

Report 102
PROJECT ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE
MUSLIM WORLD

Weekly Presentation: January 20, 2010

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Period: From January 10-16, 2010

This week report dwells much on Yahoo/AP/Reuters News, New York Times. 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

US/Canada

- General: Tide is turning against Taliban
 - Republican: Afghans must match US commitment
 - In a gender shift, more moms become breadwinners
 - It isn't going to get easier for Obama in second year
 - Obama chides banks' "audacity" for fighting fee
 - Obama to woo House Dems on health care deal
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- Final frantic run for health care
 - Haiti Lies in Ruins; Grim Search for Untold Dead
 - Haiti: Where will all the money go?
 - Canada Parliament move eliminates Tory lead: poll

Western Europe

- France moves closer to banning full Muslim veil
 - Status of face-covering veils Muslim around Europe
 - France suspends expulsions of illegal Haitians
 - Paris prosecutor opens probe of Angolan separatist
 - Togo bus rampage exposes France's Angola ties
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- UK Tories lay out defense policies
 - Brown tries to woo middle classes
 - Britain rules out copying US bank tax plan
 - Dutch PM backs away from criticizing Iraq report
 - Ex-UK communications chief: Be proud of Iraq war
 - Dutch lawmaker fails to avoid hate speech charges
 - UK Gov't to appeal European ruling on terror laws
 - UK moves to ban controversial Islamist group
 - UK universities warn that they face 'meltdown'
 - UN, Egypt protest Italy's treatment of migrants
 - Europe, Mideast protest tighter airline security
 - European Central Bank keeps rates on hold
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- Greece insists it will restore financial stability

- Greece unveils anti-crisis plan
- EU's Rehn says Greece will not be expelled from eurozone
- Greek Cypriots reject new Turkish Cypriot proposal
- UN envoy satisfied with intensified Cyprus reunification talks
- Controversy hits pope's Rome synagogue visit
- Pope defends invitation to Anglicans to convert
- Mideast peacemakers mull aid to Palestinians

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- Spain says it supports further EU enlargement

Southeast Europe

- Report: "Broad improvements" in freedom in Balkans
- Montenegro, Kosovo establish diplomatic relations
- Waiting for the rainbow in Montenegro

Bosnia

- BiH minorities win in constitution case
- RS's Dodik plans to organise referendum in first half of year
- Inzko again criticises lack of reforms in BiH
- EU's Ashton calls for strategy on BiH
- Merkel says BiH is "long way" from EU membership

Croatia

- Croats vote for president
- Croatia's president-elect vows to fight corruption
- Croatia's Mesic says Serbia should stop hoping for Kosovo's return
- Slovenia to allow Croatia to open two more EU chapters
- Bakonschi says Romania should be less timid in relations with EU

Controversy erupts around Bulgaria's EU Commissioner-designate

- Romania
- Romanian lawmakers to begin debating 2010 budget
- Romanian parliament approves 2010 budget
- Bulgaria's Borisov elected as GERB chairman

Serbia

- Serbia's Tadic calls for reconciliation among Balkan nations
- Serbia's Tadic wants apology for war crimes against Serbs in BiH
- Serbian parliament to debate resolutions on war crimes
- Serbia's Tadic sets condition for attending inauguration in Croatia
- Serbs debate NATO membership
- Serbia's LDP reiterates it won't join government coalition
- Serbian intelligence agency working to locate Mladic, Hadzic
- EU officials: ratifying SAA with Serbia will be priority

Albania

- Albania seeks EU assistance to deal with floods
- NATO countries send aid to Albania's flooded north
- Albanian government praises its response to flooding
- Albania's Topalli asks EU for visa-free travel, aid
- Albania to establish committee for national census

Kosovo

- Feith says Kosovo's relations with Serbia a priority
- Mauritania recognises Kosovo's independence
- Kosovo police expel Serbia's Bogdanovic
- KFOR commander criticises parallel structures
- Ischinger links Serbia's eventual EU bid to Kosovo
- Political disagreements leave Gjilan/Gnjilane votes uncertified
- EULEX arrests suspect for decade-old attempted murders
- EULEX arrests suspect for decade-old attempted murders

Oceania

- Australia says India ties unaffected by attacks

Report Summary

USA/Canada

Political Issue

His first year in office has been characterised by numerous compelling domestic and foreign problems, a clear signal for President Obama that second year will not be easier either. The Obama administration evidently inherited tough and unfinished responsibilities from the Bush administration, therefore exacerbating the workload for the new administration and at the same time telling on Obama's job rating.

The attempt by the Canadian conservative minority government to suspend the parliament has caused the government public resentment. According to a recent poll, the liberal party is rated higher closer to the conservative party owing to this latest development.

Economic Issue

The interlock of politics and economics is showcasing itself as debate between republican and democrat deepens over President Obama's plan to recoup the bailout funds from major banks known as 'financial crisis responsibility fee'. The democrat party is said to be facing serious problem amid midterm Congressional election, hence tapping into public sentiment is a good chance for the democrat to challenge Wall Street excess. Doing that will make democrats portray republican as party of the rich objecting to Obama's plan to make the bank pay for their irresponsibility.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Among the aftermaths of the financial recession in the U.S were joblessness and the replacement of breadwinner from husband to wife. This indicated that joblessness was not altogether affecting all; rather many men became layoff, while women got and still remained in teaching or health care industry. The most affected people according to report were the married couples with kids under 18.

Haiti one of the poorest countries in the region became the country that started the year with a natural disaster. So terrible was the earthquake that the world over has rushed towards solving the humanitarian problems amid there. However, there is a growing concern in the USA about the effectiveness of the fund Haiti is expected to receive. The concern owes to the political instability and lack of accountability in the country, more importantly Haiti is yet to account for the \$197 million emergency

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

American spy agency recently suffered a great loss in Afghanistan; an incident that somewhat embarrassed the US, yet Gen. Stanley McChrystal, topmost US army in Afghanistan said the tide is turning against the Taliban because his men were seizing the stronghold of Taliban. On the same note, a republican delegate that recently visited Afghanistan sharply mentioned that Afghanistan must match up with US pace in the country. It was a clear message to President Karzai government that the US is expecting nothing less, after the contentious election giving Karzai a second term in office.

Western Europe

Political Issue

French lawmakers are working towards total ban of niqab in the public sphere in France. The attempt was triggered by President Sarkozy last June saying full veil worn by Muslim women will not be welcome in France. The extent to which Europe can prove is democratic principles is an unsettled issue for Muslims across Europe.

Event in Africa is having a reflection in France. French authority is opening an inquiry into the plight of Angola that Angolan separatist leader Rodriques Mingas seen as a French citizen should be brought to book for inciting violence that killed Togolese players in Angola for the on-going African Nations Cup. France has been at loggerhead with Angola since the 1980s over an illegal arms trade; meanwhile France and other western powers have long supported Mingas against the socialist Angolan government

British conservative leader David Cameron said if elected as the next premier, Britain will be more cautious in getting entangled in world affairs and in trouble spots. His remark came amid Kim Howells' comment, a former minister with Labour, quoted as saying that Britain needs to scale back its role on the world stage.

As the British election draws by, political gimmicks between Labour ruling and conservative party steal the air. According to polls, the former hails behind the latter in view of many troubles the Labour party is going through. Prime Minister Gordon Brown is wooing the middle class for the June election asking for their votes promising his party has more to offer them.

The Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende saved his coalition government by accepting that invasion of Iraq has no legal backing. Balkenende of course supported the invasion then but retracted, when Labour a coalition member threatened to pull out and thus call for early election, year before the next scheduled national election.

Knowing full well that going to Iraq was unjustified, yet Alastair Campbell, Blair's communications strategist from 1997 until his resignation in August 2003 staunchly defended the war before the Iraq Inquiry. He holds that rather than feeling remorseful, Britain should be rather proud of how they have contributed to the so-called change in Iraq after Saddam.

Economic Issue

British finance minister Alistair Darling diffused the hypothesis that his country will copy the US in taxing banks, an attempt to make them pay for government bailout during the peak of the financial crisis. Instead Britain hope to recover state aid by eventually selling stakes recently built up in rescued British banks.

The European Central Bank has also rejected the insinuation that Greece might be exiting the Eurozone owing to the huge deficit suffered by Greece. In the same vein, outgoing Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn, the EU's new commissioner for economic and monetary affairs reiterated that Athens will not be expelled from the Eurozone. Nonetheless, the Greek Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou said that Greece will make every effort to improve its plan to overcome its grave economic state

Social/Humanitarian Issue

An Amsterdam judge is refusing to accept the plea of Dutch lawmaker Geert Wilders, whose speech and video clips anger not just Muslim in the Netherlands but the entire Muslim world. He referred to the Quran as fascist and terrorist manifesto and thus called for banning the Quran in the Netherlands, closing borders to immigrants, and taxing clothing commonly worn by Muslims, such as headscarves, because they "pollute" the Dutch landscape. Wilders' lawyer is yet to convince the judge, if convicted Wilders would face a maximum sentence of two years in prison, though a fine of up to euro18,500 (\$26,800) is more likely for inciting hatred against Muslim although he claimed all he have done are within the purview of freedom of speech.

The European justice commission is asking for great guarantee even if full scanner must become operative in European airports. He holds Europeans are human being not objects to be scan unduly. It is now a growing concern for some countries as the US government has order profound search of 14 nations deemed security risks. Beside Syria and Lebanon, they include Cuba, Iran, Sudan, Iraq, Algeria, Afghanistan, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Yemen. .

In view of the Haiti earthquake, the French authority has suspended deportation of illegal Haitian in France. Of course this might be for a short while, however there is no indication how many of 80,000 Haitian in France will be affected by the suspension.

Pope Benedict XVI's is gaining more spotlights for ecumenical moves and intention to bridge difference with other faith. Anglican leaderships are not comfortable with the Pope's move to accept Anglican into Catholicism. In the same way, the beautification and sainthood of Pope Pius has raised the ire of many Jews, who hold that Pope Pius did little to stop the holocaust.

The recent ruling of the European Court of Human Rights that British law violates individual freedoms signals the big debate between collective laws and individual laws of European countries. The British Terrorism Act passed in 2000 gave police right to stop and search people even without adequate proof. The ruling came forth when two white British were discriminatorily harassed.

The recent violence in Rosarno, Italy has been totally condemned by the U.N. rights officials Jorge Bustamante and Githu Muigai. Both vehemently denounced the racial inclined violence that killed and injured African immigrants working on farms in Rosarno. The Egyptian foreign minister is also asking Italy to examine the way the country deals with immigrants who mostly get entangled in religious and racial discrimination.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Southeast Europe

Political Issue

According to the Freedom House latest report, freedom around the globe generally declined, but a handful of Balkan countries show some improvement. The few bright spots included notable gains in Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia among those showing improvement. Even though the report has to be crosschecked yet the fact that these countries are counted as gained spots show the impact of EU integration in making them better countries.

Montenegro has refused to acknowledge Serbia's plea that Podgorica should wait for the outcome of ICJ on Kosovo independence before making decision to recognise the new state or not. Montenegro has recently opened diplomatic relations with Kosovo through an exchange of letters between foreign ministers.

Transition from authoritarian rule to democracy is often regarded as good omen, but according to some in Montenegro the country is still waiting for a rainbow. While under Yugoslavia, Montenegro is said to be one of the affluence federation in the region, but with the collapse of communism and the 90s war, Montenegro was shaken off its affluence and now waiting to join the EU before the past glory can be regained.

The constitution needs amendment, must treat equally and justly smaller ethnic minority and must be harmonised with the basic principles of the European Convention on Human Rights. This was the groundbreaking ruling by the European Court of Human Rights against the constitution of Bosnia. The court came up with the ruling in a case between Finci and Sejdic vs. BiH. The new ruling will further push the country towards constitutional reform as part of the prerequisites of EU integration.

