

Gaddafi defiant as West mulls action

Libya will fight no fly zone, US and anti-regime leaders meet in Cairo

AFP, Tripoli

Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi stood firm yesterday, accusing the West of plotting to seize his country's oil and the insurgents of being traitors backed by Al-Qaeda, as his forces pounded rebel-held areas.

"The colonialist countries are hatching a plot to humiliate the Libyan people, reduce them to slavery and control the oil," he said on state television.

Gaddafi also warned that his people will take up arms if a no-fly zone is imposed by Western nations or the UN, as many of the rebels have been calling for.

"If they take such a decision [to impose a no-fly zone], it will be useful for Libya, because the Libyan people will see the truth, that what they want is to take control of Libya and to steal their oil," he said in an interview with Turkish TRT TV later.

"Then the Libyan people will take up arms against them," he said.

He again said Al-Qaeda was behind the insurrection that began on February 15 and called on the inhabitants of Benghazi, the rebels' main base,

to "liberate" the eastern city.

Gaddafi made similar accusations against Western countries, especially France, in interviews aired by the French LCI television channel and Turkish television yesterday.

"If Al-Qaeda manages to seize Libya, then the entire region, up to Israel, will be at the prey of chaos," he told Turkey's public TRT channel.

Pro-Gaddafi forces now appear to have re-taken the city of Zawiyah, 50km from Tripoli.

The sounds of shellfire and four large explosions were heard early yesterday from west of the rebel-held oil town of Ras Lanuf, where the lightly-armed insurgents have been checked in their attempt to occupy Bin Jawad, some 30 kilometres away.

Aircraft were flying overhead but had not launched any strikes.

As pressure grew from inside Libya and elsewhere in the Arab world for a no-fly zone, the White House said US President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron had agreed to press forward with planning on a range of possible responses.

Measures under consideration included surveillance, humanitarian assistance, enforcement of the arms embargo and a no-fly zone, the White House said.

Cameron said the world could not stand aside while Gaddafi did "terrible things" to the Libyan people. "We have got to prepare for what we might have to do if he goes on brutalising his own people," he added.

Britain and France have made the most aggressive calls among Western powers for a no-fly zone to stop Gaddafi's troops attacking opposition forces.

However, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said that any decision to impose a no-fly zone over Libya should be made by the UN and not by Washington.

In Cairo, US ambassador to Libya Gene Cretz and other US officials met members of the opposition seeking to topple Gaddafi, the State Department said, declining to identify them.

"We are engaging a wide range of leaders, and those who both understand and can potentially influence events in Libya," State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said.



PHOTO: AFP

Libyan rebel fighters fire an anti-aircraft weapon at an airforce jet loyal to leader Muammar Gaddafi during clashes few kilometres outside the town of Ras Lanuf yesterday.

NEWS IN brief

Euro MPs urge EU to recognise Libya opposition

AFP, Strasbourg

Top lawmakers demanded yesterday that EU leaders recognise Libya's opposition and support the imposition of a no-fly zone, as Tripoli rebels came to the European Parliament seeking legitimacy.

But European Union foreign and security chief Catherine Ashton refused to back either call just 48 hours from an emergency summit of heads of state and government where the bloc will thrash out policy towards Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.

The head of the parliament's Liberals, former Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstadt, told the 736-member chamber two days before the emergency EU summit that it was time to grant "recognition" to the rebels.

Japan names new foreign minister

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's centre-left government yesterday named as its new foreign minister Takeaki Matsumoto, who hails from a powerful political family but faces tricky relations with the US, China and Russia.



Takeaki Matsumoto

Prime Minister Naoto Kan picked the former banker and great great grandson of Japan's first prime minister because of his "capability, knowledge and to ensure continuity of diplomacy", said Kan's top spokesman Yukio Edano.

Russia made \$8.6 billion from arms sales in 2010

AFP, Moscow

Russia sold arms and military equipment worth more than \$8.6 billion in 2010, with India, Algeria and China the largest customers, the head of the state arms exports agency said yesterday.

Sales of arms rose more than \$1 billion year-on-year in 2010, up from 7.4 billion in 2009, the head of Rosoboronexport, Anatoly Isaikin, said at a news conference in Moscow.

Russian planes and helicopters were in particular demand and accounted for more than 40 percent of the total, he said, citing Sukhoi and MiG jets.

At the beginning of 2011, Rosoboronexport had a portfolio of orders worth \$38.5 billion, he said.

Blast kills five in Algeria

AFP, Algiers

A bomb struck a vehicle in Algeria and killed five people, media reported yesterday, in the deadliest attack in months as the country battles violence blamed on Islamist militants.

Three of the people killed in Tuesday's blast were from the same family, local media reported.

