

Battle for Abidjan rages around presidential palace

AU urges strongman to quit immediately, Gbagbo alleges coup

AFP, Abidjan

Gunfire erupted around the home of under-siege Ivory Coast strongman Laurent Gbagbo and the presidential palace yesterday, Abidjan residents and AFP journalists reported.

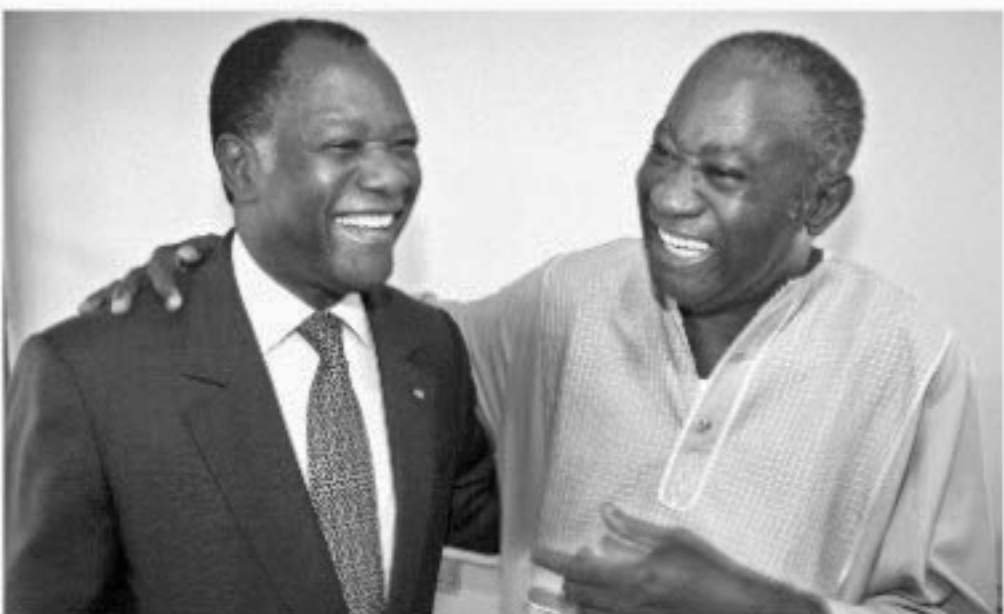
"The shooting doesn't stop. Gbagbo's men are resisting in all their positions," a resident of the nothern suburb of Cocody, where Gbagbo lives, told AFP.

"We are hearing deafening artillery shots, RPG7 (rockets) and machine guns," he said.

The African Union urged strongman Laurent Gbagbo to step down immediately in favour of internationally recognised president Alassane Ouattara.

AU Commission Chairman Jean Ping "urges Laurent Gbagbo to immediately hand over power to President Alassane Dramane Ouattara in order to shorten the suffering of the Ivorian people," a statement said.

But Gbagbo has no intention of quitting despite being under attack by forces loyal to his rival which he brands a "coup d'etat", his repre-



Alassane Ouattara and Laurent Gbagbo after election on October 27, 2010

sentative in Paris said yesterday.

"President Laurent Gbagbo has no intention of abdicating or giving himself up to any rebel at all," said Toussaint Alain, a close ally of Gbagbo who acts as his Europe spokesman in Paris.

"He is facing a post-electoral coup d'etat by Alassane Ouattara who is supported by an international coalition."

Ouattara's ambassador in Paris, Ally Coulibaly, said Thursday that Gbagbo will not be hurt if he gives himself up to his opponents' forces.

Intense fighting between soldiers loyal to the outgoing president and the army of internationally recognised president Alassane Ouattara, started Thursday night around 10:00 pm within the perimeter of Gbagbo's residence.

It was impossible to confirm if Gbagbo was still in his home.

Pro-Ouattara fighters entered Abidjan, the country's economic capital, Thursday after sweeping through towns across the country in an all-out offensive against Gbagbo's regime.

They seized the airport and the state television on Thursday night.

Yesterday fighting continued in the administrative district of Plateau, home to the presidential palace, where the roar of heavy artillery shelling pierced the air.

Incumbent Gbagbo failed to respond to a deadline set by his rival to step down on Thursday and now faces being ousted by force.

Pro-Ouattara forces violating rights: UN

AFP, Geneva

The UN human rights office said yesterday it was alarmed by reports that pro-Alassane Ouattara forces in Ivory Coast were committing serious human rights violations and urged restraint.

