



VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis (L) greets directors, employees with their families, of Cooperative Credit bank of Rome, as he arrives for his meeting in Aula Paolo VI at the Vatican. The pope leaves this Saturday for Cuba, where he will spend four days before arriving in Washington on Sept 22. — AFP

POPE TO DELIVER SPEECHES IN US TRIP IN SPANISH

POPE FRANCIS TO MEET FIDEL CASTRO IN CUBA 'PROBABLE'

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis will deliver only four of the 18 addresses he will make during his forthcoming visit to the United States in English and the rest in his native Spanish, the Vatican said yesterday. The 78-year-old Argentine pope had been practising his English over the summer and had been expected to deliver more of his speeches and homilies in English. But spokesman Father Federico Lombardi told reporters that Francis still felt more comfortable speaking Spanish.

Asked if there was any symbolism in the fact that Francis had chosen to deliver so many speeches in Spanish, the second-most used language in the United States, Lombardi said:

"I don't think that is the intention ... He feels more comfortable (with Spanish). The real reason is the ease of expression and that he will have to make less effort." The pope used English for some

addresses during a trip to Sri Lanka and the Philippines in January but had trouble with his pronunciation. In that trip, he improvised in Spanish while an aide translated into English.

The pope leaves this Saturday for Cuba, where he will spend four days before arriving in Washington on Sept 22. Pope Francis is likely to meet Fidel Castro during his upcoming trip to Cuba, the Vatican said yesterday.

"A meeting with Fidel Castro is probable, even if it is not yet scheduled for a specific time in the programme", spokesman Federico Lombardi told reporters ahead of the pontiff's eight-day trip to Cuba and the United States, which begins Saturday. Fidel's hope to meet the Argentine "was expressed by his brother, President Raul Castro, to the pope when he came to the Vatican in the spring," he said. Francis was widely recognised for

the key role he played in Cuba's reconciliation with the United States this year.

The countries agreed a historic deal in July to re-establish full diplomatic relations, severed at the peak of the Cold War. It would not be the first meeting between Fidel and the head of the Roman Catholic Church: both John Paul II and Benedict XVI travelled to Cuba and met the former leader.

Spokesman Lombardi ruled out a possible meeting during the US-leg of the trip with Russian President Vladimir Putin, brushing off media reports that the pair would meet when the pontiff addresses the United Nations in New York. Lombardi also dismissed concerns over Francis's security, saying the 78-year old pope who loves nothing more than to plunge into the crowds would move around freely during the trip. — Agencies

PUTIN TO HELP TAJIKISTAN AFTER DEADLY GUN BATTLES

DUSHANBE: President Vladimir Putin yesterday said Russia would help Tajikistan ensure stability after gun battles killed more than 20 people this month, stoking fears of Islamist-related unrest in the ex-Soviet state. Putin, on a visit to the Tajik capital Dushanbe, was speaking after gunmen loyal to the country's ex-deputy defence minister clashed with government forces in circumstances that have not been fully explained. Putin said Moscow was worried about a possible spillover of violence from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and other Central Asian states.

"Here in Tajikistan you are confronted with problems, with encroachments and attempts to rock the situation, and I would like to say that you can always count on our assistance and support," Putin told a summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (ODKB), a security body of six ex-Soviet states. Russia's support has long been vital for Tajik President Imomali Rakhmon, the former head of a Soviet state farm who has ruled since 1992 with little tolerance of dissent. Moscow backed his secular government in a 1992-97 civil war against Islamic militants in which tens of thousands were killed. The ODKB, which Rakhmon is chairing this year, is seen by analysts as a regional counterbalance to NATO. It has joint rapid reaction forces set up to combat terrorism, drug trafficking and religious extremism.

Russia dominates the organisation, which also includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Kremlin keeps a

6,000-strong base in Tajikistan and a military air-base in next-door Kyrgyzstan.

Some Russian politicians refer to Central Asia as "Russia's soft underbelly" and Moscow has watched the pullout of NATO troops from Afghanistan with unease. Putin, addressing other ODKB heads of state, said the situation there was deteriorating because of the withdrawal.

