

Report 99
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

- Mullen worries about Iran running out clock on U.S.
- Health Care bill clears key Senate test
- Senate Democrats clear hurdle on health care bill
- Health care bill on brink of Senate passage
- Abortion looms as possible block to health bill
- Senate OKs health care measure, reaching milestone
- Senate bill could hurt insurers at least initially
- Obama plan could limit records hidden from public
- Guantanamo prison may have to stay open until 2011
- US anti-drug effort in Afghanistan criticized
- Labor Data Show Surge in Hiring of Temp Workers
- Nonbinding Climate Deal May Aid Senate Bill
- Canada's opposition says not keen on 2010 election
- Harper rules out raising taxes to cut deficit

Western Europe

- France's Hated Immigration Minister, Eric Besson: Cheers from Sarkozy
- Muslims slam UK pledge to reform war crimes law
- UK's Gordon Brown to testify before Iraq inquiry
- UN climate chief urges avoiding blame over summit
- Greek parliament starts discussions on 2010 budget
- Greek parliament adopts 2010 crisis budget
- Moody's downgrades Greece's credit rating
- Greek trade unions poised to strike
- Greek president declines invitation to visit Macedonia
- World markets up again on US economic hopes

Latin America

- Ecuador revokes Shuar radio broadcast license
- Ecuador TV station returns to air after suspension
- Venezuela's Chavez threatens to oust Toyota

- US envoy visits Zelaya at Brazilian embassy
- Top Cuban official says Obama lied in Copenhagen
- Colombia to Chavez: Maybe 'spy plane' was Santa

Southeast Europe

Serbia

- Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia celebrate end of EU visas
- Serbia decides to submit EU application by year-end
- Serbia to deliver EU membership application Tuesday
- Serbian parliament endorses 2010 budget bill
- Serbia's Tadic downplays possibility of early elections

Ahmeti re-elected as leader of Macedonia's DUI

Bosnia

- Bosnian Serb arrested for war crimes in BiH
- BiH sentences two Bosnian Serbs for war crimes
- European Court of Human Rights rules BiH constitution is discriminatory
- BiH court charges Bosnian Muslims with terrorism
- Inzko delivers state property inventory to BiH's Spiric

Croatia

- Croatia to elect president amid economic crisis
- Five arrested for war crimes in Croatia
- Slovenia denies blocking Croatia's EU bid

Romania

- Romania's Boc announces cabinet picks, vote expected Wednesday
- Romanian parliament approves new cabinet
- Basescu sworn in as Romanian president
- Romania's Geoana remains PSD leader

Kosovo

- Kosovo, Saudi Arabia establish diplomatic relations
- Kosovo commission orders revote in three municipalities
- North Mitrovica expected to remain a challenge for Kosovo government
- Activists react to Kosovo's exclusion from visa liberalisation process
- Kosovo reports progress in identifying missing persons
- EULEX promises results soon in Kosovo's fight against corruption

Bulgarian tobacco farmers block highway

Albania

- Albania's Meta says opposition should contribute to EU efforts
- Albania's Berisha accused of libel
- Five arrested in Albania for corruption

Oceania

Report Summary

USA/Canada

Political Issue

The White House is determined to making certain classified documents declassified as a way unfolding hidden secret to the public. The declassification of more than 400 million secrets pages of Cold War-era documents could sharply curb the number of new and old government records hidden from the public. But the order to declassify the documents also will give everyone more time to process the 400 million pages rather than flinging them open at year's end without a second glance.

Having an election is nothing very soon in Canada. The Liberal main opposition party that demanded for an election in September has backed down from such proposal saying most Canadians are not ready for election as the economy of the nation demand repair from all parties.

Economic Issue

The recovery of the U.S economy from the global meltdown is showing positive sign as hiring of temporary workers surges, thus, that might further make employers employ permanent workers. But such will not be that easy not until there is a clear signal that the recovery of the economy will gain more strength and be sustained.

The Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said. Ottawa will not raise taxes to rein in its budget deficit after a stimulus package ends next year but will focus instead on restraining spending to balance its books.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Obama called it a historic legislation after the protracted healthcare reform bill was passed by the Senate before the Christmas holiday. This new health programme makes Obama happy that one of his campaign objectives is achieved. Interestingly, the bill was faced with many hurdles from republican, liberal democrats and anti-abortion groups. The compromise of the Democrat-led Senate made such hurdles resolvable. The anti-abortion lawmakers ensured a redraft of the bill; hence federal money will not be used for abortion and whoever which to abort might be doing that on her own account.

It was the intention of the Obama administration to close down the Gitmo prison by January 16, 2010, but such might not be possible not until 2011. Housing the inmates in Thomson Correctional Center, a local prison at Illinois, an underused state facility about 150 miles west of Chicago is yet to be finalized with the Illinois state and more importantly the idea might be blocked in the House and by those refusing the trial and relocation of Gitmo inmates in the United States.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

The outcome of the UN Copenhagen climate summit was not forthcoming as it failed to meet the demand of the developing nations. Nonetheless, it left the developed, polluting countries with a non-binding deal. The U.S from the very start was skeptical of the summit fearing for its economy. Nevertheless, whatever the outcome of the summit, US lawmakers can now make law that will consolidate and tallies with the demand of the EU economy. U.S lawmakers were wary especially those from manufacturing states, who are worried that U.S. industry would be forced to live by rules that would give an advantage to Chinese competitors.

Geostrategic Issues

Adm. Mike Mullen added a military flavour to the recipe on how to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear bomb. He said the U.S can no more have an open ended talk with the Iranian and he was optimistic that the new proposed sanction will have more backing than the previous, meanwhile military option is not out of the question, even though U.S does not want another war in that region.

The State Department's internal watchdog has criticized the agency's nearly \$2 billion anti-drug effort in Afghanistan for poor oversight and lack of a long-term strategy. The department's inspector general said the Afghanistan counter-narcotics program is hampered by too few personnel and rampant corruption among Afghan officials. The inspector general's report also noted that despite a consensus among U.S. agencies that eradicating poppy fields is essential, the focus has shifted to interdiction of drug organizations and alternative crop projects. That shift is advocated strongly by Richard Holbrooke, the Obama administration's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Western Europe

Political Issue

When a British court issued a warrant for the arrest of Tzipi Livni the ex-foreign minister of Israel if she comes to Britain, the warrant raised dust within the Israeli government asking the British government to change the rule. Britain like Spain and Belgium are few European countries where universal jurisdiction is operational for war crimes. Britain foreign minister David Milliband has hinted that such law will be adjusted for visitors of Livni's stature, but the Muslim Council of Britain is strongly against it, saying the government will further dent its image of a double standard player in the Middle East politics.

Eric Besson, the Minister for Immigration, Integration and National Identity, is one of the most detested French politicians because of his tough position on French identity and immigration. His action drew the ire of both the right and left, yet remains a favourite of the President Sarkozy. Eric Besson and the president are on the same note for their tough stances on veil and integration. Meanwhile, Eric Besson's ability to stir up

national identity issue across the country is allegedly helpful for Sarkozy and his conservative party to win votes in the forthcoming regional election.

The name dispute between Greece and Macedonia is far from resolving. Both countries are trying all measures to resolve the issue, but Greece's obstinacy that before Macedonia can be integrated into the EU, her name must be changed from Macedonia to Northern Republic of Macedonia, a proposal yet to acceptable by the latter. The extent to which the case is serious shows how Greek President Karolos Papoulias declined the invitation of his Macedonian counterpart, Papoulias saying such a trip would be possible only after the name dispute between the two countries is resolved

The British prime minister would not face the Iraqi inquiry committee not until after the British election. This is done in order to save the proceeding from politics, although opposition parties have questioned the hearing postponement as unfair as they might use the outcome for political gain. The legitimacy of the inquiry committee is further questioned because it is not empowered to shoulder blame on the public officers for their complicity or lapse, rather to recommend against the repetition of similar mistake if at all found.

Economic Issue

The ruling Greek Socialist Pasok strives at bringing the economy to normalcy after witnessing a huge blow from the economic recession. Thus, the Greek parliament has adopted a crisis budget for 2010 in a bid to bring order to its chaotic public finances and restore its badly dented credibility with foreign investors and the European Union. Yet Moody's downgraded Greece's credit rating, the third ratings agency to do so over fiscal concerns. Moody's said that its future rating decisions will depend on the government's plans to cut debts.

Along with the state of the economy, Greek civil servants' trade union ADEDY announced that it plans to stage a 24-hour strike in late January or early February against the labour and wage reforms planned by the government, in the face of ballooning debt and deficits.

According to report world stock markets rose amid mounting optimism about the speed of the U.S. economic recovery after further solid economic data. This is an indication that the United States economy is still relevant in the world economies.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Latin America

Political Issue

Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez has threatened to expel Japanese carmaker Toyota unless it produces an all-terrain model of 4x4 vehicles used for public transport in poor and rural areas. During his speech Chavez said he would not hesitate to expel and expropriate plants from other Asian and U.S. automobile companies operating in Venezuela if they failed to share technology with locals. Chavez's action suggests that there is expectation as in tangible technology transfer and more compliance from the foreign companies to the local demand.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Ecuadorean media station whose license was revoked and broadcast shut down is now back on air after the move of closing the media house raised dust of criticism against the government. Teleamazonas was said to have incited violence during protests in October in Ecuador's southeastern jungles to protest proposed legislation they said would allow mining on Indian lands without their consent and lead to the privatization of water. Socialist President Rafael Correa said such was false reports and has lashed out at private stations seen as conspiring with business groups opposed to his socialist reforms.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Cuban climate official Bruno Rodriguez said Obama's speech at Copenhagen was a display of the empire interest and arrogance. He said the US made a back door negotiation with others conspirators upon which a facade deal was reached. He said the US threatened the developing world and saw the whole deal as nothing short of making polluters to cut down their pollution.

