

Report 106
PROJECT ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE
MUSLIM WORLD
Weekly Presentation: February 2, 2010
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Period: From January 24-30, 2010

This week report dwells much on Yahoo/AP/Reuters News, BBC, 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

- Obama Plans Bipartisan Summit on Health Care
- GOP wary of pitfalls in Obama's health care summit
- Deal on Jobs Shows Limits of Push for Bipartisanship
- President Obama increases US debt limit
- Poll: Obama has edge over GOP among public
- Texas gov. candidate questions any US role in 9/11

Western Europe

- 2,500 protest Muhammad cartoon in Norway
- Climate data 'not well organised'
- MI5 denies cover-up over Binyam Mohamed torture affair
- Germany, Forced to Buoy Greece, Rues Euro Shift
- EU leaders pledge to help Greece
- Greek PM Papandreou calls EU response 'timid'
- Greece to restructure public sector
- ECB's Trichet confident of Greek austerity plan success
- European Swift bank data ban angers US

Southeast Europe

- EU uses incentives to retain its best and brightest

Romania

- Blizzards pummel southeastern Romania
- EU gives Romania an extra year to cut budget deficit
- Romania to become "defence pillar"
- Russia concerned over Romania's plans for missile shield
- Romanian Constitutional Court requires amendments to electoral law

Bulgaria

- Britain backs Bulgaria's bid to join euro zone
- EC offers positive assessment of two more programmes for Bulgaria

Kosovo

- EU extends Feith's mandate in Kosovo
- Feith says strategy for northern Kosovo will be sent to Belgrade
- ISG supports Kosovo's strategy for north
- Kosovo to participate in KFOR downsizing
- Pack says Kosovo's EU integration depends on domestic leadership

Serbia

- BiH, Serbia restore full diplomatic relations
- Dacic: Serbian political situation is stable
- Serbia's SNS collects 300,000 signatures backing early elections
- IMF supports Serbia's pension reform efforts

Bosnia

- Dodik urges RS parliament to pass bill on referendums
- RS passes controversial referendum law
- RS's Dodik denies law on referendums is aimed at secession
- EP rapporteur says BiH could get visa liberalisation in July
- Inzko initiates talks with BiH leaders on property issues

Albania

- Albanian government, opposition leaders to meet at Topi's office
- Brussels welcomes initiative to resolve Albania's political crisis
- Albanian opposition warns of street protests
- Albania, Turkey launch visa-free travel
- Berisha says Albania wants to become regional energy superpower

Macedonia

- EU, US representatives to Macedonia condemn Thaci's rhetoric
- Opposition parties in Macedonia join forces
- EP passes resolutions on Macedonia, Croatia and Turkey

Croatia

- Croatia's Kosor, opposition leaders fail to agree on constitutional changes
- Croatia's Mesic storms out of TV interview
- Croatian troops ordered to take time off amid economic crisis
- Slovenia to allow Croatia to open more EU negotiations chapters

Oceania

Report Summary

USA/Canada

Political Issue

President Obama has called on the Republican Party for a bipartisan meeting geared at discussing the deadlock healthcare issue. Such meeting is hoped to put an end and challenge the republican before the Americans on health insurance issue. The Obama administration has been struggling to passed a healthcare bill into law, but faced with republican rejections on many counts. It is quite interesting the extent to which the bipartisan meeting will bridge the gulf of misunderstanding owing to the ideological difference on health reforms between the two parties. Paradoxically, Obama despite his inability to get his objective done was still favoured by American as the New York Times/CBS News poll suggested.

In a similar vein, the Senate will be going for the implementation of a bipartisan job proposal in order to bail the economy from its rising unemployment. Most Americans are seriously taking on the Obama's administration not because he can't do the job but he has not been able to revive the economy as expected. Political tussle between the democrat and republican has exacerbated the whole messy situation. Hence, should the Americans sit on

the fence watching the political drama in Washington or tell their representatives that a real change is demanded.

Conspiracy surrounding the event of 9/11 remains unfinished and unraveled. Muslims are seen to be the only group questioning the event as they think conspiracy theory gives explanations to the intrigued event. A republican Debra Medina said on an American TV show, Glenn Beck Show, that there were "some very good arguments" that the U.S. government was complicit in hatching the plan of Sept. 11, 2001, although she later retracted her statement. Yet are we all clear about the entire intelligence and intrigue surrounding 9/11.

Economic Issue

America like every part of the world still reads the wordings of the financial crisis on the wall. Obama administration has been preoccupied on how to bring the economy back to its feet, even though the administration does not expect an economic miracle very soon. Obama administration has approved a law that would limit US borrowing in order to manage the economy's deficit.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Western Europe

Political Issue

Economic Issue

Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou has sent a signal to the EU that principled statement and promises cannot save his country from further economic woes. Greece economy was shocked by the financial crisis and has yet to regain its stamina. While many Greeks want a quick change as government increases tax and other austerity measures, yet they are not ready to accept international or external interference in their economy, saying no problem to exit the Eurozone.

Germany a strong member of the Eurozone is likely to help through a bilateral loan but such intention is flaring debate among Germans that the government is extending benevolence outward when the economy is yet to finally make its grip.

Thus, Should the EU come to the aid of Greece or as Spanish Prime Minister once said Greece should fix its home on its won.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Counterterrorism is a legitimate effort shouldered by a country to protect itself from the menace of terrorism. Many suspected terrorists have been alleging that they were tortured and mistreated beyond the line of civility. This question many countries along with the United States involved in rendition practices are yet to answer. Binyam Mohamed a British citizen got the judgment of a British court that he has the right to know the complicity of MI5 in his torture, a claim MI5 and the government has outrightly rejected.

Is it justifiable to irritate Muslims sentiment under the premise of freedom of speech and expression?

A peaceful protest of about 2500 Norwegian Muslims is an indication that Muslim have learnt to be prudent in the way they raise their discontentment against sacrilegious remarks and depiction of their religion. Dagbladet daily, a Norwegian newspaper printed an offensive caricature of the prophet and according to Dagbladet's acting editor-in-chief, Lars Helle he takes no regret for the publication rather "It was a test for Norwegian society whether this would be a peaceful protest or not,"

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

How far true is the threat of global warming and climate change seen as consequence of human engagement with the environment, or is it just another ploy by scientists to further tame the non-scientist. Part of the world facing climate problems might well say yes it is true and a threat, but is it man-made or natural. Professor Jones behind the Climategate affairs said critics and skeptics must be careful in arguing against the fact that recent climate warming was most likely predominantly man-made. According to him, scientists must take the responsibility to communicate the reasons and correlation between humans and recent climate change.

Geostrategic Issues

Is it another setback to EU-US ties or simply a show that the EU is a rebranded bloc that can distinguish right from wrong? The European Parliament has finally blocked US accessibility to the bank accounts of Europeans, which the European Parliament says does not protect private right. Although as part of counterterrorism measure, EU gave such access to the US after the event of 9/11, but surprisingly the EU came to know that the US had been secretly doing that even before the permission was granted.

