

'We're all with you'

Says Suu Kyi to Egyptian protesters

AFP, London

Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi told anti-regime protesters in Egypt yesterday that "we're all with you", as hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in Cairo.

In a live question and answer session on BBC World Service radio, the Nobel peace laureate, who has fought the military regime in Myanmar for decades, said she was "very interested" in the situation and urged protesters to stay strong.

"It's necessary to keep cool heads and strong hearts and not ever to lose hope and to keep on going," she said, in response to a caller from Cairo who asked her advice as he faced a "very scary moment of transition" in Egypt.

She added: "And I would want you to know that we're all with you -- that people all over the world who want freedom, somehow or the other feel connected to other people who are struggling for freedom."



Passengers wait under large tent set-up in the parking lot outside Cairo's International airport (upper right) as Egyptians and foreigners prepare to leave Egypt, a mother carries her daughter on her shoulders with the word "Masr" or "Egypt" written on her forehead (lower right) and thousands gather in Cairo's Tahrir Square (left) heeding a call by the opposition for a "march of a million" to mark a week of protests calling for the ouster of Hosni Mubarak's long term regime yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

50 Egypt NGOs call for Mubarak resignation

AFP, Cairo

Fifty Egyptian human rights groups yesterday called on President Hosni Mubarak to "step down to avoid bloodshed," on the eighth day of anti-government protests that have left at least 125 people dead.

In a statement, the rights groups call for "parliamentary and presidential elections to be held within six months under the supervision of the judiciary."

Among the statement's signatories are Egypt's main human rights groups, including the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the Centre for Economic and Social Rights and the Arab Centre for the Independence of the Judiciary.

The groups also called for "a new constitution formulated by a commission representing all parties and political groups as well as civil society."

Egypt's Mubarak hangs on as army steps back

REUTERS, Cairo

President Hosni Mubarak's grip on Egypt looked increasingly tenuous yesterday after the army pledged not to confront protesters who converged in Cairo in their tens of thousands to demand an end to his 30-year rule.

Anti-Mubarak reformists and opposition figures hoped one million Egyptians would join the biggest protest to mark an uprising which erupted a week ago to force Mubarak to step down.

The disintegration of Mubarak's power structure would usher in a new era in modern Egyptian history and reconfigure the geopolitical map of the Middle East, with huge ramifications for Washington and allies from Israel to oil giant Saudi Arabia.

The army, a powerful and respected force in Egypt, dealt a possibly fatal blow to the 82-year-old Mubarak on Monday night when it said troops would not open fire on protesters and that they had legitimate grievances and a right to peaceful protest.

Mubarak's new vice president, Omar Suleiman, appointed to show the government was willing to bring in reforms, offered to open a dialogue with the opposition.

But the measure, along with the dismissal of his cabinet and the promise of reform, appeared to be too little, too late.

"There is nothing that we will accept from him other than he takes the plane and leaves," said Ahmed Helmi, a 45-year-old lawyer, one of thousands of Egyptians flocking to Tahrir Square yesterday to try and to push Mubarak over the edge.

The uprising broke out eight days ago amongst a population fed up with corruption, oppression and economic hardship and quickly spiraled to a crisis unprecedented during 30 years of rule enforced by ruthless security forces.

The United States and other Western allies watched at first in confusion as thousands demanded the downfall of a stalwart ally who has been a key figure in Middle East peace moves.

Two Koreas agree date for military talks

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korea will hold working-level military talks on February 8, the defence ministry said yesterday, in their first contact since the North's deadly shelling of a border island last November.

The talks will set the date, place and agenda for a higher-level military meeting, possibly between defence ministers.

But Seoul said the high-level meeting would only go ahead if Pyongyang took responsibility for two attacks on the South last year and promised no repetition.

The date for the working-level talks is a compromise after the South proposed February 11 and the North suggested February 1.

Jordan king fires govt, Islamists slam new PM

AFP, Amman

King Abdullah II of Jordan yesterday sacked the government after weeks of protests, but his choice of replacement premier failed to satisfy the powerful Islamist opposition's demands for reforms.

