

LIBYA CONFLICT

Gaddafi forces shell town after he accepts peace plan

REUTERS, Benghazi

Forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi shelled the besieged town of Misrata yesterday after the African Union said he had accepted a plan to end Libya's civil war.

Al Jazeera television quoted a rebel spokesman as saying five people died and 20 were wounded in Misrata, a lone rebel bastion in western Libya, which has been under siege for more than six weeks.

Rebels in Misrata told Reuters Gaddafi's forces fired Russian-made Grad rockets into the city, where conditions for civilians are said to be desperate.

The insurgents said they would accept no plan that allowed Gaddafi to stay in power and prepared to advance on the eastern front after repelling a major government assault on Sunday against their town of Ajdabiyah.

Prospects for a ceasefire looked remote.

South African President Jacob Zuma, head of an AU peace mission,

said early on yesterday that Gaddafi had accepted a peace "road map," including a ceasefire, after talks in Tripoli.

A spokesman in the rebel capital of Benghazi said the opposition would look at the plan but Gaddafi must end his 41-year rule.

"The Libyan people have made it very clear that Gaddafi must step down, but we will consider the proposal once we have more details, and respond," spokesman Mustafa Gheriani told Reuters.

Libyan officials have repeatedly said that Gaddafi, who holds no official state position, will not quit.

The AU delegation went to Benghazi to confer with rebel leaders yesterday and was met by more than 2,000 demonstrators holding banners reading: "African Union take Gaddafi with you" and "Gaddafi has committed genocide."

Officials from Nato, which is bombing Libyan government armor under a United Nations mandate to protect civilians, said they took note of the AU proposal but the alliance would continue

operations while civilians were at risk.

"It does not appear that this indication of a peace deal has any substance at this point," said one Nato official in reference to the shelling of Misrata.

The African Union does not have a good track record in brokering peace deals, having failed recently to end conflict or disputes in Somalia, Madagascar and Ivory Coast.

"The issue of Gaddafi stepping down from any political position is a closed issue ... Muammar Gaddafi does not hold a position of power," Abdel Monem al-Lamoushi, a government spokesman, told Al Arabiya television.

"No one has the right to send Muammar Gaddafi into exile out of the land of his forefathers. This man will not leave Libya."

At the front outside the eastern rebel town of Ajdabiyah, rebels buried the charred bodies of Gaddafi troops killed in air strikes and said they had been ordered to wait until noon to advance because new Nato bombing was expected.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Rebel fighters look for the remains of those who were killed by what they said was a Nato airstrike in the western gate of Ajdabiyah yesterday.

NEWS IN

brief

Uganda police arrest opposition leader

AFP, Kampala

Ugandan police yesterday arrested opposition leader Kizza Besigye as he tried to stage a protest in Kampala, police spokeswoman Judith Nabakooba told AFP.

"He was arrested after blocking a road leading into Kampala," she said. "Police tried to move him on but he resisted."

"Teargas was used to disperse a rowdy crowd that was throwing stones," the spokeswoman added.

Besigye, who was President Yoweri Museveni's main challenger in February 18 presidential elections he claims were rigged, had called for a "walk-to-work"

Gbagbo to be put on trial

Says UN envoy

AFP, United Nations

Ivory Coast strongman Laurent Gbagbo is "alive and well" after his detention yesterday and will now be put on trial, the country's UN envoy Youssoufou Bamba said.

"Mr Gbagbo was arrested, he is alive and well and he will be brought to justice for the crimes he has committed," the envoy said.

Forces loyal to internationally recognized president Alassane Ouattara detained Gbagbo at his bunker in Abidjan yesterday.

"It was carried out swiftly and professionally," Bamba said, insisting that only Ivory Coast forces were

Berlusconi returns to dock, laughs off sex crime trial

AFP, Milan

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi yesterday accused Italy's judges of being out to get him and laughed off his ongoing sex crime trial as he returned to court on fraud charges in a separate trial.

