

Report 137 Summary
PROJECT ON BUSINESS AND POLITICS IN THE
MUSLIM WORLD

Weekly Presentation: September 22, 2010

By: Bakare Najimdeen

Period: From Sept 12-18, 2010

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

- House Dems deeply divided over Obama tax cut plan
- G.O.P. Allies Drive Ad Spending Disparity
- House G.O.P. Leader Signals He's Open to Obama Tax Cut
- Senate G.O.P. Digs In to Keep Tax Cuts
- Wide G.O.P. Field Tests the Waters for 2012 Contest
- Poll Suggests Opportunities for Both Parties in Midterms
- Survey: Obama retains wide approval in Europe
- Muslim summit planned over NYC Islamic center
- Aging gas pipe at risk of explosion nationwide
- California Braces for Showdown on Emissions
- Cement flows for permanent plug of BP's Gulf well
- Obama Is Said to Be Preparing to Seek Approval on Saudi Arms Sale
- Aid to Counter Al Qaeda in Yemen Divides U.S. Officials
- Conservatives have narrow lead: poll
- Unpopular BC sales tax deal upheld by court

Western Europe

- Ashton designates six new 'strategic partners'
- Visegrad countries step up co-operation on EU funding
- Senior lobbyists profit from expanding EU
- EU backs women in Afghanistan elections
- EU overcomes objections on Pakistan trade plan
- EU to open markets to South Korea in July 2011
- Commission could overturn 2014 coal subsidy cut-off
- APNewsBreak: Top US envoy engages Arabs on Israel
- US steps into French Roma row
- Sarkozy unleashes 'violent' tirade against Barroso at summit
- Reding did not mean the Holocaust, but the 'Great Devouring,' Andor says
- Leaked document reveals Roma targeted in French crackdown
- Sarkozy's office hits back at criticism on Gypsies

- French Senate passes ban on full Muslim veils
- Pope to UK: deeply sorry, ashamed of sex abuse
- Bank of England head to address union conference
- UK won't sideline human rights in hunt for trade
- UK lawmakers: Major defense review has been rushed
- UN: Number of hungry people declines
- Greece's Papandreou calls for unity in passing reforms
- Greece gripped by new wave of protests
- Greece's Papandreou fears nationalism may harm ties with Albania

Southeast Europe

- EU urges Bulgaria, Romania to boost fight against crime, corruption

Albania

- Berisha says Greece can't stop Albania's EU integration
- Albanian government poised for reshuffle
- Albanian parliament approves cabinet changes
- Albania's Topi urges judiciary to be pro-active

Bosnia

- Campaigning in BiH enters the digital age
- RS lawmakers adopt controversial state property law
- BiH Court upholds sentences of war crimes convicts

Bulgaria

- Bulgaria's Parvanov criticises France's Roma repatriation policy

Kosovo

- Kosovo ready for talks with Serbia, excluding status and division
- Kosovo's Vetevendosje opposes talks with Serbia
- Survey finds most in Kosovo support dialogue with Serbia
- Kosovo rules out talks with Belgrade without US
- NATO's Rasmussen warns against quick pullout from Kosovo

Macedonia

- Macedonia's thorny path to the EU
- Macedonia to conduct census in April

Montenegro

- Montenegro, EU sign agreement on classified information

Romania

- Roma row overshadows EU summit
- Romanian public servants plan open-ended strike

Serbia

- Serbia: talks with Pristina don't imply Kosovo recognition
- Serbian opposition parties launch talks aimed at early elections
- EU Council reportedly to seek opinion on Serbia's candidate status
- Serbia charges nine with war crimes committed in Kosovo
- Austria to ratify SAA with Serbia by year end

Oceania

- Australia's minority government rules out mine tax changes

- Conservatives threaten to shatter Australia PM's rule
- Australian regulator delays ruling on BHP-Rio link
- Australian central bank calls for trade focus on India
- Five men on trial in Australia for plotting army attack
- Australian Aborigines 'world's first astronomers'

Report Summary

US/Canada

Political Issues

The debate over tax extension has divided democrat Congressmen, White House is opposed to extending tax for rich Americans, doing that could be detrimental for most congressmen struggling to retain their seats in a hot congressional election. Senate republicans say they are prepared to give the White House all that it takes to keep the Bush era tax cut.

Meanwhile, report has it that republicans are leading democrats in election adverts and campaign spending is flooded by deep-pocketed donors.

Polls however suggest that Americans are though not happy with Obama's administration handling of the economy but are comfortable with democrats as compared to republicans.

American presidential election is far from being around the corner but prospective G.O.P presidential candidates have started testing their clout across the country through republican organized summits. Sarah Palin, a leading figure in the revolutionary Tea Party groups is receiving considerable spotlight.

Economic Issues

Social/Humanitarian Issue

American extremists have indeed played into the hand of Muslim in building solidarity for the proposed Ground Zero centre. The centre at the start received certain degree of trepidation among some Muslims but that fear has transformed into solidarity due to the current of Islamophobia that followed the announcement of the centre.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

The ruptured pipeline in California has spotlighted the security concern of energy pipeline across the nation. The rupture unveiled the need for proper mechanism for checking pipelines, with particular reference to private company involved.

Final cementation of leak created by BP at the Gulf of Mexico is underway, the seal is expected to put an end to the spill that for months troubled the United States and raised eye brow between London and Washington.

Geostrategic Issues

His rating at home might be nothing to write home about, but back in Europe, Europeans' judgment of him is much higher than Americans. President Obama has been able to receive considerable points for his handling of international affairs, though Europeans were not as optimistic as Americans on certain issues such as Afghanistan and Iran.

Obama administration wants a \$60 billion military deal with Saudi Arabia to give more leverage to Riyadh in the region amid growing tension over Iran nuclear weapon. But Congress is yet to decide if the deal will challenge Israel military superiority.

Effort by the Obama administration to facilitate the Yemeni government in combating al-Qaeda's threat is dividing military officers in Washington. The military aid is expected to roll-back insurgency in the desert country but opponents believe American weapons could end up with al-Qaeda.

Washington is throwing in all pressure on both sides of the coin for many reasons. If Israel must see a peaceful neighbourhood it has to compromise in the on-going Mideast Peace Process, and if Arab would like to see the state of Palestine they would have to concede few of their grievances against Tel Aviv, such as not resubmitting petition against Israel secretive nuclear capability to IAEA.

Western Europe

Political Issues

The EU is not just a collection of countries but an alliance of countries having shared interest. The Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) are one of the interest groupings within the EU urging the bloc to support their energy infrastructure projects for the next budget year.

France's expulsion of Roma is creating a crack within the EU as members are widely unhappy with the expulsion. The saga also brought forward certain forgotten episodes of the Nazi's atrocity as regard the massacre of Roma, though only Jew persecutions have always been highlighted. The matter has escalated across the Atlantic, U.S American lawmakers also showing discontentment towards the French discriminatory policies. Paris of course was not silent and comfortable with the tirade thrown, that regardless of its EU membership French integrity must not be insulted.

Sweden's center-right government heads into Sunday's election with a commanding lead in the polls, boosted by popular tax cuts and healthy public finances that stand out in debt-ridden Europe. The election will show another defeat for the Social Democrats.

Defending the policy of reaching out to the neglected emerging economies, the British government holds that economic ties will not becloud its fight against human right violation. The new government tends to keep a balance and stay clear from accusation

levied on previous government for taking flexible stance on human right violation in lieu of economic benefits.

Economic Issues

The new EU findings which states that senior lobbyists profit from expanding EU's projects and even earn much as more than EU senior officials will justify the clamour by certain angle of the EU that the bloc's expenditures should be cut. This can also bring back home similar argument in Washington that role of lobbyists should be reduce in politics.

As Pakistan gets enlisted into EU new strategic partners, it makes the protracted issue of Generalised System of Preferences Plus scheme, which offers a reduced-tariff regime in return for democratic reform commitments in 2014 and accessibility of Pakistan into EU market much easier. Protectionism is one factor for which Pakistan's name was previously objected.

The EU also reached a compromise on South Korea after overcoming reservations of EU car makers. The deal opens EU car market to Seoul and expected to enter into force on 1 July 2011.

The general cut on government spending across Europe is having a great impact on the entire economy. In the UK, defense spending is being critically examined amid a fear that such slash might endanger British military strength and influence.

Greek streets are witnessing another round of protests as government intensifies reform effort aim at stabilizing and opening up the receded economy. If Athens continues to play by IMF's rules, the financial borrower will not hesitate to approve more loan as part of the bail out package.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Leaked report from the French Interior ministry is reported to have contradicted the position of government that expulsion of Roma was not premeditated and purposeful. Despite the international condemnation, French rightists are supporting Sarkozy on the issue.

French Senate passed the bill banning veil in the public with a heavy fine for violators of the law. Before the law will go into force, the Constitutional Council will need to examine its legality. Though the bill receives appreciable support and believes to be officializing the growing Islamophobia.

As the Roma saga divides the EU, the less address issue is the economic status of the Roma that for long have been EU discriminated ethnic group even in their homeland like Romania and Bulgaria. Life abroad for some Roma is better than living in the homeland where life is not bearable.

Amid a wide spread animosity for the Catholic Church and slight protest for the papal's London visit. Pope Benedict XVI mustered the courage to publicly denounce as shameful the scandal that rocked the Church he is leading.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

The UN Food and Agricultural Organization's report records a drop in the number of hungry people in the world. The development owes to the fall in food prices, though the organization does not fence the reality that an estimated 925 million people are undernourished worldwide.

Investing in renewable resources and reducing emission of greenhouse gas are important energy on EU table. The coal resource countries want subsidies for their sector to be extended till 2018, a plea rejected by EU climate change countries.

Geostrategic Issues

Afghanistan elections this time around will be conducted with the aid of EU sponsored women security forces in order to ensure adequate women participation and general election good conduct. The effort was part of EU €35 million election-support budget for Afghanistan.

The designation of six new developing countries as 'strategic partners' of Europe is an indication that the bloc is waking up to the growing influence these countries irrespective of their location. Egypt, Israel, Indonesia, Pakistan, Ukraine and South Korea are the new 'strategic partners' to join the EU's existing nine partners.

Southeast Europe

Political Issues

The criminal and judiciary system of Bulgaria and Romania have again come under EU radar. As EU members, their systems are still lagging behind and Brussels expects both countries to intensify reform effort in that regard.

