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ERT off air: Thought for the day

One of the great moments in global radio is BBC Four's "Thought for the Day." Greek state broadcaster ERT is one of many that have adopted the format, giving a couple of minutes of airtime on its Second Program to the great and good musing about faith, current affairs and life in general. One can only wonder, though, exactly what the government's thought for the day was when it decided to shut down ERT and dismiss some 2,700 staff on Tuesday.



There was plenty wrong with ERT, which had long been treated like most other parts of the public sector by successive governments who felt they had supporters to take care of and money to burn. Its 19 regional radio stations speak of an excess

that was simply unsustainable. Thessaloniki, a city with 800,000 inhabitants, had three radio stations when Inner London, which has a population of more than 3 million, has only one.

There was also a lot to cherish about ERT, though. It continued to make challenging documentaries when practically nobody else in Greece did. Its stations played music that nobody else would. Even its insistence on sticking with tinny 80s theme tunes for its news and sports shows had a naive charm about it. Most of all, though, it did the job that all national broadcasters should do by being a common reference point for millions. There are few more emotional experiences one can have listening to the radio than hearing Diaspora Greeks cast to the four corners of the earth calling in to a Saturday night show on the Second Program to request Greek songs and share their memories and feelings about the homeland they left behind.

There was certainly no such sentimentality in the government's decision to announce ERT's closure and pull the plug within a few hours. There was no debate in Parliament, no public discussion and no consent from New Democracy's coalition partners, PASOK and Democratic Left. Instead, a legislative decree was passed to allow ministers to close public enterprises and government spokesman Simos Kedikoglou appeared on TV to inform the public that ERT had become a bottomless pit, absorbing 300 million euros a year in license fees and producing mismanagement and inefficiency rather than good TV and radio programs.

With an unstilted delivery any news anchor would have been proud of, Kedikoglou said all this without acknowledging that it was New Democracy and PASOK that had picked all of ERT's directors in previous ye-ars and stuffed the organization as full of journalists and managers friendly to their particular causes as they could.

ERT is one of many illicit affairs that these two parties would like to sweep under the carpet. How better to do it than to execute the corporation's closure at the same time as the troika is in Athens wondering what happened to the coalition's promise to fire 2,000 civil servants this summer? Greece's lenders, after all, were looking for a "game changer." Which way will the game go though?

The decision to close ERT has apparently come from the top but in making this choice, Prime Minister Antonis Samaras also takes a huge risk. His decision for a "bold" move that would make up for the government's inability to chip away at the civil service by firing offenders and non-performers has ample potential to backfire. It's true that Samaras has stolen a march on his coalition partners, forcing them to put up or shut up in the government's bid to meet troika targets. But is this the best way to ensure the coalition remains intact and functioning? It's also true that Samaras's move shoves SYRIZA center stage, where it will have to show if it possesses the wherewithal to harness whatever anger is created by ERT's closure. But is it really wise to stoke the forces of protest and resistance when they appear to have abated? It's likely that there are Greeks who will interpret shutting down ERT as an indication that the government is willing to confront its challenges head-on. There are others, though, who will feel uncomfortable, even angered, by riot police standing in front of the country's public broadcaster – imagery that conjures up painful memories in a country that lived through a dictatorship in the not-too-distant past.

A lot could ride on whether Greeks genuinely believe this is an attempt to shake up the public sector and shake out its most negative elements. The government says that in the months to come, it will reopen ERT under a new name and with fewer employees. However, will people really trust the parties who created the unstable structure they built over the years to rebuild it as a fairer and more productive edifice? Can they really put their faith in New Democracy, which in 2011 opposed a PASOK plan to re-structure ERT, saying the broadcaster should be safeguarded from such action? There's a thought for the days ahead. **By Nick Malkoutzis.**

Timeless Illusions

By Costas Iordanidis

Turkey is facing a serious crisis – although this is nothing new. Political logic dictates that the end of an authoritarian leader begins the moment he shows signs of moderation and retreat in reaction to any kind of pressure or advice. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is obviously aware of this.