"We've had unconfirmed reports of quite serious human rights violations committed by the Force Republiqueaines de Cote d'Ivoire, the pro-Ouattara forces," said Rupert Colville, spokesman for the UNHCR.

The reported violations, committed particularly in west Ivory Coast's Guiglo and Daloa areas, include looting, extortion, abductions, arbitrary arrests and ill treatment of civilians, added the spokesman.

They are "alarming enough for us to make the point quite strongly to the forces supporting Ouattara that they should be careful," said Colville.

LIBYA INTERVENTION

US Congress mulls vote as UK sends strong message to regime

Libya's rag-tag rebels badly need training: Gates

AFP, Washington

With the US Congress sharply divided over military strikes in Libya, top senators worked Thursday on a measure formally authorising the use of force against strongman Gaddafi's troops.

"We are already, in fact, beginning the work of drafting an appropriate resolution. Whether we will need it or not, we don't know," Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry said at a hearing on the crisis.

Meanwhile, British officials met a top Libyan regime aide in London and gave him a "strong message" that leader Muammar Gaddafi had to step down, a government source said Friday.

Mohammed Ismail, a key confidant of Gaddafi's powerful son Saif al-Islam, had been visiting family in the British capital in recent days when the British government took the opportunity to make contact, they said.

Britain's Foreign Office refused to confirm or deny Ismail's visit.

"We are not going to provide a running commentary on our contacts with Libyan officials," a spokeswoman said.

"In any contact that we do have, we make it clear that Gaddafi has to go, that we encourage

those around him to abandon this brutal regime and embrace a better future for Libya that allows political transition and real reform that meets the aspirations of the Libyan people."

Republican Senator John McCain said he was working with Kerry, Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, and independent Senator Joe Lieberman on a measure endorsing President Barack Obama's decision to use force.

The senators hoped to craft a resolution "that can receive an overwhelming vote in the Senate. It would not be a good signal, otherwise," Fox News Channel quoted McCain as saying at a press conference.

The move came as some lawmakers charged Obama overstepped his constitutional bounds by acting before securing formal approval from Congress for the operation, and calls to denounce or defund the operation.

Democratic Representative Dennis Kucinich has offered a resolution that would deny funding for military operations in Libya and attacked Obama's decision to act absent formal congressional authorisation.

"The critical issue before this nation today is not Libyan democracy, it is American democ-

Gbagbo's regime.

►19-21: Clashes in Abidjan leave at least six dead.

►3: MARCH

►3: Seven women are killed during a rally in the pro-Ouattara neighbourhood of Adobo, Abidjan.

►21: The New Forces movement, based in the north and loyal to Ouattara, makes military gains in the west of Ivory Coast.

►28: The New Forces step up their offensive in the west and south.

►30: The New Forces take control of Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast's administrative capital. Gbagbo's military chief, General Philippe Magnou, seeks refuge in the South African ambassador's residence.

►31: Ouattara's forces take control of the country's main cocoa exporting centre, the port of San Pedro and overnight sweep into Abidjan. Ouattara calls on Gbagbo's supporters to come over to him. UN peacekeepers take over Abidjan airport.

►4: APRIL

►1: Ouattara's forces engage in fierce gun battles in Abidjan with Gbagbo's troops around his home and the presidential palace.

NEWS IN brief

'Military means' not the answer in Libya

AFP, Beijing

Germany's foreign minister yesterday said the situation in war-torn Libya could not be resolved through "military means" and called for a ceasefire.

Guido Westerwelle made the comments after meeting his Chinese counterpart Yang Jiechi in Beijing.

"There can only be a political resolution and we must get the political process underway. That should begin with a ceasefire that Gaddafi must heed to allow the peace process to begin," he told reporters.

UN court declines ethnic cleansing case against Russia

AFP, The Hague

A UN Court yesterday declined to hear 'ethnic cleansing' charges brought by Georgia against Russia, saying it had no jurisdiction in the case concerning South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

"The court, by 10 votes to six, finds that it has no jurisdiction to entertain the application," International Court of Justice president Hisashi Owada told the hearing.

The UN's highest court said that attempts to resolve the issue between the two countries through bilateral negotiations should have taken place before Georgia sought intervention by the court.

Seven Kurdish rebels killed in southern Turkey

AFP, Ankara

The Turkish army killed seven Kurdish rebels and seized explosives in clashes in a southern province yesterday, Anatolia news agency quoted officials as saying.