Southeast Europe

Political Issue

Albanian President Bamir Topi is hosting a mediation meeting between the ruling party and the opposition Socialist party. The latter has been boycotting the parliament accusing the ruling party of irregularities during last June election. Although accepted to attend the meeting but threatening street protest if there is no correction of the allegation.

It is another plus mark for Turkey in the Balkan. Ankara has been able to broker a reconciliation pact between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. With the nominalization of relations both countries will respect each other sovereignty and reestablish diplomatic contacts.

Western Balkan region became an experiment laboratory where tragic genocide took place in the 90s. The region is vehemently struggling for development and more importantly to integrate with the EU, thus the call for a war as suggested by the leader of the Macedonian Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA) Menduh Thaci that if the government fails to redress its treatment of the Albanian minority in the country, then there will be war. EU envoy to Macedonia Erwan Fouere and US Ambassador to Skopje Philip Reeker condemned this statement.

Bosnia political uncertainty has been further heightened recently by the law passed in the parliament of Republika Srpska (RS). The law could pave the way for a future referendum on the entity's independence from the rest of the federation. Republika Srpska Prime Minister Milorad Dodik defied international objection to the referendum.

Meanwhile, Serbia and Croatia have shown their objection to the law, Croatia president is reported to have made war threat that if such referendum is done, he would launch war against Bosnia.

Can Serbia politically exonerate itself from the past crime committed during the Milosevic era if Serbia continues to maintain that it is the rightful inheritor of Yugoslavia? Serbia is doing all it can showing its readiness to be an integral of the EU, however political divide in the country, coupled with its inability to nail down fugitive war criminal makes Belgrade a country that must try more.

Pieter Feith, the International Civilian Representative in Kosovo said, the ICR will intimate Serbia with the proposal that intends to integrate northern Kosovo with the rest of Kosovo. The north largely a Serb populated region has been operating a parallel structure and supported by Serbia. Despite the objection of Serbia to the proposal, the proposal has received the backing of the 25 member states of the International Steering Group (ISG) in Vienna. Nonetheless, whatever the case, can Kosovo really enjoy and maintain its sovereignty independent of Serbia.

Macedonia has been suffering both internal and external problems, with a new political storm in the country, can the ruling VMRO-DPMNE government survive the political storm against his party. Twelve political parties in Macedonia last week announced their coalition and have formerly signed agreement under the name The Front Party geared at toppling Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, even though the latter still maintain high popularity among the people.

Economic Issue

The Eurozone is facing a great economic trauma upon the economic problems facing Southern Europe. This however does not stop country like Bulgaria, longing to join the Eurozone with the support of London. Bulgaria like its Mediterranean counterparts experienced a huge financial shock during the global recession.

The extent to which the financial crisis affected the Western Balkan countries is reflected in the recent announcement by the Croatian military that almost half of the country's troops should go for an unpaid holiday.

Romania has been offered two years extension by the European Commission to trim down its budget deficit in order to keep in line with the commission demand. The Romanian government in recent times has been trying various austerity measures thought to be good enough to bring the economy back to its position after the financial meltdown.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Albania and Turkey have formally entered into a visa-free agreement, which gives citizens of the two countries 90 days stay without hitch.

European Union is not just interested in the integration of the Western Balkan with the rest of Europe but equally aims at the scientific development of the region. The newly initiated Marie Curie Actions a joint programme of the EU People programme along with the Seventh Framework Programme is a testimony to that.

Geostrategic Issues

The European Parliament has further given the Balkan region and Turkey the encouragement that they are welcomed in the EU as much as these countries can speed up their reforms. Similarly despite its political problems, European Parliament rapporteur on visa liberalisation for the Western Balkans Tanja Fajon says Bosnia is on the verge of joining the Schengen visa liberalisation scheme. But that will not be same for Kosovo till after 12-18 months as it meets the EU-set criteria before it can benefit from visa liberalisation.

Slovenia that has been roadblocking Croatia-EU integration due to border problem, but Slovenia has recently raised-up short white flag, thus Croatia will be able to open few chapters in its EU talk.

Keeping in view of transferring power to Kosovo government, NATO forces in the country is expected to be downsized, but that process according to Albanian Defence Minister Arben Imami will be incomplete without the consent and understanding of Kosovo leadership.

Whatever is the benefit coming out of the US missile system which Romania has accepted on it soil, the Russia factor that has always been there cannot disappear. It will take the US a rigorous adventure to still explain to Kremlin that the system will pose no threat to Russia.

Oceania

Political Issue

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Report Detail

US/Canada

WASHINGTON — President Obama said Sunday that he would convene a half-day bipartisan health care session at the White House to be televised live this month, a high-profile gambit that will allow Americans to watch as Democrats and Republicans try to break their political impasse. Mr. Obama made the announcement in an interview on CBS during the Super Bowl pre-game show, capitalizing on a vast television audience. He set out a plan

that would put Republicans on the spot to offer their own ideas on health care and show whether both sides are willing to work together. "I want to come back and have a large meeting, Republicans and Democrats, to go through systematically all the best ideas that are out there and move it forward," Mr. Obama said in the interview from the White House Library.

Mr. Obama challenged Republicans to attend the meeting with their plans for lowering the cost of health insurance and expanding coverage to more than 30 million uninsured Americans. Republican leaders said they welcomed the opportunity and called on Democrats to start the debate from scratch, which the president said he would not do.

The move by Mr. Obama comes after weeks in which the administration has appeared uncertain about how to proceed on his top domestic priority since Republicans captured the Senate seat previously held by Senator Edward M. Kennedy. House and Senate Democrats had been increasingly at odds over what the bill should say, how to move ahead tactically and, in some cases, whether to continue at all. The idea for the bipartisan meeting, set for Feb. 25, was reached in recent weeks, aides said, as part of the White House strategy to intensify its push to engage Congressional Republicans in policy negotiations, share the burden of governing and put more scrutiny on Republican initiatives. Mr. Obama's announcement came after he surprised his rivals in late January by requesting that a session with House Republicans be open to cameras. That meeting produced a spirited 90-minute question-and-answer session with the president that many in the White House viewed as a critical success for Mr. Obama. In making the gesture on Sunday, Mr. Obama is in effect calling the hand of Republicans who had chastised him for not honoring a campaign pledge to hold health care deliberations in the open, broadcast by C-Span, and for not allowing Republicans at the bargaining table.

Nancy-Ann DeParle, the director of the White House Office for Health Reform, briefed Democratic Congressional staff members in a conference call ahead of the interview, with Katie Couric. Separately, some Congressional staff members expressed concern that Mr. Obama's meeting would simply prolong an already tortuous process. And Democrats still face steep challenges in reconciling the differences between the House and Senate bills. Some House Democrats are firmly opposed to a proposed tax on high-cost employer-sponsored insurance policies, which they think will hit some middle-class workers and violate Mr. Obama's campaign promise not to raise taxes on Americans earning less than \$250,000 a year.

