



Pakistani soldiers stand by blindfolded and bound Taliban militants arrested in a military operation in Bara Akka Khail, a village of the Khyber Agency yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

UN force rejects order to quit Ivory Coast

AFP, Abidjan

The United Nations peacekeeping force in Ivory Coast rejected isolated leader Laurent Gbagbo's demand that it pack its bags yesterday, at the risk of provoking a showdown with his hardline supporters.

Gbagbo has ordered the 10,000-strong UN mission to leave, accusing it of arming rebels loyal to his rival Alassane Ouattara, but UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon dismissed the ultimatum and called on him to step down.

Both Gbagbo and Ouattara claim to have won last month's presidential vote but, while the latter has been recognised as the victor by the international community, the incumbent is clinging doggedly on to power.

Tension has reached boiling point in the commercial capital Abidjan, where violence erupted Thursday during a protest march by Ouattara's supporters, and where Gbagbo's loyalist armed forces are in an uneasy stand-off with the UN.

"We're going to continue our patrols but we're not seeking confrontation. There are sensitive areas where we don't go, near the presidency," said Hamadoun Toure, of the United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI).

"We're increasing our vigilance, and we're ready for anything," he said.

Ivory Coast has been divided between north and south since 2002, when a failed putsch against Gbagbo triggered civil war. UNOCI deployed in 2004 to monitor a ceasefire, and was assigned to oversee last month's elections.

The UN monitors endorsed results from Ivory Coast's electoral commission that gave Ouattara victory in the November 28 run-off, but Gbagbo's allies on the Constitutional Council annulled the result, claiming fraud.

Now, both men style themselves president. Gbagbo retains control of the southern armed

forces, the Abidjan ministries and the cocoa ports that are Ivory Coast's main source of revenue.

Ouattara is backed by former rebel fighters from the north -- the so-called "New Forces" -- but he and his government are holed up in a luxury golf resort in Abidjan, protected by a cordon of UN peacekeepers.

The United Nations, United States, former colonial power France, the African Union and Ivory Coast's West African neighbours in the ECOWAS bloc have all demanded that Gbagbo step aside and allow Ouattara to assume office.

Instead, there is every sign that the regime is hardening its stance.

On Thursday, troops and police fired on pro-Ouattara demonstrators in Abidjan, killing between 11 and 30 people. Opposition newspapers and radio stations have been banned, and the Golf Hotel is surrounded.

Late on Friday, gunmen in military uniform opened fire on a UN peacekeeping patrol returning to its Abidjan base. Then, on Saturday, Gbagbo's spokeswoman ordered French and UN troops to leave.

"The president of the Republic of the Ivory Coast has just asked for the immediate departure from Ivorian territory of UNOCI and the French forces that support it," Education Minister Jacqueline Lohoues-Oble said.

The UN Secretary General was unimpressed and rejected the order out of hand.

Ban condemned attacks on UN troops and said the force "will continue to monitor and document any human rights violations, incitement to hatred and violence, or attacks on UN peacekeepers."

Gbagbo's next move is not yet clear, but his most notorious lieutenant -- Minister for Youth Charles Ble Goude -- has called on his supporters to be prepared to fight to reassert Ivory Coast's sovereignty.

ISRAELI AIR STRIKE Five killed in Gaza Strip

BBC ONLINE

An Israeli air strike has killed five people in the Gaza Strip, according to Palestinian sources and the Israeli military yesterday.

The five killed were militants, Palestinian hospital sources said.

The rocket targeted "a squad of terror operatives", Israel said, "who were preparing to launch rockets towards Israeli territory".

Rocket fire from Gaza has dropped sharply since Israel's devastating 22-day offensive in December 2008.

Hamas, the Islamist group which controls the Gaza Strip, says it has tried to stop rocket fire aimed at Israel.

Palestinian sources later identified the five dead as members of a small militant group, Ansar al-Sunna, Reuters news agency reported.

In the past 18 months one person in Israel, a Thai farm worker, has been killed by a rocket fired from Gaza.

According to Israeli Defence Force figures, 180 rockets and mortars have been fired into Israel by militants in 2010.

The United Nations says that in 2010, 55 Palestinians, including 22 civilians, have been killed by Israeli military action in Gaza.

The UN says over 200 Palestinians have been injured in the same period.

Obama to sign end to military gay ban

AFP, Washington

The United States stood yesterday on the cusp of letting gays serve openly in its military for the first time, as the US Congress sent President Barack Obama a bill to bring about the historic shift.

Senators voted 65-31 Saturday to approve House-passed legislation to repeal the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" compromise of 1993 requiring gay soldiers to keep quiet about their sexual orientation or face dismissal.

"It is time to recognize that sacrifice, valor and integrity are no more defined by sexual orientation than they are by race or gender, religion or creed," said Obama, who vowed during his 2008 White House bid to lift the ban.

