

Johannesburg Violence Claims 12 Lives

Twelve people have been killed in a wave of weekend violence against immigrants around Johannesburg, police said Sunday, with gangs of armed youths rampaging through poor areas in South Africa's economic capital.

President Thabo Mbeki announced that a panel had been set up to look into the xenophobic attacks and the South African Red Cross said it had launched an appeal to help displaced people.

"Since Friday to now there have been 12 murders," provincial police communications director Govind-samy Mariemuthoo told AFP when asked about the troubles, which intensified over the weekend and spread to outlying areas.

Since the beginning of last week, foreigners have been targeted by mobs carrying machetes and guns in several run-down parts of the city despite pleas for calm and widespread condemnation from politicians.



French Students Demonstrate

More than 20,000 French high school students, parents and teachers marched in Paris on Sunday against plans by President Nicolas Sarkozy's government to cut thousands of jobs in education, AFP reported.

"Enough of these fools, who shut factories and shut schools!" chanted the demonstrators, who numbered around 20,000 according to police and 35,000 according to unions. Unions fiercely oppose the government's plans to cut 22,900 civil servant jobs including 11,200 in education this September, and another 35,000 next year, mostly by not replacing retiring employees.

"We are getting no answers in this conflict. The government has to take steps to relaunch talks," said the head of the FSU union, Gerard Aschieri, at the head of the march.

The rally came three days after a major strike in which hundreds of thousands of teachers and civil servants walked off the job in protest and ahead of a fresh public sector strike on Thursday.

Georgia to Vote Under Tensions

Ex-Soviet Georgia will vote in parliamentary elections on Wednesday under the shadow of rising tensions with Moscow and fears of post-election unrest, said AFP.

Polls show pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement is likely to retain its majority in the 150-seat parliament against an opposition fractured by infighting.

But with Saakashvili counting on Western support in an increasingly bitter conflict with Russia, the vote will also be a crucial test of his country's democratic credentials.

Tensions over Russia's support for Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia have reached fever pitch ahead of the election. Saakashvili says the two countries had come close to war.

Diplomats and analysts warn that Wednesday's vote will have to be conducted fairly if Georgia is to get continued Western support in the row.



US Funding Cuban Dissidents

Cuba has documented proof that US officials on the island are delivering private funds to political dissidents in order to undermine the communist government, Cuban officials said Sunday.

Although Cuba has accused US officials of funneling federal funds to dissidents before—a charge Washington has repeatedly denied—Sunday's accusation is the first to suggest American diplomats are acting as couriers to deliver privately donated cash, outside Washington's auditing oversight.

Cuban Foreign Ministry and State Security officials made the accusation in an exclusive interview with The Associated Press ahead of a detailed accusation they plan to outline at a news conference on Monday. They gave no further details.

An official from the US State Department's US Interests Section in Havana declined to comment on Sunday and said authorities at the American mission were unlikely to respond until they had seen a detailed denunciation. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he did not have authorization from Washington to speak with the media.

Trash Crisis in Italy



Rubbish is used to barricade a main street of Fuorigrotta, a large quarter of Naples, on May 19.

A resurgent trash crisis in Naples and squabbling over immigration pose challenges to newly elected Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi as he finalizes a sweeping security and economic reform package, Reuters reported.

Berlusconi is moving his cabinet to the troubled port city of Naples on Wednesday to agree on the reforms, the first major initiative of his conservative government since it came to power last month.

The prime minister promised during the election campaign he would base his government in the southern city instead of the capital Rome to resolve the rubbish crisis.

The package, according to media reports, may include calling in the army to help clear away Naples' garbage and reimposing border checks to stem illegal immigration, despite Italy's membership in the European Union passport-free Schengen Zone.

> Immigration

Berlusconi's attorney, Niccolò Ghedini, complained on Sunday that a bid to make illegal immigration a custodial offense was foiled when a party inside Berlusconi's coalition, the National Alliance, objected.

Ghedini said the cited concerns were that Italy would be seen as "excessively severe in European circles." He said he thought the measure would have been a good deterrent.

"We are very different than other countries ... We're the door to the Mediterranean and we need to defend ourselves."

Europe's leading human rights watchdog and

Spain both expressed concern last week over episodes of xenophobia and violence against immigrants in Italy.

Italian police were forced to evacuate illegal Roma camps in Naples after local people, angry at a suspected baby-snatching incident involving a 17-year-old Roma girl, set fire to Roma shacks repeatedly during the night. Nobody was injured.

