

Gates urges N Korea to show good faith

AFP, Seoul

Fresh nuclear disarmament talks with North Korea are still possible but only if the communist state ends "dangerous provocations" and shows good faith, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates said yesterday.

Gates, ending an Asian tour with a brief stopover in Seoul, said the process must start with talks between the two Koreas, despite tensions that spiked with the deadly bombardment of a South Korean island by the North in November.

The United States and close ally South Korea also accuse Pyongyang of torpedoing a South Korean warship last March with the loss of 46 lives, a charge it denies.



Tunisians shout slogans during a protest rally in front the Interior ministry in Tunis after Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's address to the nation yesterday. Thousands of Tunisians demanded the departure of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in marches in the capital and other towns, a day after he pledged to not seek another term to end growing unrest.

North Sudan ruling party says South vote "broadly fair"

REUTERS, Khartoum

A senior north Sudanese official said the south's independence referendum was largely fair and his party would accept the likely vote for secession -- the most conciliatory gesture to date from Khartoum.

The comments from a leading member of the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) will allay initial concerns that the north might try to disrupt the vote in an effort to keep control of the south's oil reserves.

It may also reduce the risk of a relapse into general north-south conflict after the referendum. Northern and southern leaders remain at odds over some sensitive issues including how to share out oil revenues after a split and the ownership of the Abyei region,

where clashes re-erupted as the vote began.

Southerners yesterday started their penultimate day of voting in the week-long referendum on whether to declare independence, a plebiscite that it widely expected to see the underdeveloped region emerge as a new nation.

"We are satisfied with the process and, as it has been declared by the President Al-Bashir, we will respect the outcome of the referendum... It will most likely be for secession," the NCP's Ibrahim Ghandour told Reuters in an interview yesterday.

Ghandour, the NCP's secretary for political relations, said the vote was "broadly fair," despite some reports of supporters of Sudanese unity being intimidated in remote areas of south Sudan's Bahr El-Ghazal states.

TUNISIAN PROTESTS

Thousands march urging president to quit

BBC ONLINE

Thousands of demonstrators have gathered in the centre of the Tunisian capital, Tunis, calling for President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to leave office immediately.

On Thursday night, Mr Ben Ali - who has governed Tunisia since 1987 - announced he would stand down in 2014.

His speech came after weeks of protests that have left at least 23 dead.

A BBC correspondent in Tunis says security forces are surrounding the protesters but have not yet intervened.

Tunisia has not seen such protests in the 23 years since Mr Ben Ali came to power, says the BBC's Adam Mynott in Tunisia.

Trade unions have called on people to observe a general strike today.

AFP correspondent, who is outside the interior ministry in Tunis, says between 6,000 and 7,000 people have gathered, test-

ing the president's promises of greater freedom of expression.

They are saying Mr Ben Ali must go and that Tunisia cannot have true democracy while he remains in charge.

This is in reaction to the president's speech, our correspondent says, but probably not the reaction he was expecting.

Human rights groups say more than 60 people have died in weeks of unrest across the country, as security forces responded to people protesting over corruption, unemployment levels and high food prices.

Meanwhile, UK tour operator Thomas Cook is pulling out all its customers currently on holiday in Tunisia. A spokesperson for the company said six special flights had been laid on to repatriate its tour groups.

Tourism is key to Tunisia's economy and an important source of jobs.

The UK, the US and France are all advising against non-essential travel to Tunisia.

Greek lodges challenge over WWII atrocity suit

AFP, Athens

Greece yesterday lodged its challenge to a German appeal at the International Court of Justice against a ruling that gave compensation to Greek victims of a Nazi wartime atrocity, officials said.

The Greek foreign ministry said Athens had lodged its demand "to participate in the process in order to present its position... and secure justice for the victims of Distomo," a Greek village massacred by Nazi troops in 1944.

Germany has dismissed the Greek challenge as unfounded and expressed confidence that the ICJ will rule in its favour.

British coalition dealt polls blow

AFP, London

Britain's coalition was dealt a blow yesterday in its first by-election test, with the opposition Labour Party claiming voters had delivered a clear message on the government's austerity measures.

The poll in Oldham East and Saddleworth was the first proper chance for voters to cast their verdict on the eight-month-old coalition between Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

Debbie Abrahams retained the seat outside Manchester in northwest England for Labour with a greatly increased majority of more than 3,500.

The Liberal Democrats finished second while the Conservatives in third place saw their vote slashed by more than 7,000.

In the general election in May, Labour beat the Liberal Democrats by just 103 votes but the lawmaker elected was stripped of the seat for making false claims about his Lib Dem opponent.