"The prosecutors are working against the country," Berlusconi told reporters in the courtroom, as some 200 supporters outside held up placards reading "Silvio Resist!" and clutched blue balloons from his People of Freedom party.

He said there should be an overhaul of Italy's justice system to prevent it becoming "a weapon of political struggle" -- after his government earlier this year proposed reforms seen as curbing the power of

Hamas can't set terms of truce

Says Israeli foreign minister

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel must not let the Gaza Strip's Islamist Hamas rulers dictate terms of a ceasefire after a recent escalation of fighting, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman said yesterday.

Calm returned to Gaza Strip and southern Israel overnight after four days of cross-border violence in which 19 Palestinians died, with United Nations and Egyptian mediators having helped to negotiate a truce.

Lieberman, who leads the ultranationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party, a main coalition partner in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government, told Israel Radio that Hamas would use any lull to

Gunfight in Pakistan kills four: police

AFP, Peshawar

Three militants and a policeman were killed in a pre-dawn gunfight in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar yesterday, police said.

More than 4,200 people have been killed across Pakistan in attacks blamed on Taliban and other Islamist extremist networks, concentrated in the northwest, since government troops stormed a radical mosque in Islamabad in 2007.

Yesterday's clashes took place in the wealthy suburb of Hayatabad when a group of five militants attacked a police patrol with small machine guns

SYRIA UNREST

Students rally for slain protesters

AFP, Damascus

Syrian students rallied in Damascus yesterday to express solidarity with protesters killed over the weekend, as the army moved in on the flashpoint town of Baniyas.

France and Germany, meanwhile, slammed the deadly assaults by security forces on anti-regime protesters and called on President Bashar al-Assad to make good on his promises of reform.

"Students rallied in solidarity with the victims of Daraa and Baniyas, chanting 'We will sacrifice our soul and blood for you martyrs'," a human rights activist told AFP.

He was referring to the southern town of Daraa, a protest hub where rights groups say 26 people were killed on Friday, and the northern coastal town of Baniyas, where a bloody weekend crackdown left four civilians dead, according to witnesses.

A YouTube video of the Damascus rally showed students chanting "Allah, Freedom and Syria, only!", a recurring slogan of anti-regime protests demanding political reforms and more freedom.

They also chanted "One, one one... the Syrian people are one!", in an apparent bid to exorcise the ghost of sectarian strife raised by authorities as the protests death toll rises.

Abdel-Karim Rihawi, president of the Syrian League for the Defence of Human Rights, told AFP some demonstrators chanted pro-regime slogans before security forces intervened.

US set to appoint envoy to revive Myanmar policy

AP, Washington

President Barack Obama plans to name a special envoy to Myanmar who is expected to seek more help from the repressive government's neighbours in pressing for democratic reform. Building agreement on the best way to proceed will be tricky.

Southeast Asian nations have called for lifting sanctions, which the US still opposes, while regional powers India and China have their own strategic relationships with Myanmar and have shown little appetite for meddling in its internal affairs.

To be confirmed by the Senate, Derek Mitchell, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific security affairs, probably will have to voice support for sanctions and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. That could make it tougher for the envoy to negotiate with Myanmar's dominant military once he is in the job, said David Steinberg, a Myanmar expert at Georgetown University.

Mitchell, a China scholar with long experience in Asia, would not comment on his

nomination, which is expected within a week and would require him to give up his job at the Pentagon.

An article he co-authored in Foreign Policy magazine in 2007, when he was director for Asia strategy at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies think tank, offers clues on how he'd like to operate as envoy.

The article suggested bringing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, China, India, Japan and the United States together in developing a road map that would lay out benefits if Myanmar pursued true political reform and national reconciliation.

In the years since the article was written, Myanmar has launched another bloody crackdown on democracy protesters, continued brutal military campaigns against ethnic minorities and seen thousands flee across its borders. US officials also suspect Myanmar has nuclear ambitions and imported some Scud missiles from North Korea, which Myanmar's neighbours would be worried about, too.