What those banking on his defeat fail to realize, however, is that he has shown flexibility, not toward the Kemalists, but toward the Kurds, in whose areas things remain calm. Abdullah Ocalan is the "informal" partner of the Turkish prime minister,

of the Islamic masses and the discrediting of the old establishment comprising the justice system and the armed forces – something which he systematically planned over the last three years.

What happens within Turkey, however, is not really the point. The question is Greece's ongoing helplessness against a massive Turkey and the undiscussed illusion of an imminent Turkish collapse, which seems to be taking quite a while.

The problem is timeless. When Greeks threw their support behind the Young Turks movement in 1908,



something which cannot be erased given the insignificant numbers of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) members taking part in the protests across the country.

During Ottoman rule, the Kurdish element acted as a shield against Iran's Shiites on the eastern border. Kurds rallied around Mustafa Kemal Ataturk against Greek forces in Asia Minor, though their "services" went unrecognized by the Kemalists once they had prevailed.

Erdogan's strategy against the Kurds has substantially altered the internal balance of power and has proven successful to a great extent, for the time being at least. Keeping this portion of the country – which is highly experienced in warfare – inactive makes the handling of Islamist protesters a complicated, but not impossible, process.

The Turkish premier is pitting the Islamist elite against the hordes of his own supporters, who he is encouraging. His power lies in the support

their hopes were crushed. Following the collapse of the "Megali Idea" in Asia Minor, the myth of a Greek-Turkish friendship between Ataturk and Eleftherios Venizelos was dispelled following the persecution of the Greeks of Istanbul in 1955. Next came the Cyprus invasion in 1974, planned by the Islamist – albeit of Kurdish decent – Bulent Ecevit. Fresh illusions were nurtured following a meeting between Andreas Papandreu and Turgut Ozal in Davos in 1988, while Erdogan's victory over the Kemalists felt like love at first sight.

The farce of illusion every time a new face emerges or exits the Turkish political scene must stop. It's time we realized that whatever change takes place within Turkey will not solve Greece's issues with its neighbor. Greece should not worry about the Kemalists or the Islamists, but about its own inability to act as a structured country.

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PUBLISHER

SOTIRIS REKOUMIS

EDITOR

DENISE REKOUMIS

LAYOUTS

JOHN REKOUMIS

CONTRIBUTORS

DR. STAVROS BASSEAS, JOHN REKOUMIS,
DENISE REKOUMIS, DR JORDAN TSOLAKIDIS,
CHRIS MERENTITIS, CHARLES MOURATIDES

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**180 N. LASALLE ST.
SUITE 1801
CHICAGO, IL. 60611
PHONE: (312)456-8005
FAX:456-8006**

Greek court suspends ERT broadcaster closure

A Greek court has suspended a government order to close state broadcaster ERT - a move that triggered mass protests in the country last week.



The top administrative court said ERT could resume transmission until a new national media body is set up. The ruling came as Prime Minister Antonis Samaras and his coalition allies held crisis talks on the issue.

Mr Samaras, who says ERT is corrupt, had reportedly offered to restart a trimmer version of the broadcaster. Recently the court - the Council of State - upheld Mr Samaras's plan to replace ERT with a new broadcaster later this year but backed the position of the other coalition partners that the signal must be restored in the interim.

It ordered the government to restart ERT broadcasts on a temporary basis.

The case was brought by ERT's union in an attempt to block Mr Samaras's surprise move.

The court's verdict increases pressure on Mr Samaras to row back, reports the BBC's Mark Lowen in Athens.

Each side will claim victory, he

adds, but in the end the unity of the government has been badly weakened.

Mr Samaras had suggested a new, leaner, cheaper broadcaster would be established within weeks and he proposed hiring a small team to produce news programmes in the interim. But his idea was rejected by his two coalition partners - Evangelos Venizelos of Pasok and Fotis Kouvelis of the Demo-

cratic Left.

