears that Iran could use its enriched uranium to make a bomb.

In an interview with AFP in September Lula said he believed US-led criticism of Iran was reminiscent of Washington's fallacious justification for the war in Iraq.

“Even today, those leaders in favor of the war in Iraq are unable to explain why they invaded if there were no chemical weapons. Well, I am seeing the same sort of things starting to happen over Iran,” he said.

Iran is already under three sets of UN sanctions over its refusal to suspend uranium enrichment.

Ahead of Monday’s visit Ahmadinejad welcomed Brasilia’s support for Tehran’s nuclear drive.

“While there is an unfair polemic in Western countries against Iran’s peaceful nuclear program, the people of Brazil side with the Iranian people,” Ahmadinejad said in a statement.

“If the Brazilian people and the Iranian people are united on issues such as the Zionist regime’s cruel attack on the defenseless people of Gaza, this will show a mutual desire” for peace, he added.

During the visit Ahmadinejad is expected to discuss cooperation in the areas of technology, oil production and space exploration.

In his trip to Bolivia, which sits on South America’s second largest gas reserves, Ahmadinejad and his counterpart Evo Morales will hold a private meeting and sign bilateral agreements, La Paz has said.

And in Venezuela, the Iranian hardliner is expected to receive a warm welcome given his warm relations with Chavez, as the two leaders are known for their populist economic policies and strong anti-US tirades.

Chavez, who also supports Tehran’s nuclear program, has himself been a regular visitor to Iran since the presidency of Ahmadinejad’s predecessor Mohammad Khatami, the reformist president.

Although Cuba is not on Ahmadinejad’s itinerary, Iran has also been stepping up its ties with Havana over the past few years with the latter even reducing tariffs on dozens of imported Tehran goods.

Since his disputed re-election in June Ahmadinejad has been dogged by mass protests by opposition supporters charging the polls were rigged, and the regime has come under fire abroad for its violent suppression of protests.

Ahmadinejad has also faced criticism at home by his political rivals over the benefits of seeking allies thousands of miles away in Latin America.

And the United Nations human rights committee blasted Iran for “serious, ongoing and recurring” human rights violations, in a non-binding resolution adopted on Friday.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad left Tehran on Sunday morning for a tour of Africa and Latin America, including visits to Brazil and Venezuela, which support Iran's nuclear program, IRNA reported.

Ahmadinejad will visit Gambia before traveling to Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela and Senegal, the report said. "Countries like Iran, Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, the Gambia and Senegal have the ability to create a new political power in the world," Ahmadinejad said before leaving Tehran. (AFP)

At least 1,000 people held a protest in Rio de Janeiro against Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is visiting Brazil. Dressed in white, the protestors said that "Brazil means diversity, peace, tolerance and coexistence between human beings; Ahmadinejad symbolizes the opposite."

One of the signs held by the protestors read, "A person who denies the Holocaust denies the slavery in Brazil." The demonstrators demanded that the Brazilian president teach his Iranian guest that "racism is a crime." (AFP)

Brazil's status as an emerging world power receives a serious diplomatic test on Monday when Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, president, hosts Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nejad, Iran's leader, in the capital Brasília.

Critics said the visit would lend legitimacy to the Iranian government following the disputed re-election of Mr Ahmadi-Nejad. It comes as Tehran faces intense international pressure led by the US over its nuclear ambitions and alleged support for terrorism, along with the Iranian leader's trenchant denunciations of Israel.

Analysts said Brazil's recognition would be important for Tehran, which has been supported recently by at least four Latin American governments opposed to the US. Mr Ahmadi-Nejad will also visit two of those – Bolivia and Venezuela.

Hamid Molana, an adviser to Iran's president, told the IRNA state news agency: "This is the first time in Latin American history that an Islamic government has been so present in the US backyard."

Mohsen Shatterzadeh, Iran's ambassador to Brazil, said "the death of unilateralism" had created opportunities for the "birth of new powers in the east and west" which could "challenge western dominant powers".

Analysts believe Mr Ahmadi-Nejad has been trying over the past four years to establish a lever in Latin America with which to put pressure on Washington.

But Brazilian officials said the visit was a natural consequence of developing bilateral ties. "The relationship is taking on bigger dimensions economically, and from the political point of view the best way to deal [with Iran] is to engage it," said Roberto Jaguaribe, head of the Middle East department at Brazil's foreign ministry. "Not to engage only encourages more radical positions."

A US state department official said: "We are working with other governments including Brazil to encourage Tehran to address concerns over Iranian government policies such as the pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability, support for terrorism and its human rights record."

Privately, however, US officials said they were concerned about contacts between Iran and other governments.

Eric Farnsworth, a former state department employee and vice-president of the Council of the Americas, a foreign policy think-tank, said: "Brazil's growing influence on the global stage means that leaders with whom the president of Brazil chooses to meet gain greater credibility and, indeed, legitimacy."

Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress, said: "Brazil can't have it both ways. It can't be a world player and expect to receive Ahmadi-Nejad and have nobody notice. Everyone will notice and none of [the reactions] will be positive."