The king named Maruf Bakhit to replace Samir Rifai with orders to carry out "true political reforms," the palace said, but the Islamists criticised the choice, saying he is not a reformist.

"Bakhit's mission is to take practical, quick and tangible steps to launch true political reforms, enhance Jordan's democratic drive and ensure safe and decent living for all Jordanians," a palace statement said.

But Zaki Bani Rsheid, a leader of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), said Bakhit "is a not a man of reforms."

"He carried out the worst parliamentary elections in Jordan in 2007. He is not the right person to run things at this current state and get Jordan out of crisis," Bani Rsheid told AFP.

The Islamists have long charged that the 2007 election was rigged.

NEWS IN brief

France seizes Ben Ali family plane: official sources

AFP, Paris

French authorities have seized a plane belonging to the family of ousted Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, official sources said yesterday.

The aircraft was seized at Le Bourget airport near Paris, where it had been parked in a hangar for a week, the sources said. It belongs to the Mabrouk family, one of whose members is Ben Ali's son-in-law.

The move came a day after Europe's foreign ministers froze the assets of Ben Ali and his wife Leila Trabelsi in response to a request from the Tunisian authorities.

2010 deadliest year for Afghan civilians

AFP, Kabul

A human rights watchdog said yesterday that 2010 was the deadliest year for ordinary Afghans since a US-led invasion nearly a decade ago, with more than 2,400 civilians killed.

Taliban and other insurgents were responsible for more than 60 percent of the dead, the report by the Afghanistan Rights Monitor (ARM) said, blaming the US-led force for 21 percent of the casualties.

"Almost everything related to the war surged in 2010," ARM, a Kabul-based rights watchdog said in its annual report on civilian deaths.

No plans to amend Pak's blasphemy law, says Gilani

PTI, Islamabad

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani has said his government has "no intention" of amending Pakistan's blasphemy law, which has been at the centre of a heated debate after liberals and rights activists called for its repeal.

Gilani made the remarks during a meeting with a group of ministers and parliamentarians that called on him this evening, said a statement issued by the premier's office.

He said it was the Pakistan People's Party government led by late Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that introduced the blasphemy law.

Two sisters shot dead in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Suspected Islamist rebels have shot dead two sisters in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said yesterday, in what would be their first major attack of the year.

The two women were killed in Sopore town, 55 kilometres (35 miles) north of the region's main city Srinagar, senior police officer Altaf Ahmad told AFP, adding that the motive was unclear.

"Two Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) militants barged into the house of Ghulam Nabi Dar late Monday night and dragged his two daughters, Akhtar and Arifa, out of their house before gunning them down," the officer said.

Cambodian court jails Thai activist

AFP, Phnom Penh

A Cambodian court yesterday sentenced a high-profile Thai nationalist activist to eight years in prison on spying and illegal entry charges in a case that has rekindled border tensions.

Veera Somkwamkid -- a former leader of the "Yellow Shirt" movement -- and his secretary Ratre Pipattanapaibul were found guilty on charges of illegal entry into Cambodia, trespassing on a military area and attempting to gather information that could affect national defence.

The judge at Phnom Penh Municipal Court handed Ratre a six-year jail term.

Myanmar junta PM tipped for president

NAPPYIDAW, Myanmar

Myanmar's junta prime minister is likely to become the country's president, officials said yesterday, amid a secretive selection process in the military-dominated parliament.

The likely appointment of Thein Sein, a trusted ally of Senior General Than Shwe, will do little to ease criticism that the regime held a controversial November election simply to hide military power behind civilian rule.

Thein Sein "will be president", a Myanmar official source told AFP, after he was selected as a potential nominee by national parliament lawmakers, sitting for a second day yesterday.

The country's supreme leader, Than Shwe, who has ruled with an iron fist since 1992, was apparently not among those put forward for the top political post.

"The senior general... will retire after handing over to the new government," an official told AFP yesterday.

But the 77-year-old has been the subject of a storm of conflicting speculation in recent months and many analysts believe he could attempt to retain some sort of control behind the scenes to ensure his security.