WASHINGTON – Even as Republicans publicly welcome President Barack Obama's call for a bipartisan confab on health care, some privately worry that he might be laying a trap to portray their ideas as flimsy. If so, a shaky showing by GOP leaders could possibly embolden congressional Democrats to make a final, aggressive push to overhaul the nation's health care system, with or without any Republican votes. Some Republicans doubt that scenario, saying Democrats have lost momentum for any plan that's certain to draw fierce criticism. But they noted Monday that the White House has not backed away from its support of legislation similar to what the Democratic-controlled House and Senate passed separately in December over strong GOP objections. "This is a clever tactic by the president to try to put the Republicans on the defensive," said John Feehery, a GOP consultant and former congressional aide. "There's a vast ideological gulf" between the two parties on health care, he said, making it likely that the Feb. 25 half-day meeting will be more showmanship than substance. The House's top two Republican leaders openly questioned Obama's sincerity and hinted they might skip the meeting if he uses the Democratic bills as the starting point for discussions. "Assuming the president is sincere about moving forward on health care in a bipartisan way, does that mean he will agree to start over?" said a letter to White House Chief

of Staff Rahm Emanuel from House GOP leader John Boehner of Ohio and GOP Whip Eric Cantor of Virginia. "If the starting point for this meeting is the job-killing bills the American people have already soundly rejected, Republicans would rightly be reluctant to participate," Boehner and Cantor wrote.

They asked Obama to rule out the possibility of using "budget reconciliation" rules, which could allow Democrats to enact some health care provisions with a simple Senate majority, not the 60-vote super majority needed to halt filibusters. Democrats control 59 of the Senate's 100 seats. In response to the letter, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs released a statement contending that Obama is "open to including any good ideas that stand up to objective scrutiny." White House communications director Dan Pfeiffer said the president will not rule out the reconciliation route but is sincere in wanting to hear Republicans' ideas for improving the health care legislation.

President Barack Obama has signed a law increasing the limit on how much the US government can borrow. The debt limit was raised to \$14.3 trillion (£9.1tn) from \$12.4tn, and will allow the government to function for the rest of the year.

Mr Obama also approved legislation that requires new spending to be offset with cuts elsewhere. He is seeking to address the record US budget deficit, which is predicted to reach \$1.56tn this year. The "pay-as-you-go" or "paygo" rule was in place in the 1990s - the last time there was a federal budget surplus. The House of Representatives passed the debt limit bill last week, sending it to the White House for the president's signature. The US Treasury was expected to exceed the current \$12.4tn debt limit within weeks. Failure to raise the limit would have roiled financial markets.

WASHINGTON — Key Democrats and Republicans in the Senate reached a rare bipartisan agreement on Thursday on steps to spur job creation. But Democratic leaders said they would move ahead on only some elements as the two parties maneuvered to address both the struggling economy and voter unrest over gridlock in Washington. Senator Harry Reid, the Nevada Democrat and majority leader, said he would take four core job-creating initiatives from the bipartisan proposal — including tax breaks for businesses that hire unemployed workers and increased public works spending — and seek to move those rapidly through the Senate.

“We feel that the American people need a message,” Mr. Reid said. “The message that they need is that we’re doing something about jobs.”

Yet his decision to embrace only portions of the bipartisan plan developed by Senators Max Baucus, Democrat of Montana, and Charles E. Grassley, Republican of Iowa, caught some lawmakers by surprise and threatened to undermine Republican support for the proposal even as members of Congress and the White House sought ways of working together across party lines after months of deep partisan division.

The White House projected Thursday that unemployment would fall this year by only a little, if at all, and would remain well over 6 percent until 2015.

While Mr. Reid stripped out of the bipartisan bill some tax breaks and other provisions intended to win Republican support, as well as special-interest provisions to win the backing of specific senators, the scaled-back package retained a combination of tax cuts and spending with the potential to win support from both parties.

The centerpiece is a payroll tax holiday that would waive the 6.2 percent Social Security tax for any employer who hires a worker who has been out of a job for at least 60 days. In addition, the bill would provide a \$1,000 income tax credit for every new employee retained for at least 52 weeks.

It would also extend a tax break that would allow businesses to write off up to \$250,000 in capital investments in 2010 rather than depreciating the costs over time, and reauthorize spending on road and transit programs through the end of the year. And it would allow state and local governments to receive a federal subsidy for a portion of the interest paid on bonds that finance public works projects.

WASHINGTON - At a time of deepening political disaffection and intensified distress about the economy, President Obama enjoys an edge over Republicans in the battle for public support, according to the latest New York Times/CBS News poll.

While the president is showing signs of vulnerability on his handling of the economy — a majority of respondents say he has yet to offer a clear plan for creating jobs — Americans blame former President George W. Bush, Wall Street and Congress much more than they do Mr. Obama for the nation's economic problems and the budget deficit, the poll found. They credit Mr. Obama more than Republicans with making an effort at bipartisanship, and they back the White House's policies on a variety of disputed issues, including allowing gay men and lesbians to serve openly in the military and repealing the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy. The poll suggests that both parties face a toxic environment as they prepare for the elections in November. Public disapproval of Congress is at a historic high, and huge numbers of Americans think Congress is beholden to special interests. Fewer than 1 in 10 Americans say members of Congress deserve re-election. As the party in power, Democrats face a particular risk from any wave of voter discontent; unfavorable views of the Democratic Party are as high as they have been since the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, though Republicans continue to register an even worse showing. The percentage of Americans who approve of Mr. Obama's job performance, 46 percent, is as low as it has been since he took office.

Still, the poll suggests that Mr. Obama and his party have an opportunity to deflect the anger and anxiety if they can frame the election not as a referendum on the president and his party, but as a choice between them and a Republican approach that yielded results under Mr. Bush that much of the nation still blames for the country's woes. That is what the White House has been trying to do since the beginning of the year. For all the erosion in support for Mr. Obama, Americans say he better understands their needs and problems and has made more of an effort to be bipartisan than Congressional Republicans, the poll found. "It feels like an attempt to sabotage the majority and to regain control of power rather than working on a compromise," John Smith, a Republican from Greenville, S.C., said of his party after participating in the poll.

AUSTIN, Texas – A Republican gubernatorial candidate said Thursday she has questions about whether the U.S. government was involved in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks — a statement she swiftly backed away from and one that drew immediate criticism from her better-known rivals in the race. Gov. Rick Perry and Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison dismissed the comments made by Debra Medina on the Glenn Beck Show that there were "some very good arguments" that the U.S. was involved in bringing down the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

"I don't have all of the evidence there, Glenn," Medina said. "I think some very good questions have been raised. In that regard there's some very good arguments and I think the American people have not seen all the evidence there."

Medina later released a statement saying she did not believe the government was involved in the attacks. "There is no doubt in my mind that Muslim terrorists flew planes into those buildings on 9/11," Medina said in the written statement. "I have not seen any evidence nor have I ever believed that our government was involved or directed those individuals in any way."

Medina, Perry and Hutchison are battling for the GOP nomination. In recent weeks, Medina has surprised political observers by surging in public opinion polls and raising her profile in two televised debates. Perry said Medina's remarks "were an insult to the thousands of Americans who lost loved ones." He countered that anyone "should be ashamed" for suggesting involvement by former President George W. Bush's administration. Bush was Perry's predecessor as Texas governor.

