

Transition must start now

Say world leaders to Mubarak

AFP, Paris

World leaders gave a cool response yesterday to Hosni Mubarak's vow to quit in September, with Barack Obama saying change must start now and other leaders demanding he stand down immediately.

The 82-year-old, president of Egypt for the last 29 years, had hoped that his promise in a televised address on Tuesday night would buy him some breathing space, both from demonstrators and his fellow leaders.

But it soon became clear that his attempt to shut down the argument had failed, with Obama among those indicating that his pledge to leave power after September elections did not go far enough.

What is clear, and what I indicated tonight to President Mubarak is my belief that an orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful and it must begin now," Obama said after a phone call with the long-time US ally.

"He recognises that the status quo is not sustainable and that a change must take place," Obama continued in remarks directed at Mubarak, protesters, the Egyptian army and the

American public.

The leaders of Britain and France struck a similar note, warning that the transition towards genuine democracy had to begin immediately.

"The transition needs to be rapid and credible and needs to start now," Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron told parliament.

"We should be clear -- we stand with those in this country who want freedom, who want democracy and rights the world over," he said, referring to the protesters in Egypt who oppose Mubarak's rule.

Sarkozy's office said that the French president wished "that a concrete transition process begin without delay."

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle welcomed what he said would be the opening of a new era following the Egyptian president's announcement but sounded a note of caution about the role Mubarak intended to play.

"It is good President Mubarak has opened the way for a new political beginning. We will have to see what role he himself plays," Westerwelle said in an interview on German radio.

The prime minister of Turkey, Europe's geographical bridge to the Arab world, was much blunter, saying Mubarak should not hang around and instead must stand down immediately.

"The (Egyptian) people expect a very different decision from Mubarak," Recep Tayyip Erdogan told journalists.

"The current administration does not inspire trust so far as the democratic change wanted by the population is concerned."

While some Egyptians have said Mubarak's announcement should draw a line under the days of mass protests, others have voiced fears that he will exercise his control of the levers of power in the months ahead to fix the succession.

Carl Bildt, the Swedish foreign minister, said that it was vital that no attempt should be made to limit the choice of the people.

"The Mubarak era in Egyptian politics is over," said Bildt.

"Now the decisive task will be to organise free and fair elections of Egypt's next president and to create credibility for the political development until then," he added.



PHOTO: AFP

Egyptian protestors opposed to President Hosni Mubarak clash with pro-Mubarak protestors (top) during clashes in Cairo's Tahrir square yesterday.

NEWS IN brief

Obama signs new nuclear deal with Russia

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama yesterday signed ratification documents for a new START nuclear arms reduction treaty with Russia, in a showpiece moment for his "reset" of ties with the Kremlin.

Obama signed the documents in the Oval Office surrounded by key senators and top national security and military officials, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

Clinton backs 'just, democratic' Sri Lanka

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton voiced hope for a "just and democratic" Sri Lanka as she offered congratulations ahead of the war-torn island's Independence Day on Friday.

Clinton said in a statement yesterday that the United States and Sri Lanka have historically enjoyed "a strong relationship based on mutual interests and a shared commitment to the ideals of democratic governance."

"We hope to continue our efforts to strengthen this relationship by assisting in post-war reconciliation to bring about a peaceful, prosperous, just and democratic future for all its citizens," Clinton said.

French minister fights off Tunisia allegations

AFP, Paris

Allies of France's foreign minister fought off embarrassing allegations of links to Tunisia's ousted leader yesterday after a report that the owner of a private jet she used was close to his regime.

The allegations raised pressure on the minister, Michele Alliot-Marie, following France's U-turn over authoritarian ruler Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime after his fall last month.

The investigative weekly Le Canard Enchaîné reported in its Wednesday edition that Alliot-Marie and her family accepted a flight on a jet owned by Tunisian businessman Aziz Miled, who it said is close to Ben Ali's clan.

Nepal recalls S Arabia envoy over graft claim

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal said yesterday it had recalled its ambassador to Saudi Arabia after he was accused of stealing insurance money from the family of a migrant worker who died there.

