

# Mubarak 'listened to the voices' of Egyptian people

AFP, Brussels

Europe yesterday welcomed Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's decision to stand down, saying he had "listened to the voices of the Egyptian people" and opened the way to reform.

European Union foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton said that by departing, Mubarak had "opened the way to faster and deeper reforms."

"It is important now that the dialogue is accelerated leading to a broad-based government which will respect the aspirations of, and deliver stability for, the Egyptian people," she said in a statement.

"The future of Egypt rightly remains in the hands of the Egyptian people," the statement added.

She called for "all abuses" of human rights after 18 days of mass protests to be investigated and said the EU stands "ready to help in any way it can", during "an orderly and irreversible transition towards democracy and free and fair elections."

EU parliament head Jerzy Buzek, a former Solidarity activist in Communist Poland, added that the Egyptian army "must pursue a constructive role in the democratisation process."

"This is only the beginning of a long road to lasting change," he warned, calling for "a more just economic and social order, building on the rule of law."



PHOTO : AFP

A distorted picture of embattled Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak (centre), Egyptian anti-government demonstrators flood coastal city Alexandria and Cairo's landmark Tahrir Square yesterday (upper and lower right) and demonstrators wave their shoes as they react to a speech by the strongman who refused to stand down immediately.

# Mubarak, 82, survived plots, but not his people

AFP, Cairo

He survived 10 attempts on his life, and at 82 his health was a subject of speculation. But in the end, it was his people who brought down Egypt's modern-day pharaoh.

Pulling off a second surprise in as many days, President Hosni Mubarak yesterday stepped down and handed over power to the army from whose ranks he emerged, his deputy Omar Suleiman announced on television.

Late Thursday when he had been expected to quit, Mubarak said in a televised speech he would stay on until September, to the fury of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators waiting to celebrate in central Cairo.

The party was delayed for one day, in an emotional roller-coaster for the mostly youthful demonstrators.

Until the outbreak of anti-government protests on January 25, Mubarak seemed insurmountable as president of the most

populous nation in the Arab world.

His rise to power came unexpectedly, when his predecessor Anwar Sadat -- who made history by signing a peace deal with Israel -- was gunned down by Islamist militants on October 6, 1981 during a military parade in Cairo.

He took office a week after the assassination, and since then he ruled without interruption under a draconian emergency law that remains in force.

Islamic fundamentalist groups -- including Al-Jihad, Gamaa Islamiyya and Talaeh al-Fatah -- were responsible for most of the attempts on Mubarak's life on both Egyptian and foreign soil.

The first direct attempt to kill him came in 1993, a year after Islamists launched a campaign of violence aimed at toppling the secular Egyptian government, when a bid to fire rockets at his plush Cairo residence was foiled.

## Egypt PM to appoint deputy from "wise men"

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt's vice-president told the prime minister yesterday to appoint a deputy premier from a council of "wise men" who have been in talks with the government to find a way out of the country's crisis.

The state news agency said Vice President Omar Suleiman had asked Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq to appoint a deputy prime minister who would take responsibility for "a national dialogue" with opposition forces and independent figures.

Suleiman held the first session of the dialogue on Sunday.

## Russia, Japan crisis talks end in failure

AFP, Moscow

The crisis talks between Russia and Japan over four Pacific islands ended in acrimonious failure yesterday when Tokyo reaffirmed its claim on the chain and Moscow accused its neighbour of extreme behaviour.

The two-hour meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Japanese counterpart Seiji Maehara was marked by an icy atmosphere and indications of an increasingly tense stalemate in the Kuril Islands dispute.

Japan stalemated down a Russian proposal to form a joint commission to help resolve the crisis and the two diplomats notably failed to discuss a mooted visit to Moscow by Japanese Prime Minister Noto Kan.

"We could not bridge our differences," the Japanese foreign minister said flatly after talks that included a brief but unscheduled one-on-one meeting with Lavrov.

The difficult talks opened with the two delegations staring coldly at each other from opposite sides of a long table and Lavrov telling Maehara in a stern voice that he found Japan's recent actions unacceptable.

"To be honest, I expected to receive you in Moscow against a better backdrop," a stern-looking Lavrov said as he opened the talks.

"Your visit comes against the background of a series of completely unacceptable actions," he added.

## April 13, 2036, the 'Doomsday'? Asteroid 'Apophis' could slam into the Earth on that day

THE DAILY MAIL ONLINE

An asteroid travelling at 23,000mph could crash into earth on April 13, 2036 killing millions causing global chaos.

In a scene straight from a science-fiction film, scientists are predicting that the 300-yard-wide Apophis could slam into the planet.

If the comet passes through a narrow gravitational keyhole in April 2029 it will be on course for a massive collision seven years later.

The force of earth's gravity is so great that if the asteroid goes through the hole its path could be 'tweaked' sending it straight towards us.