Hutchison stressed that it was "al-Qaida terrorists who declared war on America. To suggest otherwise is an affront to the men and women who are sacrificing their lives to root out the terrorists in Afghanistan and around the globe."

Beck, who is influential among the Libertarian-leaning voters that Medina has attracted, said he had been flooded with mail since he announced she would be on the show. Medina said in the interview that she has not been questioning the attacks publicly. "There was a theme that ran against you, and that is, you are a '9/11 Truther,'" Beck said, referring to the term given to people who doubt the official account of Sept. 11. "While I don't endorse anyone ... I think I can write her off the list," Beck said. "Let me take another look at Kay Bailey Hutchison if I have to. Rick, I think you and I could French kiss right now."

Western Europe

OSLO – About 2,500 people marched through downtown Oslo in a protest Friday against a Norwegian newspaper that printed a caricature of the Prophet Muhammad. The demonstrators chanted "God is great" in Arabic and waved placards calling for a boycott of the Dagbladet daily. On Feb. 3, the newspaper published a photograph showing a man in front of a computer screen with a depiction of Muhammad as a pig. The picture accompanied an article that said users were posting offensive material about Muslims and Jews on the Facebook page of Norway's security police. Dagbladet's acting editor-in-chief, Lars Helle, told The Associated Press that he doesn't regret printing the offending image and that he welcomed Friday's protest. "It was a test for Norwegian society — whether this would be a peaceful protest or not," Helle said. He said Dagbladet has not received any direct threats since it published the caricature. A hacker attack originating from Turkey brought down the newspaper's Web site for two hours Wednesday evening, but Helle said it's unclear whether that attack was connected to the caricature.

Protesters said they wanted to show Norwegian media how hurtful such images are to Muslims. Islamic law generally opposes any depiction of the prophet, even favorable, for fear it could lead to idolatry. "We have done nothing to anybody. We want to live here in peace. Norway is our home. Our children live here. Why should they (Norwegian media) hurt us like this?" said Naradim Muhammad, a 43-year-old school teacher who helped organize the demonstration. The demonstration was peaceful, except for a firecracker that was apparently thrown by a protester onto a restaurant patio. It caused burn damage to a patio sofa, but nobody was injured. After the blast, organizers ordered the crowd to disperse, encouraging them to go home or to a local mosque to pray. Police spokesman Joern-Kristian Joergensen said the protest concluded without further incident. However, Oslo police, who maintained a low profile during the demonstration to avoid confrontation, would remain on alert throughout the evening, he said. Angry protests swept across Muslim countries in 2006 after a Danish newspaper printed 12 caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. That newspaper said it was challenging a perceived self-censorship among artists afraid to offend Islam.

Phil Jones, the professor behind the "Climategate" affair, has admitted some of his decades-old weather data was not well enough organised. He said this contributed to his refusal to share raw data with critics - a decision he says he regretted. But Professor Jones

said he had not cheated over the data, or unfairly influenced the scientific process. He said he stood by the view that recent climate warming was most likely predominantly man-made. But he agreed that two periods in recent times had experienced similar warming. And he agreed that the debate had not been settled over whether the Medieval Warm Period was warmer than the current period. These statements are likely to be welcomed by people sceptical of man-made climate change who have felt insulted to be labelled by government ministers as flat-earthers and deniers. 'Bunker mentality' Professor Jones agreed that scientists on both sides of the debate could suffer sometimes from a "bunker mentality". He said "sceptics" who doubted his climate record should compile their own dataset from material publicly available in the US. "The major datasets mostly agree," he said. "If some of our critics spent less time criticising us and prepared a dataset of their own, that would be much more constructive."

His colleagues said that keeping a paper trail was not one of Professor Jones' strong points. Professor Jones told BBC News: "There is some truth in that.

"We do have a trail of where the (weather) stations have come from but it's probably not as good as it should be," he admitted. "That's similar with the American datasets. There were technical reasons for this, with changing data from different countries. There's a continual updating of the dataset. Keeping track of everything is difficult. Some countries will do lots of checking on their data then issue improved data so it can be very difficult. We have improved but we have to improve more." His account is the most revealing so far about his decision to block repeated requests from people demanding to see raw data behind records showing an unprecedented warming in the late 20th Century. Professor Jones said climate scientists needed to do more to communicate the reasons behind their conclusion that humans were driving recent climate change. They also needed to be more transparent with data - although he said this process had already begun. He strongly defended references in his emails to using a "trick" to "hide the decline" in temperatures. These phrases had been deliberately taken out of context and "spun" by sceptics keen to derail the Copenhagen climate conference, he said.

The head of MI5 has denied officers withheld information over what it knew about the the torture of a UK resident. In an unprecedented move, Jonathan Evans defended the security service against claims it misled MPs over the US's treatment of Binyam Mohamed. The Court of Appeal earlier ruled that Mr Mohamed could learn what MI5 knew about his 2002 mistreatment while in secret detention in Pakistan.

The home secretary has attacked the media's "baseless" accusations. Mr Evans's highly unusual decision to respond came amid a row over changes made to the Court of Appeal's judgement in the Binyam Mohamed case. Following the judgement, it emerged that the leading lawyer for the government, Jonathan Sumption QC, had lobbied the judges to remove a paragraph from the draft judgement. The barrister said the paragraph was "exceptionally damaging" because it left the impression that MI5 did not have a culture of respecting human rights and did not object to "coercive interrogation techniques". Mr Sumption told the judges he believed the words, written by Master of the Rolls Lord Neuberger, could be read to mean that MI5 had also misled the Intelligence and Security Committee. The disputed paragraph does not appear in the final judgement - but Channel 4 News claimed on Thursday that it related to US documents concerning Mr Mohamed's treatment, which MI5 allegedly failed to disclose to the committee. Strong defence

In an article published in the Daily Telegraph on Friday, Mr Evans said that his officers had never misled parliamentarians and operated within the law.

He said claims of a "culture of suppression" at the heart of the security service were "the precise opposite of the truth". "People who choose to work in the service do so because they want to protect the UK and its liberties," wrote Mr Evans.

"We are an accountable public organisation and take our legal and oversight responsibilities seriously. "The material our critics are drawing on to attack us is taken from our own records, not prised from us by some external process but willingly provided by us to the court, in the normal way. No cover-up there." Adding his voice to the row, Home Secretary Alan Johnson said claims in some parts of the media that MI5 had orchestrated a cover-up were a "ludicrous lie". "The security services in our country do not practice torture," he said.

BERLIN — As Europe edges toward emergency guarantees to stem market panic over one of the most profligate members of the euro bloc, the country that the region turns to for leadership, Germany, is suffering from growing doubts about the European experiment it long championed. Reluctant German leaders now find themselves forced to help Greece remain solvent, or risk watching markets attack one weak member after the next, from Portugal to Spain to Italy, threatening the stability of the euro, the European currency Germany fought so hard to create.

On Thursday, European leaders meeting in Belgium announced they had agreed to a political statement to try to reassure bond markets and head off the crisis, and said that finance ministers would work through the details next week.

