

# Blast at Yemen ammo plant kills 78

AP, Sanaa

Yemen's chaos deepened yesterday when people looting a munitions factory set off an accidental explosion that killed at least 78 in an area torn from government control by Islamist militants exploiting the president's rapidly dwindling power.

The seizure of the factory amplified Western fears that the fragile Yemeni state could deteriorate quickly because of President Ali Abdullah Saleh's stand-off with an opposition coalition of youth groups, military defectors, clerics and tribal leaders calling for his ouster.

Saleh has cooperated closely with the US in the battle against Yemen's branch of al-Qaeda, which has used areas of Yemen long out of state control to launch attacks including the attempt to bomb a Detroit-bound airliner with a bomb sewn into underwear.

Saleh has also battled regional rebellions in the north and south.

State control diminished further this month as massive demonstrations spiralled in major cities and the government pulled police from many towns, and anti-government protesters in other areas pushed out police and soldiers and set up militias for self-defence. The protesters blame Saleh for mismanagement, repression and the fatal shootings of protesters, and say they will not relent until he goes.

On Sunday, armed men whom residents described as religious militants seized the towns of Jaar and al-Husn, a hilltop overlooking them, and the factory that makes Kalashnikov assault rifles, ammunitions and explosives used to build roads in the mountainous southern province of Abyan, where Yemen's al-Qaeda branch has been active.

Residents offered few details about

the militants' identities or broader allegiances.

Factory worker Hakim Mohammed told The Associated Press by telephone that the militants took two armoured cars, a tank, several pickup trucks mounted with machine guns and ammunition. Later, dozens of impoverished men, women and children entered the facility and looted anything of value that remained, including cables, doors and vehicle fuel, he said.

Some emptied gunpowder barrels to use for collecting rain water, and others picked through the compound's cafeteria for forgotten bags of flour and sugar, said Mohammed, 28.

Residents told the Al Jazeera satellite network that someone may have dropped a lit cigarette next to the remaining explosives, setting off a massive blast that could be heard 10 miles away, resident Seif Mohammed said.

# Nato to takeover Libya strike soon

AFP, Brussels

The strikes against Libyan ground forces are still being led by the international coalition, as it will take around two days to transfer full control to Nato, alliance officials said yesterday.

Nato agreed late Sunday to take charge of all military operations in Libya from a US-led coalition that has been protecting civilians from Moamer Kadhafi's forces since March 19.

"Nations are assigning assets to Nato authority as we speak," Nato spokeswoman Oana Lungescu told a news briefing, stressing that the transition is "not instantaneous."

"It is a phased transition that is expected to take place over a couple of days," Lungescu said.

Group Captain Geoffrey Booth, of Nato's international military staff, said Lieutenant General Charles Bouchard, commander of the alliance mission in Libya, had yet to "actively" take control of "all aspects" of the operation.

"Nato is only enforcing the no-fly zone, so

the attacks that are being done on ground assets at the moment are coalition operations, not Nato," Booth said.

Nato ships last week began enforcing an arms embargo against Libya and an alliance plane flew the first flight on Sunday to enforce the no-fly zone aimed at keeping Kadhafi's air force grounded.

Meanwhile, Nato has taken over enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya, the general in charge of operations told reporters yesterday at the Allied Joint Force Command in Naples in southern Italy.

"Yesterday (Sunday) Nato aircraft flew the first no-fly zone enforcement over Libya," said General Charles Bouchard, who was appointed on Friday to head the operation codenamed "Operation Unified Protector".

Bouchard added that the broader military mission in Libya was still transitioning to Nato from the Western-led coalition that began attacking Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi's forces on March 19.

Nato officials on Sunday said that the transition would take 48-72 hours.

# Egypt confirms election in September

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt will hold a legislative election in September and will lift emergency laws before the vote, the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces said yesterday.

Mamdouh Shaheen, a member of the military council, said a date for a presidential election had yet to be set.

The legislative election date means parties that were crushed under Hosni Mubarak's rule have some five months to prepare for the first free parliamentary polls in decades.

The military council has ruled Egypt since Mubarak was toppled from power on February 11. It plans to relinquish power to a civilian government once a presidential election is held.