Republika Srpska (RS) Prime Minister Milorad Dodik is defying the objection of High Representative Valentin Inzko that a referendum is needless. Dodik intends to organise a referendum during the first half of this year to decide if foreign prosecutors should continue their duties in Bosnia. Inzko has said such opinion sampling is an attempt to digress from issues that matter, such as the absence of political consensus, economic problem, minority crisis and other serious problems facing the country. These of course have been hampering Bosnia-EU talk.

Croats have elected President-elect Ivo Josipovic as the new leader amid the political tension the country is witnessing. Josipovic during his first press conference promises to fight corruption, warning that graft is blocking reforms needed to accelerate the country's EU integration process. He said he wants to forge closer co-operation with neighbouring countries

Outgoing Croatian President Stipe Mesic urges Serbia to wake up from self inspired slumber and should face reality of the existence of Kosovo as an independent state. Mesic also warn Belgrade to stop inciting Serbs minority not to participate in Kosovo political process.

Serbia President Boris Tadic is giving a condition that he will not attend the attend next month's inauguration of Croatian President-elect Ivo Josipovic if Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu is present. Tadic said appearing with Sejdiu would signal de facto recognition of Kosovo's independence.

Serbian President Boris Tadic visit to Banja Luka, the second largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina to commemorate the 18th anniversary of the founding of the Republika Srpska (RS), the Serb-run republic established after the Dayton Peace Agreement was memorable. Tadic acknowledge the crimes committed under Yugoslavia, thus apologised and equally wanted others involved in the war to apology to Serbia. He believes friendly neighbourhood is the best for the region.

Economic Issue

Romanian parliament recently approved the 2010 budget for the country, which opposition sees as non-friendly to the masses. The budget of course is tailored according to the commitments made to the IMF.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Albania humanitarian problem due to flood is getting worst and Tirana is seeking the assistance of EU to solve the problem. Few EU countries have responded to the call for help. Albanian government is instituting a committee that will look into the forthcoming census in the country. The census is criticised because it intends to record ethnic and religious composition in the country. Experts and academics have criticised this aspect of the census, arguing that it would allow many Albanians to embrace Greek nationality and benefit from the higher pensions Greece pays to its minorities. Athens says there are about 150,000 Greek minority citizens living in Albania, while authorities say the actual number is closer to 30,000.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Serbia intellectuals are debating the justification of the country to be part of NATO. The opinion streaming out from the group is that Serbia should not, because it will be tantamount to consenting to the killing of Serbs carried out by NATO during the 90s war. Secondly, it will also be a recognition of Kosovo and more importantly accession to NATO might offend Russia, a traditional ally of Serbia, whose opposition to Kosovo independence is unquestionable.

Mauritania became the 65th country to recognise Kosovo's independence. The increasing recognition offends Serbia, even though International Civilian Office chief Pieter Feith has said managing relation between Serbia and Kosovo is pertinent in coming years.

Oceania

Political Issue

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Series of attacks on Indian students in Australia last year is re-echoing as another attack surfaces last week. The incidents have been troublesome and obviously damaging ties between Australia and India. Indian government urges the Australian government to critically examine the incidents, even though Canberra is unready to accept the attacks as racially inspired.

It is quite interesting to note that despite the attitudinal change of the current Labour government, the anti-immigration sentiment of the previous conservative Howard's government is arguably still firm. Thus, animosity towards immigrants is simply not governmental but a view shared by some in the larger society.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Report Details

US/Canada

WASHINGTON – The top U.S. commander in Afghanistan says he believes the U.S. troop surge in Afghanistan is turning the tide against the Taliban. In an interview aired Monday on ABC's "Good Morning America," Gen. Stanley McChrystal said he believes the troop surge has "changed the way we operate in Afghanistan" and is blunting the Taliban's momentum. But McChrystal added: "It's not a completed mission yet." He cited as evidence of progress a meeting he recently held in a river valley in Helmand province, an area where the Taliban has been strong and one of the first targets of the surge. "When I sit in an area that the Taliban controlled only seven months ago and now you meet with a shura" — a traditional meeting — "of elders and they describe with considerable optimism the future, you sense the tide is turning," he said. President Barack Obama is sending an additional 30,000 U.S. soldiers to Afghanistan, which will bring the number of U.S. troops close to 98,000.

WASHINGTON – The Afghanistan government must match the U.S. commitment in that war-ravaged country while expanding the Afghan army and security forces to have a chance at stabilizing the region, says a Republican lawmaker who just returned from a trip there. Only significant growth in training of Afghan security forces, targeting the insurgency, securing population centers and strengthening Afghan and Pakistani governments will prevent the region from serving as a safe haven for radical Islamic terrorists again, Rep. Mike Castle of Delaware said in the weekly GOP video and radio address. "In meeting with President (Hamid) Karzai, our delegation made clear that the commitment of the United States must be met with by equal determination of the Afghan government," he said. The Obama administration is hoping to reverse worsening conditions in Afghanistan as an additional 30,000 American and 7,000 NATO troops pour into the conflict in coming months. The fight — once mostly limited to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border — has spread across the country. Castle said he's encouraged by the troops' efforts, however. "Particularly since the surge in Afghanistan began, we have seen progress toward helping establish a country that can govern itself, defend its borders and be an important ally in fighting terrorism," Castle said.

In southern Afghanistan, the U.S. State and Agriculture departments are working to help this former agricultural hub of Afghanistan regain its potential, he said. "The focus on agriculture will hopefully make progress in reducing the rampant opium and narcotics trade," he said. "While President Karzai has pledged to help eradicate poppy crops, there must be development in Afghanistan of crops and methods other than poppies to sustain the people of this country." Castle also said Republicans were pleased with the decision by Defense Secretary Robert Gates, a holdover from the Bush administration, to continue as head of the Pentagon.

WASHINGTON – The number of working moms who are the sole breadwinners in their families rose last year to an all-time high, and the number of stay-at-home dads edged higher, in a shift of traditional gender roles caused partly by massive job losses. The number of moms who were the only working spouse rose for the third straight year, according to Census Bureau figures released Friday. The number of dads who were the

only working spouse dropped, and the number of stay-at-home dads ticked higher. The figures are for married couples with kids under 18. "Women are really stepping in and helping families stay afloat. The question is whether men are stepping up and picking up the slack around home," said Kristin Smith, a family demographer at the University of New Hampshire. In most households with moms as breadwinners, both parents were working until the husband was laid off or retired, and the wife remained in her job. In other situations, a non-working wife may have rejoined the labor force, in a growing industry such as teaching or health care, to sustain the family income after the husband was let go. By the numbers, about 4 percent or 963,000 moms were the only parent in the labor force. The share of fathers as the sole worker was much bigger — 28.2 percent or 7.3 million — but still the lowest since 2001. The share of couples who both work stayed the same at 66 percent or 17 million. There were 158,000 stay-at-home dads, up from 140,000 in 2008. Still, the number is less than 1 percent of married couples. The recession's toll has been harder on male-dominated industries such as construction and manufacturing. There are also longer-term cultural changes at work, too, as more women earn college degrees and the better job opportunities they bring. "The economic crisis is heavily affecting families, and what the latest data show is that gender roles are flexible and are going in the direction of egalitarian roles," said Pamela J. Smock, a sociology professor at the University of Michigan. She said the shifts could have lasting effects after the economy rebounds, as people become more accustomed to the roles of breadwinner moms and stay-at-home dads. Smith sees a continued reliance on wives as breadwinners, "particularly if we see a jobless economic recovery like we did after the 2001 recession." Her research on working moms found that employed wives last year contributed to 45 percent of total family earnings. That was up from 44 percent in the previous year, the large single-year increase in the last decade.

WASHINGTON — There'll be no parade this time for President Barack Obama. No grand speech from the west front of the Capitol, no fireworks, no glittery balls to kick off the second year of his presidency on Wednesday, as there were for the first. Just a lot of hard work, an agenda full of unresolved problems and perhaps a more sober sense of just what's possible for the 48-year-old president, who's a little grayer now than he was a year ago. He faces a country that's struggling to find its footing after a staggering recession, a nation that's starting to show signs of growth but is still losing jobs. He looks out at a world where he's made precious little progress, still trying to get Israelis and Palestinians to the peace table, and to get the North Koreans to give up their nuclear weapons and the Iranians to abandon their own nuclear program. He'll tackle those and other challenges with far less political capital than he had a year ago. His approval rating has dropped sharply and is the second lowest in half a century for any president entering his second year, while his disapproval rating is the highest ever at this point in a presidency. As a result, his fellow Democrats approach midterm congressional and statehouse elections this year nervous about being tied too closely to his agenda.

Obama may have to change his to-do list in his sophomore year. If he gets a health care bill in coming weeks, he'll pivot to jobs and the economy. Then a new budget, and changes in taxes. Proposals such as the "cap and trade" plan to limit the emissions that cause global warming probably will have to wait. So, too, will overhauling immigration law. "They have to rethink some things, recalibrate and refocus. They tried

to do too much. And he's taken some hits as result," said Steve Schier, a political scientist at Carleton College in Minnesota. He'll have to navigate not only through a wary Congress but also amid a backlash among many Americans against his agenda, notably his health care proposal. "The conventional wisdom a year ago was that the tectonic plates had shifted, that Obama could win and anything was possible," said Michael Franc, the vice president of government relations at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative policy institute. Yet polls show that, despite the 2008 election, Americans remain more moderate to conservative than liberal, and that creates a head wind against Obama's agenda for a more activist national government.

WASHINGTON (Reuters) – President Barack Obama on Saturday slammed Wall Street's "audacity" for fighting a bailout fee he wants to slap on financial firms and said his Republican opponents had sided with big banks. With Obama's popularity hovering around 50 percent and congressional elections in November, the White House wants to cast itself alongside ordinary Americans while branding Republicans as the party for the rich. "Like clockwork, the banks and politicians who curry their favor are already trying to stop this fee from going into effect," Obama said in his weekly radio and Internet address. "We're not going to let Wall Street take the money and run. We're going to pass this fee into law," Obama vowed after proposing a levy to raise up to \$117 billion over the next 10 years to recoup projected losses on a taxpayer bank bailout. A number of the banks have already repaid capital they received under the \$700 billion bailout, called the Troubled Asset Relief Program, which was conceived in 2008 by Obama's predecessor, Republican George W Bush. They complain they are being penalized unfairly for losses mainly run up by U.S. automakers and insurer American International Group, which was rescued in September 2008. Some Republicans warned the fee would be dumped on customers. "President Obama's plans to institute a 'financial crisis responsibility fee' to recoup the bailout funds from major banks is nothing more than another tax on the American public," said Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele.

Tapping into public rage over Wall Street excess, Obama said the money owed taxpayers paled beside the riches banks plan to pay themselves after the government rescued financial markets in 2008 and early 2009. "If the big financial firms can afford massive bonuses, they can afford to pay back the American people. Those who oppose this fee have also had the audacity to suggest that it is somehow unfair," he said. "The very same firms reaping billions of dollars in profits, and reportedly handing out more money in bonuses and compensation than ever before in history, are now pleading poverty. It's a sight to see." Linking the fee with his administration's goal of financial regulatory reform that it says is needed to prevent a repeat of the crisis, Democrat Obama also sought to channel public anger over the bailout toward the Republican Party. "The industry has even joined forces with the opposition party to launch a massive lobbying campaign against common-sense rules to protect consumers and prevent another crisis," he said.

