



World joins in Royal Wedding

AFP, Los Angeles

The fairytale wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton captured the imagination of the world yesterday, with millions sharing in the celebration of the royal nuptials at parties across the globe.

An estimated two billion people were expected to have watched on TV when William and Kate exchange vows at Westminster Abbey, and even in the home to the Hollywood stars royal glamour shined strong.

"We have movie stars, but they're not as good," said Paula Haitley, 30, as she arrived at the Cat and Fiddle British pub on Sunset Boulevard.

"It's a Cinderella story to make Hollywood drool," Andrew Rule from London commented in Sydney's Daily Telegraph tabloid.

Australia's state broadcaster ABC as well as two of the three major commercial networks provided live coverage of the nuptials that took place in the evening in Sydney.

Neighbouring New Zealand was also celebrating the event, with the national New Zealand Herald declaring it the "Happiest day of our lives" on its front page.

Across Asia tens of millions tuned in to the event as national channels interspersed wedding coverage with discussion, commentary, and off-beat tributes to British life.

British embassies across the region organised parties with big screens for VIP guests to watch the festivities.

Meanwhile in Paris, some well wishers visited the statue by the Pont d'Alma that has become an unofficial memorial to William's mother, the late Diana, Princess of Wales.



FATAH, HAMAS UNITY DEAL Cairo invites parties to sign next week

REUTERS, Gaza

Egypt has invited Palestinian leaders to Cairo next week for the signing of a unity agreement that would end rivalry among ruling factions, Palestinian officials said yesterday.

The Egyptian-brokered deal, announced unexpectedly on Wednesday, calls for forming a new government acceptable to both Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction, which is dominant in the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip Hamas's rulers.

Israel denounced the agreement, saying Abbas could not be a peace partner if he mends ties with Hamas, an Islamist group whose charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish state, but which has said it is open to a long-term ceasefire.

Western powers said the unity deal was an important step, but made clear they expect any new administration to accept international demands, which include the recognition of Israel and a renunciation of violence.

"We have always asked for reconciliation and peace between Gaza and the occupied territory (West Bank). But this can only work if it is done in the necessary environment," said Pierre Vimont, secretary-general of the diplomatic corps of the European Union.

The EU, in coordination with the United States, United Nations and Russia, has been trying to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

20 drown as Egypt ferry capsizes

AFP, Cairo

Twenty-two people drowned yesterday when a bus on a ferry fell into the Nile River in a southern Egyptian province, state media reported, revising an earlier death toll of 43.

The official MENA news agency put the death toll at 22, after initially reporting that 43 people died.

It said that the bus plunged into the river when the ferry crashed into the shore.

State television reported that rescue workers were looking for more victims and had transferred survivors to hospital.

Police officials put the toll at 17 dead and said five were still missing.

They told AFP that the ferry was carrying a bus loaded with 32 passengers.

Syrian protesters defy regime crackdown

At least 32 dead on Syrian 'day of rage'

AFP, Damascus

Syrian security forces shot dead at least 32 people when tens of thousands of protesters rallied for a "day of rage" after Friday prayers, defying warnings of a harsh crackdown, activists said.

Protests against President Bashar al-Assad's regime took place in most major centres around Syria, witnesses said, in a repeat of pro-democracy rallies that have become the norm after weekly Muslim prayers.

In the protest epicentre of Daraa, military officials said four soldiers were killed and two captured by "armed terrorists," though a rights activist said the dead men had been killed defending protesters.

At least 32 people were shot dead by security services in Daraa, according to rights activists.

Dissidents say security forces using live rounds and tear gas have killed more than

450 people since the Syrian protests erupted in mid-March.

Friday's rallies come as the UN Human Rights Council held a special session on Syria in Geneva and the European Union met in Brussels to consider a wide range of sanctions against Damascus.

The call for mass demonstrations was made on Facebook page, Syrian Revolution 2011, a motor of the protests in which demonstrators inspired by uprisings across the Arab world are seeking greater freedoms.