The pressure of junior coalition partner has forced the major Albanian ruling party to agree to cabinet reshuffling and has been approved by the parliament. Meanwhile President Topi urges the judiciary not to sit on the fence but to become active in resolving the conflict between ruling and opposition parties.

October 3rd elections will be a decisive date for voters in Bosnia, but the apathy of youth and women is big concern for political parties, taking advantage of the internet to woo voters' participation.

The recent property law passed by Serb entity parliament will further make other ethnic Bosnians question the intentions of Republika Srpska's (RS). Republika Srpska's

(RS) parliament adopted a Law on State Property, which stipulates that the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) entity will manage, secure and protect all forms of property within its territory; the law is rejected by Bosniaks as contradictory to the Dayton Peace Accords.

Nine years after the last census, Macedonia will have another population count by April next year, a process to be monitored by EUROSTAT.

Ethnic politics continues to polarize Macedonians, while majority of Macedonians want to join the EU and NATO but not at the cost of their identity, ethnic Macedonian Albanians want the government to sacrifice whatever it takes to secure their membership of EU. The name dispute between Macedonia and Greece has been one of the deadlocks for Macedonia-EU talks.

Serbian opposition parties are gearing up for a bigger alliance that could force the government into going for an election. Politics in Serbia has always been around Serb identity, issue of Kosovo and EU integration.

Economic Issues

Romanian civil servants have planned to launch a large strike action against massive unemployment in the country and pension cut.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

War criminals are facing justice across the region as governments are pulling all strings to ensure that ills of the past do not go unaddressed. Meanwhile Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov broke his silence as he referred to the expulsion of Roma from France as un-normal, violating European spirit.

Food, Environment and Energy Issue

Geostrategic Issues

Athens is taking seriously the murder of a Greek in Albania, Greece has warned Tirana to protect Greek minority otherwise its EU accession talks could see a roadblock as it is the case with Macedonia. Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha urges Athens not to walk that path.

Prospective talks between Kosovo and Serbia has divided the country, although around 60% of a surveyed group wants the talk. Pristina believes it should be under the auspices of UN, U.S and EU and rejects discussing Kosovo's independence. Meanwhile NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen urged Alliance members not to be too fast with scaling down troops in Kosovo, because Pristina's ability to manage security is still in the making.

European Commission is preparing report on Serbia's readiness for the EU amid all diplomatic crises surrounding Belgrade. Meanwhile, Austria parliament has signaled to ratify the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with Serbia by the end of the year.

Oceania

Political Issues

Labour party is not ready to lose the support of its coalition partners (green and independent parties) therefore increasing tax for the powerful mining sector is out of the question. Attempt to increase tax for the sector was instrumental for the fall of ex-PM Kevin Rudd. Meanwhile, opposition party has vowed to shatter the newly formed coalition government.

Economic Issues

A merger of Rio and BHP is a threat for Asian and European steelmakers. The two mining giants have been negotiating a joint venture; the possibility of such venture will be determined by The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) decision, which is still pending.

Australia's third largest export country is India and as trade surplus between the two records around \$14.5 billion US in 2009, the importance of New Delhi to Canberra cannot be downplayed. Reserve Bank of Australia notes that China's economy should not be allowed to over cloud the importance of India.

Social/Humanitarian Issue

Victorian Supreme Court in Melbourne hosted five Muslim men charged with attempt to commit act of terror. The action of men was reported to be a reaction to attack of Muslim states of Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the presiding judge state, the court is only to prosecute the men for the charges and nothing to do with Islam.

Professor Ray Norris is making attempt to increase the status of Australian aborigine as world first astronomers through his profound study of the ancient recorded tradition of the neglected community of Australia.

Report Details

US/Canada

WASHINGTON – Congressional Democrats are confronting deep divisions in their nervous ranks over whether to support President Barack Obama's plan to raise taxes on the wealthiest Americans — or just punt the entire matter until after voters go to the polls Nov. 2. Democratic leaders committed to Obama's proposal were to hear

Wednesday from endangered lawmakers who fear that raising taxes on anyone in a weak economy could be politically lethal. "Don't raise taxes in a recession," said Rep. Earl Pomeroy, D-N.D. Democratic leaders refused to say whether they were open to changing Obama's plan, or even commit to a vote before the balloting seven weeks off. Instead, they called House Democrats together Tuesday night to discuss a poll showing that extending tax cuts for middle-income earners was a winning strategy for the party. Not everyone was convinced. A group of moderate and conservative House Democrats was collecting signatures on a letter calling for Democratic leaders to offer a bill extending tax cuts for all Americans. Broad tax cuts passed during the George W. Bush administration are due to expire at the end of the year.

Outside groups supporting Republican candidates in House and Senate races across the country have been swamping their Democratic-leaning counterparts on television since early August as the midterm election season has begun heating up. Driving the disparity in the ad wars has been an array of Republican-oriented organizations that are set up so they can accept donations of unlimited size from individuals and corporations without having to disclose them. The situation raises the possibility that a relatively small cadre of deep-pocketed donors, unknown to the general public, is shaping the battle for Congress in the early going. The yawning gap in independent interest group spending is alarming some Democratic officials, who argue that it amounts to an effort on the part of wealthy Republican donors, as well as corporate interests, newly emboldened by regulatory changes, to buy the election. "While each of our campaigns has the resources they need to be competitive, we now face shadow groups putting their thumbs on the scale with undisclosed, unlimited and unregulated donations," said Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, chairman of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. As the primary season ends this week and the general election begins in earnest, the nightmare for the Democrats is that this is just the beginning. Tracking by Democratic media buyers, in fact, shows that other large chunks of television time have been set aside in the coming weeks in key House races by more Republican-leaning groups. The snapshot of early television spending would seem to be a fulfillment of Democrats' worst fears after the Supreme Court's ruling in the Citizens United case in January that lifted a ban on direct corporate spending on political campaigns.

WASHINGTON — The House Republican leader, John A. Boehner, on Sunday opened the door to a compromise on the contentious issue of the Bush-era tax cuts, saying he would vote to maintain lower rates for families earning less than \$250,000 even if President Obama and Democrats insisted on ending the cuts for wealthier Americans. With Congress returning to Washington this week, Mr. Boehner's decision is likely to reframe both the final intense weeks on Capitol Hill before the elections and the fall campaign, in which embattled Democrats have planned to paint Republicans as obstructionists favoring the rich over the middle class. Mr. Obama in recent days has lambasted Congressional Republicans — at times singling out Mr. Boehner by name — for threatening to block an extension of the tax cuts for more than 97 percent of Americans to preserve lower rates for "millionaires." And Democratic party leaders had been planning to use the tax fight to help rally their base. "If the only option I have is to

vote for some of those tax reductions, I'll vote for them," Mr. Boehner said in an interview on "Face the Nation" on CBS, during which the host, Bob Schieffer, pointedly asked whether Republicans would hold the tax breaks for most Americans "hostage" to keep the lower rates for the wealthy. The Bush-era tax cuts are due to expire on Dec. 31 and have become a major issue in a midterm campaign dominated by voter anger over the weak economy and concerns about the nation's rising debt. Policymakers face a difficult choice: to continue the tax cuts in a bid to appease constituents and perhaps spur economic growth, or let the rates expire as a way to raise revenue and help reduce the deficit. Mr. Obama insists the nation can no longer afford tax breaks for the wealthy, while Republicans say any tax increase is a grave mistake.

WASHINGTON — The Senate Republican leader proposed legislation on Monday to continue all of the Bush-era tax cuts indefinitely, testing the willingness of Democrats to allow a tax increase on the wealthiest Americans in a weak economy and making clear that a partisan fight will extend deep into the campaign season if not beyond. The proposal by the Senate leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, came a day after the House Republican leader, John A. Boehner of Ohio, suggested a potential compromise, saying he would vote for President Obama's plan to extend the cuts only for households earning less than \$250,000 if he had no other choice. In part, Mr. McConnell's proposal illustrated the greater leverage that Republicans enjoy in the Senate, where they control 41 seats — enough to filibuster and block any bill. While Mr. Boehner cannot stop House Democrats from forcing a vote on the president's favored tax plan, Mr. McConnell made clear that he would have a say and that he wanted to put a handful of wavering Senate Democrats on the spot. But Mr. McConnell's position also served as a political counterweight to Mr. Boehner's statement on Sunday, which suggested that some Republicans wanted to avoid a brawl in which they would be cast as blocking tax relief for the middle class to ensure that tax cuts continued for the wealthy. Senate Republicans, by contrast, seem to relish the fight. Democrats immediately dismissed Mr. McConnell's plan, noting that he had not offered any way to make up the \$700 billion in lost revenue over 10 years that extending the tax breaks at the highest income levels would cost the government.

DES MOINES — The Republican presidential field for 2012 is beginning to take shape in a period of intensive upheaval set off by the rise of the Tea Party movement, expanding the roster of potential candidates but presenting a more complicated road to the nomination. The opportunities and pitfalls were on full display Friday — in some ways a kickoff to the Republican contest — as no fewer than six possible contenders made appearances in Washington and, in one especially closely watched case, here in Iowa, the first stop on the path to the White House. At least as many more Republicans are already taking steps to test candidacies of their own. At a gathering of conservatives called the Values Voter Summit in the capital, Mitt Romney hewed closely to the issues of small government and low taxes that have driven Tea Party members this year, suggesting the Obama administration's economic policies are "one reason they will serve only one term." Mr. Romney, who has assiduously courted conservative support since his unsuccessful campaign in 2008, mocked those who once declared Republicans an "endangered species." But the political spotlight on Friday truly belonged to former Gov.

Sarah Palin of Alaska, whose keynote speech at the party's annual Ronald Reagan dinner here set off a new round of "will she, won't she?" speculation that has made it hard for other potential candidates to find their place in the growing field. Ms. Palin was coy about her intentions, jokingly recalling that her husband, Todd, urged her to skip an afternoon jog to avoid headlines like "Palin in Iowa, decides to run." She did not mention her political future, but delivered a sharp critique of party leaders who have been skeptical of some winning Tea Party candidates. "We can't blow it, G.O.P., but we won't wait for that political playbook to be handed to us from on high from the political elites. We won't do that," Ms. Palin said, speaking over applause. She added, "It may take some renegades to get us there. It may take folks shaking things up to get us there." The Iowa debut of Ms. Palin did not go u.

