

# Syrian cabinet resigns amid unrest

REUTERS, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad accepted his government's resignation yesterday after nearly two weeks of pro-democracy unrest that has posed the gravest challenge to his 11-year rule.

But the move was unlikely to satisfy protester demands since the cabinet has little authority in Syria, where power is concentrated in the hands of Assad, his family and the security apparatus.

Tens of thousands of Syrians held pro-government rallies yesterday, awaiting a speech in which Assad was expected to announce a decision on lifting emergency laws that have served to crush dissent for almost 50 years.

That is a key demand of anti-government demonstrations in which more than 60 people have been killed.

"President Assad accepts the government's resignation," the state news agency SANA said, adding that Najji al-Otari, the prime minister since 2003, would remain caretaker until a new government was formed.



Muhammad Naji Otari

Protesters at first had limited their demands to greater freedoms. But, increasingly incensed by a security crackdown on them, especially in the southern city of Deraa where protests first erupted, they now call for the "downfall of the regime."

Syrian state television showed people in the Syrian capital Damascus and in Aleppo, Hama and Hasaka waving the national flag, pictures of Assad and chanting "God, Syria, Bashar."

Employees and members of unions

controlled by Assad's Baath Party, which has been in power since a 1963 coup, said they had been ordered to attend the rallies, where there was a heavy presence of security police.

All gatherings and demonstrations not sponsored by the state are banned in Syria, a country of 22 million at the sensitive heart of generations of Middle East conflict.

Vice President Farouq al-Shara said on Monday the 45-year-old president would give a speech in the next 48 hours that would "assure the people."

Last week Assad made a pledge to look into ending emergency laws, consider drafting laws on greater political and media freedom, and raise living standards. But the increasingly emboldened protesters have not been mollified.

However Syrian officials, civic rights activists and diplomats doubt that Assad, who contained a Kurdish uprising in the north in 2004, would completely abolish emergency laws without replacing them with similar legislation.

## End 'barbaric genocide' Gaddafi urges West

AFP, Tripoli

Colonel Muammar Gaddafi urged world powers to end their "barbaric" offensive against his oil-rich country.

"Stop your barbaric, unjust offensive on Libya," Gaddafi said in the letter published by the state news agency Jana.

"Leave Libya for the Libyans. You are committing genocide against a peaceful people and a developing nation," he said in the letter addressed to the London meeting of more than 35 countries to map out a post-Gaddafi future for the north African country.

"It seems that you in Europe and America don't realise the hellish, barbaric (military) offensive which compares... to Hitler's campaigns when he invaded Europe and bombed Britain," he said.

# World leaders meet on Libya's future

## US won't rule out arming Libyan rebels

AFP, London

International powers met in London yesterday to map out a future for Libya, vowing to continue military action until leader Muammar Gaddafi stops his "murderous attacks" on civilians.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has not ruled out arming rebel fighters in Libya, the US officials said yesterday, despite assertions by key US allies that such a move would be outside the UN mandate.

"We've not made that decision... but we've not ruled that out," Washington's UN ambassador Susan Rice told ABC television when asked about military support to the fighters battling Gaddafi's forces.

In the conference, British Prime Minister David Cameron said that although the military action was having an effect in protecting civilians, the western city of Misrata was still under attack from the Libyan leader's forces.

"I propose that today's conference should agree to set up a contact group, which will put political effort on a sustained basis into supporting the Libyan people," he said.

"As I speak the people of Misrata are continuing to suffer murderous attacks from the regime," he added.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the allied strikes on Libya would go on until Gaddafi meets the terms of a UN resolution calling for a ceasefire and authorising a no-fly zone to protect civilians.

Britain had invited the main group representing the Libyan opposition to London but not allowing them to participate in the talks, underlining the diplomatic difficulties of planning for a post-Gaddafi era.

Libya's opposition Transitional National Council (TNC) issue a statement yesterday vowing to work for free and fair elections in a "modern, free and united state".

France is the only Western country to have recognised the rebels officially. Qatar followed suit on Monday.

Britain and Spain have refused to rule out the possibility of offering Gaddafi a safe corridor out of the country, amid reports that a possible exile plan could be discussed at the meeting.

## NEWS IN brief

### Myanmar regime set to transfer power

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar will swear in its new president within two days, paving the way for the imminent transfer of power from the ruling junta to a nominally civilian government, officials said yesterday.