Donald Yeomans, head of Nasa's Near Earth Object Program office, said there was a chance the asteroid could collide with earth.

'If it goes through what we call a keyhole during that close Earth

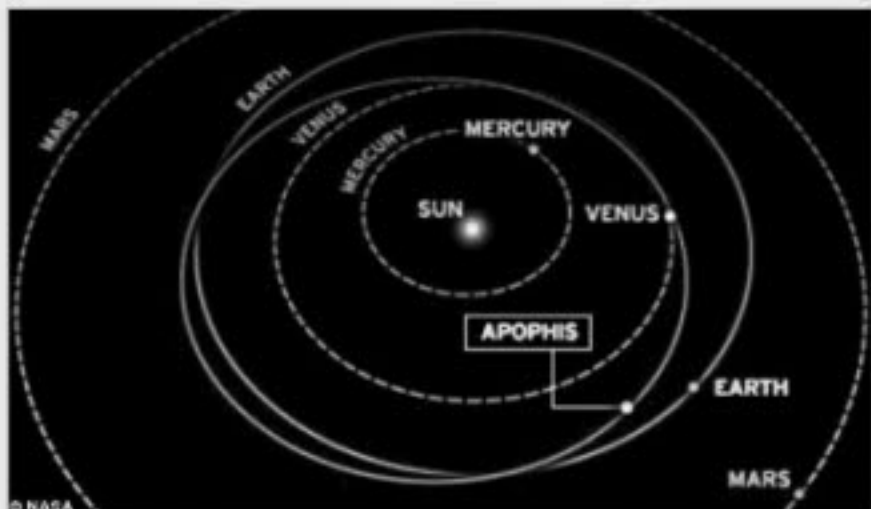
approach... then it will indeed be perturbed just right so that it will come back and smack Earth on April 13, 2036,' he told Life's Little Mysteries.

Professor Leonid Sokolov of the St Petersburg State University told the RiaNovosti website: 'Apophis will approach Earth at a distance of 37,000-38,000 kilometres on April 13, 2029.'

'Its likely collision with Earth may occur on April 13, 2036. Our task is to consider various alternatives and develop scenarios and plans of action depending on the results of further observations of Apophis.'

Russian scientists held a meeting 14 months ago to look at launching an operation to knock the asteroid off path.

Although Russian scientists are predicting the asteroid may strike earth, Mr Yeomans said it is unlikely.



## Thai amends constitution for smooth polls

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's parliament yesterday approved constitutional amendments that the prime minister had set as a condition for early elections, as protesters gathered in Bangkok to demand his resignation.

The legislation, approved by 347 to 37 votes, includes a switch to a single-seat constituency system from multiple seats, and an increase in the number of lawmakers elected through party-list proportional representation.

Under the new system, there will be 375 constituency-based members of parliament and 125 from party lists.

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has said the amendments to the charter -- introduced following a 2006 coup and approved in a referendum the following year -- are necessary before parliament can be dissolved for snap polls.

Abhisit said Wednesday he would call a vote in the first half of this year if there was no fresh political violence.

The British-born, Oxford-educated head of the establishment Democrat Party, who came to power in 2008 through a parliamentary vote, must call an election by the end of this year, when his term finishes.

Mass protests in April and May of last year by the "Red Shirt" movement, which is broadly loyal to fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra, left 90 people dead in street clashes between demonstrators and the army.

The Reds, who were campaigning for immediate elections, have held a series of peaceful one-day rallies in the capital in recent weeks.

## Iran gas pipeline explodes

AFP, Tehran

A gas pipeline exploded yesterday in central Iran near the Shiite holy city of Qom, without causing casualties or disrupting gas supplies, media reports said.

The official IRNA news agency said the blast occurred near Salafchegan, a special free economic zone southwest of Qom. It did not say what caused the explosion.

"The repair work has started and there is no cause for worry," the report said the Qom branch of National Iranian Gas company.

Earlier yesterday the ISNA news agency, citing unnamed gas company officials, said distribution of gas to households, power plants, businesses and industrial consumers had not been disrupted.

## Assange not facing 'secret' trial

BBC ONLINE

Claims Julian Assange would face a "secret trial" on sexual assault charges in Sweden are inaccurate, a UK extradition hearing has been told.

Clare Montgomery QC, for the Swedish authorities, said evidence from a trial would be heard in private but the arguments would be made in public.

The Wikileaks founder's lawyer said his client might not have a fair trial.

Sweden wants Mr Assange to face sexual assault claims, which he denies. The case was adjourned to 24 February.

At Belmarsh Magistrates' Court in south-east London, Geoffrey Robertson QC, representing the Wikileaks founder, said rape trials in Sweden were "secret" and heard behind closed doors - a claim that was denied by representatives of the Swedish authorities.

In addition to this, he said, criticism of Mr Assange by Sweden's prime minister could damage his chance of a fair trial.

