

Obama hopes to avoid government shutdown

Talks on budget ends without deal

BBC ONLINE

Talks aimed at avoiding a shutdown of the US government have broken up with no deal, leaving negotiators just hours to agree a budget compromise.

President Obama said that progress had been made after night-time talks with congressional leaders.

He said he was not prepared to express "wild optimism" but hoped to be able to announce a deal by yesterday morning.

Without a deal, the law funding most of the US government were to expire at midnight yesterday, forcing a shutdown.

Some 800,000 government employees would be barred from working and would not be paid, government lending would cease, and national parks and other government-run sites would close.

The US military would continue to operate, but troops would not be paid until the deadlock was broken, the BBC's Adam Brookes reports from Washington.

The last US government shutdown came in 1995, amid dispute between the Republican Congress and Bill Clinton's White House.

That shutdown lasted for 20 days and was estimated to have shaved a full percentage point off US economic growth for one quarter of the year.

Obama held two sessions of talks on Thursday with the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, John Boehner, and the Democratic Senate majority leader Harry Reid.

The president spoke after the second session ended without an agreement.

"I'm not yet prepared to express wild optimism, but I think we are further along today than yesterday," he said.

The White House then announced that his planned trip to the state of Indiana yesterday had been postponed.

Republicans in the US House have pushed for \$61bn in cuts between now and the end of the fiscal year on 30 September, and have sought to use the

budget bill to dismantle Democratic policy priorities.

The Democrats have accepted cuts of more than \$33bn.

Our correspondent Adam Brookes says there is an ideological dimension to the dispute, with the Republicans calling for budget cuts in areas such as abortion and environmental protection that Democrats want to see protected.

Looking tired, Obama spoke late on Thursday after leaving the cross-party meeting, which also included Vice-President Joe Biden.

"My hope is that I'll be able to announce to the American people some time relatively early in the day that a shutdown has been averted, that a deal has been completed," he said.

"There's no certainty yet."

Meanwhile, Boehner and Reid said in a joint statement they would work through the night "to attempt to resolve our remaining differences".

22 Syrian protesters killed

AFP, Damascus

At least 22 protesters were killed yesterday as anti-regime demonstrations and clashes with security forces raged around Syria, the head of the National Organisation for Human Rights said.

"We have the names of 17 demonstrators killed in Daraa, and we have been told of the deaths of two protesters in Homs and three in Harasta," Qurabi told AFP by telephone from Cairo, where he lives in exile.

"We are aware that live bullets, tear gas and another gas that causes fainting were used," he added.

Qurabi's report was more or less in line with other activists, who earlier said 13 protesters had been killed in the flashpoint southern town of Daraa, a number of people wounded in the central industrial city of Homs and also spoke of fighting in Harasta.

Standoff persists in Ivory Coast as crisis deepens

France declares end of Gbagbo era

AFP, Abidjan

Ivory Coast's UN-recognised president Alassane Ouattara enforced a blockade yesterday around his rival Laurent Gbagbo's Abidjan residence, as the United Nations said it had found more than 100 bodies in the west of the country.

Reports of massacres in west Ivory Coast emerged as Ouattara's forces swept through the region on their way to confronting Gbagbo in the economic capital, where the humanitarian situation was dire yesterday, with bodies lying on the streets and shortages of food, water and medicines.

"The human rights team investigating... in west Cote d'Ivoire found more than 100 bodies in the past 24 hours in three locations," Rupert Colville, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said in Geneva.

Ouattara promised in a televised address Thursday that "light will be shed" on reports of massacres and other crimes.

Several hundred people were reportedly massacred in the western town of Duekoue last week, with forces loyal to Gbagbo and Ouattara blaming each other and the

International Criminal Court in The Hague announcing a formal probe.

In Abidjan, residents reported gunfire and explosions. Gbagbo was still holding out in a bunker in the presidential residence after Ouattara's forces failed to remove him in an aborted assault on Wednesday.

