

Egypt vows action after 12 die in sectarian clash

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt's military rulers vowed yesterday to crack down on religious violence after 12 people died in clashes in a Cairo suburb sparked by unconfirmed suspicions that Christians had abducted a woman who converted to Islam.

The inter-faith conflict on Saturday was Egypt's worst since 13 people died in violence on March 9 that followed a church burning and threw down a new challenge for generals ruling the country since the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak.

Injured Muslims and Christians being treated in hospital showed reporters small holes that looked like gunshot wounds.

Egypt's army said yesterday that 190 people would be tried in military courts over Saturday's violence.

Prime Minister Essam Sharaf cancelled a tour of Gulf Arab states to

chair a cabinet meeting where the government decided to deploy more security near religious sites and toughen laws criminalizing attacks on places of worship.

Tension was high and the army cordoned off streets near the Saint Mina church, where about 500 conservative Salafist Muslims massed on Saturday to call on Christians to hand over the woman.

The Salafists were joined by other Muslims who demanded access to the church to see if the woman was inside. Tensions flared, gunfire broke out and the two sides exchanged firebombs and stones, witnesses said.

Soldiers and police fired shots in the air and used teargas to separate the two sides but stone-throwing in streets near the church went on through the night.

A power cut plunged the neighbourhood into darkness, making it harder for the security forces to quell

the violence.

Egypt's highest religious authority, Al-Azhar, held an emergency meeting to discuss the clashes. The governor of Giza province, where the church lies, said relatives of the dead and injured would receive compensation.

Sectarian strife often flares in Egypt over conversions, family disputes and the construction of churches. Muslims and Christians made demonstrations of unity during the protests that overthrew Mubarak, but interfaith tensions have grown.

Some Christians said the security forces had been too slow to disperse the crowd in front of Saint Mina and looked on as tension got out of hand. Christians make up about 10 percent of Egypt's 80 million population.

Hundreds of secular Egyptians gathered in Alexandria to call for religious unity and punishment for those who took part in Saturday's violence.



PHOTO: AFP

Tunisian women shout slogans during a demonstration participated by thousands yesterday to call for democratic reform denouncing terrorism following last month's deadly bomb attack in Marrakesh. Al-Qaeda's regional offshoot has denied any involvement in the atrocity.

Bahrain to lift emergency law

REUTERS, Manama

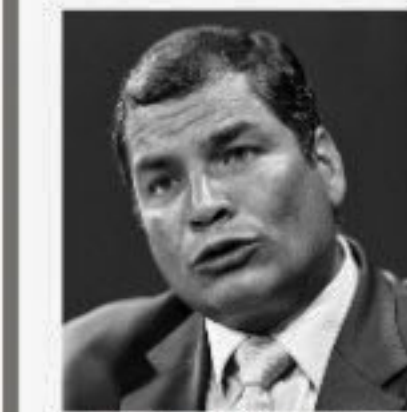
Bahrain's king ordered an end to the emergency rule imposed in mid-March to quell a wave of anti-government protests as leading opposition figures went on trial yesterday for plotting against the Gulf state's monarchy.

Bahrain state TV said the state of emergency will end June 1 in line with a royal decree. The lifting of the martial laws two weeks before the three-month emergency rule's official expiry seemed to reflect the rulers' determination to again showcase the kingdom as stable and able to host international events like the Formula One race.

The 21 opposition leaders and political activists who went on trial yesterday in a special security court face charges of attempting to overthrow the Sunni monarchy.

NEWS IN brief

Correa scores victory in Ecuadoran referendum



AFP, Quito

Leftist Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa scored a big political victory late Saturday when early official returns and private exit polls showed voters had approved his controversial reform proposals in a national referendum.

The National Election Council announced, after a quick count of the votes, that the 10 measures put on popular vote had received approval ranging from 44.9 to 50.7 percent.

According to data released by the Santiago Perez polling firm, the initiatives received even stronger popular support -- from 61 to 64 percent of the vote.

Tunis imposes overnight curfew

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia on Saturday declared an overnight curfew in and around the capital after several days of unrest there.

