

Report 107
PROJECT ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE
MUSLIM WORLD

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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 to establish fiscal commission Thursday: official
- GOP sees possible upside in health care summit
- Reid will back public option if GOP barrier fails
- Biden: US got 'money's worth' from stimulus act
- Obama says stimulus bill saved troubled economy
- Judging stimulus: Jobless rate high, growth real
- Left and right united in opposition to controversial SCOTUS decision
- Excited GOP: Energy on the right, divisions within
- NY Democrats seek to avoid Massachusetts debacle
- Lautenberg's illness could hurt Senate Democrats
- Captured Taliban leader could shape stalemated war
- Body scanners violate decency: Scholars
- Justice Department clears former Bush lawyers for torture memos
- Poll shows Conservatives, Liberals stalled

Western Europe

- Europe's First Halal Industrial Park
- UK jobless rates holds at 7.8 percent
- Bank of England votes to keep interest rates low
- Greece's woes scared countries into action: Finland
- Eurozone members urge Greece to cut spending, raise taxes
- Up to 25 billion euros in aid mooted for Greece: report
- Papandreou accuses EU of using Greece as scapegoat for bigger economic problems
- Spain to take 5 from Guantanamo
- France orders 5 former Gitmo inmates back to court
- UK police seek evidence from Guantanamo detainee
- Rights watchdog urges terror suspect torture probe
- Diplomats to meet Israeli envoy in Hamas killing row
- 11 Hamas slaying suspects on Interpol wanted list

- Dutch government collapses over Afghan mission
- Report: France exposed soldiers to radiation
- Hundreds protest outside UK nuclear weapons site
- British bishops urge 'carbon fast' for Lent
- Britain, France: Probe Iran election violence

Southeast

Albania

- Albanian president hosts meeting of government and opposition
- EP official urges Albania's opposition to halt boycott
- EC urges Albania to resolve political crisis
- Albania: PACE official to join political deadlock negotiations
- Albania completes several chapters of EC questionnaire

Bosnia and Herzegovina

- Inzko meets with US Congressional delegation in BiH

Bulgaria

- US and Bulgaria to discuss anti-missile shield
- Russia asks Bulgaria about US shield elements
- Bulgaria seeks German help in identifying tax evaders

Croatia

- Croatia inaugurates new president Thursday
- Croatia's Josipovic disappointed Tadic is skipping inauguration
- Balkan interior ministers agree to boost co-operation
- Croatia gets green light on EU chapters

Kosovo

- Kosovo's EU visa liberalisation conditioned on repatriation
- CoE's Hammarberg says Kosovo repatriation must stop
- ICO says all parties should be consulted about strategy for northern Kosovo
- Kosovo municipality to vote again in March
- NATO's Fitzgerald says Kosovo institutions will decide on KSF

Macedonia

- EP delegation: Skopje committed to resolving name dispute

Montenegro

Romania

Serbia

- Serbia's Kostunica eyes early elections
- Serbia's Tadic urges countries to co-operate against organised crime

Slovenia

Oceania

- UK's BNP says migrating Hanson 'welcome': report
- Australian court sentences 5 men in terrorist plot

Report Summary

USA/Canada

Political Issue

An executive order by President Obama will lead to the creation of a bipartisan fiscal commission that would be overseeing US budget deficit. The commission is said to have received backing from the Senate but was later blocked by republican. As the nation prepares to see and hear a bipartisan debate on healthcare, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid says he will support allowing the government to sell insurance in competition with private industry even without the Republican consent.

Healthcare summit between the democrats and republicans is expected to produce mixed reactions even though republicans are nurturing the fear that democrats will use the summit to their advantage as President Obama will be moderating the sitting. However, GOP are holding on polls showing that Americans are on their side on the health issue.

Both President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden defended their government that whatever the critique of republicans, their administration is doing quite fine for the economy. They both hold that taxpayers have "gotten their money's worth" out of the \$787 billion stimulus programme, though joblessness remains troubling still they have been able to save as many as 2 million jobs. Obama's stimulus package is still being expected to do more, pick pace rapidly and turn around the economy for the ordinary masses.

Who should be the last judge, the public or the government?

Despite the political tussle and schism in Washington, a new poll by Washington Post-ABC News poll suggest that Americans across political spectrums have nonetheless rejected the recent court ruling that gives right to corporations and unions to freely fund political campaign. The ruling was resented by President Obama on grounds that such will further entrench interest politics; most Americans have now joined the president. With such development Senators already preparing bill that could revert unwanted court rulings find the recent public resentment as a greasing moment to further articulate their bill.

It was a shock for them when Edward Kennedy's long held Massachusetts seat was taken by Republican Scott Brown. The retirement of prominent democrats also added to the storm shaking the democrat party. In bid to avoid the Massachusetts debacle, democrats in New York are tussling in replacing Governor David Paterson and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand both of whom they see too weak to confront tough republicans on track. More trouble is rolling in for democrat as the nation's second-oldest senator; New Jersey Sen. Frank Lautenberg is suffering from stomach lymphoma which would take months for recovery. His absence from the Senate will undoubtedly cost democrat a minus vote for their bills.

Can President Obama make it through for another term, answering such will be determined by Americans come next presidential election? The impetus for depriving Obama a second term was more heightened during the recently concluded GOP conference, used as platform to challenge Obama's policies and the democrats as a whole.

Canadian politics though calm yet public rating of the conservative minority ruling government and opposition liberal party continues to fluctuate. Polls have always been showing digital difference between the two. Opposition is trying to unseat the government for its Afghanistan and economic policies.

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Using a nude scanner machine was no doubt the consequence of a suspected terror attack by a Nigerian on a US airliner. But that nevertheless stopped a US Islamic scholar from kicking against the anti-religious machine. Sheikh Ali Suleiman Ali, a member of the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA), said "The scanners are un-Islamic and against decency," and it is not only abhorred by Muslims but other religious groups are also against it.

It was a triumphant moment for republican but seen as an unfair decision by democrats. The just concluded investigation of the Justice Department of two high-level Bush administration officials, whose memos were used for the justification of harsh interrogation techniques created mixed reactions between republican, democrats and civil right groups. The Justice Department though believe they have made wrong judgment but that does not amount to legal sanction as expected by the democrats.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Much appears to be expected from captured Taliban commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar because of his rank and implication to the group. The US and Pakistani intelligence officers believe Baradar can be helpful in figuring out moderates Taliban for table discussion instead of battlefield confrontation. Can the US win the Afghan war through Baradar's assistance if killing of innocent Afghans continues?

Western Europe

Political Issue

Probing the post June election in Iran will be extra-judicial interference in Iranian domestic issue. There is no doubt that human right violation might have been violated during the street protest. The request by certain western powers that an inquiry to the post

election demonstration should be conducted will obviously amount to interfering in Iranian sovereign matters.

It all started as a threat but eventually became a reality that was embarrassing to the Dutch centre-right Christian party. The coalition government collapsed due to the insistence of a coalition partner, the Labour Party asking for Dutch troops out of Afghanistan in accordance to the promise made to the people. However, Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende has been delaying such troop withdrawal saying it will embarrass NATO, even though people around Europe are becoming discontented of the Afghanistan protracted war.

Economic Issue

The British economy is said to be showing sign of recovery but unemployment rate is yet to decline rather increasing amid the fear that the Bank of England is uncertain whether to stimulate the economy with billion of pounds. In view of the status of the British economy, the Bank policymakers have also decided unanimously to keep British interest rates at a record low level and to freeze radical credit-easing.

Complementing the growing strength of Islamic Finance in Europe and Britain in particular, a London based venture capital firm, Halal Industries plan to establish the first ever Europe's first halal industrial park. The park is estimated at around \$6.27 billion a year. The project will be in conjunction with Penang International Halal Hub (PIHH), a Malaysian based agency. With a success in London, it is expected that similar project will emerge in Germany and France, the home of European Muslims.

The repetition of the Greek economic woes worries European governments, an experience not just worrisome for the Greek but for the whole Eurozone. The Finnish government is strengthening her finance and urging other European economies to follow suit.

Nonetheless, the Greek economy is expected to be rescued by funds coming from fellow Eurozone members, a consequence of the critical meeting held among Eurozone Finance ministers in Brussels. According to German Der Spiegel, a weekly magazine, the German finance ministry along with other Eurozone member will be supporting Greece with aid worth between 20 and 25 billion euros. Meanwhile, the Greek prime minister though welcomed the step but accused the bloc of using his country as a scapegoat, for asking Greece to cut down its spending. The fact enunciated by the prime minister was that Greece is facing such problem owing to the obnoxious law of the previous government.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

President Obama's intention to close the Guantanamo bay prison by January 16, 2010, is of course an infeasible intention, but the administration has been doing much to get the inmates relocated to a third country. Few European countries including Spain are

ready to accept the inmates after every security arrangement and issue are accomplished. Meanwhile, French highest court has ordered the rehearing of five acquitted Gitmo inmates, though reason for such rehearing is yet mentioned but more likely for being "criminal association with a terrorist enterprise," a broad charge often used in terror cases in France. Defense lawyer of two among the inmates criticized the new ruling saying it amounted to a "sinister page in the history of the judicial system" and "a great cruelty on a human level."

After decades of denial, the French government has finally consented that soldiers were used during its nuclear test in Sahara desert in Africa. The victims of the nuclear test will be compensated by the government but is yet clear who the victims are, whether native French citizens, African French soldier or the people around the Sahara desert. The French government might be ready to compensate the natives, but less unlikely for the Africans. The French government has yet to offer apology for its brutal colonial policies in Africa, how much more compensation for nuclear test victims.

Meanwhile in the UK, anti-nuclear weapon protesters protested against the use of a factory in Aldermaston, southern England where warheads for Trident nuclear submarines are made.

British human right activists are not taking rest not until their government accept being complicit to the torture undergone by British citizens at the U.S international condemned prison in Guantanamo and offer apology or compensation. It is becoming unbearable for the government as lawyers and human right activists are using judicial channel, demanding for documents and facts that British intelligence agencies M15 and M16 were involved in criminal torture of British citizens, an allegation the British government rejects.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

The call by the bishop of London Rev. Richard Chartres that faithful Christians should not just abstain from meat, alcohol or chocolates during the Lent, but should also fast on energy use, that is reducing the amount of carbon they will be emitting during the Lent. The fact that religious institution is also concern about the climate is an indication that global warming discourse transcends the realm of science and politics.