Il Giornale newspaper, owned by Berlusconi's brother, cited a survey showing most Italians wanted to expel unemployed Roma, known in Italy as "nomads". Some 66.5 percent also said they favored DNA tests and fingerprinting of all Roma for a census.

Naples, a symbol to many Italians of the country's inability to tackle corruption, organized crime and unemployment, again made headlines on Sunday for its inability to clear rubbish. Residents set pitrid piles of garbage ablaze, some of them blocking streets.

The trash problem - the result of Naples' dumps being full has been blamed on years of weak governance and organized crime.

Berlusconi was expected, according to one media report, to turn to the army to help restore order in Naples and could create secret trash dumps, presumably so citizens won't protest when refuse goes to their neighborhoods.

The trash, and illegal tips of household and hazardous waste run by the local mafia known as the Camorra, are blamed for illnesses in local children and carcinogenic dioxins that were found in buffalo-milk mozzarella cheese earlier this year.

Defense Minister Ignazio La Russa said he also favored calling in the army to join anti-illegal im-

migrant police patrols. He told Il Giornale their experience in foreign peacekeeping missions had prepared them.

"Today the army is professional and has concrete preparation. In Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon policing was carried out in much more difficult situations," La Russa said.

Also on Wednesday, Berlusconi's cabinet is expected to approve tax cuts that were at the heart of his campaign, including eliminating the tax on a primary residence.

> Criticism

Meanwhile, Spain's Socialist government criticized conservative Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi on Sunday over his tough stance on illegal immigrants and disparaging comments over the prominent role of women in the Spanish cabinet.

According to AFP, Spain's Minister for Employment and Immigration, Celestino Corbacho, accused Berlusconi's government of seeking to "criminalize" immigration instead of managing it.

"Berlusconi wants to criminalize those who are different and, I assume, the responsibility of managing the phenomena, which is different," he told reporters during a visit to the western town of Villa Franca de los Barros.

"An illegal immigrant can only have one destiny, which is to return to his country, but before that human rights must be respected," he added.

Italian police arrested hundreds of people last week in a sweep of migrant shantytowns in major urban areas as part of a crackdown on street crime. More than 100 were immediately expelled.

In Focus

American Gun Lobby Prepares For Showdown

The powerful US gun lobby has painted the 2008 presidential race as a showdown over the right to bear arms, but the election could also prove to be a key test of its political firepower, AFP reported.

At its annual meeting in Kentucky this weekend, the National Rifle Association focused most of its energy on gearing up its members to defeat the Democratic nominee in November, whether it is Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton.

NRA leaders warned that both risk eroding gun ownership rights. But their influence is hampered by a tough national climate for Republicans, after eight years of President George W. Bush, and a mixed record on past campaigns.

"Your presence here today will send a very strong message to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton: we're watching," said Chris Cox, executive director of the NRA's Institute for Legislative Action, at the group's leadership forum Friday.

He added that he expects the 6,500 people who attended the forum and the other 4.3 million NRA members to have a "very strong presence at the voting booth" in November.

While the group will not officially endorse a candidate until after the parties' national conventions this summer, it sent strong signals this weekend that likely Republican nominee John McCain would get its backing -- despite some differences with him in the past.

Addressing the NRA conference Friday, McCain sought to highlight his conservative credentials as he courted the gun owners' votes.



Mahathir Quits Ruling Party

Former Malaysian Premier Mahathir Mohamad has quit the ruling party UMNO in protest over the leadership of his successor Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, AFP quoted his son as saying on Monday.

"Mahathir has resigned from UMNO in protest over Pak Lah's continued leadership as both the prime minister and president of UMNO," Makhzani Mahathir told AFP, referring to Abdullah by his nickname.

"He will also write a letter to the UMNO secretary-general to inform him of his resignation," he said, adding that Mahathir announced his departure during a speech Monday in Alor Star, the capital of his home state Kedah.

"He made it clear at the gathering at Alor Star that he is resigning in protest over the current leadership," he said.

Mahathir ruled Malaysia and the dominant United Malays National Organization (UMNO) for 22 years until 2003 when he handed over to Abdullah, his hand-picked successor.

However, in recent times he has been a vocal critic of Abdullah's administration and since disastrous March general elections, which produced UMNO's worst ever results, has actively campaigned for him to step down.

News website 'Malaysiakini' quoted Mahathir as urging all UMNO ministers and party leaders to follow him by quitting the party and return only when Abdullah has departed.

"I will only come back to the party when there is a change in leadership," it quoted him as telling the Alor Star gathering.

"Wait till Abdullah quits as the prime minister and party president and then we can return to UMNO," he reportedly said.