

Allies disagree over arming Libyan rebels

China warns France on Libya strikes

AFP, Paris

Disagreement over arming the rebels battling Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi emerged yesterday with at least three of the countries enforcing the no-fly zone over the country opposing the idea.

Russia also criticised the proposal, amid dissent within Nato over the conduct of the whole Libyan operation. Meanwhile, Coalition military strikes on Libya could violate the "intention" of the UN resolution if civilians suffer, Chinese President Hu Jintao yesterday told visiting French leader Nicolas Sarkozy.

The tough talk from Hu came during a meeting at the start of Sarkozy's mini-tour of Asia, which will include a G20 meeting on global monetary reform and a stop in disaster-struck Japan.

Britain, France and the United States on March 19 launched air strikes on Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's

forces under the auspices of a UN Security Council resolution authorising "all necessary measures" to protect civilians.

"The aim of the UN's resolution is to stop violence and protect civilians," China Central Television quoted Hu as saying in talks with Sarkozy at the Great Hall of the People in the heart of Beijing.

"If the military action brings disaster to innocent civilians and creates a bigger humanitarian crisis, that would violate the original intention of the Security Council resolution," Hu said.

"China disapproves of using military force in international affairs."

Both France and the United States have raised the possibility of arming the rebels though critics have said such a move would go beyond the terms of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, which provides for the protection of civilians.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe

said Tuesday that Paris was prepared to discuss with its allies the supply of military aid to the rebels.

Speaking at an international conference in London, Juppe conceded that that arming or training the rebels was not covered by two UN Security Council resolutions on Libya in recent weeks.

"This is not allowed by either Resolution 1973 or Resolution 1970. For the time being, France is sticking to the strict application of these resolutions," he said.

"Having said that, we are prepared to discuss this with our partners," he told reporters after the conference to map out Libya's future, which concluded that Gaddafi should step down.

British Prime Minister David Cameron refused yesterday to rule out arming the rebels.

Asked in parliament what Britain's policy was Cameron replied: "We do not rule it out but we have not taken the decision to do so."



PHOTO: AFP

Libyan rebels drive through Brega, 240 kms south of the rebel stronghold Benghazi yesterday after fleeing from the key oil town of Ras Lanuf which was overrun by loyalist forces of Gaddafi.

Iraqi PM vows to punish Tikrit attackers

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's prime minister vowed yesterday to punish those behind an attack on a provincial council headquarters in which 58 people were killed after gunmen stormed in and took hostages.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki did not say who was behind the attack. But officials and analysts pointed fingers at al-Qaeda.

"All initial indications show that it is al-Qaeda, but maybe there are also other elements cooperating with them," said Ali al-Moussawi, a media adviser to Maliki.

"The criminals who planned and carried out this crime will not escape punishment and the investigation committee must submit its findings as soon as possible", said the prime minister.

Yemen's Saleh makes new offer to protesters

REUTERS, Sanaa

Yemen's president has made a new offer to protesters demanding he steps down, proposing he stays in his post until elections are held but transferring his powers to a caretaker government, an opposition source said yesterday.

Ali Abdullah Saleh made his offer at a meeting on Tuesday night with Mohammed al-Yadoumi, head of the Islamist Islah party. It was the first time Saleh had dealt with Islah, once a partner in his government, an opposition spokesman said.

"The opposition could pick a head of government of its own choosing and there would be parliamentary elections by the end of the year," an opposition source said of Saleh's offer.

He said the opposition was still considering its response.

Weeks of protests by thousands of Yemenis in Sanaa and other cities have brought Saleh's 32-year to the brink of collapse, but the

United States and top oil producer Saudi Arabia, a key Yemen financier, are worried over who could succeed their ally.

They have long seen Saleh as a bulwark of stability who can keep al-Qaeda from extending its foothold in a country that many see as close to disintegration.

Yemen's al-Qaeda wing claimed responsibility for a foiled attempt in late 2009 to blow up an airliner bound for Detroit, and for U.S.-bound cargo bombs sent in October 2010.

U.S. officials have said openly they like working with Saleh -- who has allowed unpopular U.S. military operations in Yemen against al-Qaeda -- and Saleh has said the U.S. ambassador is involved in talks to find a solution.

Sheikh Hamid al-Ahmar, a key tribal figure who belongs to the Islah party, told Reuters on Tuesday Islah and the opposition could handle the militant issue better than Saleh, whose government he said was not serious in confronting them.

Japan orders to check all nuclear reactors

AFP, Osaka

Japan yesterday ordered a check of all nuclear reactors to ensure there will be no repeat of the crisis currently unfolding at the Fukushima plant in the wake of the devastating March 11 quake.

Trade and industry minister Banri Kaieda made the request in a letter to the CEOs of the nine regional utility companies and two other entities that operate Japan's more than 50 reactors.

