

'No break' with Mubarak in transition Says Berlusconi

AFP, Brussels

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi said at an EU summit yesterday that Egypt's transition towards democracy should take place "without breaking" with President Hosni Mubarak.

"We are hoping for a transition in Egypt that brings more democracy without breaking with a president like Mubarak that the West, and first and foremost the United States, consider as wise, a reference for the entire Middle East," Berlusconi said.

"Mubarak said he would not run for election again," Berlusconi added.

Berlusconi's entourage said the statement did not imply that Mubarak should remain in office.

"He would like to see someone like Mubarak at the head of the country," said an aide who asked to remain anonymous.



Boats lie in a car park in Cardwell yesterday. Smashed yachts lay stacked like matchwood near a marina as a level-5 cyclone called Yasi hit the best part of Australia on Thursday.

PHOTO : AFP

EGYPT UNREST

Army holds the key but plays the sphinx

AFP, Cairo

The wait-and-see stance of the Egyptian military is raising many questions, but underlining one fact: its role will be decisive regardless of how the ongoing turmoil will end.

Political analysts are scrambling to decipher its sphinx-like conduct. Is it complicit in police brutality? Prudent in the face of a fluid situation? Split at the top of its command structure? Just biding its time?

No lack of questions means "plenty of things are moving within the system and the army," said a Western diplomat on condition of anonymity.

Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the defence minister who is also deputy prime minister, personally waded into the unrest at Tahrir square on Friday, saying said he wanted to "inspect the situation" first-hand.

He did so a day after US Admiral Mike Mullen, chief of the US joint chiefs of staff, said he had been "reassured" by the Egyptian army's top brass that troops would not open fire on demonstrators.

And in a television interview with ABC News, Vice President Omar Suleiman insisted on Thursday that the Egyptian gov-

ernment would not use the army against its own people to break up the anti-Mubarak protests.

"We will not use any violence against them," he said. "We will ask them to go home but we will not push them to go home," said Suleiman.

Imad Gad of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo said the military, which is held in high esteem in Egypt, wanted to keep its options open and was waiting in the wings.

"The army -- meaning its headquarters staff, not the intelligence services -- does not want to give the impression of intervening, because it wants to take power," he said.

"It is waiting to be asked to do so, in order to be cast as the saviour."

Since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1952, all the Egypt's presidents -- Mohamed Naguib, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar al-Sadat and Mubarak, a former air force commander -- have come from the military.

The backbone of a regime to which it remains loyal, the army holds the respect of Egyptians on account of its traditional neutrality during moments of popular unrest and its leading role in the major Arab-Israeli wars.

Food prices behind global unrest: UN

AFP, Rome

The United Nations food agency yesterday warned that record-high prices for basic commodities are generating unrest around the world and helped topple the Tunisian president last month.

"Not only is there a risk, but there have already been riots in some parts of the world because of rising prices," Jacques Diouf, head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), told reporters in Rome.

"Some governments have found themselves in difficult situations and there is even one that has fallen," he said -- a reference to the ousting of Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in a popular revolt on January 14.

The FAO on Thursday said food prices have reached their highest level since the UN agency began measuring them in 1990.

The FAO's index measuring monthly variations for a variety of staples rose 3.4

percent from December 2010 to reach 231 points.

France, which has promised to stamp out food price volatility as the current head of the G20 group of leading world economies, warned of "hunger riots".

"There is a real risk of hunger riots," French Agriculture Minister Bruno Le Maire said at a joint press conference with Diouf.

Le Maire called for "structural measures" to avoid spikes in food prices, including greater transparency over production and stocks.

He said that G20 countries should agree on a system of food stocks that can be released for parts of the world that are most at risk.

"Speculation on hunger in the world is economically dangerous and morally unacceptable," he said, referring to widespread criticism of the role played by financial speculators on global commodity markets.

UN rights chief urges Egypt to probe clashes

AFP, Geneva

UN human rights chief Navi Pillay said yesterday that Egypt must carry out a "transparent and impartial" investigation into violent clashes this week between pro and anti Mubarak supporters.

"The Prime Minister has apologized for Wednesday's violence. I welcome this public recognition -- unique in Egypt's recent history -- that the authorities have failed in their duties to protect the people," Pillay told journalists.