# Fukushima contamination 'well beyond' 30km zone

## Says France nuke safety authority

AFP, Paris

Air-borne nuclear contamination has spread "well beyond" the 30-kilometre exclusion zone around Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant, the head of France's Nuclear Safety Authority (ASN) said yesterday.

"Beyond 30 kilometres (19 miles), it is clear that there are patches of contamination, and that a certain number of products have been polluted," Andre-Claude Lacoste told journalists at a briefing.

"It would not at all be surprising to find, here and there, contamination well beyond a radius of 100 kilometres (62 miles)," he said. While precise measurements of radioactive pollution are still lacking, he added, "it is obvious that managing contaminated areas is going to take years, if not decades."

The government last week asked people still living between 20 and 30 kilometres from the plant to leave voluntarily, effectively more than doubling the previous

exclusion zone.

Even inside the plant, disabled monitors and gauges make it impossible to determine water levels in spent fuel pools, or to know what percentage of fuel rods in the reactors might have melted, Lacoste said.

Workers trying to restore systems to cool overheating fuel rods sought yesterday to work around puddles of dangerously radioactive water discovered inside reactor number two.

Experts fear that the primary containment vessel housing the number two and three reactors are no longer intact, at that highly-contaminated water could be seeping into the soil or nearby sea.

"The situation remains extremely serious, and we remain in a major crisis," Lacoste said.

Only with the restoration of the plant's cooling systems and a steady supply of fresh water will it be possible to stabilise the reactors, he added.

# Traces of radioactivity in US rain

AFP, Washington

Traces of radioactivity from damaged nuclear power facilities in Japan have been detected in rainwater in the northeast United States, but pose no health risks, officials said.

The Environmental Protection Agency, in an update Sunday, said it had received reports of "elevated levels of radiation in recent precipitation events" in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania and that it was "reviewing this data."

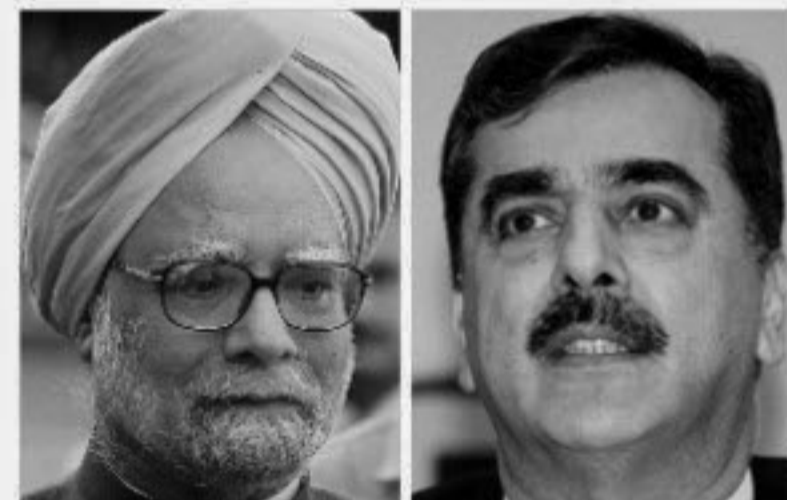
The EPA has been monitoring radiation from the Fukushima nuclear plant in Japan, and had previously detected "very low levels of radioactive material" in the United States.

# Can cricket bring thaw in Indo-Pak relations?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Can cricket succeed where diplomacy has failed to secure a thaw in the Indo-Pak relations? What and how much can Prime Ministers Manmohan Singh of India and Yusuf Raza Gilani of Pakistan achieve sitting in the VIP enclosure of a cricket stadium in Mohali where the two teams face each other in the World Cup semi-final tomorrow, instead of an air-conditioned conference room accompanied by their officials? These are the questions being discussed in diplomatic circles in New Delhi in the midst of huge media hype not only about the cricket match but also the highly-anticipated meeting between the two top leaders who are expected to discuss a roadmap for future engagements between the two nuclear-powered neighbours.

The sight of Manmohan Singh and Gilani watching cricket together at Mohali in Indian state of Punjab will be the third instance in a history of cricket diplomacy between the two countries. The first time the game was used as a diplomatic tool was in 1987 when the then Pakistan president Gen Zia-ul Haq had visited Jaipur to watch the second day's play



of a test match between India and Pakistan at the invitation of his Indian counterpart at that time Rajiv Gandhi. Eighteen years later, in 2005, the then Pakistan president and another military ruler Gen Pervez Musharraf and Manmohan Singh had watched a one-day international between the two countries in Delhi and the event had led to improvement in bilateral ties with resumption of peace talks.