Justice minister Prem Bahadur Singh told AFP the envoy had failed to explain why he transferred money owed to the family of a man killed in a road accident into his personal bank account.

"It was inappropriate for him to keep the money in his account, and his actions have tarnished the image of our country," Singh added.

Russia warns Ireland over spy row

AFP, Moscow

Russia will take retaliatory measures after Ireland's "unfriendly" expulsion of a Russian diplomat in a fake passports scam linked to last year's US spy scandal, a top official said yesterday.

"This is an unfounded and unfriendly act, which of course will not go without a corresponding reaction," Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov told the Interfax news agency.

Such tit-for-tat expulsions are normally only announced once the person has left the country.

Ireland expelled a Russian diplomat Tuesday after an investigation found Moscow had stolen the identities of six of its citizens to use for spies' passports, the Irish foreign ministry said.

Egypt rejects calls for transition to start forthwith

AFP, Cairo

Egypt yesterday rejected calls from the international community for an immediate transition of power, amid deadly protests against President Hosni Mubarak's regime.

"What foreign parties are saying about 'a period of transition beginning immediately' in Egypt is rejected," foreign ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki said in a statement, charging that such calls "sought to inflame the internal situation in Egypt".

United States President Barack Obama have called for an immediate transition of power in Egypt, where at least 300 people are reported to have died during nine days of protest.

Jordan PM starts work on reformist govt

AFP, Amman

Jordan's new premier started consultations yesterday to form his government charged with passing reforms and meeting the demands of popular protests, despite objections from the Islamist opposition.

"Maruf Bakhit will meet today and Thursday with Senate President Taher Masri and Lower House Speaker Faisal Fayez as well as heads of parliamentary blocs and committees," a member of his entourage told AFP yesterday.

"He will also hold discussions with heads of all political parties," mainly Islamist leaders as well as trade unions, the source added.

"The composition of the new government should be announced Saturday or Sunday if the consultations go well," he said.

Australia braces for 'worst ever storm'

AFP, Cairns, Australia

A terrifying cyclone roaring towards Australia strengthened to the most dangerous threat level yesterday, as officials warned it could be the deadliest storm in generations.

As the winds that heralded Severe Tropical Cyclone Yasi's arrival began battering hundreds of kilometres of Queensland coast, state Premier Anna Bligh told residents it was now too late to escape "the most catastrophic storm to ever hit our coast."

Yasi was upgraded to a category five storm from category four as it menaced the populous east coast, where it was expected to hit around 10:00pm yesterday, the Bureau of Meteorology said.

"This impact is likely to be more life-threatening than any experienced during recent generations," it said in an ominous warning that raised the expected strength of the looming storm.

Yasi, packing a 650-kilometre front and an eye measuring about 35 kilometres across, was on course to slam directly into the area between the tourist hub of Cairns and

Cardwell to the south.

Power lines and trees were felled by early gusts, with an offshore weather station at Willis Island clocking 185 kilometres an hour winds before it was destroyed.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard said Yasi looked like the worst cyclone in Australian history and said the nation was with Queenslanders as they faced "many, many dreadful, frightening hours" waiting for it to strike.

"This is probably the worst cyclone that our nation has ever seen. In the hours of destruction that are coming to them, all of Australia is going to be thinking of them," she said.

Yasi was expected to generate highly destructive winds of more than 280 kilometres per hour, 700 millimetres of rain and a storm surge that is threatening to flood towns and tourist resorts.

The epic cyclone, the first category five to hit the area since 1918, was over the Coral Sea about 400 kilometres offshore, but high winds were battering the coast a full 10 hours before its arrival.

LATEST LEAKS

Al Qaeda seeking 'dirty' bombs

AFP, London

Al-Qaeda is attempting to procure nuclear material and recruit rogue scientists in order to build a radioactive "dirty bomb," leaked documents published in Telegraph newspaper revealed yesterday.

The cables, released by the WikiLeaks website, showed that security chiefs told a Nato meeting in January 2009 that Al-Qaeda was planning a programme of "dirty radioactive improvised explosive devices (IEDs)."

