

Egypt protests mount as govt rejects 'hasty' reforms

Three dead, hundred wounded in south, thousands block parliament

AFP, Cairo

Galvanised by the biggest day of protest since their campaign to oust Hosni Mubarak's regime began, Egyptian pro-democracy campaigners attempted to blockade parliament yesterday.

Meanwhile, at least three people were killed and 100 wounded in two days of clashes between police and demonstrators in a town in southern Egypt's New Valley region, a security official told AFP yesterday.

Police fired live rounds when local people rioted in the oasis town of El Kharga, more than 400 kilometres south of Cairo, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Scores were wounded and three people died of their injuries yesterday.

The furious mob responded by burning seven official buildings, including two police stations, a police barracks, a court house and the local headquarters of President Hosni

Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party.

The unrest in the country's south was the latest indication that the frustration with Hosni Mubarak's 30-year-reign has spread far beyond Cairo's Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the massive two-week-old protests.

Around a thousand marched on parliament to demand its member's resignation. The protest was peaceful, and government troops secured the building, but the marchers swore they would not leave until the body was dissolved.

Egypt's 82-year-old president has deputed his vice president and former intelligence chief Omar Suleiman to draw selected opposition groups into negotiations on democratic reform before elections in September.

Some parties have joined the talks, but the crowds in Tahrir insist that Mubarak must go before they will halt the protest. Suleiman, however, warns

that the transition must be slow and orderly if there is not to be chaos.

"A clear road map has been put in place with a set timetable to realise a peaceful and organised transfer of power," he said Tuesday on state television.

Afterwards, however, he told Egyptian editors that he would not allow "uncalculated and hasty steps" and warned "there will be no ending of the regime, nor a coup, because that means chaos."

The United States is watching events in the biggest country in the Arab world with great concern, hoping the transition to elected rule can take place without a descent into violence or an Islamist or military takeover.

On Tuesday, US Vice President Joe Biden renewed an appeal for "immediate" and "irreversible" political change in a phone call to Suleiman, including a wider national dialogue with the opposition, a White House statement said.



PHOTO: AFP
(Anti clockwise from top left) Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (R) meets with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister and the Presidential Special Envoy to the Middle East Alexander Sultanov (C) in Cairo, Egyptian anti-government protesters gather outside the Parliament gates and a doctor takes care of an injured man in Tahrir Square yesterday, on the 16th day of protests against the regime of President Hosni Mubarak.

Mubarak must leave Says Brotherhood

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood said yesterday it remains open to dialogue with the Egyptian regime, but repeated their demand for President Hosni Mubarak to leave office immediately.

"The president must leave his position. A new era should start," senior Brotherhood member and spokesman Mohammed Mursi told a press conference.

Speaking as protests against Mubarak entered their 16th day, he said the organisation, Egypt's biggest opposition group, remained open to dialogue with the government.

Power transition in Egypt a constitutional dilemma

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt, the Arab world's most populous and influential country, faces the danger of a power vacuum unless some sort of agreement on a transitional government is reached.

A popular uprising has gripped Egypt since Jan 25, with protesters camping out in central Cairo demanding the departure of Mubarak, even after the president announced he would not seek re-election in September.

The 'Wise Men' proposal is based on article 139 of the constitution that would allow Mubarak to hand executive powers to his deputy while staying on as figurehead until September.

Handing power to Suleiman offers a compromise between protesters' demands for Mubarak to leave office immediately and his decision to stay on until the end of his term in September.

"Consultations are continuing to find an

end to this crisis," Mohammed Habib, a member of 'Wise Men' said. "The truth is that the youth movement do not accept Mubarak's presence in any form or shape. We are trying to persuade them to accept it...We are trying to reach a compromise."

Even if they all agree on the proposal, article 82 of the constitution could present a legal complication. It says that while the president is able to delegate powers to a deputy, that person is not allowed to request constitutional amendments or dissolve the parliament or local shura councils.

If that article holds, it would be impossible for a Suleiman-led administration to carry out the constitutional reforms promised by Mubarak in response to the protests.

Without constitutional changes, a presidential election in September would have to run under the same rules that opposition parties say stack all the cards in favour of Mubarak's National Democratic Party and effectively foil a meaningful rival bid.