"The real threat of terrorist and extremist groups infiltrating the countries neighbouring Afghanistan is rising," he said, in a clear reference to the Central Asian nations of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

Putin said he was also concerned about Russian citizens who had left to fight with Islamic State militants returning home. Moscow would continue to provide military assistance to the Syrian government, he added.

"It's obvious that without the Syrian authorities and the military playing an active role, without the Syrian army fighting Islamic State on the ground, it's impossible to drive terrorists from this country and from the region as a whole," Putin said. In remarks clearly aimed at his critics in the West, Putin said that Russia's support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad had nothing to do with the influx of refugees now flooding the wealthier nations of the European Union. "If Russia had not supported Syria, the situation in this country would have been worse than in Libya, and the flood of refugees would have been even higher," he said. — Reuters



DUSHANBE: Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) shakes hands with his Tajikistan's counterpart Emomali Rakhmon during their meeting in Dushanbe yesterday before a session of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). — AFP

DEBATE LEAVES GREEK NATIONAL ELECTION OUTCOME UNCERTAIN

ATHENS: The outcome of Sunday's Greek national election looks more uncertain than ever after the country's two dominant politicians ruled out working with each other and apparently failed to sway undecided voters in a final televised debate.

Three hours of often lively exchanges on Monday night that were long on rhetoric but short on substance ended with leftist Syriza party leader Alexis Tsipras and his conservative New Democracy rival Vangelis Meimarakis as evenly matched as before the cameras rolled, commentators and other politicians said. "It was a duel of political insignificance," said Stavros Theodorakis, head of the centrist To Potami party, polling around 5 to 6 percent surveys and a potential coalition ally for both Syriza and New Democracy.

"There was a lot of tough-guy talk and aggression, the epitome of constructive ambiguity. I don't think either won. I think both lost."

Prospects of a grand coalition between the parties, hitherto one of several options, faded as Meimarakis said Syriza was welcome to join New Democracy in an alliance but ruled out sharing power with Tsipras. Tsipras had previously dismissed allying with New Democracy.

"Given what the two political leaders have said, a grand coalition seems difficult," said Thomas Gerakis, head political analyst for pollsters Marc, who scored the debate a draw. He said chances of To Potami and the socialist PASOK party, also polling around 5 percent, entering government

had increased. Independent political analyst Theodore Couloumbis also said the "defensive" debate produced no clear winner. He described Tsipras as nervous and took Meimarakis to task for criticising state TV for showing side-by-side images that suggested he is shorter than Tsipras. Meimarakis is in fact a head taller. "That's a bit like taking it out on the referee," Couloumbis said.

Undecided

Voted into office on an anti-austerity platform, Tsipras forced Sunday's election by resigning in August, trying to quell a rebellion in his party and win a stronger mandate to push through austerity measures linked with Greece's third bailout. The final poll before Monday's debate, including the preferences of the undecided voters that make up around 15 percent of the electorate, put both parties on 31.6 percent - well short of the 36.3 percent that took Syriza to power in January.

Pollsters said they expect the first surveys taken after the debate to be published by early Thursday. Greek newspapers were split mostly along party lines, but short on concrete examples of where they thought their man had won.

Independently daily Kathimerini said no clear winner emerged and "both men clashed over everything" from the economy to corruption, the bailout and the refugee crisis - a pithy evaluation of two long-winded and largely negative campaigns. — Reuters



THESSALONIKI: Pedestrians pass posters of left-wing parties in the northern Greek city of Thessaloniki, yesterday. Alexis Tsipras the leader of left-wing party Syriza and former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras called a snap election for Sunday, Sept. 20 after reaching an agreement with eurozone countries for a third bailout, and has clung to a slim lead in opinion polls despite a sharp drop in his approval ratings. — AP

RUSSIA EXTENDS UKRAINIAN PILOT DETENTION BY 6 MONTHS

DONETSK: A Russian court yesterday ruled that a Ukrainian female helicopter pilot held over her alleged role in the killing of two Russian journalists must stay behind bars for another six months as her trial is set to go ahead.

