

World tells Gaddafi to quit

Mass evacuations from Libya criss-cross Mediterranean while 100,000 flee to neighbouring countries

AFP, Benghazi

World leaders called on Muammar Gaddafi to step down yesterday to avoid a catastrophic civil war as tens of thousand flee the troubled country causing a 'humanitarian crisis'.

The chaos engulfing the oil-rich North African state of 6.3 million has fanned fears that his hold on power could descend into civil war as the United Nations confirmed that nearly 100,000 people have streamed out of the country.

Fears of all-out conflict as die-hard loyalists mount a desperate rear-guard action prompted countries to evacuate tens of thousands of citizens and close down embassies, to escape reported gunfire, looting and food shortages.

US President Barack Obama said Gaddafi needs to 'leave now', having lost the legitimacy to rule, in a call echoed by leaders in Britain, Germany and Italy. "The time has long come for him to leave," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, saying a UN Security

Council decision against his regime was a signal to all 'despots'.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said Gaddafi's downfall was now only a question of time. "It's inevitable that this will happen... I think we are at a point of no return," Frattini said.

Britain revoked Gaddafi's diplomatic immunity and Foreign Secretary William Hague too called on him to stand down, as the 'best hope' for Libya.

Tunisia's main border crossing with Libya is overwhelmed by thousands of people fleeing unrest, many of them Egyptians, and faces a humanitarian crisis, an aid group said yesterday.

More than 10,000 people escaping Libya passed through the main border post at Ras Jedir on Saturday, the Red Crescent said, with a flood of arrivals that started on February 20 continuing into Sunday.

Egyptians in particular were angry that they had received no help from their government and the Red Crescent called for help for Egypt to repatriate its

nationals.

Accommodation in the area was scarce with the arrivals being sheltered in a school, hangars, a nearby military camp and with locals.

Some said they had to sleep in the open, on their suitcases, despite the cold.

Meanwhile, the UN refugee agency said yesterday that close to 100,000 people, mainly foreign migrants, have fled Libya to neighbouring countries during the past week of turmoil in the North African nation.

"UNHCR emergency teams are working with Tunisian and Egyptian authorities and NGOs to support close to 100,000 people that have fled the violence in Libya in the past week," the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said in a statement.

A UNHCR count showed that they were overwhelmingly foreign migrants, mainly Egyptians and Tunisians.

The refugee agency urged foreign help for Egypt and Tunisia to cope with the exodus.



PHOTO: AFP

Instigator of the 'February 20' movement on Facebook, Oussama El Khlifi (front), protests in Rabat yesterday. Thousands of young Moroccans have joined the movement calling for peaceful demonstrations demanding a new constitution limiting the king's powers and more social justice.

Yemen president vows to resist protests

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh vowed yesterday to defend his three-decade regime "with every drop of blood," accusing his opponents of hijacking protests in a ploy to split the nation.

Despite two weeks of escalating protests demanding that he step down, after uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia forced the resignations of Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Saleh has repeatedly refused to resign.

In his latest comments, reported by the state-run Saba news agency yesterday, he accused his opponents of trying to revive secessionist efforts that sparked a short-lived civil war in 1994.

"There is a conspiracy against Yemen's unity and territorial integrity and we, in the armed forces, have served to preserve the republican regime with every drop of blood we have," Saba quoted Saleh as saying.

"We are trying in every way possible to deal with and overcome these difficulties democratically, through dialogue with all political leaders, but in vain."

His one concession has been to pledge not to seek reelection in 2013.

An AFP tally based on reports by medics and witnesses shows that at least 19 people have been killed in almost daily clashes since February 16.

Tunisian PM resigns over demos

BBC ONLINE

Tunisian interim Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi has announced on state TV that he is resigning - a key demand of demonstrators.

He was speaking at a news conference in Tunis, after making a lengthy speech defending his record in government.

Ghannouchi is seen as being too close to former President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, who was toppled in an uprising last month.

Ghannouchi had served under Mr Ben Ali since 1999.

On Friday and Saturday, anti-government protesters held huge rallies calling for Ghannouchi's resignation.

At least three people were killed in clashes between demonstrators and security forces in Tunis on Saturday.

Clashes hit Oman as protest continues in Arab world

AFP, Muscat

The wave of protests sweeping the Arab world spread to the once placid Gulf sultanate of Oman yesterday with police shooting dead two demonstrators.

In Oman, security forces opened fire on demonstrators who tried to storm a police station, killing two with rubber bullets and wounding around five others, a security official said.