Fredrik Reinfeldt's remarks had shown "complete contempt for the presumption of innocence", he said.

Mr Robertson told the hearing that the prime minister's comments this week had created a "toxic atmosphere" in Sweden.

## US, Israel to exit Middle East, says Ahmadinejad

AFP, Tehran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said yesterday that a new Middle East is being created which would be free of the United States and Israel, as he backed the Arab uprisings but warned Egyptians to be watchful of America's "friendly face."

Massive crowds of Iranians, waving flags and chanting "Death to Mubarak!" and "Death to America!" descended on Tehran's Azadi Square (Freedom Square) to listen to the hardliner who lashed out at the West and Israel in a speech marking the 32nd anniversary of the Islamic revolution.

## Clashes between south Sudan army, rebels kill 105

AFP, Juba

A spate of attacks by rebels against the south Sudanese army in the region's troubled Jonglei state killed 105 people, 39 of them civilians, an army spokesman said yesterday, leaving a hard-won truce in tatters.

"On the side of the military that includes the SPLA, the police and the prison services, 20 were killed in Fangak town, while 30 of Athon's men were killed," Philip Aguer told AFP.

He was referring to renegade southern general George Athon whose supporters attacked troops of the south's Sudan People's Liberation Army on Wednesday evening shattering a "permanent ceasefire" they signed just last month.

"Sadly, there were 39 civilians killed, including women and children, and 65 others wounded," as well as 30 wounded SPLA troops, Aguer said, adding that the fighting had now halted.

The latest reported deaths from clashes in Fangak town on Wednesday evening and Thursday morning represent a dramatic jump from an earlier toll of 16 people killed in fighting between southern troops and the rebels in the Door area of Fangak county.

"The number of casualties is high because the attacks were a surprise. This is something we were not expecting because we trusted the ceasefire that was signed," Aguer said.

There was no immediate response from Athon when AFP tried to contact him by phone, but speaking to the independent Sudan Radio Service on Thursday he accused the SPLA of starting the attacks.

Medics at Malakal hospital, in neighbouring Upper Nile state, said that several people wounded in the fighting had already arrived and they were expecting to receive more.

"We are preparing ourselves to be ready for any help we can give to those who may come," said Tut Gony, the hospital's medical director.

## NEWS IN brief

### BBC Persian TV coverage of Egypt jammed in Iran

AFP, London

The BBC's Persian television service is being jammed from within Iran following coverage of the mass protests against President Hosni Mubarak's rule in Egypt, the broadcaster said yesterday.

BBC Persian TV has been working with the BBC's Arabic TV service to broadcast rolling news from Egypt, and the broadcaster believes it is this coverage which has prompted the jamming which began on Thursday.

Many Iranian viewers claimed to have been watching events unfold in Cairo and elsewhere in the region extremely closely, the Corporation said.

### Assange extradition decision due February 24

AFP, London

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange will hear on February 24 if a judge has ruled in favour of his extradition to Sweden, court officials said yesterday.

After three days of legal argument, Judge Howard Riddle told Assange to report back to Belmarsh Magistrates Court in London on February 24.

Court officials confirmed to AFP that the judge was expected to give his decision on that day.

But if he rules in favour of Sweden's attempts to secure Assange's extradition from Britain to face questioning over allegations of rape and sexual assault, the WikiLeaks founder can appeal the decision.

### UN rights head raps Israel over settlements impact

AFP, Jerusalem

UN human rights chief Navi Pillay sharply criticised Israel yesterday for ignoring the harm done to Palestinians by its Jewish settlement policy and the construction of a vast West Bank barrier.

She also condemned Palestinian militants in Gaza, describing their rocket attacks on Israel as "war crimes" which were a "major obstacle" to efforts to broker a peace agreement between the two sides.

Speaking to reporters at the end of a six-day visit to the region, Pillay said she had been shocked at the apathy among Israeli officials when she raised the issue of the suffering of Palestinians living near settlements or close to the towering barrier which

### Strikers ground all Pakistani state airline planes

AP, Karachi

Pakistan's state-owned airline grounded all flights yesterday, stranding thousands of angry passengers as an employee strike stretched into a fourth day and turned violent in some areas as police clashed with striking employees.

Pilots and support staff went on strike Tuesday over a proposal to have the struggling carrier share routes with Turkish Airlines. PIA managers say the route-sharing idea will lessen its financial losses, but

### Philippines, Maoists agree on ceasefire before talks

AFP, Manila

Philippine government and Maoist guerrillas have agreed to observe a seven-day ceasefire as formal peace negotiations resume next week in Oslo to end an insurgency that began in the 1960s.

Since 1986, there have been stop-start talks to find a political solution to one of the world's longest-running Communist insurgencies.

The talks, brokered by Norway, had been stalled since 2004 after the Maoists were placed on terrorist blacklists by Washington and some Western