French forces later bombarded Gbagbo's positions in a bid to destroy heavy weaponry, and a Western source said the aim was "to hit a maximum of objectives in order to reduce the potential for resistance".

"We have entered the post-Gbagbo era. The end is now in sight," French foreign ministry spokesman Bernard Valero told journalists in Paris. "The Gbagbo era is now over."

In Washington US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and UN chief Ban Ki-moon issued an alert on a potential humanitarian crisis while denouncing attacks on UN peacekeepers.

But Toussaint Alain, an aide to Gbagbo, dismissed the call for reconciliation, calling Ouattara an "imposter" and insisting Gbagbo would not step down.

UN Secretary General Ban urged Gbagbo to quit power before it was "too late" while the Ivory Coast ambassador to the UN said he would be taken and put on trial.

Japan faces 'earthquake sickness'

AFP, Tokyo

An increasing number of people are experiencing motion sickness in Japan due to hundreds of aftershocks since the massive earthquake of March 11, physicians say.

"We are seeing a sharp increase in the number of patients complaining of dizziness," the Mejiro University Clinic, which specialises in ENT conditions, said on its website.

"They are likely experiencing 'earthquake sickness', a condition similar to motion sickness," the hospital's chief physician Hideaki Sakata wrote on his blog.

Residents and rescue workers in the northeastern region, struck by a 9.0-magnitude earthquake on March 11, had felt nearly 400 aftershocks stronger than magnitude 5.0 as of yesterday morning.

Four dead as new tremor hits Japan

Japanese economy in dire straights

AFP, Sendai

A powerful aftershock rocked Japan's tsunami disaster zone, killing at least four and triggering new concerns over nuclear power plants in a region still grappling with an atomic emergency.

Electricity was cut across a huge area of northern Japan, forcing cooling systems at three nuclear plants to switch to emergency power and plunging more than 3.3 million households into darkness late Thursday night.

Officials and reports said four people had been killed by the 7.1 magnitude tremor, which struck off the coast near Sendai -- one of the most powerful to hit Japan since the country's worst post-war disaster four weeks ago.

In the town of Kitakami, northwest of the epicentre, an AFP reporter witnessed queues forming at convenience stores as people tried to stock up anew on food, water and batteries.

"The midnight quake reminded me of the fear I felt a month ago," he said. "I'm fed up with earthquakes. No more quakes, please."

Operator Tohoku Electric Power said some water overflowed from pools housing spent fuel at the Onagawa plant and spilled onto the floor, but that radiation levels remained normal.

A spokesman for the plant's operator, Tohoku-Electric Power Co, said radiation levels were still "far below the level that would require us to report to authorities".

March's record quake has exacted a heavy cost on the world's number three economy, and rippled across industries worldwide as parts supplied from Japan run short.

Japan's economy is in a "severe condition" with no quick recovery in sight following a triple disaster triggered by the March 11 earthquake that has sent service-sector sentiment plummeting the most on record, the government said.

While Japan confronts the economic impact of the disaster, it also faces increasing alarm from its neighbours with China expressing concern at the pumping of radioactive water into the sea from a crippled nuclear plant.

Japan said it would ease shipping restrictions on milk and vegetables from near the Fukushima plant, while New Delhi overturned a blanket ban on importing Japanese produce.

NEWS IN brief

Kenyan deputy premier summoned at ICC court

AFP, The Hague

Kenyan Deputy Prime Minister Uhuru Kenyatta and two co-defendants appeared before the International Criminal Court yesterday, to face charges of crimes against humanity during deadly post-election violence.

Kenyatta, son of Kenya's finding father Jomo Kenyatta, is the highest ranking Kenyan official targeted by the ICC in connection with the violence in the months following President Mwai Kibaki's contested re-election in December 2007 that left some 1,200 dead.

US Secretary of State to visit quake-hit areas of Japan

AFP, Tokyo

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will go to the disaster zone to meet American troops helping with relief efforts when she visits quake-hit Japan next week, Jiji Press said yesterday.