The curfew will run from 9:00pm to 5:00am until further notice, the defence and interior ministries said in a joint statement cited on television and by the official TAP agency.

The measure was necessary because of "violence and pillaging" on the outskirts of Tunis over the past

Australia defends Malaysia asylum seekers plan

AFP, Sydney

Australia yesterday defended plans to send hundreds of asylum seekers to Malaysia, saying it was an important signal to people smugglers, but refugee advocates slammed the proposal as cruel.

Australia wants to transfer 800 boat people to Malaysia for processing as part of a yet-to-be-finalised one-off deal which the Canberra government hopes

Militants kill 2 Buddhists in restive Thai south

REUTERS, Yala

Suspected insurgents killed two Buddhists in a drive-by shooting yesterday in Thailand's deep south, police said, the latest in an upsurge of violence in the troubled region bordering Malaysia.

The attack took place in front of a mosque in Pattani province a day after twin bombings by suspected rebels killed at least seven security forces, marking one the

Saudis reject Mecca holy water scare

AFP, Jeddah

Saudi authorities have rejected claims that holy Zamzam water from a spring inside the Grand Mosque complex of Mecca is polluted and stressed there were no health risks.

The Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques Affairs said in a statement Saturday it had no reports suggesting there was any issue with Zamzam water which was safe for drinking.

A spokesman for the presidency, Ahmad al-Mansuri, told AFP daily samples were being taken from the 31-metre (105-foot) deep well, and measures were taken to ensure it was safe.

According to Islamic tradition, the spring has never gone dry for over 4,000 years and pilgrims treat the water as sacred and having miraculous healing powers.

Heavy fighting grips Libya's besieged Misrata

Italy rescues 500 Libya refugees in 'miracle' operation

AFP, Misrata

Libyan regime forces laying siege to Misrata intensified their assault on the lifeline port yesterday as smoke billowed from a fuel depot bombing, attacks a rights group said may amount to an atrocity.

Two loud explosions were also heard in Tripoli, where the regime of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi has its headquarters, as jets flew overhead, witnesses said.

Meanwhile, Italian coast guards and local fishermen saved all 500 refugees on a boat from Libya early yesterday after their vessel hit rocks off the island of Lampedusa, an operation one rescuer described as a "miracle".

Refugees threw themselves into the water in the night, with some clinging to ropes strung between the rusty fishing boat and the shoreline by rescuers, as officers and local residents dived in to help along the rocky coast.

In Misrata, fighting broke out in the resort area of Burgueya, west of the make-or-break city in the Libyan conflict lying about 200 kilometres east of the capital.

Forces loyal to Gaddafi "destroyed the only tanks that were full," said Ahmad Monthasser, a rebel from Misrata.

"Someone pointed out the exact location of the fuel depots. This means inside the city there is a fifth column that is collaborating with Gaddafi," he said.

Government troops have stepped up their attacks on the port of Misrata, the main source of supplies to rebels fighting to oust the veteran strongman in western Libya.

Misrata is seen as the key to the Libyan conflict, which broke out in mid-February after Gaddafi's security forces waged a bloody crackdown on protests inspired by regime-changing movements in Tunisia and Egypt.

At least nine rebels were killed and 50 wounded in fierce clashes in the northwestern town of Zintan as Kadhafi forces pressed the insurgents on several fronts on Saturday.

A barrage of shells had also struck Wazin, a western town near the border with Tunisia, forcing thousands to flee, while loyalist fighters also attacked the southern oasis towns of Ojla and Jalo, which neighbour oil facilities.

Skepticism in Pakistan over bin Laden's alleged role

AGENCIES

Pakistani security officials reacted with skepticism on Sunday to a US assertion that Osama bin Laden was actively engaged in directing his far-flung network from his compound in Abbottabad where he was killed on May 2.

Washington said on Saturday that, based on a trove of documents and computer equipment seized in the raid, bin Laden's hideout north of Islamabad was an "active command and control center" for al-Qaeda where he was involved in plotting future attacks on the United States.

