

Libyan crackdown 'escalates' as Arab world rage in protest

AGENCIES, Baghdad

The escalating revolt in Libya yesterday emboldened protesters across the Arab world, where tens of thousands flooded streets from Tunisia to Yemen to demand better lives and greater freedom.

Reports from Libya indicate thousands may have been killed or injured as the government crackdown escalates 'alarmingly', UN human rights head Navi Pillay has said.

Witnesses in Tripoli say pro-Gaddafi forces have opened fire on protesters.

Nato ambassadors are holding emergency talks.

Around the capital, Tripoli, an elite brigade commanded by Col Gaddafi's son Khamis is believed to be dug in.

"The violence we have seen is appalling and unacceptable," said Prime Minister David Cameron. "People working for this regime... should remember that international justice has a long reach and a long memory."

However, much of the country is now in the hands of anti-government forces.

In Az-Zawiyah, 23 people were killed and 44 wounded and heavy fighting was reported in Libya's third city Misrata, and in Zouara, further west towards the Tunisian border.

The United Nations warned Libya's food distribution system was at risk of collapsing and from Cairo, state media reported that Kadhaif al-Dam, a close Gaddafi aide had resigned in protest against the handling of the crisis.

Across Yemen, tens of thousands demonstrated after the main weekly Muslim prayers to demand that veteran President Ali Abdullah Saleh step down.

In the capital, thousands poured into a main square near Sanaa University, many of them women, chanting "Out, out!" and "God bears witness to your acts, Abdullah."

The protesters have dubbed yesterday 'the beginning of the end' for Saleh's regime which has been in power in Sanaa since 1978.

In Tunisia, tens of thousands rallied to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi's

transitional government in the biggest rally since last month's ouster of Ben Ali.

Demonstrators chanted "Ghannouchi leave" and "Shame on this government" as army helicopters circled above what police estimated as 100,000 people.

In Bahrain, the anti-regime campaign entered a 12th day with a mass rally to honour seven victims of a deadly police crackdown last week.

The mainly Shiite protesters, demanding an end to two centuries of the Sunni Al-Khalifa dynasty, gathered in a Pearl Square festooned with banners calling for reform and waved red-and-white national flags.

"Nobody is scared of tanks or weapons," Ibrahim Ali, a 42-year-old mechanical engineer told AFP.

Jordan too braced for 10,000 members of the powerful Islamist opposition movement and other parties who were expected to march through central Amman for their own "day of anger" by deploying several thousand security forces.



Egyptian evacuees wait in an airshed after fleeing from Libya yesterday near the Tunisian city of Ben Guerdane. More than 30,000 Tunisian and Egyptian migrants have fled to their home countries from Libya since Monday, the International Organisation for Migration said Thursday, adding that it expects tens of thousands more to leave.

PHOTO : AFP

NEWS IN brief

Britain to seize Gaddafi's London assets

AFP, London

Britain will shortly seize billions of pounds in assets that Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi has stored in the European country, the Telegraph newspaper reported yesterday.

Britain's finance department has set up a unit to trace Gaddafi's British assets which it believes include bank accounts, commercial property and a 16.1 million dollar London home, the paper said.

"We are ready to move in on Gaddafi's assets, the work is under way. This is definitely on the radar at the highest levels", a government source told the British daily. Britain understands that Gaddafi owns around 20 billion pounds in liquid assets, mostly in London. According to the paper, these will be frozen 'within days.'

Russia may send French Mistral warship to Kuril Islands

AFP, Moscow

Russia may send one or even two French-designed Mistral warships to the Pacific to protect a chain of islands that are bitterly claimed by Japan, its top general said yesterday.

"We do not exclude that one or possibly two Mistral warships will be sent to the Pacific Fleet, including for the purpose of addressing security issues in the Kuril Islands," Chief of Staff General Nikolai Makarov told Interfax.

The islands row has escalated dramatically in recent weeks, with President Dmitry Medvedev vowing to step up the islands' defences and Japan reasserting its claim on the land annexed by the Soviet army at the end of World War II.

S Korea charges Somali pirates with murder attempt

AFP, Seoul

South Korean prosecutors yesterday charged five Somali pirates captured in January with attempted murder -- punishable by life imprisonment -- and said some had also seized one of Seoul's ships last year.

The five were captured during a dramatic raid by Seoul's navy commandos in the Arabian Sea and flown to South Korea, in the country's first legal attempt to punish foreign pirates.

Eight other pirates were killed during the raid on the South Korean-owned Samho Jewelry on January 15, while all 21 crew were rescued.