WASHINGTON – Striving to close the deal on health care, President Barack Obama planned a trip to Capitol Hill on Thursday to urge rank-and-file House Democrats to yield on key issues still standing in the way of a historic legislative achievement. Obama's late afternoon visit comes amid intense White House negotiations with

Democratic leaders aimed at settling core differences between the House and Senate that must be resolved before the sweeping overhaul legislation can pass. Public support for the health care remake continues to drop, perhaps in part because of the messy debate in Congress, and lawmakers are feeling the press of other issues, from unemployment to ballooning budget deficits. Late Wednesday, Obama and senior Democrats emerged from marathon health care talks with a declaration that they had made tough gains — but no deal just yet. The same group of leaders was to meet again at the White House on Thursday, pressing for the framework of an agreement within days. House Democrats are uneasy over concessions they are being asked to make to preserve the 60 votes needed to pass the bill in the Senate. That includes dropping the government-run insurance option liberals have fought for and accepting some form of a tax on high-cost health insurance plans adamantly opposed by many House Democrats and by labor unions. House Democratic leaders are pushing for more generous subsidies to help make health insurance affordable to a greater number of middle-class households, as well as other concessions. The bill would extend coverage to more than 30 million Americans now uninsured, bar insurance companies from denying coverage to people with medical problems and attempt to slow the ruinous rate of increase in health care costs. Rep. Rob Andrews, D-N.J., predicted Obama would find a supportive audience

WASHINGTON — Like a roller-coaster ride on its last twisting turns, President Barack Obama's campaign to remake health care is barreling into final days of breathless suspense and headlong momentum. Democrats — led by Obama himself — are deploying this weekend to salvage an unpredictable Senate race in Massachusetts, while senior White House and congressional staffers in Washington hurry to finish work on cost and coverage options at the heart of the sweeping legislation. A Republican victory in the race to fill the late Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's seat would deprive Democrats of the 60-vote majority needed to pass the bill in the Senate. Obama and Democratic congressional leaders would have a political window of perhaps days only to try to ram the bill through — at considerable risk of incurring public wrath. Democrats put on a bold public face Friday, while working behind the scenes with grim determination. Negotiators are "pretty close," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said at the end of a week of marathon negotiations to reconcile House- and Senate-passed versions.

A White House statement said there are "no final agreements and no overall package." But no further meetings were scheduled, and Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., the third-ranking House Democrat, said, "Something should be going to CBO very soon," indicating that aides were drafting the decisions made around the table in the White House Cabinet Room. The Congressional Budget Office is the official arbiter of the cost and extent of coverage that any legislation would provide. No details were immediately available, and congressional aides stressed the decisions made at the White House had not yet been fully shared with the Democratic rank and file. One key obstacle appeared on its way to a resolution when Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., requested the elimination of an intensely controversial, one-of-a-kind federal subsidy to cover the entire cost of a Medicaid expansion in his home state. That provision in the Senate-passed measure has drawn criticism from governors and others in both political parties from the moment it was disclosed, and even former President Bill Clinton urged that it be jettisoned.

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — Survivors strained desperately on Wednesday against the chunks of concrete that buried this city along with thousands of its residents, rich and poor, from shantytowns to the presidential palace, in the devastating earthquake that struck late Tuesday afternoon. Calling the death toll “unimaginable” as he surveyed the wreckage, Haiti’s president, René Préval, said he had no idea where he would sleep. Schools, hospitals and a prison collapsed. Sixteen United Nations peacekeepers were killed and at least 140 United Nations workers were missing, including the chief of its mission, Hédi Annabi. The city’s archbishop, Msgr. Joseph Serge Miot, was feared dead. And the poor who define this nation squatted in the streets, some hurt and bloody, many more without food and water, close to piles of covered corpses and rubble. Limbs protruded from disintegrated concrete, muffled cries emanated from deep inside the wrecks of buildings — many of them poorly constructed in the first place — as Haiti struggled to grasp the unknown toll from its worst earthquake in more than 200 years. In the midst of the chaos, no one was able to offer an estimate of the number of people who had been killed or injured, though there was widespread concern that there were likely to be thousands of casualties. “Please save my baby!” Jeudy Francia, a woman in her 20s, shrieked outside the St.-Esprit Hospital in the city. Her child, a girl about 4 years old, writhed in pain in the hospital’s chaotic courtyard, near where a handful of corpses lay under white blankets. “There is no one, nothing, no medicines, no explanations for why my daughter is going to die.”

Governments and aid agencies from Beijing to Grand Rapids began marshaling supplies and staffs to send here, though the obstacles proved frustrating just one day after the powerful 7.0-magnitude earthquake hit. Power and phone service were out. Flights were severely limited at Port-au-Prince’s main airport, telecommunications were barely functioning, operations at the port were shut down and most of the medical facilities had been severely damaged, if not leveled. A Red Cross field team of officials from several nations had to spend Wednesday night in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic to gather its staff before taking the six-hour drive in the morning across the border to the earthquake zone. “We were on the plane here with a couple of different agencies, and they all are having similar challenges of access,” Colin Chaperon, a field director for the American Red Cross, said in a telephone interview. “There is a wealth of resources out there, and everybody has the good will to go in and support the Haitian Red Cross.” The quake struck just before 5 p.m. on Tuesday about 10 miles southwest of Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s capital, ravaging the infrastructure of Haiti’s fragile government and destroying some of its most important cultural symbols. “Parliament has collapsed,” Mr. Préval told *The Miami Herald*. “The tax office has collapsed. Schools have collapsed. Hospitals have collapsed. There are a lot of schools that have a lot of dead people in them.” He added: “All of the hospitals are packed with people. It is a catastrophe.”

President Obama promised that Haiti would have the “unwavering support” of the United States. Mr. Obama said that United States aid agencies were moving swiftly to get help to Haiti and that search-and-rescue teams were en route. He described the reports of destruction as “truly heart-wrenching,” made more cruel given Haiti’s long-troubled circumstances. Mr. Obama did not make a specific aid pledge, and administration officials said they were still trying to figure out what the nation needed. But he urged Americans to go to the White House’s Web site, www.whitehouse.gov, to find ways to donate money. “This is a time when we are reminded of the common humanity that we

all share," Mr. Obama said, speaking in the morning in the White House diplomatic reception room with Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. at his side.

Aid agencies said they would open their storehouses of food and water in Haiti, and the World Food Program was flying in nearly 100 tons of ready-to-eat meals and high-energy biscuits from El Salvador. The United Nations said it was freeing up \$10 million in emergency relief money, the European Union pledged \$4.4 million and groups like Doctors Without Borders were setting up clinics in tents and open-air triage centers to treat the injured.

WASHINGTON – How difficult will it be for the United States and other donors to track the millions of dollars in earthquake aid headed to Haiti? U.S. government auditors pulled out of the country years ago after concerns over kidnappings and other crimes scuttled their efforts to monitor Haiti's spending of \$45 million in U.S. aid after storms there killed thousands. Corruption, theft, violence and other security problems and Haiti's sheer shortage of fundamentals — reliable roads, telephone and power lines and a sound financial system — will add to the challenges of making sure aid is spent properly as foreign governments and charities try not only to help Haiti recover from this week's devastating earthquake but to pull itself out of abject poverty. Past efforts haven't been easy. The Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, faced problems on a smaller scale in 2005 and 2006 as auditors tried to review the use of roughly \$45 million in aid the U.S. provided after Tropical Storm Jeanne struck Haiti in September 2004, killing more than 2,000 people, injuring more than 2,600 and affecting an estimated 300,000 others.

The inspectors wanted to visit projects funded with the money to measure progress. But after an initial fact-finding trip to Haiti, it was considered too dangerous for them to go back. They could visit only projects deemed safe as destinations. In summer 2005, many employees of the Agency for International Development — which is coordinating the current U.S. response to the earthquake — were temporarily pulled out of Haiti, according to government reports.

Haiti is one of the poorest places on Earth. Most basic public services are lacking, people typically live on less than \$2 a day, nearly half the population is illiterate and the government has a history of instability. The public has little opportunity to be sure that aid to the government is used honestly and well. Nor is following the money easy for donors, including the United States, 700 miles away and one of the country's biggest helpers. "It has been a challenge, and I think it really is one of the things we have to look at when the country has had such long-standing problems that it seems as though we have made little dent there," said Rep. Russ Carnahan, D-Mo., chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee's subcommittee on international organizations, human rights and oversight. The immediate focus is search and rescue and addressing immediate public health needs. But after that, "I think there's going to be a number of questions that arise," Carnahan said. Just last month, a private group, the Heritage Foundation for Haiti, urged Haiti's government to complete an audit of a \$197 million emergency disaster program to respond to corruption allegations over how the money was handled. Haiti's senate cited the allegations when it removed Prime Minister Michele Pierre-Louis in November and replaced her with Jean-Max Bellerive.

OTTAWA (Reuters) – Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's decision to suspend Parliament has cost his party its lead in public support, a poll released on Wednesday found. The Strategic Counsel poll, published by the Toronto Star, showed Harper's Conservatives with 31 percent popular support and the opposition Liberals with 30 percent, which would make an election a toss-up if one were held today. In October, as the population reacted adversely to a Liberal attempt to topple the minority Conservative government, Strategic Counsel had put the Conservatives 13 points ahead. The Conservative lead had been falling after the Liberals abandoned their attempt to force an election but the sharpest decline in the lead came in the wake of Harper's decision to end the current session of Parliament. The move is constitutional and has been done more than 100 times before. But the opposition accused Harper of trying to avoid parliamentary scrutiny of whether Canadian soldiers had turned over Afghan prisoners to likely torture at the hands of Afghan authorities in 2006-07.

Harper's rationale was that he wants to get a fresh start when Parliament reopens on March 3, and recalibrate the government's agenda to look ahead to growth from last year's focus on getting through the recession. The poll, which used a mixture of online and phone surveys of 1,860 Canadians, found the left-of-center New Democratic Party with 18 percent support. Such a sample size is considered accurate to within 2.3 points, 19 times out of 20.

Western Europe

LA VERRIERE, France – The man she married is French, her four children were born in France and she speaks French with only a trace of her native Arabic tongue. Faiza Silmi contends her clothes — a head-to-toe robe and filmy tissue covering her face — are the reason France has denied her citizenship in her adopted land. The 32-year-old Moroccan may soon be facing an even fiercer blow. A top French lawmaker submitted a draft law this week that would ban such Islamic dress anywhere in public, a measure that would set a European precedent and trap thousands of women between their religious convictions and the law of the land. "They say I'm too attached to my religion," Silmi told The Associated Press at an empty restaurant near her home southwest of Paris, her large eyes peering from a slit in her veil. "Lots of Christians live in Morocco and we don't make them wear scarves." Unlike Muslim headscarves, full-body, face-covering robes are a rare sight in the streets of France, home to an estimated 5 million Muslims, the largest such population in western Europe. France's main Muslim leaders have declared that Islam does not require women to cover their faces with niqabs or burqas.

In a country whose national emblem is Marianne, a bare-chested woman, there is deepening concern over the all-encompassing garb, often black or brown and worn with gloves, attire typical in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Here, it is widely viewed as a gateway to radical Islam, an attack on gender equality and other French values, and a gnawing away at the nation's secular foundation.

President Nicolas Sarkozy opened the door to a possible ban in June, telling a parliament session in Versailles that such dress "is not welcome" in France. A parliamentary panel set to work in July on a six-month mission gathering information on the garments. On Tuesday, the head of Sarkozy's conservative UMP party in parliament's lower house, Jean-Francois Cope, jumped the gun before the panel's report was finished,

and filed draft legislation on a ban. "No one may, in spaces open to the public and on public streets, wear a garment or an accessory that has the effect of hiding the face," the draft text reads. The document cites public security concerns, thus includes all face-covering clothes, in a bid to head off challenges from those who might claim such a law would violate constitutional rules on individual rights — a major concern along with how such a law would be enforced. It foresees fines for those who break the law.