Nadia Savchenko, who is feted for her heroism in Ukraine, faces up to 25 years in prison for her alleged participa-

tion in the killing of the journalists in war-torn eastern Ukraine last year.

Savchenko, 34, has denied the charges and spent more than 80 days on hunger strike to protest her detention. She appeared in court in the southern Russian town of Donetsk on the border with eastern Ukraine for a second preliminary hearing after her lawyers'

request for the trial to be moved to Moscow was denied. During the closed hearing, lawyers asked that she be released from jail during her trial, citing her diplomatic immunity as a Ukrainian delegate to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

"The court did not listen to the defence's reasoning and extended

Savchenko's detention behind bars by six months," her lawyer Mark Feigin told journalists outside court. He said her team would appeal the ruling.

"Any judge or investigator who has a hand in detaining a Parliamentary Assembly delegate becomes a legal target for criminal prosecution," another defence lawyer, Ilya Novikov warned, saying Kiev had already charged those responsible. Savchenko's case concerns two journalists on Russian public broadcaster VGTRK, Igor Kornelyuk and Anton Voloshin, who died in shelling on June 17, 2014, in Ukraine's Lugansk region. Russian prosecutors say Savchenko was involved in her capacity as a volunteer in a Ukrainian battalion. She is accused of monitoring the journalists and directing artillery to fire at them as they filmed at a checkpoint.

Her lawyer Feigin called the journalists' deaths "a dramatic event that happened by chance."

The prosecution also accuses her of illegally crossing the border into Russia without documents, posing as a refugee, before being detained.

Kiev denies this and accuses Russia of kidnapping Savchenko and smuggling her from Ukraine. Savchenko was one of the first Ukrainian women to train as an air force pilot and served in Iraq for six months. The spokesman for the powerful Investigative Committee that oversees major cases, Vladimir Markin said Savchenko "was given all her rights in full and even more than usual."

The court agreed to the request by her defence team for the case to be heard by three judges.

Kiev and the West accuse Russia of sending weapons and troops across the border to help separatists in a conflict that has claimed at least 8,000 lives since April 2014. — AFP



ROSTOV-ON-DON: Russian riot police officers patrol in the court yard in Donetsk, in the Rostov-on-Don region of Russia, yesterday, during the high-profile trial of the 34-year-old Ukrainian airforce helicopter navigator Nadezhda (Nadya) Savchenko. A Russian court yesterday ruled that a Ukrainian female helicopter pilot held over her alleged role in the killing of two Russian journalists must stay behind bars for another six months as her trial is set to go ahead. — AFP

GERMANY ENTITLED TO CUT BENEFITS TO SWEDISH FAMILY

BERLIN: Germany is entitled to cut off unemployment benefits to a Swedish family that came to the country to find work but only held temporary jobs for a short time, a European Union court ruled yesterday.

There has been mounting concern in EU countries, particularly Britain, about perceived abuse of workers' freedom of movement inside the 28-nation bloc and of welfare systems. The European

Court of Justice decision followed its ruling last year that Germany was allowed to refuse jobless benefits to a Romanian immigrant who made no effort to seek work.

In the latest case, a Bosnian-born Swedish national and her three children, who were born in Germany during a previous stay there that ended in 1999, returned to Germany in mid-2010. The mother and eldest daughter

worked in several temporary jobs lasting less than a year and didn't work after that, a court statement said.

From December 2011 to May 2012, the family received benefits for the long-term unemployed and their dependents, until a Berlin job center ended the payments. It argued that they weren't entitled to the benefits "as foreign jobseekers whose right of residence arose solely out of the search for

employment."

The European court ruled that denying citizens of other EU countries some welfare benefits when their right of residence arises only from seeking work "does not contravene the principle of equal treatment." It said countries can refuse such benefits to other EU nationals who haven't yet worked there or who have worked for under a year and then been unemployed for over six

months. "Free movement of citizens comes with rights and obligations," EU spokesman Christian Wigid said. "It is not a right to free access to member states' social security systems."

The British government welcomed the ruling and said it supports its argument that EU nations "should have the freedom to design their own welfare systems without being constantly challenged by the courts." — AP