The bloodshed in the normally sleepy pro-Western sultanate came a day after veteran ruler Qaboos announced new social benefits for students in response to protests earlier this year against rising prices and corruption.

The demonstrators were mostly unemployed and were demanding jobs, better salaries and measures to curb corruption, witnesses said.

For decades the sultanate was an isolated country living on the margins of the modern world, but the 2010 UN Human Development Report released in November said Oman made the most improvement since 1970 out of 135 countries.

Anger also brewed in Yemen, Bahrain and

even in Tunisia and Egypt -- where streets protests have already brought an end to the autocratic regimes of presidents Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak.

Security forces and anti-government protesters clashed again in the Tunisian capital with police using tear gas to disperse stone-throwing youths.

In the Bahraini capital Manama, anti-regime demonstrators kept vigil in hundreds of tents in Pearl Square, which has become the epicentre of anti-government protests that entered their 14th day yesterday.

Meanwhile, eighteen Bahraini MPs from Al-Wefaq Shiite opposition bloc officially submitted their letter of resignation yesterday to protest the killing of anti-regime demonstrators, lawmakers said.

In Tunisia, security forces and anti-government protesters clashed in the capital Tunis with police firing tear gas and warning shots to disperse stone-throwing youths in a third day of violence.

In Casablanca, Morocco, almost 1,000 people rallied yesterday amid a heavy police presence to demand political reforms and a new constitution.

UK 'to end direct aid to 16 countries'

BBC ONLINE

The UK is to stop direct aid to 16 countries, including Russia, China and Iraq, papers seen by the BBC suggest.

A draft copy of the government's review of its overseas aid budget - due to be published this week - also reveals aid to India will be frozen.

But overall, the international development budget will rise by a third in this Parliament as a new approach focuses on value for money, it says.

The report states that aid spending is good for Britain's economy and safety.

The draft document outlines plans for greater transparency and accountability, with an emphasis on funding programmes that deliver greater results and which, specifically, help girls and women.

Resources will be focused on the 27 countries that account for three-quarters of the world's maternal mortality and malaria deaths, such as Ghana and Afghanistan.

By 2014, 30% of UK aid is expected to go to war-torn and unstable countries.

The report confirms that direct aid to countries including Iraq and Kosovo will stop, whilst aid to India will be frozen.

India is currently one of the biggest recipients of UK development aid, and there have been media campaigns in the UK suggesting an economy growing at nearly 10% a year simply does not need British assistance.

But others point out that nearly half a billion people in India are still desperately poor, and efforts to reduce global poverty will not progress without significant aid.

N Zealand prays for quake dead

AFP, Christchurch

Grieving New Zealanders mourned Christchurch earthquake victims yesterday as police said the disaster's final death toll was set to reach about 200.

The number of confirmed fatalities from Tuesday's 6.3-magnitude quake reached 147 late yesterday but police fear more than 50 still listed as "unaccounted for" lie dead in the rubble of New Zealand's second largest city.

Asked if he expected a final toll of 200, district commander Dave Cliff replied: "Yes, and probably a little higher than that ultimately."

Previously police had said that more than 200 people were missing, but clarified that that figure had included the fatalities confirmed so far.

NEWS IN brief

Sarkozy names ex-premier Juppe foreign minister

AFP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy named former premier Alain Juppe as his new foreign minister yesterday, after Michele Alliot-Marie, tainted by her ties to the former Tunisian regime, resigned.

Juppe will be replaced as defence minister by Gerard Longuet, the leader of Sarkozy's centre right party in the French Senate, the president announced in a brief televised address to the nation.

Sarkozy's chief of staff, Claude Gueant, will become interior minister, charged with restoring the government's reputation as tough on crime with a view to his leader's expected 2012 reelection bid.

Britain freezes Gaddafi's assets

AFP, London

Britain yesterday froze the assets that Libyan leader Moamer Gaddafi and his family have held in the European country, the Foreign Office confirmed.

"The government has today taken action to freeze the assets of Colonel Muammar Abu Minyar al-Qadhafi (Kadhafi), members of his family and those acting on their behalf or at their direction," the statement said.

Britain understands that Kadhafi owns around 20 billion pounds (32.2 billion dollars, 23.4 billion euros) in liquid assets, mostly in London, according to the Telegraph newspaper.