After the emergency talks ended, Mr Venizelos said they would meet again on Wednesday to discuss a cabinet reshuffle. Mr Kouvelis said all ERT channels must reopen immediately following the court ruling.

The row has threatened to topple the government and force Greece - which is struggling to pay its huge debts - into fresh elections.

ERT workers celebrated outside the broadcaster's headquarters after hearing the court ruling.

"I've been here seven nights and this is the first time I've seen people smile," said reporter Eleni Hrona.

However, our correspondent says there is also the recognition that later this year many will lose their jobs as a new, leaner national broadcaster is formed.

Meanwhile, as coalition leaders went into talks, the main opposition party Syriza held a rally in Athens' Syntagma Square to demand early elections.

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The older you get, the tougher it is to lose weight, because by then your body and your fat have gotten to be really good friends.
The easiest way to find something lost around the house is to buy a replacement.
He who hesitates is probably right.
Did you ever notice: The Roman Numerals for forty (40) are XL.
If you can smile when things go wrong, you have someone in mind to blame.
The sole purpose of a child’s middle name is so he can tell when he’s really in trouble.
Did you ever notice: When you put the 2 words ‘The’ and ‘IRS’ together it spells ‘Theirs...’
Aging: Eventually you will reach a point when you stop lying about your age and start bragging about it.
Some people try to turn back their odometers. Not me, I want people to know ‘why’ I look this way.
I’ve traveled a long way and some of the roads weren’t paved.
When you are dissatisfied and would like to go back to your youth, think of Algebra.
You know you are getting old when everything either dries up or leaks.
One of the many things no one tells you about aging is that it is such a nice change from being young.
Ah, being young is beautiful, but being old is comfortable.
Lord, Keep your arm around my shoulder and your hand over my mouth.
AMEN!

EU and US 'in biggest trade deal'

UK Prime Minister David Cameron has announced plans for what could be "the biggest bilateral trade deal in history" between the EU and the US. He announced the start of formal negotiations on a trade deal worth hundreds of billions of pounds, aimed at boosting exports and driving growth.

Mr Cameron said a successful agreement would have a greater impact than all other world trade deals put together. The talks were announced ahead of the G8 summit in Northern Ireland.

US President Barack Obama said the first round of negotiations would take place in Washington in July. They aim to conclude by the end of 2014.

The French have already expressed misgivings about parts of the trade deal. They are worried that if they cannot protect their film industry from Hollywood's dominance, their unique artistic culture will be undermined.

After intense talks with other EU countries last week, it seems the French have persuaded the negotiators to honour what they call a cultural exclusion. That leaves the way open for other sectors to say they are also exceptional and should not be included in the trade deal.

The French claim the Americans want to exclude financial services from the free trade negotiations. The Americans have not acknowledged that publicly but it is a reminder that behind closed doors the discussions might be very difficult.

Mr Obama said he was confident of reaching an agreement. "There are going to be sensitivities on both sides... but if we can look beyond the narrow concerns to stay focused on the big picture... I'm hopeful we can achieve [a deal]."

'Once in a generation'

Mr Cameron said the deal could be worth £100bn to the EU economy, £80bn to the US and £85bn to the rest of the world. He said the pact could create two million jobs, and lead to more choice and lower prices in shops. "This is a once-in-a-generation prize and we are determined to seize it," said Mr Cameron.

European Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso. who will lead the negotiations with President Obama, said that integrating the EU and US economies would not be easy but "we will find convincing answers to legitimate concerns".

"We'll find solutions to thorny issues, we'll keep our eyes on the prize and we will succeed," he said.

Herman Van Rompuy, the president of the European Council, said: "Together Europe and the United States are the backbone of the world economy. Opening up that space further for opportunities for business and consumers is simply common sense."

The trade talks had been under threat from a potential veto from France, but on Friday EU ministers agreed to French demands to exclude the film and television industry from the talks. Obama: "I'm hopeful we can achieve... high standard comprehensive agreement"

Some had argued that omitting the media business from the trade talks even before they had begun could prompt the US to seek exemptions for other sectors.

