

US official holds talks in Syria amid thaw in ties

AFP, Damascus

US State Department official William Burns met Syrian President Bashar al-Assad yesterday a day after Washington named its first ambassador to Damascus in five years in a bid to engage a former foe.

Burns, the US under secretary for political affairs, met the Syrian leader against a barrage of domestic opposition to the engagement of one of Israel's bitterest enemies.

But he described the appointment of a new ambassador as a positive signal of intent by the administration of President Barack Obama.

"This is a clear sign after five years without an ambassador in Damascus of America's readiness to improve relations and to cooperate to pursue a just and comprehensive peace



PHOTO: AFP

Handout picture shows Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (L) meeting US Undersecretary for Political Affairs William Burns in Damascus on Wednesday. Burns met the Syrian leader a day after Washington named its first ambassador to Damascus in five years in a bid to engage the former foe.

between Arabs and Israelis," said Burns.

The White House was keen to "make progress on all tracks in the peace process and to pursue regional peace and stability," the US diplo-

mat told reporters after meeting Assad.

"There are challenges on the road but my meeting with President Assad leaves me hopeful that we can make progress together in the inter-

est of both our countries.

"I had quite productive and extensive discussions with President Assad. We talked about areas on which we disagree but also we found areas of common ground on which we can build," Burns said.

Washington's ties with Damascus had been strained by Syria's three-decade-old alliance with Iran and US allegations of meddling in the affairs of its eastern neighbour Iraq.

Career diplomat Robert Ford will be the first US ambassador to Damascus since Washington recalled its envoy after Lebanon's former prime minister Rafiq Hariri was killed in February 2005 in a bombing blamed on Syria.

"Ambassador Ford is a highly accomplished diplomat with many years of experience in the Middle East," said White House spokesman Robert Gibbs.

Mossad in hot seat over Hamas man's murder

AFP, Jerusalem

The Mossad was in the hot seat yesterday over the murder of a top Hamas man in Dubai, as at least seven Israelis said their identities were stolen by the assassins, widely thought to be agents of the Jewish state's infamous secret service.

The killing of top Hamas militant Mahmud al-Mabhuh while on a weapons purchasing trip to Dubai last month has widely been blamed on the Mossad, although no evidence has yet linked the agency, which in keeping with tradition has kept mum on the affair.

But suspicions deepened after Dubai this week released the photos and names of the 11 European passport holders -- six from Britain, three from Ireland, one from Germany and one from France -- alleged to have been members of the hitsquad.

Shortly afterwards, Britain, France and Ireland said that the passports used in the operation were faked and at least seven of the "assassins" turned out to be dual national Israelis whose passports appeared to have been stolen.

Khamenei slams Hillary for spreading 'lies'

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei lashed out at US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton yesterday, saying she had spread "lies" against the Islamic republic during a tour of the Gulf.

"Those who have turned the Persian Gulf into an arms depot in order to milk regional countries for money have now dispatched their official to go around the Persian Gulf and spread lies against Iran," Khamenei said referring to Clinton at a meeting with visitors from the northwestern city of Tabriz.

Clinton wrapped up her visit on Tuesday to the Gulf where she drummed up support for new round of UN sanctions against Tehran for pressing ahead with its sensitive uranium enrichment programme in defiance of repeated Security Council ultimatums.

During her trip, Clinton said that Iran was moving towards a "military dictatorship" and that there was no "evidence" to support Tehran's claim that its nuclear programme was entirely peaceful.

Clinton's tour of Qatar and Saudi Arabia aimed to isolate Iran from its Arab neighbours and to put pressure on Tehran's ally Beijing to drop its resistance to UN sanctions targeting mainly Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Last week, Iran began enriching uranium to 20 percent purity, which Washington and other world powers say adds to evidence it is seeking a nuclear weapon.

Tehran denies the charge, insisting its goal is peaceful nuclear energy and research.