Earlier, in a conference call with the finance ministers from the 16 countries that use the euro and the president of the European Central Bank, Jean-Claude Trichet, officials said that some action had to be taken to calm markets and take pressure off Greece. It appeared clear that Germany, with an assist from France, would have to take the lead. "The Germans are the only ones with deep pockets," said Daniel Gros, director of the Center for European Policy Studies in Brussels. "If it was just Greece, they could consider letting them go down the drain, but it threatens the entire euro zone." Berlin has been mostly silent on the matter. That is partly to put pressure on Greece, as civil servants struck there Wednesday to oppose cutbacks that the government has promised in order to rein in its enormous budget deficit.

But a bailout will be politically awkward for Chancellor Angela Merkel's government. It is precisely the financial millstone that opponents warned about when Germany gave up its treasured mark, a move that a majority of people here, in contrast to their political leaders, opposed at the time. "If the German government would just transfer money to Greece, people in Germany would feel their worst fears had come true," said Thomas Mayer, chief economist at Deutsche Bank.

The role of savior has been thrust upon Germany by default. The euro bloc has myriad rules and regulations intended to avoid the need for prosperous members to rush to the aid of those with weak economies.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- Eurozone leaders promised Thursday (February 11th) to help Greece overcome its severe financial crisis but stopped short of offering financial assistance. Instead, they will ask the EU finance ministers to offer specifics when they meet early next week. Bloc leaders in Brussels vowed to "take determined and co-ordinated action, if needed, to safeguard financial stability in the euro area as a whole". They also asked Athens to honour its commitment to cut its deficit by 4% this year, voicing support efforts to fully implement the cost-cutting programme. Afterward, Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou said his government is ready to take additional measures to deal with the huge deficit, which ballooned to 12.7% of GDP last year.

Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou has criticised the European Union's response to the country's financial crisis as timid and too slow. Mr Papandreou told cabinet members at a televised meeting in Athens that the EU lacked coordination and undermined Greece's credibility. At a summit in Brussels on Thursday, the EU offered Greece its backing

but gave no details of any plans to help. Greece's debt crisis has put pressure on the euro, causing it to lose value. Speaking on his return from Brussels, Mr Papandreu said that while Greece had received a statement of support, delays and conflicting statements over the past few months had made things worse. "But in the battle against the impressions and the psychology of the market, it was at the very least timid," he added. He said that speculation about the country had "created a psychology of imminent collapse". Mr Papandreu also accused EU institutions - the Commission, the member states and the European central bank - of a lack of coordination. After the Brussels summit, EU leaders said Greece must take further measures to tackle its huge debts and cut its budget deficit by 4% this year. Greece's deficit is, at 12.7%, more than four times higher than eurozone rules allow. Mr Papandreu said after the summit that his country was ready to take the extra action needed to reduce its deficit. Thursday's talks followed a public sector strike that brought many services to a standstill in Greece. The government's decision to freeze public sector salaries and raise the retirement age are among the austerity measures that have angered Greek trade unions.

ATHENS, Greece -- Finance Minister George Papaconstantinou says the government will unveil a bill this week aimed at restructuring the public sector and limiting the budget crisis. In an interview with Ethnos on Sunday (February 7th), Papaconstantinou said "there is waste of money everywhere," in the public sector, adding that the legislation is also aimed at tax evasion, another serious problem in Greece. Exemptions and other relief for some categories of tax payers will end, Papaconstantinou added.

OTTAWA, Canada -- Eurozone members told a meeting of G-7 members on Saturday (February 6th) that they are keeping a close eye on the situation in Greece and its government's austerity plan, European Central Bank (ECB) President Jean-Claude Trichet told reporters in the town of Iqaluit, northern Canada, where the meeting was taking place. Trichet reiterated that the ECB is confident of Greece's ability to implement all measures needed to get its public finances in check.

The European Parliament has blocked a key agreement that allows the United States to monitor Europeans' bank transactions - angering Washington. The US called the decision a "setback for EU-US counter-terror co-operation". The vote was a rebuff to intensive US lobbying for EU help in counter-terrorism investigations. EU governments had negotiated a nine-month deal which would have allowed the US to continue accessing the Swift money transfer system. Top US officials - including Vice-President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner - had contacted MEPs in recent days to urge them to consider "the importance of this agreement to our mutual security", the Associated Press news agency reported. But Euro MPs said the deal provided insufficient privacy safeguards. Lawmakers in Strasbourg voted 378-196 against the deal, with 31 abstentions. Secret access: The US started accessing Swift data after the 11 September 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington. But the fact that the US was secretly accessing such data did not come to light until 2006.

Last week the Greens' home affairs expert, Jan Philipp Albrecht MEP, said that in backing the new deal the European Commission and EU governments had "not respected the fundamental criticism about the lack of sufficient protections with regard to privacy and the rule of law". The leader of the Socialist group, Martin Schulz MEP, said: "We want a new and better deal with proper safeguards for people's privacy." Tracking the funding of terror groups globally has been a priority for Washington since the 2001 attacks. Swift handles millions of transactions daily between banks and other financial institutions worldwide. It holds the data of some 8,000 banks and operates in 200 countries.

Southeast Europe

The EU People programme -- along with the Seventh Framework Programme and Marie Curie Actions -- is funding a range of opportunities for working scientists to return to and remain in Europe. The projects offer financial assistance in training, mobility and career development. Marie Curie Actions aims to increase the ability of researchers to move freely between countries while providing training and career development for those who take jobs abroad. Areas of study are chosen by applicants. A website devoted to research policies in the Western Balkans -- wbc-inco.net -- said the objective of the Marie-Curie International Reintegration Grants is to make Europe a more attractive place for advanced study for scientists who have done their work overseas for at least three years. The site details how to apply for the grant. "Researchers from EU member states or associated countries who have at least four years full-time postgraduate research experience or a doctoral degree, and who have benefited from a Marie Curie training and mobility action for at least 18 months are eligible for participation in the programme." The goal is take the knowledge these people have gained from institutions in other parts of the world and "transfer" it back to Europe, according to the site

TIRANA, Albania -- President Bamir Topi will host a meeting between Prime Minister Sali Berisha and opposition leader Edi Rama on Saturday (February 13th). Both have said they will attend. Berisha is mediating in a bid to end the SP's boycott of parliament, which began in September. The SP insists it won't return until alleged manipulations of the June 2009 general elections are investigated. The boycott has hampered EU-related reforms, prompting the Council of Europe to issue a resolution on the stalemate.

TIRANA, Albania -- Helmut Lohan, head of the EC delegation in Tirana, said Brussels welcomes a political roundtable scheduled for Saturday (February 13th). President Bamir Topi is organising and mediating the session, aimed at ending a parliamentary boycott the opposition Socialist Party (SP) has been staging since September. SP lawmakers are demanding an investigation into alleged manipulation that occurred during the June 2009 general elections. Lohan said that, "... it is up to [the] political leaders of Albania to find a solution in order to continue European integration in line with the country's interests." The EU Presidency welcomed the initiative Thursday, praising the readiness of Albania's two biggest parties -- the SP and the ruling Democratic Party -- to participate.