There was no claim of responsibility for the attack, which struck close to Djelfa, about 270 kilometres south of the capital Algiers.

US aircraft carrier to join drills with S Korea

AFP, Seoul

A US aircraft carrier is to take part in joint US-South Korean war games, American military officials said yesterday, amid threats by Pyongyang, which has labelled the drill a rehearsal for invasion.

The nuclear-powered USS Ronald Reagan and its strike group will "participate in Foal Eagle, an annual field-training exercise designed to enhance combat readiness" of the two allies, the US 7th Fleet said in a statement.

The US and South Korea have said the exercises are defensive in nature while training their forces "to respond to any provocation".

Egypt's new cabinet meets as hundreds clash in Cairo

AGENCIES, Cairo

Egypt's new cabinet, led by Prime Minister Essam Sharaf, met yesterday for the first time putting efforts to return stability as new clashes erupt in Cairo.

Sharaf, who came to office after a purge of officials linked to ousted President Hosni Mubarak, said on Monday he would work to get Egypt's economy back on its feet after weeks of protests and political turmoil.

The cabinet adjourned its meeting for an emergency session with the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces by noon, a cabinet source said, without providing further details.

Meanwhile, attackers armed with knives and machetes yesterday waded into hundreds of pro-democracy activists in Cairo's Tahrir Square, witnesses said, as insecurity raged in post-revolutionary Egypt.

Stone-throwing skirmishes were continuing as an AFP reporter arrived at the scene, and activists were gathering sticks and stockpiling rocks to defend themselves from the mob, supporters of ousted president Hosni Mubarak.

"A couple of hours ago the pro-Mubarak

thugs attacked us and tried to come into Tahrir, but we were able to push them back, with sticks and stones. We fear they will return," a young militant, Moez Mohammed, told AFP.

Tahrir Square was the symbolic heart of last month's uprising that forced Mubarak from office, and hundreds of pro-democracy activists remain camped out there to maintain pressure on the military regime that replaced him.

"Hundreds of men carrying knives and swords entered Tahrir," state television reported, as footage showed rocks being thrown and hundreds of activists scattering and diving for cover.

The clashes took place as the newly appointed cabinet met with the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to propose a law criminalising incitement to hatred, which could lead to the death penalty, state TV said.

The military rulers were struggling to bring calm on several fronts, as clashes between Coptic Christians and Muslims in the working class area of Moqattam left 10 dead and scores wounded, the health ministry said.

Sudan demo blocked by heavy security

AFP, Khartoum

Hundreds of baton-wielding riot police barred Sudanese opposition activists from demonstrating yesterday, arresting dozens and beating up others, an AFP correspondent reported.

Some 500 riot police were deployed in Abu Janzeer square, in the centre of the Sudanese capital Khartoum, after an alliance of opposition parties announced plans to hold a demonstration there at 1:00pm local time.

As soon as the demonstrators stepped into the square, the police started beating them with batons and arresting them, an AFP correspondent at the scene reported.

The police had said on Tuesday that the planned demonstration was "illegal" and that they would not allow it.

Opposition sources said the secretary general of Sudan's Communist Party, Mohammed Ibrahim Nugud, had been arrested at the site, and that three prominent figures in the communist and Baath parties were also arrested in their homes early yesterday.

"Early this morning the police arrested two of our leaders, including Fariq Abdelmajid, and Mohammed Dia al-Din from the Baath Party," a Communist Party member told AFP.

Sudan's opposition alliance includes traditional heavyweights the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party, and the Popular Congress Party of jailed Islamist leader Hassan al-Turabi.

It also includes the northern branch of the former southern rebel movement the SPLM, as well as the smaller Communist Party and Baath Party.

Fresh clash in Yemen kills 1

AFP, Aden

A supporter of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was killed yesterday in clashes with anti-regime demonstrators in the southern province of Hadramaut, a security official told AFP.

"One of Saleh's partisans was killed and another was injured in dawn clashes yesterday between anti- and pro-regime" demonstrators in the southeastern province of Hadramaut, said the official requesting anonymity.

Anti-regime members of the Nahd tribe opened fire on loyalist fellow tribesmen near the town of Seiyun, killing Rabie al-Nahdi and wounding another man, a local official said.

In the capital Sanaa, a Yemeni protester died of gunshot wounds yesterday after being hit when police opened fire overnight on anti-regime demonstrators.

Tunisia's ex-ruling party dissolved

AFP, Tunis

A Tunisian court yesterday dissolved the Rally for Constitutional Democracy (RCD), the former governing party of Tunisia's deposed leader Zine ElAbidine Ben Ali.