Geostrategic Issues

Stop hiding behind 'no discussion of intelligence and security issue' was the advice offered by Lawmaker Menzies Campbell, a member of the parliament's foreign affairs committee to the Israeli government. The assassination of Mahmud al-Mabhuh, a Hamas leader in Dubai weeks back allegedly perpetrated by Israeli Mossad is causing diplomatic storm between Israel and European countries. The Mossad agents allegedly used British, German, French and Irish passports. Britain for one is demanding explanation from Israel and Ireland is also angered because of the Irish fake passport

involved in the whole saga. Meanwhile, Interpol is on hurt for the Mossad agents by the behest of the Dubai police.

Southeast Europe

Political Issue

Croats are expected to welcome their new President Ivo Josipovic, a leftwing intellectual into the presidential palace. Josipovic won the January presidential elections on an anti-corruption platform and has promised to lead the country into the EU bloc during his 5-year mandate. But Josipovic felt disappointed that Serbian President Boris Tadic skipped his inauguration. Tadic has earlier and clearly stated that he will not attend the function if Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu is in attendance.

Political reconciliation between Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha of the Democratic Party (DP) and SP leader Edi Rama in an on-going process in the office of the Albanian president. European Parliament and Commission are taking serious concern over the reconciliation process and are ready to help Albanian President Bamir Topi who is mediating the process.

Serbian opposition parties are calling for an earlier election to salvage the country from what they see as government's inability to stop an "economic, social, political and moral" agony and destruction facing Serbia.

Economic Issue

In the wake of the global financial meltdown, European countries became more concerned of tax in generally and its evaders in particular. Some Germans were said to have evaded domestic tax by banking with the Swiss Bank. Thus the German government is making attempt to procure a stolen data from an ex-Swiss banker having names of likely defaulters. Similarly, Bulgaria owing to its financial problem and propensity to maintaining a workable economy is seeking German government's assistance is figuring out tax defaulters if Berlin gets the stolen data having names of tax defaulters.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Organised crimes and illegal commerce will not cease in the Balkan region if concerted and composite effort fails to be rendered. This was the assertion of the regional security agencies during a summit in Zagreb. Serbian President Boris Tadic reiterates similar commitment after a ceremony in Pancevo to mark Army Day. The region wants to cleanse itself from the name stained as route and transit where illicit drug passed through to Western Europe. Does the security agency possess the political will to undertake this complex business having political backing?

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Will Russia permit US to take advantage of her neighbourhood for missile defence system? If the plan to place US missile in both Romania and Bulgaria goes forth, what geo-strategic consequences will that triggers.

Despite the dragging political stalemate facing Albania since last June, the country has been able to complete the EU questionnaire as part of its prerequisites for EU accession. The EU Permanent Representatives Committee has also given Croatia green light to start negotiation on the judiciary and fundamental rights chapter, while fisheries and environment chapters will later commence.

After Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro got inducted in the EU visa liberalization scheme, other countries in the region felt their exemption is not apt. Kosovo one of those longing for induction into the scheme has been made to understand that visa liberalisation process with EU countries is conditioned on the repatriation of thousands of Kosovo citizens living illegally across Europe. But human right groups along with Council of Europe (CoE) Commissioner for Human Rights Thomas Hammarberg are saying that sending Kosovars back home is unjustified due to the economic situation of the nascent country.

Oceania

Political Issue

British Nationalist Party, a far-right party is welcoming controversial and anti-immigration Australian politician Pauline Hanson to join the party. Hanson does not see any longer Australia as land of opportunity; she has continuously failed to get a seat in the parliament, thus relocating to Britain. Could these likeminded really turnout becoming bedfellows?

Economic Issue

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Five Muslims were sentenced to 23 to 28 prison terms by Justice Anthony Whealy of the New South Wales Supreme Court Australia. The judge passed his judgment upon the bulk of evidence against the sentenced and their unrepentant reported show-off. However, the judge never failed to link and established that the extremism of the sentenced was due to the plight of Muslims in other countries, but that in itself should not make them use Australia as ground for extremism.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Report Detail

US/Canada

WASHINGTON (AFP) – US President Barack Obama will Thursday sign an executive order establishing a bipartisan commission to find ways to reduce the gaping US budget deficit, a White House official said. Obama has chosen Democrat Erskine Bowles, White House chief of staff for ex-president Bill Clinton, and former Republican senator Alan Simpson of Wyoming to head the panel, the official said. The president has repeatedly complained that plans for a congressionally mandated fiscal commission were killed in the Senate -- by Republicans who had previously backed the idea as a way of trimming huge US deficits. "Unfortunately this proposal -- which received the support of a bipartisan majority in the Senate -- was recently blocked," the president said in his radio and YouTube address to Americans on Saturday. "So, I will be creating this commission by executive order." The congressionally-appointed commission would have had more teeth and the power to force lawmakers to vote on its recommendations. The Obama administration acknowledged earlier this month that the budget deficit will swell to a record 1.556 trillion dollars in fiscal 2010.

WASHINGTON – Congressional Republicans see a chance for political gain in President Barack Obama's televised health care summit next week, even though the president will be running the show. Obama and the Democrats are certain to highlight a crucial element of their health care plan — extending coverage to more than 30 million Americans — at the one-of-a-kind event. By comparison, a Republican plan would only help 3 million more. But during a time of ballooning deficits, the GOP figures reining in rising medical costs — not coverage — could resonate with voters in an election year. The Democratic health overhaul plan is estimated at some \$1 trillion over 10 years, and Republicans will contrast their financial approach with that of the Democrats. So even on Obama's turf, the GOP thinks it can score a few political points. "I think what we have to do is keep it on the policy and really continue to describe that we have listened to the American people, and anyone listening to the American people would say scrap this bill and begin again, and let's begin again by focusing on lowering costs," Rep. Dave Camp of Michigan, who will be attending the summit as the top Republican on the House Ways and Means Committee, said Tuesday.

Republicans know they go into the half-day event Feb. 25 with built-in disadvantages. Obama dominated when he debated House Republicans at their retreat in Baltimore last month, and the White House would like to recreate that dynamic, capitalizing on Obama's speaking skills. The president has already said he'll moderate the forum, and the location and staging at the Blair House guest residence are of the White House's choosing, giving Democrats home-court advantage. But Republicans say they have a different advantage: Polls show Americans side with them on the substance. All they have to do is remind viewers that's the case, and they could chalk up something like a win that could make the going even tougher for the Democrats. In a New York Times/CBS poll released this month, 56 percent said they preferred "a smaller government providing fewer services" to 34 percent in favor of "a bigger government providing more services." Some 27 percent named jobs as the most important issue

confronting the nation while 25 percent said the economy. Thirteen percent said health care, fewer than the 16 percent who said "other."

WASHINGTON – Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid says he will support allowing the government to sell insurance in competition with private industry if the White House and Democratic leaders push a health care bill with no Republican backing. Many conservatives and some moderates oppose the so-called public option. It's in the House bill, but not the Senate version. The White House is trying to reconcile the two bills before Thursday's bipartisan summit. Reid's office said Friday he will work with the White House and Democratic lawmakers to try to craft a public option that can overcome obstacles such as a bill-killing GOP filibuster. Some congressional Democrats say they doubt the White House would include a public option in the proposal it will unveil Monday.

WASHINGTON – Vice President Joe Biden asserted in an interview Wednesday that taxpayers have "gotten their money's worth" out of the \$787 billion stimulus program that Congress passed during the depths of the recession.

In an interview broadcast on CBS's "The Early Show," Biden defended the program against accusations by Republican critics that it hasn't been the job-manufacturing machine the administration promised to the American people.

He argued that money invested in both private and public-sector initiatives has saved as many as 2 million jobs, and said, "I don't think they realize it." Biden said the program, now a year old, was designed to be implemented in two stages, saying "we've only been halfway through the act."

Christina Romer, who heads the White House Council of Economic Advisers, said in a separate interview that one component of the stimulus program had worked especially well. "State fiscal relief really has kept hundreds of thousands of teachers and firefighters and first responders on the job," she said. "We have seen productivity surge," Romer said on ABC's "Good Morning America." "And that, at one level, is a good sign," she said. The Obama administration has been feeling considerable political pressure of late, in part because of the stunning upset of its favored candidate in the special election to fill the Senate seat vacated by the late Sen. Edward Kennedy. Earlier this week, a leading Senate Democratic moderate, Indiana's Evan Bayh, joined an increasing number of lawmakers who have announced they will be leaving Congress. This has come amid rising public anger over joblessness, high deficits and Washington partisanship.

Biden said "we're in a situation here where if we do nothing about that cost curve — in the last 10 years, health care costs have gone up 100 percent." Gesturing with his hand, he said: "Now, unless you bring that cost curve from going like this, down like this, we're in deep trouble."

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama hailed Wednesday's one-year-old economic stimulus law as an accomplishment that staved off another Great Depression and kept up to 2 million people on the job. Still, with millions still out of work and losing patience, Obama acknowledged that to them, "It doesn't yet feel like much of a recovery."

Marking the anniversary of the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Obama aimed his message at people skeptical about the expensive relief measure and Republican lawmakers who voted against it and continue to hammer him about it.

To the public, Obama explained, as he has many times before, that the stimulus plan was composed of tax cuts for most Americans along with help for state governments, extended social service benefits and huge investments in energy, education and infrastructure. "One year later, it is largely thanks to the recovery act that a second depression is no longer a possibility," Obama said. To his Republican critics, who say the bill was a costly, debt-financed blunder that has not delivered on the promise of job creation, Obama challenged them to take up the case with people who have stayed employed or have found help solely because he and the Democratic-run Congress acted.

Obama even delighted in recounting a section of his State of the Union address last month in which he talked of the tax cuts from the stimulus plan and watched Republican lawmakers fail to applaud the idea. "They were all kind of squirming in their seats ... It was interesting to watch," Obama said. And Obama made sure to commend himself and his own team for taking action.

The United States has lost an astounding 8.4 million jobs since this recession began in December 2007. Obama said the stimulus plan is on target to create or save 1.5 million more jobs, bringing up the estimated total to 3.5 million. But he sought to remind people that the goal of law was never to restore every job. The government can build confidence and demand and rescue people in hard times during a severe economic slide, Obama said, but it will always be businesses of the private sector that ultimately generate jobs and a recovery. Obama made repeated references to how well, in his view, his government has done with the stimulus. "There has never been a program of this scale, moved at this speed, that has been enacted as effectively and as transparently as the recovery act," Obama added. Referring to Vice President Joe Biden and the other top aides, Obama said, "This team has done an outstanding job." Biden, who has led the stimulus implementation, took his own swipe at critics. "They're unwilling to step up," he said. "Well not us."