Clinton would be the first foreign dignitary to travel to northeastern Japan, where entire towns and villages were destroyed by the 9.0-magnitude quake and massive tsunami that struck on March 11.

Jiji said Clinton would visit Japan for two days, arriving on March 17, citing government officials. A foreign ministry official told AFP he was not aware of the plans.

Russian security service wants to ban Skype, Gmail

AFP, MOSCOW

The Russian security service has proposed banning Skype, Hotmail and Gmail as their "uncontrolled use" could pose a security threat, a service official said during a government meeting yesterday.

The comments from the head of the service's information and special communication centre Alexander Andreyechkin were disowned by the Kremlin but come amid mounting concern over state meddling in the Internet in Russia.

The Federal Security Service (FSB) is "increasingly concerned" by the mass use of these services, which use foreign-made encryption technology, Andreyechkin said, RIA Novosti agency reported.

1.5m people protests in Colombia

BBC ONLINE

Hundreds of thousands of Colombians have joined street demonstrations yesterday against the policies of President Juan Manuel Santos.

Students and lecturers protesting against proposed university reforms were joined by trade unionists demanding improved conditions.

Colombia's main trade union federation, the CUT, said 1.5m people joined the demonstrations in cities nationwide.

The protests are the biggest since President Santos took office in August.

But otherwise the protests are reported to have been peaceful and good-natured.

Nine killed in deadly day of Gaza violence

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli warplanes and tanks hammered Gaza yesterday, killing nine people in the deadliest day of violence in the Strip since the end of the Gaza war two years ago.

And a truce declared by Palestinian armed groups unravelled even before it could take hold as they fired dozens of mortar rounds and rockets into southern Israel.

The latest deaths came after 24 hours of deadly tit-for-tat violence that began on Thursday when Hamas militants fired an anti-tank missile at an Israeli school bus.

Since the bus attack, Israel has launched more than 20 raids on targets across the enclave. By Friday afternoon, it had killed 14 Gazans -- including seven civilians, among them a 10-year-old boy, five Hamas militants and one policeman.

In the wake of the strikes, the self-declared truce called by Hamas appeared meaningless, with both Hamas and Islamic Jihad claiming mortar and rocket attacks on Israel yesterday.

Two of Friday's deadliest strikes took place around the southern city of Khan Yunis, with one killing two Hamas militants just east of the city.

A second hit a group of civilians slightly farther north, killing a man in his 50s and a woman and her 21-year-old daughter, medics said.

Another missile strike killed one Hamas militant near the northern town of Beit Lahiya.

Fierce fighting kills 50 militants in Pakistan

AFP, Khar

Pakistani officials said yesterday that 50 militants and four soldiers had been killed in a district where the United States this week criticised the army's efforts to defeat Islamist insurgents.

The deaths, which could not be verified independently, were reported in Mohmand, part of Pakistan's lawless tribal belt on the Afghan border singled out for criticism in a White House report flatly rejected by Islamabad.

The United States has branded the northwestern tribal area, which lies outside Pakistani government control, a global headquarters of Al-Qaeda and one of the most dangerous places on Earth.

Local administration official Maqsood Hassan told AFP that militants attacked a security force patrol in the Baizai area of Mohmand, triggering an exchange of fire on Thursday.

"Four soldiers and 10 militants were killed in the attack, which was repulsed," Hassan said.

A separate air offensive targeting militant hideouts in different areas of Mohmand killed 40 rebels on Thursday, Hassan said.

Troops used fighter jets and helicopters to pound rebel positions, he said.

A White House report on Tuesday noted a deterioration in the border areas this year and said Pakistan still had no clear path to triumph over insurgents.

Blast kills Muslim cleric in Kashmir

REUTERS, Srinagar

A bomb went off outside a mosque in Kashmir's main city yesterday, killing a prominent Muslim cleric, police and witnesses said, the first such attack near a religious place in recent years.

Moulana Showkat Shah, chief of the Jammu and Kashmir Jamiat-e-Ahle Hadith which is involved in social work, was entering the mosque to lead Friday prayers when the bomb went off. One worshipper was wounded.