Possible hurdles?

The timeframe for the talks to conclude - 18 months - may surprise some, given that similar trade deals in the past have involved years of negotiations.

The formal launch of the talks has been on the cards for some time. Free trade between the US and the EU has been under discussion for several years, and a US-EU working group was established in 2011 to discuss the prospect of a free trade agreement.

The EU has said the deal will focus on bringing down remaining tariffs and other barriers to trade, and standardise technical regulations and certifications.

Currently the US and EU impose relatively low tariffs on goods traded between them, but analysts say other barriers are often in place to prevent European companies competing in the US and vice versa.

Can summit live up to ambitious agenda?

One example is found in the car industry, where the EU and the US employ equally strict - but differing - safety standards, meaning that European car makers must meet both before they can sell cars in the US market, putting them at a disadvantage. Agriculture is also expected to be a significant bone of contention.

IMAGES OF THE WORLD



According to sources, the Greek National Tourism Organization has agreed to implement a program of cooperation with eight major tour operators in Germany, with a total budget of nearly 450,000 euros, following a decision by the organization’s general secretary, Panos Livadas. GNTO will contribute 100,000 euros each to programs with TUI, Thomas Cook and REWE, 40,000 to each of Alltours and FTI, 30,000 euros to Schauinsland Reisen, 12,000 euros to Dertour and 10,000 to Attika Reisen.



Rebels fought to halt an advance by President Bashar al-Assad's forces into northern Syria on Monday while U.S. President Barack Obama faced a showdown with Russia's Vladimir Putin over Obama's decision last week to arm the insurgents. New evidence emerged of escalating foreign support for the rebels, with a Gulf source telling Reuters that Saudi Arabia had equipped fighters for the first time with shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, their most urgent request. Rebels said Riyadh had also sent them anti-tank missiles.



Iran is ready to show more transparency on its nuclear programme, says President-elect Hassan Rouhani. In his first news conference since Friday's election, Mr Rouhani described as "unfair" sanctions imposed on his country. He also said Tehran would not suspend uranium enrichment activities. The West suspects Iran of trying to build nuclear weapons. Iran says its programme is entirely peaceful.

The conference hall of the Strategic Research Centre in Tehran was crammed full of journalists and supporters of Mr Rouhani. The national anthem played on his arrival. He smiled and waved to the audience. Many journalists who voted for him could not stop clapping or yelling congratulations. He gave diplomatic answers to sharp questions from journalists, proving he is a serious conservative politician moving towards moderation. When asked whether he had any plan to improve Iran's relations with the UK, he looked at me very carefully with a beatific smile, and answered: "I will try to solve Iran's problems with all countries recognised by the Islamic Republic on the basis of mutual respect and trust, and England is not an exception."

His government would work towards "constructive interaction with the world", thanking Iranians for "choosing moderation" Efforts to end continuing fighting in Syria and restore stability must rest with "the Syrian people" The economy would be his main priority. Relations between Iran and the US were "an old wound that needs to be healed". The conference ended abruptly when a man in the audience shouted that reformist leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, who is currently under house arrest, should be president. Mr Rouhani, a long-standing political figure in Iran, won just more than 50% of the vote in the election, avoiding a run-off vote. Iran's president has limited powers, with key policy decisions being taken by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

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God Bless Charles Schumer

The amendment to the new immigration law submitted by United States Senator Charles Schumer, Democrat from New York, is one of the most important pieces of news in recent years. That is because the purpose of the amendment is “to maintain the Greek language and culture in America.”

How surprising! While many of us renounce with airs of grandiosity our Greek identity, key elements of which are the language and culture, here comes an American Jewish Senator to open our eyes.

The episode is also an object lesson about never leaving the field of battle no matter how bleak the prospects for victory. Schumer, being a very sharp politician, was certainly not acting in a vacuum.