WASHINGTON – Did the stimulus work or not? A year after Congress passed President Barack Obama's huge economic revival plan, the results are mixed — and hardly final. Despite Obama's bold promises, unemployment remains stubbornly high. But job losses have slowed dramatically. And the nation's recent economic growth is real, even though the government has spent just one-third of the massive stimulus plan. The program_ originally estimated at \$787 billion but now priced at \$862 billion — is to continue pumping federal money into the economy into 2011. One year into the program:

- Many states and local governments owe their fiscal survival to the stimulus. But those governments are scrambling to find ways to fill the holes in the coming year.
- Thousands of road and bridge projects broke ground with stimulus money, helping to keep the anemic construction industry afloat. But job losses still were significant, with as many as one in four construction workers unemployed.

Obama used Wednesday's one-year anniversary to offer his own assessment and, predictably, rated the effort an unprecedented success. "There has never been a program of this scale, moved at this speed, that has been enacted as effectively and as transparently as the recovery act," the president declared. But the legacy of the American

Recovery and Reinvestment Act is yet to be sealed. In the next 12 months there will be a second wave of government spending, perhaps topping \$300 billion. By this time next year, the country could have a better idea whether the program was a costly, debt-increasing blip that made ripples in the nation's economy, or a lifesaving jolt that shielded the country from a financial abyss. Obama argued on Wednesday that the history already had been written. "One year later, it is largely thanks to the recovery act that a second depression is no longer a possibility," he said.

How are others to judge the recovery program?

When Obama launched it last year, he cast the program as bigger and better than just an ordinary jobs bill. The program, he said, would provide lasting public works projects, improve education, save ailing state and local governments, offer relief to millions devastated by losing their jobs and homes and help provide much-needed health care. Despite the broad range of those promises — and evidence shows that at least some of them have been kept — Obama's stimulus will forever be judged by jobs. By the time the stimulus program kicked in last April, the recession had cost the economy more than 6 million jobs. Since the program began, the nation has lost 2 million more

Much has been made of late about the hyper-partisan political environment in America. On Tuesday, Sen. Evan Bayh explained his surprising recent decision to leave the Senate by lamenting a "dysfunctional" political system riddled with "brain-dead partisanship." It seems you'd be hard-pressed to get Republicans and Democrats inside and outside of Washington to agree on anything these days, that if one party publicly stated its intention to add a "puppies are adorable" declaration to its platform, that the other party would immediately launch a series of anti-puppy advertisements.

But it appears that one issue does unite Americans across the political spectrum.

A new Washington Post-ABC News poll finds that the vast majority of Americans are vehemently opposed to a recent Supreme Court ruling that opens the door for corporations, labor unions, and other organizations to spend money directly from their general funds to influence campaigns.

As noted by the Post's Dan Eggen, the poll's findings show "remarkably strong agreement" across the board, with roughly 80% of Americans saying that they're against the Court's 5-4 decision. Even more remarkable may be that opposition by Republicans, Democrats, and Independents were all near the same 80% opposition range. Specifically, 85% of Democrats, 81% of Independents, and 76% of Republicans opposed it. In short, "everyone hates" the ruling.

The poll's findings could enhance the possibility of getting a broad range of support behind a movement in Congress to pass legislation that would offset the Court's decision. Of those polled, 72% said they supported congressional action to reverse its effects. Sen. Charles Schumer, who's leading the reform effort in the Senate, told the Post that he hoped to get "strong and quick bi-partisan support" behind a bill that "passes constitutional muster but will still effectively limit the influence of special interests."

The findings of the poll are a bit surprising considering the fact that the case split the Supreme Court, with the five conservative justices in favor and the four more liberal justices against it. The decision was almost universally hailed by Republicans in Washington, who saw it as a victory for the free speech provided for under the

Constitution, while President Obama and prominent Democrats in Washington almost universally derided it as a dark day for American democracy.

However, Sen. John McCain, one of the original sponsors of the campaign finance law struck down by Court's decision and one of its few prominent Republican opponents, may have been prophetic when he predicted Americans would turn against the Court. McCain told CBS's "Face the Nation" that there would be a "backlash" once awareness grew about "the amounts of union and corporate money that's going to go into political campaigns." Perhaps the new poll numbers show that McCain might have been onto something.

WASHINGTON – Conservatives seem more fired up than they've been in years, rallying against President Barack Obama. But energy alone won't herald a Republican revolution, and the excitement pulsing through the GOP base masks disputes and divisions the party faces ahead of critical midterm elections. "I think 2010 is going to be a phenomenal year for the conservative cause, and I think Barack Obama is a one-term president," former Vice President Dick Cheney declared Thursday, making a surprise appearance at an annual gathering of conservatives and earning a raucous reception. This year's political environment certainly seems unfriendly for the Democrats who control the White House and Congress, and Republicans are poised for big electoral gains following recent statewide victories in Massachusetts, New Jersey and Virginia. Yet, fights within the party could hinder the GOP's prospects come November. So could the lack of both a leader and a message other than anti-Obama.

Along with the right wing's new fervor, the GOP's struggle to find a unified voice was clear from the start of the annual three-day Conservative Political Action Conference — both in the speaker whom organizers chose to deliver the keynote address but also in what he had to say. "America already has a Democrat Party. It doesn't need two Democrat parties," said Marco Rubio, suggesting that Republicans who don't adhere to certain principles — namely his Senate primary opponent Charlie Crist in Florida — are no different from Democrats. Rubio added: "People want leaders who will come here ... and stand up to this big-government agenda, not be co-opted by it."

In the Senate race that typifies the GOP's identity crisis, Rubio is backed by grass-roots groups in his bid against Crist, the establishment-favored governor once considered a shoo-in for the nomination. Given a national platform, Rubio gave a speech that contained several criticisms of Crist, though not by name, and that was met with much enthusiasm. Such bitterly contested primaries underscore the short-term and long-term challenges facing Republicans. "There is still a struggle within the Republican Party over who we are and what we stand for," acknowledged Sen. Jim DeMint of South Carolina. Then he took on GOP senators he believes don't fight for individual liberty, smaller government and lower spending, telling the crowd: "It's a fight between those who take their constitutional oath seriously and those who don't." "I would rather have 30 Marco Rubios in the Senate than 60 Arlen Specters," DeMint added, referring to the moderate Republican-turned-Democrat of Pennsylvania. The problems don't end at such squabbles. Republicans have no unifying leader like Ronald Reagan. There are many big voices in the mix, including TV's Glenn Beck and 2008 vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin. But there's no unifying message like the Contract with America that was credited with helping the GOP take over Congress in 1994. Also, antiestablishment "tea party"

coalitions — largely made up of people with conservative and libertarian views — aren't pledging allegiance to the Republican Party. But GOP chairman Michael Steele is trying to bring them into the fold; he recently held an hours-long meeting with several "tea party" leaders. "Let's say to the Republicans: 'Will you show us you know how to be you?'" said Dick Arme, the former House majority leader from Texas who has seemed to take on the de facto "tea party" leader role — even as he insists he doesn't want it. "They must come to us and show they're worthy of our loyalty. We don't come to them."

NEW YORK (Reuters) – In a year in which Republicans look likely to make sweeping gains in congressional and governors' elections, New York Democrats are more concerned with fighting each other. The national party has already suffered a stunning loss of the late Ted Kennedy's U.S. Senate seat in Massachusetts and a string of prominent retirements. But many Democrats in New York believe that one of their sitting senators and the incumbent governor are too weak to survive. Governor David Paterson and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand both face voters in the traditionally liberal state for the first time in their current jobs. Paterson became governor in 2008 after Eliot Spitzer quit amid a prostitution scandal and Gillibrand was named in to replace Hillary Clinton who became U.S. Secretary of State last year. "The state Democratic Party, to the extent that one exists, is in such a state of disarray at this point in time," said Fordham University political scientist Bruce Berg. "They are clearly their own worst enemy ... (and) are doing a very good job of hanging themselves." Paterson, the state's first black leader, is seen as particularly vulnerable. The New York Times reported that President Barack Obama asked him to step aside in favor of a stronger candidate because he could not win.

Paterson refused and plans to officially launch his campaign on Saturday. But he has only raised \$3 million, which pales beside the \$16 million banked by New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo, his likely Democratic challenger. Cuomo also leads Paterson in polls even though he has not yet declared his candidacy. Gillibrand's likely rival in the Democratic primary is Harold Ford, a former U.S. Representative transplanted from Memphis, Tennessee, who while still officially considering a run is traveling around the state holding events. Some Democrats see Paterson and Gillibrand as weak and want to replace them in September's primaries to avoid embarrassment in November. Among Republicans, former U.S. congressman Rick Lazio, has launched a bid for governor, while several potential candidate are eyeing Gillibrand's job. Political commentators said competitive primaries could position Democrats better for November. "Cuomo appears to be the most commanding Democratic candidate, and I do not think his prospects in the general election would be hurt if he and the current Governor Paterson went at it head to head," said Robert Shapiro, a Columbia University political scientist.

WASHINGTON – Concerns about New Jersey Sen. Frank Lautenberg's health pose yet another challenge for Democrats struggling to retain control of the Senate. Lautenberg's announcement Friday that he's suffering from stomach lymphoma and will receive treatment over the next few months could complicate matters for Democrats as they seek to muster enough votes to overcome Republican delaying tactics over jobs, health care and more. Even before his illness, Democrats had lost their 60-vote supermajority when Republican Scott Brown won the special election to replace the late

Democratic Sen. Edward Kennedy. That deprived them of the numbers needed to head off any GOP filibuster. Now, they're staring at the possibility of further erosion — and momentum gained by newly emboldened Republicans — going into the midterm elections. Indiana Democrat Even Bayh is planning to step down, a surprise decision that followed a flurry of other Democratic retirements, including Sen. Christopher Dodd in Connecticut. In Delaware, Vice President Joe Biden's son decided against a Senate run, boosting Republican hopes to take over the seat Biden held for 36 years. In Illinois, Republicans like their chances in trying to win President Barack Obama's old Senate seat. That's now held by Democrat Roland Burris, who was appointed by a scandal-tainted governor and has decided not to seek a full term. If Lautenberg, 86, has to miss multiple votes for health reasons, Democrats could struggle to fill the void. A first test could come Monday when a vote is expected on a Democratic jobs bill. A Lautenberg spokesman said Friday the senator would miss the vote. "It's one less vote, simple math," said Gary Jacobson, a political science professor at the University of California at San Diego. "It just makes it a little harder." The nation's second-oldest senator is expected to return to work between treatments. Lautenberg is to undergo six to eight chemotherapy treatments and should make a full recovery, his doctor said. Despite his doctor's hopeful words, news of Lautenberg's diagnosis shook Democrats.