Before leaving on Sunday on his five-day visit, which will also take in Gambia and Senegal, Mr Ahmadi-Nejad said: "Iran, Brazil and Venezuela can play a determining role in planning, regulating and establishing new orders in the world." The president faces a crisis of legitimacy at home, one worsened by being unwelcome in many western and Islamic countries.

Critics of his leadership blame him for downgrading Iran's relations with neighbouring countries, notably Saudi Arabia, and antagonising the west.

Instead, he has approached Latin American countries which are geographically distant and have few historic ties.

Mr Jaguaribe said Brazil repudiated Mr Ahmadi-Nejad's comments denying the Holocaust and said Brasília, while not actively involved in the Middle East peace process, had a role to play in encouraging dialogue between the region's governments. The two countries would explore mechanisms to expand trade, which was currently worth just \$2bn a year, he said.

This will be the third visit to Brazil by a Middle East leader this month. Shimon Peres, Israel's president, was there two weeks ago and Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, visited at the end of last week.

After Mr Peres met Sérgio Gabrielli, president of Petrobras, the Brazilian national oil company said it was considering ending its operations in Iran, although officials stressed the decision was purely technical.

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva may lose global influence by playing host to the Iranian leader, who is searching for new economic opportunities ahead of stiff sanctions the West has threatened.

Reporting from Bogota, Colombia Borzou Daragahi, and Beirut -- Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrives today in Brazil on a Latin American and African tour amid U.S. and domestic criticism that, by playing host, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is squandering his newfound global influence.

The first visit to Brazil by an Iranian head of state has generated two protests in the last week in which thousands of demonstrators, many of them Jews alarmed by Ahmadinejad's views on the Holocaust and on Israel, took to the streets and beaches of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. Protests in May forced Ahmadinejad to cancel a scheduled visit.

The controversial Iranian leader, who is also visiting Venezuela, Bolivia, Gambia and Senegal, said Sunday upon boarding a plane in Tehran that he hopes to help spearhead a new global order in cooperation with Latin America and Africa.

"These countries are important and each has a determining role in their region or continent," Ahmadinejad said before leaving for his first stop in Banjul, capital of the tiny West African Muslim nation of Gambia.

"New orders should be established in the world," he said, according to state television. "Iran, Brazil and Venezuela in particular can have determining roles in designing and establishing these new orders."

In Brazil, Ahmadinejad and Lula are expected to sign cooperation agreements in biotechnology, energy and agriculture. An Iranian deputy foreign minister told the official Brazilian news agency last month that Tehran hopes to expand trade with Brazil to \$15 billion from \$2 billion in the petrochemical, energy, agricultural and medical fields.

About 200 Iranian businessmen are traveling with Ahmadinejad, who is scheduled to address the Brazilian Congress and speak to students in Brasilia.

Venezuela's ambassador to Tehran announced this month that new uranium deposits had been discovered in Venezuela and that his country and Iran "are now cooperating on a research and development project," the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported.

"At this juncture, Iran and Venezuela have no nuclear cooperation," said David Velasquez Caraballo, the envoy. "But in the future, such cooperation might be established."

Ahmadinejad, weakened by a domestic opposition movement that accuses him of stealing Iran's June 12 presidential election, is searching for new economic opportunities, with stiff sanctions and economic restrictions threatened by the West if negotiations on Tehran's nuclear development program fail.

The U.S. government and many Western analysts are concerned that Brazil's reception of Ahmadinejad could signal implicit approval of Iran's resistance to international pressure to abandon its nuclear enrichment efforts. Iran says the program is for peaceful uses, but Western nations believe its goal is to develop a nuclear weapon.

During a State Department briefing last week, spokesman Ian Kelly said the U.S. hoped that Lula would use the meetings to "stress the importance of Iran living up to its international obligations" and agreeing to a U.S. proposal that Iran enrich uranium in another country.

Harvard history professor Kenneth Maxwell said that kind of mediation by Lula is unlikely. Although Lula is framing the visit as "ratification of Brazil's enhanced role in the world," the reality is that it "places Brazil between a rock and a hard place," Maxwell said, and possibly hampers international efforts to bring Iran to account.

"Ahmadinejad is not just any other world leader. Iran is currently in the middle of a major dispute with the U.S. and its allies. Ahmadinejad vociferously denies the Holocaust and calls publicly for the destruction of Israel," Maxwell said.

U.S. Rep. Eliot L. Engel (D-N.Y.), who chairs a House subcommittee on Latin America, told the BBC last week that Brazil's invitation was "a serious mistake."

Strengthened by its growing economy, natural resource riches and Lula's prestige, Brazil is gaining a higher diplomatic profile. Last month, Rio de Janeiro won designation as host of the 2016 Summer Olympic Games after a Lula-led lobbying campaign involving dozens of Third World countries on the Olympic voting committee.

The Ahmadinejad visit, along with Lula's defense of leftist Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and his claim that President Obama has ignored Latin America, may have thrown cold water on Obama's plan to use Lula as a proxy in Latin America policy, said Eric Farnsworth, a former Clinton administration official who is vice president of the Council of the Americas in Washington.