"I have today taken action to freeze the assets... so that they cannot be used against the interests of the Libyan people," British finance minister George

Russia could 'lose \$4 bn' in Libya arms deals

AFP, Moscow

Russia could lose almost \$4 billion in arms export contracts to Libya after Moscow joined other world powers in slapping an arms embargo on Gaddafi's regime, a report said yesterday.

The Interfax news agency quoted a military source as saying that Russia had a swelling order book for contracts from Libya worth \$2.0 billion while negotiations had been in progress for deals worth \$1.8 billion more.

"Among the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, Libya is one of the main buyers of Russian weapons," the source, which was not identified, told the agency.

"As of today, contracts for military hardware of

Govt mulling law on share buyback

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in the House while describing various government measures to boost the share market in the wake of recent crash.

During the question hour session, a number of lawmakers voiced concern over the recent turmoil in the stock market causing sufferings to a huge number of small investors. They also enquired into the government moves to address the situation.

In response, the finance minister informed the House about the government's ongoing and future measures including

enactment of share buyback law to regain confidence of the small investors.

If the buyback law is passed, a company can buy back its own shares held by the public either to increase the share value or

to eliminate threats by shareholders who may be looking for controlling stake.

Reasons for buybacks include putting unused cash to use, raising earnings per share, increasing internal control of the company, and obtaining stock for employee stock option plans or pension plans.

The Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE), the country's prime bourse, moved in early 2009 for introduction of buyback law but failed.

The finance minister also explained some reasons behind the recent unrest in the share market as he said many small investors invested in the market to gain within short time without any prior knowledge on the capital market. They believed they would get profit by investing in the share market, he

said.

Besides, share prices of some companies were overpriced illogically, he said.

The minister said no-one sells their shares when the market is up, but they start selling shares in a panicky situation when the market witnesses a downtrend.

"And what can we do in this situation? We don't find any reason behind their behaviour," the minister added.

He said one lakh investors entered the share market after its fall for making profit by manipulating the market. "They should be punished," he said.

The minister said the government is monitoring the situation in the capital market round the clock.

About the probe body investigating the share market crash, he said the committee may submit an

interim report on their findings and the government will also publish it.

M U H I T H ' S RESENTMENT

The finance minister expressed resentment at a supplementary question raised by independent lawmaker Fazlul Azim, who said the country's economic situation is in a "bad state". "The country is suffering from power and gas crises. New industries are not getting power and gas connections. Prices of essentials are spiralling. Share market has collapsed. The overall economic situation is fragile. I want to know the government measures to improve the country's economy amid all these," Azim said in a supplementary question.

Azim in his scripted question wanted to know

whether new branches of scheduled banks will be set up in Noakhali district.

In response, the finance minister sharply reacted to Azim's statement about the economy.

"I will not reply to his question. The original question was on setting up branches of state-owned banks in his constituency. He always speaks thousands taking the opportunity during question-answer hour," Muhith said.

"His tongue should be controlled. His statement should be expunged from parliament proceedings," the finance minister said.

Speaker Abdul Hamid said an MP can ask any question to the minister. But he will have to submit notices in some cases in advance seeking answer to his questions.

BGMEA protests order

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for six hours every evening until the final match on April 2 so that power cuts do not affect enthusiastic cricket fans watching the games on television.

"We have told the factories about the government decision and asked them to shut their plants in the peak evening hours," said Manjur Rahman, head of state-owned Dhaka Electric Supply Company.

The order has enraged the country's 5,000 garment exporters.

The BGMEA in a letter to the prime minister said the shutdowns threatened the country's business image.

"We have said the order to shut factories has already started affecting the garment factories. We won't be

able to ship our products in time if the order is not scrapped immediately," said BGMEA President Abdus Salam Murshedy.

"All the companies have been booked with export orders. If they can't export the orders in time, it will obviously anger the buyers. Our reputation as a top garment exporter will be seriously dented," he told AFP.

Apparel export is the backbone of economy of the country, accounting for 80 percent of all the country's exports. The factories employ more than three million workers, mostly women.

"The whole economy will be affected because of this anti-industry step. We are great cricket fans, but

that does not mean that we shall shut factories just to watch World Cup matches," Murshedy said.

Bangladesh is struggling to tackle a major power crisis with regular outages.

The government took similar step during the football World Cup in 2010 as power blackouts during key matches saw tens of thousands of people stage violent protests, vandalising power offices and damaging cars.

Along with India and Sri Lanka, the country is a co-host of the cricket World Cup, which started in Dhaka on February 19.

On Friday night fans across the country erupted in celebration after Bangladesh beat Ireland in a nail-biting match.