To get much done, they need to secure Republican votes and they haven't had much luck winning over moderate Republicans like Maine's Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins. "The stars are not lining up for the Democrats these days," said Jacobson. "It portends a continuing stalemate in which the Republicans think their best strategy is to just block everything and to hope that they pick up a lot of seats in 2010." Any decline in Lautenberg's recovery would be a serious concern for Democrats in New Jersey as well. Republicans there won control of the governor's office in November. If Lautenberg were unable to finish his term, Gov. Chris Christie would appoint an interim successor. That could give a Republican candidate the added advantage of incumbency in an already favorable environment for the GOP. New Jersey Democrats failed to advance legislation to take the interim appointment power away from Christie. The legislation was introduced during the lame-duck session with Lautenberg in mind. Lautenberg is not up for re-election until 2014.

WASHINGTON – The capture and interrogation of Taliban commander Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar could help unravel the Afghan insurgency, but it's less likely to lead U.S. forces to Osama bin Laden. In nearly two weeks of interrogation in Pakistan, the Taliban operations chief has provided limited information, officials said. In his discussions with his Pakistani captors, Baradar has focused on his own fate and not provided full details about the location of fellow insurgents or weapons caches.

That means the immediate benefit from Baradar's arrest has been his sudden absence as the Taliban's daily battlefield commander. But if he decided to cooperate, the growing hope among both U.S. and Pakistani officials is that he would play the broker in negotiating a cease-fire between the Afghan Taliban and the U.S. and NATO-led forces fighting in Afghanistan. U.S. officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss classified intelligence issues, said Baradar does have a wealth of in-depth information on other Taliban leaders and could point to moderates who are approachable and warn away from hard-liners unwilling to get involved in the peace process.

It is not clear, though, whether the United States shares the broader belief apparently held by Pakistan's government that Baradar could be a direct player in eventual peace negotiations across the border in Afghanistan. But some officials who have dealt with the Taliban in the past see positive signs in Baradar's push last year inside the Taliban's command to have the faction's leaders focus on governing as well as controlling territories. "It seems he was trying to shift the organization from purely military to partly also political," said Richard Barrett, the head of a U.N. group that monitors the threat posed by al-Qaida and the Taliban. "That seems to be a prelude to Taliban sitting down at table or at least talking." Baradar is known as a savvy and powerful leader who "could issue an order which would be not only transmitted within a relatively short period, like 24 hours or so, down to the district level, but also would be obeyed," Barrett said. "That's quite significant."

The operations chief was centrally involved in the distribution of a manual last July that cautioned Taliban fighters against brutalizing civilians and pressing them to try and avoid killing innocents in suicide bombings. A similar push against civilian casualties has been a top priority of the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal. Afghan civilian deaths, U.S. military officials stress, have made it more difficult to win the hearts and minds of Afghan citizens. U.S. officials have declined to provide any details of the information gained from Baradar. But some have suggested that he has a great deal of information, or even advice, on the Taliban's internal political landscape. In such a role, he could dole out details that would guide the coalition as it tries to leverage a settlement for the war. Baradar was arrested earlier this month in a joint operation by CIA and Pakistani security forces in the southern port city of Karachi, according to U.S. and Pakistani officials. Both the Pakistani army and the White House on Wednesday finally publicly confirmed the arrest.

WASHINGTON – Muslim scholars have criticized the use of body scanners for security in US airports as a violation of religious teachings on decency not only in Islam but in all faiths, asserting that officials need to be educated on respecting people's religious convictions. "The scanners are un-Islamic and against decency," Sheikh Ali Suleiman Ali, a member of the Fiqh Council of North America (FCNA), told IslamOnline.net. The FCNA, based in Indiana, has issued a statement against Full Body Security Scanners on the ground of violating Islamic teachings that men or women be seen naked by other men and women. The scanners, also known as nude-body scanners, have been installed in airports after the December 25 foiled plane bombing attempt by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian Muslim. "A general and public use of such scanners is against the teachings of Islam, natural law and all religions and cultures that stand for decency and modesty," said the FCNA. "The fatwa basically reiterates the fact that privacy and guarding the private parts should not be violated other than in terms of necessity," stressed Dr Ihsan Bagby, a member of FCNA Executive Council. "These screening devices show the private parts of both men and women." FCNA advised Muslims to insist on having alternatives of nude body scanning like the patting down search. "Muslims won't have a problem to the pat-down search," said Sheikh Ali, also the imam of the Canton Mosque. He insisted that it is not only Muslims who have spoken out against the controversial body scanners. "We know that Christian and Jewish groups do

not approve this too." The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), a grassroots civil rights Muslim group, has thrown its weight behind the FCNA fatwa.

The scholars asserted that American Muslims, estimated at nearly 7 million, fully support any necessary measures for the safety and protection of all passengers. "We are not against security," insisted Imam Ali, the FCNA member. "We are concerned about the security and safety of human beings, but this is not in the way." He noted that US officials are not aware of the severity of the issue for Muslims and other religious groups. "They need to be educated about that. We need to educate them." Imam Ali believes that officials should understand the urgency of finding other alternatives for body scanning that does not jeopardize people's morality.

"We wish the government takes this seriously. This has to do with ethics and dignity of human beings." Dr. Begby, a prominent African American convert and a professor of Islamic Studies at Kentucky University, agrees. He believes officials are likely unaware of the high emotions Muslims have regarding the body scanning issue. "It is a major religious concern and not a matter of inconvenience for Muslims." He insists that moves like the FCNA fatwa are not about heaping criticism or being misdemeanant, but rather about education. "The fatwa is to make officials notice that this is a very serious religious issue. It is our responsibility to reach out to US officials and educate them on the matter."

WASHINGTON — Two former high-level Bush administration officials who provided legal justification for harsh interrogations of overseas terror suspects are likely to escape any formal punishment now that the Justice Department has concluded they should not be held legally responsible. In a long-awaited report released early Friday evening, Deputy Associate Attorney General David Margolis said that former department lawyers John Yoo and Jay Bybee should not have their law licenses revoked as a consequence of their legal advice to the Bush administration signing off on the controversial interrogation methods. In a 69-page legal memo, Margolis concluded "that these memos contained significant flaws. But as all that glitters is not gold, all flaws do not constitute professional misconduct....I conclude that Yoo and Bybee exercised poor judgment by overstating the certainty of their conclusions and underexposing countervailing arguments." Democrats and civil liberties and human rights advocates had demanded that the lawyers face some legal sanction because their memos were used to justify the use of interrogation techniques such as waterboarding, widely condemned as a form of torture. The Justice Department's assessment reverses the recommendations of ethics officials within the department's Office of Professional Responsibility, which had earlier concluded that state bar committees should determine whether Yoo's and Bybee's law licenses should be revoked. After reviewing that recommendation, Margolis concluded that Yoo, currently a University of California, Berkeley law professor, and Bybee, now a federal appeals court judge, had demonstrated poor judgment rather than committed ethics violations. Some Democrats in Congress pounced. "The materials released today make plain that those memos were legally flawed and fundamentally unsound," said House Judiciary Committee Chairman John Conyers, Jr. (D-Mich.). "While the Department ultimately concluded that the lawyers did not breach their minimum professional obligations, I certainly hold top lawyers at (the Justice Department) to a higher standard than that, as all Americans should." Republicans hailed the results as only fair for officials whom they say were just doing their jobs. "In the

wake of 9-11, attorneys at the Justice Department were faced with unprecedented challenges, not knowing whether other attacks were imminent," said House Judiciary Committee Ranking Member Lamar Smith (R- Texas). "They did their best to follow the law." Ethics investigators had completed a draft of the report during the Bush administration. But it was kept secret and became the subject of criticism by Democratic senators because Attorney General Eric Holder's predecessor, Michael Mukasey , delayed the report after reading it. In a break with tradition, the subjects of the investigation were permitted to read a draft of the results and comment on it. Margolis, who's a career attorney of three decades, did not respond to a request for comment. Justice Department spokeswoman Tracy Schmalzer said the department "followed the longstanding review process."

TORONTO (Reuters) – Canada's Liberals have failed to gain any ground on the Conservatives, despite discontent with the government's decision to suspend Parliament until early March, according to a new poll. An Ekos opinion poll released on Thursday showed the Conservatives with 31.2 percent support, compared with 29 percent for the Liberals. This is little changed from a similar poll released last week that showed the Conservative government with 31 percent and the main opposition Liberals at 29 percent. Just four months ago, an Ekos poll showed the Conservatives with 40.7 percent and the Liberals with 25.5 percent, though support for the minority government has eroded since then and the two major parties are virtually tied. "It is extremely unusual for no party to command even a third of the electorate over many weeks, which is the situation we have now," said Ekos President Frank Graves. "Though the Conservatives have tumbled from the low forties four months ago to the low thirties now, the Liberals have made much less impressive gains." The Conservative government has felt a public backlash over a late-December decision to shut down Parliament for a longer than usual holiday break until March, when it plans to introduce a new budget. The Liberals charge that Prime Minister Stephen Harper is trying to hide from his critics, over issues such as the economy or Canada's combat mission in Afghanistan. The latest poll showed that an even 41 percent said they were happy with the direction that the government was taking, compared with 48 percent that said that it was heading in the wrong direction. However, the Liberals and leader Michael Ignatieff have not managed to capitalize on the Conservatives' slide and build support among voters, who show little enthusiasm for an early election, Graves said.

Western Europe

LONDON — A British venture capital firm plans to launch Europe's first halal industrial park, tapping an under-served market worth up to \$6.27 billion a year. "If you look at some figures, the halal sector in the UK is worth between 2 to 4 billion pounds, the majority of that is imported," Mahesh Jayanarayan, chairman of Halal Industries, told the Reuters Islamic Banking and Finance Summit. He said the Super Halal Industrial Park (SHIP) will be based in South Wales, adding that it was chosen because of its meat industries and affordable land prices. The park would provide services such as storage, product packing, meat selection and processing as well as research and development.