The newly elected Abrahams said: "The voters have... sent a clear message to those watching in Downing Street.

"Across the country there is growing anger against your reckless policies, your broken promises and your unfair cuts."

Late Pope John Paul on way to sainthood

BBC ONLINE

Pope Benedict XVI has formally approved a miracle attributed to his late predecessor, paving the way to John Paul II's beatification on 1 May.

The process of beatification, or declaring the late pontiff to be "blessed", is a crucial step towards making him a saint.

John Paul died in 2005 after a papacy of nearly 27 years.

The Vatican credits him with the miraculous cure of a nun said to have had Parkinson's Disease.

Church officials believe that the Polish pope, who himself suffered from the condition, interceded for the miraculous cure of



Sister Marie Simon-Pierre, a Frenchwoman in her late forties.

She has said her illness inexplicably disappeared two months after John Paul II's death, after she and her fellow nuns had prayed to him.

Church-appointed doctors agreed that there was no medical explanation for the curing of the nun, although last year there were some doubts about the validity of the miracle.

A Polish newspaper said that a doctor who scrutinised the nun's case had concluded that she might have been suffering not from Parkinson's, but from a nervous disorder from which temporary recovery is medically possible.

Nigerian President wins party primary

BBC ONLINE

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan has won ruling party primaries, making him favourite in April's elections.

Mr Jonathan's main challenger was ex-Vice-President Atiku Abubakar, who was supported by some northern powerbrokers.

The president won an overwhelming victory even though some delegates said the party should choose a northerner.

The People's Democratic Party candidate has won every poll since the end of military rule in 1999.

Berlusconi in probe over sex scandal



Silvio Berlusconi

Ruby

BBC ONLINE

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi is being investigated over his dealings with a teenage nightclub dancer, prosecutors say.

Mr Berlusconi is suspected of abusing his power by trying to have the Moroccan girl - known as Ruby - released from a police cell.

Some reports say the probe includes allegations of underage prostitution. The girl was 17 at the time.

Supporters of Mr Berlusconi, 74, say the claims are unfounded.

NEWS IN brief

Rival urges force to oust I Coast's Gbagbo

AFP, Washington

Ivory Coast leader Alassane Ouattara yesterday demanded the use of force to oust strongman Laurent Gbagbo who has refused to cede power after disputed elections, speaking to a US think-tank via videolink.

"I believe seriously that force should be used to remove Mr. Gbagbo," Ouattara said in a message broadcast from Abidjan.

"This is clearly a situation of gross human rights violations," he said.

Clinton urges China to improve human rights

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton yesterday urged China to release dissidents including Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, saying that human rights problems showed Beijing's "unfulfilled promise."

In a wide-ranging speech ahead of President Hu Jintao's state visit to the United States next week, Clinton was unusually forthright in her calls for China to improve human rights, which she called "universal."

"A vibrant civil society would help address some of China's most pressing issues, from food safety to

Smarter Somali pirates thwarting navies, NATO admits

MOMBASA, Kenya

Somali pirates' use of "mother ships" to attack their prey is complicating foreign navies' efforts to improve safety in the Indian Ocean, a senior anti-piracy commander said yesterday.

Somalia's expanding army of pirates are increasingly launching their attacks from large, already hijacked vessels that offer greater physical protection during boarding and whose kidnapped crews

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BRAZIL FLOODS
Anger grows in Brazil as flood toll mounts

BBC ONLINE

More than 500 people are now known to have died in floods in south-eastern Brazil, the country's worst natural disaster for several decades.

Heavy rain has led to massive mudslides hitting several towns, resulting in thousands being made homeless.

Police say the number of dead is likely to rise further.

Brazilian authorities have been criticised for a lack of disaster planning and allowing people to build homes in areas known to become treacherous in the rainy season.

The death toll has now surpassed the devastating 1967 mudslides in Caraguatatuba, Sao Paulo state, in which up to 430 people perished.

Rescue workers will resume searching for survivors in the mountainous Serrana region, north of Rio de Janeiro, later yesterday.

Many spent Thursday scabbling with their bare hands through debris.

On her visit to the area, President Dilma Rousseff promised a shipment of seven tonnes of medicines.

In the Campo Grande area of Teresopolis, which was earlier cut off, rescuers found people pulling bodies from the mud.

In the neighbouring town of Petropolis, local resident Nelson Toledo told the BBC that some areas "had been completely devastated" by the floods and mudslides.

He said "thousands" of people remained trapped in their homes.

About 200 people are so far known to died in Nova Friburgo, some 175 in Teresopolis and dozens more in Petropolis, media report.

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