

# Tunisia unveils new cabinet in a bid to end unrest

Key trade union supports reform

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia on Thursday unveiled major changes to its interim government in a bid to put an end to daily protests against figures linked to ousted president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali who stayed on in key posts.

Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, who also served under Ben Ali, said on state television that he would remain but the crucial defence, foreign and interior ministry posts were replaced with new figures.

"This is a temporary government with a clear mission -- to allow a transition to democracy. Its mission is to organise elections in which the people will be completely free to choose," Ghannouchi said in his address.

"The situation is difficult and we must concentrate our efforts for the country to re-start... I hope everyone will get back to work," he said, after a wave of protests that came in the wake of Ben Ali's downfall on

January 14.

Hundreds of protesters who have camped out in front of Ghannouchi's offices for five days applauded and shouted with joy when they heard the news, but some of them still called for the resignation of Ghannouchi himself.

Foreign Minister Kamel Morjane announced his resignation saying he was leaving "so that the popular revolution can bear fruit." He will be replaced by career diplomat Ahmed Ounais, a former ambassador to Moscow and New Delhi.

The UGTT, which played a key role in anti-Ben Ali protests and has led opposition to the current government, said Thursday it would not be joining the new government line-up but approved of Ghannouchi staying in power.

Ghannouchi has served as prime minister since 1999 and has said he would resign only after the country holds its first democratic elections.



Egyptian demonstrators confront riot police during a protest in Cairo (upper and lower right) yesterday demanding the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak, demonstrators tear a portrait of President Hosni Mubarak (left) who has held on to power for more than three decades.



## Paraguay recognises Palestine

AFP, Asuncion

Paraguay has recognized a "free and independent" Palestinian state within its 1967 borders, the ministry of foreign affairs said yesterday.

The South American nation thus joins a wave of other regional countries that include Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru, Guyana and Uruguay.

"The Republic of Paraguay expressly reiterates the recognition of this state as free and independent with the borders of June 4, 1967," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

The 1967 borders include east Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, lands occupied by Israel in the Six Day War.

With this measure, Paraguay "reaffirms its conviction that negotiations between Israel and Palestine should re-start with the goal of reaching peace and security for both nations."

# Egypt protests put US in dilemma

AFP, Washington

Egypt's political unrest leaves Washington torn between freedom-seeking protesters and a government that has been a vital ally -- a dilemma with deep implications for its troubled Middle East policy.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has been a fulcrum of US regional strategy for decades, a guarantor of his nation's peace with US ally Israel and a central player in successive and frustrated American peace initiatives.

But with his 30-year rule seemingly under threat, amid talk of a possible "Arab spring" of revolt against authoritarian rulers, US policymakers must pick their way through a political minefield.

"They are in a difficult position because there is all sorts of momentum in Egypt -- and in Washington people think that the dominoes just are going to fall," said Gregory Gause of the University of Vermont.

"I think they are probably pulled in two

directions," Gause, a political science professor said.

Realists however fret about the loss of a stalwart US-leaning voice in a tough neighbourhood where US influence is fraying, and fear a post-Mubarak government, possibly including the Muslim Brotherhood, hostile to Washington.

They argue that if protests subside, Mubarak will not forget who his friends were in his moment of crisis.

Significant political pressure is building on Obama, who will likely be blamed by pundits on either side for any outcome unfavourable to American interests -- despite limited US leverage in the crisis.

Obama weighed in on the situation for the first time on camera on Thursday, following previous comments by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and his spokesman Robert Gibbs.

"Violence is not the answer in solving these problems in Egypt," Obama said in a YouTube question-and-answer session.

# Thousands of Jordanians march to press for reform

AFP, Amman

Thousands of Jordanians demonstrated peacefully in Amman and other cities after weekly prayers yesterday to press for political and economic reform, and demanding that the government resign.

"Egypt, the Arab nation salutes you. We urge your men to get rid of (President Hosni) Mubarak, an estimated 3,000 people chanted as they marched in Amman city centre holding national flags.

"The Arab people's message: you are corrupt, beware our anger. (Ousted Tunisian president Zine El Abidine) Ben Ali is waiting for you," they said.

