

Libyan rebels capture border post with Tunisia

Nato denies civilian killing charge

AFP, Misrata

Libyan rebels yesterday overran a post on the Tunisian border, marking their first advance in weeks against Muammar Gaddafi's forces as Nato warned civilians to stand clear of its bombing blitz.

The capture of the Wazin border post was cheered by several hundred rebels who raised the flag of the Libyan monarchy after some 150 to 200 pro-Gaddafi soldiers abandoned their weapons and fled into Tunisia.

Some insurgents paraded in the bucket of a bulldozer and dozens of rebel vehicles were present at the border post, located about 200 south of the main Tunisian-Libyan crossing at Ras Jdir.

Rebels have been pinned back by government troops for more than three weeks in the east of the country and have suffered heavy losses in Misrata, which has been pounded for more than six weeks in fighting which a doctor said had claimed at least 1,000 lives.

Among the latest to die in Misrata,

some 215 kilometres west of Tripoli, were 41-year-old Tim Hetherington, an Oscar-nominated British film director and war photographer, and award-winning US photographer Chris Hondros, also 41.

Nato warned civilians to avoid getting close to Gaddafi's troops, as it pursues a UN mandate to protect non-combatants while enforcing a no-fly zone over Libya.

"Our planners and pilots go to very great lengths to ensure we do all we can to reduce the risk to civilians when we attack targets, but the risk cannot be reduced to zero," the general in charge of Nato's operations said in a statement from Brussels.

"Civilians can assist Nato by distancing themselves from Gaddafi regime forces and equipment whenever possible," Lieutenant-General Charles Bouchard said.

"Doing this will allow Nato to strike those forces and equipment with greater success and with the minimum risk to civilians," the statement said.

Nato's warning came as Libyan official media reported seven civilians killed and 18 wounded in an alliance air raid that targeted the southwestern Tripoli suburb late on Wednesday.

Nato said yesterday however it had no indications that its raid on the suburb killed civilians, saying the target was a command and control bunker in a military compound.

In Paris, Libyan rebel leader Mustafa Abdel Jalil said the insurgents expect "major strikes by the coalition" against Gaddafi's forces.

"We are sure that Gaddafi will be overthrown sooner or later, but we want it to be as soon as possible," Jalil told French TV Wednesday after meeting with French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the United States would not join its allies in sending military advisers to aid the rebels.

"There is a desire to help them be more organised and we support that. We're not participating in it, but we support it," she said on PBS.



PHOTO: AFP

A Libyan female member of Muammar Gaddafi's forces guards a checkpoint at a street in Tripoli yesterday.

Syria lifts emergency rule

AFP, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad yesterday issued decrees ending nearly five decades of emergency law, abolishing state security courts and allowing citizens to protest peacefully, state television reported.

The announcements made successively in new flashes on state television said Assad was ending the emergency law imposed when the ruling Baath Party seized power in 1963 as well as the state security courts.

A third decree said citizens would be granted "the right to peacefully demonstrate" and noted that this is one of the "basic human rights guaranteed by the Syrian constitution."

The decree issued by Assad would "regulate" that right to demonstrate.

The moves are aimed at placating more than a month of unprecedented protests across Syria.

Australia PM vows to back disaster-hit Japan

Restriction imposed around nuclear plant

AFP, Tokyo

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday vowed to help Japan recover from last month's earthquake and tsunami by securing natural resources and energy supplies for the Asian country.

Gillard arrived in Tokyo late Wednesday on a four-day visit to hold talks with her Japanese counterpart Naoto Kan and visit northeastern Japan, hit by the March 11 disaster that has left more than 27,000 people dead or missing.

"Australia will do anything it can to assist during this very difficult period," Gillard said at a news conference after her talks with Kan. Gillard said she told Kan Australia "will continue to be a reliable supply of energy into the future."

"Particularly now the people in Japan need new energy sources because of the nuclear emergency."

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Naoto Kan banned people from going within 20 kilometres of the tsunami-hit Fukushima

nuclear plant, which has been leaking radiation for nearly six weeks.

The ban, which gives legal weight to an existing exclusion zone, comes after police found more than 60 families living in the area and residents returning to their abandoned homes to collect belongings.

The ban to be enforced from midnight, on a visit to Fukushima prefecture, where thousands now live in evacuation shelters, almost six weeks after the March 11 quake.

Resource-poor Japan is reliant on energy imports and nuclear power to produce electricity but power generation has been hit by the disaster which damaged several atomic plants. Australia is also a key supplier of uranium.

Meanwhile, a strong earthquake of magnitude 6.0 hit eastern Japan late yesterday, rattling buildings in Tokyo but appearing to cause no damage and there was no tsunami warning.

The tremor struck at a depth of 70 kilometres, off Chiba prefecture, at 10:37 pm, the Japan Meteorological Agency said.