Acting on a tip-off that militants had sneaked in from neighbouring Syria, the soldiers confronted the group in a rural area in the Mediterranean province of Hatay, the agency reported.

The militants responded with fire to calls to surrender and seven were killed in the ensuing fighting, it said.

Somali PM says one more year needed to get rid of Al-Qaeda

AFP, Mogadishu

Prime Minister Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed insists that he needs one more year to rid the country of an Al Qaeda affiliated Islamic insurgency and establish a stable government in war-torn Somalia.

Shebab Islamic militants control virtually all of south and central Somalia and a large part of the capital.

"With AMISOM's help we're gaining ground every day," Mohamed said in an interview Thursday.

"We were only appointed recently... We still need some more time to defeat the Shebab. That is our priority," said Mohamed, who was appointed in November 2010.

S Korea angered by Japan claim over disputed island

AFP, Seoul

South Korea will work to strengthen its control over islands disputed with Japan, President Lee Myung-Bak said yesterday, days after Tokyo angered Seoul by reasserting its claim.

"We will continue with our measures to bolster control" over the islands in the Sea of Japan (East Sea), Lee told a press conference.

He did not elaborate. Yonhap news agency said Thursday the South has begun work to renovate a heliport on the tiny islands, known as Dokdo in Korea and Takeshima in Japan.

US senators press Palestine peace talks

AFP, Washington

US lawmakers urged President Barack Obama Thursday to press Palestinians to resume peace talks with Israel without preconditions and battle "incitement" to violence against the Jewish state.

President Obama is to welcome Israeli President Shimon Peres to the White House for lunch, at a time of intense upheaval in the rebellion-torn Middle East.

"As part of that, president Abbas must fully renounce any and all Palestinian incitement against Israel and the Jewish people," said the 46 members of the House of Representatives.

South Korea rejects North's talks offer

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's President Lee Myung-Bak yesterday dismissed North Korea's offers of dialogue as insincere and said the communist state must apologise for two deadly border incidents last year.

"They (North Korea) need to express their apology for what they have done," Lee told a news conference. "After that, we can move on to the next step.

"But if they threaten attack and kill and after a period of time, say 'We should meet and talk', I think it is not sincere."

Cross-border relations have been icy since Seoul accused Pyongyang of torpedoing a warship in March 2010 with the loss of 46 South Korean lives.

Tensions rose further after the North's shelling of the South's Yeonpyeong border island last November, which killed four people including two civilians.

The South demands its neighbour accept blame for both incidents before relations can improve.

The North angrily denies involvement in the warship sinking, and says its shelling was provoked by a South Korean artillery drill on the island. On Thursday it told Seoul's leaders they face a choice between dialogue or war.



PHOTO : AFP

A nurse sits with a totally blind tsunami survivor, Masakichi Takahashi, 76, as he eats relief food at evacuation place as his wife is hospitalized by pneumonia in Ishinomaki in Miyagi prefecture yesterday.

Eight UN workers killed in Afghan Quran protest

AFP, Mazar-i-sharif

Eleven people including eight UN employees were killed yesterday in an attack on the organisation's headquarters in the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif by demonstrators protesting at the burning of the Quran by a US pastor, police said.

"In total, 11 people were killed -- three foreign members of the UN, five Nepalese United Nations guards and three (Afghan) protesters," General Mohammad Daud Daud, a senior officer in the northern region told AFP.

A UN spokesman in New York confirmed only that there had been an unspecified number of deaths but if the toll is confirmed the attack would appear to be the deadliest on the UN in Afghanistan since the US invasion of 2001.

A spokesman for the UN mission in Kabul, Don McNorton, said: "We are aware of an incident in our Mazar office, we are currently working to ascertain all the facts."

Six foreign UN staff were killed and another nine wounded, including some seriously, when three armed gunmen wearing explosives-packed vests attacked a central Kabul guesthouse in October 2009.

The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it was the first step in a campaign against the upcoming presidential elections.

Mazar-i-Sharif is one of seven areas chosen by President Hamid Karzai and the international coalition to launch a process called "transition". Foreign forces will pass on the responsibility for security from July 1 to Afghan forces.

Foreign forces have traditionally been less visible in the city, deemed relatively safe.

Ahead of yesterday's violence Afghanistan had condemned the "disrespectful and abhorrent" burning of the Quran by evangelical preacher Pastor Wayne Sapp in a Florida church, calling it an effort to incite tension between religions.