No militant group has claimed responsibility for the attack in Srinagar, the state's summer capital.

Showkat was an associate of Kashmiri separatist leader Yasin Malik.



A protester holds a placard at an anti-nuclear power rally at the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) headquarters in Tokyo yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Culture of impunity' in Pakistan: US

AFP, Washington

A US report said yesterday that Pakistan had a "culture of impunity" on human rights abuses and stated that security forces were operating outside the control of the civilian government.

An annual State Department survey on human rights reported widespread concerns in Pakistan -- a key US war partner -- including violence against women, child labor, corruption and discrimination against religious minorities.

The report said Pakistan had not held responsible for many incidents of human rights violation.

"A failure to credibly investigate allegations, impose disciplinary or accountability measures and consistently prosecute those responsible for abuses contributed to a culture of impunity," the report said.

Yemen's leader rejects Gulf exit plan

AFP, Sanaa

Embattled President Ali Abdullah Saleh rejected an exit plan by Gulf states trying to broker an end to bloody unrest, as tens of thousands of Yemenis turned out yesterday for pro- and anti-regime protests.

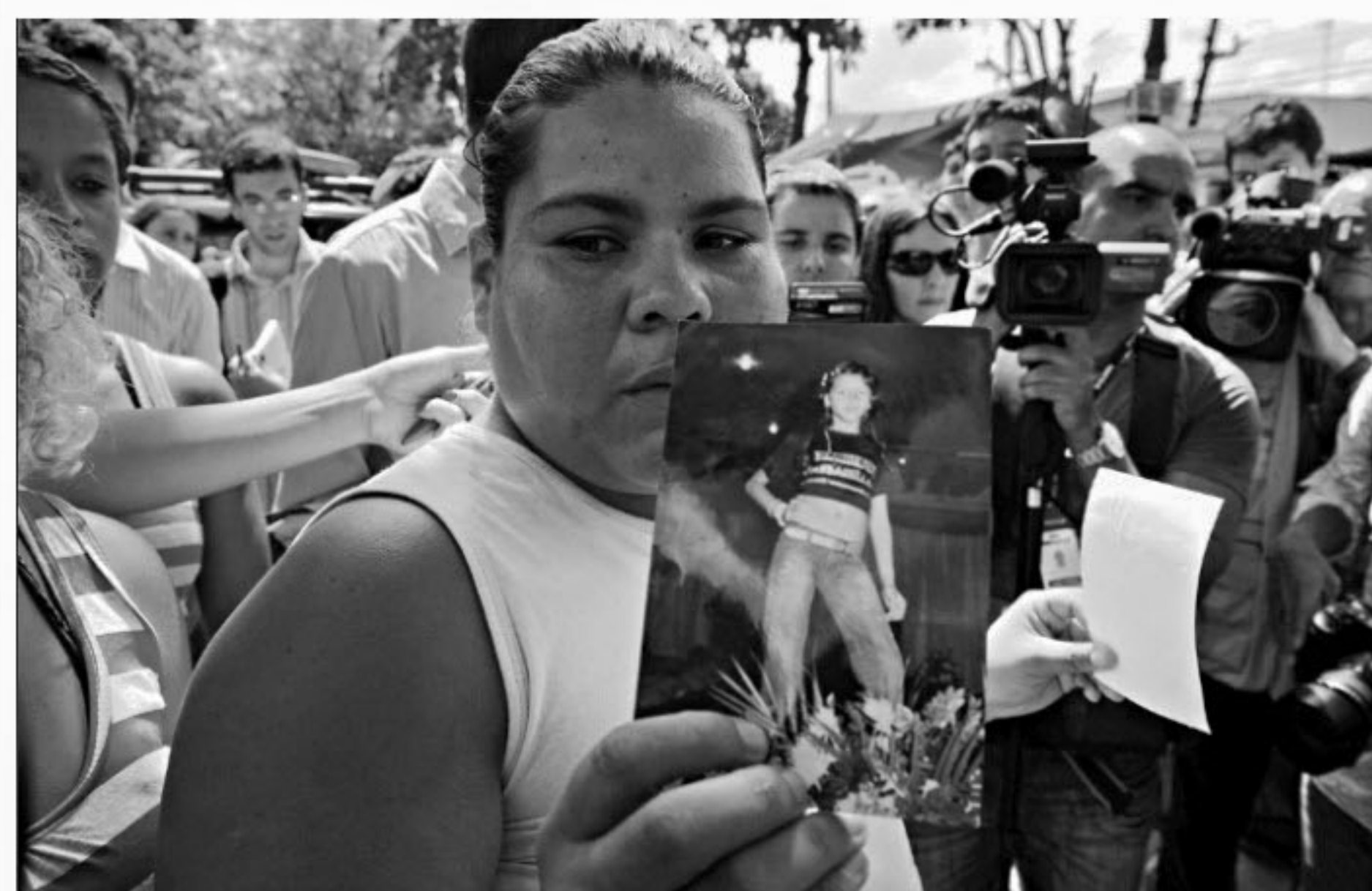
"Our power comes from the power of our great people, not from Qatar, not from anyone else. This is blatant interference in Yemeni affairs," Saleh told a massive crowd of regime supporters in Sanaa.