US, S Korea envoys discuss N Korea nuclear program

AFP, Washington

South Korea's nuclear negotiations chief met Thursday with US special envoy for North Korea Stephen Bosworth to discuss Pyongyang's uranium enrichment program, officials said Thursday.

The program disclosed last November potentially gives the North a second way to make nuclear weapons, in addition to its plutonium stockpile and envoy Wi Sung-Lac's visit came a day after the North's main ally China blocked publication of a United Nations report criticising the program.

State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said Wi was expected to held talks yesterday with Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell.

Obama praises Algeria for lifting state of emergency

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama commended Algeria Thursday for lifting a 19-year-old state of emergency, calling it a "positive sign" the government was responding to its people's aspirations.

Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika ordered the emergency measure to be lifted following unprecedented protests last month against a background of popular revolts sweeping the Arab world.

In a statement released by the White House, Obama called the move "an important step forward."

Long live Libya and its independence Says Chavez

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez praised Libya's 'independence' on Thursday, saying longtime strongman Muammar Gaddafi is facing a civil war in his country.

"Long live Libya and its independence! Gaddafi faces a civil war!" the Venezuelan leader said in a Twitter message, his first reaction to unrest shaking Libya since February 15.

Chavez is Gaddafi's main ally in Latin America. Both leaders regularly make public condemnations of US "imperialism" and have exchanged visits in recent years.

Ties are so close that Gaddafi was rumoured on Monday to have fled to Caracas, claims later denied.

No signs of life as NZ quake toll rises to 113

AFP, Christchurch

Emergency crews scoured the mangled wreckage of quake-hit Christchurch for a fourth day yesterday but found only bodies and no signs of life as the death toll climbed to 113.

"These are very, very dark days for New Zealand," Prime Minister John Key said, adding that rescue crews refused to give up hope that people remained alive in the debris after Tuesday's 6.3 magnitude quake.

"We need a bit of luck to try and find a few people that may still have survived this earthquake and are still trapped in those buildings," he told Radio New Zealand.

Police said 113 bodies had been retrieved from the rubble and were lying in a temporary morgue, without updating the figure of 228 listed as missing.

Police have also vowed to crack down on criminals after about a dozen cases of post-quake looting in Christchurch.

Al-Qaeda leader Abu Suleiman killed in Iraq

BBC ONLINE

Iraqi security forces say they have killed the man considered to be the military leader of al-Qaeda in the country.

Al-Nasser Lideen Allah Abu Suleiman, also known as Noman Salman, was a leader of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), a branch of al-Qaeda.

He is believed to have been the group's "war minister" since two of its other senior leaders were killed last year.

Abu Suleiman was shot dead in the town of Hit, west of Baghdad, say officials.

World leaders seek ways to combat Libya crackdown

AFP, United Nations

World leaders yesterday were studying punitive measures to take against Muammar Gaddafi as the Libyan strongman's brutal crackdown on a nationwide revolt grew more desperate.

France and Britain have proposed the UN Security Council pass a resolution calling for sanctions and a total arms embargo against Libya ahead of its meeting later to discuss the crisis, France's top diplomat said.

Foreign Minister Michele Alliot-Marie also said they would propose bringing members of the Libyan regime before the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

"I would like there to be a strong (Security Council) resolution in response to Gaddafi's calls to murder," she added.

US President Barack Obama had earlier spoken with French President Nicolas Sarkozy and the British and Italian prime ministers David Cameron

and Silvio Berlusconi.

Diplomats said they are studying a possible no-fly zone over Libya, as well as a travel ban and assets freeze against the Gaddafi family amid mounting concern over the growing death toll.

"All options are on the table. We are not ruling anything out," a Western diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The 15-nation council is determined to show international anger after Gaddafi rejected calls from Obama, other heads of state and the Security Council itself for a halt to the violence, diplomats said.

But they noted that sanctions are unlikely to be announced or agreed by yesterday's meeting, when UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon will address envoys.

Obama and Sarkozy, who spoke by phone, renewed their call for an end to the "continuing brutal and bloody repression and to the threatening statements of the Libyan leadership,"

the French presidency said.

In a separate conversation, Obama and Cameron promised to "coordinate on possible multilateral measures on Libya," the British prime minister's office said. Cameron has already called for a UN resolution.

The joint action between the two leaders would include moves at the UN Human Rights Council, which meets in Geneva yesterday. Western nations are seeking to have Libya kicked out of the international body.

EU is also thinking sanctions in the form of arms embargo, assets freeze and travel ban against the regime.

But Ashton, EU chief, said there has been no discussion about a military intervention.