Republicans are heading into the general election phase of the midterm campaign backed by two powerful currents: the highest proportion of voters in two decades say it is time for their own member of Congress to be replaced, and Americans are expressing widespread dissatisfaction with President Obama's leadership. But the latest New York Times/CBS News poll also finds that while voters rate the performance of Democrats negatively, they view Republicans as even worse, providing a potential opening for Democrats to make a last-ditch case for keeping their hold on power. The poll represents a snapshot of the country's political mood as the campaign pivots from primary contests that have revealed deep divisions among Republicans into the general election, where the parties deliver their competing arguments to a wider audience. The findings suggest that there are opportunities and vulnerabilities for both parties as they proceed into the final seven weeks of the campaign. A case for Republicans: Voters are remarkably open to change, even if they are not sure where Republicans will lead them. Most Americans, including one-third of those in the coalition that elected Mr. Obama, now say he does not have a clear plan to solve the nation's problems or create jobs. Democrats remain highly vulnerable on the economy. A case for Democrats: They are seen as having better ideas for solving the country's problems. The public steadfastly supports the president's proposal to let tax cuts expire for the wealthiest Americans. And far more people still blame Wall Street and the Bush administration than blame Mr. Obama for the country's economic problems. Voters have a darker view of Congressional Republicans than of Democrats, with 63 percent disapproving of Democrats and 73 percent disapproving of Republicans. But with less than two months remaining until Election Day, there are few signs that Democrats have made gains persuading Americans that they should keep control of Congress.

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama's popular support has softened at home, but he still has plenty of fans in Europe, a poll released Wednesday found. More than three-quarters of those polled in 11 European Union countries said they approve of Obama's handling of international policies, compared with just over half of Americans having that view. The annual survey was conducted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, a nonpartisan policy institution that promotes trans-Atlantic cooperation, and the Compagnia di San Paolo, a research center in Turin, Italy. The poll found that Europeans were not as enthusiastic about some of Obama's specific policies, with just under half approving the U.S. president's handling of Afghanistan and Iran. Obama's

approval ratings did dip slightly in Europe from last year's poll, from 83 percent to 78 percent. Obama found the most approval in Portugal, at 88 percent. His approval took a serious hit in Turkey, falling from 50 percent to 28 percent. Obama's dropping popularity at home has much to do with his failure to deliver a strong economic recovery and is likely to lead to sharp losses for his Democratic Party in November's congressional and state elections. For Europeans, Obama may remain a welcome contrast to his predecessor, President George W. Bush, who was unpopular in much of Europe.

NEW YORK – A proposed Islamic center near ground zero is slowly being embraced by some Muslims who initially were indifferent about the plan, partly in response to a sense that their faith is under attack. A summit of U.S. Muslim organizations is planned for Saturday and Sunday in New York City to address both the project and a rise in anti-Muslim sentiments and rhetoric that has accompanied the nationwide debate over the project. It has yet to be seen whether the groups will emerge with a firm stand on the proposed community center, dubbed Park51. The primary purpose of the meeting is to talk about ways to combat religious bigotry. But Shaik Ubaid of the Islamic Leadership Council of Metropolitan New York, one of the groups organizing the gathering, said he has a growing sense that some American Muslims who initially had trepidation are now throwing their support behind the plan. "Once it became a rallying cry for extremists, we had no choice but to stand with Feisal (Abdul) Rauf," he said, referring to the New York City imam who has been leading the drive for the center. Groups scheduled to participate in the summit include the Islamic Society of North America, the Islamic Circle of North America, the Muslim Alliance of North America and the Council on American-Islamic Relations. Gauging support for the center among U.S. Muslims is difficult. As a group, they are diverse, ranging from blacks who found the faith during the civil rights movement to recent immigrants hailing from opposite ends of the globe. They rarely speak with one voice. Yet after a pastor in Florida injected himself into the debate by threatening to burn copies of the Quran, U.S. Muslims stirred. "I think most Muslims outside New York City are more concerned about the backlash than the actual center, which most of them will never directly benefit from," said Shahed Amanullah, the editor-in-chief of the website altmuslim.com and a group of other Islam-themed sites.

SAN BRUNO, Calif. – The tragic explosion of a gas pipeline in a San Francisco suburb has shed light on a problem usually kept underground: Communities have expanded over pipes built decades earlier when no one lived there. Utilities have been under pressure for years to better inspect and replace aging gas pipes — many of them laid years before sprawling communities were erected around them — that now are at risk of leaking or erupting. But the effort has fallen short. Critics say the regulatory system is ripe for problems because the government largely leaves it up to the companies to do inspections, and utilities are reluctant to spend the money necessary to properly fix and replace decrepit pipelines. "If this was the FAA and air travel we were talking about, I wouldn't get on a plane," said Rick Kessler, a former congressional staffer specializing in pipeline safety issues who now works for the Pipeline Safety Trust, an advocacy group based in Bellingham, Wash. Investigators are still trying to figure out how the pipeline in San Bruno ruptured and ignited a gigantic fireball that torched one home after another in

the neighborhood, killing at least four people. Pacific Gas & Electric Co., the pipeline's owner, said Monday it has set aside up to \$100 million to help residents recover. Experts say the California disaster epitomizes the risks that communities face with old gas lines. The pipe was more than 50 years old — right around the life expectancy for steel pipes. It was part of a transmission line that in one section had an "unacceptably high" risk of failure. And it was in a densely populated area. The blast was the latest warning sign in a series of deadly infrastructure failures in recent years, including a bridge collapse in Minneapolis and a steam pipe explosion that tore open a Manhattan street in 2007. The steam pipe that ruptured was more than 80 years old.

LOS ANGELES — A ballot initiative to suspend a milestone California law curbing greenhouse gas emissions is drawing a wave of contributions from out-of-state oil companies, raising concerns among conservationists as it emerges as a test of public support for potentially costly environmental measures during tough economic times. Charles and David Koch, the billionaires from Kansas who have played a prominent role in financing the Tea Party movement, donated \$1 million to the campaign to suspend the Global Warming Solutions Act, which was passed four years ago, and signaled that they were prepared to invest more in the cause. With their contribution, proponents of the proposition have raised \$8.2 million, with \$7.9 million coming from energy companies, most of them out of state. This latest embrace by the Koch brothers of a conservative cause jolted environmental leaders who are worried that a vote against the law in this state — with its long history of environmental activism — would amount to a powerful setback for emission control efforts in Washington and statehouses across the country. “It would have big implications,” said George P. Shultz, the former secretary of state, who is a chairman of a campaign to defeat the ballot initiative. “That is one reason why these outside companies are pouring money in to try to derail the same thing. At the same time, the reverse is true: they put this fat in the fire and if we win, that also sends a message.”

NEW ORLEANS — Crews pumped cement into BP's blown-out oil well thousands of feet below the sea bottom Saturday, working to finally seal the runaway well. Engineers initially had planned to pump in mud before the cement, but a BP spokesman said that wasn't necessary because there was no pressure building inside the well. BP expects the well will be completely sealed — and declared permanently dead — sometime Saturday, five months after the catastrophe began April 20, when an explosion killed 11 workers, sank a drilling rig and led to the worst offshore oil spill in U.S. history. The cement couldn't be pumped in until a relief well drill nearly 2.5 miles beneath the floor of the Gulf intersected the blown-out well, which happened Thursday. The relief well was the 41st successful drilling attempt by John Wright, a contractor who led the team drilling the relief well aboard the Development Driller III vessel. Wright, who has never missed his target, told The Associated Press in August that he was looking forward to finishing the well and celebrating with a cigar and a quiet getaway with his wife.

WASHINGTON — President Obama is preparing to seek Congressional approval for a huge arms sale to Saudi Arabia, chiefly intended as a building block for Middle East regional defenses to box in Iran, according to administration and Pentagon officials. The advanced jet fighters and helicopters for Saudi Arabia, long a leading customer for these

weapons, could become the largest arms deal in American history, and one significant enough to shift the region's balance of power over the course of a decade. The key element of the sale would be scores of new F-15 combat aircraft, along with more than 175 attack and troop-transport helicopters and, if subsequent negotiations are successful, ships and antimissile defenses. The deal has been put together in quiet consultations with Israel, which has sought assurances that it will retain its technological edge over Saudi forces, even as Saudi Arabia improves its ability to face down a shared rival, the Iranians. "We want Iran to understand that its nuclear program is not getting them leverage over their neighbors, that they are not getting an advantage," a senior administration official said Friday, describing the Saudi sale as part of a broader regional strategy in which the United States has bolstered antimissile defenses in Arab states along the Persian Gulf. "We want the Iranians to know that every time they think they will gain, they will actually lose." Though the timing appears coincidental, Congress will likely be formally notified of the proposed sale in the coming days, during a visit to the United States by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran. Mr. Ahmadinejad has used his annual visit to address the United Nations General Assembly as a moment to denounce the United States and proclaim that Iran's nuclear program is entirely peaceful, though this month international weapons inspectors said they had been stonewalled on important questions about Iranian work on warhead designs. When the arms sale plan is formally sent to Congress, that will start a 30-day clock for it to consider the issue. There is little question it will go forward — the administration is already talking about how many jobs it will create in Congressional districts around the country — but several members of Congress have already expressed reservations about whether it would erode Israel's military edge.

WASHINGTON — Senior State Department and American military officials are deeply divided over the pace and scale of military aid to Yemen, which is emerging as a crucial testing ground for the Obama administration's approach to countering the threat from Al Qaeda. A package would aim to strengthen Yemeni forces, like these in Sana Province last year, so they can counter the Qaeda threat. As the terrorism network's Yemen branch threatens new attacks on the United States, the United States Central Command has proposed supplying Yemen with \$1.2 billion in military equipment and training over the next six years, a significant escalation on a front in the campaign against terrorism, which has largely been hidden from public view. The aid would include automatic weapons, coastal patrol boats, transport planes and helicopters, as well as tools and spare parts. Training could expand to allow American logistical advisers to accompany Yemeni troops in some noncombat roles. Opponents, though, fear American weapons could be used against political enemies of President Ali Abdullah Saleh and provoke a backlash that could further destabilize the volatile, impoverished country. The debate is unfolding as the administration reassesses how and when to use American missiles against suspected terrorists in Yemen following a botched strike in May. That attack, the fourth since December by the American military, killed a provincial deputy governor and set off tribal unrest.