Geostrategic Issues

Colombia's defense chief joked that Venezuelan troops might have mistaken Santa's sleigh for a spy plane, dismissing accusations by President Hugo Chavez about drones flying over Venezuela. The defense minister said Colombian aircraft couldn't fly the kind of espionage mission described by Chavez.

Southeast Europe

Political Issue

Celebration fevers filled the air in all of the three western Balkan countries that was recently inducted in the Schengen visa liberalization scheme. Premised on that, Serbia has taken advantage of her induction in the Schengen visa liberalization scheme to

formally submit its EU membership application. But as Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro celebrates their Schengen visa liberalization scheme's induction, Kosovo activists protest against the exclusion of their country asking the EU not to make the new country a black-hole in the region. In similar spirit, Turkey was also angered about the process as bias.

Serbia might have though been inducted into EU visa liberalization scheme, yet political skirmishes remain within the Serbian politics. The Vojvodina Hungarians' Union's (SVM) decision to oppose the 2010 budget is an indication to that, yet the Serbian prime minister said such will inform any form of early election.

Serbia's EU membership application coincides with Serbian parliament move to pass the 2010 budget. The budget was geared to meet all conditions set by the IMF for the disbursement of the next tranche under a 2.9 billion-euro loan. However, Vojvodina Hungarians' Union (SVM), withdrew its support, insisting there was not enough money in the budget for capital investments in Vojvodina

Croatians are going to the polls during the weekend amid a deepening economic crisis and concerns over high-level corruption to elect a president to steer the Balkans country into the European Union.

After the debated Romanian election, the president has now been sworn in, while his nominated prime minister has selected his cabinets. The new cabinet is approved by the parliament. Hence, Romania returns to relatively stable political scenario.

Kosovo's municipal elections has taken place though approve as a success, nonetheless a re-election is expected to take place in certain disputed municipalities.

Meanwhile, according to the Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED) there has been a softening and increased participation of Kosovo Serbs in local elections this year. Such political behavioural change is a sign of political development in the newly independent state.

The exclusion of Albania from the EU visa liberalization scheme holds mainly for the political instability in the country. Couple to that is the wide spread of corruption which the government has promised to uproot. Albania among others western Balkan countries struggles to make necessary reforms as deemed by the EU before accession can take place.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

At large war criminals should not consider their offense unpunishable, regional governments continue scouting for the criminals and those now apprehended are facing the book for their unforgettable crimes.

Bosnia minorities are of the plaint that the hegemony of the three major ethnic groups makes it difficult for minority serious political participation. It is in this direction, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), created as an annex to the Dayton Peace Agreements is discriminatory against minorities. Meanwhile, the Court of BiH has charged a group of Bosnian Muslims with terrorism and illegal weapons trafficking.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Oceania

Political Issue

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Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Report Details

US/Canada

ABOARD A U.S. MILITARY AIRCRAFT – The top U.S. military officer said Sunday he does not assume Iran's brief seizure of an Iraqi oil well is part of an orchestrated plan in Tehran to threaten its neighbors. Adm. Mike Mullen also said he's worried about "the clock now running" on the Obama administration's efforts at trying to keep the lines of communication open with Iran. The administration had given a rough deadline of the end of 2009 for Iran to respond to an offer of engagement and show that it would allay world concerns about its nuclear program. Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, supports that offer, and has said any military strike on Iran, whether by Israel or the United States, should be a last resort.

The U.S. and others worry that Iran's program is intended to develop nuclear weapon. Iran says its work is peaceful and designed to generate electricity but has defied international demands to prove it is not trying to build an atomic bomb. The administration is now beginning a push to get international support for additional penalties against Iran as a result, and Mullen suggested he thinks that backing was there. "I think signals are very clearly in the air that another set of sanctions, another resolution, that that's coming," he said. "I grow increasingly concerned that the Iranians have been non-responsive. I've said for a long time we don't need another conflict in that part of the world," he said. "I'm not predicting that would happen, but I think they've got to get to a position where they are a constructive force and not a destabilizing force." The administration is concerned about Iran's refusal to carry through on a tentative deal struck

in October that called for Iran to ship the majority of its low-enriched uranium out of the country in exchange for fuel to run a research reactor. The deal was seen by the U.S. and its negotiating partners as a step toward building confidence in Iran's claim that its nuclear program is designed entirely to generate power, not weapons. The administration also stepped up the momentum toward sanctions after the revelation in September that Iran was secretly building a second uranium-enrichment facility near the holy city of Qom. Mullen, who spoke to reporters while flying from Germany back to the U.S., said the oil well incident adds to his concerns about Iran's intentions toward neighboring Iraq and the rest of the world.

WASHINGTON – Landmark health care legislation backed by President Barack Obama passed its sternest Senate test in the pre-dawn hours early Monday, overcoming Republican delaying tactics on a 60-40 vote that all but assures its passage by Christmas. "Let's make history," said Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, shortly before the bill's supporters demonstrated their command of the Senate floor in an extraordinary holiday season showdown. The bill would extend coverage to more than 30 million Americans who now lack it, while banning insurance company practices such as denial of benefits on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions. The atmosphere was intensely partisan, but the outcome pre-ordained as senators cast their votes from their desks, a practice reserved for issues of particular importance. Administration officials who have worked intensely on the issue watched from the visitor's gallery despite the hour. So, too, Vicki Kennedy, the widow of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., who championed health care across a Senate career that spanned more than 40 years.

WASHINGTON – Senate Democrats won a crucial test vote on President Barack Obama's health care overhaul, putting them on track for passage before Christmas of the historic legislation to remake the nation's medical system and cover 30 million uninsured. All 58 Democrats and the Senate's two independents held together early Monday against unanimous Republican opposition, providing the exact 60-40 margin needed to shut down a threatened GOP filibuster. The vote came shortly after 1 a.m. with the nation's capital blanketed in snow, the unusual timing made necessary in order to get to a final vote by Christmas Eve presuming Republicans stretch out the debate as much as the rules allow. Despite the late hour and a harshly partisan atmosphere, Democrats' spirits were high. "Today we are closer than we've ever been to making Sen. Ted Kennedy's dream of universal health insurance coverage a reality," Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, said ahead of the vote, alluding to the late Massachusetts senator who died of brain cancer in August. "Vote your hopes, not your fears. Seize the moment," Harkin urged colleagues.

Kennedy's widow, Vicki, watched the vote from the visitor's gallery along with administration officials who have worked intensely on the issue. Senators cast their votes from their desks, a practice reserved for issues of particular importance.

The outcome was preordained after Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., wrangled his fractious caucus into line over the course of the past several months, culminating in a frenzy of last-minute deals and concessions to win over the final holdouts, independent Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and conservative Democrat Ben Nelson of Nebraska. Obama's oft-stated goal of a bipartisan health bill was not met, despite the president's extensive courtship of moderate Sen. Olympia Snowe of Maine,

the only Republican to support the bill in committee. Obama called Snowe to the White House for lengthy in-person meetings both before he left for climate talks in Copenhagen and after his return on Saturday. In the end Snowe said she was "extremely disappointed" in what she called a rushed process that left scant time for her to review, much less amend, the bill.

WASHINGTON – Democrats pushed sweeping health care legislation to the brink of Senate passage Wednesday, crushing a year-end Republican filibuster against President Barack Obama's call to remake the nation's health care system.

The 60-39 vote marked the third time in as many days Democrats have posted a supermajority needed to advance the legislation. Final passage, set for about dawn on Thursday, was a certainty, and will clear the way for talks with the House on a final compromise. Those negotiations likely will stretch into February.

The Senate has met for 24 consecutive days to debate the legislation, the second-longest such stretch in history, and Democrats held a celebratory press conference.

"We stand on the doorstep of history," said Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, who painstakingly pieced together the bill — and the now-controversial deals with wavering lawmakers that made its passage possible.

The measure would extend coverage to an estimated 31 million who lack it, while banning the insurance industry from denying benefits or charging higher premiums on the basis of pre-existing medical conditions. The Congressional Budget Office predicts the bill will reduce deficits by \$130 billion over the next 10 years, an estimate that assumes lawmakers carry through on hundreds of billions of dollars in planned cuts to insurance companies and doctors, hospitals and others who treat Medicare patients.

Obama has also said he wants legislation that slows the rate of growth in medical spending nationwide, but the CBO said it has not determined whether that is the case with the bill. Unlike the House, the Senate measure omits a government-run insurance option, which liberals favored to apply pressure on private insurers but Democratic moderates opposed as an unwarranted federal intrusion into the health care system.

In an interview with PBS, Obama signaled he will sign a bill even if it lacks the provision. "Would I like one of those options to be the public option? Yes. Do I think that it makes sense, as some have argued, that, without the public option, we dump all these other extraordinary reforms and we say to the 30 million people who don't have coverage, 'You know, sorry. We didn't get exactly what we wanted?' I don't think that makes sense."

