



►tinues today—17 Turkish soldiers were killed in early October when some 400 PKK rebels raided a military outpost in Hakkari province, near the Iraqi border, and days later rebels killed four policemen in Diyarbakir. Sympathy for the PKK remains strong among Turkey's 14m Kurds.

The Turkish parliament has now extended the army's mandate to bomb PKK targets in Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq, and Turkish aircraft have been doing just that. Yet the latest wave of PKK attacks has embarrassed the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and raised new questions about the army's competence. The cries of incompetence grew louder when *Taraf*, a newspaper, published a leaked internal report showing that the army knew about the planned attack in Hakkari but did little to stop it. It did not help when the air-force chief was photographed playing golf a day later.

In an alarming twist, ethnic tensions are erupting in western parts of Turkey as well. Two people died in the town of Altinova recently when a Kurdish youth rammed a truck into a group of Turks who were taunting Kurds by playing loud nationalist tunes. The army was called in when Kurdish homes and businesses came under siege.

The Kurds remain a huge problem for Turkey's government. The prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, raised hopes in 2005 when he said the state had "made mistakes" in handling them. Steps to ease bans on Kurdish broadcasting and education followed, and vast sums were poured into Kurdish regions. The handouts included education subsidies for the poor, especially for girls. These helped the AKP to clobber the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) in much of the south-east in the July 2007 election. Yet to many the measures smell of vote-buying. "I haven't received a penny for my girls' schooling since April," complains Sabiha Celik in Sason. "I will never vote for the AKP again."

Indeed, Kurdish support for the AKP has been fading ever since the government yielded to army pressure to resume cross-border operations against the PKK in northern Iraq. The generals are baying for a freer hand, prompting worries of a return to the human-rights abuses of the 1990s.

Ominously, the Turkish Human Rights Foundation says that, this year alone, over 30 people have been killed in alleged police violence, mostly in the Kurdish region. The government had to apologise when Engin Ceber, a left-wing activist, was tortured and beaten to death by security forces recently in an Istanbul prison.

AKP leaders, who narrowly escaped a constitutional court ban in July, have yet to utter a word about a similar closure case that is pending against the DTP on the ground that it is propagating separatism. DTP deputies spend lots of time lobbying for better prison conditions for Mr Ocalan. Many of them were handpicked by the PKK to run for parliament. Yet just as in the AKP case, much of the prosecution's argument rests on words rather than deeds. Moreover, any ban might just boost the DTP's popularity.

German education

Bottom of the form

BERLIN

The chancellor looks for ways to improve Germany's mediocre schools

AMID her other distractions Angela Merkel's attention will on October 22nd shift to a new issue: the poor state of German education. She is gathering the premiers from all of Germany's 16 states for an "education summit" in Dresden. Its vaunted aim is to transform Germany from a mediocre performer into a dazzling "education republic". Yet the chancellor's powers to achieve this goal are limited.

Nobody thinks that Germany can afford mediocrity. If its performance on international tests improved from average to excellent, growth would rise by 0.5-0.8 percentage points in the long run, says Ludger Wössmann, an economist at Ifo, a research institute in Munich. But the real stakes are

Turkey blames some of its Kurdish woes on the West. "We are still seeing co-operation with the PKK, they are doing fund-raising in EU countries and there are many PKK terrorists living in Europe. This really bothers us," Ali Babacan, the foreign minister, claimed in an interview with *The Economist*. Similar harangues at the Americans have subsided since they agreed to let the Turks pursue the PKK in Iraq.

There are some hopeful signs that Turkey is trying to make friends with the Iraqi Kurds. This week Turkish diplomats met Masoud Barzani, who heads the Kurdish regional government in Iraq. This has prompted speculation that Turkey could be thinking of reviving an amnesty for PKK fighters untainted by violence. As the winter cold sets in, many might be tempted. And, as Mr Babacan acknowledges, "a military solution is not a solution." ■

higher still. Almost half the children in some cities come from immigrant families; many speak mainly their mother tongue. In Germany parents' social status plays a bigger role in children's fates than in most other rich countries. As many as 8% of 15-17-year-olds are school dropouts; unemployment among them is three times higher than among university graduates. Yet, with Germany's population ageing, "who will pay our pensions, if not the migrants?" asks Jörg Dräger, head of education at the Bertelsmann Foundation.

Schools need to teach conduct as well as calculus, ensuring that minorities (and poor Germans) become fully functioning members of society. They are ill-equipped ►►



Angela Merkel goes back to school

to do it. Germany is one of the few European countries that still divides children up at the age of ten. The cleverest go to *Gymnasien*, the main route to university; the ordinary are sent to *Realschulen*; and the dullards attend *Hauptschulen*, often breeding-grounds for disaffection. Teaching methods have not changed "since the days of the Kaiser," says Ties Rabe, a teacher and Social Democratic member of Hamburg's legislature. Most children leave

school before lunch, which is awkward for families with two working parents. Germany has enough child-care places for just a sixth of children under three.

