

Hungary PM Sorry for Lies

Gov't Popularity Down 25%

BUDAPEST, Hungary, Sept. 27--Hungary's Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany apologized on Wednesday for the tone of a leaked speech in which he admitted lying about the parlous state of the economy to win April's election.

According to AFP, the leak of the profanity-littered tape triggered violent protests this month and calls for the government of Socialists and Free Democrats to quit. On the tape Gyurcsany said in May that "we lied in the morning, we lied in the evening".

"Of course I am sorry... these were the words of reproach, affection and passion," Gyurcsany told a press conference.

Gyurcsany said he recognized he had lost the people's trust and it would take a long time to regain their confidence, but he insisted plans to



Ferenc Gyurcsany

... In a sense I did not believe in myself either, that I would be able to tell all this," he said.

As a result of the measures, government popularity has plunged to 25 percent from around 40 percent in April and it faces a key test in Sunday's local elections.

The main opposition Fidesz party is portraying these as a referendum on the tax rises and subsidy cuts.

Fidesz has termed the government "illegitimate" and demanded that it resign to be replaced by a government of experts until new elections are held.

Under Hungary's constitution there is no means of changing the government outside of an election unless it resigns or loses four no-confidence votes, and the Socialists and Free Democrats have stood firmly behind Gyurcsany.

cut the budget deficit, which is running at 10.1 percent of gross domestic product, must be implemented.

Since winning the election, the government has reversed tack on economic policy and introduced hefty tax rises and subsidy cuts to rein in the biggest deficit in the European Union.

"I did not believe that voters would understand

Abe to Rewrite Pacifist Constitution

TOKYO, Sept. 27--Japan's new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has begun rewriting the US-imposed pacifist constitution at the top of his agenda,

a move that could lead to a more active military role overseas but alarm neighboring countries, AFP reported.

Abe, who took office Tuesday as Japan's first prime minister born after World War II, has been vague on much of his platform but has passionately vowed to revise the constitution, saying he wanted to "write it with my own hand."

"I belong to the post-World War II generation. The era dominated by the preconceived idea that the constitution should never be changed is over," Abe said during the campaign.

But experts said the process of rewriting the constitution would likely be slow and methodical as Abe seeks to win over skeptics both at home and abroad.

Abe himself turned more cautious as it became certain he would succeed Junichiro Koizumi as prime minister.

In a debate with his rivals Abe said it would take five years to revise the constitution--meaning he would need a second term if he wants to see

through the reforms as premier.

"I think he is being discreet and careful because he is serious about this issue," said Jun Ito, professor of politics at the National Graduate Institute For Policy Studies.

The constitution, which was drafted by US occupiers after militarist Japan's surrender, barred the country forever from maintaining a military or even threatening to use force.

Despite its pacifism and US guarantees to protect Japan, the country now has around 240,000 troops on active duty and an annual military budget of 4.81 trillion yen (\$41.6 billion).

A draft new constitution supported by Koizumi would preserve Japan's official pacifism but acknowledge it has a military--not the "Self-Defense Forces" as it is now known.

Polls show overwhelming public support for revising the constitution, with the main opposition party also in favor, but mixed views on how far to deviate from Japan's official pacifism.

Russia Against Putin Third Term

MOSCOW, Sept. 27--Russia's top election authority on Wednesday threw out a call for a people's poll that would clear the way for President Vladimir Putin to stay on in power, making it more likely he will step down as he plans in 2008.

Putin has said repeatedly he will abide by the constitution that restricts a head of state to serving two consecutive four-year terms in power at any one time, and go in 2008, Reuters said.

But this has not stopped supporters from urging the 53-year-old Putin to stay on and in the latest

such move a group from a southern Russian region formally sought a referendum to get the two-term rule scrapped.

Rejecting the move, Russia's election chief Alexander Veshnyakov said: "None of the members of the Central Election Commission, none of the experts, have any doubts that the question in its present form cannot be used for a referendum."

Pleading the case put by the North Ossetia region, Valery Zigoyev said the referendum would "enable President Putin to continue the reforms

which have begun".

Putin regularly clocks up popularity ratings of 70 percent or more in opinion polls. He has consistently said he will not run for a third term, though he has said he reserves the right to name the person he would like to succeed him.