Security Council mission to Middle East Calls Russia

AFP, United Nations

Russia on Tuesday called for the UN Security Council to carry out a mission to the Middle East to unblock the peace process and assess turmoil in Egypt and other countries.

The Security Council has not visited the troubled region for more than three decades. Russia's UN ambassador Vitaly Churkin said council envoys should go to Israel, the Palestinian territories, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon.

"We are making this proposal now because we are concerned about the situation in the Middle East," Churkin told reporters.

"As we all know, the efforts to restart the Israeli-Palestinian talks are at an impasse and the situation in the region is quite fragile. It is fraught with further possible complications."

He said a Security Council mission "could stabilize the situation in a certain way and could help the international efforts to restart the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations."

Churkin said there has been no Security Council mission to the Middle East since 1979. "We think that this is not right, that for so many years the Security Council members as a body have not been to the Middle East."

Russia is one of the five permanent members of the 15-nation council along with UK, China, France and the US.

NEWS IN brief

Egypt's Nilesat resumes broadcasting Al-Jazeera

AFP, Doha

Egyptian satellite operator Nilesat has resumed carrying Al-Jazeera after an 11-day suspension that began as the network gave extensive coverage to anti-government protests, a spokesman said yesterday.

"Broadcasting on Nilesat has resumed normally," the spokesman for the Qatar-based channel told AFP.

Al-Jazeera had announced on January 30 that its transmissions on Nilesat had been interrupted on orders from then-outgoing Egyptian information minister Anas al-Fikki.

Greek-flagged oil tanker hijacked off Oman

AFP, Dubai

Pirates yesterday seized a Greek-flagged, British-owned oil tanker off the coast of Oman in the second such hijacking in as many days, the Bahrain-based Combined Maritime Forces said.

"We can confirm that the Irene SL has been pirated off the coast of Oman," a spokeswoman for the international naval force told AFP by telephone.

"It is an oil tanker," she said, adding that "it was bound for the United States."

The ship, which has 25 crew members, was confirmed hijacked at 0926 GMT, she said.

It is the second oil tanker hijacked in two days.

Holiday at home to cut gaffe, Sarkozy tells French ministers

AFP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy ordered his ministers yesterday to stay in France on holiday to avoid diplomatic gaffes after scandals over hospitality from authoritarian North African leaders.

Sarkozy bowed to criticism from rivals after embarrassing revelations that his prime minister and foreign minister accepted free holiday flights in Egypt and Tunisia, shortly before popular uprisings in both countries.

"From now on, members of the government must prefer France for their holidays," President Nicolas Sarkozy told a cabinet meeting, according to a transcript released by his office.

Russia arrests 'airport bomber's siblings'

AFP, Moscow

Russia has arrested the brother and sister of the suspected suicide bomber who killed 36 people at a Moscow airport last month for allegedly helping him carry out the attack, reports said yesterday.

The brother and sister of suspected suicide bomber Magomed Yevloyev, 20, a native of the North Caucasus region of Ingushetia that neighbours war-torn Chechnya, have been arrested as suspected accomplices, security officials said.

The Ingush authorities arrested Yevloyev's 16-year-old brother Akhmed and 22-year-old sister Fatima, the Interfax news agency reported.

Facebook opens Hong Kong office in Asia push

AFP, Hong Kong

Facebook has opened a Hong Kong office as it looks to boost its presence in Asia, even though the social networking giant is banned in mainland China, a potentially huge market.

The opening of the sales office in Hong Kong, a semi-autonomous Chinese territory, comes after Facebook opened an office in Singapore last year, as social networking sites and Internet traffic see a marked rise in the region.

Taiwan detains general in China spy case

AFP, Taipei

A Taiwanese general has been arrested over claims he spied for China, the defence ministry said yesterday as it scrambled to limit the damage from what it called the worst espionage case in 50 years.

Army Major General Lo Hsien-che was recruited by China while stationed in Thailand between 2002 and 2005 and was detained late last month, the ministry said in a statement.

At the time of his arrest, the 51-year-old was head of the army's telecommunications and electronic information department, according to the statement.