"I urge Egypt to follow through and make the necessary reforms to promote human rights and democracy."

Europe issues stern warning to Egypt against violence

AFP, Brussels

European leaders bluntly warned Egypt against any breakout of violence during yesterday's "departure day" protests as they took stock of the turmoil sweeping the Arab world.

With Europe slammed for saying too little too late on the unrest rolling across its southern flank, leaders of Britain, Germany and Italy joined a European Union summit warning against further bloodshed and calling for transition to democracy.

"If we see on the streets of Cairo today state-sponsored violence or the hiring of thugs to beat up protesters, then Egypt and its regime would lose any remaining credibility or support it has in the eyes of the Western world," said Britain's Prime Minister David Cameron.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel demanded "free and peaceful demonstrations" on what she termed "this decisive Friday" while Italian leader Silvio Berlusconi backed EU calls for a democratic transition that stop short of demanding President Hosni Mubarak leave office immediately.

"Egypt should be taking steps to show there is a clear, credible transparent path towards transition," Cameron said.

Jordanians rally for reform

Islamists in 'frank' talks with king

AFP, Amman

Around 1,000 protesters gathered yesterday outside the Jordanian prime minister's office to demand reforms, before staging a sit-in near Cairo's embassy in support of anti-regime protests in Egypt.

The demonstrators, answering calls by the powerful Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the country's Muslim Brotherhood, chanted: "The people demand reform and change."

"We want freedom, not martial laws. We need a government for the poor. We want electoral law that satisfies the young and old," they said under the rain as they carried national and IAF flags after midday prayers.

Meanwhile, Jordan's Islamist leaders, who are pushing for political and economic changes, said on their website that talks with King Abdullah II had been "frank" and cantered on reform.

"The meeting with the king was frank and clear and touched on various national problems, notably political reform, a modern and democratic electoral law ... which will lead to the formation of a parliamentary government," the Islamic Action Front said of its meeting with the monarch on Thursday.

Tremor rocks India-Myanmar border

AFP, New Delhi

A strong 6.4-magnitude earthquake rocked the India-Myanmar border region yesterday, US seismologists said.

The quake struck at a depth of 88 kilometres, the US Geological Survey said, with its epicentre 85 kilometres east of Imphal in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur.

It hit at 1353 GMT but there were no immediate reports of damage from the isolated area.

The Myanmar side of the border is sparsely populated with no major population centres. Strong quakes are rare there.

The 'weird' predatory fossa of Madagascar is threatened



BBC ONLINE

It is one of the most unusual of all big predators, but the odd-looking, cat-like fossa, the largest carnivore on the island of Madagascar, faces an uncertain future.

Few fossa can now be found in a place that was once a stronghold, as villagers hunt the animal as bushmeat and in a bid to protect their own livestock, which the fossa eats.

Its population may be declining rapidly, says one of the few scientists to have studied it in the wild, and it

could already be critically endangered.

Fossa are a highly specialised predator.

Secretive and cat-like, they are expert climbers and well equipped for chasing down lemurs in the forest, preying on even the largest lemur species.

However, very little is known about them, as only a handful of scientists have been able to study fossa closely in the wild.

Little is also known about how many fossa exist on Madagascar, with official estimates suggesting that fewer than 2500 survive and the animal should be considered as Endangered.

But according to one scientist studying it, the fossa could be in an even more perilous state.

Ms Mia-Lana Lührs is currently studying the fossa for her PhD at Germany's University of Göttingen and the German Primate Center.

Within the past three years, she has recorded a substantial fall in the numbers of fossa living in Kirindy, a reserve within forests on the west of the island.

Habitat destruction is one significant cause of the fossa's recent decline reason.

But the large predator is also coming into conflict with people, as it leaves the dwindling forest in search of food.

Khamenei calls for Islamic regime in Egypt

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei yesterday called for an Islamic regime to be installed in Egypt, saying the wave of Arab revolts is an "earthquake" triggered by the 1979 Iranian revolution.

The all-powerful Khamenei said the Arab uprisings, if successful, would lead to failure of US policies in the region and that the revolts were the most worrying for the Islamic republic's arch-foe Israel as its alliance with Egypt could be broken.

"Do not back down until the implementation of a popular regime based on religion," said Khamenei.