Obama was expected to sign the measure later in the week, launching a White House and Pentagon certification process to ensure the smoothest possible transition at a time when Washington is fighting two wars.

The Pentagon has said it could take up to a year to implement the new policy.

Eight of the White House's Republican foes backed the change -- perhaps the biggest such shift in the US military since racial integration began in 1948 -- while three Republicans and one Democrat missed the vote.

The measure, its passage assured when it cleared a procedural hurdle by a 63-33 margin

earlier, fueled bitterly divisive debate in the already polarized Senate.

"The first casualty in the war in Iraq was a gay soldier. The mine that took off his right leg didn't give a darn whether he was gay or straight. We shouldn't either," Democratic Senator Carl Levin said before the ballot.

"We cannot let these patriots down. Their suffering should end. It will end with the passage of this bill. I urge its passage today," said Levin, who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"It isn't broke, don't fix it," countered Senator John McCain, the top Republican on Levin's panel and Obama's defeated 2008 White House rival and a fierce foe of lifting the ban.

"To somehow allege that it has harmed our military is not justified by the facts," McCain said. "Don't think that it won't be at great cost."

Passage triggered a time-consuming process that calls for lifting the ban only after the president, the secretary of defense, and the top US uniformed officer certify that doing so can be done without harming military readiness, effectiveness, unit cohesion, recruiting and retention.

Republicans have scoffed that the leaders involved have already stated their support to ending the policy.

"They have already made up their minds," said Republican Senator James Inhofe.

US-Turkish ties 'more important than ever'

Says Obama

AFP, Ankara

US ties with Turkey are "more important than ever" despite differences over Iran, President Barack Obama said, also urging Ankara to repair ties with Israel, in an interview published yesterday.

"Our shared interests, our shared values... undergird our relationship even when we disagree," Obama said in written response to questions by Turkey's mass-selling Hurriyet newspaper.

"Given the increasingly complex challenges the world faces, I believe that US-Turkish cooperation is more important now than ever," he said.

In June, Turkey irked the United States as it voted against fresh sanctions slapped on Iran by the UN Security Council, insisting that a nuclear fuel swap deal it hammered out with Tehran, together with Brazil, should be given a chance.

Its "no" vote came atop a severe crisis with one-time ally Israel after nine Turks were killed in an Israeli raid on a Gaza-bound activist ship.

Obama told Hurriyet he remained "committed to a diplomatic resolution" of tensions over Iran, but stressed the Islamic Republic had failed to convince the international community that its nuclear programme was solely for peaceful purposes.

Assange vows WikiLeaks strength despite new threats

AFP, Ellingham, UK

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said the site will stay strong despite another blow to its funding and the publication yesterday of new details of the sex crime allegations against him.

The Australian began his third full day under "mansion arrest" at a friend's house while he fights extradition to Sweden, vowing that the whistleblowing website would continue to publish more secure US diplomatic cables.

Assange on Saturday denounced Bank of America, the largest US bank, for becoming the latest institution to halt financial transactions for WikiLeaks after MasterCard, PayPal, Visa Europe and others.

The bank said its decision was "based upon our reasonable belief that WikiLeaks may be engaged in activities that are, among other things, inconsistent with our internal policies for processing payments."

"It's a new type of business McCarthyism in the US to deprive this organisation of the funds that it needs to survive, to deprive me personally of the funds that my lawyers need to protect me against extradition to the US or to Sweden," Assange told AFP.

The term was coined to describe the anti-communist pursuits of former US senator Joseph McCarthy from the late 1940s to the 1950s.

Assange is staying at Ellingham Hall, the mansion in eastern England of journalist friend Vaughan Smith, as part of the conditions of bail, which he was granted by London's High Court on Thursday.

He must also report daily to a nearby police station and wear an electronic tag.

Several British newspapers published lurid new details of the allegations of sexual assault against two women, over which Swedish prosecutors want to question him. The 39-year-old denies the charges.

The Guardian newspaper -- which has cooperated with WikiLeaks on the publication of the US documents -- and the Mail yesterday both reported that the two women with whom he had sex in Sweden had gone to police after

he refused to take an HIV test.

Assange hit out at Swedish handling of the case, accusing authorities there of leaking fresh details about the case that even he and his defence lawyers have not had access to.

The former computer hacker also reiterated that there were threats against his life and those of the website's staff, but he vowed that WikiLeaks would continue publishing the cables.

"We are a robust organisation. During my time in solitary confinement we continued to publish every day and its not going to change," he said.

Assange claimed earlier in an interview with Forbes magazine that a "megaleak" by the website will target a major US bank "early next year".