Prime Minister Thein Sein, who shed his army uniform to contest controversial elections last year, was named in February for the top job in the new parliament, where the military retains a stranglehold on power.

"The SPDC will be automatically dissolved after they hand over power to the new government," added another official, saying this transfer was likely

### Pro-Ouattara forces make fresh gains in Ivory Coast

AFP, Abidjan

Fighters backing internationally recognised Ivory Coast president Alassane Ouattara claimed fresh gains yesterday in a push into areas controlled by his rival Laurent Gbagbo, capturing a sixth town.

The pro-Ouattara Republican Forces seized the eastern town of Bondoukou, residents said, a day after launching their biggest offensive since a disputed November presidential election that Gbagbo refused to accept the loss.

"The town has fallen, I am looking for a way to leave Bondoukou," one resident said.

### Two Koreas in talks on potential volcano threat

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korea held talks yesterday about a potential volcanic threat from the peninsula's highest mountain, in a rare interlude of cooperation after months of confrontation.

The meeting at the South Korean border town of Munsan follows heightened concern about natural disasters, after an earthquake and tsunami devastated northeastern Japan and crippled an atomic power plant there.

After day-long discussions the two sides agreed on the need for joint research into potential hazards from Mount Paekdu on the border between North Korea and China, said Ryu In-Chang, a geologist

### Zulfikar Ali Bhutto hanging case to be reviewed

BBC ONLINE

The Pakistani cabinet has supported moves to re-examine the death sentence meted out to former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1979.

Mr Bhutto led the country's first democratically elected government, but was ousted from power in a military coup in 1977 and was hanged two years later in a controversial death sentence.

Information Minister Firdous Ashiq Awan said the cabinet unanimously endorsed the proposal.

But the question of whether the case can be reopened is a complicated one given that the Lahore High Court rejected a similar plea some years ago.

### Australian PM's computer hacked

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's parliamentary computer and the foreign and defence ministers' machines are all suspected of being hacked, with China under suspicion, reports said yesterday.

Sydney's Daily Telegraph said American intelligence officials tipped off the government that several thousand emails may have been accessed from the computers of at least 10 ministers.

The paper said the espionage occurred over more than a month, beginning in February.

Intelligent Risk chief executive Neil Fergus said interest in Australian commercial secrets may have

## Japan PM urges clean energy push

AFP, Osaka

Japan's Premier Naoto Kan said yesterday the country must push alternative energy sources as it recovers from its quake and tsunami disaster and struggles to contain a nuclear emergency.

"Taking this as a lesson, we have to lead the world in clean energy, such as solar and biomass, and make it a major pillar of a new Japan," the centre-left leader told a parliamentary committee.

His top spokesman, Yukio Edano, later said that the use of clean energy sources would likely be a key feature of a reconstruction plan for the northeastern region where entire towns were swept away on March 11.

Resource-poor Japan, highly dependent on Middle Eastern oil, meets about one third of its energy needs with nuclear power.

## Small amounts of radiation spread across Asia, Britain

AFP, Manila

Small amounts of radiation from Japan's leaking nuclear power plant have spread across Asia, authorities said yesterday, deepening concerns for millions of people already wary of eating Japanese food.

The governments of China, South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam and UK reported that radiation had drifted over their territories, although they emphasised the levels were so small that there was no health risk.

"We would like to ask the public not to panic. These are very tiny amounts in the air," Philippine Nuclear Research Institute spokeswoman Tina Cerbolis said, echoing officials in the other countries to have detected the radiation.

The iodine was detected by a SEPA air sampler in Glasgow, Scotland, after the agency stepped up its scrutiny of air quality following the problems in Japan.

Similarly low levels of iodine have been reported in other European countries such as Iceland and Switzerland, SEPA said.

Nevertheless the development was another reminder for people across the Asia Pacific about the rippling impacts of the damaged Fukushima power plant more than two weeks after a huge earthquake and tsunami crippled the facility.

Traces of radiation had in actual fact drifted all the way to the United States, with rainwater in Ohio found to have been contaminated on Monday, environment authorities there said.

## Russia 'kills 17 Caucasus militants'

BBC ONLINE

Russian forces have killed 17 rebels and destroyed an important militant base yesterday during an operation in the volatile North Caucasus, officials say.

An air strike by helicopters assisted special forces in the raid in the Russian republic of Ingushetia, Russia's anti-terrorism committee said.

Police also arrested two suspects in connection with January's suicide bombing at Moscow's Domodedovo airport.