"The Ahmadinejad visit is cause to question the ends to which Brazil might seek to use its burgeoning global profile," Farnsworth said. "It should also give pause to those who recommend that the U.S. and Brazil attempt to manage the hemisphere together. Simply put, our views of the world are different and it's not at all clear that strategic partnership is the endgame."

Harvard economist Aldo Musacchio said Brazil has strong business incentives for strengthening ties with Iran, where Brazilian state-owned oil company Petrobras is active. "Is it worth adding Iran as a market and eroding Brazil's public image by supporting Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy? I don't think so," he said.

In addition to seeking new economic opportunities, Ahmadinejad has been trying to hobnob with foreign dignitaries in an effort to bolster his credibility and legitimacy.

In September, representatives of many countries walked out of the salon when he delivered a speech to the United Nations General Assembly.

Nov. 23 (Bloomberg) -- Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva plunged into Middle East conflicts today, saying Iran has a “decisive role to play” in the region after a three-hour meeting with its president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

With Ahmadinejad seated beside him in the Foreign Affairs Ministry in Brasilia, Lula said Iran can help heal divisions among Palestinians, as he expressed support for a “viable and dignified Palestinian state” to be established alongside a “secure and sovereign Israel.” Ahmadinejad has called for the destruction of Israel and questioned the Holocaust.

“I work for the building of peace in the world,” Lula said. “I defend peace in the Middle East. I defend the Palestinian state and that all may live in harmony.”

The visit by Ahmadinejad is showcasing Brazil’s push for a broader role in the world to match its growing economic clout and Lula’s drive for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Lula this month hosted Israeli President Shimon Peres and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

“There is a need for a profound reform of the Security Council at the United Nations so that all continents are represented,” Lula said.

Enrich Uranium

Ahmadinejad said he backs Brazil’s bid for a seat on the council and added that the council’s members shouldn’t have the right to exercise a unilateral veto.

Lula also said he supports Iran’s right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, while saying any nuclear program must abide by international rules.

At a separate news conference, Ahmadinejad said that although Iran is able to enrich its own uranium, it would be willing to buy the fuel abroad. The session was disrupted by the president of a group representing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, who unfurled a rainbow flag.

Lula said earlier today on his weekly radio program that he plans to visit Israel, the Palestinian territories and Jordan in March. Ahmadinejad said he’d come to Iran on the same trip.

“It won’t work to leave Iran isolated,” Lula said. “If Iran is an important actor in this strife, it’s important for someone to sit with Iran, to talk with Iran.”

Lula reiterated that the UN should lead peace negotiations in the Middle East after saying last week that the U.S. is responsible for the crisis.

In his radio address, Lula said he’ll seek to stage a soccer game between Brazil’s national team and a joint Israel- Palestine team to help further the peace process.

“I’ve had a dream for the past three years, to organize a peace game in a neutral stadium, of a mixed team,” Lula said. “This would be an extraordinary achievement for Brazil and, above all, a very important sign for peace.”

Rio De Janeiro, Nov 24 (IPS) - Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial visit to Brazil further underscored the independence of this country's diplomacy, and gave Tehran a chance to defend its points of view on the construction of a lasting peace in the Middle East.

Ahmadinejad's one-day trip to Brasilia Monday was the third visit to Brazil by a Middle Eastern leader in two weeks. Earlier this month, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva met with Israeli President Shimon Peres, and a few days ago he hosted Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

The flurry of high-level visits was one more show of Brazil's growing role in international diplomacy.

But unlike the first two visits, which drew little attention from the media and scant interest from the public, Ahmadinejad's has sparked controversy both in and outside Brazil, and was closely tracked by the international press.

Protests were held in Rio de Janeiro Sunday by representatives of the Jewish community, women's groups and organisations of gays complaining about the lack of respect for human rights in Iran and Tehran's policy towards Israel.

And during the Iranian leader's visit to Brasilia, the Brazilian Jewish Community held a march protesting his presence, while the Brazilian Palestinian Society and the Direct Democracy Movement held demonstrations in support of his trip.

The controversy and the interest with which every detail of Ahmadinejad's meetings with Brazilian officials - including a three-hour talk behind closed doors with Lula, and a visit to Congress - was followed confirm the importance that both countries have on the regional and global fronts.

The most concrete result of the visit was the signing of eight cooperation agreements in areas like science, technology, agriculture and industry, which reflect the desire of both Brazil and Iran to strengthen South-South cooperation and increase bilateral trade, which currently stands at around two billion dollars, while the goal is to raise that amount to 10 billion dollars in the near future.

Some 200 business leaders accompanied Ahmadinejad on his visit.

But the less tangible results of the Iranian leader's visit to Brazil may be the most significant.

In first place, the visit made it clear that both Brazil and Iran are keen on playing a more active role on the world stage, based on each nation's clout in their specific areas of influence.