OTTAWA (Reuters) – The Conservatives, who suffered a series of political reverses over the summer, have recovered slightly but only enjoy a narrow lead in popular support over their main rivals, according to a poll released on Thursday. The

regular Ekos survey for the Canadian Broadcasting Corp put the Conservatives at 32.4 percent support, up from 29.4 percent two weeks ago. The official opposition Liberals were at 28.9 percent, down from 29.1 percent. The results indicate neither party would have much chance of a clear win in an election now. Under Canada's first-past-the-post electoral system, a party needs to win around 36 percent of the vote to create a viable minority government. The Conservatives -- who do not have a majority in Parliament -- enjoyed an 11-point lead going into the summer before running into trouble, particularly over a decision to scrap the mandatory long-form census. Government ministers say they are confident the opposition will not bring them down in the new session of Parliament, which resumes on Monday. The Ekos automated telephone survey of 1,513 people was conducted between Sept 8 and 14 and is considered accurate to within 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

VANCOUVER (Reuters) – British Columbia's unpopular agreement to merge its provincial sales tax with Canada's federal goods and services tax was legal, a judge ruled on Friday. The ruling rejected claims by opponents of the harmonized sales tax (HST) that the provincial government failed to get needed legislative approval to make the surprise deal with Ottawa last year. The province merged its 7 percent provincial sales tax with the federal 5 percent tax, creating a new 12 percent HST that took effect in July and generally follows Ottawa's rules on exemptions. Supporters say the new system will keep companies competitive with rivals in other provinces, such as Ontario, that have adopted an HST with Ottawa. But opponents say it shifts more of the tax burden to consumers and small businesses, and the debate has gutted the popularity of British Columbia Premier Gordon Campbell and his center-right Liberal Party. Voters will decide whether to repeal the tax in a referendum scheduled for next year. In upholding the tax agreement's constitutionality, British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Robert Bauman said he was not passing judgment on the HST's merits. "That burden of proof is for others to bear and the electorate to test," he wrote. Campbell faces a party leadership review in November. He says he plans to stay on, but there have been calls from some Liberal supporters for him to step down.

Western Europe

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - EU foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton has indicated that Egypt, Israel, Indonesia, Pakistan, Ukraine and South Korea could join the EU's existing list of privileged or "strategic" partners. Ms Ashton put forward the new names in a powerpoint presentation at a meeting of EU leaders and foreign ministers in Brussels on Thursday (16 September). The roll-call of six countries ended with a "..." to indicate that the club remains open to other up-and-coming powers, an EU diplomatic source said. The same powerpoint presentation listed Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, South Africa and the US as the set of existing strategic partners. The term "strategic partner" is ill-defined in EU usage. In practice, it means boosting a foreign country's diplomatic status and organising summits and extra minister-level and expert-level meetings. But it can also be taken to mean an alternative to fully-fledged EU membership. "It's like love - no one can define it. You only know what it is when you experience it," the EU diplomatic contact added. Another diplomat remarked that the

term had been thought up a few years ago "without anyone ever really defining what it meant and whether, indeed, the others regard us as their strategic partners." Ms Ashton's list has no official status and was put forward as part of a general brainstorming session on how to make the EU more effective on the world stage. But it has the potential to stir controversy. EU plans to upgrade EU relations with Israel were put on hold after its attack on Gaza in 2009. Asked by reporters after the meeting if Ms Ashton plans to unfreeze the upgrade, she said: "There's no discussions at the moment with Israel." In the case of Ukraine, inclusion on the list could be taken as a sign that EU accession is not an option. The omission of Turkey could be good news for its EU bid. Speaking at the post-summit press conference, EU Council President Herman Van Rompuy said a rethink of EU foreign policy is needed in the wake of the 2009 Copenhagen climate change conference, where the US clinched a deal with developing countries while the EU was out of the room. "The perception is that the EU was sidelined," he said. "We have started to realise how the economic strength of developing countries is transforming into real political power." EU commission president Jose Manuel Barroso said: "Even the biggest one of the member states is not as big as any one of our strategic partners."

The so-called Visegrad countries - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia - have in a joint letter to EU energy commissioner Gunther Oettinger on Tuesday (14 September) called for Brussels' support on a series of energy infrastructure projects. The wishlist outlines transition routes which they hope could become priority projects for the EU when deciding its next financial mechanism for transition networks in 2011. The discussion about a potential new energy financial instrument for funding the schemes "should cover all potential sources ... including the instruments of the [EU budget's] cohesion policy," the letter, quoted by Polish press agency, says. At present, the EU is co-funding some gas and electricity infrastructure investments to plug funding gaps arising from the financial crisis. Under standard circumstances the EU can pay part of the money needed to finance feasibility studies, but not the actual building work. The Visegrad countries hope that formal EU prioritisation of the projects would also attract more private investors and make bank loans cheaper to obtain. The Visegrad states also met in Brussels on Thursday morning to co-ordinate their national positions ahead of the broader EU27-level summit later in the day. The breakfast meeting was attended by EU Council President Herman Van Rompuy. "Visegrad has always been a stable part of an integration process, but it is also a group which historically has common interests," Slovak Prime Minister Iveta Radicova said after the meeting.

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - Senior lobbyists working in Brussels can command larger salaries than the European officials they are paid to stalk, according to a new study on pay in the EU capital. A secretary-general of one of the many trade associations represented in Brussels can top this €400k figure, while the head of an EU NGO office rarely gets paid more than €120,000 a year, said the report which is largely based on 200 one-to-one interviews. "With up to 80 percent of legislation in certain policy areas emanating from Brussels and an expanded EU of 27 countries, most interest groups are scaling up their representation in the capital of Europe," said Ben Atfield, co-founder of E&A. "This trend is leading to very attractive remuneration for senior lobbyists and communication professionals which often dwarf salaries in national

capitals," he added. Mr Altfield cautioned that varying levels of taxation complicated the matter, with most single workers in Brussels being forced to pay Belgium's extremely high top income tax rate of 57 percent, once social security is taken into account. Special rules for EU officials mean some pay as little as eight percent however. Most MEPs get paid roughly €126,000 per year under the current set of rules, brought in after elections in June 2009.

EUOBSERVER /BRUSSELS - The EU has invested hundreds of thousands of euros and top-level diplomatic energy into trying to get more women involved in this weekend's elections in Afghanistan. A significant part of the EU's total €35 million election-support budget was spent on training up to 6,000 women security officers to search fellow women voters as they enter gender-segregated polling stations on Saturday (17 September). A chunk of the budget was already spent on supporting last year's poll, which was declared invalid due to widespread fraud. EU diplomats helped negotiate in direct talks with President Hamid Karzai to set aside 68 out of the 249 seats in parliament for women candidates only. Under election rules, if a female candidate is not elected in a gender-allocated seat she must be replaced by a female candidate from another district instead of a man. The recently-installed EU Special Representative (EUSR) in Afghanistan, Vygaudas Usackas, told EUobserver in an interview that EU foreign relations chief Catherine Ashton and the US State Department's Hilary Clinton worked out the plan after meeting the leaders of Afghani women's groups at the Kabul Conference in July. Mr Usackas then followed-up with Mr Karzai in person to help put the EU and US' "red lines" in place. "We asked him to ensure that women have a proper representation," the former Lithuanian foreign minister said. "The participation of women voters will probably vary depending on the part of the country. I think there will be much fewer women coming out to vote in the south. But it will be better in the north," he added. The EU election budget also helped to pay for setting-up polling booths, training extra male security staff, printing voting cards and putting in place a seven-person-strong team of EU observers who will make electoral reform proposals after the poll.

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - The European Union on Thursday endorsed proposals to offer a substantial new trade pact to Pakistan in the wake of the country's disastrous floods, overcoming objections from a handful of EU states who worried their textile industries could be hurt by such a move. The bloc is to offer the Asian nation increased market access to the EU for certain imports "to be implemented as soon as possible" and offer the country participation in the bloc's Generalised System of Preferences Plus scheme, which offers a reduced-tariff regime in return for democratic reform commitments in 2014. EU premiers and presidents meeting in Brussels managed to reach a compromise that laid to rest fears of France, Italy, Poland and Portugal that their textile trade, also one of Pakistan's major exports, could be damaged. The new language agreed stresses that the tariff holiday be offered "exclusively" to Pakistan, overcoming concerns that some options on the table would also have had to be offered to China and India. Additionally, the the market access would be offered on a "time-limited" basis to "key imports". The debate now shifts to what time-limited means and what items will be on the list of key imports. The French back an offering of just one year while the British take the wording to mean until 2014, when the GSP Plus scheme kicks in.

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - EU member states have clinched a compromise on the provisional application of a free trade agreement with South Korea, giving Italy an additional six months to prepare its auto industry for the opening-up of the EU market. "It is a very big step in opening markets in Asia for our companies and this will create prosperity and jobs, of course in Korea, but also in Europe," Belgian foreign minister Steven Vanackere said on Thursday (16 September) during a press conference in Brussels. EU foreign ministers agreed that the deal should enter into force on 1 July 2011, provided that the European Parliament gives its consent to the package, which includes a safeguard clause on protecting vulnerable European companies. The deal, described by Mr Vanackere as the "first new generation style agreement" and "the most ambitious [EU trade] agreement ever," is to be signed during an EU-South Korea summit in Brussels on 6 October. The Belgian diplomat added that the Korean side would have preferred an earlier date for entry into force and described the July 2011 outcome as a result of "intense negotiations" between member states. Italy had in recent days threatened to veto the deal if it stuck its original terms of entry into force at the beginning of next year.

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS – EU energy commissioner Guenther Oettinger sees a "realistic chance" for the EU to extend the deadline for coal subsidies from 2014 to 2018, a move the German politician is pushing for after having let Berlin down during negotiations in Brussels. Germany had lost the subsidies battle in July, when Mr Oettinger, much to the anger of Chancellor Angela Merkel, missed a key meeting in the college of commissioners where a decision on the matter was taken. Along with Spain, also home to a number of large coal mines, Germany had tried to extend a special subsidy regime for one last time until 2023, with 2018 eyed as final compromise. But an alliance of commissioners led by climate change czar Connie Hedegaard managed to counter Jose Manuel Barroso's attempt to fudge the issue and the deadline was set for 2014. Speaking on Wednesday (15 September) at a conference organised by German energy giant RWE, Mr Oettinger suggested a new compromise was still possible. The deadline could be extended to 2018, provided Germany reviews its coal mine policy this year instead of 2012 and vows to really put an end to the subsidies in 2018. "If there is a credible end [to the subsidy policy], then Germany could still get an extension," Mr Oettinger said.

