

Russia Still Concerned By US Missile Plan

Russia remains concerned by US missile plans for Europe, but talks are continuing, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said.

"It is premature to say that our concerns have been alleviated as talks have not yielded a satisfactory result," Lavrov told reporters in London, where he attended talks of the Middle East Quartet.

According to RIA Novosti, Lavrov said no progress has been made at talks on Russia's access to the proposed missile base and radar station in Poland and the Czech Republic. But he said the talks were continuing.

Moscow considers Washington's plans to deploy elements of its missile shield in Europe a serious national security threat.

Lavrov said he was somewhat alarmed by US officials' assessments of the agreements reached between the Russian and American leaders in the Black Sea resort of Sochi in early April as a solution to the missile dispute.



Somali Insurgents Warn of Revenge

A US air strike that killed the suspected Al-Qaeda leader in Somalia brought warnings of vengeance from Islamic insurgents and the threat of a boycott that could jeopardize peace talks with the UN-supported government.

According to AP, the biggest alliance supporting Somalia's insurgency said it might pull out of planned May 10 talks on escalating fighting and a humanitarian crisis that has caused thousands of civilian deaths and displaced hundreds of thousands over the past year.

"The US strike can undermine the UN-sponsored peace parlay," said Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, exiled chairman of the Alliance for Liberation and Reconstitution of Somalia.

"We will reconsider taking part ... due to the US military attack," he said in a telephone interview from Cairo, Egypt.

The participation of Ahmed's alliance, which includes both moderates and Islamic hardliners inside Somalia and in exile, is seen as crucial to the success of talks scheduled in neighboring Djibouti.

14 Killed in Sri Lanka

Scattered gun battles and a roadside bomb blast in Sri Lanka's embattled north killed 11 Tamil Tiger rebels and three government soldiers, the military said Saturday.

Sporadic fighting in northern Mannar district killed 10 rebels and two soldiers on Friday. Fifteen insurgents and four troops were also wounded, said a defense ministry official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of government regulations, said AP.

Tamil guerrillas triggered a bomb targeting an army truck in northeastern Welioya region Friday night, killing one soldier. Separately, a gun battle along the front lines in Welioya killed one Tamil rebel and wounded 13 others, four of them soldiers, he said. Rebel spokesman Rasiyah Ilanthirayan was not immediately available for comment Saturday.

It was not possible to independently verify the military's claims because fighting took place deep in the northern jungles where access is restricted.

Both sides commonly exaggerate their enemy's casualties while underplaying their own.



Zimbabwe Results Sparks Global Ire

Zimbabwe came under mounting pressure Saturday after the long-delayed result of a contentious presidential poll showed Morgan Tsvangirai trouncing Robert Mugabe but falling short of an absolute majority, reported AFP.

As Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) rejected the official result showing their leader winning 47.9 percent against Mugabe's 43.2 percent, world capitals called for a credible run-off and an halt to poll violence.

The European Commission spokeswoman underscored the need for "free and fair second round that is conducted in a proper manner."

Canadian Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier called the results of the March 29 presidential vote "contested," and said Tsvangirai had "a clear lead" over Mugabe, in power since 1980 when Zimbabwe gained independence from Britain.

Zimbabwe's electoral commission on Friday said in the absence of an absolute majority by Tsvangirai, there should be a run-off on a date yet to be announced.

Labour Party Loses London City Hall



Successful mayoral candidate, Boris Johnson (r) speaks as former mayor Ken Livingstone listens at London City Hall on May 2.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown suffered a crushing election "bloodbath" Saturday, as his party lost control of London's City Hall on top of its worst poll results for 40 years across the country, AP reported.

London Mayor Ken Livingstone was ousted by maverick conservative Boris Johnson, compounding a day of devastating local ballot results for Brown's Labour Party which augur badly for a general election due within two years.

Some commentators called the poll Brown's "John Major moment"—likening his fate since succeeding Tony Blair last year to that of Major's collapse at the ballot box after succeeding Margaret Thatcher in the 1990s.

Brown admitted that the losses, in local elections in England and Wales as well as the London City Hall race, sent a sobering message.

"This has been a disappointing night, indeed a bad night for Labour," Brown said, linking the effects of the global credit crunch to the centre-left party's defeat.

"We have lessons to learn from that and then we will move forward."

Labour finished third behind the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, the BBC's results showed, 11 years to the day since Brown's predecessor Blair swept into office on a landslide of popularity.