China and Russia, two of the five permanent Security Council nations with veto powers, traditionally resist sanctions against sovereign countries, but a Chinese diplomat said his country was ready to "consider" further action.

Ivorian rebels seize town, threaten advance

REUTERS, Abidjan/bouake

Rebels controlling northern Ivory Coast have seized a town in government territory and said yesterday they were still advancing, raising the prospects of a return to open war.

Loyalists of Laurent Gbagbo, clinging to power after an election most of the world says he lost, confirmed the fall of Zouan-Hounien in an overnight attack and said they would fight to take it back.

"We're in the process of re-organizing ourselves," Yao Yao, head of operations of the pro-Gbagbo Front for the Liberation of the Greater West militia told Reuters by phone from the region.

The small, remote town lies in western Ivory Coast near the forested border with Liberia and is not on a key axis, but the fighting there marks a major escalation after a week of growing violence in the world's biggest cocoa producer.

Rebel spokesman Ouattara Seydou said the New Forces had been attacked from Zouan-Hounien and were moving south to another town held by Gbagbo loyalists.

Ivory Coast's spiral back toward a war fueled by ethnic animosities follows an election last November which Gbagbo's rival Alassane Ouattara is almost universally recognized to have won.

Gbagbo, in power for more than a decade, has refused to leave the presidency of once prosperous Ivory Coast, which has been split between north and south since a 2002-03 war.

African Union efforts to end the crisis through diplomacy have made no headway.

The spreading violence has killed more than 300 people according to the United Nations, but diplomats think that figure hugely understated because the military rarely discloses its casualties or civilians killed by soldiers.

The threat to supplies has pushed cocoa futures to their highest in more than 30 years.

MULTICULTURALISM Europe conservatives' new scapegoat

TIME ONLINE

In the decade since 9/11 forced the world to update its views of Islam and look for ways to dissuade its practitioners from drifting towards extremism, Western societies have placed a high premium on the moderate Muslim: those modern, sensible examples of how Islam can be practiced and honoured harmoniously within predominantly non-Muslim communities.

French writer and anthropologist Dounia Bouzar has been iconic of that 'moderate Muslim', authoring books and articles on how mutually acceptable compromise can be found when Islam and Western societies do clash. Now, however, that effort has landed Bouzar in the uncomfortable position that moderates of various kinds have found themselves in over the ages, when their centrist positions made them targets for extremists to either side.

Bouzar's humanist brand of Islam -- yet one that remains faithful to of the religion's true tenants and strictures -- earned her a place on Time's 2005 Heroes list. Yet despite her efforts to find common ground between Muslims and wider French society -- and her feminist defence of women

within Islam -- Bouzar is no kuffar-appeasing Uncle Tom. For example, despite being an outspoken foe of the burqa as a male-imposed means of dehumanizing and enslaving women, Bouzar just as ferociously opposed the law France passed last year banning the garment.

Just as significantly, Bouzar has said legitimate French hostility to what the burqa represents has been blown far out of proportion to the number of women in France who wear it: no more than 2,000 - in a nation of 64 million people. And that, she argues, has been part of a growing and increasingly uninhibited Islamophobia being voiced by politicians and pundits in France's ongoing discussion about the country's Muslims.

Did that new initiative give Islamophobes a green light to attack moderates like Bouzar? Doubtful. But the increasing ease with which mainstream politicians and commentators now point a guilty finger at Islam on virtually any topic has created an unhealthy environment in which hard-core secularists on the extreme left have joined forces with Arab-hating neo-Nazi groups in a mutual effort to erase Islam's visibility - or even presence - in France.



Britain's Prince William (L) and his fiancée Kate Middleton, are pictured during a visit to St Andrews University in Scotland yesterday. Prince William and Kate Middleton attended the university as students from 2001 to 2005 and began their romance in St Andrews.

PHOTO : AFP

Syria wanted nuclear weapons: Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

New satellite images released by a US research institute show Syria "tried to become a nuclear power," a senior Israeli defence official said yesterday.

Amos Gilad, director of political military affairs at the defence ministry, told army radio that the new images released by the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) proved Syria was seeking nuclear weapons.

The photos posted on the ISIS website on Thursday appear to show Syrian efforts to conceal a site allegedly linked to a facility which Israel bombed in 2007 and where UN inspectors have been investigating suspicions of nuclear work.

The pictures show heightened activity and the pouring of a concrete foundation around the second site near Marj as-Sultan, outside Damascus, shortly after the May 2008 request for inspections by the UN watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Gilad said the new images show "Syria has not succeeded in relaunching its nuclear programme," but suggested they also showed new activity that could be an attempt to build new weapons development sites.