The initiative, unlikely to go to debate before spring, would be the second time France targets Muslim dress. A 2004 law born in acrimony bans Muslim headscarves and other "ostentatious" religious symbols in the classrooms of French public schools. Sarkozy's party dominates parliament and the president reiterated Wednesday his wish for a law on full veils, though it's too early to say whether it will pass.

Europe's growing Muslim population has bred tension across the continent. Wariness is pervasive since deadly attacks in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005 by Islamic radicals living in Europe. And some non-Muslims sense a threat by a foreign culture to their way of life. It took only four minarets on Switzerland's 200 mosques to push the Swiss to vote "no" to minarets in a November referendum. However, France, which wants an Islam tailored to the West, would be the only western European country to target the all-enveloping robes and niqabs, the cloth hiding the lower face. "We're going to become the laughing stock of democracies" should France ban the clothing, said Raphael Liogier, a sociology professor who runs the Observatory of the Religious in Aix-en-Provence. He is among critics who say a ban would be a violation of basic rights and "transgression of the fundamental principles of our republic." Muslim leaders of all tendencies have warned that a ban risks stigmatizing all Muslims, and anti-terrorism judge Marc Trevidic told Sunday's Journal du Dimanche that a ban "will maybe push impulsive people to want to commit attacks." However, Andre Gerin, who heads the parliamentary panel, says the full-body veil is an "attempt to instrumentalize Islam for political ends" via a "fundamentalist and barbaric ideology" that oppresses women. Gerin, a communist who served for years as mayor of Venissieux, a suburb of Lyon known as a haunt for Muslim fundamentalists, insists the phenomenon is growing.

- **FRANCE:** After passing 2004 law banning Muslim headscarves and other "ostentatious" religious symbols from classrooms, France's government submitted a draft law this week on a ban on face-covering veils. The bill could be debated this spring.

- **NETHERLANDS:** The Dutch government considered but abandoned legislation in 2006 for a total ban on Muslim veils, after lawyers said it would likely be unconstitutional. Instead, it said it would seek a ban on face-covering veils in all schools and prevent government employees from wearing them. No legislation has yet been passed.

- **BRITAIN:** The issue of full-body veils has largely faded from the spotlight since then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair called it a "mark of separation" in 2006. The coverings are more visible on the streets of London than many other European cities.

- **ITALY:** Has a law requiring people to keep their faces visible in public, dating to Italy's crackdown on domestic terrorism decades ago. Representatives of Italy's Muslim community say it's rarely applied in the case of women wearing veils.

- **BELGIUM:** The mayor of Maaseik banned face-covering veils in 2004, but there is no general ban across the country.

- GERMANY: Several states in the country, which has a large Muslim immigrant community, have banned teachers from wearing headscarves in public schools.

- SWITZERLAND: The Swiss Justice Minister Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf said in November the government could "study a possible ban" of face-covering veils if more Muslim women begin wearing them. She said they make her feel "uncomfortable."

- UNITED STATES: Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences this month banned head coverings that obscure the face for security reasons. After complaints from Muslim rights groups, it made a religious exemption that still requires those wearing Islamic veils to remove them in order to verify identity for security purposes.

- TURKEY: Islamic-style headscarves and full robes are banned in schools, universities and in government offices.

- EGYPT: In October, Egypt's top Islamic cleric banned face veils in classrooms and dormitories of Sunni Islam's premier institute of learning, al-Azhar, part of government efforts to curb radical Islamic practices.

- TUNISIA: Headscarves and full veils are banned from public buildings and schools.

PARIS – France has suspended expelling illegal immigrants from Haiti in the wake of the massive earthquake there, the country's immigration minister said Thursday. France will instead temporarily allow earthquake victims who need medical assistance into the country, Eric Besson said in a statement. The Haitian community in France is estimated at about 80,000. The statement did not say how many people would be affected by the suspension. France expels thousands of illegal immigrants each year. Tuesday's magnitude-7 quake hit the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, wreaking widespread devastation. There is no estimate on how many people were killed.

PARIS – The Paris prosecutor opened a terrorism inquiry Friday into the role of an Angolan separatist in a deadly attack on the Togolese soccer team that pulled out of the African Cup of Nations tournament as a result of the Jan. 8 shooting. The prosecutor's office is looking into remarks made to various media by Angolan separatist leader Rodriques Mingas who claimed responsibility for the attack in the northern Angolan region of Cabinda. The driver and two team officials were killed. Angola had protested to the French authorities about the failure to take legal measures against Mingas, whom the Foreign Ministry says is a French citizen, and restrict his movements. The inquiry will examine whether the prosecutor can file formal charges against Mingas for inciting "acts of terrorism." Mingas is quoted as saying that all blows are permitted in war. "In war, anything can happen, it's just starting."

The French Foreign Ministry said at the time that such remarks were unacceptable. Mingas talked to numerous French and foreign media via cell telephone. In a statement late Friday, the ministry stressed that France would not "tolerate such justifications for violence."

PARIS – A deadly shooting rampage against Togo's soccer team in Angola has pushed France into an awkward position: After years of backing a top separatist group there — and even harboring its leaders — Paris now wants better ties with the oil-rich

country's government, experts say. Once a major colonial power in Africa, France still faces criticism for a paternalistic policy called "France-Afrique," an unofficial network of patronage and cozy commercial and political ties that President Nicolas Sarkozy says he wants abolished. Friday's rampage by separatists against a bus carrying Togo's national football team killed the driver and two team officials, and prompted the squad to pull out of the African Cup of Nations in Angola. Leaders from at least two offshoots of the separatist group Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda, or FLEC, claimed responsibility for the attack in the oil-rich region, which is not geographically connected to the rest of Angola.

One of those leaders, Nzita Tiago, today lives in Paris. The other, Rodrigues Mingas, has repeatedly spoken to Western media in recent days from a French cell phone, though he insists he lives in Cabinda. In the thick of the Cold War, analysts said, French intelligence services had tight ties to FLEC as France and other Western countries backed the opponents of Angola's Cuban-backed Marxist regime. Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valero said Tuesday that authorities were looking into whether Mingas was in France, even as Mingas told the AP that Angolan forces should expect more attacks. He said earlier that "all blows are permitted during war." Valero said Mingas could face prosecution under French law for making such statements, telling reporters that "inciting violence is totally unacceptable." France's Interior Ministry, which would be responsible for tracking down Mingas, had no immediate comment. Reached by mobile phone Tuesday, Mingas said his FLEC faction would continue to target the military during the tournament. He said he was speaking from Brussels after being in Antwerp, Belgium, on Monday, and would soon leave for London. He said he did not live in Europe and was using his sister's phone. Mingas said the attack on the bus was led by a "Commander Sametonne" — referring to his nom de guerre — who told him that 15 FLEC fighters took part. They were targeting the soldiers, not the team, Mingas said. France can have complex relations in Africa, whether motivated by economic, political or other interests — and Angola is case in point, experts say. It may sometimes hedge its bets by having contacts with the political opposition.

LONDON – The leader of Britain's Conservatives said Friday that if elected he would be far more cautious than his predecessors in deciding to deploy British troops abroad. Britain's military has been strained by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, interventions that also have deeply divided public opinion. Britain's Tories supported both conflicts, but party leader David Cameron said more thought is needed for such operations in the future. The Conservatives are widely expected to take power in an election that must be held by June. They hold double-digit leads in the polls. "We've got to think through much more carefully whether Britain should get involved in a foreign conflict, and if so, how to cope with the consequences," Cameron said in a speech before Chatham House, a foreign affairs think tank in London.

He criticized the "dodgy" intelligence dossier that the Labour government had used to help justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq by warning about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's alleged nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. Cameron didn't say what he would do with the more than 10,000 British soldiers currently serving in Afghanistan, although he's previously been quoted as saying that a reduction in their

number is "pretty unlikely." His speech comes as Kim Howells, a former minister with Labour, was quoted as saying that Britain needs to scale back its role on the world stage. In an interview with The Independent newspaper published Friday, Howells said that the international community always looked to the United States and Britain to police the world's trouble spots — and that that needed to change. "When there have been big problems — Sierra Leone, Bosnia — it's our troops who have been at the very sharp end, in places of great danger. It can't continue," he was quoted as saying. A surge in British casualties in Afghanistan has shaken the public's patience with its commitment there, now stretching into its ninth year. Complaints from lawmakers, retired generals, and military families that British forces have been sent into the field without proper equipment or air support have become increasingly pointed as the fighting in Afghanistan intensifies.

LONDON (AFP) – Prime Minister Gordon Brown tried to reach out to middle class voters on Saturday, bringing the looming election battle back to the theme of class. Brown said Labour would create "more middle class jobs than ever before" if it overturns the opinion polls and wins the general election due by June. Brown has previously sniped at Conservative leader David Cameron for his privileged education and background. That led the Tories to accuse him of fighting an old-fashioned, left-wing class war in a bid to shore up Labour's traditional vote -- in the face of a looming defeat. In a major speech to centre-left activists, Brown was to say: "Social mobility will be our theme for the coming election and the coming parliamentary term. "A fair society is one where everyone who works hard and plays by the rules has a chance to fulfil their dreams whether that's owning a bigger house, taking a holiday abroad, buying a new car or starting a small business. "This is the next project for New Labour... The coming decade will provide the UK with more middle class jobs than ever before."

Brown wrote in The Guardian that he wanted to see "an expanded middle class, not a squeezed middle class". "Opportunity and reward cannot be hoarded at the top, and it is not enough to protect people at the bottom," he said. "Our values demand a genuine meritocracy for all British people, and I want to set out how in the coming decade we can unleash the biggest wave of social mobility since the Second World War -- to spread opportunity across society and to realise the aspirations of all those on middle and modest incomes." Labour's manifesto would be pitched at "anyone who wants to get a home, start a business, build a career or save for their children's future," the premier wrote. The Conservatives blasted Brown's latest move.

LONDON (AFP) – Britain has ruled out copying the United States by proposing a special tax on banks to recover state funds used to bailout lenders during the financial crisis, the British finance minister insisted on Saturday. Alistair Darling told The Scotsman newspaper that the government would not be matching a proposal announced by US President Barack Obama on Thursday for a new fee on major banking firms. "No, we are not. The Americans are doing something different," Darling told the daily, adding that Britain would recover state aid by eventually selling stakes recently built up in rescued British banks. Obama on Thursday said he wanted to recover "every single dime" taxpayers shelled out to rescue Wall Street from the economic crisis. His tax plan, if approved by Congress, would raise 90 billion dollars from 50 big financial institutions,

including foreign banks operating in the United States, under an effort to recoup money from a massive bailout of the banking sector.

Obama said the move is aimed at preventing Wall Street firms from going back to business as usual and resuming high-risk lending practices and huge bets on mortgages and other instruments he blames for igniting the financial crisis.

Britain has meanwhile taken control of major lenders Royal Bank of Scotland and Lloyds Banking Group following its own multi-billion-pound bailouts of the two groups.

LONDON – European Central Bank President Jean-Claude Trichet acidly dismissed speculation that Greece may leave the euro, saying he would not comment on "absurd hypotheses." Trichet was asked about Greece's troubles at a news conference after the bank kept its main refinancing rate unchanged at a historic low of 1 percent at Thursday's meeting. Greece's budget crisis, with a deficit of 12 percent of gross domestic product, has shocked markets and shaken the European Union. Trichet said Greece and other countries with outsize deficits had to "implement appropriate and bold measures" to get their deficits in line with rules intended to support the euro currency. "I do not comment myself on absurd hypotheses," he said in response to a question about Greece possibly leaving the euro.