TIRANA, Albania -- The opposition Socialist Party (SP) says it will organise protests if talks on overcoming the current political stalemate, mediated by President Bamir Topi, fail. SP lawmakers have been boycotting the work of parliament since September, insisting on a thorough investigation into general elections last June, which they say were marred by serious violations. Both the SP and the ruling Democratic Party have agreed to participate in talks mediated by Topi to try and overcome the crisis. Topi is expected to begin contacting representatives of the two sides Monday

TIRANA, Albania -- An agreement enabling Albanian and Turkish citizens to travel between the two countries without visas took effect on January 27th, the foreign ministry said in a statement Tuesday (February 9th). Citizens can visit either country and stay for up to 90 days without visas or any fee.

TIRANA, Albania -- Any further downsizing of NATO's troops in Kosovo will be decided in co-operation with authorities in Pristina, Albanian Defence Minister Arben Imami said on Sunday (February 7th). "Kosovo has developed into a stable country ... showing

political maturity," Imami said in Tirana, after attending a meeting of NATO defence ministers in Istanbul. He added that the number of KFOR troops will reflect current security situations. NATO recently reduced its presence to 10,000 troops. Media reports predict it will be slashed to 4,000 by next year.

ROME, Italy -- Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha confirmed on Thursday (February 11th) his government's intention to transform the country into a "regional electricity superpower". "We are determined to use all sources in the near future that will make Albania the biggest exporter of energy in the region," Berisha said in a speech at an investment forum in Verona, Italy. Berisha is expected to sign an agreement on a strategic partnership between Albania and Italy when he meets Friday with Italian counterpart Silvio Berlusconi. Both countries have pledged co-operation in building nuclear energy capacities with promoting renewable energy seen as a priority.

Serbia has fully normalised diplomatic relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), announcing the decision Tuesday (February 9th) after the fifth round of trilateral talks initiated by Turkey last October. "I can confirm ... that Serbia did give official agreement to the ambassador to come to Belgrade and represent Bosnia and Herzegovina," Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic said at a joint conference with his Bosnian and Turkish counterparts in Ankara on Tuesday. "We've overcome the problems," said Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. "Bosnia will soon assign an ambassador to Belgrade." Added Davutoglu: "We want to solve all disputes in the Balkans through diplomatic means and reach for regional prosperity and stability."

The breakthrough was another sign of Turkey's increasing influence throughout the Balkans. With Turkish prodding, Serbia's approval of a Bosnian ambassador ended three years of diplomatic problems between Serbia and its neighbour. The countries have diplomatic relations and maintain embassies in one another's capitals. But due to Serbian rejections of ambassadorial nominees, BiH has been represented in Belgrade at the level of charge d'affaires since 2007. Repairing this issue comes at an especially sensitive time. There is international concern about the stability of ethnically divided BiH. Bosnian Serb lawmakers have discussed plans to remove obstacles to a plebiscite, sparking fears of a deepening rift between the two entities, Republika Sprska and the Muslim-Croat Federation of BiH. Davutoğlu expressed hope that this positive step between Serbia and BiH would help strengthen peace and harmony -- however fragile -- inside BiH. "The territorial integrity of BiH is beyond debate," Davutoğlu said.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- Interior Minister Ivica Dacic met with the US Ambassador to Serbia Mary Warlick on Tuesday (February 9th), saying afterwards that political situation in the country is stable and that the Democratic Party-led coalition government plans to stay in power until its mandate ends. A petition drive now under way calls for early elections. Dacic also briefed Warlick on his recent trip to the United States and on plans for further co-operation between the two countries.

Also Tuesday, Dacic said his Serbian Socialist Party will support a resolution condemning crimes committed in Srebrenica in 1995, as well as one, if initiated, condemning all crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia. The resolutions would require consensus in parliament.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- The opposition Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) has so far collected more than 300,000 signatures in support of early elections, SNS representative Nikola Selakovic said on Sunday (February 7th). Selakovic expects to amass more than the one million signatures required. "The government does not want new elections because they

are aware that their popularity is falling off, but if they have any political responsibility, the ruling parties will not be able to ignore the demand," Selakovic said. SNS leader Tomislav Nikolic said his party will seek an early vote to get the parliamentary representation it deserves.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- An IMF delegation visiting Serbia backs the government's efforts at pension reform, Deputy Prime Minister Jovan Krkobabic's office said in a statement Thursday (February 11th). The cabinet plans to consolidate four existing state pension funds under one heading. This streamlining would be a first step toward reducing expenses and boosting long-term sustainability. The government is expected to proceed with pension reform this spring. The IMF mission will remain in Serbia for ten more days

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- EU envoy to Macedonia Erwan Fouere and US Ambassador to Skopje Philip Reeker on Wednesday (February 10th) strongly rejected as unacceptable a recent remark by the leader of the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA). Menduh Thaci said that if the government continues to discriminate against Albanians, there will be war in Macedonia. The opposition DPA has been boycotting parliament since last summer, protesting the government's policy towards Albanians. Both Reeker and Fouere urged Thaci to drop the rhetoric and return to parliament.

Twelve political parties in Macedonia signed a co-operation agreement last week with the common aim of toppling Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and the coalition making up his ruling VMRO-DPMNE government.

"Our utmost objective is to defeat the VMRO-DPMNE-led coalition," said coalition leader Branko Crvenkovski as the new bloc was announced in Skopje on February 1st. Crvenkovski, a former Macedonian president, said the wide range of parties have put their differences aside for the good of the nation at a critical time.

Symbolically called The Front, the multiparty union is led by Crvenkovski's Social Democratic Union for Macedonia (SDSM). The coalition is comprised of a wide range of current allies and former rivals -- from the left, the ultra-left and communists, to the dominant centre.

Their single aim is to topple the ruling centre-right coalition, which has been in power since the parliamentary elections of July 2006. Observers are generally sceptical that The Front will accomplish its goal anytime soon, pointing to polls that suggest the Gruevski government remains very popular with the public.

The Liberal Democrats -- vehemently criticising Gruevski while continuing their challenges to Crvenkovski -- did not join The Front. Also declining was the Democratic Party of Albanians, led by Menduh Thaci. Ljube Boskovski, 49, is a former interior minister in Gruevski's ruling government. Acquitted of war crimes in connection with the 2001 torture and murder of ethnic Albanians in the village of Ljuboten, Boskovski is now a fierce critic of Gruevski. New Alternative leader Gjorgi Orovcanec spoke to the crowd at the signing of the multiparty agreement, saying that the Gruevski government had not delivered on any of its promises "We do not have any investments, we do not have any money, we do not have any production, we do not have any friends." Gruevski would not comment on the challenge now rallied against him, saying only that he has no fear of losing power. Analysts have pointed out that only a small number of voters lean towards most of the parties who have signed on to The Front. Professor Jove Kekenovski says the united opposition's impact is mostly psychological, while political expert Albert Musliu applauds a consolidated opposition as a corrective to the current government.

