

Egypt unrest enters third day

Top reformist to join protesters

REUTERS, Cairo

Activists trying to oust Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak extended protests against his 30-year rule into a third day yesterday, playing cat-and-mouse with police and making a new call for protests seeking change.

Prominent reform campaigner Mohamed ElBaradei, who lives in Vienna, was due to return to Egypt yesterday. His arrival could drive on protesters who have no figurehead, although many activists resent his long absences over past months.

At least three protesters and one policeman have died in clashes since they erupted on Tuesday. The protests, inspired by a popular revolt in Tunisia and unprecedented during Mubarak's strong-arm rule, have seen police fire rubber bullets and tear gas at demonstrators throwing rocks and petrol bombs.

Like Tunisians, Egyptians complain about surging prices, a lack of jobs and authoritarian rule that has relied on heavy-handed security to keep dissenting voices

quiet.

Protesters are promising the biggest demonstrations today, the Egyptian weekend. A page on Facebook declaring the protest date gained 55,000 supporters in less than 24 hours.

"Egypt's Muslims and Christians will go out to fight against corruption, unemployment and oppression and absence of freedom," wrote an activist on the Facebook, which alongside sites like Twitter have been key tools to rally people onto the streets.

In central Cairo, demonstrators have burned tyres and hurled stones at police. In Suez, a city to the east, protesters torched a government building.

Wednesday's protests extended into the early hours yesterday, with small groups of protesters still assembling in both Cairo and Suez, and being chased off by police.

After calm returned to Suez, burned car tyres, broken wood and torn down sign posts cluttered the streets. Windows at local fast food chains are smashed.



PHOTO: AFP

Yemenis attend a protest calling President Ali Abdullah Saleh to quit, yesterday in Sanaa, as thousands of Yemenis, apparently inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, staged a mass demonstration calling on President Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign after being in power since 1978.

MOSCOW BOMBING Russia 'seeks Slavic militant'

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday searched for an ethnic Russian member of a North Caucasus militant group who vanished last year and is suspected of involvement in the horrific suicide strike on a Moscow airport.

Investigators have yet to publish any firm conclusions three days after the attack that killed 35 but unofficial reports have made a link with the group and a mysterious explosion in Moscow on December 31.

The Kommersant daily said the investigation was focusing on a man named Razdobudko from the Stavropol region just north of the Caucasus mountains who is suspected of belonging to local Islamist militant group Nogaisky Dzhamaat.

Suggesting that he could have been the suicide bomber, the newspaper said the authorities now believed that the attacker was most likely to have been a male ethnic Russian rather than from one of the Caucasus ethnic groups.

"He is not the only person suspected of involvement in the attacks," it quoted a security source as saying. "So it's not worth hurrying with conclusions."

Similar reports also appeared on other Russian news outlets, with a security source telling the RIA Novosti news agency that Razdobudko had vanished along with his wife in October last year.

Colombian mine blast kills 21

BBC ONLINE

An explosion at a coal mine in north-eastern Colombia has killed 21, officials say.

The blast at the La Preciosa mine in Sardinata is thought to have been caused by a gas build-up.

In February 2007 a gas explosion at the same mine killed more than 30 workers.

The Colombian mining minister, Carlos Rodado, ordered the mine be closed indefinitely and said the supervision of mines across the country would be stepped up.

Emergency teams were at first unable to enter the mine because of a rock collapse and the danger of gas, officials said.

TV images showed anxious friends and relatives watching from the mine entrance hoping that their loved ones would be pulled out alive.

YEMEN PROTESTS

Thousands call on president to leave

BBC ONLINE

Thousands of Yemenis are demonstrating in the capital Sanaa, calling on Ali Abdullah Saleh, president for more than 30 years, to step down.

This comes after mass protests in Egypt and a popular uprising in Tunisia that ousted its long-time leader.

Yemeni opposition members and youth activists gathered in four parts of the city, including Sanaa University, chanting anti-government slogans.

They also called for economic reforms and an end to corruption.

Yemenis complain of mounting poverty among a growing young population and frustration with a lack of political freedoms.

The country has also been plagued by a range of security issues, including a separatist movement in the south and an uprising of Shia Houthi rebels in the north.

There are fears that Yemen is becoming a leading al-Qaeda haven, with the high numbers of unemployed youths seen as potential recruits for Islamist militant groups.

Protesters gathered in several locations of the city yesterday morning, chanting that it was "time for change", and referring to the popular uprising in Tunisia that ousted President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali earlier this month.

Opposition MP Abdulmalik al-Qasuss, from the al-Islah (Reform) party, echoed the demands of the protesters when he addressed them.

"We gather today to demand the departure of President Saleh and his corrupt government," he was quoted as saying by the AFP news agency.

There have been a series of smaller protests in the lead up to yesterday's mass demonstrations.

On Saturday, hundreds of Sanaa University students held competing protests on campus, with some calling for President Saleh to step down and others for him to remain in office.

Over the weekend, Yemeni authorities arrested prominent rights activist, Tawakul Karman, accusing her of organising the anti-government protests.

Baghdad car bomb kills 48 at funeral

AP, Baghdad

Iraqi officials say the death toll from a car bomb near a Shiite funeral has risen to 48.

The blast yesterday sparked skirmishes between Iraqi troops and protesters who were infuriated by the security lapse. Officials said at least 121 people were wounded in the explosion.

It was the latest bombing in more than a week of attacks that have killed more than 200 people across Iraq, mostly Shiites and security forces.