WASHINGTON – The way abortions are covered under health care reform is a major obstacle to finalizing the legislation, even though the House and Senate both agree that no federal money should be used. The stumbling block is whether insurance plans that get federal money are completely barred from covering abortions, or whether they can cover it as long as they require customers to write separate checks for the procedure using their own money. Why does that matter? Because the House and Senate solved the dispute in different ways, neither of which makes everyone happy, and now they have to find a further compromise. "Something's going to have to give," said Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., author of the abortion language in the House. At this point it's not clear what that will be, although talks to resolve the issue have already begun and all involved in the

intraparty dispute say they want to be able to support a final health care bill. "We want to see a health care bill passed and we don't think it's particularly helpful for anyone to draw a line in the sand," said Rep. Diana DeGette, D-Colo., a leader of the House Pro-Choice Caucus. Abortion threatened to derail both the House and Senate legislation before last-minute compromises satisfied anti-abortion Democrats in both chambers. But those hard-won deals look very different. The health bill passed by the House in November bars federal funding from going to any insurance plan that includes abortion coverage. That's a significant limitation because Congress' redesigned health care system would give federal subsidies to millions of lower-income people to help them buy insurance at new marketplaces called exchanges. Since the bulk of purchasers in the exchanges would be receiving federal subsidies, most, if not all, insurance plans would be receiving federal money and therefore would be barred from covering abortion. Stupak's House language does allow insurers to offer separate rider policies covering only abortion, but abortion-rights activists contend such policies would be unlikely to materialize because there'd be little market for them. They note that most women don't plan for abortions ahead of time. Abortions in the first trimester typically cost between \$350 and \$900, according to Planned Parenthood.

WASHINGTON – Senate Democrats passed a landmark health care bill in a climactic Christmas Eve vote that could define President Barack Obama's legacy and usher in near-universal medical coverage for the first time in the country's history. The 60-39 vote on a cold winter morning capped months of arduous negotiations and 24 days of floor debate. It also followed a succession of failures by past congresses to get to this point. Vice President Joe Biden presided as 58 Democrats and two independents voted "yes." Republicans unanimously voted "no." The tally far exceeded the simple majority required for passage. The Senate's bill must still be merged with legislation passed by the House before Obama could sign a final bill in the new year. There are significant differences between the two measures but Democrats say they've come too far now to fail. Both bills would extend health insurance to more than 30 million more Americans. Vicki Kennedy, the widow of the late Massachusetts Sen. Edward Kennedy, who made health reform his life's work, watched the vote from the gallery. So did Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., the longest-serving House member and a champion of universal health care his entire career. "This morning isn't the end of the process, it's merely the beginning. We'll continue to build on this success to improve our health system even more," Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said before the vote. "But that process cannot begin unless we start today ... there may not be a next time."

At a news conference a few moments later, Reid said the vote "brings us one step closer to making Ted Kennedy's dream a reality." The Nevadan said that "every step of this long process has been an enormous undertaking." Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., chairman of the Finance Committee, said he "very happy to see people getting health care they could not get." It was the Senate's first Christmas Eve vote since 1895, when the matter at hand was a military affairs bill concerning employment of former Confederate officers, according to the Senate Historical Office.

INDIANAPOLIS – Health insurers get some big presents in the Senate's health overhaul bill — about 20 million new customers and no competition from a new government plan. Taking advantage of those boons might take some time, though. The bill imposes hefty new taxes and coverage rules that will pinch insurers by forcing them to cover more sick people without gaining enough healthy, lower-cost customers, industry insiders say. The industry is also worried the bill doesn't do enough to control health care costs. It's a matter of figuring out how to make those new customers profitable, analysts say. "There's opportunity," Miller Tabak analyst Les Funtleyder said. "Where the rubber meets the road is can you access that opportunity? At least some of them will figure out how to do it." The Senate bill is much more favorable to insurers than a similar bill passed in the House that contains a government-run option for consumers seeking individual insurance, something insurers have fought hard. They worry that a government-run plan that sets rates below market prices would pose unfair competition. Though the Senate bill still has to be reconciled with the House bill, most observers believe the government-run plan, often called a "public option," will disappear because it lacks Senate support. Both bills call for the creation of insurance exchanges that help people buy coverage. Insurers likely will lose money on business from those exchanges, said Robert Laszewski, a former insurance executive and president of Health Policy and Strategy Associates, a Virginia-based health care consultant. It's a tradeoff: People without insurance would be required to buy it — in some cases, subsidies will help them pay for it — or face fines if they don't. Insurers, in turn, would no longer be able to deny coverage based on pre-existing conditions such as diabetes or cancer. But the proposed fines are too weak and the subsidies too meager to truly motivate people to buy insurance, Laszewski said. This means the people most motivated to buy coverage through these exchanges will be those who already have health problems — who are money losers for insurers. Insurers need a mix of healthy people enrolled in their coverage to help balance out claims they pay for patients who use more insurance. The Senate bill calls for fines for people who do not purchase coverage and are not exempt from a mandate to buy it. They start at \$95 in 2014 and rise to \$750 by 2016.

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama plans to deal with a Dec. 31 deadline that automatically would declassify secrets in more than 400 million pages of Cold War-era documents by ordering government-wide changes that could sharply curb the number of new and old government records hidden from the public. In an executive order the president is likely to sign before year's end, Obama will create a National Declassification Center to clear up the backlog of Cold War documents. But the order also will give everyone more time to process the 400 million pages rather than flinging them open at year's end without a second glance.

The order aimed at eliminating unnecessary secrecy also is expected to direct all agencies to revise their classification guides — the more than 2,000 separate and unique manuals used by federal agencies to determine what information should be classified and what no longer needs that protection. The manuals form the foundation of the government's classification system. Two of every three such guides haven't been updated in the past five years, according to the 2008 annual report of the Information Security Oversight Office, which oversees the government's security classification.

The anticipated timing of Obama's order was disclosed by a government official familiar with the planning who requested anonymity in order to discuss the order before its release. A draft of the order leaked last summer.

The still-classified Cold War records would provide a wealth of data on U.S.-Soviet relations, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the fall of the Berlin Wall, diplomacy and espionage. A Soviet spy ring in the Navy led by John Walker headlined 1985, which became known as "The Year of the Spy." It took 19 years and a lawsuit for the National Security Archive, a private group that obtains and analyzes once-secret government records, to get documents on the 1959 crisis when the United States and the Soviet Union faced off over control of West Berlin. For nearly two decades, the contested documents were shuttled back and forth among various offices in the Defense Department, then on to the State Department and an unnamed intelligence agency, each conducting a separate declassification review, before the government finally gave some of them up. Obama's executive order will follow on the president's inauguration day initiatives on open government. On his first day in office, Obama instructed federal agencies to be more responsive to requests for records under the Freedom of Information Act and he overturned an order by President George W. Bush that would have enabled former presidents and vice presidents to block release of sensitive records of their time in the White House.

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama's commitment to close the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, by next month may be delayed until 2011 because it will take months for the government to buy an Illinois prison and upgrade it to hold suspected terrorists. The drawn-out construction timetable shows the political risk of Obama's pledge, a delay that could even be extended by congressional opposition to funding the purchase and upgrades for the Thomson Correctional Center, an underused state facility about 150 miles west of Chicago. Lawmakers in both parties have been wary of bringing detainees to the United States. Attorney General Eric Holder already has decided that self-declared 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and four others will be tried in federal court in New York City. In the Senate, a spokesman for Republican leader Mitch McConnell promised that the GOP would use delaying tactics to prevent funding the Illinois facility and added that he expected support from Democrats. "I think there will be bipartisan opposition" to bringing detainees to Illinois, Donald Stewart said.

Congress also needs to change a law prohibiting detention in the U.S. of detainees who are not awaiting trial. The prison in rural western Illinois may not be purchased from the state until March and will need up to 10 months of construction, said Joe Shoemaker, spokesman for Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill. Shoemaker said, "The end of 2010 or the start of 2011 has always been the mark the administration talked to us about." Obama originally said Guantanamo would close Jan. 22, 2010. While that date proved unrealistic, the president has directed administration officials to move quickly to acquire the maximum-security prison in Illinois.

White House spokesman Ben LaBolt on Wednesday would not say when Guantanamo would close. "The president remains as committed today to closing the detention facility at Guantanamo as he was when he entered office, and substantial progress has been made in recent weeks," LaBolt told The Associated Press. "The

detainee population at Guantanamo is now smaller than it has been at any time since 2002. "We will work with Congress to ensure that we secure the necessary funds to purchase and upgrade the Thomson prison — which will operate at a substantially lower cost to taxpayers — next year," he said. The failure to meet the timetable may have cost White House counsel Greg Craig his job, since Craig, who is leaving next month, was heading the effort to close the facility.

WASHINGTON – The State Department's internal watchdog on Wednesday criticized the agency's nearly \$2 billion anti-drug effort in Afghanistan for poor oversight and lack of a long-term strategy. The department's inspector general said the Afghanistan counter-narcotics program is hampered by too few personnel and rampant corruption among Afghan officials. The inspector general's report also noted that despite a consensus among U.S. agencies that eradicating poppy fields is essential, the focus has shifted to interdiction of drug organizations and alternative crop projects. That shift is advocated strongly by Richard Holbrooke, the Obama administration's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The 69-page review also said U.S. embassies in Afghanistan and Pakistan are not adequately coordinating the program's activities. It recommended that the State Department set out clear guidelines for measuring success, boost staffing and improve interagency cooperation. "The department has not clarified an end state for counternarcotics efforts, engaged in long-term planning, or established performance measures for its multipillared approach to counter poppy cultivation and the resultant illegal narcotics industry," the report said. Afghanistan is the world's leading producer of opium poppy and extremists use drug proceeds to finance their fight against U.S. and foreign troops. The report also said that as the U.S. military tries to break the link between the narcotics industry and the insurgency, the State Department's role in the anti-drug effort will change and that no plans are in place to prepare for that. "Although the department is planning new counternarcotics actions ... there is no agreement on appropriate roles for either civilian agencies or the U.S. military," it said. "The department has also failed to plan for transitioning responsibility to the Afghan government, should U.S. government funding not be sustainable at current levels." The report allowed that the program has made "some progress" but said "successes are difficult to quantify due to imprecise measurement and transnational factors." And, it said that the department's "lack of meaningful performance measures adds to the problem."