ATHENS, Greece -- Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou said on Friday (January 8th) that Greece will make every effort to improve its plan to overcome its grave economic state. The statement followed a three-day visit by EU experts who discussed Greece's recently announced strategy to address its ailing public finances. "The draft will certainly be improved as a result of the visit and the discussions," Papaconstantinou said, adding that the visit "reinforced the sense the government is moving in the right direction". Also Friday, the government announced steep hikes in taxes on alcohol and tobacco products to help counter the public debt. The higher rates take effect on Tuesday

ATHENS, Greece -- Prime Minister George Papandreou unveiled a three-year plan Thursday (January 14th) to restore financial stability to his economically embattled country. Greece will present the plan to the EU for approval on Friday. The blueprint aims to slash the public deficit to 2.8% of GDP by 2012, below the 3% ceiling permitted to countries in the eurozone. The country's deficit ballooned to 12.7% of GDP last year. The programme forecasts an economic contraction of 0.3% this year, but growth in 2011 and 2012. The government plans spending cuts, including pay freezes and salary caps for senior public sector workers. Also on Thursday, the president of the European Central Bank, Jean-Claude Trichet, dismissed as "absurd" speculation that Greece might have to leave the eurozone.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- Outgoing Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn, the EU's new commissioner for economic and monetary affairs, on Monday (January 11th) ruled out excluding Greece from the eurozone, despite the country's financial crisis. During hearings underway at the European Parliament for all commissioner-designates, Rehn said the Greek government's economic problems are being closely monitored by the European Commission. He stressed the importance of the Greek government's set of

measures to overcome the crisis, which he said should be received within the next few days or early next week.

NICOSIA, Cyprus -- Greek Cypriots on Sunday (January 10th) rejected a proposal by the Turkish Cypriots regarding power-sharing on the divided island. Last week, Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat presented the plan on the future power structure as part of ongoing reunification talks. "These proposals are unacceptable," government spokesperson Stefanos Stefanou said, adding they are far from a previous agreement to base talks on the model of a bi-communal bi-zonal federation. No details of Talat's proposals were officially announced. He and Cypriot President Demetris Christofias are scheduled to resume talks Monday.

NICOSIA, Cyprus -- UN Special Envoy for Cyprus Alexander Downer said on Tuesday (January 12th) that he is satisfied with intensified talks on reunification that began this week between Cypriot President Demetris Christofias and Turkish Cypriot leader Mehmet Ali Talat. "We are happy with the way the two leaders are conducting the negotiations," Downer told reporters after a second marathon meeting between the two leaders, who spent 15 hours in discussions regarding governance and power sharing over the past two days. They meet again Wednesday before breaking until January 25th.

THE HAGUE, Netherlands – Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende conceded Wednesday, "with the knowledge of now," that a stronger legal mandate was needed for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 — and his decision to support it. The statement in a letter to parliament appeared to have saved Balkenende's 3-year-old ruling coalition from collapse. Balkenende enraged the Labor Party, a coalition partner, on Tuesday by dismissing the findings of a government-commissioned study that criticized his coalition in 2003 for supporting the Iraq invasion. Labor lawmakers were particularly angry that Balkenende appeared to speak also for their party when he rejected the report Tuesday. Labor was not in the 2003 coalition and always opposed Dutch support for the attack. Balkenende's statement followed a day of feverish negotiations between senior members of the three parties in his current coalition amid speculation the administration could disintegrate a year before the next scheduled national election. The letter they finally hammered out said the Cabinet would "take lessons" from the critical report. Opposition lawmakers who had hoped Labor would pull out of the Cabinet and force early elections slammed the government. Popular anti-Islam lawmaker Geert Wilders called Balkenende's Christian Democrat-led administration "a Cabinet with one foot in the grave" and called on the premier to quit. But government lawmakers rallied around their embattled leader. Arie Slob, leader of junior coalition partner Christian Union, said the letter, "makes clear the Cabinet is taking the report seriously."

LONDON – Spinmaster Alastair Campbell told the Iraq Inquiry on Tuesday that former Prime Minister Tony Blair's team has nothing to apologize for even though the dossier it used to convince the British public to go to war with Iraq was riddled with faulty intelligence. Britons should be proud, not apologetic, about what the country accomplished in Iraq, despite the years of bloodshed that followed the U.S.-led invasion, Campbell said in a stout defense of Blair's decision to invade Iraq, which remains deeply unpopular in Britain. "Do I support that decision now?" he told the panel. "Yes. I think

that Britain, far from beating ourselves up about this, should be really proud of the role we played in changing Iraq from what it was to what it is becoming, and the impact that is having on the region." It was a spirited defense from the man who served as Blair's top communications strategist from 1997 until his resignation in August 2003.

Campbell conceded that planners did not properly forecast the internecine violence that gripped Iraq for years after the fall of dictator Saddam Hussein, or the growth of al-Qaida and other terrorist groups inside Iraq, but nonetheless felt Britain had performed a tremendous feat by removing Saddam. From his vantage point as a chief strategist to Blair, and the architect of Blair's largely successful communications strategy, Campbell vehemently denied long-standing suspicions that he pressured intelligence chiefs to distort their findings to strengthen the case for war against Saddam in a dossier released in September 2002. Blair presented the dossier to Parliament and the public as part of an orchestrated, Campbell-influenced public relations campaign meant to convince skeptics that Saddam posed a well-defined threat to Britain's national security.

AMSTERDAM – Dutch lawmaker Geert Wilders failed Wednesday in his bid to have judges drop or reduce charges of criminal incitement against him, despite arguing that his anti-Islam message falls within the boundaries of freedom of speech.

In a late-night decision, Amsterdam District Court said Wilders had presented no new evidence that could prompt them to reduce the charges. Wilders, one of the country's most popular politicians, is due to go on trial in March for allegedly insulting Muslims as a group and inciting hatred and discrimination against them. After the closed pretrial hearing in Amsterdam, Wilders said the session was "the first day of a political trial." Charges against Wilders stem from his 2008 short film "Fitna," which offended many Muslims by juxtaposing Quranic verses with images of terrorism by Islamic radicals. He also has called for banning the Quran in the Netherlands, closing borders to immigrants, and taxing clothing commonly worn by Muslims, such as headscarves, because they "pollute" the Dutch landscape.

Wilders' lawyer, Bram Moszkowicz, said he had petitioned judges to at least drop the charge of insulting Muslims as a group, which he said had little chance of winning a conviction. Moszkowicz cited a 2009 Supreme Court ruling that found insulting a religion is not the same as insulting followers of that religion, and not punishable under hate-speech laws. If convicted, Wilders would face a maximum sentence of two years in prison, though a fine of up to euro18,500 (\$26,800) is more likely. He could theoretically keep his seat in parliament. Muslims make up about six percent of the Dutch population, after a wave of immigration in the 1980s and 1990s, and immigration-related issues have dominated Dutch politics since the turn of the century. Wilders' opposition Freedom Party has grown quickly and now rivals the country's biggest in popularity polls. Immigrant, Muslim and anti-racism groups have long sought Wilders' prosecution, saying his remarks go beyond being offensive and worsen ethnic tensions in the Netherlands, a country once noted for tolerance.

LONDON – The British government said Tuesday it will appeal a European Court of Human Rights ruling that prevents police from using anti-terror laws to stop and search members of the public. The Strasbourg-based court ruled that a British law allowing police to stop and search people without having to first prove they were acting

suspiciously violates individual freedoms. The ruling came in a case brought by two Britons — Kevin Gillan and Pennie Quinton — who were stopped and questioned by police near an arms fair held in London in 2003. British courts ruled that police acted legally because they were dealing with a general threat of terrorism. But the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the pair's rights were violated and awarded them 30,000 pounds (\$48,000) to cover legal costs. The British government gave the police the power to stop and search anyone they wished as part of the Terrorism Act passed in 2000. Rights groups, protesters and photographers have complained that police often misuse the law to stop people from carrying out legitimate activities, such as participating in demonstrations or photographing police officers or public buildings. Home Secretary Alan Johnson said in a statement that he was disappointed by the ruling and the government would appeal. He said police would retain the powers pending the outcome. "Stop and search under section 44 of the Terrorism Act 2000 is an important tool in a package of measures in the ongoing fight against terrorism," he said.

LONDON – The British government banned an Islamist group notorious for glorifying al-Qaida and tied to terror plots at home and abroad, but its Lebanon-based spiritual leader promised to reorganize under a different name. The group, Islam4UK, will be banned starting Thursday. Its British leader, Anjem Choudary, had threatened to organize a march of hundreds of protesters through the streets of a small market town known for honoring British soldiers killed in Afghanistan. The latest ban puts the group in the same league as terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida and the Tamil Tigers. It could lead to the arrest of anyone meeting under the Islam4UK name or using the group's insignia. The group, previously known as Al-Muhajiroun, was banned before, only to change its name and resurface. Al-Muhajiroun, which means "The Emigrants" in Arabic, catapulted to notoriety shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, when it organized an event celebrating the airline hijackers who slaughtered thousands in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. The group and its founder, Omar Bakri, became among the most aggressive voices of radical Islam in Britain. Officials have said that Omar Khan Sharif, who attempted to blow himself up at an Israeli bar in 2003, was associated with al-Muhajiroun. So too was Mohammed Junaid Babar, a Pakistani-born al-Qaida member turned FBI informant. Members of the terrorist cell behind the July 7, 2005, London transit bombings and those convicted in 2007 of plotting to set off explosions across southern England using fertilizer-based explosives also had links to the group.

Officials moved to ban Al-Muhajiroun in the wake of the July 7 attacks, but by then it had ostensibly disbanded. Bakri left the country for Lebanon in late 2005. Since then the group has re-formed under new names — such as the Saved Sect or al-Gurabaa — both of which were banned in 2006. The group's leaders reacted defiantly to the new ban. "It will rally the youth to our side," Choudary told reporters in London. In a telephone interview with The Associated Press from Tripoli, Lebanon, Bakri said his followers were looking forward to regrouping under a different name. "Tomorrow we can call ourselves whatever we think is suitable for us," he said.

Peter Neumann, a professor at the International Center for the Study of Radicalization at King's College in London, said he doubted the ban would have much of an impact. "It harasses them, but it doesn't make them go away," he said, explaining that the group would probably have to empty its bank account, change its Web site and reprint

its promotional material. Neumann said Islam4UK had been allowed to operate for the past year or so in part because it kept its activities relatively discrete. It was the national outrage whipped up by Islam4UK's proposed protest at the town of Wootton Bassett which drew the government's wrath. The protest was eventually canceled by Choudary, who said his group had made its point. The Muslim Council of Britain, an umbrella group of British Muslim organizations, questioned whether banning the group rather than going after its leaders is the best way to deal with the issue.

LONDON – Oxford, Cambridge and other British universities said Tuesday that the government's plan to cut hundreds of millions of pounds (dollars) from their funding would put their world-class reputations in jeopardy. Unlike most elite institutions in the United States, Britain's top schools rely almost exclusively on taxpayers keeping them going. But strapped for cash, the government has slashed its higher education budget by 600 million pounds (nearly \$1 billion) over the next three years — a figure British media say comes to a 12 percent reduction when combined with other cuts. British universities have little chance of raising big funds on their own: Student fees by law are capped at about 4,000 pounds a year, and endowments generally are no more than modest. The Russell Group, representing 20 leading research universities, said the cuts would have "a devastating effect, not only on students and staff, but also on Britain's international competitiveness, economy and ability to recover from recession."

"It has taken more than 800 years to create one of the world's greatest education systems, and it looks like it will take just six months to bring it to its knees," according to an editorial by the group's Chairman Michael Arthur and Director Wendy Piatt, published in *The Guardian* newspaper. In defending its decision, the government noted that higher education funding had risen by 25 percent since 1997. Higher Education Minister David Lammy said now was time "to look to the higher education sector to tighten its belt."