WikiLeaks has enraged Washington with its release of thousands of leaked US diplomatic cables and confidential military documents relating to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

Assange said Friday it looked "increasingly likely" the US would try to extradite him on charges related to the leaked cables as he savoured his first day on bail.

He said his lawyers believed a secret US grand jury investigation had been started into his role in the release.

Media reports suggest that US prosecutors are trying to build a case against Assange on the grounds that he encouraged a US soldier, Bradley Manning, to steal US cables from a government computer and pass them to WikiLeaks.

A report by congressional researchers said the Espionage Act and other US laws could be used to prosecute Assange, but there is no known precedent for prosecuting publishers in such a case.

The latest US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks indicated that the United Nations offered Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe a retirement package and safe haven overseas if he agreed to stand down.

The offer was made by Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general at the time in 2000, said the memo, which was drawn up by US officials and cited the then-opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

LATEST LEAKS

UN offered Mugabe retirement exile deal

AFP, London

The United Nations offered Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe a retirement package and safe haven overseas if he agreed to stand down, according to a US diplomatic cable revealed by WikiLeaks yesterday.

The offer was made by Kofi Annan, the UN secretary general at the time in 2000, said the memo which was drawn up by US officials and cited the then-opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

"Kofi Annan, in the recent meeting in New York during the millennium summit, offered Mugabe a deal to step down," said the memo written in September 2000 and printed in Britain's The Observer newspaper.

"Although (the MDC source) said the MDC was not privy to the details, he surmised that Annan's supposed deal probably included provision of safe haven and a financial package from Libyan president (Moamer) Kadhafi."

"The opposition party heard that Mugabe turned down the offer the following day after discussing it with the first lady."

But the uneasy "unity" government has been on the brink of collapse for months.

Mugabe said on Saturday he was "very confident" of victory after his ZANU-PF party backed him to contest a likely election next year against Tsvangirai.



A Belarus orthodox nun casts her ballot into a ballot box during voting in the town of Grodno some 250 km from Minsk yesterday. Belarus went to the polls in presidential elections expected to hand a fourth term to its unpredictable strongman Alexander Lukashenko, extending his grip on power for another five years.

PHOTO: AFP

Venezuela's Chavez and US clash over future ambassador

BBC ONLINE

Venezuela has reiterated its opposition to the man likely to become the next US ambassador to the country.

The row over diplomat Larry Palmer dates back to August, when he angered Caracas with critical remarks he made about the government.

The US State Department says that if he is confirmed by the Senate, Mr Palmer will travel to Venezuela soon.

President Hugo Chavez says he should be detained and sent home if he tries to enter Venezuela.

In August, during his confirmation process, Mr Palmer suggested to a US senator that morale was low in Venezuela's military.

He also expressed concern about Colombian rebels finding refuge in Venezuela,

suggesting there were ties between the rebels and the government.

"He went ahead and said whatever he felt like saying, disrespecting Venezuela," Mr Chavez said in a televised speech. "How is he going to be ambassador? He disqualified himself."

He told his foreign minister to seize Mr Palmer if he tried to fly into Caracas international airport.

"Give Mr Palmer a coffee from me, and then bye-bye. He cannot, he cannot enter the country."

Mr Chavez was speaking a day after the Venezuelan parliament voted to allow him to rule by decree for 18 months, without needing the support of congress.

The move has been denounced by his critics in Venezuela, and the US State Department.

Iraq PM to name cabinet, delay security posts

AFP, Baghdad

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki will himself take charge of Iraq's security as ministers heading the army and police will not yet be named when he unveils his cabinet today, sources said yesterday.

The naming of the government, which must be considered by parliament and approved by Saturday, is the final step in ending the protracted political impasse that has persisted since inconclusive elections on March 7.

It also comes with a year to go before US troops must withdraw from Iraq entirely.

Politicians said the ministers of interior, defence and national security would not be named when Maliki presents his cabinet, citing the sensitivity of the posts and the need for consensus as reasons for the delay.

"He will head a government of 38 ministers and ministers of state, but the three ministries in charge of security will not be announced tomorrow," said Khalid al-Assadi, an MP in Maliki's coalition who is seen as close to the premier.

"The ministers will be chosen by Maliki from among a field of candidates and he will present his choices to all the parties to have their agreement because these ministers cannot be party political," Assadi said.

Maliki has in the past been accused by critics of trying to consolidate his grip on power by grouping increasing responsibilities, in particular intelligence and security, under the office of the prime minister.

An aide to the premier confirmed the delay, saying: "These three ministries need more time and study because of the sensitivity of the posts."

"Everyone must agree on the candidates and the nominees must be acceptable, and that needs more time," the aide added, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Maliki's State of Law coalition won 89 seats in the elections, two fewer than the Iraqiya bloc of ex-premier Iyad Allawi. But neither won enough for a parliamentary majority, triggering an impasse that is only now being resolved.

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