VIENNA – Barack Obama's top nuclear envoy warned Arab ambassadors Wednesday that they risk contributing to a failure of Mideast talks if they use an upcoming meeting in Vienna to pressure Israel over its nuclear program, diplomats said. They told The Associated Press that Gary Samore, Obama's top adviser on nuclear issues, delivered that message at a closed meeting with Arab ambassadors accredited to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Three diplomats accredited to the International Atomic Energy Agency agreed to discuss the confidential meeting on condition of anonymity. Arab nations plan to introduce a resolution urging Israel to open its nuclear program to international perusal at an agency conference next week. That resolution narrowly passed at last year's annual conference of 151 nations, further increasing Mideast tensions. One of the diplomats said that — although Samore was attending this week's 35-nation IAEA board meeting — his main focus in Vienna was to persuade the Arab nations not to resubmit the resolution at the annual IAEA conference next week,

reflecting the priority attached to the issue by the Obama administration. Israel is commonly assumed to have nuclear arms but declines to discuss its status. The annually recurring row in Vienna over its nuclear program has assumed greater significance than usual against the backdrop of renewed Israel-Palestinian peace talks and the threat by the Palestinians to walk out of the talks if Israel resumes construction of settlements on the West Bank. One of the diplomats said Samore was also lobbying other IAEA nations to gather as many opponents of the vote as possible, should the Arabs go ahead and submit the resolution. Another said Arab representatives at the closed meeting told Samore they would have to consult on higher levels before making any decision. Two diplomats said Samore also warned that continued pressure on Israel could doom chances of a planned 2012 conference on a Mideast nuclear-free zone, as proposed by the U.N.'s 189-nation Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty conference earlier this year.

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - The French-EU row over Roma deportations has sent ripples all the way to Washington, where some US officials have urged Paris to stop the expulsions and respect the human rights of this ethnic minority. "Obviously the human rights of the Roma is something that is important to us and we would encourage France and other countries to respect the human rights of the Roma," said the official under the protection of anonymity, AFP reports. His comments were echoed by two congressmen chairing the so-called Helsinki Commission, an independent US agency dealing with security, democracy and human rights in Europe. France should stop playing a "shell game" with Roma and abandon discriminatory laws targeting Muslims, said the two chairs, Democratic congressman Alcee L. Hastings and his Democratic colleague Benjamin L. Cardin. Mr Hastings drew parallels between the inflammatory rhetoric surrounding the proposed Islamic cultural centre near Ground Zero and France's expulsion of Roma and adoption of laws targeting Muslims. The French Senate on Tuesday passed a law banning the wearing of burqas, the full-body covering worn by some Muslim women and other face coverings. The law is to take effect in six months, pending approval by the country's constitutional council. "I perceive such actions as wrong-headed political manoeuvres, particularly the discriminatory policy of targeting Roma for expulsion, and I would argue that there is a danger to politicians, the media, and the public focusing only on these issues," Mr Hastings said. "France, and other countries, should focus on integrating Roma where they are," he added. Meanwhile, in Paris, several human rights organisations have announced their intention to take the minister of interior to court for "racial discrimination, along with the authors of the leaked instructions issued on 5 August on how to target Roma "with priority."

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - An infuriated, defensive Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, on Thursday (16 September) played down a "violent" clash with European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso over the issue of Roma expulsions during an EU summit, with his shouting reportedly heard at the other end of the corridor. "If there was one person in the room that remained calm, it was me," Mr Sarkozy later claimed during a press briefing, denying reports from officials that his exchange with Mr Barroso had been "violent." According to EU sources, Mr Sarkozy's "yelling" during the EU leaders' meeting was widely heard as he attempted to, in his words, "defend the honour of France." Speaking in front of cameras, Mr Sarkozy blamed justice

commissioner Viviane Reding and her "deeply shocking" and "insulting" comments made on Tuesday that likened his Roma deportation policy to that of France's pro-Nazi regime in the Second World War. He denied having "any problem" with Mr Barroso, but in the same breath reminded the Portuguese politician that he had last year supported him in his efforts to win a second term as chief of the EU commission. "I appreciated the fact that Mr Barroso distanced himself from Ms Reding, but I am the president and cannot allow my country to be insulted." In a lengthy discourse on what he said was a non-discriminatory crackdown on Roma camps and expulsion of irregular migrants and EU citizens, Mr Sarkozy said he had no intention of bringing a halt to his policies, as it was the "duty" of his government to uphold the rule of law and public order. The document that had caused the uproar, giving instructions to police to target Roma camps "with priority," was allegedly signed by a minor official from the ministry of interior, he said, and had been "immediately withdrawn" when Mr Sarkozy found out about it, one month later.

EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - Weighing into the bitter European Union debate over the Roma, the bloc's social affairs chief, Laszlo Andor, uniquely among his commission colleagues, has come to the defence of vice-president Viviane Reding's comparison of France's expulsions to the horrors that befell the continent during World War II. Although most leaders defended the commission's right to investigate France for a breach of EU law, almost uniformly, they have said Ms Reding went too far when she said: "This is a situation I had thought Europe would not have to witness again after the Second World War." But Mr Andor, Hungary's representative in the commission, and by some degree its most left-wing member, has said her comparison is historically accurate and he "totally" supports all her words. He is frustrated that much of the discourse over the past few days both by politicians and in the media has assumed that Ms Reding had likened French treatment of Roma with that of Jews, forgetting that for many gypsies, the Holocaust is also known as "O Baro Porrajmos," or the Great Devouring. "Europe must not forget that the Roma suffered a great loss of lives during the Holocaust," he told Spanish daily La Razon on Thursday. This aspect of the Holocaust is infrequently recalled, and has not featured in much of the debate in the past few weeks. Some 250,000 gypsies died during the Porrajmos, a Romani term for the Holocaust, Mr Andor reminded the paper. While no government is massacring Roma, the commissioner noted that the round-ups and destruction of the camps themselves have very strong echoes within the community of the round-ups that took place across Europe 70 years ago.

PARIS, France -- An internal letter issued this summer by the French Interior Ministry was leaked to the media Saturday (September 11th) and appears to contradict recent government statements insisting that its controversial expulsions of illegal immigrants did not target the Roma. The note, sent to prefects in the beginning of August, said that "within three months, 300 illegal camps are to be dismantled, predominantly those of the Roma." Just last Thursday, Immigration Minister Eric Besson said the crackdown did not specifically target Roma. "The treatment given these people has no connection with their real or supposed membership of the Roma community," Besson said, amid growing international criticism against the expulsion of hundreds of Roma to their homelands: Bulgaria and Romania. On Friday, French President Nicolas

Sarkozy spoke by phone with Romanian counterpart Traian Basescu. They agreed "to provide an efficient response to the problem posed by the integration of the Roma", Sarkozy's office announced.

PARIS – President Nicolas Sarkozy's office fired back Wednesday at European Commission criticism of France's crackdown on Gypsies, or Roma, saying some of the complaints are unacceptable. A day earlier, EU Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding called France's expulsions of Roma to Eastern Europe "a disgrace" — something she had thought Europe would not have to witness again after World War II. The exchange heightened tensions between France and the European Union a day before a summit of EU leaders Thursday in Brussels. Sarkozy's office said the issue of the Roma was not on the agenda for talks. French authorities have recently dismantled more than 100 illegal camps and sent home more than 1,000 Roma, mainly back to Romania, in a crackdown that has drawn international condemnation. Sarkozy has called Roma camps sources of crime such as illegal trafficking and child exploitation. A senior official at the presidential palace said France doesn't want an argument with the commission but "some of the comments are simply unacceptable." He declined to be named, in line with office policy. After a Cabinet meeting, government spokesman Luc Chatel also objected to Reding's remarks, saying, "It is unacceptable to compare the situation today with a tragic period in our history."

PARIS – The French Senate on Tuesday overwhelmingly passed a bill banning the burqa-style Islamic veil on public streets and other places, a measure that affects less than 2,000 women but that has been widely seen as a symbolic defense of French values. The Senate voted 246 to 1 in favor of the bill in a final step toward making the ban a law — though it now must pass muster with France's constitutional watchdog. The bill was overwhelmingly passed in July in the lower house, the National Assembly. Many Muslims believe the legislation is one more blow to France's No. 2 religion, and risks raising the level of Islamophobia in a country where mosques, like synagogues, are sporadic targets of hate. However, the law's many proponents say it will preserve the nation's values, including its secular foundations and a notion of fraternity that is contrary to those who hide their faces. In an attempt to head off any legal challenges over arguments it tramples on religious and other freedoms, the leaders of both parliamentary houses said they had asked a special body to ensure it passes constitutional muster. The Constitutional Council has one month to rule. The bill is worded to trip safely through legal minefields. For instance, the words "women," "Muslim" and "veil" are not even mentioned in any of its seven articles. "This law was the object of long and complex debates," the Senate president, Gerard Larcher, and National Assembly head Bernard Accoyer said in a joint statement announcing their move. They said they want to be certain there is "no uncertainty" about its conforming to the constitution. France would be the first European country to pass such a law, though others, notably neighboring Belgium, are considering laws against face-covering veils, seen as conflicting with the local culture. "Our duty concerning such fundamental principles of our society is to speak with one voice," said Justice Minister Michele Alliot-Marie, opening a less than 5-hour-long debate ahead of the vote.

LONDON – Pope Benedict XVI said Saturday he was ashamed of the "unspeakable" sexual abuse of children by priests, telling the British faithful during Mass in Westminster Cathedral that he was deeply sorry and hoped the church's humiliation would help victims heal. Benedict also said he hoped the church would be able to use its contrition to purify itself of the "sins" of its ministers and renew its commitment to educating the young. Benedict addressed the abuse scandal head-on during his homily, which was broadcast live on British television, a day after six people were arrested in an alleged terrorist plot against him. They remained in custody Saturday. The sex abuse scandal has clouded Benedict's four-day state visit to this deeply secular nation with a centuries-old history of anti-Catholic sentiment. Polls have indicated widespread dissatisfaction in Britain with the way Benedict has handled the crisis, with Catholics nearly as critical of him as the rest of the population. Anger over the abuse scandal runs high in Britain in part because of the enormous scale of the abuse in neighboring Ireland, where government reports have detailed systematic abuse of children at church-run schools and cover-up on the part of church authorities. The pontiff issued his comments in the seat of English Catholicism amid indications he would meet with British abuse victims, and as abuse survivors and others opposed to his visit prepared a march Saturday afternoon in London's Hyde Park to demand more accountability.

