

# Tunisia's new leadership braces for protests

## 3 ministers resign as key trade union rejects new govt

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia held its breath yesterday as a new transition government unveiled unprecedented freedoms but also left powerful posts in the hands of old regime figures braced for protests.

Meanwhile, three ministers belonging to Tunisia's main trade union resigned from the new government yesterday, after the union refused to recognise the country's new leadership earlier, one of the three told AFP.

"We are resigning from the government after a call from our union," said Houssine Dimassi, who had been named minister for training and employment in a transitional unity government unveiled only on Monday. Dimassi said the two other ministers

resigning were Abdeljelil Bedoui, who was named as a minister working in the prime minister's office, and Anouar Ben Gueddour, a junior transport minister.

Tunisia's main trade union, which played a key role in protests against the North African state's ousted president, refused to recognise the new government yesterday, a spokesman told AFP.

The union has decided "not to recognise the new government," its spokesman Ifa Nasr said.

Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi is one of eight ministers staying on from the previous government of disgraced president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who resigned and fled on Friday in the Arab world's first such

popular revolt.

Ghannouchi said that the ministers remaining, including the defence and interior ministers, had acted "to preserve the national interest."

"They kept their posts because we need them at this time," Ghannouchi said on French radio Europe 1. "All of them have clean hands," he said.

Police have clashed with Ben Ali loyalists in the capital in recent days.

As he unveiled the new government and promised parliamentary and presidential elections within six months on Monday, Ghannouchi announced complete media freedom and the release of all political prisoners.

But many Tunisians remained unconvinced by the new leadership.



PHOTO: AFP

A Secret Service agent guards his post on the roof of the White House while a lamp post is adorned with Chinese and US national flags in Washington, DC, on January 17, 2011 prior to Chinese President Hu Jintao's state visit. Ahead of a legacy-building state visit to the US, Chinese President Hu Jintao called for "common ground" while acknowledging that "sensitive issues" needed to be addressed

# Change tugs at US-China ties ahead of Hu visit

AFP, Washington

China's President Hu Jintao has set out for the United States at a time of flux and stress in Sino-US ties, with America weakened by crisis and Beijing flexing a new range of powers.

Hu headed to the United States yesterday, the foreign ministry in Beijing said.

And while US President Barack Obama will lay on the pageantry of a state visit after Hu arrives later in the day, tensions on human rights, currency rates and North Korea, as well as military mistrust, are wobbling the key relationship.

Obama and Hu also both face domestic political puzzles that could stress ties between the world's top power and its fastest growing one.

America is scarred by a financial meltdown and its slow recovery. A power transfer is meanwhile looming in China, where economic and military expansions have uncorked new challenges for communist

leaders.

Hu's state visit will likely be his last before a Chinese leadership transition is complete by 2013 and will have US officials seeking a glimpse into the next era of relations with Beijing.

"America and China have arrived at a critical juncture, a time when the choices we make, big and small, will shape the trajectory of this relationship," US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said last week.

In the past, US presidents framed their efforts as peacefully managing China's emergence into the world economy and global diplomatic system.

But that once far-off day when China would take its place among the great powers has already arrived, making Obama's task more complex.

Obama's first move in China-US relations was to seek cooperation across a broad range of issues, from climate change to economic disputes, which sparked talk of a new G2 grouping of dominant powers.

# African army chiefs meet on I Coast intervention

AFP, Bamako

West African military chiefs met yesterday to finalise a plan for military action to force Ivory Coast's Laurent Gbagbo to give up the presidency after he lost a November election.

Gbagbo has refused to hand over to his rival Alassane Ouattara, widely recognised as winner of the November 28 election, despite mounting pressure and threats of military action.

"Our preparations are very advanced and we are ready to move into action if necessary and that must be made clear," senior Nigerian officer Olusegun Petinrin told AFP.