Departure plan offered to Yemen president

AFP, Sanaa

A plan from Gulf mediators calls for embattled Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to quit 30 days after a national unity government is formed, a government official said yesterday.

The Gulf Cooperation Council plan urges "the formation of a national unity government with 50 percent held by the ruling party, 40 percent by the opposition and 10 percent by other parties," the official said.

"The president would submit his resignation to parliament within 30 days," with new presidential elections within two months after the president's resignation.

Saleh has since January faced protests calling for his ouster, in which more than 130 people have been killed.

UN bid won't create Palestinian state: Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

A Palestinian bid for United Nations recognition is a double-edged sword that will neither bring about the creation of a state nor end the conflict, a senior Israeli minister has warned.

In an interview with AFP, Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor said the Palestinian strategy of avoiding negotiations in favour of achieving statehood via the UN would achieve little on the ground and only exacerbate the conflict.

"They have a new strategy -- no terror, building a state bottom up with economic growth, and, at the same time, they want to replace negotiations with pressure on Israel, to replace an agreement with a UN resolution," he said.

The strategy, which comes as talks remain in deep freeze over the issue of Israeli settlements, has caused deep concern in Israel, with Defence Minister Ehud Barak warning it would create a "diplomatic tsunami" against the Jewish state.

The Palestinians first issued a declaration of independence in November 1988 and 130 countries have since recognised their state

on the 1967 borders, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas has said.

And many more look set to do so in September -- including four of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, senior negotiator Nabil Shaath told AFP in an interview at the weekend.

Every attempt of recognising Palestine has been approved by 14 out of 15 of the members, but vetoed by the United States.

This time, if the Americans veto the motion, the issue will be referred to the UN General Assembly under a "Uniting for Peace" resolution which allows the 192-member body to take binding decisions, he explained.

Meridor said the strategy could leave Israel facing even greater international isolation but that it would not do the Palestinians much good either.

"It is not good for us," he said. "But will it create a state? No, he said.

"We will still need to sit down and decide on a border and other things. Is it going to be way to end the conflict? No. It's going to add more anger and more friction to the conflict."

But he acknowledged the Palestinians were unlikely to change course and return to talks.

France mulls recognising Palestine

AFP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy hosted Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas in Paris yesterday as Europe reflects more and more openly on the prospect of recognising an independent Palestine.

Any French move to welcome a Palestinian state into the community of nations would be made jointly with the European Union, and would be seen as an attempt to give a jolt to the stalled Middle East peace process with Israel.

Thus far, most world powers have been reluctant to recognise Palestine before it becomes a viable entity within agreed borders, but now some are starting to think recognition could revive the stalled search for peace.

NEWS IN brief

Mubarak's name to be removed from all public places

PTI, Cairo

Two months after he was toppled in popular uprising, a Cairo court yesterday ordered removal of former president Hosni Mubarak's name and that of his wife Suzanne to be removed from all public places including streets and parks.

Judge Mohammad Hassan Omar said the names of Mubarak and his wife would be removed from "all public squares, streets, libraries and other public institutions around the country."

Currently, Pan-Arab channel al Jazeera reported that over 500 public schools in Egypt bear the name of Hosni or his wife, besides innumerable public buildings and streets.

Mubarak, who is under detention is presently admitted in a military hospital for treatment of heart ailment with his wife looking after.

Martelly confirmed as Haiti presidential vote winner

AFP, Port-au-prince

Popular-singer-turned-politician Michel Martelly was confirmed yesterday as the winner of Haiti's March 20 presidential election, officials announced.

Final results released by Haiti's Provisional Electoral Council showed that Martelly took 67.57 percent of the vote in the March 20 election.

The council did not however, release the results of legislative elections held the same day.

Berlin University offers chair to detained Chinese artist

AFP, Berlin

The University of the Arts in Berlin has invited Ai Weiwei to be a guest professor, the institution said in a statement yesterday, amid ongoing international uproar at the Chinese artist's detention.

Hailing the outspoken dissident as "one of the best-known contemporary artists", the university said it "stood for the freedom of the arts and therefore for the freedom of artists."

Ai, who was taken into custody in Beijing on April 3 as he tried to board a flight to Hong Kong, is under investigation for unspecified "economic crimes".

Hillary condemns Syria violence

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Wednesday strongly condemned "ongoing violence" by the Syrian government against demonstrators, saying Damascus needed to launch a "serious political process" to end deadly unrest.

Clinton said the United States was particularly concerned about conditions in Homs, where at least 10 people were reported killed in clashes on Tuesday after 20,000 people staged an overnight sit-in protest demanding embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's ouster.

The government "must cease the violence and begin a serious political process," Clinton said.

25 Iraqis die as bus plunges into valley

AFP, Damascus

Twenty-five Iraqis died and 20 were injured yesterday when their bus hit two trucks and plunged into a valley between Damascus and the central city of Homs, the official news agency Sana said.