The uptick in violence has sparked fears about Iraq's stability as US military prepares to withdraw from the country at the end of the year.

Iraqi police and officials at three Baghdad hospitals confirmed the casualties but spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to release the information.

The car that exploded about 2 pm yesterday had been parked with the vehicles of other mourners, several yards (meters) away from the funeral tent, so it wouldn't raise suspicion, police said. Several other cars were set ablaze and nearby houses were damaged.

Myanmar faces flak over rights record

AFP, Geneva

Myanmar came under pressure in the UN human rights council yesterday to speed up genuine democratic reform, as western nations blasted "alarming" abuse and some Asian neighbours sought more change.

"The human rights situation in Myanmar is alarming," Sweden said in a statement to the 47 nation assembly as the council held its first regular review of Myanmar's human rights record.

Western countries including Britain, France and the United States called on the military regime to immediately free more than 2,000 political prisoners.

NEWS IN brief

Series of quakes hits southern Iran

AFP, Tehran

A series of earthquakes hit southern Iran's Kerman province yesterday, damaging dozens of houses in the affected villages, state television website said.

The strongest, at 6.0-magnitude, hit near the town of Mohammadabad-Rigan at around 12:08 pm (08:38 GMT) and was followed by a 4.8-magnitude aftershock at 12:13 pm (08:43 GMT), the report said.

Earlier yesterday Mohammadabad-Rigan was hit with jolts measuring 5.1 and 4.0. Local officials said the earthquakes caused no

Medvedev says WikiLeaks 'positive', 'healthy'

AFP, Davos

Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev said Wednesday he thought the release of leaked US diplomatic cables by the WikiLeaks website could have a positive effect on international diplomacy.

Brandishing his iPad, the tech-friendly Medvedev said modern communications had linked people in such a way that "no very serious secret can be guaranteed immune from being disclosed today."

"At the end of the day, I believe this WikiLeaks story should make the spirit of international relations healthier even if, in itself, this was an illegal

British arrests over cyber group 'Anonymous'

AFP, London

British police arrested five people yesterday as part of an investigation into cyber attacks by the online group "Anonymous", which last year assailed websites that were hostile to WikiLeaks.

In a series of dawn raids in England, three teenage boys and two adult men were arrested on suspicion of breaking the Computer Misuse Act 1990, as part of an international probe, London's Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) said.

"The five males aged 15, 16, 19, 20 and 26 are being held after a series of coordinated arrests at

Hariri party seeks tribunal commitment from new PM

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon's outgoing premier Saad Hariri yesterday asked his Hezbollah-backed successor to clarify his position on a UN tribunal probing the killing of Hariri's father before deciding on whether to join the new cabinet.

MP Fuad Siniora, of Hariri's Future Movement, said prime minister-designate Najib Mikati was asked during consultations with Hariri to say clearly whether his government would cease all cooperation with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL).

Australians face flood recovery tax

AFP, Sydney

Australia unveiled a flood tax on higher earners yesterday as Prime Minister Julia Gillard warned the deluge would shave 0.5 points off GDP in fiscal 2010 and cost Aus\$5.6 billion for recovery.

Gillard said the record inundation, which crippled the mining and farming state of Queensland this month, "may prove to be the most expensive natural disaster our nation has ever seen", with coal mines to suffer for months to come and farmers facing "seasons" of difficulty.

"Treasury's preliminary estimates are that GDP growth in this financial year will be about half a

Hubble detects the oldest known galaxy

BBC ONLINE

The Hubble Space Telescope has detected what scientists believe may be the oldest galaxy ever observed.

It is thought the galaxy is more than 13 billion years old and existed 480 million years after the Big Bang.

A Nasa team says this was a period when galaxy formation in the early Universe was going into "overdrive".

The image, which has been published in Nature journal, was detected using Hubble's recently installed wide field camera.

According to Professor Richard Bouwens of Leiden Observatory in the Netherlands: "We're seeing these galaxies - 'star cities' - that are building themselves up over cosmic time."

The research team observed rapid

growth over a relatively short period of time: Their sample data showed there was just one galaxy in existence about 500 million years after the Big Bang. But this rises to 10 galaxies some 150 million years later. The tally has doubled about 100 million years later.

"You start out with these little seeds in the very early Universe which would eventually have formed stars, then star clusters, baby galaxies then eventually these large majestic galaxies that we know today," according to Professor Bouwens.

"It's very exciting to see this complicated physical process actually take place somewhere that no man has seen before," Professor Bouwens told BBC News.

He compares the early galaxy to a toddler: It is much smaller than older galaxies like our own Milky Way and it is growing more quickly.

UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Secretary General Robert Serry (L), guided by Dr Robert Rozett, visit the Hall of Names at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem yesterday, on the International Day of Commemoration to honour the victims of the Holocaust.



PHOTO: AFP

Muslim birth rate falls

Says a study

REUTERS, Paris

Falling birth rates will slow the world's Muslim population growth over the next two decades, reducing it on average from 2.2 percent a year in 1990-2010 to 1.5 percent a year from now until 2030, a new study says.

Muslims will number 2.2 billion by 2030 compared to 1.6 billion in 2010, making up 26.4 percent of the world population compared to 23.4 percent now, according to estimates by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

The report did not publish figures for worldwide populations of other major religions, but said the United States-based Pew Forum planned similar reports on growth prospects for worldwide Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Judaism.

"The declining growth rate is due primarily to falling fertility rates in many Muslim-majority countries," it said, noting the birth rate is falling as more Muslim women are educated, living standards rise and rural people move to cities.