The heir to the Persian empire, Iran enjoys significant territorial, linguistic and cultural cohesion, added to its abundant natural resources and considerable technological development - it launched a domestically made satellite in 2008, and 48 percent of the population has access to the internet - all of which give it a strong sense of national pride and a central role in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Brazil, for its part, buoyed up by strong economic indicators, besides its position as Latin America's giant, has expanded its influence on the international scene.

In South America, in particular, it has consolidated its leadership, fuelling the regional integration process by means of political, economic and infrastructure initiatives during Lula's nearly seven years in office.

Despite criticism of the visit by several major local media outlets and opposition leaders and lawmakers, the Brazilian government went ahead with the invitation to Ahmadinejad, thus reinforcing the independence that has marked its diplomacy on earlier occasions.

The president himself repeatedly defended the visit saying that peace cannot be built in the Middle East without talking with all political and religious factions. In his opinion, if dialogue only took place between politically aligned countries, the conversation would be restricted to a "club of friends" which would fail to lay the foundations for real peace in the region.

During the recent visits by Middle Eastern leaders, Lula took the opportunity to state that he believed that key to peace in the region was the emergence of a viable and dignified sovereign Palestinian state co-existing alongside Israel, and recognising its right to exist. He also emphasised nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, and said he backed Iran's right to develop the peaceful use of nuclear energy, just as Brazil has done.

For his part, Ahmadinejad declared his support for Brazil's aspiration to becoming a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

He expressed that support during a visit to the Brazilian Congress, where he explicitly acknowledged the Holocaust, placing controversial earlier remarks on the subject in a broader context.

The Iranian leader said Palestinians should not have to pay for an error that occurred on European soil, and asked whether Brazilians would give up their territory for crimes committed in another part of the world.

According to Ahmadinejad, the Palestinian question has not yet been solved because the peace proposals formulated by the U.N. Security Council for the region have not been based on a sense of justice.

That was another reason, he said, for Iran's backing for Brazil's aspiration to a permanent seat on the Security Council, where - he argued - China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States should be stripped of their veto power.

From that key position in the global body, Brazilian diplomacy could play a positive role in peace initiatives, he said.

Only the future will tell whether the results that both governments hope for from the heightened cooperation will be forthcoming. If they are, not only the economic ties between Brazil and Iran will be strengthened, but the Lula administration will begin to play a more decisive role in peace efforts in the Middle East.

That would be welcomed by both Israeli and Palestinian authorities, as indicated by the recent visits by Peres and Abbas.

Brasilia: Visiting Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad said on Monday that US and Israeli military threats against Iran were a thing of the past, and that, in any case, "they don't have the courage" to attack Iran.

"The age of military attacks is over, now we've reached the time for dialogue and understanding. Weapons and threats are a thing of the past," the Iranian told a joint press conference with President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, closing his one-day visit. Ahmadinejad's visit was greeted on Sunday in Rio de Janeiro by a 1,000-strong rally of members of Jewish, anti-racist and gay rights groups who protested his past tirades against Israel and other groups. Fielding a question on whether he feared an attack from Israel or the United States,

Ahmadinejad said armed confrontation was no longer a possibility. That's clear "even for mentally challenged people", he said with a smile.

Besides, he added, "those you mention (Israel and United States) don't have the courage to attack Iran. They're not even thinking about it".

During the joint press conference, a protester quietly waved a gay-rights banner in the crowd before police escorted him from the venue. Ahmadinejad met for three hours with Lula to discuss Iran's controversial nuclear program.

Dialogue urged: Lula urged his Iranian counterpart to engage in dialogue on nuclear non-proliferation but backed Iran's right to develop a peaceful nuclear programme.

Lula offered support for Ahmadinejad while also nudging him to pursue dialogue with the West. "We recognize Iran's right to develop a peaceful nuclear program in compliance with international accords," Lula said in a prepared speech at a news conference with Ahmadinejad.

The Brazilian leader then turned to his guest and said, "I encourage you to continue engaging interested countries to seek a just and balanced solution on the Iranian nuclear issue."

Military honors: Ahmadinejad, meanwhile, arrived in Bolivia for a short visit on Tuesday. He was greeted at the airport with full military honors by President Evo Morales. Agencies

São Paulo state governor José Serra, the main leader of the Brazilian opposition and a probable presidential candidate at the 2010 elections, criticized the Lula administration for receiving Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and recalled that the Iranian Defense minister has been accused of the attack against the Argentine Jewish Mutual, AMIA, in 1994, in Buenos Aires.

Serra from the Social Democrat party, PSDB, said he regretted that the Brazilian government "receives with open arms the man whose minister of Defense is in the wanted list of Interpol because of the bomb attack against the AMIA Jewish organization which left 85 dead and hundreds maimed and injured"

Serra is the current governor of the state of Sao Paulo and leads opinion polls for next year's presidential election with 35% support.

Serra also questioned the fact that Brazil a signatory of the Nuclear Arms Non Proliferation Treaty officially receives Ahmadinejad against whom there are serious claims he is developing nuclear arms.

