

Sweden among least corrupt nations

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BERLIN, December 1, 2011 (AFP) - Corruption is hampering efforts to tackle the eurozone debt crisis, a top anti-graft watchdog said Thursday, as Greece and Italy scored badly in a list of nations seen to be the most sleaze-ridden.

The economic dramas in the euro area have happened "partly because of public authorities' failure to tackle the bribery and tax evasion that are key drivers of the debt crisis," said the Berlin-based Transparency International (TI).

On a scale of zero (perceived to be highly corrupt) to 10 (thought to have little corruption), Italy scored 3.9 and Greece 3.4, ranking 69 and 80 respectively in the list of 182 countries.

Robin Hodess, TI's research director, said the eurozone crisis "reflects poor financial management, lack of transparency and mismanagement of public funds."

"There is a strong link between poor performance in terms of perceptions of corruption and broader issues around economic governance," added Hodess in an interview with AFP.

When graft is widespread, "people feel the pinch at all levels," she said, calling on Rome and Athens to do "much more" in fighting corruption.

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Globally, war-torn Somalia and North Korea were joint bottom of the list, perceived to be the world's most corrupt countries with a score of 1.0.

Iraq climbed a few places up the list but was still close to the bottom at 175th and Afghanistan remained rooted at 180th despite efforts to curb bribery and corruption there. Libya was 168th.

Most Arab Spring countries ranked in the lower half of the index, scoring below 4.

TI said it had warned before the revolutions in the region that "nepotism, bribery and patronage were so deeply ingrained in daily life that even existing anti-corruption laws had little effect."

At the other, more virtuous, end of the scale, New Zealand topped the ranking with 9.5 points, coming just ahead of Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Singapore.

Nearly two-thirds of the countries listed scored less than five, indicating, according to TI, that much work remains to be done in battling graft.

"This year, we have seen corruption on protesters' banners be they rich or poor," said TI chief Huguette Labelle.

"Whether in a Europe hit by a debt crisis or an Arab world starting a new political era, leaders must heed the demands for better government," she added.

France and Germany, to which many are looking for a solution to the eurozone crisis, scored relatively well, coming in 25th and 14th respectively.

The United States was one place above France, while fellow global powerhouse China placed

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75th. Russia was one of the worst countries on the list, coming in 143rd with a score of 2.4.

The survey "uses data from 17 surveys that look at factors such as enforcement of anti-corruption laws, access to information and conflicts of interest," TI said.

"Corruption continues to plague too many countries around the world," the NGO concluded.