The hiring of temporary workers has surged, suggesting that the nation's employers might soon take the next step, bringing on permanent workers, if they can just convince themselves that the upturn in the economy will be sustained. As demand rose after the last two recessions, in the early 1990s and in 2001, employers moved more quickly. They added temps for only two or three months before stepping up the hiring of permanent workers. Now temp hiring has risen for four months, the economy is growing, and still corporate managers have been reluctant to shift to hiring permanent workers, relying instead on temps and other casual labor easily shed if demand slows again. "When a job comes open now, our members fill it with a temp, or they extend a part-timer's hours, or they bring in a freelancer — and then they wait to see what will happen next," said William J. Dennis Jr., director of research for the National Federation of Independent Business. The rising employment of temp workers is not all bad. However

uncertain their status, they do count in government statistics as wage-earning workers, adding to the employment rolls and helping to bring down the monthly job loss to just 11,000 in November. Indeed, the unemployment rate fell in 36 states in November, the **Bureau of Labor Statistics** reported last week, partly because of the growing use of temps. The bureau, which issues the monthly employment reports, does not distinguish between permanent and casual employment, with one exception: it has a special category for temp workers, the men and women supplied by **Manpower, Kelly Services**, Adecco and other agencies. Last month 52,000 temps were added, greater than the number of new workers in any other category. Not even health care and government, stalwarts through the long **recession, did better.**

COPENHAGEN -- An agreement on climate change, forged here by President Obama and the leaders of China, India, Brazil and South Africa, disappointed many delegates and environmentalists. But it may provide impetus for passage of climate change legislation in the Senate. The Copenhagen Accord included two elements that are seen as critical to winning the support of senators, especially those from manufacturing states, who are worried that U.S. industry would be forced to live by rules that would give an advantage to Chinese competitors. First, it commits China to reining in emissions of greenhouse gases, which could help sway senators who are worried about China doing its part. Second, it requires nations to allow international verification of their carbon reduction activities, an issue about which some senators have voiced concerns.

"We will be able to review China's progress in an international format," said Brooks Yeager, who led environmental negotiations for the State Department during the Clinton administration. "That's pretty important from the point of view of the competitive interests that are important to the Senate." Yeager, now executive vice president for policy at the nonprofit group Clean Air-Cool Planet, called the agreement "weak" but said China's involvement is significant and means that the Senate "could realistically be brought around to considering a climate change bill this spring."

The Copenhagen talks ended over the weekend in chaos and confusion, with a majority voting simply to "take note" of the deal after unanimous ratification failed. Obama himself said the deal falls short of what will be necessary in the long run to mitigate global warming, calling it only a "first step." The agreement includes no legally binding language and few details, with the expectation that specifics will be fleshed out over the coming year. The agreement, however, reflects the firm stance of U.S. negotiators to base concessions and demands on what could realistically be expected to pass the Senate. Under the accord, countries would reduce greenhouse gas emissions sufficient to hold the rise in global temperatures to less than 2 degrees Celsius. Developed nations would provide "adequate, predictable and sustainable" financial resources to help poor countries adapt to the impact of climate change.

It commits developed countries to a joint adaptation fund of \$30 billion through 2012, ramping up to \$100 billion annually through 2020. And it requires both the reductions and financing to be "measured, reported and verified" to "ensure that accounting of such targets is rigorous, robust and transparent."

Those broad concepts could be enough to bring some wavering senators to the table. But the fact that they are broad in the first place suggests heavy lifting ahead as countries wrangle over the details. The next major U.N. climate talks take place next

summer in Mexico, which means the next six months will be critical to the Copenhagen agreement's fate.

OTTAWA (Reuters) – In a sharp change of position, the head of Canada's main opposition party said in an interview published on Saturday that he was not keen on trying to trigger an election next year. The comments by Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff mean it is likely the minority Conservative government -- which needs the support of opposition legislators to stay in power -- will be able to push through its budget early next year. The Liberals were level in the polls with the Conservatives in early September but fell away sharply after Ignatieff said he would try to bring down the government on the grounds that it was mishandling the economy. Prime Minister Stephen Harper accused the Liberals of playing games during a crisis. "Canadians did not want an election in 2009. I've heard that message 100 percent ... for Canadians it was a year of anguish and economic uncertainty," Ignatieff told the French-language La Presse newspaper. Asked about an election in 2010, he replied: "I think Canadians are still worried about the economy. They keep telling us 'We've had enough elections. Do your work and leave us in peace'. I think that will continue in 2010."

The Liberals have since recovered some of the lost support but polls indicate that if an election were held now, the result would be a third consecutive Conservative minority government. The party won elections in January 2006 and October 2008. No one in Harper's office was immediately available for comment. The prime minister was due to head back to Canada on Saturday from climate talks in Copenhagen. Harper could try to trigger his own defeat over the budget -- expected in late February or early March - - by including policies unacceptable to the three opposition parties, who control a majority of seats in the House of Commons. But he has repeatedly stressed he has no interest in an election now and wants to focus on the struggling economy.

A senior Liberal told Reuters on Saturday that while an election in 2010 was not Ignatieff's priority, he would look at the budget before deciding whether to support it or not. Ignatieff, a former journalist and Harvard academic, angered some of his legislators by not consulting them before issuing his election threat in September. The Conservatives regularly portray Ignatieff as a snob who is out of touch with ordinary Canadians. Ignatieff noted that despite the attacks, the two parties were at the same levels of public support as they had been in the 2008 election. The Liberals, who have governed Canada for longer than any other party, lost their way after the 2006 election defeat and are finding it hard to come up with a coherent program. The party is due to hold a policy conference in March. "The priority in 2010 is to create (a) moderate, credible centrist option ... we have a lot of work to do," said Ignatieff.

OTTAWA (Reuters) – The Canadian government will not raise taxes to rein in its budget deficit after a stimulus package ends next year but will focus instead on restraining spending to balance its books, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said.

Ottawa, which unveiled a two-year stimulus program in January, predicts the budget deficit this year will be C\$55.9 billion (\$53 billion). Some economists say this can only be eliminated with the help of tax increases. "We won't be raising taxes, but we will be constraining growth (in public spending), making sure that growth is very much

contained in the future, and that the tax base of the country can gradually recover," Harper told CTV television in an interview that was shown to reporters on Tuesday.

"And within four to five years, if we follow that path, we should be back to a balanced budget." The minority Conservative government has cut taxes several times since it was first elected in January 2006. Harper, who also said the next budget would be in March, played down the idea that Canada has recovered from the recession. "I'm much more cautious. We don't yet have the kind of private sector-led growth that we need to see. We don't yet have a turnaround in the job market ... we're optimistic that 2010 is going to be a year of recovery."

Western Europe

The French newsweekly *Marianne* calls him "the most hated man in France." A Socialist legislator recently compared him to Pierre Laval - the wartime French official who most enthusiastically collaborated with the nation's Nazi occupiers. Such contempt isn't usually directed at someone in a rather anonymous cabinet role. But Eric Besson, the Minister for Immigration, Integration and National Identity, is different: he's currently overseeing a national debate on French identity that detractors on both the left and the right say stigmatizes minorities and immigrants. And yet, despite the fierce criticism and controversy, he's the cabinet member President Nicolas Sarkozy is relying on most to secure conservative gains in regional elections in March.

As the *Marianne* headline attests, there's something in Besson that just about everyone in France can detest. A former Socialist party official, Besson is considered the consummate traitor by the left after defecting from the 2007 presidential campaign of SÉgolÈne Royal over strategy differences and throwing his support behind Sarkozy, the conservative candidate. Since then, he's embraced his new right-wing faith with the zealously of a convert, making many long-time conservatives uncomfortable. Chief among his more hard-line moves has been the decision to hold an ongoing series of town hall meetings across France to define the French national identity. Some say the forums are already being used by disgruntled right-wingers to blame crime, rising unemployment and other social ills on minorities and immigrants. Opponents also argue that they play into the hands of Jean-Marie Le Pen's extreme-right National Front (FN) party.