The makeshift nuclear bombs, which could be used against soldiers fighting in Afghanistan, would contaminate the surrounding area for years to come.

The leaked documents also revealed that Al-Qaeda papers found in 2007 convinced security officials that "greater advances" had been made in bio-terrorism than was previously feared.

US security personnel were warned in 2008 that terrorists had "the technical competence to manufacture an explosive device beyond a mere dirty bomb."

Also laid bare in the diplomatic cables are the attempts made to smuggle volatile materials as rogue organisations seek to get their hands on weapons-grade fuel.

The memos detailed how a freight train on the Kazakhstan-Russia border was found to be carrying weapons-grade material while a "small-time" dealer in Lisbon tried to sell radioactive plates stolen from Chernobyl.

Yemen's president backs down on rule-for-life plan

'Day of rage' to go ahead today

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni leader Ali Abdullah Saleh, facing demands that he quit, said yesterday he will freeze constitutional changes that would allow him to be president for life and put off a controversial April poll.

"I will not extend my mandate and I am against hereditary rule," Saleh said during an emergency session of parliament and the consultative council ahead of a "day of rage" civil society groups and opposition leaders have called for today.

Meanwhile, opposition leaders in Yemen vowed yesterday to go ahead with anti-government protests today -- billed as a "day of rage" -- despite a pledge by President Ali Abdullah Saleh not to extend his rule.

Saleh, who has been president for decades but whose term is due to end in 2013, urged a parliamentary opposition alliance known as the Common Forum to halt their street protests.

Saleh's opponents also accuse the 68-year-old president of grooming his eldest son Ahmed, who heads the Republican Guard, an elite unit of the army, to succeed him.

WikiLeaks candidate for 2011 Nobel Peace Prize

AFP, Oslo

A Norwegian member of parliament said yesterday he had nominated WikiLeaks for this year's Nobel Peace Prize, saying the whistleblower website was a gauge of transparency.

Jailed Chinese dissident "Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year for his struggle for human rights, democracy and freedom of speech in China," Snorre Valen, a member of the Socialist Left Party that is part of the ruling left-leaning coalition, pointed out on his blog.

"Likewise: WikiLeaks have contributed to the struggle for those very values globally, by exposing (among many other things) corruption, war crimes and torture -- sometimes even conducted by allies of Norway," he wrote, implicitly referring to the United States.

After releasing hundreds of thousands



Julian Assange

of confidential US documents about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, WikiLeaks has in recent months been slowly publishing more than 250,000 leaked US diplomatic cables, earning the website's founder Julian Assange powerful enemies in Washington.

The deadline for this year's Nobel Peace nominations expired Tuesday with thousands of people eligible to submit proposals, including members of parliament and government worldwide, university professors, previous laureates and members of several international institutes.

The names of nominees are kept secret for 50 years, but those entitled to nominate candidates are free to reveal their picks for the prestigious award, which will be announced in October.

Among WikiLeaks' accomplishments is the role it played in the recent Tunisian Jasmine Revolution, Valen said yesterday.

Subsidised food

FROM PAGE 1 government employees and village police will get 20 kilograms of food grains every month under fair price cards.

Besides, the government is planning to introduce food rationing system for the ultra poor in villages. According to the plan, the government will provide rice and wheat at fair prices to around 1,000 people of each of the 4,500 union parishads countrywide.

The food minister also told the House about the government's other ongoing measures including open market sale (OMS) of rice and providing around 11.18 lakh families with 20kg of rice every month at Tk 24 a kg through fair price cards.

On food stock, the minister said around 8.49 lakh metric tonnes of food grains are stored in government granaries. Besides, 1.25 lakh metric tonnes of imported food grains have reached the Chittagong port while 1.25 lakh metric tonnes more is on its way.

The minister said a process is going on to import 5 lakh metric tonnes of rice from India and Thailand.

"The food stock of the country will reach 19 lakh metric tonnes by March. So, we need not fear any food crisis," the minister added.

Meanwhile, in response to lawmakers' queries Commerce Minister Faruk Khan told the House about the government's measures to keep the price of commodities stable.