STOCKHOLM – Sweden's center-right government heads into Sunday's election with a commanding lead in the polls, boosted by popular tax cuts and healthy public finances that stand out in debt-ridden Europe. But Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt's chances of a historic re-election don't only depend on defeating the opposition bloc led by the Social Democrats, who have lost their dominance of politics in the Scandinavian welfare state. Reinfeldt's four-party coalition must also survive a challenge by a small anti-immigration party, which hopes to play a kingmaker role by winning enough votes to deny either side a majority in Parliament. "Those who like Sweden do not vote for the Sweden Democrats," Reinfeldt said in the west-coast city of Goteborg. He urged voters to keep the party out of Parliament to ensure his alliance can maintain its majority. The Sweden Democrats demand sharp cuts to immigration and have called Islam Sweden's biggest foreign threat since World War II. Both blocs have ruled out relying on the support of the party, saying it represents xenophobic views that counter Sweden's tradition of tolerance. The Sweden Democrats say the other parties have been reluctant to discuss problems with the integration of immigrants, which make up 14 percent of Sweden's population of 9.4 million.

LONDON – Bank of England Governor Mervyn King is to face a potentially unfriendly audience as he addresses a conference of trade union leaders. King is to speak to the annual gathering of the country's main union federation, the Trades Union Congress, on Wednesday. King is also expected to answer questions on topics ranging from unpaid taxes to bank bonuses. Bob Crow, the general secretary of the Rail Maritime and Transport union, intends to boycott the speech, saying King "is on the side of the bosses — he is not welcome here." Public and Commercial Services union general secretary Mark Serwotka says he "would not have invited him, but now that he is coming we intend to make sure he answers questions from representatives of ordinary working people."

LONDON – Foreign Secretary William Hague said Wednesday that Britain will defend human rights across the globe, even as it seeks to woo trading partners with sometimes questionable records. In a major policy speech, Hague said efforts to spur Britain's economic recovery by bolstering ties to India, China and others won't lead to a timid stance from diplomats in confronting abuses. Prime Minister David Cameron recently visited New Delhi and Turkey to pitch for new trade. He has also identified the Gulf Arab states and China as important future allies. Rights groups have raised concerns about the conduct of governments in those regions, citing torture and executions in China and restrictions on freedom of expression in Turkey. "We will raise our concerns about human rights wherever and whenever they arise, including with countries with whom we are seeking closer ties," Hague said, speaking at London's Lincoln's Inn — a legal center dating back to at least the 15th century. Alongside the war in Afghanistan, Cameron and Hague have made trade a priority for the new government's foreign service, and appointed a former business department official as the ministry's chief diplomat.

LONDON – Crucial decisions on the future of British defense policy and its nuclear weapons capability are being rushed, kept behind closed doors and could be riddled with mistakes, lawmakers said Wednesday. Ministers and military officials are finalizing a major overhaul of the country's armed forces, aimed at making deep cuts to the defense budget as the government seeks to slash the national debt. The review, to be published before the end of the year, will consider whether projects including a 20-billion-pound (\$32-billion) upgrade to Britain's nuclear submarine fleet, can go ahead as planned. Experts believe that about 30,000 of Britain's 175,000 armed forces personnel are likely to be cut under the review, and that one of two new aircraft carriers, being built at a cost of 5 billion pounds (\$8 billion), could be mothballed. Britain's new government announced in May it would conclude a defense review before the end of the year and handed responsibility for decision making to a newly formed national security council. Parliament's defense select committee said in a report the process was being rushed because of the need for urgent spending cuts, and that the public and defense industry had not been adequately consulted. "The rapidity with which the strategic defense and security review process is being undertaken is quite startling...", legislators said in their report. "We conclude that mistakes will be made and some of them may be serious." The review is the first to overhaul military strategy since 1998 and was initially announced by the previous government in February. The process is intended to provide an analysis of the looming threats to Britain, and to consider the country's role in the wider world.

ROME – The number of chronically hungry people in the world dipped considerably below the 1 billion mark — the first drop in 15 years — thanks partly to a fall in food prices after spikes that sparked rioting a few years ago, U.N. agencies said Tuesday. Still, an estimated 925 million people are undernourished worldwide, and the latest figures don't reflect the repercussions from the massive flooding in Pakistan. The Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization's report suggested some progress in the battle to end hunger, but stressed the world is far from achieving the U.N. promoted Millennium Development Goal of reducing the proportion of undernourished people in developing countries to 10 percent by 2015. The report estimated there are 98 million fewer chronically hungry people than in 2009, when the figure just topped 1 billion.

That's partly because food prices have fallen from the peaks in 2007-2008, when they sparked violence in several developing countries, and because cereal and rice harvests have been strong. Cereal production this year was the third-highest ever recorded, despite a drought-fueled wheat shortfall in Russia, said FAO director-general Jacques Diouf. Also heartening, Diouf noted, is that cereal stocks are high -- some 100 million tons more than the low levels of 2007-2008, when some 38 countries shut down their food export markets in reaction. Increased demand for biofuels and soaring petroleum prices took much of the blame for the spiraling upward prices then. Food prices are still "stubbornly" high, but "we haven't seen the type of behavior panic buying" that helped feed the speculation and fears of a couple of years ago, said Josette Sheeran, the executive director of the U.N. World Food Program.

THESSALONIKI, Greece -- Prime Minister George Papandreou said in his annual speech on economic policy Saturday (September 11th) that the government is fighting for Greece's survival. "Either we win or we sink together," Papandreou told a commercial fair in Thessaloniki. Papandreou stressed that the government will proceed with reforms and will liberalise economic sectors, such as electricity production and transport. During his speech, an angry man, later identified as a respected cancer specialist, threw his shoe at the prime minister. Immediately arrested, he was later released. Meanwhile, about 20,000 people attended protest marches held in Thessaloniki against the government's austerity measures. Several hundred youths tried to break a cordon of police, who used tear gas to disperse them after clashes that lasted several minutes near the fair. Lorry drivers also joined the protest, announcing the launch of a new strike Monday against proposed changes to the transport sector. In other news, the IMF approved the second tranche Friday of the 110 billion-euro aid package for Greece. This tranche totals 9 billion euros: 2.5 billion from the IMF and 6.5 billion from the EU.

ATHENS, Greece -- Truck owners parked hundreds of vehicles along major highways on Monday (September 13th) to protest government plans to open their sector to greater competition. The action caused long queues at gas stations across the country, as motorists feared they may face another fuel shortage similar to the one in July, when a similar protest was held. Back then, the government intervened, requiring fuel truckers to end the protest. Since that remains in force, drivers cannot actually declare a strike. Their union said they will hold daily protests instead. Meanwhile, state railway workers launch a 24-hour strike Tuesday against planned salary and staff cuts in their sector. Prime Minister George Papandreou said on Monday he sympathises with the protestors. "Of course we don't want violence and we need ... to keep this dialogue going so that people feel that we're working together to solve this problem," Papandreou told a conference in Oslo hosted by the IMF and the International Labour Organisation.

ATHENS, Greece -- Prime Minister George Papandreou expressed concern Saturday (September 11th) that nationalistic-inspired acts against the Greek minority in Albania may create serious problems in relations between the two countries. After his annual speech in Thessaloniki regarding the economy, he was asked about a recent incident in Himara. Greece describes it as the ethnically motivated murder of a Greek minority member. Papandreou noted that Greece can attach conditions to Albania's

eventual EU integration if Tirana fails to protect the rights of its Greek minority. "Nationalism has always created great problems," said Papandreou.

Southeast Europe

BRUSSELS, Belgium - EU foreign ministers urged Bulgaria and Romania on Monday (September 13th) to take urgent action against crime and corruption, and to strengthen judicial transparency and accountability. At a meeting in Brussels, the bloc's top diplomats praised Bulgaria's recent drive to beef up penal reforms and indictments in cases involving high-level corruption and organised crime. At the same time, however, they warned of "important deficiencies" in court procedures and inadequate criminal cases on the heels of police work.

As for Romania, the EU foreign ministers said new legal codes due to take effect in October 2011 "will provide an important opportunity for a thorough reform of the Romanian judicial system". On the other hand, Bucharest was criticised for making "little effective progress ... as regards the efficiency of the judiciary process, consistency of jurisprudence and the accountability of the judiciary".

TIRANA, Albania -- Prime Minister Sali Berisha responded on Thursday (September 16th) to a comment by Greek counterpart George Papandreou, regarding protecting the Greek minority in Albania. Following some incidents by nationalists, Papandreou suggested such acts may create serious problems in relations between the two countries, even support for Albania's EU integration. In response, Berisha said on Thursday "I don't think Greece could take a position to block integration, as it has supported all integration processes in the region." He was in Brussels attending a summit of the European People's Party.

TIRANA, Albania -- The government is expected to undergo changes in at least three ministerial posts, given a request Prime Minister Sali Berisha sent to the president's office Monday (September 13th). Triggering it was a request filed six months ago by junior government coalition partner, the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI). Berisha had refused to act any earlier, citing the government's busy schedule. President Bamir Topi will now have to sign a decree giving Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ilir Meta the post of economy ministry, taking over for Dritan Prifti, described by the opposition as the most corrupt member of government. Edmond Haxhinasto, also a member of SMI, will replace Meta as foreign minister. The presidential decree will be sent on to parliament for approval.

TIRANA, Albania -- Parliament adopted a pair of cabinet personnel changes at a session Thursday (September 16th) that was boycotted by the opposition. Both changes involve members of the junior coalition partner Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI). Deputy Prime Minister Ilir Meta moves from foreign minister to minister of economy, telecommunication and energy. He had argued he wanted to spend less time aboard in order to focus on party developments. Edmond Haxhinasto replaces Meta as foreign minister. Prime Minister Sali Berisha proposed the changes earlier this week. Due to the opposition boycott, they were approved by 72 of the 140 lawmakers.