Struggling with massive deficits from trying to bail out crisis-hit banks, the government has promised painful cuts across the public sector. Universities would be unlikely to get much more out of the rival Conservatives should they win upcoming elections. The opposition party has promised even harsher austerity measures. But is Oxford University — the English-speaking world's oldest university — really on the verge of a "meltdown," as described by Arthur and Piatt in their editorial? The institution, which developed rapidly in the 12th century, wouldn't say which, if any, of its programs might be axed if there is a funding shortfall. And Cambridge University, which recently celebrated its 800th birthday, has said only that it shares the concerns raised in the editorial and would seek to minimize the impact of any cuts.

ROME – U.N. human rights officials said Tuesday that they were worried about Italy's deep-rooted racism against migrants following clashes in a southern town between African farmworkers, residents and police. Hundreds of Africans fled the farm town of Rosarno in the underdeveloped southern region of Calabria in trains, cars and caravans of buses arranged by authorities. Their departure came after two days of violence that erupted last week when two migrants were shot with a pellet gun in an attack they blamed on racism. Dozens were injured in clashes between the migrants and local residents and officials. Three migrants were severely beaten with metal rods. The violence is "extremely worrying since it reveals serious and deep-rooted problems of racism against

these migrant workers," U.N. rights officials Jorge Bustamante and Githu Muigai said in a statement. Bustamante is the U.N.'s special rapporteur on migrants' rights. Muigai is special rapporteur on racism and intolerance. Egypt's foreign ministry also called on the Italian government to protect the migrants and minorities against widespread discrimination. "The latest round of violence was one example of various kinds of violations which migrants and minorities, including Arab Muslim minorities, in Italy face," Egyptian foreign ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki said in a statement that alleged "discrimination, violence and hatred." Italy hosts a large community of Egyptians who reach the country as workers under bilateral agreements or cross the Mediterranean illegally. No Egyptians have been involved in the clashes.

A few of the 1,000 or so migrants who fled Rosarno were from Arab-speaking Algeria. The vast majority were from sub-Saharan African countries, including Nigeria, Ghana, Togo, Ivory Coast and Burkino Faso. Italy's foreign minister, Franco Frattini, said he was ready to speak to Egypt but denied that any religious motivation was behind the clashes, according to the ANSA news agency. Frattini, who is on a tour to some African nations, was speaking from Mauritania.

BRUSSELS – Officials in the Middle East and Europe questioned tighter U.S. airline security measures Tuesday, saying increased body scanning and inspections of Arab passengers would be discriminatory and overly intrusive.

After the alleged Christmas Day attempt by a Nigerian man to blow up a Detroit-bound jetliner, the Obama administration said it would require more full-body pat-downs, searches of carryon bags, full-body scanning and explosive-detection technology at U.S. airports. The European Union has said it may require member nations to put in more full-body scanning machines in order to conform with American security measures and ease passengers' trips from Europe to the U.S. But the European Union's new top justice official said at a confirmation hearing Tuesday that for privacy reasons scans must be voluntary, not mandatory, come with a guarantee they pose no health hazard and their images must be quickly destroyed. "Our citizens are not objects. They are human beings," Justice Commissioner-designate Viviane Reding told a European Parliament confirmation hearing. The U.S. has also demanded more careful screening for people who are citizens of, or are flying from, 14 nations deemed security risks. Beside Syria and Lebanon, they include Cuba, Iran, Sudan, Iraq, Algeria, Afghanistan, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Yemen.

Lebanon's Information Minister Tarek Mitri complained that "citizens of different countries are singled out in a discriminatory fashion." In Syria, the state-run news agency said Washington's top diplomat in Damascus was summoned to the Foreign Ministry and told the new measures constituted "unfriendly behavior." Existing EU law allows the union's executive body, the European Commission, to attempt to unilaterally impose transport security across the 27-nation bloc, such as body scanners in every airport. The European Union has indicated it may force resistant member states to use the full-body scanners being pushed by the Obama administration in the wake of the failed Christmas Day bombing.

ROME – Pope Benedict XVI's planned visit to Rome's main synagogue on Sunday has sharply divided Italian Jews, with some angered by his moves to push World

War II Pope Pius XII toward sainthood. Some Jews and historians have accused Pius of not doing enough to stop the Holocaust. A top rabbi and at least one other prominent community member have announced they will not attend the synagogue visit in protest. And the tension, which comes on the heels of other mishaps in Jewish-Catholic relations, has raised fears of demonstrations, although both sides insist they will not let the event be marred by controversy. Jewish leaders from around the world have traveled to Rome for the German-born Benedict's third visit to a synagogue as pope after seeing ones in Cologne, Germany, and New York. He will be following in the steps of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, who became the first pontiff to set foot in a synagogue when he visited the monumental synagogue in Rome near the Tiber River in 1986. "It will be a meeting of peace, friendship and mutual respect," said Rome's chief rabbi, Riccardo Di Segni. "But above all it will be an example of how to coexist even if he have differences."

But Rabbi Giuseppe Laras, head of the Italian Rabbinic Assembly, told the *Corriere della Sera* daily on Thursday that he will not be at the synagogue because he felt that such a step on Pius so close to the visit was a "less than friendly" gesture. Cardinal Walter Kasper, the top Vatican official in charge of relations with Jews, said "problems and difficulties will be open until the last day of history," but "the visit will not speak about the problems, but about what we have in common." Last month, Benedict sparked outrage among some Jewish groups by signing a decree on Pius' heroic virtues, paving the way for him to be beatified once a miracle attributed to Pius' intercession is confirmed.

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI defended his decision to invite disaffected Anglicans to join the Catholic Church en masse, saying Friday it was the "ultimate aim" of ecumenism. Benedict told members of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that the invitation wasn't an attack on the church's reunification efforts with other Christians but was rather designed to help them by bringing about "full and visible communion." The Vatican in October announced it was making it easier for traditional Anglicans upset over women priests and gay bishops to join the Catholic Church while retaining many of their Anglican traditions, including married priests.

The move roiled the 77-million Anglican Communion, already on the verge of schism over woman and gay clergy, particularly since its spiritual leader, Archbishop Rowan Williams, wasn't consulted and was only informed at the last minute. Anglicans split from Rome in 1534 when English King Henry VIII was refused a marriage annulment. For decades, the two churches have held theological discussions on trying to reunite, part of the Vatican's broader, long-term ecumenical effort to unify all Christians who have separated from Rome over the centuries. The Vatican denied that it was poaching for converts in the Anglican pond and said its unprecedented invitation was merely a response to the many Anglican requests to join the Catholic Church. The Vatican's invitation "is not in any way contrary to the ecumenical movement but shows, instead, its ultimate aim which consists of reaching full and visible communion of the Lord's disciples," Benedict told the members of the congregation, which he headed for a quarter century before becoming pope. Benedict has made healing the divisions in the church a priority of his papacy, reaching out not only to Anglicans but also to Orthodox Christians and breakaway Catholics as well in a bid to unify all the Christian faithful. In that vein, he told congregation members that he hoped they resolve the remaining doctrinal

problems with a group of traditionalist conservatives, the Society of St. Pius X, which includes a Holocaust-denying bishop. The society, founded in 1969 by the late ultraconservative Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, split from Rome over the modernizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council, particularly its outreach to Jews. Lefebvre and four bishops were excommunicated in 1988 after Lefebvre consecrated them without papal consent.

BRUSSELS – U.S. envoy George Mitchell urged European and other international donors on Tuesday to help the Palestinian Authority finance its institution-building program as it prepares to set up a Palestinian state. After meeting with America's partners in the quest for a solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, Mitchell said President Barack Obama was committed to achieving peace in the Middle East. "Central to the effort is resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of two states," Mitchell told reporters. "To that end we stressed coordination and working together to support the Palestinian Authority's program to build the institutions of a future state," he said. "No one country and no one person can do this alone." The meeting in Brussels came as the Obama administration gears up to try to relaunch stalled Israeli-Palestinian talks. The consultations involved the foreign ministers of France, Spain and Norway, which chairs the international donors' grouping. Also taking part were Tony Blair, the international Mideast envoy, and Catherine Ashton, the European Union's incoming foreign policy chief. The European Union is the largest donor to the Palestinian Authority, contributing more than one billion euros last year to help cover its budget and finance economic development. "We have to see that the institutions that are the embryo of what will become the (Palestinian) state have to be supported," Norway's Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere said. "We feel confident that donors will again rally to the challenge and stand up to support a Palestinian state living side by side by Israel," he said. Western-backed Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, an internationally respected economist, has announced plans to build institutions regardless of progress in peace talks, aiming to be ready for statehood in two years. Talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority broke off a year ago, mainly over the issue of Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian land. Israel committed to a full settlement freeze under a 2003 peace plan but did not meet that obligation. The Palestinians say there is no point negotiating while Israel expands the settlements. Past efforts by the Obama administration have failed to get Israel to halt construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. Israel captured both from Jordan in the 1967 Mideast war.

MADRID, Spain -- Foreign Minister Miguel Moratinos said on Friday (January 8th) that Spain will continue talks on the EU accession of Balkan countries. Moratinos, who will preside over the European Foreign Policy Council over the next six months, told journalists that talks with Croatia will continue. Four more chapters in Turkey's EU accession talks will open, while discussions with Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Macedonia should continue as well. He urged Skopje to resolve its long-standing name dispute with Athens and for Cyprus to be reunified. Regarding Kosovo, whose independence Spain does not recognise, Moratinos said he hopes for "constructive developments".

Southeast Europe

Though freedoms around the globe generally declined, a handful of Balkan countries show some improvement. For the fourth year in a row, setbacks in political rights and civil liberties in 2009 outweighed improvements of freedoms around the world, the US-based democracy watchdog group Freedom House said in its annual survey released Tuesday (January 12th). "This represents the longest continuous period of decline for global freedom in the nearly 40-year history" of the Freedom in the World report, said the group, which this year covered 194 countries and 14 territories. The number of electoral democracies dropped from 119 to 116 last year to reach the lowest level since 1995, the report said, while noting declines in democratic freedom in 40 countries in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and the former Soviet Union.

"The decline is global, affects countries with military and economic power, affects countries that had previously shown signs of [potential] reform, and is accompanied by enhanced persecution of political dissidents and independent journalists," said Arch Puddington, the group's director of research. "To make matters worse, the most powerful authoritarian regimes have become more repressive, more influential in the international arena, and more uncompromising." Freedom House has issued its annual assessment of the state of political rights and civil liberties in the world since 1972. To assess performance, the group examines electoral processes, political pluralism and functioning of government as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association and the rule of law. Based on their scoring of performance on a seven-point scale, with 1 representing the most free and 7 the least free, each country and territory is assigned to a broad category status of Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.

The few bright spots included notable gains in 16 of the 194 countries, with Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia among those showing improvement. "Five countries in the western Balkans experienced gains for freedom during the year," the report said. "The most notable improvements occurred in Kosovo, which advanced from Not Free to Partly Free status after holding elections that were deemed to be in compliance with international standards and strengthening the protection of minority rights." As for Montenegro, the successful organisation of the March parliamentary elections, progress in adopting anticorruption legislation and an overall stabilisation allowed its score on civil liberties to improve from 3 to 2 and its status to improve from Partly Free to Free. Croatia and Serbia improved their political rights rating by one point each, from 2 to 1 and from 3 to 2, respectively. Croatia's gain was due to improvements in the country's treatment of minority Serb and Romany communities. The health of a stable multiparty system was also noted. As in last year's survey, the number countries assessed as Free stands at 89, representing 46% of the global population. Seven Southeast European countries -- Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Montenegro, Romania and Serbia -- belong to that group. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia are placed among the 58 Partly Free countries, accounting for 20% of all people in the world. The number of the Not Free countries increased by five. It now includes 47 countries, accounting for 34% of the global population. More than half of these people live in China, which also belongs to this group.