Police said around 2,000 people staged protests in other cities, answering a call by the powerful Muslim Brotherhood which is insisting on forcing political and economic reform in the kingdom.

"Together let's make political and economic change", "no alternative to political reform," and "down with the Samir Rifai government. We want a national salvation government," read some banners, referring to Jordan's premier.

Muslim Brotherhood leader Hammam Said demanded an elected government.

# UN chief tells Gbagbo to 'respect will' of Ivorians

AFP, Davos, Switzerland

UN chief Ban Ki-moon yesterday called once again on Ivory Coast strongman Laurent Gbagbo to step down and respect the "genuine will" of the west African country's people.

The United Nations has recognised Gbagbo's rival Alassane Ouattara as victor in Ivory Coast's November presidential election and has repeatedly urged Gbagbo to accept to defeat and leave office.

"I therefore urge again the Gbagbo camp to fully respect the will of the Ivorian people," Ban told journalists on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos.

# NEWS IN brief

## Irish PM to announce election date Tuesday

AFP, Dublin

Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen plans to ask President Mary McAleese to dissolve parliament and to call a general election next Tuesday, RTE state radio said yesterday.

The election is expected to be held on February 25 with opinion polls indicating Cowen's Fianna Fail party, which elected a new leader this week, is set to be punished at the ballot box for its handling of the economic crisis.

"Taoiseach Brian Cowen has said he will seek to dissolve the Dail next Tuesday and announce the date of the general election," RTE said quoting an interview with the beleaguered premier on its Irish language service

## French court upholds gay marriage ban

AFP, Paris

The French constitutional court yesterday upheld the country's gay marriage ban, saying it was in keeping with the constitution but noting that it was up to politicians to decide if it should be overturned.

The court made the ruling in response to a bid by a lesbian couple, who have four children, to marry after spending 10 years in a PACS, or civil union.

The ruling came as a TNS Sofres opinion poll said that 58 percent of French people questioned were in favour of gay marriage, which is already possible in other European states such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Portugal and Sweden.

## Russia issues blunt message to Poland over crash

AFP, Moscow

The Russian government flatly told Poland yesterday that international law absolved its air traffic controllers of any blame for the crash that killed Polish president Lech Kaczynski in April 2010.

Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov told state television that he understood Poles were experiencing "complex feelings" after an entire generation of top leaders lost their lives outside the western Russian city of Smolensk.

But he insisted Polish suggestions that Russian air traffic controllers had somehow failed to properly notify the doomed crew about poor weather conditions were simply wrong.

## Four shot dead in Thai south

AFP, Yala, Thailand

A security volunteer collecting her two-year-old daughter from day care was among four people shot dead in separate attacks in Thailand's insurgency-plagued south, police said yesterday.

Unknown gunmen attacked the 37-year-old Buddhist woman in front of her child in Pattani province on Thursday afternoon.

Two Muslim men, aged 24 and 41, were killed in separate drive-by shootings in the same province on Thursday.

Another gun attack in neighbouring Yala province on the same day left a 35-year-old Muslim security volunteer dead at his home.

## South Korea relaxes apology demand for nuclear talks

AFP, Seoul

South Korea has relaxed a demand for the resumption of aid-for-disarmament talks with the rival North, saying yesterday that an apology for last year's deadly attacks is not essential to restart the process.

A senior government official, who asked not to be named, said the paramount precondition for reconvening the six-party talks was Pyongyang's sincerity about dismantling its nuclear weapons program.

The six-party talks involving the two Koreas, the United States, China, Japan and Russia stalled in 2009 when Pyongyang walked out in protest against a new round of UN sanctions for the North's nuclear and missile tests.

# WikiLeaks rival OpenLeaks to launch soon

AFP, Davos, Switzerland

The founder of OpenLeaks, a rival project to WikiLeaks, said yesterday that the new service would begin in the next few weeks with a full release scheduled towards the end of the year.

Speaking on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Daniel Domscheit-Berg, a former WikiLeaks spokesman, said: "A small alpha phase test will begin in the next few weeks."

"A beta test phase will begin in the summer ... and we are looking at a full release towards the end of the year," he added.