Assad's embattled regime reiterated its running ban on demonstrations, despite having lifted a decades-old law barring them earlier this month, as the Muslim Brotherhood accused the regime of genocide.

"To the youths of the revolution, tomorrow we will be in all the places, in all the streets... We will gather at the besieged towns, including with our brothers in Daraa," said the Facebook group.

Al-Qaeda suspected in Morocco blast

AFP, Marrakesh

The Al-Qaeda terror network is suspected of involvement in a bomb attack on a popular tourist cafe that killed 15 people in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh, the government said yesterday.

The Moroccan news agency, citing an official source, said that the death toll was 15, not 16 as previously stated, and it said the dead included "two Moroccans, two French nationals, two Canadians and a Dutch national."

Communications Minister Khalid Naciri said that investigators would pursue all leads including possible links to Al-Qaeda which operates a north African offshore in the region.

"All leads will be investigated, including Al-Qaeda," he said. "The investigation continues to find the perpetrators, but for the moment I am not prepared to point the finger."

The victims, mostly foreigners, died Thursday when a suspected suicide bomb exploded at a tourist cafe in Djemaa el-Fna, the main square of Marrakesh.

A total of 23 others were badly injured, two of whom died overnight.

French intelligence and anti-terrorism experts will travel to Marrakesh yesterday to help in the probe, a Moroccan official source said, particularly the "identification of the bodies".

International police agency Interpol condemned the attack and said it would ensure "the Moroccan authorities investigating this terrible attack have the full support of the global law enforcement community."

The blast was condemned as a terrorist attack by the Moroccan government, the European Union, the United States and France and a Moroccan official said it may have been the work of a suicide bomber.

LIBYA WAR

Viagra allegations against regime

Allies divided at UN

AFP, United Nations

The United States on Thursday raised allegations that Muammar Gaddafi's regime gives viagra to troops to carry out rapes as the UN Security Council wrangled over coalition attacks in Libya, diplomats said.

Russia and other nations have argued that France, Britain, the United States and their allies patrolling a no-fly zone over Libya are going beyond the mandate given by UN Security Council resolutions.

But the United States insisted that coalition actions were within the resolutions. US ambassador Susan Rice highlighted the use of viagra in the closed-door meeting as the debate intensified, according to diplomats present.

Rice said Gaddafi's forces were "issuing viagra to soldiers so that they go out and rape," said one diplomat at the meeting.

The ambassador did not give sources for the allegations. But another diplomat at the meeting said she made the comment as part of a debate with another envoy to highlight that "the coalition is confronting an adversary doing reprehensible things."

The US mission did not immediately comment on the claims.

Yemeni protesters decry Saleh transition deal

REUTERS, Sanaa

Vast crowds of Yemenis took to the streets yesterday to demand the immediate departure of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, instead of the phased handover of power envisaged by a Gulf-mediated agreement.

Some 100,000 people flooded a five-km (three-mile) stretch of Sanaa's main Siteen Street to mark a "Friday of Loyalty to the Martyrs" -- at least 142 protesters have been killed during three months of anti-Saleh unrest across Yemen.

"We will continue our revolution forcefully and we will not back down even if we have to offer a million martyrs," a cleric shouted to crowds, as they released balloons inscribed "Leave!".

Equally large pro-Saleh crowds also gathered in the capital to mark a "Friday of Constitutional Legitimacy." Waving flags, the demonstrators held pictures of the president and banners reading: "Be firm and don't back down, we are with you."

Saleh, facing the gravest challenge to his 32-year-old rule, addressed the rally himself. "These crowds of our people have said their word: yes, yes to the legitimacy of the constitution, no to coups, no to chaos," the 69-year-old leader said.

The United States and nearby top oil producer Saudi Arabia want the Yemen standoff resolved to avert chaos that could enable a Yemen-based wing of al Qaeda to operate more freely.