Halal Industries has partnered with the Penang International Halal Hub (PIHH), the agency set up by the Malaysian state to promote halal-related industries. Muslims should only eat meat from livestock slaughtered by a sharp knife from their necks, and the name of Allah, the Arabic word for God, must be mentioned. Jayanarayan said the project will take three to five years to launch and will cost around 150 million pounds -- a sum he plans to raise in the capital markets, by sourcing government grants and by finding anchor-partners. "This would be a private equity play but also a property play, purely because we are trying to pre-sell the project to industrial people to come in." Europe has no halal industrial parks, despite being home to millions of Muslims. Growing Demand Jayanarayan says SHIP will help to make Britain a landmark Halal center for the region. "You have 2.5 billion people on the planet eating halal food, directly or indirectly," he noted. "This halal market is not going away, it is not some fad." The total European halal food market is currently valued at about \$66 billion, including meat, fresh food and packed food, while the global market is worth about \$634 billion. A successful first project could lead to further launches across Europe, particularly countries with sizable Muslim population such as France and Germany.

LONDON – The number of people claiming jobless benefits in the United Kingdom has hit a 12-year high at a moment when the Bank of England is uncertain whether to pump billions more into stimulating the economy, official reports showed Wednesday. The nation's unemployment rate held steady at 7.8 percent in the three months ending in December, the Office for National Statistics said, but the number of people claiming unemployment benefits, the jobseeker's allowance, rose by 23,500 in January to 1.64 million, the highest figure since April 1997. The Bank of England's rate-setting Monetary Policy Committee decided earlier this month not to expand its program of asset purchases which has pumped 200 billion pounds (\$310 billion) into the economy. Minutes of the meeting on Feb. 3-4 disclosed some debate on expanding the program, known as quantitative easing, though eventually the panel decided unanimously to stand pat. "For some members, the arguments were finely balanced," the minutes said. "Given a quantitative easing increase was discussed ... those hoping for and/or thinking that there may be more quantitative easing at a later date have certainly not had their hopes dashed," said Marc Ostwald, strategist at Monument Securities. But Vicky Redwood, analyst at Capital Economics, said she believe that "before long, the recovery will be looking weak enough to justify further action." The minutes also disclosed concern that more stimulus might increase expectations of inflation. "For some members, there also remained risks that adding to the size of the asset purchase program might increase the chance of unwarranted increases in asset prices, and that attempting to eliminate the degree of spare capacity too rapidly might eventually result in more inflationary pressure," the minutes said.

The committee appeared sanguine about unemployment, noting that the rate had stabilized although there had been an increase in part-time working and decrease in full-time unemployment. "But the pace at which full-time employment was falling had been moderating since the summer of 2009. And the rate at which unemployed workers were finding employment had picked up. Overall, the employment data remained more resilient than might have been expected given the scale of the decline in recorded GDP," the minutes said. In the latest jobless data, the Office for National Statistics said the

number of full-time workers fell by 37,000 to 21.22 in the fourth quarter, the smallest quarterly drop since July 2008. The number of part-time workers rose by 25,000 to 7.67 million. The number of people out of work for more than a year rose by 37,000 in the last quarter of 2009 to 663,000, also the highest since 1997.

The unemployment rate, which peaked at 7.9 percent during the current recent recession, was the same as the rate reported in January for the three months through November.

LONDON (AFP) – Bank of England policymakers voted unanimously to keep British interest rates at a record low level and to freeze radical credit-easing plans, minutes of a recent meeting showed on Wednesday. The central bank's Monetary Policy Committee voted 9-0 in favour of keeping its key lending rate at 0.50 percent at its last meeting held on February 3-4. It was also united over a decision to pause its extraordinary policy of pumping billions of pounds (dollars) of new money into the British economy. "The Committee voted unanimously in favour" of the propositions, the minutes said. In order to revive the economy, the Bank of England has pumped out £200 billion under the radical policy of quantitative easing (QE). Introduced last March when the BoE also slashed borrowing costs to 0.50 percent, QE meant that the central bank created money by purchasing bonds from commercial institutions. The QE policy was launched in a bid to get banks lending again to businesses and individuals and so help drag Britain out of its worst recession in modern history, which ended in the fourth quarter of 2009. But the economy grew by just 0.1 percent in the final three months of last year, well short of market expectations for a 0.4-percent expansion, sparking speculation that the central bank may decide to revisit QE.

HELSINKI (Reuters) – Greece's financial problems have scared other government into taking action to strengthen their finances, and any talk of a "chain reaction" affecting other countries should be avoided, Finland said on Saturday. "Greece has been such a hard lesson," Finnish Finance Minister Jyrki Katainen told national broadcaster YLE in an interview. "It has scared political decision makers into taking ... comprehensive actions." Concern over Athens' ability to repay its debt has shaken confidence in the euro and prompted European Union leaders to pledge they will take coordinated action, if needed, to preserve the stability of the single currency. The Greek government has said it plans to slash its public deficit from 12.7 percent of gross domestic product to less than three percent by 2012. Katainen said it was important not to link the problems in Greece with other European countries. "There has been a fashion in recent days to say that Spain, Portugal and Italy are next in line because they are southern European countries and they have economic worries," Katainen said. "It is very dangerous to link, via rumors, these countries, who through their own actions can very well get their economies into shape," he said. "This speculation ... has to be avoided." On Spain, Katainen said: "The market believes that Spain can recover when it takes comprehensive actions, large budget cuts, and I believe that this is still possible."

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- The finance ministers of the 16 members of the eurozone urged Greece on Monday (February 15th) to further slash spending and raise taxes or face possible sanctions next month. Athens must submit a progress report to the European Commission by mid-March so the bloc can assess actions by the government and their

impact on the budget. Euro Group Chairman Jean-Claude Juncker refused to describe any concrete measures eurozone members might undertake to help Greece. Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou insists that Athens is only seeking EU political support, not economic help. The meeting continues on Tuesday in an expanded format that includes finance ministers of EU member states.

Also Tuesday, Greek customs officials and finance ministry staff kicked off a three-day strike in Athens protesting planned salary freezes and reduced bonuses. Protestors argue the measures would cut between 300 and 700 euros of their monthly wages. The action is expected to affect cross-border trade, particularly fuel supplies. Only perishable goods and medicine will be allowed to pass in and out of the country

BERLIN (Reuters) – The German finance ministry has said that countries using the euro currency will together provide aid worth between 20 and 25 billion euros (\$27.2 and \$34 billion) for Greece, the German weekly magazine Der Spiegel reported on Saturday. Citing "initial considerations" by the ministry, Der Spiegel said each country's share of the financial aid for Greece would be calculated according to the proportion of capital each country holds in the European Central Bank. The German finance ministry could not immediately be reached for comment.

ATHENS, Greece -- Prime Minister George Papandreou on Friday (February 12th) accused the bloc of using Greece as a scapegoat to hide the 27-member group's own failures. Speaking at a government session only a day after the EU leaders agreed to help Greece deal with its financial woes, Papandreou stressed that because of the "criminal policy of the previous" right-centrist New Democracy government, he not only had to convince his partners of his political will to effect needed, radical change, but also had to fight powerful attacks by international speculators. "The Union, the Commission, even Eurostat had the responsibility to be vigilant and to point out to the previous government the slippery slope it was on," he stated. Papandreou added that the situation has been aggravated by numerous statements creating the impression that Greece is on the brink of collapse.

MADRID – Spain said Monday it is willing to take in five inmates from the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay, not just the two it had announced last month. Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos told breakfast meeting with reporters that the inmates will not pose a security threat. The transfers, he said, "will be done with all the legal guarantees so as to defend the security situation that our country requires."

He said the nationalities of the former prisoners would be announced when they arrive in Spain. Officials have said previously that Spain had agreed to accept one Yemeni and one Palestinian. A Foreign Ministry official said later those two are still due to come to Spain and the government is now studying the background of other inmates at the U.S. prison for terrorism suspects in Cuba. The spoke on condition of anonymity in line with ministry rules. He said it is not yet known when Spain might give final approval for the transfers. In Washington, State Department spokesman Gordon Duguid told reporters Tuesday that it would be a "positive move" if Spain were to accept five detainees. He commended allies and friends willing to accept inmates, saying such cooperation would help Obama's goal of closing down the prison. Other European countries that have agreed to take in

Guantanamo inmates include France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy and Portugal. Most have agreed to take in one or two, or three at most. President Barack Obama had pledged to close the Guantanamo prison in January of this year but missed that deadline.

His special envoy for this task, Daniel Fried, met with Spanish officials in Madrid in June and asked Spain to take in four prisoners. From the outset, Spain has been receptive.

Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero has been eager to establish good ties with the United States and Obama, after angering then-president George Bush in April 2004 by withdrawing Spanish peacekeepers from Iraq. Zapatero has also agreed to send more Spanish troops to Afghanistan in response to a plea from Obama for more allied help in fighting the Taliban.

PARIS – France's highest court on Wednesday overruled a lower court's acquittal of five former inmates at the Guantanamo Bay prison and ordered an appeals court to rehear the case centering on terrorism charges. The Court of Cassation did not immediately explain its reasons for the ruling, but a copy of its decision will be available Thursday, a spokesman for the court said. The high court said a new appeals court panel will be created to handle the case, said the spokesman on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter. A defense lawyer representing two of the men criticized the ruling, saying it amounted to a "sinister page in the history of the judicial system" and "a great cruelty on a human level." France is among the few Western countries to prosecute nationals who have returned home from Guantanamo. The acquittal had been a high-profile foreign disavowal of the prison, which President Barack Obama wants to shut down. The Paris criminal court in 2007 convicted the five — Ridouane Khalid, Brahim Yadel, Khaled ben Mustafa, Nizar Sassi and Mourad Benchellali — of "criminal association with a terrorist enterprise," a broad charge often used in terror cases in France.

During the original 2007 trial, the suspects had acknowledged having spent time in military training camps in Afghanistan, but said they had never put their combat skills to use. But last February, a Paris appeals court ruled that agents from the French counterterrorism agency DST who questioned the five inmates at Guantanamo in 2002 and 2004 had overstepped their roles, and overturned the convictions. The court ruled that DST could not act as both a spy agency and a judicial police service, which questions detainees under French law. The men, who were arrested in Afghanistan in 2001, each spent a total of 2.5 to 3 years in custody at Guantanamo and in France, to which they were repatriated in 2004 and 2005. All seven French citizens who were at Guantanamo were sent home in 2004 and 2005. One was immediately released; another was acquitted in trial; the last five were convicted for roles in a terror group in Afghanistan. The five were each sentenced to a year in prison. Because they had served more than that time before the trial, they did not return to prison after the sentencing. William Bourdon, a lawyer for Sassi and Benchellali, called the court's ruling "a step backward for the state of law in France ... unfortunately, this is a rather sinister page in the history of the judicial system." "For my clients, a third trial after all these lost years — notably 2 1/2 years at Guantanamo, for nothing — amounts to a great cruelty on a human level, and it's unbearable," he said. Asked how they responded to the decision Wednesday, he said simply: "Badly." Bourdon said a new trial isn't likely to take place until at least next year,

and that there is little likelihood that the former detainees will be ordered to return behind bars no matter what the final verdict is.