"Mixing national identity with immigration is an error," says conservative legislator and former Interior Minister François Baroin, who is one of several politicians on the right calling for the debates to be ended. "It's opening Pandora's box." Former conservative premiers Alain JuppÉ and Jean-Pierre Raffarin have similarly questioned the "utility" and "intellectual rigor" of the debates. And Sarkozy's own commissioner for ethnic diversity, Yazid Sebag, admitted to being "not very comfortable" with the initiative. But Besson has at least one key figure on his side: Sarkozy. On Wednesday, the President expressed his "very strong support" for Besson, whom he described as "the target of unrivaled attacks," including from "friends on his own side." He added that Besson had only introduced the national identity debates that Sarkozy himself had wanted. Neither Besson nor Sarkozy has been shy in acknowledging that the formerly taboo topics of national identity and immigration are now such a concern among voters that they're fair game to be taken up by mainstream conservatives. Some pundits also see stealing a page from Le Pen's playbook as the best way for Sarkozy to woo FN voters to

his camp ahead of the March elections, just as he did in 2007 when his presidential campaign took up anti-immigration and law-and-order platforms to win over far-right voters. Plus, Besson has argued, if you steal FN voters, you will eventually kill the party. "We should have never abandoned values that are part of our Republican patrimony to the National Front," Besson told RTL radio in defending the debates last month. The sharp-tongued Besson has slapped down his leftist detractors with mockery and insults, and even dismissed the growing criticism from the right as "caf  clap-trap." In doing so, he has not only shown the same defiant pugnacity that has become his boss's trademark, but has also become Sarkozy's most effective political operative handling an explosive issue. "Once he bolted the Socialist Party, Besson's very political existence depended not only on joining Sarkozy's cause, but hanging on to his coat-tails as high as they'd take him," says a former adviser to conservative politicians who requested anonymity. "No one else would dirty themselves with this nasty, divisive electoral ploy over national identity, which made it just the job for Besson. He's convinced the sky's his limit, so long as he does whatever Sarkozy orders." But there's a risk to that: the tactic may backfire. Sarkozy's approval ratings have fallen to a record low of 39% since the identity debates were announced. Meanwhile, a poll this week showed that 55% of people consider the debates "not necessary." And two months ago, 64% of respondents in another poll called them merely "an electoral tool." The possibility that this could lead to a spanking for the right in the March elections has only grown as other right-wing politicians have followed Besson's lead with provocative statements of their own. Earlier this month, a conservative mayor in eastern France used the identity debates to describe immigrants in France as "10 million people we pay to do jacks---." And on Dec. 14, Secretary of State for Families Nadine Morano caused an uproar by appearing to characterize young Muslim men in France as job-slacking, slang-speaking louts who need to love their country more. The outcry over such statements - and the debates themselves - has many conservative officials worried that the topic of national identity may alienate far more mainstream voters than it seduces FN backers. If this happens, it could produce a very bad March surprise for the right - something that could cause Sarkozy to bolt from his friend's side and join the growing ranks of Besson haters in the country.

LONDON – Britain's flagship Muslim organization on Wednesday attacked a government pledge to reform a war crimes law used to try to arrest visiting Israeli dignitaries, saying the move could hurt Britain's image in the Middle East. The Muslim Council of Britain said it was "deeply disappointed" that the country's foreign minister, David Miliband, promised to change the law so that judges could no longer issue secret arrest warrants against Israeli officials or military officers, saying the move was biased toward Israel. "You appear to be committing the government to the path of selective compliance with the enforcement of international law," the council's Secretary General Muhammad Abdul Bari wrote in a letter to Miliband. "This is surely not in the best interests of our country as it will add a further dimension to the double standards that our government is seen to have in relation to the politics of the Middle East."

Britain is one of the European pioneers of universal jurisdiction, a broad legal concept that empowers judges to issue arrest warrants for nearly any visitor accused of committing war crimes anywhere in the world. Spain and Belgium have similar rules.

Because ministers and heads of state tend to enjoy immunity, pro-Palestinian activists in Britain and elsewhere have often set their sights on former Israeli officials — most recently targeting Tzipi Livni, who served as foreign minister at the time of Israel's attack a year ago on the Gaza Strip. The winter offensive, aimed at ending rocket strikes in Israel, claimed more than 1,400 Palestinian lives, among them hundreds of civilians, and drew a storm of international criticism. Thirteen Israelis were also killed.

Israelis were outraged and British government officials embarrassed when it emerged last week that a London judge had issued an arrest warrant for Livni on suspicion of involvement in war crimes.

The warrant was later withdrawn when it became clear Livni would not come to the country, but the matter badly strained relations between Britain and the Jewish state. Israeli President Shimon Peres demanded that Britain change the law, saying that British officials had "promised they would fix this and it is time that they do so." Miliband has said that the British government is determined to put an end to the threat of arrest hanging over visitors of Livni's stature, explaining that Israeli leaders needed to be able to travel freely to Britain if U.K.-Israeli relations were to endure. The Muslim Council urged Miliband to reconsider. "Justice and fairness is not served by being or by being seen to be partisan and compliant to demands made by one major player in the conflict," it said. Calls seeking comment from Britain's Foreign Office and its Ministry of Justice were not immediately returned.

LONDON – British leader Gordon Brown won't testify before his country's investigation of the Iraq war until after the next general election, the committee behind the inquiry said Wednesday. The Iraq Inquiry, which is investigating the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, said Brown and other senior ministers wouldn't be quizzed until after the poll in an effort to keep proceedings clear of party politics.

"The committee believes that only after the general election can these ministers give their evidence fully without the hearings being used as a platform for political advantage," it said in a statement. A general election — which is widely expected to sweep Brown's ruling Labour Party out of office — must be held some time before the middle of 2010.

The decision to delay Brown's testimony was criticized by Britain's two leading opposition parties. Britain's Liberal Democrats said it appeared that John Chilcot, who was appointed by Brown to lead the inquiry earlier this year, was sparing the prime minister a potential embarrassment ahead of a tough election.

"This looks like a deal cooked up ... to save Gordon Brown and his ministers from facing the music," Liberal Democrat lawmaker Edward Davey said in a statement.

"Brown signed the checks for the Iraq war, and he should explain that decision before polling day," he added, referring to Brown's tenure as treasury chief at the time of invasion. The opposition Conservatives, who unlike the Liberal Democrats supported the invasion, also criticized the inquiry's decision. Critics of the invasion had long demanded an investigation into whether the war, which has been extremely unpopular in Britain, was illegal. Many were disappointed when it was announced that the inquiry had no power to apportion blame or establish criminal or civil liability. The easygoing tone of questioning has also been criticized. Its mandate is limited to offering recommendations on how to prevent a repeat of the mistakes that dogged the invasion and its bloody aftermath. Still, it remains the most sweeping investigation of its kind by any nation

involved in the war, and it is the first time that many senior officials — including British ambassadors to Washington, top foreign policy advisers, spy masters and military chiefs — have had to answer publicly for their role in the conflict.

AMSTERDAM – The top U.N. climate official says that though the Copenhagen global warming summit went sour countries should avoid blaming each other and get down to work on a better deal next year. Yvo de Boer says the 193-nation conference that ended last weekend outlined a way forward for negotiators and succeeded in mobilizing emergency funds for poor nations to prepare for climate change. President Barack Obama helped broker a limited accord in the last hours. But de Boer says the achievements were set aside amid acrimony over the failure to reach a legally binding deal.

De Boer told Britain's BBC television Wednesday that "things may have gone sour in Copenhagen," but a broader agreement won't be achieved "by pointing fingers at each other."

ATHENS, Greece -- Parliament began discussions late on Saturday (December 19th) on the country's 2010 budget, and aimed to find a way out of the current financial crisis. "This first step is one of the most complicated moments in our recent history... In a moment of unprecedented crisis that has hit the country we need national unity between parties, public institutions, businesses, workers," said Prime Minister George Papandreou. He said that rating agencies that lowered their assessments of Greece's solvency are undermining the government's efforts to stabilise the economy. In December, Standard & Poor's and Fitch downgraded Greece's sovereign rating due to the country's huge budget deficit and public debts.

Speaking in Copenhagen on the sidelines of the UN Climate Change Conference last week, Papandreou urged Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez, whose country will take over the EU's rotating presidency in January, to look into the policies of rating agencies.

ATHENS (AFP) – T Greece -- Parliament began discussions late on Saturday (December 19th) on the country's 2010 budget, and aimed to find a way out of the current financial crisis. he Greek parliament has adopted a crisis budget for 2010 in a bid to bring order to its chaotic public finances and restore its badly dented credibility with foreign investors and the European Union. The budget, passed by a healthy majority in the single-chamber parliament late Wednesday, is marked by a reduction in the public deficit from 12.7 percent of output in 2009 to 9.1 percent. The 160 Socialist Pasok deputies in power since October voted for the budget, and 139 opposition members including conservatives, communists, the radical left and extreme right voted against. One conservative member was absent. Wrapping up five days of debates, which came as Greece's debt has soared bringing a drop in its credit ratings, Prime Minister George Papandreou said the budget was "a contract to reconquer our credibility."

Papandreou went on: "We shall prove our capacity and determination to change this country, to ourselves and to any foreigner who puts in doubt our will."

The Socialists, elected in October on an economy rescue ticket, had already warned that the 2010 budget was the nation's "toughest" since the restoration of democracy in 1974 after seven years of military rule. The government is struggling to restore investor

confidence and muster funds to service an estimated 300-billion-euro debt following three successive downgrades from international credit rating agencies this month.

The budget aims to reduce the deficit from 12.7 percent of output to 9.1 percent in 2010, which would still exceed the limit of 3.0 percent for countries that use the single European currency. But the government has already promised to aim for a bolder deficit cut to 8.7 percent of output next year.

Under the budget the debt will in fact rise to 120.8 percent of GDP compared to 113.4 percent for 2009. Expenditure will fall back by 2.3 percent while income is slated to rise by nine percent over 2009. Tax revenue is expected to be up due to a tougher fight against fraud while public spending will be cut essentially through cutting back on waste. The defence ministry's budget is down 6.6 percent over 2009. GDP is expected to stagnate in 2010 with a drop of 0.3 percent, showing a slight improvement over 2009 when a drop of 1.2 percent is expected. Inflation is forecast at 1.4 percent against 1.2 while unemployment would continue to rise, to 9.7 percent against nine percent in 2009. Public coffers face a major drain from state hospital debts -- estimated at 6.3 billion euros -- and pension funds sapped by Greece's aging population and widespread social contribution avoidance. "Unless this course is checked we'll need loans in May to pay pensions and other benefits," deputy labour minister George Koutroumanis told deputies. The government also plans to borrow up to 53 billion euros in 2010 and expects to fork out 12.95 billion euros -- or 5.3 percent of output -- in interest payments next year to service the debt. The Socialists pledged to cut waste in the bloated Greek civil service and public sector and boost revenue through a crackdown on entrenched tax evasion.