He has hundreds of thousands of Greek and Cypriot-American constituents. It’s only natural for him to look out for their interests and see to act upon their reasonable requests. In any case, some prominent members of the community needed to intervene with the Senator to convince him of the need for this amendment, including Theodore Spyropoulos, Father Alexander Karloutsos, Andy Manatos, Dennis Mehiel, John Catsimatidis, Nick Larigakis and others. This newspaper, with many of commentaries and editorials, and working behind the scenes, also worked toward this end.

The issue is simple: Many young people of Greece will travel to foreign lands anyway because of the economic crisis in the Motherland. Why shouldn’t they seek out the welcoming arms of our community and contribute their talent and energy to the American economy?

But America has strict restrictions regarding work visas. That is the situation that the Schumer amendment seeks to remedy and it does it in a particularly useful way for the community: by facilitating the preservation of our language and culture.

Greek and Cypriot immigrants will be required to offer their services as teachers, advisors, etc. in schools, churches, law firms, travel agencies, and at The National Herald.

We have been informed that contrary to earlier reports, the amendment will provide visas for 18-month stays, which can be renewed. But even that is not enough. At the least they should be allowed to stay for a minimum of three years. Otherwise few will pack their belongings and immigrate to America.

Senator Schumer said on May 25 that he will confirm that it does not limit the number of immigrants and that is a great advantage. He urged everyone, however, to contact their Congressional Representatives and Senators and ask them to do vote for the broader immigration reform bill, and support the Schumer amendment. So we are on the verge of a historic evolution. Let’s do it right. (National Herald).

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Painful deadlock

By Costas Iordanidis

The unity of Greece’s power-sharing administration is under severe strain and the country could possibly be heading toward general elections. If political memory went no further back than a year ago, it would be clear to everyone that the outcome of the May and June 2012 elections



effectively derailed the nation’s fiscal adjustment program, added more debt to the country’s empty coffers, and exacerbated recession and unemployment.

On a political level, the outcome of those two ballots was the election of leftist SYRIZA as main opposition, the emergence of Golden Dawn as the most vigorous party in the existing Parliament, the near-elimination of PASOK from the political map and growing tension within New Democracy.

There is little love for PASOK or its current leader, Evangelos Venizelos. Democratic Left leader Fotis Kouvelis may be irritating in the same way that the leader of a debating society can be annoying. Having been away from the country’s executive powers – barring some very short breaks

– the Left has a rather theoretical understanding of politics.

But these are the only politicians Prime Minister Antonis Samaras can depend on at the moment. And he has an obligation not to insult their dignity, not to present them with tough dilemmas – regardless whether the issue at stake is a serious or an insignificant one and whether they beg to differ on certain issues.

The crisis has underscored the primitivism of the Greek political leadership. The politicians of the European north tend to work for the stability of the system and its adaptation to the needs of a constantly evolving environment. In the minds of the Greek political leader it is all about self-affirmation and survival. He is allergic to others. He is the provincial man on the European stage.

New Democracy could well win the next elections but neither PASOK nor Democratic Left would again join hands with Samaras, leaving the country in a deadlock. Even if a government were formed, the prime minister would be different, so the risk of a deeper conservative break-up is evident. But even if ND were to achieve a full majority in Parliament, on the back of Greece’s electoral law, it would find it impossible to govern as it would face all opposition parties given the absence of a rigid state apparatus and generalized corruption.

For better or for worse, the country’s two-party system is no more. Voting for Golden Dawn is a political act and expresses the will to destroy the political system – Valhalla on fire, Wagner’s twilight of the gods, not on the safety of the stage but in society.

It’s questionable if we should cry over the death of political dwarfs at a time when the country is in risk of going up in flames.