"The driver of the bus carrying the travellers along the road from Damascus to Homs lost control of his vehicle, which collided with two trucks. The bus then fell into a valley" from a height of 15 metres, Sana said, citing the Damascus police chief.

"Twenty-five people died and 20 were injured. All the victims were Iraqi nationals," he said.

UN eyes to eradicate bird flu within 10 years

AFP, Rome

It will take at least 10 years to eradicate the H5N1 bird flu virus, which has killed scores of humans, from poultry in the six countries where it is endemic, a UN agency said yesterday.

The strain of the avian influenza virus was reported in 60 countries at its peak in 2006 but most had managed to stamp it out, the Food and Agriculture Organisation said in a report.

It however remained "firmly entrenched" in Bangladesh, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia and Vietnam, including because of the nature of their production and market chains, and quality of veterinary services, it said.

Another factor was that in these countries "fear of H5N1 does not necessarily translate into concrete plans for virus control and elimination," the report said.

The H5N1 strain of avian influenza has killed around 320 people worldwide since 2003.

"Eliminating the highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza virus from poultry in the six countries where it remains endemic will take 10 or more years," the agency said in a statement.

It made recommendations for each country regarding measures they should take over the next five years to enable them to eliminate the virus.

"They contain a mix of measures aimed at outbreak control and response, gathering and analysing information, and disease prevention and risk reduction," it said.



PHOTO: AFP

Fire set by rioters engulfs a building at Sydney's Villawood Detention Centre yesterday.

Colombian tribe fighting a losing battle to survive

SAN JOSE DEL GUAVIARE, Colombia

The Nukak-Maku tribe, nomads discovered only 23 years ago who number no more than 600, is struggling to adapt after Colombian guerrillas chased them from their homes deep inside the country's lush tropical forests.

"Llego la plata" ("the money is coming"), someone murmured from inside a palm leaf hut crowded with 10 adults and two dozen children thrown into an unfamiliar world.

Handed bread and panela, a block of unrefined whole cane sugar which is rich in calories, tribesmen seized the food before one woman suddenly asked for "Coca-Cola".

Albeiro Riano, a doctor trying to improve the living conditions of the Nukak people, told AFP that expressions like "Llego la plata" and "Coca-Cola" showed how the tribe was losing its cultural values.

Wembe, chief of this small clan of 30 living in Agua Bonita, near the south-central town of San Jose del Guaviare,

complained that food was growing scarce.

"Hunting, fishing, it's all really lacking," he said in broken Spanish.

His clan no longer has any blowpipes to hunt monkeys, especially prized by the Nukak for their meat.

And diseases have plagued the group. "Malaria, the flu, diarrhea, amoeba," said Wembe.

The Nukak, driven from their homes by Marxist FARC guerrillas, have been forced to leave the depths of the jungle.

Only 600 members of this endangered tribe remain and "99 percent no longer live on their original lands, the worst thing that could ever happen to them," said Riano.

Their neighbors reject them and barely consider them human, he added, noting that some women have fallen into prostitution while the men have "become modern slaves in the region's huge coca fields."

The discovery of the Nukak, in 1988, was hailed by anthropologists, who paid tribute to the significant knowledge of the hunter-gatherers in zoology and botany. Now there is anger about their predicament.

Asylum seekers torch buildings in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Asylum seekers torched nine buildings at a Sydney detention centre in a night of wild riots with a handful of protesters remaining on rooftops yesterday as police worked to regain control.

The riots kicked off late Wednesday at the Villawood Detention Centre with an estimated 100 detainees involved at the height of the drama.

At one stage firefighters were pelted with roof tiles and pieces of furniture as they tried to tackle the blazes, with riot police called in to protect them.

Among the buildings destroyed were a computer room, kitchen, medical facilities and a laundry.

The immigration department said the fires had been contained but an AFP photographer said several people remained on the roof, sitting beside a large white sign that read "We need help".

Immigration spokesman Sandi Logan condemned the "appalling" behaviour of protesters.

The protest started with just two inmates, apparently upset at the immigration department denying their applications for visas to remain in Australia.

Australia has a policy of mandatory detention for asylum seekers while their claims are processed, and generally holds detainees on remote Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean.

GULF OF MEXICO OIL SPILL BP to sue US firm

AFP, London

British energy group BP said yesterday it had sued Cameron International, the makers of a blowout preventer (BOP) which BP believes failed in the lead up to last year's Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

The maligned oil giant confirmed it was to sue the US firm at federal court for supplying faulty equipment.

According to a BP statement, one of the BOP's "blind shear rams", which was meant to cut the faulty drill pipe and seal the well, failed to close fully due to a piece of trapped drill pipe.

The blast killed 11 people and sent some 4.9 mn barrels of oil gushing into the Gulf.