Ahmadinejad is "a pathetic character who denies the Holocaust" and has implemented a repressive policy similar to that of the "Stalinist processes in Moscow".

For the chairman of the PSDB, party of former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the attitude of the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on receiving Ahmadinejad is "contradictory" since "he is head of a dictatorial and repressive regime", while it refuses to recognize Roberto Micheletti as de facto president of Honduras.

"How would the government of Lula da Silva react if only 10% of the Iranian regime repression was happening in Honduras, where we feel so angry and only condemn the ousting of president Zelaya", pointed out Serra.

However President Lula da Silva argued it was "important" to talk with Teheran as part of the Middle East dialogue.

"If Iran is a major player in all this conflict, it is important for someone to sit with Iran, talk to them so we can return to some sort of normality in the Middle East", he underlined during his radio program.

"It is senseless to isolate Iran. I believe in a balance and I'm convinced it is United Nations that should be doing the negotiations, based on an understanding: the world needs peace, people are tired of death and killings", he added.

"I speak to everybody, I don't accept intolerance", emphasized Lula. "Those who believe there are people with whom you must not talk are as intolerant as those who do not want peace".

The Iranian president currently on a tour of South America and Africa is traveling with a delegation of 280 people, most of them businesspeople.

Finally Lula da Silva underlined "Brazil's diplomatic capacity" pointing out that "there are few countries in the world that in a fortnight have hosted Israeli president Shimon Peres, the president of the Palestinian National Authority Abbas and the leader of Iran Ahmadinejad".

Rio de Janeiro, Nov. 23 (Xinhua) -- Brazil's good economic performance during the international financial crisis and its positive image abroad have boosted Brazilian President Lula's approval ratings at home.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's personal approval ratings jumped from 76.8 percent in September to 78.9 percent in November, while his disapproval ratings declined from 18.7 percent in September to 14.6 percent in November, according to a CNT/Sensus survey released on Monday.

The approval ratings of president's administration also rose, from 65.4 percent in September to 70 percent in November, despite the massive blackout of Nov. 10, which affected 18 Brazilian states for several hours.

These high approval ratings can also be attributed to Brazil's ongoing economic recovery and growth as well as to the positive economic outlook under Lula and his administration.

Brazil's economy showed strong growth in the third quarter of 2009 and has become one of the leading forces in the global economic recovery, said the international rating agency Moody's Investors Service. Moody's also predicted that the country's gross domestic product would register a growth of 0.5 percent to 1 percent in 2009 and 4.5 percent in 2010.

The citizens interviewed were also asked to compare President Lula's administration with that of his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who served as president from 1995 to 2002.

A total of 76 percent of Brazilians considered the Lula administration better, while 10 percent preferred the Cardoso administration. Other 11.1 percent considered the two administrations equal.

The CNT/Sensus survey was carried out between Nov. 16 and 20 among 2,000 Brazilians from 24 states, with an error margin of 3 percentage points.

Rio De Janeiro, Nov. 23 (Xinhua) -- Sao Paulo State Governor Jose Serra, from the opposition Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB), kept the lead in the voting intentions for the 2010 presidential elections, according to a CNT/Sensus survey released on Monday.

According to the survey, Governor Serra attained 31.8 percent of the voting intentions for next year's elections. Meanwhile, President Lula's handpicked candidate, Chief of Staff Dilma Rousseff from the Workers' Party (PT), garnered only 21.7 percent, despite a high approval rating for Lula.

Congressman Ciro Gomes, from the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), ranked third with 17.5 percent, and Senator and former Environment Minister Marina Silva, from the Green Party (PV), received 5.9 percent of voting intentions.

The CNT/Sensus survey also considered a scenario without Governor Serra as the PSDB candidate, but with Aécio Neves, the governor of Minas Gerais state, instead. In this case, Congressman Gomes would take the lead with 25 percent of voting intentions, against Rousseff's 21.3 percent. Governor Neves would then have 14.7 percent of voting intentions, while Senator Silva would get 7.3 percent.

Brasilia, Nov. 26 (Xinhua) -- China's top political advisor Jia Qinglin met here on Thursday with Brazilian Federal Senate President Jose Sarney, exchanging views on bilateral ties and cooperation.

Jia, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), hailed the increasingly solid political basis, wider cooperative scopes between the two countries, and their closer communication and coordination in international affairs.

China has become Brazil's largest trading partner. And substantial achievements have been made in major joint projects in such fields as energy, finance and infrastructures, Jia said.

He noted the China-Brazil joint efforts in the earth resource satellite program as an example for South-South cooperation.

Jia also spoke highly of the collaboration between the two sides in international organizations such as the United Nations, World Trade Organization and Group of 20.

The development of ties should be attributed to both sides' adoption of an overall and strategic view in handling bilateral relations, their similar development stages as well as their common responsibility in defending the overall interests of the developing countries, he said.

Despite the changes in the world arena nowadays, Jia said, China is willing to work with Brazil to boost political mutual trust, deepen pragmatic cooperation, and strengthen bilateral coordination and collaboration in international affairs.