Iraklio to be home port for cruise firms



Four European cruise companies – two from Germany, one from Spain and one from Italy – are examining the possibility of using the port of Iraklio for homeporting by 2015, Yiannis Bras, chairman and chief executive of the Iraklio Port Authority, has told Kathimerini. He added that there have already been talks with the heads of the companies regarding the infrastructure and the services the Greek side can provide so an agreement can be reached. In the first five months of the year, the number of cruise passengers calling at Crete’s biggest port has grown by almost 100 percent from the same period last year, amounting to 60,121. Bras forecasts that the increase for the whole of the year will amount to 40 percent on an annual basis as Iraklio expects the arrival of 178 cruise ships with a capacity of 327,000 passengers.



To tip or not to tip...?

A New York restaurant has banned tipping to spare customers the bother. Is the discretionary tip falling out of favour in the land where it’s king?

About 800 public servants to lose jobs when organizations are merged or scrapped

The dismissal of some 2,600 employees at public broadcaster ERT is likely to be followed up soon by the firing of another 800 civil servants from state organizations which are being merged or scrapped altogether.

Seventeen bodies are to be shut down and another 53 will be merged under the government's plans. This will affect more than 1,300 public servants, of whom about 800 will be sacked, while others who are deemed surplus to requirement will be placed in a mobility scheme.

Athens has agreed with the troika to dismiss 4,000 civil servants by the end of this year and 15,000 by the end of 2014.

According to documents 216 people are employed at the 17 organizations which will be shut down. They will all lose their jobs. Another 1,107 people work in the 53 bodies that will be merged. These include the Organization Against Drugs (OKANA), the Therapy Center for Dependent Individuals (KETHEA) and the National Organization for Medicines (EOF). The National Library and 44 regional public libraries will come under the management of a single organization.

The firing of at least 2,000 civil servants this summer had been one of Greece's commitments, and a personal pledge to the

NEWS FROM GREECE

troika by Prime Minister Antonis Samaras, so Greece could receive its next bailout loan of 3.3 billion euros. During the troika's current visit to Athens, officials have also pressured the government over removing restrictions to sackings in the private sector.

Gov't to tread cautiously after DEPA failure

Following the failure of the Public Gas Corporation (DEPA) tender and hoping to save face in that for gas transmission network operator DESFA, the government is accelerating the privatizations program, giving priority to projects such as the Piraeus Port Authority (OLP), in a bid to reduce the shortfall expected in revenues and fend off pressure from its creditors to introduce more measures.

The coming week will be crucial for developments on the sell-off front as it should see definitive decisions regarding the outcome of the DESFA tender. The government expects to get a positive result to edge closer to the target for revenues of 1.6 billion euros from

privatizations this year and reverse the negative picture created from the lack of bidders for DEPA.

From the statement issued by state privatization fund TAIPED on Wednesday after the sole binding offer from Azeri state energy firm Socar, it emerges that awarding the 66 percent stake in DESFA to the only bidder will depend on whether the Azeris raise their offer. TAIPED stopped short of revealing the price offered, but it is said to range between 390 and 430 million euros. A meeting of the



two shareholders, TAIPED and Hellenic Petroleum, will decide on the offer "that is being examined on its details and concession," said TAIPED.

The fund is hoping to convince Socar to raise its bid – something that will be

seen next week – although market sources expect the government to announce its decision after the Azeri choice of a natural gas pipeline to Western Europe is made known.

Regardless of the DESFA tender's outcome, the need to speed up the sell-off program and quickly restart the DEPA tender was clearly expressed by the European Commission through spokesman Simon O'Connor this week. He asked for "any consequences [on the Greek program's timetable] to be minimized" as Brussels is worried about the opening of a funding gap that could deepen its rift with the International Monetary Fund as the latter would apply more pressure

for another Greek debt restructuring.

In view of all this, TAIPED is putting projects such as port privatization at the forefront, starting with OLP, because they can move ahead faster. In addition to that, alongside the redrafting of plans for the DEPA tender, it is examining the possibility of lending priority to a further privatization of Hellenic Petroleum and accelerating the procedure for the sale of Public Power Corporation's grid operator, ADMIE.