# S Sudanese warned against premature celebrations

AFP, Juba, Sudan

South Sudan leaders warned against premature independence celebrations yesterday as the slow process of collating the result of last week's vote ground on amid indications of a landslide.

Information minister Barnaba Marial Benjamin said that any triumphalism about the separation of the mainly Christian, African south from the mainly Arab, Muslim north risked sparking a "miscarriage" for their nascent state.

"The opinion polls indicate that the south will definitely vote for a state of their own but we must still wait for the final result," the minister said.

"Don't dance and beat drums and celebrate before the baby is born in case there may be a miscarriage."

Benjamin called on southerners to be particularly careful about any crowing in front of northerners still in the south, nearly all of whom were excluded from voting in the referendum by the registration criteria.

"The north Sudanese who are here, these people are here to stay. They have the right as much as you (have) as citizens of Sudan," he said.

# World is 'one poor harvest' from chaos

## A new insight revealed

AFP, Washington

Like many environmentalists, Lester Brown is worried.

In his new book "World on the Edge," released this week, Brown says mankind has pushed civilisation to the brink of collapse by bleeding aquifers dry and overplowing land to feed an ever-growing population, while overloading the atmosphere with carbon dioxide.

If we continue to sap Earth's natural resources, "civilisational collapse is no longer a matter of whether but when," Brown, the founder of Worldwatch and the Earth Policy Institute, which both seek to create a sustainable society, told AFP.

What distinguishes "World on the Edge" from his dozens of other books is "the sense of urgency," Brown told AFP. "Things could start unravelling at any time now and it's likely to start on the food front."

"We've got to get our act together quickly. We don't have generations or

even decades -- we're one poor harvest away from chaos," he said.

"We have been talking for decades about saving the planet, but the question now is, can we save civilization?"

In "World on the Edge", Brown points to warning signs and lays out arguments for why he believes the cause of the chaos will be the unsustainable way that mankind is going about producing more and more food.

Resources are already beginning to be depleted, and that could cause a global "food bubble" created by overusing land and water to meet the exponential growth in demand for food -- grain, in particular -- to burst.

Two huge dustbowl have formed in the world, one in Africa and the other in China and Mongolia, because of soil erosion caused by overplowing.

In Lesotho, the grain harvest has dropped by more than half over the last decade or two because of soil erosion, Brown said.

# Moscow reaffirms Soviet recognition of Palestine

REUTERS, Jericho, West Bank

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said yesterday Moscow had recognized an independent Palestinian state in 1988 and was not changing that position adopted by the former Soviet Union.

But on his first visit to the Israeli-occupied West Bank as Russian head of state, Medvedev stopped short of making a ringing declaration of recognition of Palestinian statehood by the Russian Federation that he represents.

Israel has been alarmed in the past two months by a string of recognitions by Latin American states including Brazil and Argentina which some analysts say could be a precursor to a move by the Palestinians to seek full United Nations membership.

At a news conference with Medvedev in Jericho, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said: "We remember that Russia was one of the first states in the world to recognize the state of Palestine in 1988."

Medvedev responded, saying: "Russia made its choice a long time ago ... we supported and will support the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to an independent state with its capital in East Jerusalem."

The Soviet Union recognized a Palestinian state in 1988, after it was declared by the late Yasser Arafat in a move that won broad support in the Communist bloc and Third World but had little real impact on diplomatic and political realities.

# BRAZIL FLOODS Death toll keeps raising

AFP, Itaipava, Brazil

The death toll from devastating floods and landslides in Brazil rose Monday to 655, as the military stepped up efforts to reach isolated communities near Rio by helicopter.

More than 1,500 emergency personnel, including from the army, air force, police and fire services, were mobilized to tackle the disaster -- the worst of its kind in Brazil's history.

"We have just taken a group of firemen to open roads in difficult to access areas and to help with rescues," military helicopter pilot Lieutenant Sales told AFP after flying over one cut-off village with dozens of desperate residents.