"It sounds ridiculous," said a senior intelligence official. "It doesn't sound like he was running a terror network."

The Obama administration has seen no evidence Pakistan's government knew bin Laden was living in that country before his killing, the US national security adviser said yesterday.

Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani is scheduled to "take the nation into confidence" in parliament on Monday, his first

statement to the people more than a week after the incident embarrassed the country.

Pakistani officials said the fact that there was no internet connection or even phone line into the compound where the world's most-wanted man was hiding raised doubts about his centrality to al-Qaeda.

Analysts have long maintained that, years before bin Laden's death, al-Qaeda had fragmented into a decentralised group that operated tactically without him.

On Saturday, the White House released five video clips of bin Laden taken from the compound, most of them showing the al-Qaeda leader, his beard dyed black, evidently rehearsing the videotaped speeches he sometimes distributed to his followers.

The government-selected clips also provide an opportunity for the US to paint bin Laden in an unflattering light to his supporters. The videos include outtakes of his propaganda films and, taken together, portray him as someone obsessed with his own image and how he is portrayed to the world.

None of the videos was released with sound.

Laden had Pak 'support network'

Says Obama

AFP, Washington

Osama bin Laden had a "support network" in Pakistan but it is not clear if the Pakistani government was involved, US President Barack Obama said in his first public comments on the issue.

The fact that bin Laden turned up in leafy Abbottabad, home to the Pakistani equivalent of the West Point and Sandhurst military academies has been greeted with incredulity.

"We think that there had to be some sort of support network for bin Laden inside of Pakistan," Obama told the CBS show "60 Minutes," according to excerpts of an interview released yesterday.

Japan won't abandon nuclear power

AP, Tokyo

Atomic power will remain a major part of Japan's energy policy despite the ongoing crisis at one tsunami-crippled plant and a looming shutdown of another while its quake protections are improved, a government official said yesterday.

Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshito Sengoku also said no reactors other than the three units at the Hamaoka power plant in central Japan would be shuttered over quake and tsunami concerns.

There is "no need to worry" about other reactors, Sengoku said. "Scientifically, that's our conclusion at the moment."

The government evaluated Japan's 54 reactors for quake and tsunami vulnerability after the March 11 disasters that heavily damaged the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant in northeast Japan.

Chubu Electric Power Co., which runs the Hamaoka plant, is still considering the government's request to shut the reactors while the utility builds a seawall and improves backup systems to protect the reactors from a major earthquake and tsunami.

Nuclear energy provides more than one-third of Japan's electricity, and shutting the three reactors would likely worsen power shortages expected this summer. Already, buildings have reduced lighting, stores have trimmed service hours and subway operators have shut air conditioning in a conservation effort in the capital region since the March 11 disasters.

LADEN KILLING AFTERMATH

Chance of mistaken ID is one in 11.8 quadrillion

AFP, Washington

US officials are certain Osama bin Laden is dead after DNA and other tests, saying Saturday there was a one in 11.8 quadrillion chance of mistaken identity.

"Based on that analysis, the DNA is unquestionably his. The possibility of a mistaken identity on the basis of this analysis is approximately one in a 11.8 quadrillion," said the official. The al-Qaeda network has also con-

Seized material shows value of manhunt: CIA

AFP, Washington

The trove of material seized in the raid on Osama bin Laden's hideout demonstrates how important it was to track down the al-Qaeda chief, CIA Director Leon Panetta said Saturday.

"The material found in the compound only further confirms how important it was to go after Bin Laden," Panetta said.

"Since 9/11, this is what the American people expected of us. In this critical operation, we delivered," he added.

'Mother-in-law dies' on news of killing

AFP, Dubai

Al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden's first mother-in-law died of a stroke after hearing the news that US forces killed him in Pakistan, a London-based Arabic newspaper reported yesterday.

Nabih al-Ghanem, the mother of bin Laden's first wife, Najwa, was taken to a hospital in Latakia in northern Syria where she died after suffering the stroke, the Asharq Al-Awsat daily said.