Conservative leader David Cameron said the results were "a very big moment" for his party, while some commentators suggest its strong showing could be a springboard to victory in a general election which must be held by mid-2010.

The front page of London's Evening Standard newspaper read "Bloodbath for Brown," while the Daily Mail called it "Black Friday."

Saturday's newspaper headlines summed it up: "Meltdown for Brown," said the Telegraph; "Brown's long, bloody Friday" from the Guardian; the Independent had "The May Day Massacre;" while the Express simply said "Brown and Out."

The London defeat was the most high profile blow.

Livingstone, famous as "Red Ken" from his far-left days in the Thatcher era, had won international plaudits for his management of the city over the last eight years, including introduction of the pioneering congestion charge.

Six months ago he seemed set for a smooth reelection for a third term—but the surprise candidature of Johnson, an eccentric former journalist and television game show star, electrified the London contest.

A cronyism scandal this spring hit his poll ratings badly, and Johnson's rise was fueled by the growing wave of unpopularity directed at the Labour Party nationally.

The colorful Tory, whose victory was confirmed early Saturday, said in his victory speech that he hoped the result "does show that the conservatives have changed as a party that can again be trusted."

In the wider local polls, held only in England and Wales, the other parts of the United Kingdom operating separate political systems, the Conservatives had a 44 percent projected share of the vote, the Liberal Democrats 25 percent and Labour 24 percent, the BBC said.

With results from all 159 local councils counted, the Conservatives controlled 12 more at 65, Labour lost control of nine to leave 18, and the Liberal Democrats were up one at 12.

Worryingly for Brown, Labour lost seats in key heartlands such as south Wales, while the Conservatives made gains beyond their southern England powerbase.

Senior government ministers insisted Brown was still the best man for the job, in number 10 Downing Street. However, disgruntled backbenchers were more outspoken.

Labour MP Derek Wyatt said: "Gordon has committed spectacular own-goals and the public is punishing him for it."

Fellow backbencher Ian Gibson said Brown was running out of time to prove he could turn things around.

"I'll give him six months to do it or there will be really hard talking," he warned.

News in Brief

Morales:

Let the People Decide

Bolivia's President Evo Morales said Friday that a political battle over demands for autonomy by Bolivia's largest state should be resolved by a nationwide referendum.

The Bolivian president spoke in an interview with The Associated Press less than two days before the eastern state of Santa Cruz votes on a broad declaration of autonomy from Morales' government—a vote the president calls illegal.

Morales said he would consider working some of the state's demands into Bolivia's new constitution if voters nationwide approved.

"If we politicians can't find a way to agree, let the people decide with their vote," Morales said in the interview.

Santa Cruz leaders, who could not immediately be reached for comment on the proposal, want autonomy to keep more of the state's natural gas revenues and shelter their vast plantations and ranches from Morales' plans for land redistribution. The declaration is expected to pass in a landslide.

Morales, the country's first indigenous president, counters that he needs a strong central government to spread Santa Cruz wealth to the rest of South America's poorest country. He has proposed a constitution that would outline a detailed bill of rights and considerable autonomy for the country's 36 indigenous groups. The constitution has yet to go to voters.

Meanwhile, the Organization of American States late Friday expressed support for Bolivia's territorial integrity ahead of an autonomy referendum in the country's biggest province, said AFP.

In a resolution, the OAS Permanent Council rejected "any attempts to disrupt" Bolivia's constitutional order and its territorial integrity.

Bolivia is bracing for a weekend vote on autonomy in the province of Santa Cruz that many fear could send the Latin American nation into violent turmoil.

US-Belarus Diplomatic Spat Escalates

Eleven US diplomats left Belarus on Saturday after being declared persona non grata amid escalating diplomatic tensions between Washington and the ex-Soviet nation, embassy officials said.

Belarus on Wednesday had ordered 10 of the embassy's 11 diplomats to leave the country, giving them 72 hours to comply, AP reported.

All 11 left Saturday, an embassy official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to speak to the media.

The departures leave the embassy with just four US staffers, down from 35 at the start of the year. The US ambassador left in March after Belarus pulled its ambassador from Washington.

The US State Department has warned Belarus it may order the Belarusian Embassy in Washington and the country's consulate in New York closed and shut down the US Embassy in Minsk.

Relations between Washington and Minsk have worsened in recent months, mainly because of US sanctions imposed on a state-controlled oil-processing and chemicals company, Belneftekhim, as well as travel restrictions on Lukashenko and top government officials.