However, the stakes in who rules Russia have risen enormously under Putin as its economic clout as an energy producer has grown. Many analysts say there is a faction in the Kremlin that would like him to stay on for four more years.

Philippines Rejects Muslim Demand For Land

MANILA, Philippines, Sept. 27--The Philippine government on Wednesday rejected demands by Muslim rebels for control over vast swathes of land as peace talks remained at a standstill, AFP quoted a senior government official as saying.

Chief presidential aide Eduardo Ermita conceded that the talks with the Muslim separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) "are at a stalemate right now on the issue of territory."

Ermita, speaking on the sidelines of a counter-terrorism forum in Manila, said the government simply could not sign an agreement giving up whole villages to the MILF unless those villages were to agree to the move in a plebiscite.

"We will stand pat with our position ... we will follow the constitutional processes," said Ermita, who is the executive secretary to President Gloria Arroyo.

MILF chief negotiator Mohager Iqbal said Wednesday that government negotiators had promised to come up with a new proposal by week's end that could break the impasse.

If the MILF finds the government proposal acceptable, then talks could resume in Kuala Lumpur, he said.

Negotiations stalled earlier this month due to the rebel demand that 1,000 parcels of land on the southern island of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago be set aside as "ancestral domain" under special control of the minority Muslims.

Manila has said it can only give 600 parcels, and that such a move would be subject to Congressional approval.

MILF leaders have threatened that fighting could break out again if this impasse was not resolved soon.

But Ermita dismissed the threat, saying: "They think they can pressure the government. They cannot. We have the armed forces and the police."

He expressed hope that the three-year ceasefire between the MILF and the government would hold, adding that both the Malaysian government and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), which have fostered the peace negotiations, are encouraging both sides to continue the talks.

5 Thai Schools Torched



Thailand firemen try to put out a fire in a school in the largely Muslim southern province of Yala, Thailand, Sept. 26. (AFP Photo)

BANGKOK, Thailand, Sept. 27--Arsonists set five schools on fire in central Thailand, a stronghold of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who was ousted in a military coup last week, Reuters quoted the army as saying on Wednesday.

A military spokesman condemned the attacks, but did not say who was suspected of being behind them.

However, a military officer in the area, who declined to be identified, said he suspected "local politicians who had close

links to national politicians" were responsible.

Three old primary schools built of wood were destroyed in Kampaengpet province, 360 km (220 miles) north of Bangkok, while villagers doused two other fires, soldiers in the areas said.

Arson attacks on schools have been common in more than two years of separatist violence in the Muslim-majority far south as militants see them as symbols of government, but not in other parts of the overwhelmingly Buddhist country.

Polish PM Under Fire



Jaroslaw Kaczynski

WARSAW, Poland, Sept. 27--Poland's prime minister faced calls to resign on Wednesday after television aired what it said were secretly filmed meetings at which his top aide discussed with an opposition MP what she wanted for switching sides.

The ruling conservatives of Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski are trying to build a new majority coalition after ditching their leftist partners. Self-Defense last week in a row over the budget and a decision to send troops to Afghanistan, Reuters said.

They dismissed accusations of wrongdoing and said Kaczynski, who came to power last year vowing to weed out corruption in the ex-communist European Union member, would not step down.

The angry reaction to the television report cast doubt on the conservatives' chances of cobbling together a majority and a small party regarded as possible kingmakers suspended coalition talks.

"Right now the talks about the coalition are suspended," leader Waldemar Pawlak of the Peasants' Party (PSL) said.

"We are waiting for Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski to explain this ... The situation is very serious."

Poland's deepening political crisis follows a anti-government protests in fellow EU newcomer Hungary, sparked by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany's admission he lied to the electorate.

OIC FMs Want Pope to Apologize

UNITED NATIONS, Sept. 27--An organization of 56 Islamic nations pressed Pope Benedict on Tuesday to apologize for his comments linking Muslims and violence, keeping alive a two-week-old controversy, Reuters said.

Foreign ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, or OIC, approved a statement urging the Vatican to "retract or redress" the comments in which the pope cited quotes saying the Muslim faith was spread by violence.

