

# Strikes swell Egypt protests despite regime threats

## FM warns of coup if protests persist, Egypt govt and US swap barbs as tension mounts

AFP, Cairo

Tens of thousands of Egyptian workers walked out yesterday in mass nationwide strikes to demand wage increases and show support for the widening revolt against President Hosni Mubarak's regime.

Strikes swept private and public sector workplaces in cities across the country, unions said, as the opposition defied stark warnings from Mubarak's lieutenants that they could face a military crackdown.

In Cairo, some 3,000 health workers marched to join the anti-regime crowds that have blockaded parliament and occupied central Cairo's "liberated" Tahrir Square, epicentre of the defiant popular revolt.

A security official confirmed union reports that thousands of employees in the public sector were staging strikes in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria,

the canal city of Suez and cities on the north coast and on the Red Sea.

The strikes broke out as both sides in Egypt's conflict toughened their rhetoric, with Vice President Omar Suleiman and Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit tacitly threatening to turn to the military to regain control.

Speaking to the Arab news network Al-Arabiya yesterday, Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit said that if "adventurers" take over the process of reform the military "will be compelled to defend the constitution and national security ... and we'll find ourselves in a very grave situation."

The night earlier, he was more explicit, saying in an interview with "PBS NewsHour" that there would be chaos if Mubarak stepped down immediately. "Do we want the armed forces to assume the responsibility of stabilizing the nation thru imposing martial law, and army in the streets?" he said. It

was the second coup warning this week, with Prime Minister Omar Suleiman making similar threats Tuesday.

The warnings reflect growing government impatience as its own attempts to manage the crisis have failed. Mubarak has refused to step down immediately, saying he will serve out the rest of his term until September elections.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian foreign minister has accused the United States of imposing its "will" on its Arab ally, as the White House warned that Cairo had failed to even reach a "minimum threshold" for reform.

"When you speak about 'prompt,' 'immediate,' 'now,' as if you are imposing on a great country like Egypt, a great friend that has always maintained the best of relationship with the United States, you are imposing your will on him," Abul Gheit said Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP  
Egyptian anti-government demonstrators wave Egyptian flags at Cairo's Tahrir Square yesterday on the 17th day of protests against President Hosni Mubarak's regime. Thousands more Egyptian demonstrators joined a mounting tide of protest against Mubarak's regime despite stark threats of a government crackdown.

## NEWS IN brief

### US lawmakers revive China currency bill

AFP, Washington

US lawmakers announced Wednesday they would introduce legislation a day later to punish China for allegedly keeping its currency -- and therefore its exports -- artificially cheap.

Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown and Republican Senator Olympia Snowe wrote to Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner last month saying they would propose a bill to treat currency undervaluation as an improper subsidy for Chinese goods.

### Saudi embassy dismisses rumours about king's health

AFP, Rabat

The Saudi embassy in Morocco, where King Abdullah has been convalescing after surgery in the United States, yesterday strongly denied rumours that the octogenarian monarch had died.

"I can assure that the health of King Abdullah is excellent and gives no cause for any concern," a senior embassy official told AFP.

An informed source told AFP: "These are baseless rumours. The king is alive and well, and he has held several audiences since his telephone call with

### Suicide blast kills Afghan district governor

AFP, Kunduz

A suicide bomber in northern Afghanistan killed a district governor and two others yesterday after walking into the administrator's office to hand over a letter, police said.

Five people were also injured in the attack on Abdul Wahid Omerkhail, the governor of Chardara district in the northeastern Kunduz province, a police commander said.

"The district governor and two of his companions have been killed. Five other people were injured," Abdul Rahman Aqtash, the deputy provincial police chief, said. He said the attack was carried out by a

### Ulfa begins 'unconditional peace' talks

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Top leaders of Assam's insurgents' outfit Ulfa yesterday met Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram as they began the first face-to-face unconditional talks with the government in an attempt to end the over three decades of a violent movement.

An eight-member Ulfa delegation led by its chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa met Chidambaram at his North Block office here as a part of an introductory meeting. The meeting was followed by a full session with senior Home Ministry officials led by Home Secretary G K Pillai.

Yesterday's meet was the first with the government in Ulfa's 31-year-old history.

### Sudan detains opposition leader

AFP, Khartoum

Sudanese security services yesterday arrested prominent government critic Mariam al-Mahdi, daughter of the prime minister whom veteran President Omar al-Bashir ousted in a 1989 coup, a member of her Umma party said.

Mahdi was arrested as she went with a group of activists to petition the security forces for the release of protesters detained nearly two weeks ago, Habab Mubarak, the daughter of another leading Umma party member Mubarak al-Fadil, told AFP.

"The minute we stepped out of the car they

### DR Congo mass rape trial begins

BBC ONLINE

An army officer in the Democratic Republic of Congo and 10 other soldiers have gone on trial at a military court yesterday over an alleged mass rape of civilians.

Prosecutors say Lt Col Kibibi Mutware and the other soldiers, including three officers, raped at least 35 women.

The alleged rapes took place on 1 January in the town of Fizi, in the eastern province of South Kivu.

Col Kibibi has denied the charges. There have been numerous cases of mass rape in the unstable east of DR Congo.

Military sources say the incident began when a mob lynched a soldier who had shot a civilian.

### No need for more meetings with South Says North Korea

AFP, Seoul

North Korea said yesterday there was no need for further dialogue with "traitors" in South Korea, a day after the collapse of military talks aimed at easing months of high tensions.

The two-day talks were the first since the North's shelling of a South Korean island on November 23, which killed four people including two civilians and briefly raised fears of all-out war.

Pyongyang's delegation, in a statement carried by the official news agency, blamed a plot by the South Korean "group of traitors" including the defence and unification ministries for the collapse of the talks.