France bans Muslim full-face veil

AFP, Paris

Police in France, home to Europe's biggest Muslim population, arrested two protesters wearing niqab veils yesterday after a ban on full-face coverings went into effect.

The women, part of a demonstration that erupted in front of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, were detained for taking part in an unauthorised protest rather than for wearing their veils.

But, in theory at least, French officials can now slap fines on Muslim women who refuse orders to expose their faces when in public.

"Today was not about arresting people because of wearing the veil. It was for not having respected the requirement to declare a demonstration," said police spokesman Alexis Marsan.

RADIATION SPILLAGE

Japan expands evacuation zone as new quake strikes

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan on yesterday expanded the evacuation zone around its crippled nuclear plant because of high levels of accumulated radiation, as a strong aftershock rattled the area one month after a quake and tsunami sparked the worst nuclear crisis since Chernobyl.

A magnitude 7.1 tremor shook buildings in Tokyo and a wide swathe of eastern Japan yesterday evening, triggering a small tsunami alert. NHK state television said it caused the off-site power supply for two damaged reactors to shut down.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the aftershock struck 38 km (24 miles) west of the city of Iwaki, at a depth of 13 km (8 miles).

Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepco), which operates the plant, said workers had stopped pouring cooling water on reactors No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3 at Fukushima.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yukio Edano said villages and towns outside the 20 km (12 mile) evacuation zone that have had more accumulated radiation would be evacuated.

Pressure mounts for Mubarak trial

AFP, Cairo

Two months after he was ousted, president Hosni Mubarak was facing yesterday increasing pressure to be brought to justice over alleged corruption and violence against protesters.

On Sunday, the public prosecutor said Mubarak and his two sons would be questioned, after the broadcast of an audio tape in which the former president defended his reputation, breaking a two-month silence.

Interior Minister Mansur Essawy said "all measures would be taken to ensure the safety of Mubarak and his sons" Alaa and Gamal when they go in for questioning, but warned they could be arrested if they fail to show up.

"If the former president and his two sons refuse to appear before the prosecution at the date to be set, the public prosecutor will be notified and legal measures



will be taken," Essawy told the official MENA news agency late on Sunday.

Mubarak and his sons will be questioned about allegations and legal complaints that they were "connected to the crimes of assault against protesters, leading to deaths and injuries," MENA said.

The ousted president would also be quizzed on allegations of graft, it added.

An estimated 800 people were killed in clashes with police and the former president's supporters during the protests that erupted on January 25.

In an audio message aired on pan-Arab television network Al-Arabiya, the 82-year-old Mubarak complained he was the victim of a smear campaign.

He pledged his assistance in a probe of his family's foreign assets, but his defiance in threatening lawsuits against the media angered Egyptians who have been pressing for his trial.

ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN KERALA

Rahul takes swipe at Marxist leader over age

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A row over age between Rahul Gandhi, the scion of India's Nehru-Gandhi family, and VS Achuthanandan, the octogenarian Marxist leader, has spiced up the campaign for elections to a new legislative assembly in the southern Indian state of Kerala.

It was Rahul, 40, who began it all by having a dig at 87-year-old Achuthanandan, Kerala chief minister whose party CPI(M) seeks to retain power amid a challenge from main rival Congress party, by telling an election meeting in the state on Saturday that if the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front is re-elected in the polls, Kerala would have a 93-year-old head of a state government.

On Sunday, Achuthanandan, addressing an election meeting, hit back by having a swipe at Rahul, the Congress general secretary, terming the latter "Amul Baby", the reference being an advertisement of a popular milk brand.

"Everyone knows Rahul Gandhi is an Amul Baby and he has fielded Amul babies in some constituencies," said Achuthanandan.

Achuthanandan recalled he started his political career at the age of 16 and quoted a poem in his mother tongue Malayalam that said "grey hair was not the sign of my growing age, neither the young age proof of my youth. Not bowing my head before the bourgeoisie is my youth."



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani paramilitary ranger officials escort released Pakistani prisoners after the handover by Indian authorities at The Wagah Border Post yesterday.