The party was suspended from official activities in February by the interior ministry after Ben Ali fled abroad on January 14 at the height of a popular uprising to overthrow his autocratic regime.

The court "has decided to dissolve the Rally for Constitutional Democracy and to liquidate its assets and funds," the ruling said, triggering a burst of applause from a packed courtroom.

Since it was created in 1988, the party had never been audited and had never filed annual accounts, the ministry added.

13 killed as Sectarian strife flares in Egypt

REUTERS, Cairo

Thirteen people were killed in violence between Egyptian Christians and Muslims, the health ministry said yesterday, as sectarian tensions that appeared to evaporate in the country's revolution resurfaced.

The health ministry said 140 people were wounded, state media reported.

The violence in Cairo Tuesday night was the worst outbreak of sectarian strife since President Hosni Mubarak was swept from power on February 11 by a mass uprising characterised by solidarity between Christians and Muslims.

It was not immediately clear how many of the dead were Christian or Muslim. The violence erupted following a protest by Christians over an arson attack on a church in Helwan south of Cairo.

The strife represents another challenge to the military rulers to whom Mubarak handed power, and who made restoring law and order a top priority.

Petrol bombs and rocks were thrown, witnesses said. At least one of the dead was a Christian who had been struck in the back by a bullet, but it was unclear who fired it. The army fired into the air at one point to disperse protesters.

The health ministry earlier put the death toll at four.

Christians protesting over the attack on the church had blocked a main highway south of Cairo and violence started after Muslims, who wanted to pass through, clashed with the protesters, a security source said.

Polar ice loss quickens, raising seas

BBC ONLINE

Ice loss from Antarctica and Greenland has accelerated over the last 20 years, research shows, and will soon become the biggest driver of sea level rise.

From satellite data and climate models, scientists calculate that the two polar ice sheets are losing enough ice to raise sea levels by 1.3mm each year.

Overall, sea levels are rising by about 3mm per year.

Writing in Geophysical Research Letters, the team says ice loss here is speeding up faster than models predict.

They add their voices to several other studies that have concluded sea levels will rise faster than projected by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its landmark 2007 assessment.

By 2006, the Greenland and Antarctic sheets were losing a combined mass of 475Gt (gigatonnes - billion tonnes) of ice per year.

On average, loss from the Greenland sheet

is increasing by nearly 22Gt per year, while the much larger and colder Antarctic sheet is shedding an additional 14.5Gt each year.

If these increases persist, water from the two polar ice sheets could have added 15cm to the average global sea level by 2050.

A rise of similar size is projected to come from a combination of melt water from mountain glaciers and thermal expansion of seawater.

"That ice sheets will dominate future sea level rise is not surprising - they hold a lot more ice mass than mountain glaciers," said lead author Eric Rignot from Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, California.

"What is surprising is this increased contribution by the ice sheets is already happening."

Since 2007, several other research groups using different methods have concluded that a figure between one and two metres is likely - which would have profound consequences for island nations and countries with long, low coastlines such as Bangladesh.



PHOTO: AFP

US Vice President Joe Biden (TopL) and Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov (TopR) observing a contract signing ceremony in a bid to buy eight Boeing 777 jets between Boeing and Aeroflot in Skolkovo innovation centre, Moscow yesterday. Biden is on a tour to Finland, Russia and Moldova to consult Washington's partners on global and regional issues and bolster a 'reset' of ties with the Kremlin.

Russia could 'swap US spy for Bout'

AFP, Moscow

A former Russian defence ministry official sentenced to 18 years for spying for the United States may be swapped for alleged 'Merchant of Death' arms dealer Viktor Bout, Interfax reported yesterday.

A former defence ministry officer and employee of Russia's Rosatom nuclear agency, Andrei Khlychev was last week given an 18-year sentence by a Moscow court for spying for the United States, the news agency said, quoting a source in law enforcement.

"Currently, the possibility is being considered to swap Andrei Khlychev -- who was sentenced by the Moscow city court to a lengthy prison term -- for one of the Russians imprisoned abroad, possibly Viktor Bout," the source told Interfax.

There was no official confirmation of the

report.

Bout's brother Sergei said he was not aware of any such possible plans. "I know nothing about it, although it would be good news," he told Interfax.

Viktor Bout was arrested in a US sting in March 2008 and extradited from Thailand in November after a long legal battle. He is currently being held in a high-security prison in New York.

The law enforcement source told the Russian news agency that Khlychev was accused of passing on classified data related to the work of the Russian nuclear industry.

The Moscow city court hearing into the Khlychev espionage case was held behind closed doors, Interfax said.

Last July, Russia and the United States staged their biggest spy swap since the Cold War, exchanging 10 agents deported by the United States for four freed by Moscow.