Myanmar expert Maung Zarni, of the London School of Economics, said it was a "crucial question as to what Than Shwe will do".



Thein Sein

Ireland set for election on February 25

BBC ONLINE

The Irish Republic is to hold an early general election on 25 February, its first national vote since the bail-out.

Prime Minister Brian Cowen announced that parliament was being dissolved, more than a year before his term in office was due to expire.

Mr Cowen, who is not standing for re-election, said the vote would define Ireland's future.

Analysts expect Mr Cowen's Fianna Fail party to suffer a crushing defeat at the election, as voters blame them for mismanaging the economy.

Nineteen Fianna Fail members of the Dail (TDs) and four ministers were standing down from national politics yesterday.

Swiss block Haiti's Duvalier account

AFP, Geneva

Haiti ex-dictator Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier's Swiss millions have been blocked under new legislation that came into force yesterday to ease their return, the Swiss government said.

The Swiss Foreign Ministry confirmed the entry into force of the new law on the restitution of assets of politically exposed persons on its website.

"The Duvalier funds were then blocked under article 14," setting in motion the legal process for seizure, it added.

Wind of Change: Is Syria next?

REUTERS, Damascus

On the surface all is calm in Syria, tightly ruled by the same authoritarian party for half a century, despite the upheaval in several of its Arab neighbours. Below, ordinary Syrians are quietly captivated by the tumult.

What began as a popular uprising that toppled the Tunisian government before spreading into Algeria, Jordan, Yemen, Sudan and, of course, Egypt, may now be headed for Syria.

Opposition movements in Syria are calling for mass protests on Saturday against the rule of President Bashar Al-Assad.

The groups are organising on Facebook, with several pages promoting protests in Damascus, Aleppo and other cities.

Protest organisers want better living standards, human rights improvements and a greater voice for youth, according to the Middle East Media Research Institute, a Washington-based organisation that studies and translates news accounts and social-media postings.

Storm to pound US with icy blast

AFP, Chicago

A massive winter storm began dumping fresh snow, ice and sleet across a huge swathe of the US early yesterday, with bitter winds bringing an icy blast to some 100 million people, a third of the country.

High winds and freezing rain threatened to turn roads into deadly ice rinks and knock down trees and power lines and forecasts warned of dangerously cold temperatures.

Predawn television footage showed heavy snow in the plains city of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and lightning and sleet pounding Dallas, Texas.

Blizzard, winter storm and freezing rain warnings were issued for more than half of the country's 50 states, from North Dakota and Colorado down to New Mexico, then up through Texas, Kansas and Missouri to the Great Lakes region and across Pennsylvania to New England.

For Chicago, the National Weather Service said that the "dangerous, multifaceted and life threatening winter storm" with high winds and heavy snowfall would make travel "impossible" at times.

147 killed in Tunisia: UN

AP, Tunis, Tunisia

The head of a United Nations mission investigating the uprising that toppled Tunisia's longtime president last month says 147 people were killed and another 510 injured in the unrest.

Bakr N'diaye, who heads the mission sent by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, says the death toll does not include 72 people who died in prison riots.

But opposition members have insisted the death toll was much higher.

N'diaye was speaking yesterday at a news conference in the capital, Tunis.

Locals, tourists flee as cyclone nears Australia

AFP, Sydney

Hospitals, hotels and homes in seaside cities in Australia's Queensland state were evacuated yesterday as a monster cyclone intensified to "deadly" proportions and roared towards the populous coast.

Severe Tropical Cyclone Yasi, packing winds of around 250 kilometres per hour, was on course to slam into the holiday resort-strewn coast early Thursday, bringing with it treacherous storm surges and heavy rains.

"This storm is huge and it is life-threatening," Queensland Premier Anna Bligh warned as one of the worst cyclones in the region's history sent residents and tourists fleeing.

"This is potentially a deadly storm and we need to take it absolutely seriously."

Authorities ordered the evacuation of two hospitals in the port city of Cairns, where 122,000 residents are in the direct path of the massive storm that is threatening a 650 kilometre-long front.