Macedonia....BRUSSELS, Belgium -- The European Parliament (EP) approved a resolution by Slovenian lawmaker Zoran Thaler on Wednesday (February 10th) which recommended the EU to set dates for start of membership talks with Macedonia. The draft was supported by 548 lawmakers, 45 voted against it and 35 abstained. The document recommended that Macedonia quickly settle its name dispute with Greece. Without a solution to the issue, it will not be possible to start negotiations with the EU over the next 6 months, Spanish Minister of State for the European Union Diego Lopez Garrido said.

EP lawmakers also adopted the resolution on Croatia's progress, which said that accession talks with the country might end by the end of this year if all criteria are met. The document was supported 582-24, with 37 abstentions.

Separately, the lawmakers also approved a resolution on Turkey -- urging the country to ease local restrictions on civil liberties and settle its long-standing issues with Cyprus. The parliament urged the country to improve the rights of women and of its Kurdish minority, adopt a new law on increasing press freedom and withdraw its troops from northern Cyprus. "Progress in terms of concrete reforms remained limited in 2009," the resolution said, urging Ankara to "translate its political initiatives into concrete amendments."

BUCHAREST, Romania -- Fierce blizzards have blocked dozens of roads and left about 20 towns and villages without electricity in the south and southeast, the Interior Ministry announced on Sunday (February 7th). In Bucharest, a code-orange alert is in effect until Monday night. Schools are closed and many roads are impassable. Part of the highway connecting Bucharest and Constanta has been closed and rail service is also been affected.

The European Commission (EC) proposed on Monday (February 8th) that the deadline given to Romania to trim its budget deficit should be extended by one year to 2012, because of the severity of the economic downturn. "Romania has made a serious effort to limit the deterioration of its budget deficit and to preserve macro-economic stability during the past year," said Joaquin Almunia, outgoing EU Economic and Monetary Affairs commissioner. "The worsening of the economic situation since the initial recommendations were made justifies extending the deadline by one year." Announcing its new proposal, Brussels said that Romania took effective action to trim its fiscal gap last year, citing the reduction of the country's public wage bill and of public expenditure on goods and services. Despite the moves, Romania's exports have dropped significantly and domestic demand has shrunk due to the global economic and financial crisis. As a result, the economy is believed to have contracted by about 7% in 2009, well above the 4% the EC had forecast last spring. After years of strong economic growth, Romania was hit hard by the global recession and requested international assistance in March 2009 to cushion the impact. In return for a 20 billion-euro IMF-led rescue package, including a 5 billion-euro contribution from the EU, the country promised a series of reforms to curb public spending.

Romania confirmed last week that it is ready to take part in the new version of the US anti-missile defence shield. Speaking in Brussels on Thursday (February 4th), President Traian Basescu spoke of "allied solidarity" between his country and the United States, while also seeking to assuage Moscow's concerns. "The new system is not aimed against Russia," Basescu said. "I would like to stress very much, Romania will not host a system against Russia, but against other threats." Romania, the president explained, will host ground interceptors, with the missile shield elements becoming operational by 2015. The shield will cover the entire territory and protect against medium- and short-range missile attacks, he said. "The gradual-adaptive development of the anti-missile system in Europe, including the elements in Romania, is entirely consistent with the decisions made at the Bucharest NATO summit," Basescu said. Bucharest and Washington will soon hold bilateral negotiations

followed by a ratification of necessary agreements by the Romanian parliament, he added. The planned defence system is a combination of land- and sea-based SM-3 missile interceptor systems and was discussed by US Vice-President Joe Biden in Bucharest in October 2009. The United States earlier dropped an initial anti-missile shield plan in Poland and the Czech Republic. According to US Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs PJ Crowley, Romania's decision extends the area of missile defence coverage into southern Europe. "As this architecture develops and grows, it will protect all of Europe," he said. Analysts say Romania sees a potential boost to its role in the region as a result of signing onto the plan.

Romania....MOSCOW, Russia -- The foreign ministry on Friday (February 5th) expressed concern and demanded an explanation after Romania announced plans to deploy elements of a proposed US missile defence shield. The Supreme Defence Council in Bucharest backed the idea Thursday. President Traian Basescu says the facilities should be operational by 2015 and that the new system is not directed against Russia. But Moscow is not convinced. "This is a serious issue and we will analyse it seriously. This, of course, causes our concern. We need clarifications. We will raise these issues in our contacts with our European and US partners," the Russian ministry said in a statement.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- The Constitutional Court has issued a ruling in a controversial case on amendments to election legislation. The decision forces parliament to make the necessary changes by 2012, in time for the next regular general elections, local media reported on Monday (February 8th). The current system suggests a quasi majority vote, which in effect is diluted by a nationwide electoral threshold of 5% along with a requirement to attract 50% of the vote in single-seat constituencies in a single round. Under the present system, seats left vacant are redistributed among parties above the threshold through a proportional distribution. This has led to extreme cases such as lawmakers being elected with only a few hundred votes and placing third or fourth in balloting. The Constitutional Court insists on removing two major provisions -- the 5% threshold and the redistribution of vacant seats through a proportional rule. President Traian Basescu of the Liberal Democratic Party strongly supports the changes.

Bulgaria....LONDON, Great Britain -- Following a meeting Monday (February 8th) with British counterpart Gordon Brown, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov said Sofia can count on London's full support in efforts to join the euro zone and attract British investment in several sectors, including energy and tourism. The two officials also discussed the ongoing blockade by Greek farmers of the border between Greece and Bulgaria, and access to the British labour market by Bulgarians. Currently, Bulgarian workers don't have free access to this market. Earlier in the day, Borisov announced that a British investment fund will invest about 50m euros in the construction of a factory building electric cars near Stara Zagora.

Bulgaria....BRUSSELS, Belgium -- The European Commission (EC) has offered a favourable assessment of two more programmes -- Environment and Administrative Capacity -- involving structural and cohesion funds, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov said at an EU summit Thursday (February 11th) in Brussels. Total appropriations from the EU budget for the two programmes amount to 1.47 billion euros and 132m euros, respectively. The EC has assessed six of seven operational programmes. The Human Resources programme will be assessed soon.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor and opposition leaders failed to find common ground on constitutional changes during a meeting Tuesday (February 9th). The main point of contention relates to voting procedures for the Diaspora community. Talks will continue on Friday. The amendments, required by the country's EU accession process, need the support of two-thirds of lawmakers.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- Outgoing President Stipe Mesic walked out of a TV interview Thursday (February 11th), visibly angry with the line of questioning regarding his relationship with state prosecutor Mladen Bajic. The interview with journalist Ivana Brkic -- taped for the RTL channel -- was to be broadcast on Sunday. When Mesic was asked if he supports the re-election of state prosecutor Mladen Bajic "since [Bajic] has a grip on him", the clearly infuriated politician stood up and left the set. Mesic leaves office next week.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- Army Chief of Staff Slavko Baric said on Friday (February 5th) that almost half of the country's troops have been sent on a prolonged unpaid holiday because of national budget constraints. Speaking to local television channel HTV, Baric added that the vacation of all brigades who are not operational will last until the spring. The army has 16,000 troops, 7,000 of whom are without operational tasks.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- Slovenian Prime Minister Borut Pahor said on Thursday (February 11th) his country will approve the opening of at least two more negotiation chapters in Zagreb's EU accession talks next week. Pahor, speaking on the sidelines of the EU summit in Brussels, did not specify which chapters. Croatian media reports suggest they would be on fisheries and the environment.