On Tuesday, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad adopted a twin-track approach warning world powers against imposing sanctions but suggesting that Iran could suspend its enrichment of uranium to 20 percent purity.

"If anybody seeks to create problems for Iran, our response will not be like before. Something in response will be done which will make them (the world powers) regret" their move, Ahmadinejad told a Tehran news conference.



PHOTO: AFP

The face of Pharaoh Tutankhamun is displayed in a climate-controlled case at his tomb in the Valley of the Kings, close to Luxor, 500km south of Cairo, in this November 4, 2007 file photo.

Tutankhamun died from broken leg, malaria

AP, Cairo

Egypt's most famous pharaoh, King Tutankhamun, was a frail boy who suffered from a cleft palate and club foot. He died of complications from a broken leg exacerbated by malaria and his parents were most likely brother and sister.

Two years of DNA testing and CT scans on Tut's 3,300-year-old mummy and 15 others are helping end many of the myths surrounding the boy king. While a comparatively minor ruler, he has captivated the public since the 1922 discovery of his tomb, which was filled with a stunning array of jewels and artefacts, including a golden funeral mask.

The study, which will be published Wednesday in the Journal of the American Medical Association, provides the firmest family tree yet for Tut. The tests pointed to Pharaoh Akhenaten, who tried to revolutionise ancient Egyptian religion to worship one god, as Tut's father. His mother was one of Akhenaten's sisters, it said.

Tut, who became pharaoh at age 10 in 1333 BC, ruled for just nine years at a pivotal time in Egypt's history. Speculation has long swirled over his death at 19.

Dalai Lama heads for Obama meet

AFP, New Delhi

Tibet's exiled spiritual leader the Dalai Lama headed yesterday for the United States and a long-awaited meeting with President Barack Obama that has infuriated China.

For the 74-year-old Dalai Lama -- vilified by Beijing as a "wolf in monk's robes" -- recognition by the White House is crucial to maintaining a critical international spotlight on Chinese treatment of his Himalayan homeland.

The Obama administration has stressed that the president is receiving the Dalai Lama as a spiritual rather than political leader, and the meeting will take place in the White House Map Room and not the Oval Office.

But such diplomatic nuances will do little to dampen the Tibetan's enthusiasm and are not expected to mollify Chinese anger.

"The most important thing is that the meeting is taking place," the Dalai Lama's spokesman Tenzin Takha said before leaving India with the Buddhist leader.

'Haiti quake far more destructive than 2004 tsunami'

AFP, Port-Au-Prince

The scale of devastation in Haiti is far worse than in Asia after the 2004 tsunami, a study has said, estimating the cost of last month's earthquake at up to 14 billion dollars.

The report released Tuesday from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) raised the possibility that the quake could be the most destructive disaster in modern history.

Its stark assessment comes with Port-au-Prince still lying in ruins more than one month on, while the bodies of more than 200,000 dead pile up in mass graves outside the capital.

The study's release coincided with what would normally be Haiti's annual carnival, an explosion of pulsing music and colourful parades. But this year, the events have been cancelled as no one is in the mood to party.

The preliminary IDB report estimated the damage at between eight and 14 billion dollars in what was already the poorest country in the Americas before the catastrophe.

Factoring in Haiti's population and economic output, the upper estimate would make it the most destructive natural disaster in modern history, the bank said.

"Indeed, in this respect the Haiti earthquake was vastly more destructive than the Indonesian tsunami of 2004 and the cyclone that hit Myanmar in 2008," an IDB statement said.

"It caused five times more deaths per million inhabitants than the second-ranking natural killer, the 1972 earthquake in Nicaragua."

Haiti officials say more than 217,000 people were killed in the quake, or about 2.4 percent of the country's population of nine million.

Astronauts unveil phenomenal new window on world

AP, Cape Canaveral

In a highly anticipated grand finale to their mission, astronauts opened the shutters on the International Space Station's new observation deck yesterday and were humbled by "absolutely spectacular" views of Earth from inside the elaborate atrium of windows.

