

Obama urges Gbagbo to quit immediately

Russia questions UN's use of force in Ivory Coast

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama yesterday urged Ivory Coast strongman Laurent Gbagbo to step down immediately and voiced strong support for French and UN military efforts faced with the violence.

"To end this violence and prevent more bloodshed, former president Gbagbo must stand down immediately, and direct those who are fighting on his behalf to lay down their arms," Obama said in a statement.

"Every day that the fighting persists will bring more suffering, and further delay the future of peace and prosperity that the people of Côte d'Ivoire deserve," he said, using the nation's French name.

French and UN helicopters fired at the presidential palace, presidential residence and two military barracks held by the 65-year-old Gbagbo, target-

ing heavy weapons being used against civilians.

"I strongly support the role that United Nations peacekeepers are playing as they enforce their mandate to protect civilians, and I welcome the efforts of French forces who are supporting that mission," Obama said.

Meanwhile, Russia yesterday questioned the use of force by the UN peacekeepers in the West African nation of Ivory Coast where a conflict over a disputed election has led to devastating fighting.

"We are now looking into the legal side of the issue because peacekeepers had a mandate which requires them to be neutral and impartial," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters.

He added that Moscow had requested a special briefing at the UN Security Council to address the situation but was not satisfied with its

results. "So far we have not received particularly precise answers to our questions. But we will be looking into this situation," he said in televised remarks.

On Monday, UN and French helicopters fired on the Ivory Coast presidential palace and bases of strongman Laurent Gbagbo in the main city Abidjan after he lost November elections but refused to step down.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has said the aim was to stop heavy weapons being used against civilians and not a declaration of war against Gbagbo.

Russia is "extremely concerned" by the violence in Ivory Coast, Lavrov said. "The situation there is not improving but abruptly deteriorating," he said.

"We have demanded that those who apply force in the regions where peaceful civilians are located not allow any action which may lead to new victims."



PHOTO: AFP

Internationally recognised Ivory Coast leader Alassane Ouattara's forces ride an armed vehicle in front of the Golf hotel in Abidjan yesterday.

NEWS IN brief

Turkey, Indonesia call for Libya ceasefire

AFP, Jakarta

Turkey and Indonesia yesterday called for a ceasefire in Libya and promised to help in rebuilding the country, as rebels and government forces battled for key eastern cities under a UN no-fly zone.

The call came after Muammar Gaddafi's regime on Friday rejected an opposition offer of a truce provided his forces ended their assaults on rebel-held cities.

In a joint statement, the two leaders "stressed the importance of the preservation of the sovereignty, national unity and territorial integrity of Libya".

Veteran PM asked to form new Kuwait cabinet

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait's veteran premier, Sheikh Nasser Mohammed al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, was asked yesterday to form his seventh government in five years despite opposition protests, state news agency KUNA announced.

Sheikh Nasser, a nephew of the emir who re-appointed him, resigned last week after MPs sought to question three of his top ministers, in a political crisis which the cabinet deemed dangerous to national unity.

The emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, re-appointed Sheikh Nasser, 71, over stiff opposition from several MPs and a youth campaign which amassed thousands of signatures against his re-appointment.

General David Petraeus being considered for CIA top job

AFP, Washington

General David Petraeus is being "seriously considered" for the job of CIA director, according to a report late Monday by National Public Radio.

Petraeus is the commander of US forces in Afghanistan but plans to leave that post later this year, and NPR, citing unnamed government officials, reported that Petraeus "would take the job if offered."

Leon Panetta is currently the CIA's director but is seen as a likely replacement for Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who plans to step down this year.

Dozens of illegal immigrants escape Malaysian camp

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

More than 100 illegal immigrants have fled a detention camp in Malaysia after burning down an accommodation block, a senior security official said yesterday.

Rusli Mokhtar, deputy commandant of the Lenggeng immigration depot, just south of Kuala Lumpur, said the break-out happened late Monday.

Rusli said 19 of them had been recaptured and police have mounted an operation to round up the others.

US to try 9/11 accused at Guantanamo

AFP, Washington

In a major about-face, the Obama administration said on Monday that 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and four alleged co-conspirators will be tried by a military tribunal at Guantanamo rather than a civilian court in New York.

Announcing the U-turn, Attorney General Eric Holder insisted the accused plotters accused of the September 11, 2001 attacks could have been successfully prosecuted in a federal court, but blamed Congress for imposing measures blocking the trials of Guantanamo inmates in the United States.

President Barack Obama's administration had to "face a simple truth" that the congressional restrictions were "unlikely to be repealed in the immediate future," Holder said.

"And we simply cannot allow a trial to be delayed any longer for the victims of the 9/11 attacks or for their family members who have waited for nearly a decade for justice," he said.

Holder, saying he made the decision "reluctantly," formally referred the cases of Sheikh Mohammed, Walid bin Attash, Ramzi Binalshibh, Ali Abd al-Aziz Ali, and Mustapha Ahmed al-Hawsawi to the Defence Department for trials before military commissions.