Separately Thursday, Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor announced that the Netherlands is now open to starting negotiations on the judiciary and fundamental rights chapter. Before the chapter can be closed, however, Amsterdam insists on Zagreb's full cooperation with The Hague war crimes tribunal and the turning over of missing war documents known as the "artillery diaries" related to 1995's Operation Storm.

BANJA LUKA, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- Republika Srpska (RS) Prime Minister Milorad Dodik urged the entity's parliament Monday (February 8th) to pass a draft law on referendums as proposed by the government. He said this version will be upheld by the Constitutional Court and relevant international organisations. Opposition parties have said they want to amend it.

Shunning warnings from the international community, the parliament of Republika Srpska (RS) adopted a law Wednesday (February 10th) that could pave the way for a future referendum on the entity's independence, further destabilising Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Amendments to the law on plebiscites -- tabled by RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik's ruling Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) -- were approved after two days of heated debate in the 83-seat assembly. The new legislation was passed 46 to 16, with six abstentions. Bosniak members of the RS parliament boycotted the vote, insisting the bill violates both the Dayton Peace Accords and the BiH Constitution. The law allows citizens of the Serb-run entity to hold referenda on national issues while only covering a few technical aspects, such as voting procedure and the manner in which a plebiscite can be called. It does not specify when a referendum can be organised or which questions will be asked. Dodik has repeatedly threatened to call a referendum on RS's independence if the entity's autonomy was at risk. While he has not made direct secessionist threats in recent months, he raised the plebiscite issue in December when the RS parliament rejected High Representative

Valentin Inzko's decision to extend the mandates of foreign judges and prosecutors working in Bosnian courts. Dodik denied on Tuesday that the new Law on Referendum and Civic Initiative was aimed at facilitating the entity's secession from BiH or violating the Dayton Accords. "We want to pass a law and then call a referendum about support of the Dayton Peace Agreement and decisions disparaging it," he said. Dodik has often challenged the authority of Inzko, the top international envoy who -- under Dayton -- has overarching powers in BiH, including the ability to impose laws and fire elected officials.

The RS prime minister -- currently under investigation by foreign prosecutors for alleged involvement in corruption -- insists that there is no need for an international presence in the country's legal system. The entity's citizens, Dodik says, should decide all such matters. The law was approved despite the international community's stated warnings that plebiscites on such questions could further undermine BiH's stability. "While a referendum can be a legitimate mechanism in the right circumstances, it can be counterproductive, and even provocative, when used to pursue a narrow political agenda," the US Embassy in Sarajevo said in a statement Tuesday. "The United States would consider provocative any referendum that threatens the stability, sovereignty or territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina." Inzko has reportedly warned the leaders of Bosnian Serb parties, which backed the law, the passing of this referendum would further isolate RS from the European and world communities.

BANJA LUKA, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- Republika Srpska (RS) Prime Minister Milorad Dodik reiterated on Tuesday (February 9th) that a draft law on referendums is not aimed at seceding from BiH or violating the 1995 Dayton Peace Accord. The debate in parliament grew heated with opposition parties insisting the measure should include provisions for mandatory referendums in specific cases, such as joining military pacts and amending the constitution. Bosniak lawmakers say the bill is an "anti-Dayton" act and walked out. The debate continues Wednesday.

The US Embassy in Sarajevo warned against challenging Dayton Peace Accord structures, including the powers of high representatives. Washington, it said, would consider any referendum that endangers stability, sovereignty or the territorial integrity of BiH as provocative

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- European Parliament (EP) rapporteur on visa liberalisation for the Western Balkans Tanja Fajon says BiH has made significant progress in implementing conditions in its EU visa liberalisation road map. In an interview with the Sarajevo-based daily Dnevni Avaz on Sunday (February 7th), Fajon said she expects the country to get a positive evaluation and recommendation from the European Commission, which means being added to the so-called Schengen White List in early April. If so, she said, the EP and the EU could complete procedures required to scrap visa requirements sometime in July. Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro were included in the EU visa liberalisation regime in December.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- High Representative Valentin Inzko met on Monday (February 8th) with Bozo Ljubic, leader of the Bosnian Croat HDZ 1990 party, marking the start of a new round of talks with key politicians. The focus is on the current political stalemate and issues related to state and military property. Resolving the matter is crucial to transitioning the Office of the High Representative into an EU Special Representative office, currently a year behind schedule. In other news, a team from the European Commission arrived in BiH on Monday to assess progress made in meeting criteria for visa liberalisation. The team will spend a week on site, meeting with officials responsible for border management, immigration and asylum.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The EU has agreed to extend the mandate of Pieter Feith, the EU special representative for Kosovo, by six months, local media reported Friday (February 12th). The decision will be formalised during discussions at the next EU ministers meeting on February 22nd. Feith is also head of the International Civilian Office (ICO), which implements the Ahtisaari plan of supervised independence for Kosovo. The ISG has advised the ICO to cut its staff by 15% and may take another look at Feith's mandate in June, should the European Commission report on Pristina's progress be more positive.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- International Civilian Representative Pieter Feith said on Tuesday (February 9th) that the strategy for Serb-dominated northern Kosovo will be forwarded to Belgrade authorities, though not for consultation. Austrian news agency APA reports that Feith expects it will take time for Serbia to accept it the strategy, which has the EU's backing. The strategy seeks to put the north under the control of Kosovo institutions, rather than Belgrade-backed parallel structures.

Kosovo....VIENNA, Austria -- The strategy to bring Serb-dominated northern Kosovo legally and politically in line with the rest of the country won unanimous backing by the 25 member states of the International Steering Group (ISG) in Vienna on Monday (February 8th). The ISG members will also support International Civilian Representative Pieter Feith and Prime Minister Hashim Thaci as they implement the strategy, sources close to the meeting said. Feith and Thaci briefed the ISG about the plan to dissolve Serb parallel structures in the north, establish municipalities that will act under the authority of Kosovo institutions, and install courts to restore the rule of law to that part of the country. Though they extended Feith's mandate, meeting participants decided to cut the staff of the International Civilian Office (ICO) by 15% within a few months. Separately Monday, Serbian official Oliver Ivanovic dismissed as invalid the ICO decision to appoint a team to help establish a new municipality in northern Mitrovica. He cited a 2002 agreement between UNMIK and Serbia's government, which Ivanovic says remains in effect.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- European Parliament (EP) member Doris Pack says Kosovo needs 12 to 18 months to meet the EU-set criteria before it can benefit from visa liberalisation. "It depends on politics. If Kosovo authorities work faster, the processes can move faster too," Pack was quoted as saying by public broadcaster RTK on Sunday (February 7th). Pack said progress generally has been uneven. She noted that many Serbs participated in the November municipal elections, describing their involvement as key to the process.