The group issued its statement a day after Pope Benedict assured diplomats from some 20 Muslim nations and the leaders of Italy's Muslim community that he respected them and was committed to dialogue.

It was the fourth time he had tried to make amends, without actually apologizing directly, for his Sept. 12 speech at a university in his native Germany.

Several of the envoys attending the unprecedented meeting at his summer residence south of Rome said they felt it had gone a

long way to help end the controversy. But others said they still thought an apology was in order.

The pope had enraged Muslims by quoting 14th century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus, who said everything the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) brought was evil (such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached).

The OIC statement said Islamic nations' foreign ministers "believe that it is befitting to the Vatican to retract or redress the said

statement, in demonstration of the correct spirit of Christianity in dealing with Islamic issues."

The ministers expressed their "profound regrets" over the remarks and said they feared his language "might engender a situation of tension between the Muslim world and the Vatican, to the detriment of the real interests of the two parties."

The foreign ministers gathered on the sidelines of a meeting of the 192-nation UN General Assembly in New York.

Uganda Rebels Say Peace Talks in Danger

JUBA, Sudan, Sept. 27--Uganda's rebel Lord's Resistance Army warned on Tuesday that government troop movements had placed peace talks in "grave threat and danger" and vowed to walk out unless troops are pulled back, AFP said.

After the first face-to-face meeting between the two sides since a landmark truce took effect last month, the rebels said they would quit the negotiations in the southern Sudanese capital of Juba in a week if action was not taken.

Chief LRA negotiator Martin Ojil said the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF) were preparing to attack rebel fighters at two neutral camps in southern Sudan where they are gathering under the truce, and demanded their withdrawal.

"The Juba peace talks are in grave threat and in danger of failure due to unfolding heavy military in Uganda, southern Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo," he said in a statement.

It said Ugandan soldiers were Ri-Kwanga camp near the DRC border violation of international law.

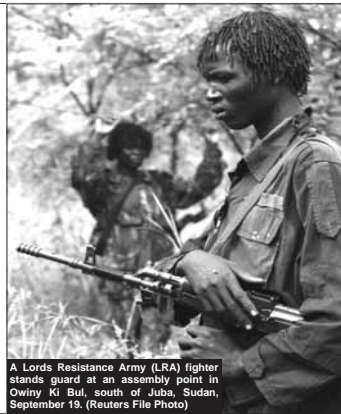
"As a precondition and in order for the negotiations to resume, (the LRA) demands the immediate withdrawal of the UPDF," the statement said.

It added that the LRA would "not proceed with the negotiations" unless that and six other "issues of grave concern"--including the provision of food, water and medicine to the camps--were addressed.

"Before resuming negotiations, (the LRA) shall at the end of seven days review its position on the very grave subjects of this statement," Ojil said.

The Ugandan military has denied deploying soldiers to either of the two sites and accused the rebels of inventing complaints in order to get out of the talks aimed at ending northern Uganda's brutal, two-decade war.

But on Monday, the country's army chief told reporters in the region that the military would begin attacks on LRA fighters at the camps the moment the peace talks failed.



A Lords Resistance Army (LRA) fighter stands guard at an assembly point in Owinyi Ki Bul, south of Juba, Sudan, September 19. (Reuters File Photo)

WORLD News In Brief

Call Denounced

BAGHDAD--Iraqi Sunni and Shiite factions on Wednesday denounced calls by President Jalal Talabani for a long-term US military presence in the country. "We condemn these irresponsible proposals," the Sunni Muslim Scholars' Association said.

More Presence

CANBERRA--Afghanistan could need foreign military support for 10 more years, Australia's military commander warned on Wednesday, as Taliban insurgents intensified fighting against foreign troops in the nation's troubled south.

New Commitment

COLOMBO--The leader of the Tamil Tiger rebels told the Sri Lankan government that he is committed to resuming talks on ending decades of ethnic bloodshed, a minister said Wednesday.

US Envoy Summoned

CARACAS--President Hugo Chavez said Venezuela summoned the US ambassador to the South American nation on Tuesday to protest the detention of its foreign minister at a New York airport over the weekend.