Ideology has often thwarted reform. Social Democrats and others on the left want students of different abilities to spend more time in the same schools. The Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Ms Merkel's party, has long championed the three-tier system, partly because the tier-

less alternative smelled to many of East German egalitarianism. Yet Ms Merkel must keep her distance. Under Germany's federal system, education is mainly the responsibility of the states. Premiers have no intention of yielding authority. And Social Democrats have the extra suspicion that Ms Merkel may use her education summit to promote the CDU.

Tinkering with education is a risky political business. The CDU and its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union, have been punished in state elections this year by parents angry over their handling of school reforms. Success, if it comes, is often apparent only after decades. But state governments are finding they have no choice. Dwindling numbers of children, especially in eastern Germany, troubled immigrants in the cities and a flight from *Hauptschulen* are forcing them to rethink how they organise schools. Fortunately a "demographic dividend" from fewer children will free some €8 billion-9 billion a year by 2015 to help pay for change.

Hamburg is more than usually chaotic, with eight types of school at secondary level. A third of its children are from immigrant backgrounds and half are socially disadvantaged, says Alexandra Dinges-Dierig, a former education minister. With the *Hauptschulen* withering, Hamburg plans to merge all varieties of secondary school bar the *Gymnasien* into new "neighbourhood schools" that will offer custom-tailored learning, more practical experience outside school and a slower track to university. Hamburg's schools have already been liberated from centralised bureaucracy. School directors hire their own teachers, for example.

This is bold stuff, especially coming from a state run by the CDU. But Hamburg's two-tier structure may become the norm. Berlin and Schleswig-Holstein are doing something similar. More states are testing pre-schoolers' German, and tutoring those who do not measure up. Until four years ago fewer than half the states had centralised school exams, says Mr Wössmann. Now all but one do, at least for the pre-university test, the *Abitur*. Testing, which helps to make schools more accountable, plus greater autonomy seem to be two of the surest ways to improve schools' performance.

Ms Merkel's summit is likely to dwell mainly on what happens before primary school and after high school. Jürgen Zöllner, Berlin's education minister, hopes it will seek easier entry to university for students without the *Abitur* and come up with money for more social workers and free pre-schools. Mr Wössmann argues that Germany should follow the Netherlands in letting parents spend public money on any type of school they want. But for Germany's conservative educators, that is likely to be a reform too far. ■

Italian education

Schools out

ROME

Plans to reform the Italian school system run into criticism

ITALY may be facing recession, but for Siggì, a textile firm near Vicenza in the north-east of the country, 2009 offers the promise of unprecedented growth. Siggì is the biggest producer of *grembiuli*, or school smocks. Once universal in Italian primary schools, they were becoming as outdated as ink-wells. But in July the education minister, Mariastella Gelmini, backed the reintroduction of *grembiuli* to combat brand- and class-consciousness among schoolchildren. Siggì's output this year has almost sold out and its chairman, Gino Marta, says that "next year could see an out-and-out boom."

The decision on whether pupils should wear the *grembiule* has been left to head teachers. It does not figure in either of the two education bills that have been introduced by Ms Gelmini. But it has become a symbol of her efforts to shake up Italian education. Her critics argue that these are a vain attempt to turn back the clock; her supporters see them as a necessary first step to a more equitable, efficient system.

On October 30th the opposition she has aroused will culminate in a one-day teachers' strike. The union's main complaint is a programme of cuts aimed at saving almost €8 billion (\$11 billion). It includes the loss by natural wastage of 87,000 teachers' jobs over the three academic years to 2012 and the return to a system in which just one teacher is allotted to each year of elementary school.

If this is all the reforms do, they could prove as disastrous as union and opposition leaders predict (international studies find primary schools are the only part of Italy's education that does well). But it is also planned that 30% of the money saved will be reinvested in schools. Ms Gelmini's supporters hope that she will use it to redress the crippling imbalances in education, which is one of Italy's biggest structural economic weaknesses.

One problem is "lots of badly paid teachers", says Roger Abravanel, author



of a recent book on meritocracy*. "The number of teachers per 100 students is one of the highest in the OECD." Education, particularly in the south, has often been used by politicians for patronage and job creation. This may explain why, despite studying for longer and in smaller classes, Italian secondary pupils do badly in international comparisons. "The north is around the OECD average, but the south is on a par with Uruguay and Thailand," says Mr Abravanel. Giacomo Vaciago, an economics professor at the Catholic University of Milan, says that "although for the time being the debate is about cuts, the big problem is quality, which is random."

Presenting the latest reforms alongside Ms Gelmini, Italy's prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi, promised that, by 2012, the best teachers would be getting a €7,000 bonus. But Mr Vaciago is unconvinced by the plans. "The present government is making cuts and hoping that the quality comes through as a result. There is no obvious guarantee it will," he comments.

* Meritocrazia. Garzanti Libri, Milan.