Unlike WikiLeaks, OpenLeaks will not publish leaked documents directly online but instead make leaks available to partner media and other organisations.

"We are just a mechanism to accept documents from sources and these sources decide who they want to give it to

... we are actually a very neutral mechanism," said Domscheit-Berg.

It would be a not-for-profit organisation with all the services to be free of charge, he added.

Media taking part in the project would have an OpenLeaks section of their website where whistleblowers can submit information. OpenLeaks ensures the anonymity of the sources, Domscheit-Berg explained.

He added he wanted to work with similar whistleblowing organisations that have sprung up in the wake of WikiLeaks' success.

"We don't see them as competitors but as something that can help these organisations to create more robust solutions, so we'd like to exchange knowledge and experience," he said.

Founded in 2006, WikiLeaks emerged into the media spotlight last year with major document leaks on the Iraq war.

# Albanian opposition to rally despite warnings

AFP, Tirana

Albania's opposition pushed ahead with plans for a new mass protest yesterday, defying international appeals and police warnings, a week after another demonstration turned deadly.

The rally, due at 2pm, is aimed at honouring the three victims of last week's demonstration, the main opposition said.

Security was beefed up around the capital Tirana ahead of the demonstration, with hundreds of anti-riot police officers were deployed around government buildings alongside units of armed elite officers.

# New START treaty to enter into force on Feb 5

AFP, Moscow

The new Russia-US nuclear disarmament treaty will enter into force on February 5 during an official ceremony in Munich attended by the two country's top diplomats, state media said yesterday.

President Dmitry Medvedev signed the new START agreement's ratification yesterday after the milestone pact's passage this week by both houses of Russia's parliament and the US Senate last month.

The pact -- which slashes existing warhead ceilings by 30 percent over the next decade -- enters into force the moment the two sides swap their respective "instruments of ratification".

A Russian diplomatic source told ITAR-TASS that ceremony will be held during the February 4-6 Munich Security Conference.

"The exchange is expected to occur on February 5 when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meet in Munich," the diplomatic source told the state-run news agency.

# Snooker dispute sparks deadly clashes in Nigeria

REUTERS, Bauchi, Nigeria

Clashes between Christian and Muslim youths in central Nigeria triggered by a game of snooker have killed four people and led to the burning of houses, churches and mosques, police said yesterday.

Residents said the dispute in Tafawa Balewa, in Bauchi state, started when a man from the Muslim Hausa ethnic group refused to pay for a snooker game on Wednesday evening.

The snooker club owners, from the mostly Christian Sayawa ethnic group, threw him out but he returned with a gang of friends and tried to set the building ablaze, witnesses said.

Several houses and places of worship were torched as rioting broke out the following morning, leading the police to call in reinforcements from the northern states of Gombe and Kano and the local government to impose a dusk-to-dawn curfew.

"We cordoned off the area in order to prevent a spill over of the crisis to other places," Bauchi state police commissioner Mohammed Abdulkadir Indabawa said.

Bauchi lies next to Plateau state, where religious and ethnic clashes have killed more than 200 people over the past month, according to US-based Human Rights Watch.

The tension is rooted in decades of resentment between indigenous groups and Muslim settlers.

# Free homes for Brazil flood victims

BBC ONLINE

Brazil says it is going to build 8,000 houses to give free to poor people made homeless by floods and landslides in Rio de Janeiro state this month.

President Dilma Rousseff said 6,000 homes would be paid for by the state and federal governments.

The other 2,000 would be donated by a consortium of construction companies.

Ms Rousseff said there would also be heavy investment in flood prevention measures. More than 830 people died in the floods and landslides.

They struck in a mountainous region north of Rio de Janeiro. Another 540 people are still missing.

President Rousseff announced the building programme at a joint press conference with Rio de Janeiro state Governor Sergio Cabral.



South African girls from the McAuley school stand behind a banner wishing well to former South African president and Nobel Peace prize laureate Nelson Mandela (inset) yesterday nearby the Mill park hospital in Johannesburg. Doctors discharged a cheerful Nelson Mandela from hospital after he was successfully treated for breathing difficulties during a two-day stay where he laughed and joked with visitors.

PHOTO: AFP