Three Russian police officers were reported killed in the operation.

The suicide bombing at Russia's busiest airport on 24 January killed 37 people and injured more than 180.

There are suspicions that Doku Umarov himself may have been killed.

## India, Pakistan agree to set 'terror hotline'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India and Pakistan have agreed to set up a "hotline" to share information about terror threats, a joint statement said yesterday after talks between their home secretaries in New Delhi.

"Both sides agreed to set up a hotline between the home secretary of India and the interior secretary of Pakistan to facilitate real-time information sharing with respect to terrorist threats," said the statement.

"Both sides reiterated their commitment to fight terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and reaffirm the need to bring those responsible for such crimes to justice," it added.

India broke off ties with Islamabad in the wake of the 2008 attacks on Mumbai, which were blamed on militants from the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LET) network who travelled from Pakistan.

In 2001, another attack by Pakistani militants on the Indian parliament in New Delhi brought the two countries to the brink of another war. They have fought three since independence in 1947.

Last month, the two countries announced they would resume a formal peace dialogue with a view to resolving their issues, including the vexed subject of Kashmir, which is divided between them.

The two days of talks between Indian home secretary GK Pillai, the highest official in the home ministry, and his Pakistani counterpart Chaudhary Qamar Zaman were the first step in this process.

The joint statement said that Zaman had also agreed "in principle" to India's request to send a commission to Pakistan to investigate the Mumbai attacks.

"Modalities and composition in this connection will be worked out through diplomatic channels," the statement said.

Pakistan also provided updates on the ongoing trials and investigation into the Mumbai attacks, it added.

India has been pressing its neighbour to prosecute the alleged masterminds in Pakistan of the attacks and has provided several dossiers of evidence recorded by Indian police and intelligence agencies.

Pakistan has charged seven people but none has been convicted.

## 58 killed in Iraq provincial council attack

AFP, Tikrit

Security forces stormed the provincial council building in former dictator Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit yesterday after an hours-long shootout with gunmen that left 58 dead and 97 wounded, a police official said.

"The latest toll is 58 dead and 97 wounded, and there are many with serious injuries. Six of the dead were the attackers," said the official, stationed at Tikrit's main hospital.

"The security forces have now taken over the provincial council building," a police official said, adding that three council members were among the dead.

The gunmen, wearing military uniforms and suicide vests, had swarmed into the provincial council building in the city of Tikrit, about 160 kilometres north of Baghdad, immediately after a suicide bomber detonated his payload and cleared

the way, according to security officials.