Fears of disease spreading have added urgency to the search for decomposing bodies, and officials have told to avoid using runoff water for drinking.

# West 'hyping' Iran nuclear threat Says ex-IAEA chief

AFP, Vienna

The West is "hyping" the perceived nuclear threat from Iran, the former head of the UN atomic watchdog Mohamed ElBaradei said in an interview yesterday.

"There's a lot of hype in this debate," ElBaradei told the Austrian news agency APA.

The Egyptian-born diplomat, who headed the International Atomic Energy Agency for 12 years until November 2009, pointed to a US intelligence report released in 2007 which suggested Iran had indeed been working on a nuclear weapons programme but abandoned it 2003.

"This assessment is still accurate today," ElBaradei said in comments reproduced in German.

ElBaradei, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work at the IAEA in 2005, did not rule out that the Islamic republic had indeed thought about building a bomb in the 1980s.

At the time, Iran was engaged in a "terrible war" with Iraq, which had used chemical weapons, he argued.

"Every other country in this situation would have had to think about how to defend itself," he said.

In the meantime, however, Iran's atomic programme was merely the means "to become a key player in the Middle East."

Western powers accuse Iran of seeking to build a bomb under the guise of a civilian nuclear power programme, a charge Tehran has steadfastly denied.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas meet with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev following their joint press conference in the West Bank town of Jericho yesterday on the latter's first visit to the occupied territories.

# NEWS IN brief

## Rwandan genocide trial opens in Germany

AFP, Frankfurt

A former Rwandan mayor went on trial yesterday accused of ordering three Tutsi massacres during the country's 1994 genocide, in the first such case prosecuted in Germany.

Onesphore Rwabukombe, a 54-year-old ethnic Hutu, is accused of genocide, murder as well as incitement to genocide and murder before the higher regional court in the western city of Frankfurt.

"Between April 11 and 15, 1994 the accused ordered and coordinated three massacres in which a total of at least 3,730 members of the Tutsi minority who had sought refuge in church buildings were killed," prosecutor Christian Ritscher read out from

## US-backed bio-weapons lab irks Kazakh opposition

AFP, Almaty

The Kazakh opposition voiced alarm yesterday over comments by the US ambassador revealing that the United States intended to help the republic build a "dangerous biological pathogens" facility in its largest city Almaty.

The comments by outgoing US Ambassador Richard Hoagland were made at an official reception last week and then published on the embassy website.

Hoagland praised the two countries' cooperation on efforts to prevent the spread of weapons of mass

## Tunisian Islamists to shun presidential polls

AFP, Paris

Tunisia's popular Islamist party Ennahdha will field no presidential candidate and denounces the transition leaders as a government of "exclusion", a Paris-based spokesman told AFP yesterday.

The spokesman Houcine Jaziri said the party would not take part in a presidential election to be held in six months after the ousting of former authoritarian president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali.

The party will take place in legislative polls however, he said, speaking to AFP in Paris.

"There will be no democratic transition without

## Irish PM confident of victory in leadership vote

AFP, Dublin

Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen said yesterday he was confident of facing down his foreign minister in a vote for their party's leadership with an election looming after a divisive EU-IMF bailout.

Cowen has put his job on the line, challenging his Fianna Fail colleagues to vote against him if they think he is the wrong man to lead them into a general election expected in March.

His challenger, the previously loyal Micheal Martin, says what is at stake is the very survival of the party which has dominated Ireland for years and

## Thailand prolongs emergency rule in south

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand extended emergency rule in most of its violence-plagued deep south for another three months yesterday despite rights groups' concerns about the powers awarded to the military.

The decree, which was first introduced in 2005 and covers most of the Muslim-majority provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat, has been criticised by rights campaigners who say it effectively gives the army legal immunity.

The state of emergency allows the military to detain suspects for questioning without charge.

The extension came despite Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva hinting during a visit to Pattani on Monday that he would consider gradually rolling back the decree, which was lifted in one district last