The move came the same day the president announced plans to stand for re-election and also followed a decision earlier Monday by the US Supreme Court rejecting three appeals by Guantanamo detainees protesting their indefinite detention.

Obama has vowed to close Guantanamo, having held it up as a symbol of all that was wrong with the so-called "war on terror" waged by his predecessor George W Bush.

Yemen's Saleh urges opposition for talks

REUTERS, Sanaa

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh urged his opponents yesterday to join talks to end a two-month-old political crisis as fresh clashes erupted between his troops and protesters seeking to finish his 32-year rule.

With US pressure mounting on Saleh to negotiate his exit, Saleh accepted an invitation by Gulf Arab states to hold talks with opposition in Saudi Arabia.

Saleh, who ignored a transition-of-power plan offered by the opposition Saturday, accepted the Arab Gulf states' invitation and urged to the opposition to follow suit.

Meanwhile, two dissident soldiers and three other people were killed in Sanaa yesterday.

Fukushima radioactive leak may have slowed down

Reuters, Tokyo

The operator of Japan's crippled Fukushima nuclear power plant said it had reduced the flow of highly radioactive water out of a reactor, a possible sign of progress in an almost month-long battle to contain the world's biggest nuclear disaster in quarter of a century.

Samples of the water used to cool the damaged reactor No. 2 were 5 million times the legal limit of radioactivity, adding to fears that contaminants had spread far beyond the disaster zone.

The government said it was considering imposing radioactivity restrictions on seafood for the first time in the crisis after contaminated fish were found. India also became the first country to ban food imports from all areas of Japan over radiation fears.

Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO) said late yesterday that it had slowed the radioactive water flow from reactor No. 2 at its Fukushima Daiichi plant. Earlier, desperate engineers had used little more than home remedies, including a mixture of sawdust, newspaper and concrete, to stem the flow of contaminated water.

"We can't actually measure the amount but we have visually confirmed that the amount of water flowing out is decreasing, so we have reason to think our measures are working to a certain extent," a TEPCO official told reporters.

Workers are still struggling to restart cooling pumps -- which recycle the water -- in four reactors damaged by last month's 9.0 magnitude earthquake and tsunami.

Until those are fixed, they must pump in water from outside to prevent overheating and meltdowns. In the process, that creates more contaminated water that has to be pumped out and stored somewhere else or released into the sea.

TEPCO has offered "condolence money" to those affected in the Fukushima region where the plant is based. But one city rejected the money and local mayors who came to Tokyo to meet Prime Minister Naoto Kan demanded far more help.

"We have borne the risks, co-existed and flourished with TEPCO for more than 40 years, and all these years, we have fully trusted the myth that nuclear plants are absolutely safe," said Katsuya Endo, the mayor of Tomioka town.

2G SCAM Indian tycoon questioned

AFP, New Delhi

Indian billionaire Anil Ambani was called before a powerful parliamentary committee on yesterday for what promised to be an uncomfortable hearing into a multi-billion-dollar telecom fraud.

Ambani, who heads Reliance ADA, was set to give "oral evidence" before the 13-member Public Accounts Committee (PAC) over the allegedly fraudulent distribution of licences in 2008 to top telecom firms at throwaway prices.

His company, Reliance Telecom, a unit of Reliance Communications, has been charged by police in the case and Ambani was expected to be questioned about this. Three Reliance executives are also to stand trial.

The telecom scandal has tarnished the reputation of the government in India.

Ozone depletion over Arctic at record level

AFP, Geneva

Depletion of the ozone layer over the Arctic has reached record levels, the UN weather agency WMO said yesterday, blaming harmful substances in the atmosphere and a very cold winter.

The Arctic ozone layer suffered a loss of about 40 percent from the beginning of winter to late March, up from the previous record of about 30 percent over the entire winter, according to the World Meteorological Organisation.

"Depletion of the ozone layer -- the shield that protects life on Earth from harmful levels of ultraviolet rays -- has reached an unprecedented level over the Arctic this spring because of the continuing presence of ozone-depleting substances in the atmosphere and a very cold winter in the stratosphere," the WMO said in a statement.

With the ozone poor region shifting away in late March from the pole to cover Greenland and Scandinavia, these Nordic regions would have to watch for higher than normal ultraviolet radiation in coming weeks.

"As the solar elevation at noon increases over the next weeks, regions affected by the ozone depletion will experience higher than normal UV radiation," said the WMO.

"The public is recommended to stay informed through national UV forecasts," it added.

Stratospheric ozone provides a natural protective filter against harmful ultra-violet rays from the sun, which can cause sunburn, cataracts and skin cancer and damage vegetation.

Its depletion is caused by extreme cold temperatures at high altitude and a particular type of pollution, from chemicals often used in refrigeration, some plastic foams, or aero-

Haiti gets new leader

AFP, Port-au-prince

Michel Martelly, a carnival singer with a colourful past who seized the mantle of change, is Haiti's new president after storming to a landslide victory, preliminary results showed.