Jia also proposed closer contact between CPPCC and Brazilian National Congress.

Sarney, on his part, recalled his meeting with late Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping two decades ago.

To enhance the cooperation and consolidation between China and Brazil is in accordance with both peoples' interests and is conducive to the peace and development of the world, Sarney said.

Jia arrived on Wednesday for an official good-will visit to Brazil, the last leg of his four-nation tour. He has already visited the Philippines, Peru and Ecuador.

Tegucigalpa, Honduras—The Honduran Supreme Court recommended Thursday that lawmakers vote against restoring ousted President Manuel Zelaya, another blow for his quickly fading chances of returning to power.

The Supreme Court submitted its opinion six days before Congress is scheduled to vote on Zelaya's fate as part of a U.S.-brokered agreement to end the political crisis over a June coup.

The justices concluded that Zelaya should not be restored to the presidency because he has criminal charges pending against him, Supreme Court spokesman Danilo Izaguirre said.

"While he faces judicial charges, he cannot return to power," Izaguirre said.

Zelaya, who has been holed up in the Brazilian Embassy since sneaking back into the country from his forced exile Sept. 21, has declared the U.S.-backed pact a failure, arguing Congress is violating the spirit of the agreement by waiting until after presidential elections Sunday to decide his future.

The agreement called for the formation of a unity government but left the decision on restoring Zelaya up to Congress, which was given the option of consulting the Supreme Court and other institutions.

The Supreme Court justices had initially deemed Zelaya's ouster legal because he violated court orders to cancel a referendum on rewriting the constitution.

Opponents say Zelaya wanted to lift a ban on presidential re-election; Zelaya denies that was his goal.

Soldiers arrested Zelaya and whisked him out the country at gunpoint on June 28. Hours later, Congress voted to back his ouster.

Western Hemisphere countries, once united in condemning the coup, are divided on whether to recognize the elections, which had been scheduled before Zelaya's ouster.

Left-led Latin American countries say supporting the vote would be tantamount to whitewashing the coup. But the United States has indicated it will restore ties with the next Honduran government.

Deforestation in the Amazon seems unlikely to achieve any tangible results after Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan president, Alvaro Uribe, his Colombian counterpart, and Rafael Correa of Ecuador pulled out.

The talks in Manaus, the capital of Brazil's Amazonas state, on Thursday had been expected to bring together the leaders of the eight nations that have territory inside the huge rainforest region.

But the only leaders still attending are Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the host; Bharrat Jagdeo of Guyana; and Nicolas Sarkozy, representing the overseas territory of French Guiana.

The objective of the meeting had been to reach a mutual agreement to protect the world's largest rainforest in the run-up to the UN climate summit in Copenhagen next month.

Al Jazeera's Gabriel Elizondo, reporting from Manaus, said that the meeting had been thrown together at the last minute.

"They apparently got some confirmation over the last few days that the heads of state would be coming, but then at the last minute several of them pulled out saying that their schedules would not allow it," he said.

"This is definitely a very embarrassing issue for Lula."

Border dispute

Relations between the leaders of Venezuela and Colombia are poor due to a dispute over Bogota's agreement to allow US forces greater access to military bases in the country.

A series of border incidents, including the destruction of two footbridges by Venezuela, have led Colombia to last week to put its forces on "maximum alert".

"There has been a lot of sabre-rattling been going on between those two countries," Elizondo said.

"So I think once Hugo Chavez said he wasn't going to come, then Uribe decided he was going to go either. I think there was a bit of political one-upmanship."

Environmental activists gathered in Manaus before the talks to urge leadership at the climate summit in Copenhagen.

"We are sending a message to Obama, Lula and Sarkozy. Actually, it is for all world leaders. There is no more time for talks," Paulo Adario, Greenpeace's Amazon coordinator, said.

"Either they take on a historic role to fight and make something concrete in Copenhagen and go down in history or they will go to waste."

Brasilia has pledged to voluntarily cut its greenhouse gas emissions by at least 36 per cent by 2020, while the US announced roughly 17 per cent reductions for the same year.

Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has fallen to its lowest level in 20 years, but still 7,000sq km of rainforest were still cleared.

Manaus, Brazil (Reuters) - Brazil will not recognize the winner of this weekend's election in Honduras as a legitimate president, Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim said on Thursday, setting the stage for a potential showdown with Washington.

Honduras will hold elections on Nov. 29 in hopes of ending a political crisis that began when soldiers toppled leftist President Manuel Zelaya on June 28, installing Roberto Micheletti as the country's de facto leader.

Asked whether Brazil would recognize the president emerging from elections in Honduras, Amorim said: "No, it will not."

Washington -- which condemned the coup -- has not announced an official position on the election but has suggested it will support the outcome by saying recognition of the presidential election was not contingent on Zelaya's reinstatement.

Neither Micheletti nor Zelaya -- who has been holed up inside the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa since he snuck back into the country in September -- are running for president.

Recognizing the election would be paramount to legitimizing the June coup, Amorim said on the sidelines of a climate summit in the Amazon city of Manaus.