LONDON – British police investigating allegations that the country's spies colluded in torture are seeking evidence from a Guantanamo Bay detainee who alleges he had his head beaten against a wall while a U.K. intelligence officer looked on, lawyers told a court Friday. Shaker Aamer, 42, a Saudi-born man who lived in Britain before his detention, is among the 196 remaining detainees — and the last with ties to the U.K. — at the U.S. prison camp in Cuba. He claims he was the victim of violence while held in Afghanistan in 2002. Police have applied to London's High Court for access to secret documents on Aamer sent by Britain to the U.S. panel assessing the fate of detainees still held at Guantanamo. The U.S. has previously refused to return Aamer to Britain citing security concerns. Aamer's attorney Richard Hermer told a hearing that police also have visited the detainee's legal team to seek details on his claim that an official from Britain's domestic spy agency MI5 was present during his alleged abuse. Britain's government has previously rejected Aamer's allegations, and no criminal investigation is taking place in connection with his case. However, police are investigating two cases of alleged misconduct by MI5 and MI6 — the country's foreign intelligence agency — in relation to suspects held overseas. Speaking following the High Court hearing, another lawyer for Aamer, Gareth Peirce, said his evidence is crucial to those police inquiries.

"It is potentially one of the most important criminal investigations there has been in this country," Peirce said. "Mr. Aamer is a victim and key witness in that investigation — and yet where is he? He is in Guantanamo where the police can't go to interview him. A missing witness." Police declined to comment on whether officers would seek to interview Aamer in person, or elaborate on their interest in his allegations. An officer from MI5 is being investigated over claims he may have colluded in the mistreatment of Binyam Mohamed, a former Guantanamo Bay detainee, in Pakistan in 2002. In September, MI6 referred concerns over the conduct of one of the agency's officers to the government's chief legal adviser, who later asked police to investigate. Britain's Foreign Office said in a statement that Aamer's legal team had made "unsubstantiated allegations" about U.K. involvement in his alleged abuse. "We do not accept allegations of U.K. involvement or complicity in his mistreatment," the Foreign Office said in a statement. "We firmly reject any suggestion that we torture or mistreat people or ask others to do so on our behalf." Peirce also claimed that Britain had not done enough to pressure the U.S. to release Aamer. A total of 13 British citizens, or British residents, have been released from Guantanamo since 2004, including Mohamed — who returned last February. The Foreign Office said it has repeatedly demanded Aamer be released, and is continuing to press authorities in Washington. "This is a decision for the United States, and there is no guarantee that we will be successful," the ministry said.

LONDON (AFP) – Britain's human rights watchdog called Saturday for an urgent independent probe into claims that the security services were complicit in the torture of more than 20 of its terror suspects. The police are already investigating allegations that the services were complicit with the abuse of Britain's last remaining Guantanamo Bay detainee, a court heard Friday. The Equalities and Human Rights Commission made the call in a letter to Justice Secretary Jack Straw. The letter "calls for an independent

investigation to determine whether senior officials and ministers turned a blind eye to the use of 'enhanced interrogation techniques' by the US and the systematic use of torture by the Pakistani Intelligence Services, amongst others", the EHRC said on its website.

"Torture contravenes UK and international law and the values that Britain upholds," commission chair Trevor Phillips said. "Ministers and government agencies are facing very serious allegations of knowing that UK citizens were being tortured, failing to take action to stop that torture and supplying questions to be used in the interrogation of men who were subjected to a high level of ill-treatment. "Given the UK's role as a world leader on human rights it would be inexplicable for the government not to urgently put in place an independent review process to assess the truth, or otherwise, of these allegations. "The government must take the opportunity of an independent review to be as open and transparent with the public as possible." Friday's court revelation concerning Guantanamo inmate Shaker Aamer came a week after a judge ordered the disclosure of torture evidence in the case of a former Guantanamo detainee, drawing criticism from US authorities. In last week's case, involving British resident Binyam Mohamed, an Ethiopian national, the released documents showed that he had been shackled and told he would "disappear" if he failed to cooperate with US interrogators.

In Friday's case the High Court heard that British detectives had applied for the release of secret documents related to their inquiries about Aamer, held at the US detention camp on Cuba since February 2002.

LONDON (AFP) – Diplomats meet Israel's ambassador Thursday to discuss fake British passports used by alleged killers of a Hamas chief amid speculation its Mossad spy agency was behind the murder in Dubai. The Israeli envoy to London was summoned to the Foreign Office Wednesday, said a government spokesman, hours after Prime Minister Gordon Brown pledged a "full investigation" of the passports affair. In another sign of growing diplomatic tensions over the murder, Ireland also voiced concern over the use of fake Irish passports. Speculation about who was behind the killing of Mahmud al-Mabhuh last month has centred on Israel's Mossad intelligence services, which have used agents with fake foreign passports for such operations in the past.

Related article: Mossad's forays abroad

Dubai's police chief this week released the photos and names of the 11 European passport holders -- six from Britain, three from Ireland, one from Germany and one from France -- alleged to have been members of the hit squad. All the countries except Germany have since said their passports had been faked. Britain had abstained from talking about a possible Israeli link but on Wednesday it announced it wanted to clarify matters with Israel. "The defrauding of British passports is a very serious issue. The government will continue to take all the action that is necessary to protect British nationals from identity fraud," the government spokesman said. "Given the links to Israel of a number of the British nationals affected, there will be a meeting between the FCO Permanent Under Secretary and the Israeli ambassador (on Thursday)," the spokesman said. Lawmaker Menzies Campbell, a member of the parliament's foreign affairs committee, urged Israel to drop its traditional refusal to talk about security matters in the face of "an abuse of British sovereignty." "To take refuge in the traditional Israeli view that we don't comment on intelligence and security matters... in my view does not stack up," he told BBC television, and urged the envoy to say whether or not Mossad was

involved. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman sought earlier Wednesday to play down the escalating row, saying there was no reason to believe the Jewish state's spy agency was involved. "There is no reason to think that it was the Israeli Mossad and not some other intelligence service or country up to some mischief," he told local media.

PARIS – Interpol has put 11 people suspected in the slaying of a Hamas militant leader in Dubai on its most-wanted list. The international police agency says it has issued red notices, its highest-level alert, to its member countries worldwide for "11 internationally wanted individuals who have been charged by UAE-Dubai authorities with coordinating and committing the murder." Interpol says it was acting on the request of Dubai authorities and that it believes the suspects used false passports. Interpol issued the notices — which include photographs — "to limit the ability of accused murderers from traveling freely using the same false passports." Hamas commander Mahmoud al-Mabhouh's body was found Jan. 20 in his hotel room.

AMSTERDAM – The Dutch coalition government collapsed Saturday over whether to extend the country's military mission in Afghanistan, leaving uncertain the future of its 1,600 soldiers fighting there. Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende announced that the second largest party in his three-party alliance is quitting, in a breakdown of trust in what had always been an uneasy partnership. Balkenende made no mention of elections as he spoke to reporters after a 16-hour Cabinet meeting in The Hague that ended close to dawn. However, the resignation of the Labor Party — which has demanded the country stick to a scheduled withdrawal from Afghanistan — would leave his government with an unworkable majority, and political analysts said early elections appeared inevitable. Balkenende said his center-right Christian Democratic Alliance would continue in office together with the small Christian Union, and would "make available" Labor's cabinet seats. But he did not spell out his intentions. The coalition, elected to a four-year term, marks its third year in office on Monday. "Where there is no trust, it is difficult to work together. There is no road along which this cabinet to go further," Balkenende said. The Dutch debate comes as opinion polls in many troop-providing European countries indicate growing public opposition to sending more soldiers to Afghanistan amid a global financial crisis and shrinking defense budgets. Dutch soldiers have been deployed since 2006 in the southern Afghan province of Uruzgan on a two-year stint that was extended until next August. Labor demanded that Dutch troops leave Uruzgan as scheduled. Balkenende's Christian Democratic Alliance wanted to keep a trimmed down military presence in the restive province, where 21 soldiers have been killed. "A plan was agreed to when our soldiers went to Afghanistan," said Labor Party leader Wouter Bos. "Our partners in the government didn't want to stick to that plan, and on the basis of their refusal we have decided to resign from this government." NATO recently sent a letter to the government asking if it would consider staying longer — a move that the Western alliance normally would do only if it had a clear signal of agreement. In Brussels, alliance spokesman James Appathurai said NATO would not comment on internal political debates in member countries. "Of course, Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen continues to believe that the best way forward would be a new smaller Dutch mission, including a provincial reconstruction team in Uruzgan to consolidate the success that the Dutch have

had and to transition to Afghan lead," Appathurai said. He said that whatever happened, the Afghan people should know that the alliance will "continue to provide support to them as long as necessary." Still, any Dutch withdrawal would be a worrying sign for the alliance, which has struggled to raise the 10,000 additional troops that its top commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, has demanded to accompany the 30,000 American reinforcements being deployed there.

PARIS – France's military purposely exposed soldiers to a 1961 nuclear test in the Sahara Desert to study how the atomic bomb would affect their bodies and minds, a French news report said Tuesday, citing a classified defense document. Reacting to the report in Le Parisien newspaper, the government pledged full transparency. Defense Minister Herve Morin denied that soldiers in the April 25, 1961 operation were used as human guinea pigs, but said "it is obvious that today nobody would carry out tests in such conditions." In total, France conducted 210 nuclear tests, both in the atmosphere and underground, in the Sahara Desert and the South Pacific from 1960-1996. After decades of pressure from victims, the government finally agreed last year to compensate them.

Le Parisien newspaper said it had obtained a 260-page confidential document summarizing France's nuclear tests in the Sahara, including the April 25, 1961 aboveground test, which was code-named "Gerboise verte" or green gerboa. The military document, drawn up in 1998, said the test was designed to "study the atomic weapon's physiological and psychological effects on man, to obtain elements necessary to prepare them physically and morally for modern combat," Le Parisien said.

