

Ivory Coast's Ouattara headquarter attacked

Pro-Gbagbo forces deny allegation

AFP, Abidjan

Ivory Coast strongman Laurent Gbagbo's forces attacked the headquarters of his rival, UN-recognised president Alassane Ouattara, on Saturday in a major escalation of the battle for control of the country.

A UN spokesman and witnesses told AFP the Golf Hotel in Abidjan, where Ouattara has been holed up since disputed November elections, came under attack from about 5:00pm local time.

It was the first time since the start of the west African nation's political crisis that the hotel had come under direct attack.

"The FDS (pro-Gbagbo Defence and Security Forces) are attacking us and we are trying to push them back," one fighter with the pro-Ouattara forces said.

"The firing is very close. Snipers fired bursts from Kalashnikovs. The pro-Gbagbos are attacking us on all fronts," a hotel resident said.

But Gbagbo camp denied carrying out the attack labelling it as an imaginary one.

Gbagbo spokesman Ahoua Don Mello told AFP: "It's absolutely false. There has been no attack on the Golf (hotel). It's an imaginary attack."

A spokesman for the UN mission in Ivory Coast (UNOCI), Hamadoun Toure, said UN peacekeepers had responded after the hotel had come under mortar fire from Gbagbo's forces.

"The Golf Hotel was attacked with mortars," Toure said, adding that the attack had come from south of Abidjan's lagoon and the presidential residence.

"In conformity with our mandate to protect the Golf Hotel where president Ouattara and his team are, the peacekeepers responded by targeting the origin of the firing coming from the other side of the lagoon. We intentionally avoided the residence of president Gbagbo."

The attack broke the calm of what

had been a relatively quiet day in Abidjan, where Ouattara's forces have blockaded Gbagbo inside the presidential residence.

The United Nations had warned on Friday that Gbagbo's forces had gained ground in the commercial capital under cover of a lull in fighting.

UN peacekeeping chief Alain Le Roy said that troops fighting for Gbagbo still had tanks and other heavy weapons and had made advances in the city.

Clashes with Gbagbo's troops had also forced French soldiers to abort an evacuation of diplomatic personnel from Abidjan Saturday.

French forces drew fire during the operation and French helicopters destroyed an armoured vehicle of pro-Gbagbo forces in Abidjan's diplomatic quarter, Burkhard said.

The evacuation had been requested by the "government of an allied country", he added, which he did not identify for security reasons.



PHOTO: AFP

Rebel fighters drive their vehicle behind a destroyed tank in the eastern town of Ajdabiya in Libya yesterday.

RADIOACTIVE WATER SPILL

Japan fails to stop flow

Ruling party faces disaster in local polls

REUTERS, Japan

Japanese nuclear power plant operator TEPCO expects to stop pumping radioactive water into the ocean today, days later than planned, a step that would help ease international concern about the spread of radiation from a smashed nuclear plant.

Prime Minister Naoto Kan's Democratic Party was likely to be punished at yesterday's local polls for his handling of the massive earthquake and tsunami that ravaged Japan's northeastern coast on March 11, killing 13,000 and triggering the world's worst nuclear accident since the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

China and South Korea have also criticised Japan's handling of the nuclear crisis, with Seoul calling it incompetent, reflecting growing international unease over the month-long atomic disaster and the spread of radiation.

Japan is struggling to regain control of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant that was damaged by the magnitude 9 quake and 15 meter tsunami.

The nuclear plant's operator, Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO), has been pumping sea water into the reactors to cool the nuclear core, and then discharging the water, after it has become contaminated, back into the Pacific Ocean.

TEPCO had planned to stop the discharge on Saturday, but work was interrupted by a powerful aftershock late on Thursday. The firm then pushed the target back to Sunday, a goal it failed to meet.

"We are making checks on remaining water, and the final check is scheduled for tomorrow," a company spokesman told a press briefing late yesterday.

TEPCO was forced to start pumping sea water into the power plant after failing to restart the reactors' cooling systems after the quake. It has been pumping in nitrogen to cool the core, but officials say they are unsure of what to do next.

It is also grappling with a major humanitarian and economic crisis and facing a damages bill as high as \$300 billion -- the world's biggest for any natural disaster.

Peruvians to elect new president

BBC ONLINE

Peru is voting for a new president yesterday after one of the most unpredictable and tightly-contested campaigns in recent history.

The front-runner is a left-wing former army officer, Ollanta Humala, but he is not expected to win the 50% required for outright victory.

Four other candidates have a realistic chance of getting through to a run-off.

They include Keiko Fujimori, daughter of the disgraced former President Alberto Fujimori.

Also in contention are former President Alejandro Toledo and former Prime Minister Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, as well as Luis Castaneda, a former mayor of the capital, Lima.

Israel, Palestinians float Gaza ceasefire

18 Palestinians killed in 4 days of airstrikes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian officials floated a ceasefire yesterday to end an upsurge of violence in Gaza, as Israel warned of a still stronger response if rocket fire from the coastal strip continues.

Speaking shortly after a rocket fired from Gaza struck near the southern city of Ashkelon, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that any further attacks would be dealt with harshly.

"If the criminal attacks against the Israeli military and civilians continue, Israel will respond with even more force," he told reporters at the beginning of the weekly cabinet meeting.

But both Israeli and Palestinian officials expressed support for a potential ceasefire, after days of rocket fire and retaliatory Israeli air raids that killed at least 18 people in Gaza.