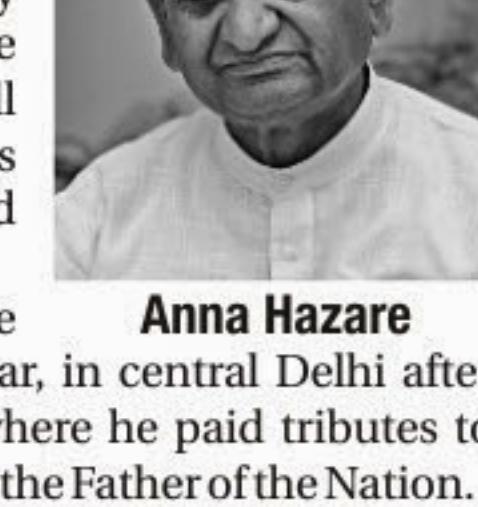
The 50-year-old faces the huge challenge of rebuilding the Caribbean nation, which was the poorest country in the Americas even before a January 2010 earthquake flattened the capital Port-au-Prince and killed more than 225,000 people.

Martelly, with 67.57 percent of the vote, ended the dreams of former first lady Mirlande Manigat, who was vying to become Haiti's first democratically elected female leader but finished with a disappointing 31.74 percent showing.

He should now take office on May 14, after the current president steps down.

Indian anti-corruption activist on hunger strike

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi



Anna Hazare

Rejecting an appeal by the office of the Indian prime minister, leading anti-corruption crusader and social worker Anna Hazare yesterday launched an indefinite hunger strike to push for changes to a draft bill facilitating corruption complaints against the prime minister and cabinet.

Hazare, 72, began his fast at the landmark observatory, Jantar Mantar, in central Delhi after taking out a march from Rajghat where he paid tributes to Mahatma Gandhi at the memorial of the Father of the Nation.

"We will fast unto death until the government enacts the Jan Lokpal (citizens' ombudsman against anti-corruption) Bill which is most necessary to fight corruption in our country," Hazare told reporters here.

Social activists Swami Agnivesh, Kiran Bedi and Sandeep Pandey were also present on the occasion.

Hazare had yesterday said he was saddened when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh rejected the demand by leading civil society members to include them and senior ministers in the joint committee to draft the Jan Lokpal Bill.

Late last night, the prime minister's Office had issued an appeal to Hazare not to go on hunger strike.

PM Manmohan Singh's Congress government, re-elected in 2009, has become mired in graft allegations ranging from the cut-price sale of telecoms licences to corruption surrounding last year's Commonwealth Games and vote-buying.

Koran burning protest enters fifth day

AFP, Kabul

Fresh protests erupted in the Afghan capital Kabul yesterday over the burning of a Koran by a US pastor, taking angry and violent demonstrations into a fifth day, an AFP photographer said.

Several hundred people gathered at Kabul University chanting "death to America" and "we want the burner of the Koran to be tried" in the wake of previous protests which have left 24 people dead, including seven UN staff.

"A protest has started by Kabul University students in front of the university. It is peaceful and under control at the moment," interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

Prime Minister of Thailand Abhisit Vejjajiva (L) shakes hands with his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh during a welcome ceremony at the Presidential palace in New Delhi yesterday. Vejjajiva is in India on a two-day state visit.

Thai PM sees 'immense' trade potential with India

AFP, New Delhi

Thailand's premier yesterday said the south-east Asian kingdom and India should build on commercial ties that have seen bilateral trade increase six-fold over the last 10 years.

"The trade possibilities are immense," Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, on a one-day trip to New Delhi, told a business audience, urging the two countries to use their shared cultural and democratic heritage to meet that potential.

He forecast bilateral trade would reach \$10 billion by 2012. Two-way trade stood at \$6.7 billion last year.

Even quicker trade growth is expected when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) moves to a single market, set for 2015, Vejjajiva said.

Vejjajiva said Indian investors should see Thailand as a gateway to the 10-nation ASEAN market.

He added prospects for Thailand's economy were good, forecasting "broad-based

growth" of four to 4.5 percent this year. India's rapidly expanding economy is expected to grow by double that rate in 2011/12.

Vejjajiva, on his first visit to India since becoming prime minister in 2008, said Bangkok wanted to "energise various bilateral mechanisms" including a limited free trade pact in 2003.

The two countries have since been negotiating a comprehensive free trade agreement in goods, services and investment that Indian government officials say is nearly ready to be signed.

"Two-way investment is high on our agenda," added Vejjajiva.

Trade with India is still a fraction of Thailand's trade with China. But Thailand believes India could eventually provide a counterweight to China's growing economic might.

"There's still lot of untapped potential both in trade and economy and that is what both sides seek to harness," Indian foreign affairs spokesman Vishnu Prakash said.