ATHENS, Greece -- Moody's downgraded Greece's credit rating Tuesday (December 22nd), the third ratings agency to do so over fiscal concerns. Moody's said that its future rating decisions will depend on the government's plans to cut debts. Earlier this month, Standard & Poor's and Fitch downgraded Greece's sovereign rating due to the country's huge budget deficit and public debt. Greece, a member of the eurozone, has been heavily criticised for its rapidly expanding deficit, now estimated at 12.7% of GDP. Analysts had predicted Moody's downgrade of government bonds would be worse than it was, triggering a welcome rally in early trading Tuesday. The Athens benchmark stock index was up 2.42%. Over the past 30 days, it has dropped 11.9%.

ATHENS, Greece -- The civil servants' trade union ADEDY announced on Tuesday (December 22nd) that it plans to stage a 24-hour strike in late January or early February against the labour and wage reforms planned by the government, in the face of ballooning debt and deficits. "We will not accept that the cost of the crisis will be borne on our shoulders," ADEDY head Spyros Papaspyros told Reuters. The private sector trade union, the General Confederation of Greek Workers, also said on Tuesday that it is considering a strike.

ATHENS, Greece -- President Karolos Papoulias declined his Macedonian counterpart's invitation for a visit on Tuesday (December 22nd), saying such a trip would be possible only after the name dispute between the two countries is resolved. Macedonian President Gjorge Ivanov had extended the invitation early last month. In his response Tuesday, Papoulias wrote "I do not wish to suggest what would be in the

interest of your country... [but] a solution to the name issue will prove beneficial for the legitimate aspirations of your people." "I ought to highlight that the longer it takes for a solution, the longer the accession course of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia towards the EU will remain pending," the Greek head of state added.(

LONDON – World stock markets rose Wednesday amid mounting optimism about the speed of the U.S. economic recovery after further solid economic data.

In Europe, the FTSE 100 index of leading British shares was up 49.51 points, or 0.9 percent, at 5,378.17 while Germany's DAX rose 24.78 points, or 0.4 percent, to 5,970.47. The CAC-40 in France was 28.47 points, or 0.7 percent, higher at 3,926.85.

Earlier, all major Asian markets rose strongly in the wake of Tuesday's advance on Wall Street after existing home sales figures for November came in much stronger than anticipated. Wall Street was poised to open higher again shortly after strong personal incomes and spending data — Dow futures were up 22 points, or 0.2 percent, at 10,430 while the broader Standard & Poor's 500 futures rose 3.9 points, or 0.4 percent, to 1,117.50. The Commerce Department reported that personal incomes rose by a six-month high of 0.4 percent in November while spending swelled 0.5 percent, the second consecutive monthly increase.

The focus later will be on new homes sales figures for November and whether they match the previous day's strong existing home sales data. In addition, investors will be looking for an insight into the state of consumer confidence in the crucial pre-Christmas period, when the University of Michigan updates its most recent survey.

"New home sales may not match the scale of the leap in existing home sales, but they should still be higher, and the market is also flirting with the idea of an upward revision to consumer confidence," said Daragh Maher, an analyst at Calyon Credit Agricole.

Contrary to many expectations, stocks around the world have rallied this week — many analysts were anticipating a modest pullback as investors shut up shop for the year by booking profits accumulated during the nine-month bull market.

Earlier, China's benchmark Shanghai Composite Index rose 23.26 points, or 0.8 percent, to 3,073.78, while Sydney's S&P/ASX added 0.8 percent to 4,739.30 amid strength in coal stocks.

Latin America

QUITO, Ecuador – Ecuador has revoked the broadcast license for an indigenous radio station in the Amazon region over accusations it incited violence during protests in October. Station director Pepe Acacho said Wednesday that radio Arutam continues to broadcast to the Shuar Indian community in spite of the revocation.

The Shuar put up barbed-wire roadblocks on highway bridges in Ecuador's southeastern jungles in October to protest proposed legislation they said would allow mining on Indian lands without their consent and lead to the privatization of water.

After a protester was killed, President Rafael Correa backed away from the proposal and withdrew police from the restive area. "We are going to be on alert, in constant communication with our followers," said Acacho, also a Shuar leader. "We've warned before about persecution by the government against our indigenous movement, especially against the Shuar Federation." Also on Wednesday, nationwide TV broadcaster

Teleamazonas filed a new appeal against a three-day shutdown by Ecuador's telecommunication regulator. The station, which went off the air Tuesday, has been highly critical of what its news anchor has suggested are Correa's autocratic tendencies.

Correa said Wednesday that he did not have any influence over the decision by regulators to sanction Teleamazonas for allegedly reporting false information.

The June broadcast cited by the regulator claimed Ecuador's natural gas exploration in the Gulf of Guayaquil being done jointly with Venezuela's state oil company could force the suspension of fishing for six months. Teleamazonas's vice president of news, Carlos Jijon, insisted Wednesday that the suspension was politically motivated. "I have the right to suspect that the decision to close Teleamazonas was not made by the superintendent of telecommunications but instead by the president of Ecuador," he said.

QUITO (Reuters) – An Ecuadorean private television station critical of President Rafael Correa came back on air on Friday after a three-day suspension that fueled concern among government critics over press freedom in the Andean country.

Correa has in the past called for the Teleamazonas channel to be shut down for broadcast what he said were false reports and has lashed out at private stations he says are conspiring with business groups opposed to his socialist reforms.

The country's telecommunications superintendency ordered Teleamazonas off the air after charging the channel with broadcasting unsubstantiated news reports earlier this year. "We will maintain our responsible, independent and pluralist journalistic line," Teleamazonas vice president Carlos Jijon told Reuters.

Teleamazonas said the suspension was illegal and it plans legal action. It had been under investigation for violations of a law drafted by a dictatorship nearly 35 years ago. Officials say the station was given full rights to defend itself.

Correa says he is not undermining press freedom, but fighting media barons who have for years gone unregulated. The Ecuadorean leader says tighter regulation is needed, but his campaign parallels moves by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who refused to renew the license of one broadcaster and threatened to shut another anti-government station.

The suspension came as Ecuador's lawmakers debate creation of a government-controlled watchdog with powers to punish journalists, in a measure critics say they fear will be used in a crackdown on media freedoms.

CARACAS (Reuters) – Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez has threatened to expel Japanese carmaker Toyota unless it produces an all-terrain model of 4x4 vehicles used for public transport in poor and rural areas. The fiery socialist, in a speech late on Wednesday, also said he would not hesitate to expel and expropriate plants from other Asian and U.S. automobile companies operating in Venezuela if they failed to share technology with locals. "What's this that Toyota doesn't want to make the 'rustic' model here?" Chavez said, during a ceremony in Caracas to hand owners the keys to economically produced cars that Venezuela's government has imported from Argentina.

"We must force them. And if they don't, then they should leave and we'll bring another company in ... The Chinese want to come and they make 'rustic' models."

During a decade in power, Chavez has nationalized large swathes of the Venezuela economy -- including the oil and power sectors -- as part of his "21st century revolution" but has so far left car manufacturing relatively untouched. He turned on Toyota, the

world's biggest automaker, when a transporter said there was a scarcity of all-terrain models to serve people in under-privileged areas. Caracas' poor mainly live in hillside slums, while many rural areas lack decent roads, meaning tough 4x4s are the main means of transport. Chavez ordered his Trade Minister Eduardo Saman to carry out a "severe inspection" of Toyota, and warned other companies they must start sharing technology with Venezuelans. "You tell the people at Toyota that they have to produce this model and we are going to impose a quota, and if they don't meet it, we will punish them," he told Saman, adding that the state would not hesitate to expropriate Toyota's facilities and pay appropriate compensation.

TEGUCIGALPA (AFP) – US Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens visited deposed President Manuel Zelaya on Saturday as part of a bid to find a solution to the political crisis gripping the impoverished Central American nation, an official said.

Zelaya has been holed up at the Brazilian embassy in Tegucigalpa, where he returned in September after a brief exile following his June 28 military-backed ouster.

"Hugo Llorens came to the embassy and told Zelaya he would travel to the United States for Christmas. Steps to resolve the crisis will follow," Zelaya advisor Rasel Tome told AFP. "Efforts are ongoing at the Central American level and in the Dominican Republic for a dialogue in a neutral environment."

Honduras held elections last month won by Porfirio Lobo, who is slated to replace Zelaya and the interim regime in January, when the deposed leader's term officially ends.

Washington backed an agreement in the Honduran crisis that called for Zelaya to be reinstated before the November 29 vote. The pact was not honored, but US support for Zelaya has cooled, with the United States now insisting his reinstatement is an internal matter. De facto leader Roberto Micheletti said Zelaya could only leave the country on condition he give up his claims to the presidency for good, thus thwarting an attempt at dialogue last week between the deposed leader and Lobo set to take place in Santo Domingo. Lobo has called for an "amnesty" of all those involved in the coup, and voiced hope that Micheletti would step down before he is sworn into office next month.