The flare-up came after an anti-tank missile fired from Gaza hit an Israeli school bus on Thursday, wounding two people, one

Arab League demands no-fly zone over Gaza

AFP, Cairo

Arab League chief Amr Mussa said yesterday the organisation will ask the UN Security Council to impose a no-fly zone over Gaza, which Israel has pounded with air strikes in response to rocket fire.

"If they cease firing, we'll cease firing," he said, reacting to reports that the political wing of the Islamist group Hamas, which controls Gaza, was ready for a truce.

"We will act along the lines of what happens on the ground," added Barak, who indefinitely postponed a trip to Washington as violence escalated around the territory where Israel fought a devastating 22-day conflict in December 2008-January 2009.

It was the first time that an Israeli minister had floated the possibility of a ceasefire since deadly clashes with the Palestinians broke out.

Hamas and other armed groups in Gaza had previously announced a unilateral truce that unravelled before it had a chance to take hold, with militants firing dozens of rockets and mortar rounds into southern Israel.

Thursday.

Mubarak to be quizzed over corruption

Army to replace Mubarak-era governors

AGENCIES

Former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has been summoned by the state prosecutor for questioning over alleged corruption and killings of protesters.

The announcement came shortly after Mubarak made his first statement since he was ousted two months ago, denying accusations of corruption.

The former leader said he had the right to defend his reputation and denied having any assets in foreign countries.

Mubarak's sons Gamal and Alaa have been summoned for questioning as well.

Meanwhile, Egypt's interim military government has said it will remove some provincial governors appointed by former President Hosni Mubarak.

The move is an apparent concession to protesters who want Mubarak and his allies tried for corruption.

The prosecutor-general said Mubarak's statement, broadcast on al-Arabiya TV, would not affect the inquiry.

On Friday, Cairo's Tahrir Square once again filled with demonstrators calling for Mubarak and his family to be tried for corruption.

At least one person was killed and dozens were injured when troops moved in to clear the square.

Dozens shot in Yemen

APP, Sanaa

At least one anti-regime protester was killed and dozens shot in the cities of Taez and Sanaa.

Three other people were killed, including an intelligence officer and a soldier, in Abyan province, an Al-Qaeda stronghold in southern Yemen.

The protester died of a gunshot wound after security forces using live fire hit dozens of demonstrators in overnight clashes in Sanaa and Taez, a city to the south of the capital, medics said.

More than 40 protesters were wounded by live gunfire in clashes between security forces and demonstrators calling for President Ali Abdullah Saleh's ouster that raged deep into Saturday night, medics said.

Energy crisis leaves Nepal in the dark

APP, Kathmandu

By the light of a single candle Shankar Prasad Bhandari strains his eyes as he tries to count out the correct change for a customer in his blacked out shop on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

Rolling 14-hour power cuts, triggered by a growing energy crisis, mean that much of life in the Nepalese capital and across the Himalayan nation functions by candlelight these days.

The impact can be seen -- or squinted at -- everywhere. Television stations broadcast evening news programmes from studios in semi-darkness, while schoolchildren face a daily race with the sunset to complete their homework.

The economic cost has been enormous, with industries forced to reduce operations and small businessmen such as Bhandari closing their shops before what used to be the profitable evening shopping rush.

"I'm losing business and that's making it hard to support my family," the 42-year-old told AFP.

Nepal generates a measly 643 megawatts of electricity a year -- most of it



A Nepalese news presenter at a studio in Kathmandu.

from antiquated hydroelectric plants.

That is barely half of the national requirement and imports from India fail miserably to make up the shortfall.

Compounding the sense of public frustration is the fact that Nepal should, according to most experts, be an energy-producing powerhouse.

Feasibility studies suggest the country's vast mountain river system has the potential to generate up to 83,000 megawatts of hydropower.

But investment in infrastructure has been almost non-existent, largely due to a 10-year civil war between the government and Maoist rebels that only ended in 2006.

Deadly clashes erupt in Syria's coastal city

APP, Nicosia

Syrian security forces opened fire in the coastal town of Banias yesterday, killing some people and wounding others, witnesses told AFP.

"Syrian security forces have been firing for the last two hours in the neighbourhood of Ras al-Nabie where there is the Al-Rahman mosque," a focal point of demonstrations, a witness told AFP, saying four were wounded.

Another witness reported "many dead and wounded" without providing any numbers.

Five people had already been wounded in a drive-by shooting carried out by plainclothes agents of the Syrian government in the Mediterranean coastal town, according to a witness.

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATION China criticises US preaching

BBC ONLINE

China has told the US to stop preaching on human rights, after the state department's annual report on the issue criticised China.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said the US should concentrate on its own rights issues and stop interfering.

Chinese authorities have launched a major crackdown on dissent recently.

Unveiling the report, US officials expressed particular concern over the recent arrest of the artist Ai Weiwei, an outspoken critic of the government.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also highlighted reports of other intellectuals and activists being "arbitrarily detained" in recent weeks.

Mr Hong said China was happy to talk about rights "on the basis of equality and mutual respect", but added that Beijing "resolutely opposes" meddling in other country's affairs.

"We advise the US side to reflect on its own human rights issues and not to position itself as a preacher of human rights," he said. "[The US should] stop using the issue of human rights reports to interfere in other countries' internal affairs."

The state department's annual report criticising China, followed swiftly by a tough riposte from Beijing, is now a well-established diplomatic ritual.

But analysts say this year's tit-for-tat exchange has been sharpened by Beijing's crackdown on dissent.

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