Bin Laden had married Najwa, his Syrian-born cousin, when he was 17, and they had 11 children, the paper said adding she had left Afghanistan a few days before the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the

Swiss minister criticises Obama's address

AFP, Geneva

Swiss Defence Minister Ueli Maurer has criticised President Barack Obama's announcement of Osama bin Laden's killing, claiming in a press interview on Sunday that it raised the al-Qaeda leader's status.

"It is problematic for me when a president announces this news. That way he raises a terrorist to the same level as himself," Maurer was quoted as saying

'Al-Qaeda mutiny' kills 17 in Iraq jail

AFP, Baghdad

The accused mastermind of last year's Baghdad church siege overpowered a policeman while being led to questioning, sparking a jail mutiny yesterday that killed six police, including a general, and 11 inmates.

The daring incident by suspected al-Qaeda insurgents came as security was tightened in Iraq, where authorities fear reprisals after the death of Osama bin Laden in a US special forces raid in Pakistan on May 2, with 24 policemen already having been killed in a car bomb south of Baghdad on Thursday.

"This incident was planned well in advance," Atta told reporters, putting the death toll at six police and 11 inmates.

Bin Laden's young Yemeni bride

CNN ONLINE

When 18-year-old Amal al-Sadah became the fifth wife of 43-year-old Osama bin Laden in 2000, she was "a quiet, polite, easygoing and confident teenager" who came from a big, conservative family in Yemen, a relative told CNN in an exclusive interview.

The relative, Ahmed, who knew al-Sadah growing up, said she came from a traditional family in Ibb, Yemen -- established and respectable but certainly with no militant views prior to the arranged marriage paralleling the al-Qaeda leader's terrorism.

The Yemeni government is apparently pressuring the family not to speak publicly about their notorious in-law, bin Laden, Ahmed said.

An al-Qaeda figure in Yemen named Sheikh Rashed Mohammed Saeed Ismail told the Yemen Post in 2008 that he was "the matchmaker" and that al-Sadah was one of his students, describing her as "religious and pious enough."

Ismail accompanied the young bride-to-be to Afghanistan in July 2000, where she



Amal al-Sadah

and bin Laden were married after he gave her family a \$5,000 dowry.

The marriage was apparently a political alliance to shore up bin Laden's support in the land of his ancestors.

Back in Yemen, al-Sadah was barely spoken of again, Ahmed told CNN.

The marriage was immediately fruitful, and al-Sadah and bin Laden gave birth to their first child, a daughter named Safiyah, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in the weeks after 9/11.

After 9/11, bin Laden told Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir that he had plans for his youngest daughter, Safiyah who probably saw her father shot dead.

"I became a father of a girl after September 11," he said. "I named her after Safiyah who killed a Jewish spy at the time of the Prophet. (My daughter) will kill enemies of Islam like Safiyah."

Al-Sadah, now 29 and the youngest of the five wives, has told interrogators that for five years she didn't venture outside the walled compound, according to a Pakistani military spokesman.

Afghan forces clash with Taliban for second day

AFP, Kandahar

Taliban militants who staged a wave of attacks on a major Afghan city, killing four people, were holding out for a second day yesterday as sporadic firefights kept residents on lockdown.

Nearly 50 people have been wounded in 24 hours since militiamen armed with suicide vests, guns and rocket-propelled grenades besieged targets in Kandahar including the governor's office, police stations and the local intelligence HQ.

The attacks are the most significant since the Taliban announced the start of their annual spring offensive last week and vowed to step up their fight after US commandos killed Osama bin Laden in neighbouring Pakistan.

But provincial governor Torkyalai Wesa said the militants also suffered heavy losses during the fighting -- 18 insurgents were killed and seven captured.

As the biggest city in the south and the Taliban's birthplace, control of Kandahar is seen as key to US-led efforts to end the nearly 10-year Taliban insurgency and hand Afghan forces responsibility for national security by 2014.

The dramatic standoff began at around 1:00 pm Saturday when a squad of militants attacked the governor's office from nearby buildings.

Officials said at least 10 blasts, including seven suicide attacks, rocked the city as assaults spread rapidly to other sites.