

Doha meeting reveals divisions on Libya

REUTERS, Doha/tripoli

Britain pressured other Nato members to step up ground attacks in Libya yesterday but cracks appeared in the alliance as foreign ministers met in Qatar to try to break the deadlock in the civil war.

Nato divisions surfaced at the international "contact group" meeting, not only over arming the rebels and increasing air strikes but also on creating a fund from frozen Libyan assets to help the opposition trying to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon underlined the humanitarian disaster caused by the war, telling the meeting that up to 3.6 million people, or more than half the population, could need assistance.

Paris and London are increasingly frustrated that air strikes have neither tipped the balance of the war in favour of rebels trying to end Muammar Gaddafi's 41-year rule nor even ended devastating shelling of the besieged city of Misrata.

Libyan state television said yesterday that Nato planes had bombed Misrata's main Tripoli street, scene of repeated battles between rebels and government troops. It said people were killed, without giving details.

It said alliance planes also attacked Gaddafi's birthplace of Sirte, east of Misrata, and Aziziyah, south of Tripoli.

British Foreign Minister William Hague told Reuters that other coalition aircraft must join ground attacks.

Nato said it destroyed 16 tanks, an anti-aircraft gun and a pickup truck in operations on Tuesday.

Rebels attending the Doha meeting said they expected more support, saying Nato was using "minimum" power and needed to step up attacks on Gaddafi's heavy weapons.

Britain and France, western Europe's two main military powers, are delivering most of the air strikes on Gaddafi's armour since President Barack Obama ordered US forces to take a back seat.

Other Nato countries are either

keeping their distance from the campaign or enforcing a no-fly zone but not bombing.

A wide gap appeared at once between Nato hawks and doves.

In another disagreement, German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle voiced reservations about an Italian call to create a fund from frozen assets to aid the rebels. "The question is, is it legal? The answer is we don't know," he said.

Britain's Hague called for a temporary financial mechanism to fund rebel government in the eastern territory they control. The rebels said they needed \$1.5 billion in aid for civilians.

The "contact group" agreed to meet again in Italy in the first week of May to discuss Libya's future, an Italian Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

A spokesman for the rebel national council at the Doha talks said the coalition was considering supplying arms which should go to soldiers who have defected from the army. The rebels only had "primitive weapons" taken from Gaddafi's troops, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

A Libyan rebel gestures as he sits behind a heavy machinegun, near the western gate of the town of Ajdabiya, yesterday. Italy and Qatar saying they need arms to defend themselves and Britain urging regional aid in a summit on Libya recognising their need.

Egypt to revise all gas deals

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's prime minister has asked for the revision off all contracts to supply gas abroad, including to Israel, the official news agency MENA reported yesterday.

Prime Minister Essam Sharraf "has directed the revision and review of all gas contracts Egypt agreed to with all countries, including Jordan and Israel," the report said.

The contracts are to be revisited so the gas "would be sold with deserved prices that achieve the highest returns for Egypt," it added.

The prime minister is to meet Jordanian energy minister Khaled Tuqan on Thursday to discuss the deal with his country, MENA said, adding the revisions could bring Egypt an extra three to four billion dollars in revenue.

NEWS IN

brief

French aid plane lands in Libya rebel stronghold

AFP, Benghazi

A French government plane carrying 10 tonnes of medical supplies landed yesterday in the rebel stronghold of Benghazi, an AFP correspondent said.

The plane, an Airbus, landed at Benghazi airport also carrying members of non-governmental organisations, the first such French-chartered aid plane to reach the rebel stronghold.

It touched down as an international conference on the Libyan crisis opened in the Qatari capital, Doha,

Austrian finance minister announces resignation

AFP, Vienna

Austrian Finance Minister and deputy chancellor Josef Proell announced his resignation yesterday for health reasons.

"I am stepping down from all political offices," Proell told a hastily-convened news conference in the capital Vienna.

"My decision is not against politics, but for my

Fourth Bahraini dies in custody, HRW urges probe

AFP, Dubai

A fourth detainee has died in Bahraini custody, the country's Shiite opposition said yesterday, as Human Rights Watch urged the Gulf kingdom to investigate the deaths of arrested activists.

"The death of businessman Karim Fakhrawi in mysterious circumstances in prison has been confirmed," the main Shiite opposition group, Al-Wefaq, said on its Facebook page.

Al-Wefaq said the death of Fawakhri, arrested on April 3, was the fourth since the Sunni-ruled country, backed by forces from Gulf neighbours, crushed Shiite-led street protests in mid-March.

Turkey attacks France for face veil ban

REUTERS, Strasbourg

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan accused France of violating the freedom of religion yesterday after Paris began enforcing a law barring Muslim women from wearing full face veils in public.

Erdogan told the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that Turkey was the only Muslim country that had copied the French law on secularism.

"It's quite ironic to see that secularism is today under debate in Europe and is undermining certain freedoms," he said.

"Today in France, there is no respect for individual religious freedom," he said.

Gbagbo under house arrest in tense Ivory Coast

AFP, Abidjan

Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara ordered ousted rival Laurent Gbagbo to be held under house arrest as France said yesterday its gendarmes would patrol Abidjan's lawless streets.

Rights group Amnesty International warned that Gbagbo's supporters were at risk of violent reprisals following his arrest on Monday for having stubbornly refused to admit defeat to Ouattara in a November presidential election.

While both Ouattara and Gbagbo have called for fighters to lay down arms to help the formerly wealthy west African nation get back on its feet, Amnesty warned that supporters of the former regime faced deadly reprisals.

Armed men, some wearing military uniforms, have been conducting house-to-house searches in neighbourhoods, includ-

ing Yopougon and Koumassi, where supporters of Gbagbo are living, Amnesty said.

