

Libya blames Italy for deadly cartoon protest

10 people killed in rioting, Italian minister resigns

AFP, Tripoli

Libya blamed Italy yesterday for provoking a riot that left 10 people dead and Rome's consulate in the city of Benghazi ablaze, the deadliest protest yet against the cartoons of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM).

But despite the anger against Italy, the Libyan security minister and other security officials from the eastern city were all suspended and taken before an investigating magistrate over the use of excessive force.

On Friday, police threw teargas grenades and opened fire with live ammunition on the 1,000 demonstrators, some of whom had overwhelmed security forces to storm the consulate building and set it ablaze.

Television pictures showed angry

demonstrators setting fire to the Italian flag and throwing stones while thick clouds of black smoke billowed into sky from the consulate building in the eastern coastal city.

The Gaddafi Foundation, headed by the reform-minded son of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi Seif el-Islam, issued a statement blaming the riot on the "provocative and outrageous" actions of a controversial Italian minister.

Reform Minister Roberto Calderoli aroused uproar by vowing to sport T-shirts displaying the cartoons of Mohammed that were first published by a Danish newspaper and then reprinted elsewhere in Europe.

The foundation called on Rome to "take urgent measures against this

hateful and racist minister", otherwise it would see "its interests and relations with Libya pass into a delicate and decisive reevaluation."

It said Calderoli's behaviour had caused the riots "due to the provocation, the outrage and offence to what is sacred."

Calderoli, who has also referred to Muslim immigrants in Italy as "Ali Babas", resigned after coming under pressure from Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to step down.

The foundation's statement contrasted with comments by Libyan Foreign Minister Abdel Rahman Chalguam, who was quoted as telling Italy's ambassador in Tripoli that the protest would have no negative effects on relations.

The first secretary of the Italian

embassy in Tripoli, Dominico Bellatoni, told AFP that at least 10 demonstrators had been killed according to police reports.

He added: "No Italian was hurt when a thousand demonstrators attacked the consular building after Friday prayers and set the first floor on fire."

Another Italian diplomat, who asked not to be named, said: "The consulate was closed to the public and only six staff members were inside, but none of them was injured."

Residents said that calm had returned to Benghazi by Saturday morning, with the burned-out wrecks of cars and stones on the ground the main evidence of the tumult the previous day.



PHOTO: AFP
People stand next to a destroyed house after the landslide in the village of Guinsaugon in the town of Saint Bernard in central Philippines yesterday. The landslide death toll may cross 1800.

Landslide survivors lucky to be alive

AFP, Anahawan

Two battered and bruised young children were among the few lucky to be still alive yesterday after being plucked from a sea of mud that buried their village in the central Philippines.

They are among just dozens believed to have survived when a mountainside gave way on Friday and buried the farming village of Guinsaugon in the south of Leyte island.

In a split second the two children saw their homes and families obliterated by a wall of mud and debris. They were among 19 survivors being treated at the nearby Anahawan hospital. Officials have given different figures for the total number of survivors, ranging from around 60 to about 100.

"There is nothing more we can do for these people at the moment," Doctor Russell Dejamie told AFP. "They are in shock and they have serious injuries, the extent of which we don't know because we don't have any X-ray facilities here."



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani customs officer (R) checks the luggage of a Pakistani passenger at the Zero Point Station on the Indo-Pakistan border yesterday. A Pakistani train has arrived in India on a historic journey to the Indian border town of Munabao, resuming a service which was suspended for more than four decades.

Indian minister offers cash for beheading of cartoonists

AFP, Lucknow

An Indian state government minister has offered a reward of 11.5 million dollars for the beheading of any of the cartoonists who drew the controversial images of the Prophet Mohammed.

The offer, which made the front pages of Indian newspapers Saturday, was made by Mohammed Yaqoob Qureshi, a minister in the northern Uttar Pradesh state government, at a Muslim rally after Friday prayers.

Yaqoob told the crowd in Meerut, 400km northwest of the state capital Lucknow, that he would give "the avenger" 510 million rupees (11.5 million dollars) and his weight in gold.

"Drawing a cartoon of the Prophet is blasphemous and Muslims will not tolerate this insult," he said in speech as demonstrators cried, "Death to France, Death to Denmark".

India, France likely to ink nuke deal

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India and France are expected to sign bilateral agreements for cooperation in civil nuclear and defence sectors as French President Jacques Chirac arrives here today for a three-day official visit that narrowly missed being overshadowed by concerns over a decommissioned warship carrying toxic wastes.

Chirac, 73, who will pay his second visit to India in eight years, said in an interview to the latest issue of "India Today" magazine ahead of the trip that the two countries were close to reaching a deal that would allow India access to French civilian nuclear technology. Hectic last-minute consultations are underway between India and France to try and firm up an agreement on nuclear cooperation but complexities have crept in as India battles to implement a similar deal with the United States that has drawn sharp reaction in India particularly from Left parties.

Chirac in the interview said France was the first country to argue at international level in favour of India as a responsible power gaining access to civilian nuclear technologies.