"The army and people of (North Korea) do not feel any need to deal with the group of traitors any longer, now that they do not wish to see North-South relations improved but totally reject dialogue itself," it said.

Despite the tough language, analysts said both sides have reasons to return to talks.

"We are still keeping the door open (to dialogue). We will wait and see," said the South's Unification Minister Hyun In-Taek.

But it was unclear how North and South could reconcile their positions.

### Philippines and Muslim rebels revive peace talks

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The Philippine government and the nation's main Islamic separatist group agreed yesterday to push ahead with a faltering peace process after meeting for the first time in two years.

The government hailed the meeting as a success, saying it yielded "agreements on substantive issues" and that the two sides agreed to "fast track the peace process" with another round of talks scheduled for next month.

The meeting in Kuala Lumpur also covered concerns over the emergence of a breakaway rebel faction that authorities say

could undermine efforts to end one of the world's longest-running insurgencies.

The two sides said in a joint statement that they "discussed issues related to" feared rebel commander Ameril Umbrakato's split from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which was announced over the weekend.

In their first round of talks since Philippines president Benigno Aquino came to power last year, they agreed to renew the mandate of the international monitoring team in the troubled southern region for another 12 months.

They also exchanged drafts on their positions and agreed to meet again, possibly on March 29 and 30.

### US Republicans target deep cuts

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama's Republican foes Wednesday unveiled a spending plan that calls for slashing funds for overseas food aid, scientific research, "green" energy, and environmental protection.

The House Appropriations Committee released a list of some 70 programs that Republicans hope to pare back or scrap entirely as part of an increasingly bitter political war over how to get Washington's financial house in order.

The reductions will be part of a House spending bill to fund the US government through the end of the fiscal year on October 1, replacing a stopgap measure approved last year that expires March 4.

The measure may pass the House next week, but with some centrist Republicans uneasy, the US Senate in Democratic hands, and Obama holding the presidential veto pen, major changes to the Republican plan are all but certain.

But Republicans portrayed the estimated \$58 billion in cuts -- which spare the Pentagon, as well as massive and politically popular "entitlement" social programs -- as critical steps at a time when the US national debt runs \$14 trillion with a \$1.5 trillion yearly government deficit.

"While making these cuts is hard, we have a unique opportunity to right our fiscal ship and begin to reduce our massive deficits and debt," said Republican Representative Hal Rogers, who leads the committee that wrote the bill.

Rodgers said in a statement he and his colleagues had "scoured every program to find real savings that are responsible and justifiable to the American people."

One day after Obama called on Congress to back a six-year, \$53-billion investment in high-speed, intercity rail, Rogers called for a \$1-billion cut in existing efforts and another \$234 million from the AMTRAK rail system.

The cuts include \$899 million from energy efficiency and renewable energy programs, and heavily targets US investments in scientific research, slicing \$1 billion from the National Institutes of Health and \$1.1 billion from the Department of Energy's Office of Science.

### Ireland plane crash kills six

AFP, Dublin

A commuter plane crashed and burst into flames as it tried to land at Cork airport in southern Ireland yesterday, killing six people and injuring another six, officials said.

The accident happened as the turboprop aircraft travelling from Belfast City Airport in Northern Ireland with 12 people on board made its third attempt to touch down in fog.

"I can confirm that we have six fatalities and six people are in hospital," Cork County Council spokesman Tom O'Sullivan told AFP. Police gave the same toll.

Cork Airport said it was closed until further notice and flights had been diverted to other Irish airports.

### South Sudan rebels break ceasefire Clashes kill 16

AFP, Juba

At least 16 people died when rebels attacked south Sudanese troops in troubled Jonglei state, breaking a ceasefire signed last month, a southern army spokesman said yesterday.

"We are still waiting for full details of the casualties," said Philip Aguer, spokesman for the south's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), adding that he feared the death toll would rise.

"The rebels launched their attacks on Wednesday at 1:00 pm killing four of our soldiers, but the army fought back and 12 of the attackers were killed," Aguer told AFP.

Aguer said new clashes broke out yesterday morning in Fangak town, in the north of Jonglei, the south's most populous state.

"The men of Athor attacked again this morning but they were repelled. The situation is under SPLA control, but we don't know if they will attack."

The clashes shattered a "permanent ceasefire" signed between supporters of rebel leader George Athor and the SPLA in January, just days before a landmark referendum on independence for the south. Athor did not himself attend the signing ceremony in the regional capital Juba.

"The violation of the deal is something that is very disappointing," Aguer said.

### WikiLeaks insider dishes dirt on Assange

AFP, Berlin

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was on the sharp end of some unwelcome exposures himself yesterday as a former ally spilled the beans on the controversial Australian and his whistle-blowing organisation.

"Inside WikiLeaks" is billed as a warts-and-all account of Daniel Domscheit-Berg's time as chief programmer and media spokesman for what his tell-all book calls "the world's most dangerous website."

Set for release in 16 countries from today (Friday), it says the "chaotic" WikiLeaks cannot protect its sources and accuses the "power-obsessed" Assange of being economical with the truth, accord-

ing to leaked excerpts.

Domscheit-Berg, along with others, left WikiLeaks in September complaining that Assange was being autocratic and that the organisation, ironically for a group on a crusade for openness, was becoming excessively secretive.

WikiLeaks is "far too easy to attack," the 32-year-old told German magazine Stern this week, quoting him as calling Assange "brilliant" but "paranoid" and a "megalomaniac."

The leaks have earned Assange and WikiLeaks massive public attention and plenty of enemies.

He also has a dig for Assange's attitude to women in the book.



## Career Opportunity

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