TIRANA, Albania -- President Bamir Topi urged the justice system Wednesday (September 15th) to act as more than a spectator in the heated debate between the two main political parties, the ruling Democratic Party (DP) and the opposition Socialist Party (SP). Topi asked the judiciary to pay attention to corruption accusations levelled by both parties, which have dominated public debate for the past four months. This marks the first time Topi has injected himself into the debate, apart from urging the two sides to start a dialogue to address their differences. Topi's statement came during a meeting of the High Council for Justice in Tirana, where he said he was speaking on behalf of Albanians who want the judiciary to react to accusations at the highest level. He also insisted the justice system should remove every "corrupted and immoral official" from its ranks

As politicians and NGOs seek to mobilise voters and combat apathy, the internet is gaining traction as one campaign tool. Campaigning has shifted to high gear ahead of the October 3rd elections, and a multitude of NGOs are equally fired up to influence voters. Faced with apathy, particularly among the youth, some groups are working hard to get young people energised and engaged. An estimated 50% of this demographic does not go to the polls. "Youth vote!" and "Women vote!" are some of the many slogans on billboards posted in cities around the country. Video spots featuring actors and other prominent people regularly appear on television, communicating a similar message. Some organisations, such as the Society for Responsible Business in BiH (DOP), say they even plan to organise conferences in which political parties -- particularly youth section representatives -- will address the specific problems facing young people. These will take place "without any political messages or campaigning", said DOP President Kenan Hodzic. Others, like the Alternative Club from Trebinje, are concerned with the ethical aspects of the elections. Club President Blazo Stevanovic has urged the public to report any candidate accused of, or prosecuted for, war crimes or organised criminal activities. "In eastern Herzegovina we have already observed some [candidates] suspected of violating international humanitarian law, as well as charged with severe crimes," Stevanovic said. Analysts have mixed views concerning the role of the NGOs. Sociologist Srdjan Puhalo says the public information campaigns may produce some results but are unlikely to have a major influence. "No one will vote because of a billboard or a video, but because of an organisation with a good reputation that has proved itself through work. There are not many of those NGOs," Puhalo told SETimes.

A move by the Bosnian Serb parliament has been criticised by some in the international community, but entity politicians say they had to do something. On Tuesday (September 14th), Republika Srpska's (RS) parliament adopted a Law on State Property, which stipulates that the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) entity will manage, secure and protect all forms of property within its territory. The law also declares that an entity government can use state property without compensation and give some property to municipalities. State-owned property was temporarily banned from use on the orders of the High Representative in 2005. The RS government proposed this law because the relevant commissions dealing with the division of state property in BiH have been unable to agree since, said Justice Minister Gerard Selman. As expected, Serb and Bosniak parliament members have opposing opinions. The Serbs argue RS has a right as an entity to control its property; Bosniaks argue the law violates the BiH Constitution as well as

the Dayton Peace Accords. "The Bosnian Constitution is clear about all property of the former Socialist Republic of BiH passing on to BiH. That [position] was confirmed by the country's highest judicial institutions. It is one of the foundations of the Dayton Peace Accords, just like the two-entity structure is," collective presidency member Haris Silajdzic said.

SARAJEVO, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) -- An appeals chamber of the Court of BiH upheld on Monday (September 13th) the 17-year sentence of former Bosnian Muslim soldier Suad Kopic for war crimes committed against prisoners of war during the 1992-1995 conflict. Kopic was convicted of war crimes in the western town of Sanski Most in 1995. In other news Monday, the Court of BiH upheld the 25-year sentence of Bosnian Serb wartime commander Novak Djukic for involvement in the May 1995 Tuzla massacre. Djukic was convicted of war crimes against civilians and violating international law and the Geneva Convention. The court found him guilty of ordering an artillery attack on the northeast town of Tuzla that killed 71 people and injured more than 150. At the time, he was a regional commander of the Bosnian Serb army.

SOFIA, Bulgaria -- President Georgi Parvanov broke his silence Wednesday (September 15th) on France's controversial effort to expel thousands of Roma back to Bulgaria and Romania. "I find this group repatriation not normal," said Parvanov, a member of the left-wing Bulgarian Socialist Party. The expulsion policy, he added, does not "set a good European tone". His position contrasts with that of the GERB-led government. In Brussels on Tuesday, Foreign Minister Nikolai Mladenov said Sofia does not view the "repatriation of Bulgarian citizens of Roma descent as a mass deportation and violation of human rights".

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Officials say they are ready for talks with Serbia, but vowed not to discuss Kosovo's status. Deputy Prime Minister Hajredin Kuci said on Monday (September 13th) that parliament must authorise the talks. "Three things are important for Kosovo institutions -- the participants in these talks, topics that will be discussed and the timing of the talks. We will be very constructive and will co-operate with the international community," Kuci said. Prime Minister Hashim Thaci has ruled out including northern Kosovo, while opposition parties say that Kosovo's political status, its territorial integrity and the special status of the north are three topics that are off the table. But newspapers quote unnamed diplomatic sources as saying that the north's issues, such as customs points, courts, and the rule of law, will be part of the dialogue

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- The Vetevendosje (Self-determination) movement says it is opposed to any talks with Serbia and has called for the public to mobilise against them. Movement leader Albin Kurti said on Sunday (September 12th) that new negotiations with Serbia will only aggravate the political situation further and will harm Kosovo's sovereignty. "The very start of these talks contributes to chances of division along ethnic lines in Kosovo," Kurti said, adding that Vetevendosje will focus on implementing UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's six-point plan. It helped reconfigure the international presence in Kosovo but was opposed by Pristina institutions for stretching the responsibilities of Belgrade and Kosovo Serbs enough to dilute the authority of Kosovo

institutions. Kurti also accused Kosovo leaders of agreeing to hold talks without first receiving an apology from Serbia for crimes committed against the Albanian population.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Possible dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade enjoys public support, according to a survey released on Tuesday (September 14th). Around 60% of respondents consider the talks acceptable, according to the NGO Foreign Policy Club. The public favours mediated talks and would prefer to see the United States and the EU share this role. Kosovo Albanians and Serbs agree that the issue of missing persons, freedom of movement, northern Kosovo and the situation of Albanians in Serbia should be covered. They also agree that this process should not include the status issue or division, rather, should stick to the guidelines of former envoy Martti Ahtisaari's package. The poll also found that the best rated leader in Kosovo is Vetevendosje (Self-Determination) Movement's Albin Kurti. As for President Fatmir Sejdiu's view of potential talks, he drew a red line Tuesday regarding Kosovo borders but did not rule out talks on technical issues and issues of public interest.

PRISTINA, Kosovo -- Officials in Pristina say they will not engage in any talks with Belgrade without mediation by the United States. A week after the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that opens the door to talks, no format or timeline has been set. The resolution foresees the EU playing a lead role in facilitating the talks. Deputy Prime Minister Hajredin Kuci said on Thursday (September 16th) that the role of the United States in all Kosovo-related processes is irreplaceable. Opposition representatives also support Washington's role in talks with Belgrade. Officials reiterated however that talks will not include status or territory, rather technical issues of mutual interest.

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen urged Alliance members Thursday (September 16th) to reconsider the pace of their troop reductions from Kosovo, and to avoid unilateral moves. Rasmussen was speaking to journalists after talks in Brussels with Czech Prime Minister Petr Necas. "All partners within KFOR are right now considering a reduction of the military presence â€ The problem is that in total, the reductions seem to be too big, and we have to make sure that even if we scale down we will still have a presence in Kosovo to sufficiently ensure stability and peace," Rasmussen said. Earlier this month, Czech Defence Minister Alexandr Vondra announced that Prague intends to reduce its contingent in Kosovo and boost troops in Afghanistan.

Macedonia expects a hot political autumn as it works to meet the criteria for EU accession. The European Commission will be delivering a report in November that assesses the country's progress in implementing various reforms. These include improvements to the judiciary, public administration, Assembly rules and procedures, and implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Regardless of how much progress Macedonia has made in these areas, the country's name dispute with neighbouring Greece remains a sticking point. Although resolving the issue is not officially a pre-condition for membership, Athens has leverage within the bloc, and several other EU members have backed Greece. "Greece is a member-state, and you are not. Your positions are not equal. The world is not a fair place, especially international

politics," Swedish Ambassador to Macedonia Lars Freden has said. Within Macedonia, public opinion is divided, not only among the political parties, but along ethnic lines.

"Changing the name for EU or NATO membership is out of the question. The politician that would do such a thing would certainly be committing high treason," a 57-year-old Macedonian from Skopje, Boris Kostovski, told *SETimes*.

A survey conducted in July by the Pavel Satev Institute found that 83% of ethnic Macedonian voters would reject a name change for the purpose of Euro-Atlantic integration if a referendum were organised tomorrow. By contrast, slightly more than 73% of ethnic Albanians polled in the survey said they would vote for the change if it meant a smoother path to accession. "We should accept a certain compromise with Greece, because we want to join NATO and the EU. If the name is the only obstacle, then the politicians should find a solution so we can get this thing done," a 38-year-old Albanian from Skopje, Jonuz Berisha, told *SETimes*. An August Eurobarometer poll registered a 6% decline from last year in the number of Macedonians who think EU membership is good for the country. The government insists it is willing to find a solution, but not one that would compromise Macedonia's identity and national interests.

SKOPJE, Macedonia -- Authorities announced plans Sunday (September 12th) to conduct a census of the population and households from April 1st-15th next year. The State Census Commission will organise it, in co-operation with the Statistical Institute. The whole process will be monitored by EUROSTAT. According to a bill parliament will be considering, people would declare their ethnic and religious background, as well as their mother tongue. The census will cost the state about 14m euros. The last one was conducted in 2002

BRUSSELS, Belgium -- Montenegro and the EU signed an agreement Monday (September 13th) on security procedures for exchanging classified information, the foreign ministry announced. After the ceremony involving Montenegro's Aleksandar Andrija Pejovic and the EU's Robert Cooper, the officials noted that the exchange of classified information on common foreign, security and defence policy will be crucial to relations between Montenegro and the EU.

The leaders of the 27 EU member-states agreed during a summit Thursday (September 16th) to sign a free-trade pact with South Korea and to grant trade concessions to help prop up the flood-devastated Pakistani economy. But the one-day meeting in Brussels was overshadowed by a row over France's controversial expulsions of hundreds of Roma migrants to Romania and Bulgaria in recent weeks. Originally, the EU leaders were to focus on foreign policy, economic and trade issues. The thorny question of Roma repatriations was reportedly added to the agenda at the last minute by the bloc's president, Herman Van Rompuy, who chaired the summit. The lunchtime discussion of the issue sparked a lengthy verbal exchange between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and European Commission (EC) President Jose Manuel Barroso.