PODGORICA, Montenegro -- The government announced on Friday (January 15th) that it has established diplomatic relations with Kosovo through an exchange of letters between foreign ministers. Montenegro recognised Kosovo's independence on October 9th 2008. Last month, Serbia asked Podgorica to refrain from establishing diplomatic relations with Pristina until The Hague-based International Court of Justice decides on the validity of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia.

Montenegrins reflect on the fruits -- and costs -- of the transition from communism. The collapse of communism brought Montenegrins a multi-party democracy and eventual independence. But for many, the transition has been bittersweet. Along with others in the former Yugoslavia, citizens of Montenegro lived in relative affluence at the time the Berlin Wall fell. They lost it once Yugoslavia broke apart. "We believed that we had a better form of communism, soft socialism. In the 1980s Yugoslavia had a standard of living that was equal to that of Greece," Maja Kostic-Mandic remembers. With a younger generation taking over from the old guard, many believed the country was poised to enter the EU. Then it all went wrong. Yugoslavia descended into chaos as the state disintegrated and its republics engaged in a succession of brutal conflicts between 1991 and 2001, known as the Yugoslav wars. Today, the average Montenegrin remains worse off than before, says Kostic-Mandic, 40, a law professor and former parliament member. Her father, Branko Kostic, was vice president of Yugoslavia at the time of the breakup. "Most people had a better life then," she says, pointing to the growing income gap among citizens, one of Europe's widest. "There was no extreme poverty, no drugs, much less crime, more jobs. We were all, more or less equal, and it seemed that everybody had a chance." The affluence of those days however, rested on shaky ground. Montenegro was plagued by economic inefficiencies and depended on the federal Yugoslav government to redirect revenue from more prosperous republics. Yugoslavia eventually amassed debt exceeding 14 billion euros. Reformists, led by Ante Markovic, saw EU entry as the solution. Joining the bloc, they thought, would foster investment and create jobs and allow the debt to be paid off. It didn't happen.

In late December, the European Court of Human Rights delivered a verdict in the cases of Finci and Sejdic vs. BiH that will give the country's ethnic minorities more rights. The Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) reached a long-awaited verdict last month in the cases of Jakob Finci and Dervo Sejdic against Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Finci is a prominent BiH politician, a popular personality and leader of the country's Jewish community. He is the director of La Benevolencija, a Jewish charity and the head of the state Civil Service Agency. Sejdic is an activist of the Roma Council in BiH. The binding verdict declares the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina to be discriminatory against citizens who do not belong to one of the three constituent peoples of the country: Croats, Serbs or Bosniaks. The verdict also calls for harmonisation of the constitution with the basic principles of the European Convention on Human Rights. Finci and Sejdic argued that the constitution -- as well as the 2001 Election Law -- bars certain citizens from running for high elected office solely because of ethnic origin. The offices of president and the House of Peoples of the Parliamentary Assembly were mentioned as legally off-limits to certain ethnicities. The complaint was

filed in 2006. The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is embodied in the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement signed by BiH, Serbia and Croatia, was considered the best compromise reachable at the time. It declares the essential peoples of BiH to be Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs, thereby precluding "others" from taking senior posts in the government. The term "others" covers a large number of ethnic minorities, including the Roma, believed to number up to 70,000, the country's largest minority. The Jewish population is said to be just over 1,000. BiH has about 15 other ethnic minorities: Albanians, Montenegrins, Czechs, Italians, Hungarians, Macedonians, Germans, Poles, Romanians, Russians, Rusyns, Slovaks, Slovenes, Turks and Ukrainians. The "others" category also lists people who prefer not to identify with any specific group and call themselves "Bosnians".

BANJA LUKA, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- Republika Srpska (RS) Prime Minister Milorad Dodik told the Belgrade-based daily Vecernje Novosti on Sunday (January 10th) that he will organise a referendum in the entity during the first half of this year. He explained that the government would ask RS citizens two questions: "Do you support the Dayton Agreement, and do you oppose the High Representative [Valentin Inzko] imposing decisions?" Dodik stressed that the RS cabinet has started work on new legislation regarding referendums and will submit it to parliament later this month. He acknowledged that holding such a referendum could be the first step towards a much more important referendum on RS's status in BiH.

MADRID, Spain -- High Representative to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) Valentin Inzko criticised the lack of major reforms in the country over the past three years at a meeting of EU political directors in Madrid on Thursday (January 14th). Inzko stressed that the biggest concern is the continuing absence of political consensus. He also acknowledged some positive steps, such as measures to meet requirements for scrapping EU visa requirements. He added that continued progress on BiH's application to NATO would be a major stabilising factor.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- The EU's new Foreign Affairs chief-designate, Catherine Ashton, called on Monday (January 11th) for an effective strategy to overcome the political stalemate in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). During her confirmation hearing at the European Parliament, she rejected the idea of holding a referendum on the status of BiH's entities, as requested by Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik.

BERLIN, Germany -- Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Tuesday (January 12th) that Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a "long way" from EU membership. Speaking to journalists after talks with visiting BiH Presidency chairman Zeljko Komsic in Berlin, the German leader reiterated that chances for BiH's fast integration are slim, given a political stalemate that has blocked EU-related reforms. Merkel also minimised hopes of visa-free travel

ZAGREB, Croatia -- Voters went to the polls Sunday (January 10th) for the presidential run-off. Ivo Josipovic of the Social Democratic Party won the first round on December 27th but he failed to attract over 50% of the support, sending him into round two against runner-up Milan Bandic, the mayor of Zagreb. Polls suggest Josipovic will win handily Sunday. Meanwhile, anti-corruption police announced on Friday that they are investigating Bandic for suspected involvement in several graft cases. Police official

Vuk Djuricic told Reuters that the fact that Bandic is being investigated does not mean he will be indicted.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- During his first press conference Monday (January 11th), President-elect Ivo Josipovic vowed to fight corruption, warning that graft is blocking reforms needed to accelerate the country's EU integration process. He said he wants to forge closer co-operation with neighbouring countries. Josipovic, of the main opposition Social Democrat Party, easily won the election Sunday, beating Zagreb Mayor Milan Bandic in a run-off. In other news Monday, the Supreme Court upheld a seven-year prison sentence given to former General Vladimir Zagorec for abuse of office and embezzling nearly 4m euros worth of diamonds. Zagorec's lawyer said he would appeal to the Constitutional Court and to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, if necessary. Prosecutors say that when Zagorec stepped down as deputy defence minister in 2000, he embezzled diamonds left in 1993 by a German trader as collateral in an illegal weapons deal.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Outgoing Croatian President Stipe Mesic said on Friday (January 8th) that Serbia should stop nourishing "unrealistic dreams" that Kosovo could return to its territory. He also urged Belgrade to stop calling on the Serb minority in the young country to boycott state institutions and elections. "It would be good to stop suggesting Kosovo citizens of Serb nationality refuse co-operation ... and in that way, deprive themselves of the right to decide the way they live," Mesic said in a speech to parliament in Pristina. "It would be good to stop stirring up unrealistic dreams that it is not over yet," Mesic added. He was making his last visit before his term ends in mid-February. Tadic said Mesic's comments harm relations with Serbia and provide an unnecessary burden to his successor.

LJUBLJANA, Slovenia -- Following a meeting Wednesday (January 13th) between Prime Minister Borut Pahor and Croatian counterpart Jadranka Kosor, officials announced that Slovenia will allow the opening of two of three problematic chapters in the EU accession talks with Croatia before the next intergovernmental conference opens on February 19th. It appears the chapters will be on environment and fisheries, while the opening of the third chapter -- on foreign security and defence policy -- will be postponed. Croatia has opened 28 chapters so far, and Kosor expects to complete the accession talks this year.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Foreign Minister Teodor Baconschi said on Saturday (January 9th) that Romania should overcome its "timidity" in relations with the EU. "We should have a new behaviour. I am in no way suggesting that we should raise our voice, but we should have our own position and defend more decisively our national interest at the negotiating table," Baconschi said in an interview with public television TVR 1. Romania snagged an important post in the new European Commission, when Dacian Ciolos was named as the new agriculture commissioner. His confirmation hearing by the European Parliament is scheduled for Friday.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- Bulgarian Foreign Minister Rumiana Jeleva's nomination to serve as an EU commissioner is in jeopardy, local media reported on Tuesday (January 12th). During confirmation hearings on Jeleva as International Co-operation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response Commissioner-designate, she allegedly provided

inadequate answers concerning her resume. This was followed by a controversial interview outside the European Parliament. At issue was a potential conflict of interest amid allegations that Jeleva served as managing director of a firm called Global Consult until April 2009. If true, this is in violation of parliament protocol, which forbids EP members from participating in corporate management boards. European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso has 24 hours to reconsider her nomination.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Parliament is to start discussing the 2010 budget bill Monday (January 11th), in hopes of a vote by week's end, as pledged to the IMF. Thus far, parliamentary committees have largely ignored the government's draft, adding amendment after amendment. Finance Minister Sebastian Vladescu has threatened to resign if these various amendments are not dropped.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Parliament approved the 2010 state budget law in a 192-138 vote Thursday (January 14th), effectively maintaining the framework proposed by the government. It includes a series of unpopular measures, such as wage and pension freezes and public sector layoffs. By a margin of 176 to 147, lawmakers voted in favour of the budget for social security. Efforts by the opposition to boost pensions failed, so rates will continue to reflect commitments made to the IMF. Also Thursday, Finance Minister Sebastian Vladescu said personnel cuts in the public sector will amount to over 100,000 jobs in the next four years. This year, nearly 17,000 jobs will be trimmed, mostly in local government. Trade unions vowed to stage protests later this month. Union leader Bogdan Hossu says the finance ministry "is looking at the issue from a purely accounting perspective, without consideration for increased efficiency".

SOFIA, Bulgaria -- Prime Minister Boyko Borisov was unanimously elected as the new chairman of the ruling Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party Sunday (January 10th). He will replace Tsvetan Tsvetanov at the party's helm. Borisov, who was previously mayor of Sofia, previously did not become party leader due to legislation that barred mayors from becoming party chairmen. Tsvetanov will now become second in command. Despite the formal change in leadership, the party's political course remains unchanged.

Serbia's president visits Republika Srpska with a message for the entire region. Calling for reconciliation among all Balkan countries, Serbian President Boris Tadic said on Saturday (January 9th) that the future of the region lies within the EU. People throughout the Balkans, he said, should follow a policy of respect for different identities and national interests if any progress is to be made. Tadic made his remarks during a visit to Banja Luka, the second largest city in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was there to commemorate the 18th anniversary of the founding of the Republika Srpska (RS), the Serb-run republic established after the Dayton Peace Agreement ended the three-year conflict in the area. At the same time, the accords established the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH). "I think that after the conflicts in the 1990s our peoples need reconciliation and that this hand of reconciliation can be established as a symbol of our joint future and as a shared value," said Tadic after the ceremony. "I am convinced that only this kind of policy can lead us to a future membership in the EU together, under whose roof we will live as good neighbours and good friends." Tadic again

acknowledged the crimes committed by Serbian forces and individuals during the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s, and said he wanted to "send a message of peace to the entire region". He added that he would be pleased to see other countries follow Belgrade's example and apologise for their own part in war crimes. Speaking to Radio Television Republika Srpska (RTRS), Tadic said that the Serbian parliament must adopt a resolution condemning the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica, where up to 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were methodically executed.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- Parliament will discuss two draft resolutions condemning crimes committed during wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, according to a report Monday (January 11th) by B92. The first resolution will refer to crimes in Srebrenica, where up to 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were executed in July 1995. The other is broader, condemning all crimes in the region during the conflicts. On Sunday, President Boris Tadic said that despite possible public disapproval, parliament must adopt such language as part of Serbia's commitments to the UN war crimes tribunal.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- President Boris Tadic said on Friday (January 8th) that Croat and Muslim representatives must apologise for war crimes committed against Serbs in the former Yugoslavia. During a visit to Banja Luka, Tadic said he would be pleased if other countries follow Belgrade's example and apologise for crimes against Serbs during past conflicts. Tadic's comment to reporters followed a ceremony he attended to mark the 18th anniversary of Republika Srpska's establishment.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- President Boris Tadic said on Thursday (January 14th) he will not attend next month's inauguration of Croatian President-elect Ivo Josipovic if Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu is present. Tadic said appearing with Sejdiu would signal de facto recognition of Kosovo's independence. "Serbia is ready to take part in regional gatherings where Kosovo is represented as UNMIK-Kosovo or Kosovo-UNMIK," Tadic said. The Zagreb ceremony is scheduled for February 18th.