Regarding the new tender for DEPA, TAIPED has decided to make some careful planning before its proclamation so as to avoid the weak points that led to the failure of the first one. The deadlock in the tender was not due to the unexpected abstention by Russian energy giant Gazprom, but to the fact that it failed to attract any other investors.

The government may dismiss the reasons Gazprom has cited to stay away from filing a binding offer, referring to debts and the future financial state of the company as "mere pretexts," but responsible government officials know very well that had these issues gone away, the situation in the tender would have been totally different.

As a result of that, the new tender will only be announced after the package of measures concerning the electricity market's restructuring is concluded, as this is the source of the debts to DEPA that Gazprom referred to.

Abandoned match crowns Panathinaikos champion

Panathinaikos swept back to the throne of the basketball league after a year's recess, as Game 3 at Piraeus was abandoned on Wednesday with the score at 76-72 in the Greens' favor. Olympiakos fans showered the Panathinaikos players with objects, the referees asked for the evacuation of the stands, but as some fans refused to go after more than an hour of stoppage the referees called the game off.

Consequently Panathinaikos has won the best-of-five final series with a 3-0 score to complete the league-and-cup double for the 2012-2013 season, while Olympiakos stands to suffer a huge penalty for its fans actions.

Panathinaikos shook off an early Olympiakos lead (8-3) to lead 13-8 and then stretch its advantage to a maximum 10 points (24-14) thanks to repeated three-pointers. The Reds came back through improving their attack in the second period and ended the first half having the upper hand (39-35).

The third period produced the highest score in the series for a single quarter, with Panathinaikos netting 25 and Olympiakos 2.



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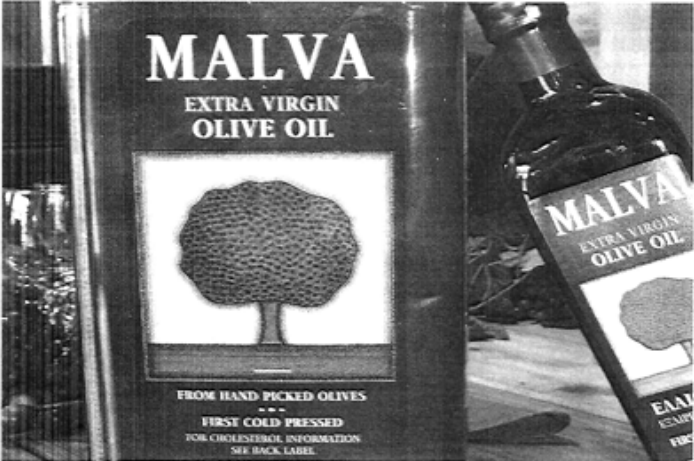
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Syria regime denounces US chemical weapons claim

Syria has dismissed as "a caravan of lies" claims that it used chemical weapons, after the US said it would give the rebels "direct military aid". President Obama made the decision after his administration concluded Syrian forces under Bashar al-Assad were using chemical weapons, a spokesman said.

But Syria's foreign ministry said the US had used "fabricated information" on chemical weapons to justify the move. Washington was resorting to "cheap tactics" to justify Mr Obama's decision to arm the rebels, said a statement from the ministry.

On the ground, there were reports of the fiercest fighting in months in Syria's largest city, Aleppo. Two years of conflict had killed at least 93,000 people, the UN said on Thursday, at a current rate of 5,000 people a month. More than 1,700 children under the age of 10 have died, it added.



Ben Rhodes, a deputy national security adviser to Mr Obama, said the president had made the decision to increase assistance, including "military support", to the rebels' Supreme Military Council (SMC) and Syrian Opposition Coalition. The US was "comfortable" working with Gen Idris, leader of the SMC, and aimed to isolate some of the more extremist elements of the opposition, such as Sunni militant group al-Nusra, he added. Mr Rhodes did not give details about the military aid, other than to say it would be "different in scope and scale to what we have provided before".

Initially US support looks likely to involve the supply of light arms and ammunition. Mr Rhodes says that the President has not made any decision to pursue a military option, like a no-fly zone, and he has ruled out the deployment of US ground troops. Requests from the opposition for anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons are, we understand, still a matter of discussion.