There is, however, consensus in the Indian establishment that when Prime Ministers Singh and Gilani meet in Mohali, it will be primarily an event enabling the two countries to improve the atmospherics for the future engagement.

The Indian prime minister has undoubtedly taken a bold decision by inviting Gilani to watch the cricket match, knowing fully well that any negative vibe emanating from the

cricket stadium in Mohali could raise a storm over his move. This gives reasons for optimism of some kind of forward movement in India-Pakistan ties, analysts said adding that the first tangible result could be in the form of resumption of India-Pakistan cricket matches in each other's country.

The meeting between Singh and Gilani will take place a day after the home secretaries of India and Pakistan wrap up their meeting in New Delhi grappling with a number of knotty issues bedevilling bilateral ties. This will be the first structured meeting between the two countries after India had broken off talks with Pakistan in the wake of the deadly terror attacks on India's financial capital Mumbai in November 2008.

India has repeatedly made it clear that any improvement in bilateral ties is contingent on Pakistan's bringing perpetrators of Mumbai terror attacks to justice quickly, Indian officials say.

The officials are, however, treading with caution about the outcome of the meeting between the two prime ministers and their cricket diplomacy as such initiatives had in the past carried nothing more than atmospheric value.

# Berlusconi attends trial for fraud

AFP, Milan

Silvio Berlusconi appeared before a judge for the first time in eight years yesterday over allegations of business fraud -- part of a web of legal woes for the billionaire Italian prime minister.

The hearing in the judge's chambers in Milan was part of a process to decide whether Berlusconi should stand trial in the case involving his company Mediatrade.

The 74-year-old is already a defendant in two separate trials.

"Everything went well," Berlusconi told reporters after coming out from the court building, saying he was preparing to attend another hearing next Monday in the case involving fiscal fraud and breach of trust allegations.

Asked by reporters about his upcoming trial due to start next week on charges of having sex with an underage prostitute and then using his status to try and cover it up, Berlusconi responded: "That's a different trial."

# Aid workers praise Myanmar quake response

AFP, Yangon

Aid workers praised Myanmar's regime yesterday for its speedy response to the recent earthquake that killed more than 70, in contrast to the aftermath of previous disasters to strike the country.

The powerful 6.8 magnitude quake struck near the borders with Thailand and Laos late on Thursday leaving an official toll of 75 dead, including one woman in Thailand.

"The government's response was very fast, it must be stressed," said Vincent Hubin, country head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) based in Yangon.

"They put up considerable resources, as was the case with Cyclone Giri, when they saved many lives," he added, referring to a disaster in the west of the country in October 2010 that killed more than 40 people.



Syrian labourers in Lebanon chant slogans during a protest to show support to their President Bashar al-Assad (portrait) outside the Syrian Embassy in Beirut yesterday.

# Syrian parliament urges Assad to clarify 'reforms'

AFP, Damascus

Syria's parliament has asked President Bashar al-Assad to explain in detail a string of reforms promised in response to a wave of popular dissent across the country, an MP said yesterday.

"On Sunday night, MPs requested that the president clarify the measures that authorities have announced and urged him to address parliament and explain," MP Mohammed Habash told AFP.

Parliamentarians also held a minute of silence, he said, to honour those killed in two weeks of unrest in Syria, where demonstrators earlier this month began taking to the streets to demand change.

The security situation in the country has worsened in past days, with reports of gangs wreaking havoc in the northern port city of Latakia and sporadic bouts of violence in the southern governorate of Daraa.

Rights groups have put the death toll at around 130, with Daraa -- a tribal area at the Jordanian border -- sustaining the most casualties.



Etsuko Watanabe (L) sobs beside her husband after finding her missing grandmother's old photos among the debris in Minamisanriku, Miyagi prefecture yesterday. The number of confirmed dead and people listed as missing from the earthquake and tsunami that devastated Japan's northeast coast topped 28,000, the National Police Agency said.

PHOTO: AFP

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