Authoritarian states in focus after Mideast turmoil

REUTERS, London

Unexpected revolt on North Africa's streets has shattered any easy assumptions powerful authoritarian leaders will survive indefinitely, perhaps even pointing to similar risks in Moscow and Beijing.

Western policymakers and many investors viewed Middle East strongmen such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Tunisia's Ben Ali as fixed points in an unstable region, largely ignoring growing social and economic strains that has now yielded violent unrest.

Many fear what happens next, particularly after the violence in Cairo this week.

For those who had begun to wonder if Western states were losing their dominance to authoritarian emerging economies such as China and Russia, recent events could signal that demands for democracy remain a powerful force.

"The Egypt situation is a wakeup call

for authoritarian regimes which believe that in longevity they can find stability," said Joel Hirst, international affairs fellow in residence at the US Council on Foreign Relations.

A number of Arab states have moved quickly to make concessions, if only symbolic, in an effort to avoid any repeat of the popular revolt the brought down Tunisia's president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali.

Jordan's King Abdullah reshuffled his government, Algeria announced political reforms and Yemen's president said he would not stand again in elections.

But with markets largely taken by surprise by the unrest, particularly in Egypt, some suggest investors should charge a higher risk premium in authoritarian states without democratic "release valves" and particularly clear succession plans.

Much also depends on how distant

rulers are seen to be from the rule. For Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his immediate cohort, analysts say the danger could lie in becoming too closely associated with perceived corrupt oligarchs.

Mubarak and Ben Ali, some say, simply lost touch.

China's Communist Party leadership is seen much more diverse and multi-centred than personality-dominated rule in Russia, Egypt or elsewhere, perhaps making it more survivable. Leaders change in cycles, and no one person has absolute power.

But elites in all states are seen facing a rising threat from the information age and social media platforms that recent events suggest can act as a powerful accelerant for dissent.

China blocked the word "Egypt" from some of its social networking sites and keeps a tight grip on Internet access.

NEWS IN brief

Kazakh leader announces snap polls

AFP, Astana

Kazakhstan's veteran leader Nursultan Nazarbayev yesterday called a snap presidential election for April 3 that is expected to see him crush a weak opposition and romp to a third decade in power.

Few doubt the 70-year-old, who has ruled Central Asia's largest oil producer and one of the world's leading uranium producers since it became independent from the Soviets, will easily win another five year term in the polls.

The country's opposition is sidelined and holds

Israel restricts access to Al-Aqsa mosque

AFP, Jerusalem

Access to Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa mosque compound was restricted yesterday in a bid to prevent demonstrations in support of the Egyptian uprising after Muslim prayers, police said.

"This Friday, we are forbidding access to the compound to men under 50 years old carrying an Israeli identity card," police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld told AFP.

The directive concerned Israeli-Arabs or Palestinians living in annexed east Jerusalem, he said.

All Palestinians from the occupied West Bank

Japan protests Russian defence chief's disputed island visit

AFP, Tokyo

Japan protested against a visit by the Russian defence minister yesterday to a disputed island chain, warning that the move threatened to sour already uneasy ties.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan said of Anatoly Serdyukov's trip to the southern Kuril islands: "It is extremely regrettable. We have firmly conveyed our resolve on the matter through the foreign ministry."

Japan's Foreign Minister Seiji Maehara summoned Russian Ambassador Mikhail Bely over the visit hours earlier to the islands, which are claimed

Italian woman abducted in Sahara

AFP, Algiers

An Italian woman tourist travelling with a driver and a tour guide has been kidnapped in the Sahara desert region of southern Algeria, security sources said yesterday.

The 56-year-old Italian who has not been identified was abducted Wednesday around 6:00 pm (1700 GMT) in Alidem, an area 130 kilometres south of Djanet, the main town in southeastern Algeria, the security official in the region contacted by AFP said.

The driver and guide who accompanied her were freed following the abduction and told investigators they had been kidnapped by "14 men riding in two

Iran to start delayed trial of three US 'spies'

AFP, Tehran

Iran is going to put on trial three young Americans tomorrow accused of spying against the Islamic republic, dismissing repeated pleas by arch-foe the United States for their release.

The trial of Sarah Shourd, Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal comes at a time when anti-American rhetoric is at fever pitch in Iran as it marks the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution which toppled the US-