The \$27 million lookout opened each of its seven eyes one window at a time as the crews of the station and shuttle Endeavour carried out their third and final spacewalk.

It was the moment everyone had been waiting for: The round central window the largest ever flown in space was the first exposed as astronauts inside cranked open the shutter as they sailed 220 miles above the South Pacific.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators stage a protest holding placards reading "Help" and "Super Powers don't end poverty, Political will does...Now or Never" during the informal meeting of development ministers on Wednesday in La Granja, near Segovia in Spain. Ministers and secretaries of state from the European Union member countries attend the meeting organised by the Spanish rotating Presidency of the EU to prepare for the New York meeting on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) schedule for September 2010.

BJP leadership meet begins amid tight security

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Indore

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) national executive met here yesterday amid tight security in the wake of the weekend Pune bombing that killed 11 people.

The party's top and second-rung leaders gathered in a tented accommodation called Kushabhau Thakre Nagar. The first to speak was outgoing president Rajnath Singh.

Attending the conclave are star leader and former deputy prime minister LK Advani, Chief Ministers Narendra Modi of Gujarat and Raman Singh of Gujarat and former presidents Murlidhar Joshi and M Venkaiah Naidu.

All of them are staying in specially designed eco-friendly tents. Some 1,300 tents and 25 VIP tents have been put up. About 5,000 delegates from all over the country are at the BJP meet.

AL, allies to campaign

FROM PAGE 1

Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and allied student organisation Islami Chhatra Shibir.

AL leaders will also soon start their own countrywide tours where they will formally demand banning of religion-based politics, said party insiders.

Awami Jubo League, youth front of AL, at its central executive committee meeting yesterday demanded that the government bans the politics of Jamaat-Shibir, and take stern actions against the killers of a Rajshahi University unit Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) activist.

Claiming that BNP, Jamaat, and Shibir have plans to destabilise the country, the meeting decided to launch a series of nationwide protest programmes which will be launched in the capital on February 23 to continue till March 3. On February 24 and March 1, Jubo League will hold protest programmes in all upazilas and districts. The series will end in the capital as well.

AL backed BCL General Secretary Mahfuzul Haider Chowdhury Rofiq said they will launch united agitation programmes along with all major student organisations to press home the demand for the ban.

BCL and allied student organisations will carry out the programmes together and separately in educational institutions across the country with special emphasis on a demand for imposing the ban on the campuses.

"We will hold rallies in all constituencies of the capital to create public opinion against the politics of Jamaat-Shibir. We want a ban on Jamaat-Shibir

politics," Dhaka City AL General Secretary Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said the city unit of 14-party recently took a unanimous decision to that end.

Key leaders of the alliance including Workers Party President Rahsed Khan Menon, and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) President Hasanul Haque Inu already made the demand publicly.

Meanwhile, State Minister for Home Shamsul Hoque Tuku told The Daily Star, "If the demand comes from all segments of the society, it will be easier for the government to concede."

He also noted that opinions on major university and college campuses are very important prior to taking any initiative in that regard. "If university authorities think that Shibir is a threat to the country's sovereignty, and responsible for destroying congenial atmosphere in educational institutions, then the authorities could ban Shibir," he said.

The Communist Party of Bangladesh backed Bangladesh Chhatra Union President Manavendra Dev said Shibir should be banned and boycotted politically, socially, and culturally. The movement against Jamaat-Shibir should also be a united one, added Manav who is also the convener of Progotisheef Chhatra Jote, an alliance of left leaning student organisations.

JSD backed Bangladesh Chhatra League President Hossain Ahmed Tafsir told The Daily Star that a united movement against the fundamentalist forces should be launched immediately.

Office of the Executive Engineer Drainage (E&M) Division Dhaka WASA, Segunbagicha Dhaka-1000. Invitation for Tender. Includes details of project, budget, and tendering process.

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