"A coup is not acceptable as a means for political change," he added.

Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's foreign policy adviser, Marco Aurelio Garcia, said on Wednesday that the United States risked souring relations with most of Latin America if it recognizes the Honduras election.

Much of Latin America would not back the winner of Sunday's poll in the Central American nation, Garcia said.

Detailed Report/Mexico

Mexico City -- The Mexican military has convicted just one soldier of a serious human rights violation during a bloody, three-year campaign against drug traffickers, according to Interior Ministry figures that are significantly lower than those reported by the U.S. government.

The Mexican military has come under scrutiny because of a surge in complaints against soldiers, including allegations of torture, beatings and illegal raids and arrests. The Mexican army is leading the fight against the powerful drug cartels as part of President Felipe Calderón's U.S.-backed strategy to put 45,000 troops into the streets and employ soldiers as police.

In response to inquiries by the group Human Rights Watch, Mexico's Interior Minister, Fernando Gomez-Mont, said that three soldiers have been found guilty of human rights crimes committed during the three years of the Calderón administration. However, one conviction resulted from an automobile accident and another was overturned on appeal, according to the Interior Ministry, which is responsible for security throughout Mexico.

The sole remaining case involved a soldier convicted of opening fire at a military checkpoint, killing one civilian. That soldier was sentenced to 9 months in prison.

Human rights monitors in Mexico and the United States describe the handful of convictions as proof that Mexico's military is incapable of prosecuting abuses among its officers and troops. The army pursues cases before secretive tribunals and refuses to release basic information, such as the names of the accused.

"The bottom line is that the Mexican military is not producing credible results, and you cannot do business with a military that refuses to be accountable," said Jose Miguel Vivanco, director of the Americas program for Human Rights Watch.

In the dark

Mexico's national human rights commission has received more than 2,000 complaints about the army's conduct over the last three years. But it has been difficult for human rights organizations, journalists and even the U.S. and Mexican governments to obtain detailed information from the army about abuse cases.

"I think the Americans are beginning to understand the magnitude of what is happening in Mexico and who they are in bed with," said Jorge Castaneda, former foreign secretary in Mexico and now a professor at New York University.

In August, the State Department reported that military courts had convicted 12 Mexican soldiers since 2006 and were investigating 52 others for homicide, torture, kidnapping and extortion. The report was required before the U.S. government could release tens of millions of dollars under the Merida Initiative, a \$1.4 billion, counter-narcotics package signed by President George W. Bush.

"The U.S. Congress made clear that it supports the Merida Initiative against the cartels, but it does not support a blank check for the Mexican military," said Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.). "A portion of our aid is conditioned on respect for human rights."

In response to questions from The Washington Post, a military spokesman, a colonel who declined to have his name used, said, "The army does not systemically violate human rights. Period. There may be individual cases of abuse, but we are dealing with them.

"It's like the United States in Iraq or Afghanistan, only more difficult because they can usually tell who are the criminals and who are the civilians," he added. "We do not have that luxury. In the drug war, the line between criminal and civilian is blurred."

Mexico City: Thousands of Mexicans rallied yesterday to show support for "shadow president" Manuel Lopez Obrador—who believes his country's top job was stolen from him in 2006 -- at the mid-point of his would-be presidential term.

A 56-year-old leftist former Mexico City mayor, Lopez Obrador's hopes of leading this country of about 106 million were dashed when official results showed he lost the 2006 race by just some 230,000 votes. He charges that a careful recount of the vote was carefully avoided by those who had the authority to duly pursue one.

Poised to emerge as a potential alternative to the conservative PAN party of President Felipe Calderon in 2012, Lopez Obrador has pushed on, day after day, insisting that he is, in fact, Mexico's legitimate president.

He works out of an elegant office in an old mansion in Mexico City, in front of a portrait in which he is pictured wearing the presidential sash.

Tens of thousands of supporters packed Mexico City's landmark Zocalo square Sunday to hear Lopez Obrador underscore that power has been usurped from the Mexican people, by—in his view—a "mafia" of powerful colluding political and business interests. "They themselves know that this movement is the only thing that can take them on, and that can stop them," he told a sea of supporters. Lopez Obrador claims 2.3 million supporters have signed up in support of his movement nationwide.

In the past three years, Lopez Obrador has crisis-crossed the country on a busy endless campaign, and has written letters to world leaders including US President Barack Obama.

He even has a complete shadow cabinet, and has been active in keeping the protest movement alive—so much so that the traditional leftist Party of the Democratic Revolution has distanced itself from him.

Mexico City, Nov. 24 (Xinhua) -- The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) announced Tuesday that it will give 1 million U.S. dollars in the 2010 fiscal year to promote gender equality and prevent violence against indigenous women in the southern Mexico states of Oaxaca and Chiapas.

The funds will be channeled through the National Women's Agency (INM), a government body.

"The goal is to create a comprehensive mode that will prevent gender violence in indigenous settlements from a cross-cultural perspective," said UNDP representative in Mexico, Arnaud Peral.