All reactors currently in use must be checked without delay, and no facility that was either halted by the earthquake or still under construction can enter operation without undergoing the same checks, he told a press conference.

At Fukushima, the massive earthquake and tsunami knocked out the cooling systems of the plant's six reactors and set off explosions and fires, releasing radiation in the world's worst atomic disaster in 25 years.

Kaieda's ministry has also ordered the nuclear operators to carry out drills to prepare the staff for emergencies, and also urged them to make sure there is a reliable back-up power supply for their cooling systems.

While listing the requirements for the nation's nuclear operators, Kaieda also insisted that Japan had no choice but to rely on nuclear power, given the lack of alternatives.

"Nuclear power makes up 30 percent of Japan's total output," he said.

Gandhi charged with racism and bisexuality

Author denies allegation

AFP, New Delhi

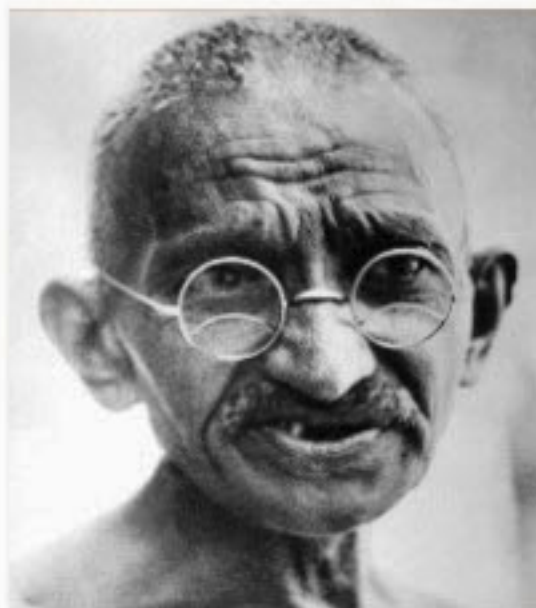
An American author on Tuesday angrily dismissed claims his new book on Mahatma Gandhi alleged that India's independence leader was a racist bisexual who left his wife for a bodybuilder.

Indian newspapers were outraged by reviews in the United States and Britain of Joseph Lelyveld's biography that focused on Gandhi's relationship with German-Jewish architect and amateur bodybuilder Hermann Kallenbach.

Gandhi lived with Kallenbach in Johannesburg for about two years from 1907 before leaving South Africa to return to India in 1914.

"How completely you have taken possession of my body," Gandhi was quoted as saying in a letter to Kallenbach. "This is slavery with a vengeance."

The British Daily Mail ran the headline "Gandhi left his wife to live with a male lover" new book claims", while the Daily Telegraph review said he had "held racist views against South African blacks."



But Lelyveld, a former executive editor of the New York Times, said "Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India" had been grossly distorted by the press coverage.

"I do not allege that Gandhi is racist or bisexual," he said in a statement issued through his publisher Alfred A Knopf. "The word 'bisexual' nowhere appears in the book."

"The word 'racist' is used once to characterize comments by Gandhi early in his stay in South Africa... the chapter in no way concludes that he was a racist or offers any suggestion of it."

The Wall Street Journal said Lelyveld's book depicted Gandhi -- who is revered as the father of independent India and an icon of non-violent protest -- was "a sexual weirdo, a political incompetent and a fanatical faddist."

The chief minister of Gujarat state, where Gandhi was born in 1869, imposed an immediate block on Joseph Lelyveld's book in a move that could be followed by India's national government.

Burma transfer of power complete

AP, Naypyitaw

Myanmar's junta was officially disbanded yesterday after handing over power to a new so-called civilian government, the latest phase of a transition to democracy that has been widely criticized as a sham.

The closed-door inauguration of the new government was announced only after it took place, in keeping with the secretive style of Myanmar's military regimes of the past 50 years.

Despite the handover, key figures in the former junta including former prime minister Senior Gen Than Shwe are expected to retain substantial hold over power.

State television and radio reported that the new government headed by President Thein Sein was sworn in by parliament in the remote capital of Naypyitaw.

Israel proposes Gaza artificial island

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel is considering building an artificial island with sea and air ports off blockaded Gaza, as a long-term solution to shipping goods into the Hamas-run Palestinian enclave, the transport minister said.

Yisrael Katz told Army Radio yesterday he wants an international force to control the island for "at least 100 years" and for unloaded cargo to be brought into Gaza along a 4.5-km (3-mile)-long bridge with a security checkpoint to prevent arms smuggling.

"The Israeli military would continue the naval blockade, but in a more localized way," he said.

Katz said he had pitched the project to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who told him to put together a plan, which "has been under examination for many months" by experts.

A spokesman for the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority described the idea as "pure fantasy" and an attempt by Israel "to divert attention from the real problems of Gaza resulting from the Israeli siege."