According to the newspaper, the military document said 300 soldiers took part in a ground exercise coinciding with the blast. The defense report said soldiers emerged from their shelters 20 minutes after the explosion "and looked with apprehension at the cloud," Le Parisien said. Soldiers on foot advanced toward the epicenter, stopping 700 meters (765 yards) away, the report said. Armored reconnaissance vehicles advanced to 275 meters (300 yards) from the site. The men wore gas masks, but military officials concluded that such protection slowed down maneuvers and decided that in the future, foot soldiers should replace them with simple anti-dusk masks, Le Parisien said, citing the report. Asked if the soldiers were used as human guinea pigs, the defense minister said "no." "We have to stop analyzing history with our 2010 vision," Morin told reporters. "We probably have to accept that errors were committed, at least about the consequences we should have taken." For decades, the government refused to bow to pressure from people sickened by radiation. As recently as 2003, then-President Jacques Chirac said during a visit to Tahiti that tests had shown no ill effects to health from France's nuclear detonations in Polynesia. Government spokesman Luc Chatel promised that more scientific data about France's nuclear testing would be disclosed. "There is a desire for transparency on the part of the government, and it's the first time that's the case," he said. France's parliament last year passed a law to compensate victims who acquired health problems following the tests, with sums to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Jean-Paul Teissonniere, lawyer for the Associations of Veterans of Nuclear Tests in Polynesia and Algeria, said the report should be taken into account as officials decide how exactly to apply the law on compensation. The report "is extra information," he said. "The Defense Ministry has been hiding things from us."

LONDON – Hundreds of peace protesters demonstrated Monday outside a factory in southern England where warheads for Trident nuclear submarines are made. The demonstrators blocked gates outside the site in Aldermaston, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) west of London, early Monday, police said. Ten people were arrested. Anti-nuclear groups said two Nobel Peace Prize winners — Jody Williams, who led a campaign to ban land mines, and Mairead Maguire, who led a campaign to end violence in Northern Ireland — were among those taking part. "People have come from all over the UK and we also have a big international contingent — it's the biggest blockade for many years," said Kate Hudson, who chairs the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. "It's a reflection of the fact that the majority of the population is against the British possession of nuclear weapons." Despite efforts from Britain's military to scale down long term spending, Defense Secretary Bob Ainsworth recently announced that the 20 billion pound (\$32 billion) program to replace Britain's Trident nuclear submarines would go ahead.

LONDON – Several prominent Anglican British bishops are urging Christians to keep their carbon consumption in check this Lent. The 40-day period of penitence before Easter typically sees observant Catholics, Anglicans, and Orthodox Christians give up meat, alcohol or chocolates. But this year's initiative aims to convince those observing Lent to try a day without an iPod or mobile phone in a bid to reduce the use of electricity — and thus trim the amount of carbon dioxide spewed into the atmosphere. Bishop of London Rev. Richard Chartres said that the poorest people in developing countries were the hardest hit by man-made climate change. He said Tuesday that the "Carbon Fast" was "an opportunity to demonstrate the love of God in a practical way."

GENEVA – Britain and France led a call Monday for an international probe into the violence that followed last year's disputed presidential election in Iran. The demand, which Iran swiftly rejected, came during the U.N. Human Rights Council's first review of Iran's rights record since the organization was founded in 2006. Iran should invite U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to "investigate the postelection violence and independently assess the human rights situation," Britain's ambassador in Geneva, Peter Gooderham, said during a three-hour U.N. debate. France, like Britain a member of the U.N. Security Council and a frequent critic of abuses in Iran, urged Tehran to accept an international panel to probe the "bloody repression" of peaceful protests and the arrests of political dissidents in the wake of the elections June 12.

Opposition groups claim the vote that returned President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power was fraudulent. A high-ranking U.S. official said a U.N.-led investigation could be one way of shedding light on claims that some of those arrested were tortured and killed in detention. "I don't think the form or the means matters as much as it does that there be some international scrutiny of what's going on," U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Michael H. Posner said. Seyed Hossein Rezvani, a senior Iranian diplomat, told reporters that an international investigation was "totally out of the question" since the country's own judicial system was capable of examining allegations of wrongdoing. But he said Iran had issued an open invitation to all of the U.N.'s independent investigators to visit the country, something campaigners have demanded for years. None

of the global body's investigators has been able to visit Iran since Ahmadinejad took office in 2005.

One investigator, Manfred Nowak, the U.N.'s expert on torture, told The Associated Press he had asked for years to visit Iran and would welcome any invitation by the government. Posner said Tehran's report to the 47-member council — which said any allegations of wrongdoing in Iran are being investigated — cast doubt on its willingness to honestly address claims of official abuse. "The human rights crisis in Iran continues and it's imperative that the U.N. find the appropriate ways to address it," he said. The Iranian government's account of the human rights situation was "clearly at odds with reality," he added. Speaking during a visit to the Gulf state of Qatar, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton earlier Monday accused Iran of becoming a military dictatorship. Iran rejected criticism of its record, telling the Geneva-based council that the country's Islamic constitution safeguards its people's human rights.

Southeast Europe

TIRANA, Albania -- President Bamir Topi on Saturday (February 13th) hosted a round-table that brought together the leaders of the government and the main opposition Socialist Party (SP) in an effort to help overcome the current political stalemate. SP lawmakers have been boycotting the work of parliament since September of last year, insisting they would not come back unless a thorough investigation is conducted into the June 2009 general elections, which they insist were manipulated. Prime Minister Sali Berisha of the Democratic Party (DP) and SP leader Edi Rama met at the president's office in Tirana and agreed to continue talks. "We agreed that the president will continue to explore for convergence points," Topi said after the meeting. He also thanked the EU, the US and international institutions for getting the talks started.

TIRANA, Albania -- European Parliament (EP) Vice-President Roberta Angelilli on Saturday urged the opposition Socialist Party (SP) to stop its parliamentary boycott and start co-operating with the government. SP lawmakers have been boycotting the work of parliament since September, insisting they will not return unless a thorough investigation is conducted into the June 2009 general elections, which they insist were manipulated. Angelilli said the EP has adopted a resolution recognising Albania's progress in efforts to improve its elections with legislative and administrative reforms. She further noted that international monitors in the June 2009 vote did not report any irregularities in the election process. The statement came hours after the first meeting between SP leader Edi Rama and Prime Minister Sali Berisha at President Bamir Topi's office

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- The European Commission (EC) wants to see concrete results from efforts to solve the political stalemate in Albania, according to a spokesperson for EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele. Angela Filote made the statement Monday (February 15th). Albanian opposition parties have been boycotting parliament since September over alleged fraud in the June 2009 general election. Fuele has said the crisis hurts Albania's application to become an EU candidate. In Tirana, Vice Prime Minister Ilir Meta said Monday that negotiations between the government and the opposition aimed at ending the ongoing political stalemate should not involve ultimatums. Meta's made the statement a day after opposition Socialist Party (SP) leader

Edi Rama and Prime Minister Sali Berisha met to discuss ways to end the SP boycott of parliament. Meta maintains that a probe of the 2009 election would violate the country's constitution.

TIRANA, Albania -- Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) President Mevlut Cavusoglu will head a delegation to assist President Bamir Topi in mediating political negotiations between the government and the opposition in the ongoing boycott of parliament. Cavusoglu's delegation will support the process to restore political dialogue in Albania, the office of the Council of Europe in Tirana announced on Thursday (February 18th). In other news, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly President Joao Soares is urging the opposition Socialist Party (SP) to end the parliamentary boycott. Soares has welcomed the idea of setting up a parliamentary commission to investigate alleged irregularities in the June 2009 general elections. Soares made the statement in Vienna, after meeting on Thursday with Albanian Parliament Speaker Jozefina Topalli and SP leader Edi Rama.

TIRANA, Albania -- Public administration officials have compiled answers to seven of the 35 chapters in the European Commission (EC) questionnaire, which is crucial to receiving EU candidate status. Answers on the free movement of workers, public procurement, fisheries, transport policies, economic and monetary policies, policies of trans-European transportation and customs were delivered to the Inter-ministerial Council for Integration on Thursday (February 18th). Albania must respond to 2,284 questions before the end of March, ahead of a progress report that will be filed regarding its EU integration process. Tirana applied for EU membership in April 2009.

SOFIA, Bulgaria -- Prime Minister Boyko Borissov said on Friday (February 12th) that the US will have preliminary talks with the Bulgarian government on the possibility of hosting elements of the US anti-missile defence shield. At a press conference, Borissov said the decision would be shared by the EC and the Bulgarian parliament. "I believe that we should demonstrate solidarity. When you are a member of NATO, you should work for collective security," Borissov said. The statement came after Romania's Supreme Defence Council approved the US plan last week.

Reacting to Borissov's statement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Sunday that he will ask Bulgaria for explanation of this "unwelcome surprise." "We have already questioned our US partners in Washington ... as to the meaning of this, and why we have this Bulgarian surprise after the Romanian surprise," Lavrov was quoted as saying.

MOSCOW, Russia -- The government is asking Bulgaria to provide more details about plans to deploy elements of the US missile defence shield on its territory. Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov said last week that Sofia and Washington will launch preliminary talks on the issue. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov met on Thursday (February 18th) with Bulgarian Ambassador to Moscow Plamen Grozdanov, telling him that Moscow is sending an official query about the purpose and substance of the talks. The issue arose after Bulgaria's neighbour, Romania, decided earlier this month to host elements of the US system, which should become operational by 2015.

SOFIA, Bulgaria -- National Revenue Agency head Krasimir Stefanov announced on Sunday (February 14th) that Sofia has asked Germany if any Bulgarian names appear on a stolen disc containing Swiss banking data, offered to authorities in Berlin. Germany announced earlier this month that it is considering buying the data from a former official at a bank in Geneva who stole it in 2006 or 2007. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has said that if this data is authentic, German authorities should obtain it. Stefanov said on Sunday that he has written to the German Finance Ministry requesting the data, should Germany decide to purchase it. "It is high time we show that Bulgaria is part of the EU and no one can evade payment of tax," Stefanov said.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- High Representative Valentin Inzko briefed a visiting US Congressional delegation Monday (February 15th) on obstacles BiH faces in its reform process. He insisted that the country's territorial integrity will not be questioned and its future as a member of the EU and NATO will not be endangered by irresponsible or obstructive policies. In other news, Prime Minister Nikola Spiric met on Monday with members of the European Parliament (EP) delegation for relations with Southeast Europe and asked them to support BiH's efforts for visa liberalisation with the EU. After the talks in Sarajevo, EP lawmaker Tanja Fajon said BiH should be included in the visa-free regime by July.