INM President Maria del Rosario Garcia Gaytan said the agency had already picked out 60 towns and villages where the program could make a difference.

Mexico City, Nov 25, 2009 (EFE via COMTEX) -- The SME union representing Mexican electrical workers said Wednesday that the government's motive in shutting down state-owned utility Luz y Fuerza del Centro was to benefit well-connected foreign companies such as Spain's Iberdrola and Repsol and Techint of Argentina.

Those companies, according to union chief Martin Esparza, want to get their hands on LyFC's distribution network in and around the Mexican capital.

Shortly after midnight on Oct. 11, Mexican President Felipe Calderon signed a decree dissolving LyFC, sending soldiers and police to occupy the company's installations and expel the few workers then on duty.

LyFC served some 25 million people in Mexico City and parts of four states, a region accounting for a third of the country's gross domestic product, Esparza noted Wednesday. He repeated the union's earlier complaint that Calderon's right-wing National Action Party gave a foreign firm access to LyFC's fiber-optic network while obstructing the state utility's attempt to implement an SME proposal to use the firm's grid to offer a package of television, Internet and telephone services.

Contending that the government's ultimate aim is privatizing the electricity industry, Esparza said more than 40 percent of power generation was already in private hands thanks to special "permits" granted by the administrations of Calderon and predecessor Vicente Fox.

Officially, the state-owned Comision Federal de Electricidad retains a monopoly throughout Mexico, apart from the region served until recently by LyFC.

The SME and its supporters have mounted large protests in the capital - one was attended by more than 150,000 people - to demand that Calderon revoke his decree dissolving LyFC and leaving its 44,504 employees jobless. EFE act/dr

Mexico City — Mexican President Felipe Calderon said in an interview that crime gangs and drug cartels were “taking over Mexico” before he launched his offensive against them, and said the crackdown had achieved uneven results.

Calderon's comments were taped prior to his statement Wednesday that reducing poverty is now “the first priority” for his administration. But in a previously-recorded interview with the news network Televisa, Calderon made it clear he wasn't abandoning the war on drugs.

“Here the choice cannot be between combating organized crime, as we are doing, or watching it take over Mexico, the way it was taking over Mexico before we acted,” Calderon said.

“The only alternative is to combat and destroy” organized crime, he said, “and we are going to destroy it.”

But Calderon acknowledged uneven results.

“There are zones of the country where we are clearly imposing the Mexican government's law, like Tijuana, or Michoacan, for example ... there are other areas where that aren't happening, like Ciudad Juarez, and for example, where the criminal organizations continue fighting each other with unheard of brutality.”

Ciudad Juarez, across from El Paso, Texas, is Mexico's deadliest city. More than 2,200 people have been killed there this year in violence that authorities largely attribute to turf battles between the Juarez and Sinaloa cartels.

The city's Mayor, Jose Reyes, said Wednesday that city residents will soon be able to report crime through an anonymous international tip line.

Reyes said officials teamed up with the international organization Crime Stoppers because residents do not trust local police. Telephone operators outside the country will start taking calls in December.

Mexico's government acknowledges that police corruption is widespread with many officers on the payroll of drug cartels.

The Defense department reported on Wednesday that soldiers detained a 16-year-old youth on a border bridge carrying about 2.2 pounds (1 kilogram) of cocaine hidden in a DVD player.

The soldiers stopped the youth at a checkpoint on the bridge that leads into El Paso, Texas, early Wednesday and noticed there was a package inside.

The army said the suspect was from Juarez but had legal residence in El Paso and was turned over to civilian authorities.

Also Wednesday, Mexico's Supreme Court dismissed an appeal challenging the country's extradition laws. The justices rejected an appeal by a suspect facing extradition to the United States, saying there is no violation of due process because suspects have a right to hearing before a judge.

Finally, the army reported Wednesday that soldiers in the northeastern state of Nuevo Leon arrested two alleged Gulf Cartel gun runners smuggling rifles and ammunition bought in the United States.

An unspecified number of assault rifles and ammunition were seized at an army checkpoint in the town of Sabinas Hidalgo on Tuesday. According to tickets found on the rifle cases, the ammunition and weapons were bought in the state of Illinois.

Mexico City - Mexico expects a peak in H1N1 influenza infections in late December and early January, Mexican Health Minister Jose Angel Cordova Villalobos said Thursday. Cordova Villalobos said that those are the driest and coldest weeks of the year in Mexico and "the virus spreads faster" in dry conditions.

"There will be more cases and more deaths, but the important thing will be to contain them," he said during a meeting with federal and state health officials.

The H1N1 flu virus, which was first detected in April in Mexico and has since become a global pandemic, has claimed 610 lives and infected a total of more than 65,000 people in the country, according to the Health Ministry.

Mexico has already received 865,000 vaccine doses. Vaccinations started Wednesday in the central state of Guanajuato, initially limited to medical personnel and pregnant women.

A second batch of 650,000 doses is expected on December 7, with the bulk of the 30 million doses that Mexico bought from European laboratories to arrive in starting in January.

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