"We don't know for sure, but there's no reason to believe that he stopped spying for China after returning home from Thailand," a ministry official told AFP.

Massive security for Indonesian Islamist's trial

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia will deploy 1,200 police at today's trial of radical Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir, who is facing the death penalty for terrorism charges.

The 72-year-old bespectacled cleric is accused of seven counts of terrorism related to a paramilitary training camp that was discovered last February in Aceh province, court official Supriyantor said.

Hundreds of Bashir's supporters are expected to rally outside the trial, which gets under way as Indonesia tries to contain a spate of religious violence that has left three people dead and several churches badly damaged.

"Around 1,200 police officers have been readied to go to South Jakarta," police spokesman Boy Rafli Amar said, referring to the district court in the capital where the trial will take place.

"We hope their presence will provide a guarantee for the judges to conduct the trial as best as possible. We hope their presence can deal with whatever situation that might arise, inside or outside the court."

Bashir's charges include "mobilising people for acts of terror", which carries the death sentence, and financing Islamist militants.

Police have said the group was training to carry out Mumbai-style attacks on Western targets and political figures in Jakarta.

South Sudan minister shot dead in Juba

AFP, Juba

South Sudan's minister of cooperatives and rural development Jimmy Lemi Milla and his bodyguard were shot dead in Juba yesterday, the southern army's spokesman said, in what appeared to be a personal dispute.

"There was shooting at the ministries, in which the minister of cooperatives and rural development was killed, as well as his bodyguard," the Sudan People's Liberation Army spokesman Philip Aguer told AFP.

"It is believed that the man responsible was the minister's driver, and he also killed himself," he added, indicating that three people in all died in the incident.

Aguer said the exact reason for the shooting was not known.

Tunisia leader gets wide powers

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's Senate agreed unanimously yesterday to grant wide powers to the interim president struggling to restore order to the country following the overthrow of ex-leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

The upper house followed the lead of the lower house of parliament which on Monday authorised interim president Foued Mebazaa to rule by decree.

"We are coming under social pressure because of the demands of the people for improvements to their situation," caretaker Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi told the house before the vote.

"But it has to be taken into account that the state is not yet capable of responding to all these demands. We do not have a magic wand."

Even as he spoke a stray bullet from the gun of a soldier who fired warning shots to disperse a crowd in Tunis wounded a 26-year-old man, witnesses said.

They said the crowd of jobless people had massed outside the social affairs ministry, which on Tuesday began distributing a dole to the handicapped and unemployed.

The shots were fired as the crowd refused to line up before the offices opened but instead tried to force a way in, the witnesses said.

The measures voted by parliament empowers Mebazaa to sidestep the assembly made up mostly of followers of Ben Ali and decide key issues by decree, relating notably to the transition to democracy and the holding of elections within six months.

Inter-Korean talks fail

AFP, Seoul

Military talks aimed at easing high tensions between North and South Korea collapsed yesterday when the North's delegation walked out, Seoul's defence ministry said.

The two sides had been meeting for the first time since the North's deadly shelling of a South Korean island on November 23, which briefly sparked fears of war.

A ministry spokesman told AFP the North's negotiators walked out of the meeting in the border village of Panmunjom and crossed the frontier 10 minutes later.

"They even failed to discuss when to meet again," he said. "Under the current situation, we can say the talks have collapsed."

A ministry official quoted by YTN television said the atmosphere "was quite charged with emotion".

The ministry said the two sides failed to agree on the agenda for a proposed higher-level military meeting, with the South demanding an apology at that meeting for two bloody border incidents last year.

North Korea flatly denies the allegation that it has carried out attacks on a South Korean ship killing 46 people. Earlier yesterday, the South agreed in principle to hold separate Red Cross talks on reunions for separated families. But the unification ministry said these talks could not now go ahead.

North and South had agreed to talk soon after their respective superpower patrons, China and the United States, called jointly for inter-Korean dialogue.



PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of opposition supporters in Sri Lanka held protests demanding the release of former army chief and defeated presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka yesterday. The United National Party, the island's main opposition group, led a march through Colombo to campaign for Fonseka who is serving a 30-month prison sentence after being arrested by the military a year ago.