Though Serbia is far from formal membership in NATO, heated debate on the issue is under way in the country. On Monday [January 11th], a group of 200 Serbian intellectuals called for a referendum on membership in NATO, claiming that the Belgrade authorities are secretly moving towards the Alliance. "Serbia has on several occasions announced it 'will never recognise the independent state of Kosovo', meaning it will never join NATO. 'Independent Kosovo' is the work of NATO, which created that state and awarded itself supreme and absolute power in it," said the intellectuals in a statement, read by writer Matija Beckovic. The loosely organised group -- with members from across the Serbian political spectrum -- has not worked together before, apparently coming together specifically to oppose NATO membership. According to their document, a key reason against joining NATO is the 1999 action in the former Yugoslavia by the Alliance, which killed an estimated 2,500 civilians. The group said its fears of a secret agreement are confirmed by a news release following a December 4th meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Brussels. It said NATO "welcomed the measures Serbia recently took to strengthen co-operation with the Alliance", though the Serbian public was unaware of

any such measures. Surveys suggest the majority of Serbian citizens oppose NATO membership. On November 7th 2009, the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy unveiled the results of a poll showing 51% of the population is against membership. Only 25% were found to be in favour. Defence Minister Dragan Sutanovac, however, believes it is logical for Serbia to join NATO.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the only opposition party that usually supports the pro-European government in key votes, once again rejected the possibility of joining the government coalition. In an interview with Beta on Saturday (January 9th), LDP leader Cedomir Jovanovic explained that joining would only increase tensions already straining the coalition. Jovanovic, however, insisted that the LDP and the government could be partners and – in all EU-related issues - be more effective this year than last

BELGRADE, Serbia -- The head of the Security and Information Agency (BIA), Sasa Vukadinovic, said on Wednesday (January 13th) that the agency has mobilised all resources to locate and arrest the two remaining war crimes fugitives -- Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic. Speaking to a parliamentary panel, Vukadinovic said the BIA has delivered all requested documents to both war crimes prosecutors and defence teams representing those charged at The Hague.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton and EU Commissioner-designate for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Stefan Fule voiced their commitment Sunday (January 10th) to accelerating the EU integration of Western Balkan countries. They have also submitted their programme for future efforts to the European Parliament. Fule said the ratification of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with Serbia will be among his priorities, now that the EU has decided to unblock its separate interim trade agreement with the country. The SAA was endorsed in April 2008 but frozen over Serbia's insufficient co-operation with The Hague war crimes tribunal.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- The European Commission (EC) announced on Friday (January 8th) that Albania has requested activation of the European Civil Protections Mechanism to help it cope with floods caused by torrential rains and melting snows. The mechanism was activated late Thursday, the EC said in a statement. Albania has requested boats and helicopters to evacuate residents, as well as water pumps, power generators, food and medicines. A state of emergency was declared in northern Albania on Saturday, where 1,200 buildings have been flooded and hundreds of families evacuated. Neighbouring Kosovo and Macedonia announced plans Saturday to provide assistance to Albania. Macedonia's government decided at an extraordinary session to send pumps, rubber boats and tents to hardest-hit areas, while Kosovo pledged to donate 200,000 euros to Albania. It will also send additional Kosovo Security Force officials, who arrived in Albania several days ago to help local authorities, and send fire-fighters. "This is only the beginning of aid," Prime Minister Hashim Thaci said. Floods also hit Bosnia and Herzegovina, swamping buildings in low-lying areas. Local authorities have warned of landslides, due to torrential rains.

TIRANA, Albania -- Greece, Slovenia, France, Austria and Italy sent aid to Albania at the weekend to help deal with devastating floods in the northern part of the country. A total of 35 Greek emergency team members with special boats and water pumps arrived on Sunday (January 10th) in the region of the Vau Dejes dam, where the Drini River has flooded large areas. Slovenia sent emergency teams, while France and Austria sent equipment. Two helicopters arrived from Italy. Kosovo sent the second contingent of its Security Forces, in the first mission undertaken outside its borders. The hardest hit areas appear to be Shkodra and Lezha where well over 2,000 homes have been flooded and nearly 5,000 people have been evacuated. One man reportedly died in Lezha after struggling to remove a tree that was blocking a flooded road. The opposition Socialist Party accuses authorities of mishandling the situation in the face of torrential rains. Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia and Serbia are also fighting floods. In many regions of Montenegro -- close to the border with Albania -- authorities have begun evacuations. Heavy rain and melting snow in the mountains have raised the levels of BiH's major rivers, flooding hundreds of houses. Rescue teams are trying to reach some of the affected regions. Heavy snow in Croatia was followed by flooding. An emergency situation was declared in the central district of Lika where about 100 homes had to be evacuated. The water levels of almost all rivers in Serbia are rising due to ten days of rain.

TIRANA, Albania -- The government on Wednesday (January 13th) described its reaction to the two weeks of flooding as a success and offered guaranteed compensation to those affected. "It has been a successful humanitarian operation which will be marked in history," Prime Minister Sali Berisha told a cabinet meeting in the north western town of Shkodra. He added that the public had been warned in time, and he rejected claims by the opposition suggesting the situation was mismanaged. The area affected in Shkodra is estimated now at an area encompassing 11,400 hectares. The General Prosecutors Office meanwhile is looking into the possible mismanagement of hydro plants and dams amid torrential rains

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- Parliament Speaker Jozefina Topalli asked EU officials on Wednesday (January 13th) to remove visa barriers for Albanian citizens and to provide aid to the flood-hit northwest region of Shkodra. Topalli was in Brussels to meet the head of the European Parliament Delegation for Relations with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo to discuss the processes of EU integration and visa liberalisation, which is expected to occur quickly.

TIRANA, Albania -- A commission of 12 ministers will be established soon to co-ordinate the next census in Albania, State Minister Genc Pollo announced on Thursday (January 14th). He explained that the headcount will also record ethnic and religious composition in an effort to end frequent disagreement on those figures. Experts and academics have criticised this aspect of the census, arguing that it would allow many Albanians to embrace Greek nationality and benefit from the higher pensions Greece pays to its minorities. Athens says there are about 150,000 Greek minority citizens living in Albania, while authorities say the actual number is closer to 30,000.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Managing relations with Serbia tops the list of international challenges for the government this year, International Civilian Office chief Pieter Feith said Thursday (January 14th) during a meeting with Hashim Thaci, the country's prime minister. Feith added that while the government made solid achievements in 2009, challenges remain. In other news Thursday, EULEX head Yves de Kermabon visited the newly established Serb-dominated municipality of Ranilug, where he dismissed Belgrade-orchestrated parallel structures across Kosovo. "Strong, fair and multiethnic rule-of-law institutions for all communities are the only option. This will be a guarantee for fair justice and will make the so-called parallel structures irrelevant," de Kermabon said.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Mauritania has become the 65th country to recognise Kosovo's independence, according to a press release issued by Kosovo's foreign ministry on Wednesday (January 13th). The acknowledgement came after long and intensive communication between the two foreign ministries

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Police on Wednesday (January 13th) expelled Serbia's Minister for Kosovo Goran Bogdanovic over illegal political activities in the municipality of Strpce. Bogdanovic was stopped around noon, ahead of a meeting with local Serb representatives elected by Belgrade institutions. Shortly afterward, police accompanied him to the Merdare border checkpoint in the north. Police Assistant Director of Operations Shpend Maxhuni said they followed an order from the Kosovo government to stop Serbian officials who enter the country without permission. Pristina says it did so after consulting with international community authorities. Bogdanovic says the police violated his rights. In response, Serbian Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic on Wednesday summoned the ambassadors of Germany, France, the UK, the US and Italy to protest the expulsion.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- KFOR considers Serb parallel structures in Kosovo dangerous, commander General Marcus Bentler said on Sunday (January 10th), adding that they violate UN Resolution 1244 and are therefore considered illegal. "These structures risk stability," Bentler said at the Italian KFOR military barracks in Peja/Pec. "We are aware of their existence, but it is up to local and international [officials] to deal with them," he added.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Serbia's membership in the EU will be conditioned on resolving its disagreements with Kosovo, Wolfgang Ischinger, former EU envoy for Kosovo's status, said on Monday (January 11th). In an interview with the BBC, Ischinger emphasised that Pristina and Belgrade must start discussions to find what he described as a "practical way" to live together without raising any fundamental issues. Ischniger noted that Germans faced the same situation in the 1960s and 1970s. "In the long term, Serbia and Kosovo will also join the EU, and at that moment all discussions on who owns which territory will be much more irrelevant than today," Ischinger added.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Disagreements among members of the Central Election Commission (CEC) led to a delay in announcing the final results of a re-count in the

Gjilan/Gnjilane municipality on Monday (January 11th). Eight members supported the results of the re-count, which declared the Democratic Party (PDK) candidate the winner by a slight margin, while the head of the commission abstained, effectively blocking the proceedings. Democratic League (LDK) representatives had requested a re-vote in Gjilan/Gnjilane instead of a re-count. Two other municipalities, Prizren and Lipjan/Lipljane, require re-votes, due to significant violations in voting on November 15th and December 13th.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- One person was arrested in Pristina on Tuesday (January 12th), suspected of participating in two attempted murders in 1999 and 2000, EULEX announced. The man, identified only as Driton H, was detained by EULEX police based on a warrant issued by a prosecutor handling the case. It stems from the arrest last month of a former Kosovo Intelligence Service agent, Nazim Bllaca, who claims he participated in several murders and blackmails against "enemies of the state". Bllaca went public at the end of November with detailed information on events following the 1999 conflict in Kosovo, insisting several senior state, party and police officials are involved.

Australia

SYDNEY (AFP) – Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith said Tuesday that ties with India had not been undermined by a series of recent attacks against Indians living in Australia. The unsolved stabbing murder of 21-year-old Nitin Garg earlier this month caused anger among Indians in Australia and overseas, and prompted India's External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna to suggest it would hurt ties. But Smith said he had spoken with his Indian counterpart on Monday and had been assured that the nations enjoyed an "excellent relationship". "We both agreed this was an issue we did not want to disturb or get in the way of what the external affairs minister described as an excellent relationship," he told reporters. Smith's comments follow the release of a statement from India's foreign ministry on Monday that said Krishna had conveyed "his deep concern" over the attacks during the telephone conversation. Krishna "emphasised to the Australian foreign minister that non-redressal of this vital issue will cast a shadow on otherwise excellent bilateral relations," it said. Smith said he relayed to the minister his condolences on the death of Garg, an accounting graduate who was stabbed to death as he made his way to work in Melbourne's western suburbs on January 2. The murder follows a spate of violence against Indian students in Melbourne over the past 18 months that has included beatings, robberies and stabbings and has threatened Australia's education industry. Police believe the vast majority of the attacks are not racially motivated and say there is nothing to suggest Garg's killing was a race hate crime. Smith said he told Krishna that Australia's Victorian state police were treating Garg's case "as one of its highest priorities". "I undertook to keep him informed of any developments in the investigation," he added.