HAVANA – Cuba's foreign minister called President Barack Obama an "imperial and arrogant" liar Monday for his conduct at the U.N. climate conference, a reflection of the communist island's increasingly fiery verbal attacks on the U.S. government.

Bruno Rodriguez spent an hour and a half lambasting Obama's behavior in Copenhagen, telling a news conference, "at this summit, there was only imperial, arrogant Obama, who does not listen, who imposes his positions and even threatens developing countries."

He called the summit "a fallacy, a farce" and said Washington used back-room deals and strong-arm tactics to foist on the world a deal that he labeled "undemocratic" and "suicidal" because it urges — but does not require — major polluters to make deeper emissions cuts. Rodriguez also said Cuba and other poor nations have refused to recognize the agreement because they weren't permitted to participate in its development.

He singled out comments Obama made during a news conference in Copenhagen, when the U.S. president said no agreement had yet been reached but he was confident one would before the summit ended. "Obama knew he was lying, that he was deceiving public opinion," the foreign minister said.

When asked if Cuba was serious about forging a climate agreement given that President Raul Castro declared Copenhagen a failure days before it ended, Rodriguez said, "Cuba's prestige is well-recognized in international negotiations."

"It was an open secret that countries would not reach an agreement," he said.

Rodriguez would not answer questions about the status of an American citizen who was detained in Cuba on Dec. 5 while working as a U.S. government contractor.

Castro first publicly mentioned the detention Sunday, when he told the Cuban Parliament that the American was arrested for distributing illegal satellite communications equipment. "The United States won't quit trying to destroy the revolution," Castro said, referring to the armed rebellion that brought his brother Fidel to power on New Year's Day 1959.

"In the past few weeks we have witnessed the stepping up of the new administration's efforts in this area," he said, adding that the arrest "demonstrates that the enemy is as active as ever."

BOGOTA – Colombia's defense chief joked Monday that Venezuelan troops might have mistaken Santa's sleigh for a spy plane, dismissing accusations by President Hugo Chavez about drones flying over Venezuela. Chavez on Sunday accused the United States of violating Venezuela's airspace with an unmanned spy plane and ordered his military to be on alert and shoot down any such aircraft. The Pentagon has declined to comment on Chavez's accusations. Colombian Defense Minister Gabriel Silva and armed forces commander Freddy Padilla told reporters Monday that Colombian aircraft couldn't fly the kind of espionage mission described by Chavez. "Colombia doesn't have that capability," said Silva. He quipped that perhaps "Venezuelan soldiers mistook Father Christmas' sleigh for a spy plane." Padilla said Colombia has only small, unmanned surveillance planes that it uses to monitor pipelines and other installations against sabotage by rebel groups. "They don't have any firepower and what they do is observe to prevent attacks on electrical towers," Padilla said.

Silva and Padilla did not discuss U.S. military capabilities at Colombian bases. Chavez has accused Colombia of allowing the United States to use its military bases to prepare a possible attack on Venezuela. Both the U.S. and Colombia have denied such allegations in the past, saying the U.S. military presence is for the sole purpose of giving support to Colombia in combatting drug traffickers and rebels.

Southeast Europe

BELGRADE, Serbia/PODGORICA, Montenegro/SKOPJE, Macedonia -- Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia celebrated on Saturday (December 19th) the first day of their visa-free regime with the EU. The decision to scrap visas for citizens of the three countries travelling to the bloc was made on November 30th. "The removal of visas gives our citizens a right that is already enjoyed by other citizens of the EU. It guarantees freedom of movement and affiliation to the European family," the foreign ministries of the three countries said in a joint statement Friday. The three countries held various events on Friday and Saturday to mark the occasion.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- The European Integration Council decided on Saturday (December 19th) that Serbia will submit its EU application by the end of the year. The session was chaired by Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic and was also attended by President Boris Tadic. Speaking to journalists after the session, Cvetkovic said that Belgrade would wait for Sweden, the holder of the EU's rotating presidency, on when a formal request could be filed officially.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- President Boris Tadic will submit Serbia's EU membership application Tuesday (December 22nd) to authorities in Sweden, current holder of the rotating EU presidency. Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt said in a statement Saturday that Serbia has made a historic step, by deciding to apply for EU membership.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- Parliament passed the 2010 budget bill Monday (December 21st), thus meeting all conditions set by the IMF for the disbursement of the next tranche under a 2.9 billion-euro loan. The government got the support of two independent members and one ethnic Albanian member after one of its coalition partners, the Vojvodina Hungarians' Union (SVM), withdrew its support, insisting there was not enough money in the budget for capital investments in Vojvodina. The SVM's decision will lead to a review of relations with that party, said Oliver Dulic, of the senior coalition ally Democratic Party. He said the government must know how many lawmakers it can rely on in parliament. The opposition meanwhile, refused to participate in the vote.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- President Boris Tadic said on Wednesday (December 23rd) that the Vojvodina Hungarians' Union's (SVM) decision to oppose the 2010 budget does not automatically mean early elections. During a visit to Novi Sad, he admitted that the SVM's move was a betrayal to the ruling coalition, but insisted that the government still enjoys a stable majority in parliament. Tadic stressed that early elections are the last thing Serbia needs right now as they would further delay economic reforms, EU integration and the fight against crime. The SVM, part of the ruling coalition, withdrew its support for the budget, insisting there was not enough money in it for capital investments in Vojvodina. The budget squeaked through Monday, with the support of two independent lawmakers and one ethnic Albanian member of parliament proving pivotal. Separately Wednesday, Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic told the RTS that he was surprised by the SVM's decision to oppose the budget, adding that serious talks are required. Parliament Speaker Slavica Djukic-Dejanovic echoed Tadic's view saying the ruling coalition is stable and there is no reason to call early elections.

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- Ali Ahmeti, leader of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), was re-elected on Saturday (December 19th). He was the only candidate for the post. In his victory speech, Ahmeti expressed hope that during Spain's EU presidency, which starts on January 1st, the long-standing name dispute between Macedonia and Greece will be resolved and Macedonia "will finally become a member of NATO and will start talks on full-fledged EU membership."

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- The prosecution announced on Friday (December 18th) they have arrested a former Bosnian Serb police officer

suspected of genocide committed in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre. Goran Markovic, 46, was detained in the town of Bijeljina in the country's northeast early on Friday, the prosecution said. He is suspected of having committed the crime in his capacity as commander of a police unit.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- The Court of BiH convicted two Bosnian Serbs on Monday (December 21st) for war crimes committed against Bosnian civilians in the Kalinovik area during the 1992-1995 conflict. Ratko Bundalo was sentenced to 19 years in prison, while Nedjo Zeljaja got 15 years. They were found guilty of persecution, murder, detention and torture of Muslims from April 1992 to March 1993. A third defendant -- Djordjislav Askra -- was acquitted due to a lack of evidence.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- The Court of BiH has charged a group of Bosnian Muslims with terrorism and illegal weapons trafficking, the court announced on Tuesday (December 22nd). According to the indictment, radical Muslim Rijad Rustempasic organised the group to carry out attacks aimed at destabilising the country. He and two others -- Abdulah Handzic and Edis Velic -- were arrested in November. As part of the same indictment, the court charged Rustempasic's brother, Muhamed, and another man, Edis Strol, with arms trafficking. According to local media reports, the group allegedly planned to bomb Sarajevo's Catholic cathedral, a monastery in the town of Fojnica, and attack NATO troops in BiH. Media reports suggest all those charged were members of the fundamentalist Wahabbi branch of Islam.

In other news Tuesday, police arrested two Bosniaks suspected of committing war crimes against Serb civilians during the 1992-1995 Bosnian conflict. Almir Padalovic, 41, and Pedzo Balic, 57, were detained in Konjic.

STRASBOURG, France -- The European Court of Human Rights ruled on Tuesday (December 22nd) that the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), created as an annex to the Dayton Peace Agreements, discriminates against minorities. The court upheld a complaint filed in 2006 by Dervo Sejdic, who is of Roma origin, and Jakob Finci, who is Jewish. They claimed that the constitution does not allow people who are not Bosniaks, Croats or Serbs to participate in elections for the tripartite presidency or for the upper house of parliament. The review by the court concurred that the constitution stipulates those seats are reserved for the three constituent people, acknowledging however that "this system, put in place at a time when a fragile ceasefire had been accepted by all parties ... pursued the legitimate aim of restoring peace." The court ordered BiH to pay 20,000 euros to Finci and 1,000 euros to Sejdic to cover costs and expenses. It also urged BiH to reform the constitution and guarantee equal representation for all.

ZAGREB (AFP) – Croatians go to the polls Sunday amid a deepening economic crisis and concerns over high-level corruption to elect a president to steer the Balkans country into the European Union. A dozen candidates are seeking to replace the popular centrist Stipe Mesic, who during his maximum two five-year terms in office guided the country to a parliamentary democracy following the authoritarian rule of independence leader Franjo Tudjman. While Mesic succeeded in gaining Croatia's entry into the NATO military alliance earlier this year, the country's EU ambitions were delayed by a border

dispute with neighbouring Slovenia and the country is unlikely to join the 27-member bloc before 2012. Polls show that the election is likely to go to a January 10 runoff as none of the 12 candidates is close to the 50 percent support needed for an outright victory. Ivo Josipovic of the main opposition Social Democrats (SDP) is virtually assured a place in the runoff as polls give him an average lead of 15 percentage points over his opponents. The 52-year-old legal expert and classical music composer, who has an untarnished political career but lacks political charisma, is likely to face either controversial Zagreb mayor Milan Bandic or businessman Nadan Vidosevic.