Will US arms fix Syrian problem?

Until now, the US has limited its help to rebel forces by providing rations and medical supplies. Administration officials have been quoted by US media as saying it is most likely to include sending small arms and ammunition. The New York Times quoted US officials as saying Washington could provide anti-tank weapons. The CIA is expected to co-ordinate delivery of the military equipment and train the rebel soldiers in how to use it, reports said. Republican Senator John McCain, who has been outspoken in calls for arming the rebels, said he did not know to which type of arms the term "military aid" referred, but that he hoped for anti-tank weapons.

He said his greatest concern was the conflict "spiralling out of control because of a failure of American leadership". In a BBC interview on Friday, Gen Idris said new weapons would help the rebels defeat the Assad regime and defend civilians.

Prime Minister David Cameron said he shared the US view that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons, but that the UK had not yet decided whether to arm the rebels. He told the BBC that engaging with moderate rebel groups - by working with them and providing training as well as technical assistance - helped limit the influence of more extremist fighters.

The US intelligence community believes the Assad regime used chemical weapons, including the nerve agent sarin, on a small scale against the opposition on several occasions in the past year, said Mr Rhodes, adding that he estimated as many as 150 people had died in the attacks. Washington's "clear" statement was welcomed by Nato Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who urged Syria to let the UN "investigate all reports of chemical weapons use".

It seems clear Mr Obama has finally been persuaded, as Britain and France have argued, that the battlefield cannot be allowed to tilt strongly in the regime's favour, as is currently happening, says our correspondent. Moscow said Washington's supposed evidence of chemical weapons use in Syria did "not look convincing".

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's spokesman told the BBC he remained against "any further militarisation" of the conflict in Syria, saying the people there needed peace, not more weapons.

The support of the West's regional allies, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, had helped the rebels in the days after the uprising became militarised. But the tide turned after the Assad regime turned to Moscow and Tehran for help. Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon have also been involved in the government's counter-offensive.

UN: India to be world's most populous country by 2028



India looks set to overtake China as the world's most populous country from 2028, according to the United Nations. At that point, both nations will number 1.45 billion people each. Subsequently India's population will continue to grow until the middle of the century, while China's slowly declines. The UN also estimates that the current global population of 7.2 billion will reach 9.6 billion by 2050. That is a faster rate of growth than previously estimated. The population growth will be mainly in developing countries, particularly in Africa, the UN says.

The world's 49 least developed countries are projected to double in size from around 900 million people in 2013 to 1.8 billion in 2050, whereas the population of developed regions will remain largely unchanged. The UN said the reason for the increase in its projection is largely new information on fertility levels in certain high birth rate countries.

Large developing countries, such as China, India and Brazil, have seen a rapid fall in the average number of children per woman, but in other nations, such as Nigeria, Niger, Ethiopia and Uganda, fertility levels remain high. Nigeria's population is expected to exceed that of the US by the middle of the century, and could start to rival China's by 2100.

China's population is expected to start decreasing after 2030.

The United Nations publishes an assessment of past, current and future population trends every two years, in a recurrent series known as the World Population Prospects. Researchers have used data for 233 countries and areas to produce Friday's report.

Kazakhstan's 21st-century capital



Astana, the world's youngest capital city, reflects the futuristic vision of its authoritarian president, contrasting sharply with its setting in Central Asia's remote steppes.

Pieman River Tarkine Tasmania



At dawn, the surface of Tasmania's Whyte River was still as a painting. An azure kingfisher skimmed low over the water, and the creaking calls of yellow-tailed black cockatoos echoed from the canopy. By the riverbank, the water stirred as a platypus prospected for food. So began another day in the Tarkine rainforest.



Johannesburg's Maboneng Precinct is now one of South Africa's hippest urban enclave. The southeastern section of Johannesburg's city centre is one of South Africa's hippest urban enclaves – an incredible example of urban regeneration.