A Hamas spokesman called it "a Zionist effort to ... internationalize" the blockade.

"I am at the stage where the prime minister has to give the green light," Katz said. "This has not happened yet ... I am certain the Europeans and the Americans and many private elements will be willing to be part of this."

Israel and neighboring Egypt tightened their blockade of Gaza after Hamas Islamists opposed to peace with the Jewish state seized control of the territory in 2007 from forces loyal to Western-backed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.



Members of Pro-Ouattara forces hold their weapons on Tuesday in Duekoue, in western Ivory Coast. Forces backing Ivory Coast's recognised president Alassane Ouattara today approached the capital Yamassoukrou in a vast offensive to seize control after a disputed election.

PHOTO: AFP

Pro-Ouattara fighters head to I Coast capital

Gbagbo calls for immediate ceasefire

BBC ONLINE

Forces loyal to UN-backed President-elect Alassane Ouattara are advancing towards Ivory Coast's capital, Yamoussoukro, on two fronts.

His forces have recently taken several towns and incumbent leader Laurent Gbagbo has appealed for a ceasefire.

Mr Gbagbo refuses to stand down despite the UN saying he lost November's poll.

A BBC reporter says Yamoussoukro is only the capital in name, but its capture would be a major symbolic victory for the pro-Ouattara forces.

Ivorian incumbent Laurent Gbagbo has appealed for an immediate ceasefire yesterday after advances by forces loyal to President-elect Alassane Ouattara.

In the town of Duekoue, up to 30,000 people took refuge in a church compound to escape the fighting.

Gbagbo refuses to stand down despite the UN saying he lost November's poll.

Some one million people have fled the violence - mostly in Abidjan - and at least 462 people have been killed since December, according to the UN.

"We call for an immediate ceasefire and the opening of talks under the mediation of the African Union high representative. Failing which, we will use our legitimate right of defence," Ahoua Don Mello, Gbagbo's spokesman, was quoted as saying by AFP news agency.

"We have adopted a strategy of tactical withdrawal. We hope that dialogue will open very shortly. It is useless to head into conflict and increase the number of victims."

He also dismissed accusations by the UN that pro-Gbagbo forces had opened fire on civilians on Monday, killing at least 10 and burning a man to death in Abidjan.

NEWS IN brief

Britain expels five Libyan diplomats

AFP, London

Britain is expelling the Libyan military attache and four other diplomats for intimidating opposition groups in London, Foreign Secretary William Hague said yesterday.

"To underline our grave concern at the regime's behaviour I can announce to the house that we have today taken steps to expel five diplomats at the Libyan embassy in London including the military attache," Hague told parliament.

"The government also judged that were these individuals to remain in Britain they could pose a

Flooding in Thailand kills 21, strands thousands

REUTERS, Bangkok

Severe flooding and mudslides in southern Thailand have killed 21 people, stranded thousands of tourists and threatened to delay shipments of rubber in the world's largest rubber-producing country, authorities said yesterday.

Trains to the region have been canceled and three airports have been shut, including one on the popular island of Koh Samui. As well as Koh Samui, foreign tourists have also been stuck at resorts in Krabi and Koh Phangan.

The Thai navy evacuated about 1,200 people from Koh Samui and Koh Tao, a remote island popular

Nicaraguan to represent Libya at UN

AFP, Managua

The regime of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi has named former Nicaraguan foreign minister Miguel D'Escoto as its representative to the United Nations, a presidential spokesman said in Managua on Tuesday.

President Daniel Ortega's government said Libya made the decision on the belief that Ali Triki was unable to obtain a US visa to take his seat at the United Nations in New York.

D'Escoto "is authorized" to speak on behalf of Libya at the United Nations, according to a letter sent to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon by the Libyan authorities in Managua, according to

Berlusconi visits migrant island of Lampedusa

BBC ONLINE

Italian PM Silvio Berlusconi has arrived on the island of Lampedusa as ships move thousands of migrants who have recently arrived there.

Hundreds, travelling mainly from Libya and Tunisia, have been arriving on the shores of the tiny island south of Sicily each night.

Its residents have protested, occupying the town hall and threatening to cut off supplies if ships do not arrive.

AFP, Phnom Penh

Ex-Khmer Rouge cadre Duch asked for forgiveness for running a feared jail where thousands died but maintained he was only following orders as he took the stand for a final time yesterday.

Cambodia's UN-backed court sentenced Duch, 68, in July to 30 years in jail for war crimes and crimes against humanity for overseeing the deaths of some 15,000 people at the notorious prison Tuol Sleng -- or S-21 -- in the late 1970s.

He asked "for forgiveness of the souls of the victims" and "for the families of those victims to accept my apology", echoing statements made at his original trial before his shock demand to be acquitted in his closing speech in November 2009.