Polls show the populist Bandic, 54, a former veteran SDP member, is running neck-and-neck with Vidosevic, 49, a former member of the ruling conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) who has headed the Croatian Chamber of Commerce since 1995. Concerns over the economy, which is set to contract by more than five percent this year and experts warn is likely to worsen in 2010, could play to Vidosevic's advantage.

Consumer spending and industrial output have also been dented, while the country's debt is climbing. Croatia's external debt is expected to reach 42.2 billion euros, or 94 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), this year and could reach 100 percent of GDP in 2010, the central bank has warned.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- Police announced on Saturday (December 19th) they have arrested five people as part of an investigation into war crimes against Serb civilians in the southern village of Grubori in the end of the 1991-95 war in Croatia. The five suspects, who are believed to have killed five Serbs, will be questioned Monday. Police spokesperson Krunoslav Borovec said that three are suspected of killing a group that consisted of mainly elderly Serb civilians, and the other two are believed to have covered up the crime.

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia -- Foreign Minister Samuel Zbogar denied on Sunday (December 20th) media allegations that Slovenia is again blocking Croatia's EU membership talks. The statement came after the weekly European Voice reported that Zagreb will be unable to open three negotiation chapters because of Ljubljana's reservations. The chapters are environment, fisheries and foreign, security and defence policy. Zbogar stressed on Sunday that Slovenia's move is not a blockade, rather, stems from reservations in principle over some parts of the text. At Monday's accession conference in Brussels, Croatia will close two other negotiation chapters, bringing the total number of closed chapters to 17 out of 33. Two other chapters don't require talks because domestic laws are already harmonised with those of the EU.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Prime Minister-designate Emil Boc announced his cabinet late on Sunday (December 20th), a total of 17 members, including himself. According to new information, four will represent the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians (UDMR), the Liberal Democratic Party's (PDL) coalition partner, while the rest are either PDL members or non-partisans close to the party. Nominees will appear before relevant parliamentary committees on Tuesday, with a vote by the full parliament expected on Wednesday. If approved, the cabinet will meet for the first time on Thursday, when it is expected to adopt the 2010 budget bill. Boc announced that the cabinet would follow the

same policies it promoted in 2008, when the PDL-Social Democratic Party coalition was formed. This includes considerable fiscal consolidation, required by the IMF.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Parliament approved Prime Minister-designate Emil Boc's cabinet Wednesday (December 23rd) by a vote of 276 to 135. Relevant committees in parliament approved the nominations of all cabinet picks on Tuesday, clearing the way for Wednesday's vote of confidence. The government will be a coalition, comprised of Boc's Liberal Democratic Party and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians. Party leaders have managed to cobble together support from independents and those representing ethnic minorities in parliament as well.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Incumbent President Traian Basescu of the Liberal Democratic Party (PDL) was sworn in to a second term in office on Monday (December 21st). During his inauguration speech, he once again embraced a programme of change and reforms, similar to the start of his term in late 2004. "My goal will be to modernise Romania," Basescu, 58, stressed, explaining that "this means turning [Romania's] formal EU membership into an everyday reality for all Romanians." He also indicated he expects parliament to approve the new cabinet, led by Prime Minister-Designate Emil Boc, when it comes before lawmakers for a vote of confidence Wednesday.

But the National Liberal Party (PNL) announced on Monday it has no intention of supporting the new government. It says its members in parliament will vote against the cabinet for the same reasons they did during a vote of confidence last month that Boc lost, bringing down the government. This time, however, the PDL and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians, the parties comprising the new cabinet, seem to have enough support to survive the vote of confidence. Its ruling majority, however, will be very slim.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Social Democratic Party (PSD) leader Mircea Geoana survived a no confidence vote within his own party Friday (December 18th). The vote followed Geoana's loss in the presidential elections by a narrow 0.75% to Liberal Democratic Party (PDL) candidate Traian Basescu, who won a second term. In addition, four members with seats in parliament left the PSD this month, which could lead to approval of the PDL-Democratic Alliance of Hungarians cabinet, making the PSD an opposition party. Despite this, party leaders were nearly unanimous in their support of Geoana, with only one vote cast against him.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Saudi Arabia established diplomatic relations with Kosovo on Tuesday (December 22nd), with Saudi Ambassador to Albania Abdullah Abdulaziz Alabdulkarim handling duties for Kosovo as well. He said his country has great respect for Kosovo and will continue providing economic support.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The Election Complaints and Appeals Commission (ECAC) decided on Saturday (December 19th) that a revote must be held in three municipalities, after a large number of irregularities were confirmed. ECAC chairperson Tahir Rrecaj said the panel has found falsification of voter lists, a larger number of votes than the number of registered voters, and family voting, a practice in which family members vote on behalf of relatives. A revote will take place in Prizren, Gjilan and

Lipjan where irregularities were confirmed at 50% of the polling stations, though no date has been announced.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Minister of Local Government and Administration Sadri Ferati admitted on Wednesday (December 23rd) that the process of establishing a northern Mitrovica municipality will remain a challenge for the government next year, when local elections are expected there at some point. International institutions must be more engaged and EULEX must intensify its efforts to secure a better environment there, Ferati said, as he presented this year's achievements by his ministry. He cited the establishment of three new Serb-dominated municipalities -- Gracanica, Klllokot-Verbovc and Ranilug -- as the most significant accomplishments in the decentralisation process this year.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED) said in a report Wednesday (December 23rd) that the increased participation of Kosovo Serbs in local elections this year is a sign that their political behaviour has "softened". Serbs also returned to their most moderate political parties -- such as the Serb Liberal Party, Serb Progressive Party and Serb Democratic Party, according to the KIPRED. As for the future of the three newly established Serb-dominated municipalities, the institute said that Serbia's parallel structures remain a challenge to stability. The institute recommended that decentralisation should continue and that the international community should dissolve Serb parallel structures, while EULEX and the Kosovo Police should establish the rule of law in the north to overcome these challenges.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Activists covered Kosovo's independence symbol "Newborn" with a black cloth on Saturday (December 19th), to protest the country's exclusion from visa liberalisation that took effect for neighbouring Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. Some NGOs urged the EU to review its policy towards Kosovo, to prevent the young country from becoming a "black hole" in the region. Ramadan Ilazi, of the organisation Fol 09, accused the EU of hypocrisy, as the two required criteria for visa liberalisation, involving borders and the rule of law, are the responsibility of international institutions, rather than Kosovo authorities.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The justice ministry presented results Tuesday (December 22nd) from its work on missing persons over the past year, noting the issue is complex and takes time. "During this period, 375 new DNA samples were taken. These samples were sent to the International Commission on Missing Persons in Sarajevo and Tuzla, (BiH)," Kosovo Justice Minister Nekibe Kelmendi said. In all, 33 more bodies were located and the remains returned to families for reburial. The fate of about 2,000 Kosovo citizens remains unknown.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- EULEX says the results of its efforts to shed light on various crimes can be expected in the coming months. EULEX deputy head Roy Reeve said on Tuesday (December 22nd) that thorough investigations, including co-operation with countries in the region, must be completed in order to resolve cases pending since the days of UNMIK. "We need full investigations and regional and European countries need to be contacted, since crime does not take place only in Kosovo. All I can say is that

investigations are under way." EULEX and the Ministry of Economy and Finance just signed an agreement to exchange information helpful in fighting corruption, money laundering and organised crime.

SOFIA, Bulgaria -- An estimated 3,000 tobacco farmers blocked one of Bulgaria's main highways Monday (December 21st) to protest subsidy cuts planned next year. They also complained they have not received crucial payments for this year. They used tractors to block the Trakia highway, connecting Sofia and Istanbul. In all, there are about 40,000 registered tobacco producers in Bulgaria and 150,000 people working in the sector.

In other news Monday, the Order, Law, Justice (RZS) party withdrew its support from the GERB-led government. "We will become a conservative right-wing opposition party," chairman Yane Yanev announced. The RZS was the smallest party in parliament even before one of its members it left this month. GERB won't be affected by RZS's move, given its informal coalition with Attack and the Blue Coalition.

TIRANA, Albania -- Foreign Minister Ilir Meta urged the opposition Monday (December 21st) to contribute to Albania's EU integration process, insisting that their parliamentary boycott is hampering reforms. "I hope that it is temporary," he added, as the opposition's support is necessary in the visa liberalisation process, in completing the EC questionnaire and all other processes that are part of EU integration. The opposition Socialist Party has been boycotting parliament sessions since September, demanding an investigation into the June general elections.

TIRANA, Albania -- Opposition Socialist Party (SP) leader Edi Rama filed a lawsuit on Tuesday (December 22nd) against Prime Minister Sali Berisha, accusing him of libel. Rama says Berisha has "repeatedly and publicly offended" him. Late last month, Berisha gave a long speech in parliament, including what he described as the "untold truth" about Rama's personal life. Rama refuted all of Berisha's claims as lies. It is now up to prosecutors to decide whether to accept the lawsuit.

TIRANA, Albania -- Police arrested five people, including two officials, for suspected corruption Tuesday (December 22nd). Procurement Office director Bujar Murati, a prosecution expert at the State Guard, and three administrators in a private company are accused of violating a public tender procedure to provide police and guard uniforms. Prosecutors say the group rigged the contract by eliminating competition. Each of the officials allegedly received a bribe of up to 125,000 euros.