"Sarkozy made a strong point defending France's position. Jose Manuel Barroso stood up and said he was not happy with the current situation in France. Sarkozy replied in a sharp manner," Reuters quoted an unnamed EU diplomat's account. An estimated 15,000 Roma from Romania, the country with the largest Roma population within the 27-nation bloc,

and Bulgaria currently reside in France. In late July, Sarkozy ordered authorities to clear 300 illegal Roma and traveller camps by the end of October. A total of about 1,000 illegal Roma migrants, mostly Romanian nationals, have since been repatriated in groups to the two Balkan countries.

BUCHAREST, Romania -- About 34,000 public servants will walk off their jobs on September 27th for an indefinite amount of time, trade union leader Sebastian Oprescu told a press conference Tuesday (September 14th), insisting that lower-profile protests against massive lay-offs in the public sector and the 25% wage cuts are pointless. He added that should other unions would join the initiative, the strike could start earlier, on September 22nd, when large street protests are already scheduled. Organisers estimate over 350 public institutions could be significantly affected.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- Future talks between Belgrade and Pristina do not mean that Serbia will recognise Kosovo, Deputy Prime Minister Bozidar Djelic said on Wednesday (September 15th). "For Serbia, the red line is that the talks do not, in any way, mean indirect recognition of Kosovo," he told TV B92. Last week, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling for EU-backed dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina aimed at promoting co-operation. Neither the timing of the talks nor the specific topics are clear. Djelic says neither Serbia nor Kosovo will be able to join the EU unless both first agree on the Kosovo issue.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) is starting talks Monday (September 13th) with other opposition parties aimed ultimately at early elections. The SNS plans talks with New Serbia and with the Socialist movement led by Aleksandar Vulin. SNS official Nikola Selakovic blames the government for failing to meet its promises and for the current economy. New Serbia leader Velimir Ilc voiced expectation that the Democratic Party of Serbia will also join the talks. Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ivica Dacic responded by saying it is natural for the opposition to seek snap elections, but he ruled them out. Serbia's next scheduled general elections are in 2012.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- The EU foreign ministers are expected to instruct the European Commission (EC) on Monday (September 13th) to draft an opinion on Serbia's readiness for EU candidate status. Beta news agency reports that Slovenian Foreign Minister Samuel Zbogar is expected to make the proposal. Serbia has the support of almost all countries in the bloc except for The Netherlands, which still insists that Bosnian Serb wartime leader Ratko Mladic must be arrested first. Germany, Spain and the UK reportedly have expressed strong support for Serbia and insist the country's efforts in harmonising its resolution on Kosovo with the EU should be rewarded. Last week, Belgrade submitted a new resolution on Kosovo to the UN General Assembly, which was adopted unanimously. It was drafted after intense talks with the EU, and it calls for dialogue on practical issues.

BELGRADE, Serbia -- War crimes prosecutor Vladimir Vukcevic announced on Saturday (September 11th) charges have been filed against nine former members of "The Jackals" paramilitary unit, for the brutal killing of over 40 civilians during the 1999 war

in Kosovo. The nine are suspected of committing war crimes against ethnic Albanian civilians in the western Kosovo village of Cuska in May 1999, to drive them from their homes. "The accused [showed] particular brutality, ruthlessness and insensitivity," Vukcevic noted in a statement.

VIENNA, Austria -- Parliament will ratify the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with Serbia by the end of the year, Barbara Prammer, speaker of the lower house, told visiting Serbian counterpart Slavica Djukic-Dejanovic on Tuesday (September 14th). Prammer said her country acknowledges the effort Belgrade has made to harmonise its resolution on Kosovo with the EU, and this will speed up the accession process. So far, five EU member states have ratified the SAA with Serbia: Slovakia, Italy, Spain, Malta and Bulgaria.

Oceania

CANBERRA (Reuters) – Australia's minority government said on Tuesday it will not increase a planned 30 percent resource tax or extend it beyond iron ore and coal mines in order to maintain support from key independent and Greens lawmakers. Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard scraped back into office for a second term last week but must now rely on support from three independents and a Green member of parliament to stay in power after dead heat elections on August 21. The mining tax legislation will be introduced into parliament in early 2011, but it faces uncertainty with the Greens and one independent wanting the tax to include more mines and raise more money and the other independents seeking more debate on details. "We've got no intention of extending it to other commodities or increasing the tax rate. That would be inappropriate, because they clearly were not on the table at the election," Resources Minister Martin Ferguson said. Ferguson said the Labor government would not change key elements of the tax, which it has negotiated with mining heavyweights BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto and Xstrata, and was a major election policy. "As far as we're concerned, we've gone to an election with a proposal. There's an agreement, and our word has to stick," he told Australian television.

SYDNEY (AFP) – Australia's opposition leader Tony Abbott Wednesday threatened to bring down Julia Gillard's fragile minority government, one day after it was sworn in, by persuading independent MPs to support him. Neither leader won an outright majority at August 21 polls but Gillard's ruling Labor party was returned to office after the prime minister managed to broker the support of minority lawmakers. But Abbott said he was determined to lure two rural "kingmaker" independents to his side by convincing them that Labor's planned national broadband Internet network was a mistake -- a move that would smash Gillard's hold on power. "I think that's what we should be doing," Abbott said, when asked whether he would try to persuade the independent MPs to defect. "Exposing the waste and extravagance inherent in the government's broadband plans, that becomes a very real prospect," Abbott told ABC radio. But country independents Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor have said Labor's plan to bring broadband to 93 percent of Australian homes was crucial in winning their support.

SYDNEY (AFP) – Australia's competition regulator Wednesday delayed ruling on BHP Billiton's proposed iron ore joint venture with Rio Tinto after the mining giants

requested more time to talk to foreign officials. "The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) today agreed to a further request by BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto that the ACCC delay making a decision regarding the proposed joint venture," the body said in a statement. The miners wanted the decision held off "until after ... further discussions with overseas regulators" and to make further submissions, the ACCC said. No new date for the ruling was fixed. The Anglo-Australian mining giants want to combine their iron ore operations in Western Australia's Pilbara region in a deal that would see BHP pay Rio 5.8 billion US dollars to level up operations as a 50/50 partnership. Wrangling over the introduction of a so-called "super tax" on mining profits cast some doubt over the deal earlier this year, with BHP warning it could reduce the merger's value. An investigation by the European Union's competition watchdog has also delayed the venture, which is opposed by steelmakers in Asia and Europe. Rio chief Tom Albanese last month hosed down media speculation that it was "dead in the water" and that the miners were trying to find a face-saving way out of the massive deal. The tie-up comes after a hostile takeover bid for Rio by BHP which was dropped in November 2008 due to the global financial crisis. It is expected to deliver savings of up to 10 billion US dollars.

SYDNEY (AFP) – Australia's central bank said Thursday that booming trade with China has overshadowed the importance of India as an equally lucrative market with better long-term prospects. India accounts for about five percent of the world's gross domestic product after a decade of economic reforms, the Reserve Bank of Australia said, adding that the industrialising country's population was expected to rise steadily. "While much attention has been paid to the fact that China has become Australia's largest trading partner, less attention has been paid to the fact that India has also become an important destination for Australia's exports," a quarterly bulletin said. "In 2009, India ranked as Australia's third largest export destination from being 15th in 1999, surpassing Australia's more traditional destinations such as the United Kingdom and the United States." Gold, coal, education and copper were among Australia's top exports to India, while the biggest imports include electrical parts, information technology and pearls and gems, the RBA said. Australia recorded a trade surplus with India of 15.5 billion dollars (14.5 billion US) in 2009, second only to its surplus with long-standing partner Japan. The RBA said the population of India, unlike that of China and other Asian countries, was expected to grow steadily, with the United Nations projecting it would become the world's most populous nation in the next 20 years. "India's long-term economic growth is likely to benefit from a working-age population that is expected to grow until at least the middle of this century, unlike countries such as Japan, South Korea and China," it said.

MELBOURNE (Reuters) – Five Muslim men went on trial before an Australian court on Monday, charged with planning an attack on a Sydney army base last year in retaliation for Australia's involvement in the Afghan war, a prosecutor said. The men, all Australian citizens with Somali and Lebanese background, planned to shoot as many people as possible in the planned suicide raid on the army base, prosecutor Nick Robinson told the Victorian Supreme Court in Melbourne. The men believed that Islam was under attack from nations such as Australia which has troops in Afghanistan, the Australian Associated Press reported Robinson as telling the court. One of the men

travelled to Somalia seeking a fatwa, an Islamic ruling, to sanction the attack as the group could not get one from an Australian sheikh. All five men pleaded not guilty to conspiring to do acts in preparation for, or planning, an attack. The men were arrested in Melbourne in August 2009. Judge Betty King told the jury that the case was not about the religion of Islam, but whether the men were guilty of criminal charges. "The Islamic faith is not on trial. It isn't about being a Muslim," said King.

SYDNEY (AFP) – An Australian study has uncovered signs that the country's ancient Aborigines may have been the world's first stargazers, pre-dating Stonehenge and Egypt's pyramids by thousands of years. Professor Ray Norris said widespread and detailed knowledge of the stars had been passed down through the generations by Aborigines, whose history dates back tens of millennia, in traditional songs and stories. "We know there's lots of stories about the sky: songs, legends, myths," said Norris, an astronomer for Australia's science agency, the Commonwealth Scientific and Research Organization (CSIRO). "We wondered how much further does it go than that. It turns out also people used the sky for navigation, time-keeping, to mark out the seasons, so it's very practical. "People were nomadic so when Pleiades (the Seven Sisters star cluster) was up they would move to where the nuts and berries are. Another sign and it would be time to move to the rivers to fish for barramundi, and so on." Norris, who has studied Aboriginal culture and historical accounts by white settlers, and made several trips to Arnhem Land in Australia's remote Outback, said his research also revealed more detailed astronomical thought. "Clearly some thinker in the past has been sitting down in the bush, watching an eclipse and trying to figure out how it works," he said, giving one example. "Those thoughts are then encoded in the songs and ceremonies. If you take a lunar eclipse, the story in Arnhem Land is it's the Sun Woman and Moon Man making love, and when they make love the body of one covers the other." Norris is now searching for evidence that would put a date on Aboriginal astronomy, such as a rock-carving of a meteor strike or comet. He is confident the Aborigines pre-dated European stargazers, including Britain's astronomy-linked Stonehenge, which is estimated at 3,100 BC, around the age of the Great Pyramid of Giza.