"We were born free, and we have free will, and they have to respect our wishes. We reject any coup against democracy, the constitution and our freedom," he said.

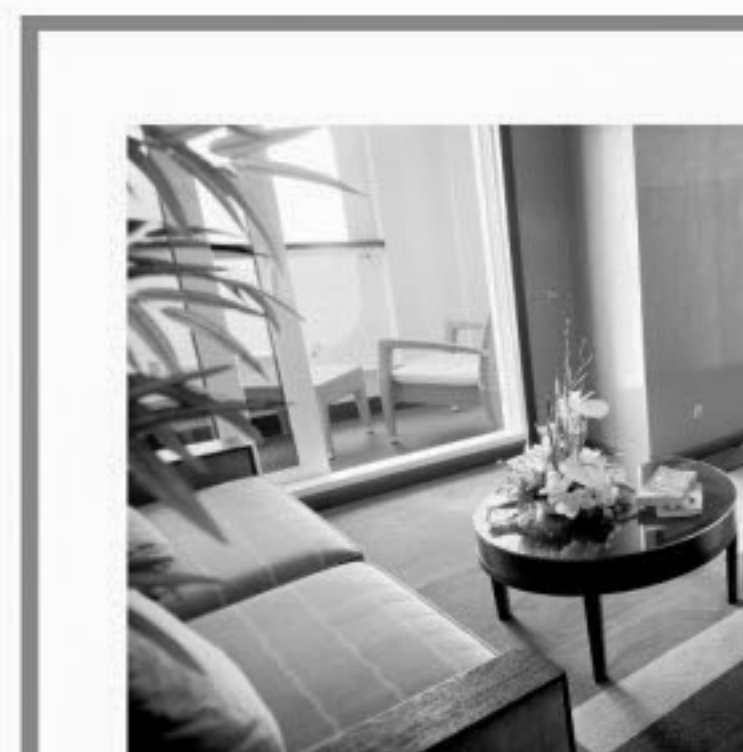
Tens of thousands of Yemenis turned out for rival protests in the capital Sanaa, one supporting the veteran president and the other calling for his departure.

Meanwhile, Yemeni security forces shot dead two protesters and wounded dozens yesterday in the flashpoint city of Ta'ez south of the capital Sanaa, witnesses said.

One witness said the two protesters were killed by gunfire, and that their bodies were taken to Safwa hospital.



Relatives of Patricia, a 15 years old youngster victim of the shooting at a school in the neighbourhood of Realengo, stand outside a hospital in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on Thursday. A man believed to be a former student opened fire in a school in Rio de Janeiro Thursday, killing 12 people including school kids and wounding 22 others before taking his own life, authorities said.



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