One eyewitness told Amnesty how a policeman belonging to Gbagbo's ethnic group was taken from his house on Tuesday and shot dead at point blank range.

Sporadic clashes have erupted in Abidjan districts still loyal to Gbagbo and with looting rife in others after 10 days of bitter fighting.

French Defence Minister Gerard Longuet said French gendarmes would patrol the city's streets.

"Ivorian and French gendarmes will patrol Abidjan to show that the rule of law is being established," Longuet told parliament, noting that senior police and military leaders had pledged allegiance to Ouattara.

The Licorne force of former colonial master France is deployed in the country to support United Nations peacekeepers, with a mandate to protect foreigners, while both forces helped Ouattara's fighters capture Gbagbo.

2,000-yearold nails linked to crucifixion

AFP, Jerusalem

Two Roman nails dating back 2000 years, found in the burial cave of the Jewish high priest who handed Jesus over to the Romans, may be linked to the crucifixion, an Israeli filmmaker has claimed.

The gnarled bits of iron, which measure around three inches each, were shown to reporters in Jerusalem on Tuesday at the premier of a television documentary series examining the question of whether they could have been the nails used to crucify Jesus.

The two nails were first found in Jerusalem 20 years ago when archaeologists uncovered a family tomb believed to be that of Caiaphas, the high priest who handed Jesus over to the Romans to be crucified.

One nail was found inside one of 12 limestone coffins found inside the cave, while the second was lying on the floor of the tomb.

The length of the nails and the fact they were bent at one end were both consistent with the crucifixion of hands, he said.

Since Caiaphas is only associated with one crucifixion -- that of Jesus -- the assumption is that these were the nails used, Jacobovici said.



"If these were found in any other tomb, we would not be here today," said the documentary maker.

Asked why the man who, according to the Gospels, sent Jesus to his death would want to be buried with the nails that ended his enemy's life, Jacobovici suggested that Caiaphas may have been racked with guilt over his decision.

An alternative theory explored in the documentary is that he may have been a secret follower of Jesus who did not realise that handing him over to the Romans would result in his death.

Historical record points to tens of thousands of people being crucified by the Romans but until now, there has only been one piece of archaeological evidence to support it -- a fossilised heel bone punctured by an iron nail which was found in Jerusalem in 1968.

Japan still working on plan to end nuke crisis

REUTERS, Tokyo

The operator of Japan's crippled nuclear plant said yesterday it was still working on a detailed plan to end the country's nuclear crisis a month after it began, as tests showed radiation levels in the sea near the complex had spiked.

Engineers moved a step closer to emptying highly radioactive water from one of the six crippled reactors, which would allow them to start repairing the cooling system crucial to regaining control of the reactors.

Japan's nuclear safety agency said the latest tests showed radiation nearly doubled last week, to 23 times above legal limits, in the sea off Minamisoma city near the plant.

Radiation in Tokyo, 240 km (150 miles) from the plant, had fallen to pre-disaster levels Tuesday, the science ministry said late

yesterday.

A series of strong aftershocks this week has rattled eastern Japan, slowing the recovery effort at the Fukushima Daiichi plant due to temporary evacuations of workers and power outages.

The beleaguered president of operator Tokyo Electric Power Co (TEPCO) said the situation at the nuclear plant, wrecked by a 15-meter tsunami on March 11, had stabilized.

But TEPCO president Masataka Shimizu said the firm was still preparing a blueprint to end the crisis, now rated on a par with the world's worst nuclear accident, the 1986 Chernobyl disaster.

"As instructed by Prime Minister Kan we are working out the specific details of how to handle the situation so they can be disclosed as soon as possible," a relaxed-looking Shimizu told a news conference in Tokyo.

Suspects confess to Belarus blast

AFP, Minsk

Suspects detained over the Minsk bombing have confessed to carrying out the attack, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko announced yesterday, ordering the interrogation of opposition figures.

"The crime was solved at 5:00 am. KGB officers and the police needed one day to complete a superb operation and detain the perpetrators without noise and chatter," he said. The security service is still called the KGB in Belarus.

"Today at 5:00 am, they confessed," he said in televised comments.

Violence killed 7 in Yemen's capital

AFP, Sanaa

At least seven people were killed including four policemen who clashed with a dissident army unit, as hundreds of thousands of anti-regime protesters rallied across Yemen on Wednesday.

"Police attacked an army checkpoint in Jawlat Amran," a suburb in northern Sanaa, "killing one officer and wounding two soldiers," a military official told AFP.

The four policemen died as the security forces traded fire with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades in the incident late on Tuesday, he said.

The targeted army unit operates under the commander of northwest Yemen's military region, General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, who has sided with the protesters and accused regime supporters of trying to assassinate him, the official said.

In the south of the country, soldiers on Wednesday shot dead two anti-regime protesters and wounded nine others in different sectors of the port city of Aden, medics and witnesses said.

They said the army opened fire as protesters tried to set up roadblocks to enforce a partial general strike, which demonstrators have vowed to stage in Aden every Saturday and Wednesday until President Ali Abdullah Saleh's fall.

They were the first deaths for exactly a month in the city, the site of deadly protests between late February and early March.

Aden's security chief General Ghazi Ahmed Ali said: "Armed groups from the Common Forum (an alliance of parliamentary groups) and the (secessionist) Southern Movement blocked the roads and tried to break into police stations."

Five civilians and four policemen were wounded in an attack on a station in the district of Al-Mansura, he said.

Protests swept provinces across Yemen on Wednesday in response to calls by the Youth for Change, a coalition of groups that has led anti-Saleh demonstrations since late January.

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