NEWS IN brief

'Many killed' as Russia raids militant base

BBC ONLINE

Security forces in Russia report killing a top Islamist militant and nine of his followers in a siege in the southern region of Stavropol yesterday.

Asker Dzhabbayev, said to have led a militant group in the nearby Kabardino-Balkaria region, was wanted over the killing of hunters and police officers.

Security forces attacked the house where the suspects were staying after they reportedly refused to surrender.

WikiLeaks Manning 'moved out of isolation'

AFP, Fort Leavenworth

Bradley Manning, the jailed US soldier accused of passing classified documents to WikiLeaks, faces far less restrictive conditions at a Kansas military prison where he was relocated last week, US officials said Thursday.

Manning on April 20 was removed from the prison at the US Marine base at Quantico, Virginia and transferred to a military brig at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, after what his supporters described as unnecessarily harsh conditions of his imprisonment.

Endeavour poised for last liftoff

AFP, Cape Canaveral

The US space shuttle Endeavour is poised to launch yesterday carrying a multibillion dollar tool for searching the universe on the penultimate flight for NASA's 30-year program.

After Endeavour returns from its 14-day mission and Atlantis launches for a final time in June, the iconic space shuttle program will close for good.

That will leave Russia as the sole taxi for astronauts heading to and from the orbiting space lab until a new spaceship is built by a partnership between NASA and private companies, by 2015 at the earliest.

Strong 6.2-magnitude quake strikes off Taiwan

AFP, Taipei

A 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck off Taiwan yesterday, the island's central weather bureau said, but there were no immediate reports of damage or casualties.

The undersea quake hit at 21:12 local time about 195 kilometres southeast of Taitung county at a depth of 178 kilometres, the bureau said.

The US Geological Survey measured the quake at a magnitude of 5.5.

BEATIFICATION OF LATE POPE JOHN PAUL II Vatican takes step to honour 'first global pope' to sainthood

AFP, Rome

One of the most admired and beloved popes in history, among Catholics and non-Catholics alike, Venerable Pope John Paul II will be beatified by Pope Benedict on Sunday.

This beatification will become the fastest on record, a little more than six years after the death of Pope John Paul II, beating Mother Teresa's beatification in 2003 by a few days.

The late pope was the most travelled pope in history with 104 trips outside Italy including one to Bangladesh in 1986.

In order to set John Paul II on the road to beatification, the Vatican had to confirm he had worked a miracle -- the healing, apparently unexplainable by science, of a French nun affected by Parkinson's who had prayed to be cured.

The process was fast-tracked and the decision to beatify John Paul II was confirmed in record time in January 2011, to the joy of supporters of the "first global pope" -- as one admiring cardinal nicknamed him.



Another miracle is needed before the late pope can be declared a saint.

Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims are set to descend on Rome this weekend to witness the beatification of Jean Paul II, the world's first "global pope" who will be put on the track to sainthood only six years after his death.

John Paul II is acclaimed as the most widely recognised Pope of modern era and as one of the most influential leaders of the 20th century. It's widely held that he was instrumental in ending communism in his native Poland and eventually

throughout Europe, while at the same time denouncing the excesses of capitalism.

Thousands of Catholics have sent stories to the Vatican describing how they were helped by the pope after his death and 270 testimonies of presumed miracles have already been selected, to be judged as a second miracle.

On Sunday, the beatification mass will be lead by Pope Benedict in St Peter's Square. A phial of John Paul II's blood, which was taken during the last days of his illness, will be on show.

Tour guide and pilgrim associations have estimated that between 300,000 and 500,000 people will come to Rome for the big day. 40,000 people are expected on specially chartered planes, while others will come by coach and boat.

Some 50 heads of state or government are expected to attend, including the Polish and Mexican presidents Bronislaw Komorowski and Felipe Calderon, King Albert II and Queen Paola of Belgium and French Prime Minister Francois Fillon.