"We are close to reaching an agreement," he said and at the same time pointed out that more work was needed on both sides.

India and the US are working on their bilateral nuclear deal in which Washington would share civilian nuclear technology and supply nuclear fuel to India in return for New Delhi separating its civilian and military nuclear programmes and permitting international inspection of its civilian nuclear programmes.

France is understood to have contended that if India is to stay on course laid in its deal with the US, it would strengthen France's hands in pushing for India's case as an exemption in the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) whose green signal is essential.

US asks Palestinians to return \$50m aid

REUTERS, Washington

The United States has asked the Palestinian Authority to return \$50 million in US aid because Washington does not want a Hamas-led government to have the funds, the State Department said on Friday.

The money was demanded as part of a full review of all US aid for the Palestinians that began soon after the militant group Hamas' surprise victory in elections last month. A Hamas-led parliament was set to be sworn in on Saturday but it could take several weeks for a Cabinet to be formed.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said the caretaker government of President Mahmoud Abbas agreed to return the money, given last year for infrastructure projects after Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and parts of the West Bank.

"In the interests of seeing that these funds not potentially make

their way into the coffers of a future Palestinian government (made up of Hamas) ... we have asked for it to be returned and the Palestinian Authority has agreed," McCormack told reporters. A Palestinian official confirmed Washington had asked for \$50 million in aid to be returned. "The Palestinian Authority promised to comply," the official said.

Over the past decade, the United States has given about \$1.5 billion in aid to the Palestinians, mostly through aid groups.

McCormack reiterated US policy that aid could not go to Hamas, which is classified as a terrorist group, but he said the United States was looking at ways of ensuring humanitarian assistance could reach the Palestinians.

For a Hamas government to get direct aid, it would have to renounce violence, recognise Israel, disarm militias and agree to past Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

US Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice will be visiting Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates next week to discuss, among other issues, how to deal with Hamas and to convince those nations not to fill any funding gap.

The mediating powers in the Middle East – the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and Russia – issued a statement last month in which they said Hamas must reject violence and recognise Israel or risk losing aid.

Several aid groups want the US government to grant a waiver for humanitarian assistance to enable them to communicate with a new Palestinian government.

Elizabeth Sime, country director for CARE's programme in the West Bank and Gaza, said world donors must understand that getting aid to the Palestinians required cooperation at least "on a technical level" with the Palestinian Authority.

Kashmiri militants dubious of Manmohan's peace overtures

AFP, New Delhi

As Indian premier Manmohan Singh met a Kashmiri pro-independence leader Friday, other separatists said they would not attend a roundtable on ending a decades-old dispute over the Himalayan region.

Singh's office announced Wednesday that the prime minister was planning a roundtable conference with Kashmiri leaders and separatists in a fresh bid to bring peace to the troubled territory.

"India should first declare Kashmir as a disputed state and revoke the 1995 parliament resolution declaring Kashmir as an integral part of the country," Syed Ali Geelani, head of the hardline wing of the separatist alliance All Parties Hurriyat Conference, told AFP.

Geelani said that Indian home ministry official had contacted him by telephone Thursday to ask if he would participate in the meeting.

"I told him that India is not serious to resolve the Kashmir issue," said Geelani, known for his vehement opposition to New Delhi's rule in Kashmir.

Other factions of the Hurriyat grouping are meeting to decide how to respond to the invitation.

A list of around 50 people, including representatives of the main Kashmiri political parties and separatist organisations, have been drawn up for invitations to the talks, according to news reports.

No specific agenda had been set for the meeting to be held in the last week of February in the Indian capital.

In a statement published in the Kashmiri press, senior separatist leader Shabir Ahmed Shah said that the conference "would only create more confusion."

One rebel group has asked Kashmiri political leaders to refrain from attending the conference.

"It is part of the game plan of Indian leaders to deceive the international community and its timing was planned with the visit of American President George W. Bush," Abu Atif, spokesman for the militant Al-Badr group, told a local news agency.

The comments came on a day the prime minister met for over an hour with the leader of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front movement, which has repeatedly called for a boycott of all India-organised elections in Kashmir.

The talks with former militant Yasin Malik come almost a month after Singh had discussions with another pro-independence Kashmiri separatist, Saajad Lone.

Singh told Malik the government has an "open mind" on the Kashmir issue and would like to involve a larger cross-section of public opinion to end "the period of suffering", the Press Trust of India reported.



PHOTO: AFP
Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, who was named as the next Palestinian leader, waves during the inaugural session of the Palestinian Parliament in Gaza yesterday.

Bush defends Indo-US nuke deal

AFP, Tampa

US President George W. Bush defended a controversial US-India agreement on civilian nuclear power as "good policy" and a key issue ahead of his early March visit to South Asia.

"I believe that it's good policy for the United States to encourage these emerging economies to use clean energy, nuclear power, so as to help reduce demand for kind of non-renewables," he said during a visit here on Friday.

"And so I'm going to talk to them about development of a civilian nuclear power industry," said Bush, who told the crowd he would be going to India "on March the 1st, around that period of time."