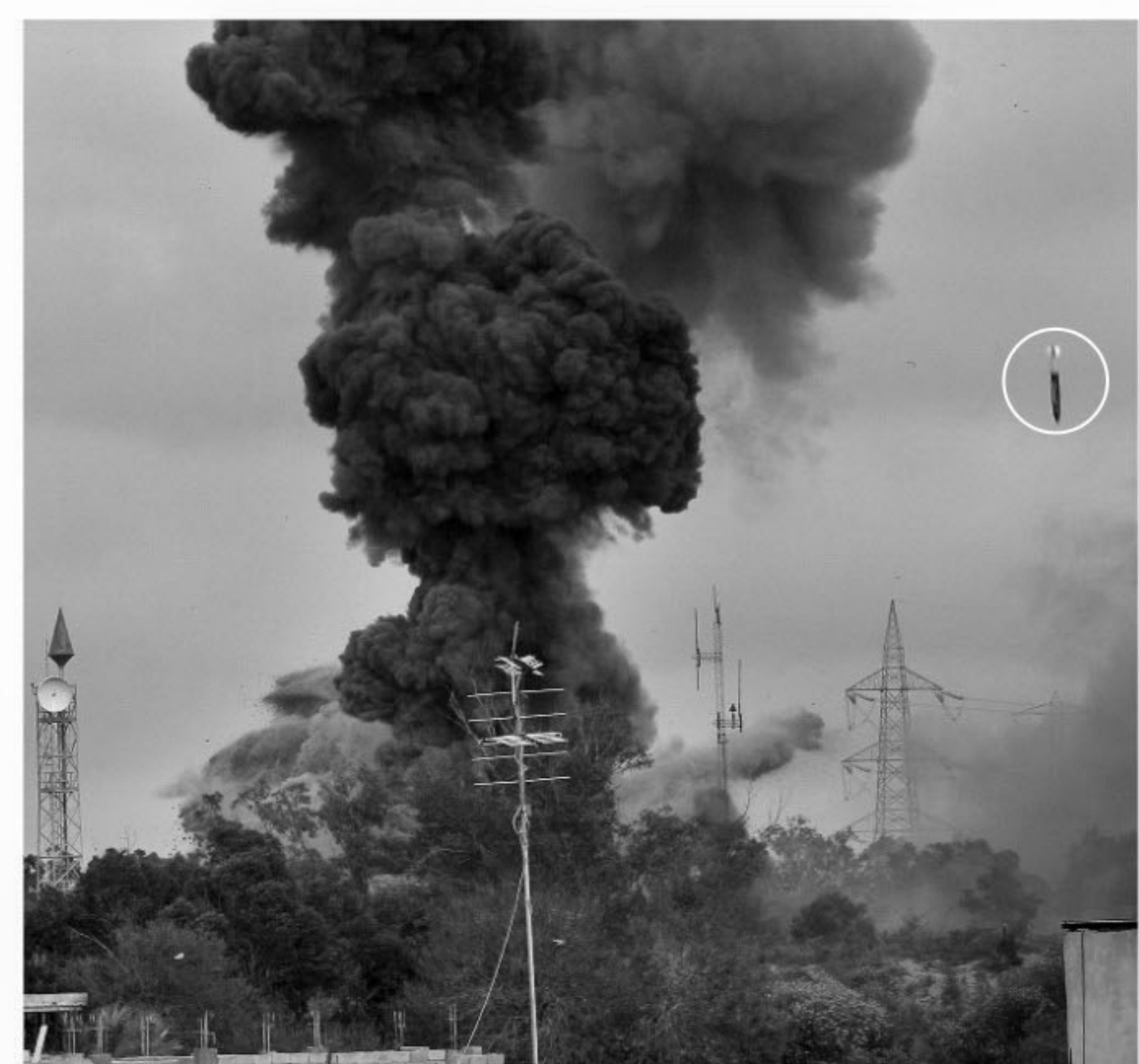
A car bomb exploded shortly afterwards as police reinforcements were arriving, they said.

"A police colonel, Imad Nofan, and his deputy were killed in the car bombing," the police official said. The same explosion also killed journalist Sabah al-Bazi, who had reported for several local and international news organisations, the police official and other sources said.

Hospital sources said they had received the bodies of six attackers. They said two showed they had died after detonating their suicide vests, and four were killed by shots fired by security forces.

For several hours, it was unclear whether hostages were being held or how many. Police said employees were still inside the building while witnesses said that at least some had managed to flee from another exit.

A curfew had been imposed over Tikrit, officials said.



Smoke billows and a missile (round marked) drops on the tightly-guarded residence of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi yesterday.

## 'Priceless' Christian relics to reveal history

BBC ONLINE

They could be the earliest Christian writing in existence, surviving almost 2,000 years in a Jordanian cave. They could, just possibly, change our understanding of how Jesus was crucified and resurrected, and how Christianity was born.

A group of 70 or so "books", each with between five and 15 lead leaves bound by lead rings, was apparently discovered in a remote arid valley in northern Jordan somewhere between 2005 and 2007.

A flash flood had exposed two niches inside the cave, one of them marked with a menorah or candlestick, the ancient Jewish religious symbol.

A Jordanian Bedouin opened these plugs, and what he found inside might constitute extremely rare relics of early Christianity.

The director of the Jordan's Department of Antiquities, Ziad al-Saad, says the books might have been made by followers of Jesus in the few decades immediately following his crucifixion.

"They will really match, and perhaps be more significant than, the Dead Sea Scrolls," says Saad.

"It seems that we are looking at a very important and significant discovery, maybe the most important discovery in the history of archaeology."

The books, or "codices", were apparently cast in lead, before being bound by lead rings.

One of the few people to see the collection is David Elkington, a scholar of ancient religious archaeology who is heading a British team trying to get the lead books safely into a Jordanian museum.

He says they could be "the major discovery of Christian history", adding: "It's a breathtaking thought that we have held these objects that might have been held by the early saints of the Church."

Mr Elkington says the relics feature signs that early Christians would have interpreted as indicating Jesus, shown side-by-side with others they would have regarded as representing the presence of God.

"It's talking about the coming of the messiah," he says. The archaeology of early Christianity is particularly sparse.

Little is known of the movement after Jesus' crucifixion until the letters of Paul several decades later, and they illuminate the westward spread of Christianity outside the Jewish world.