ZAGREB (AFP) – European Union aspirant Croatia will inaugurate its new president, leftwing intellectual Ivo Josipovic, in a ceremony in Zagreb on Thursday. Josipovic won the Balkan republic's January presidential elections on an anti-corruption platform and has promised to lead the country into the EU bloc during his 5-year mandate. The swearing in ceremony is to start at noon (1100 GMT) at Saint Marc's square in the old part of Zagreb, where the government and the parliament buildings are located. Josipovic will take the oath and make a speech in front of 1,000 invited guests. The ceremony will be attended by presidents of 10 central and southeastern European countries, as well as EU enlargement commissioner Stefan Fuele. Later on Thursday Josipovic is to make his first address to the nation that will be broadcast on national television. Josipovic, a 52-year-old law expert and classical music composer, takes over from popular centrist Stipe Mesic who held the post since 2000.

The nationalist and autocratic rule of Mesic's predecessor Franjo Tudjman, who led the nation throughout its 1991-1995 independence war until his death in December 1999, pushed the country into international isolation. Mesic, 75, managed to turn the country into an outward facing parliamentary democracy. Zagreb, which joined NATO last year, hopes the entry into the European bloc will signal a definitive move away from the legacy of the 1990s wars that tore apart the former Yugoslavia. The fight against corruption, especially at the highest levels, is one of the key criteria for Croatia to become an EU member by 2012.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- President-elect Ivo Josipovic voiced regret Monday (February 15th) that Serbian President Boris Tadic will not attend his inauguration ceremony Thursday, saying: "I have stretched my hand, and I would have liked if he had accepted it." Tadic has repeatedly said he will not attend the ceremony if Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu is there. In an interview with the Associated Press, Josipovic said

he will work to strengthen Croatia's relations with Serbia and other Balkan countries. He also vowed to tackle corruption and speed up reforms needed for Croatia's EU integration.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor on Friday (February 12th) said that a successful fight against organised crime requires close and lasting co-operation between police across the region. Opening the fourth meeting of interior ministers from the six former Yugoslav republics in Zagreb, Kosor said that without joint efforts against organised crime and corruption there would be no security and peace in the region. "The stronger the bridges we build between each other, the weaker the ties between criminal groups become," the Croatian prime minister said. The conference called "Balkan Route - yesterday, today, tomorrow" was attended by Croat Interior Minister Tomislav Karamarko, Serbia's Ivica Dacic, Montenegro's Ivan Brajovic, Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) Security Minister Sadik Ahmetovic, Slovenian State Secretary Goran Klemencic and the director of the Macedonian police Ljupco Todorovski. The officials signed a declaration pledging to increase collaboration, including exchange of experience and information, as well as lectures on drug smuggling. They also pledged to cut the notorious Balkan drug route to Western Europe. "The most relevant global security sources say that 80% of heroin from Afghanistan and Pakistan come to Western Europe through the Balkans," Serbian Interior Minister Ivica Dacic told Reuters. "On top of heroin, a growing number of people from our region are engaged in illegal trade of cocaine from Latin America. We cannot combat that successfully without regional co-operation," he added.

ZAGREB, Croatia -- The EU Permanent Representatives Committee on Thursday (February 18th) green-lighted the opening of negotiations on the judiciary and fundamental rights chapter with Croatia, local media reported. The move came after The Netherlands lifted its objections. Zagreb is expected to open chapters on fisheries and the environment on Friday.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Local media reported Monday (February 15th) that Kosovo's visa liberalisation process with EU countries is conditioned on the repatriation of thousands of Kosovo citizens living illegally across Europe. The government says it has already reached a repatriation agreement with several EU countries, including France, Belgium and Switzerland, and is in the process of hammering out agreements with Germany and Scandinavian countries. Human rights groups oppose the forced repatriation of Kosovo citizens due to poverty and difficult living conditions in Kosovo.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Council of Europe (CoE) Commissioner for Human Rights Thomas Hammarberg on Friday (February 12th) urged EU member states to stop the forced repatriation of Kosovo citizens, arguing that this only worsens the economic situation. "Kosovo is not ready to receive a larger scale of people returning from other countries at this stage," Hammarberg said in Kosovo where he wrapped up a three-day visit Saturday. Four of every 10 people in Kosovo are unemployed and the return of former citizens would have enormous impact on the country, the EU official explained

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The International Civilian Office (ICO) will continue to insist on consulting all parties, including Belgrade, regarding implementation of a strategy to extend Prstina's authority into Serb-dominated northern Kosovo. "The ICO calls on everyone to have a constructive role in this process, which aims at improving living conditions for citizens in the north. This call also includes representatives from Belgrade," ICO spokesman Andy McGuffie said on Sunday (February 14th). The strategy is aimed at ending Belgrade-backed parallel structures in the north.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The Central Election Commission (CEC) decided on Thursday (February 18th) to hold a third round of local elections in the Gjilan municipality. The Supreme Court had supported another round in the eastern municipality after irregularities were found in the run-off. CEC chairwoman Nesrin Lushta says the elections will be held on March 14th. Democratic Party (PDK) officials oppose the decision, claiming it is the result of political pressure. PDK candidate Xhemajl Mustafa will square off against Fatmir Rexhepi of the Democratic League of Kosovo.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- NATO Commander of Allied Joint Force Command Naples Admiral Mark Fitzgerald said Thursday (February 18th) that NATO does not determine the future status of the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF). "It is up to us to build the KSF. What local institutions do further with the forces, that is up to them only," Fitzgerald said after a meeting with KFOR Commander Markus Bentler in Pristina. Fitzgerald noted that downsizing KFOR troops to 10,000 soldiers is a result of the progress made in Kosovo. He stressed that KFOR is ready to respond to any threat to stability. He also confirmed NATO's support for a strategy to dismantle Belgrade-backed parallel structures, saying they represent a security threat.

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- A European Parliament (EP) delegation met on Thursday (February 18th) with Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and Deputy Prime Minister Vasko Naumovski. The delegation said afterward that Gruevski is committed to resolving the long-standing name dispute with Greece. EP lawmaker Zoran Thaler called for consensus between the government and the opposition regarding the issue. The EP delegation warned that if Skopje and Athens fail to find a solution by June, it could hurt both Macedonia and the region.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- The leader of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), Vojislav Kostunica, said on Sunday (February 14th) that calling early elections is the main goal of his party. At a DSS congress, Kostunica accused the government of endangering the country "economically, socially, politically and morally". "It is time for elections, time to stop the agony and destruction of Serbia ... It is time for a new Serbian government that will stop separatism and further divisions in the country," Kostunica said. The opposition Serbian Progressive Party is leading a petition drive to force early elections.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- President Boris Tadic vowed on Sunday (February 14th) that Serbia will continue its fight against organised crime, and urged other Balkan

countries to do the same. After a ceremony in Pancevo to mark Army Day, Tadic called for regional co-operation against crime bosses. He added that efforts to fight corruption will continue as well. Regarding calls to hold early elections, Tadic said he expects the cabinet to complete its term, which expires in 2012.

Oceania

SYDNEY (AFP) – Britain's far-right BNP has welcomed news that controversial Australian politician Pauline Hanson is emigrating and offered her the chance to restart her stalled career, a report said on Wednesday. British National Party (BNP) leader Nick Griffin told the Sydney Morning Herald he sympathised with the anti-immigration firebrand's "persecution" and said she would be "very welcome" to join his organisation. "I feel very sorry for her ... that she has been forced out of her country by this politically correct intimidation and bullying," Griffin was quoted as saying. "She would not be a sponger. We would regard her as a good addition." Hanson told Woman's Day that she was selling her property and leaving Australia "indefinitely" for Britain after becoming fed up at a lack of opportunities. She said she had given up on Australian politics and had de-registered her party, Pauline's United Australia Party, a year after failing to win election to Queensland's state parliament. "Sadly, the land of opportunity is no more applicable," she said.

Griffin described the ex-One Nation leader's political demise as a "vicious stitch-up" and said she would be welcome to play a role in the BNP. "Perhaps the last thing she wants is to be in the news. But if she does, perhaps as (Britain's) most recent immigrant, she will be very welcome if she wants to join and become involved," he said. "She has had some very interesting experiences in terms of persecution, and there would be a role for her if she wishes." Hanson infamously warned that Australia was in danger of being "swamped by Asians" in her maiden speech to the national parliament in 1996 before losing her seat two years later. She was briefly jailed in 2003 for fraudulently spending electoral funds before the conviction was quashed, and blamed last year's poll defeat on the publication of risque photos which turned out to be of someone else.

SYDNEY – Five Muslims were sentenced Monday to 23 to 28 years in prison in Australia for stockpiling explosive chemicals and firearms for terrorist attacks on unspecified targets. Justice Anthony Whealy of the New South Wales Supreme Court expressed little hope the men could be rehabilitated, saying they were motivated by "intolerant, inflexible religious conviction" and had shown contempt for the Australian government, its leaders and laws. Whealy noted the men remained dangerous and unrepentant, appearing to "wear their imprisonment like some kind of badge of honor." "Each man's conviction was that the plight of Muslims in other lands demanded violent action in this country to redress those wrongs and, through fear and panic in the community, to change the government's policies," he said. The men, aged 25 to 44, were found guilty last October on charges linked to preparing a terrorist act between July 2004 and November 2005. The men — Australian-born or naturalized citizens with Muslim immigrant backgrounds — all pleaded innocent. They stockpiled explosive chemicals and firearms, though it was not established where they would target.

During the trial, a former associate of the suspects testified the group had considered bombing an Australian Rules football final in Melbourne in 2005 that was attended by almost 92,000 people. Prosecutors said they had also discussed killing former Prime Minister John Howard. While the exact nature of the plot and its target were not certain, Whealy said the men clearly intended action that would "cause serious damage to property," if not deaths. Whealy has restricted the media from publishing the men's names. One participated in a terrorist-run paramilitary training camp in Pakistan, and three others attended similar camps in New South Wales to prepare for an attack.

"One particular feature of this trial was the fact that a considerable volume of extremist material was held by each offender in common with the other conspirators," Whealy said, noting that was "powerful evidence" they jointly held extremist views.

The men had faced a maximum penalty of life in prison. The judge allowed for parole after the men serve 17 to 21 years in prison.