

Saleh to return

Yemen youths press power transfer

AFP, Sanaa

President Ali Abdullah Saleh is to return to Yemen within days following surgery in Riyadh for bomb blast injuries, his deputy said yesterday, even as protesters demanded a swift power transfer.

"His excellency is making a strong recovery and will return home in the coming days," Vice President Abdrabuh Mansur Hadi said at a meeting of the ruling General People's Congress, quoted by Saba state news agency.

Hadi said he had spoken to Saleh by telephone.

In Sanaa, a fragile truce held despite a deadly sniper attack on loyalists of a powerful tribal chief blamed for Friday's bomb attack which wounded Saleh as he prayed inside a mosque in his compound.

As Saleh, 69, recuperated in a Riyadh military hospital, a youths' committee that has been a key player behind the four-month uprising against his nearly 33 years of iron-fisted rule called for a

quick power transfer.

The youths' committee urged "all national and political forces to begin by forming an interim presidential council ... and creating a national transitional council," in a statement.

The panel also called for the formation of a "government of technocrats" to lead the transition.

The youth group, organisers of an anti-regime sit-in demonstration at a square in Sanaa since February, encouraged Yemenis to celebrate what they hailed as "the ouster of Saleh."

"The revolution has achieved its first objective -- the ouster of Saleh," it said, adding the protesters would "continue (their) sit-in until the achievement of all goals."

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Yemen's capital on Sunday to cheer what they said was the end of Saleh's regime.

Meanwhile, the Gulf Cooperation Council said its proposed exit deal, by which Saleh would step down in return for immunity against prosecution, remained the "most suitable solution."

"The council member-states could activate (the proposal) and follow up on its implementation if Yemen parties agree on it," said GCC chief Abdullah al-Zayani, whose mediation since April has met with conditions imposed by Saleh.

The parliamentary opposition has vowed to prevent Saleh's return to power, following a crackdown on anti-regime protests that has killed at least 200 people across Yemen.

"We will work with all our strength to prevent his return," parliamentary opposition spokesman Mohammed Qahtan told AFP.

The president underwent two operations on Sunday, a Saudi official in Riyadh told AFP.

"President Saleh underwent two operations that were successful. The first was to remove a piece of shrapnel from his chest, and the second was neurosurgery to his neck."

"The next procedure will be for cosmetic surgical purposes. The period of convalescence is two weeks, after which he will return to Sanaa," the official said on condition of anonymity.



PHOTO: AFP

Tribesmen loyal to Yemeni opposition tribal chief Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar show the V-sign for victory as they stand guard near his home in the capital Sanaa yesterday.

Attacks kill 5 US soldiers, 16 Iraqis

AFP, Baghdad

Attacks killed five American soldiers and 16 Iraqis yesterday, the deadliest day for US forces in Iraq in more than two years, just months before all of them must withdraw.

The latest violence raises key questions over the capabilities of Iraqi security forces ahead of a year-end deadline for Washington to pull out, with US officials pressing their counterparts in Baghdad to decide soon whether or not they want an extended American military presence.

"Five US service members were killed yesterday in central Iraq," said a brief US armistatement.

Captain Dan Churchill, a US military spokesman contacted by AFP, declined to give details on how or where the soldiers died.

Nato batters Tripoli ahead of Russian envoy's visit

AFP, Tripoli

Nato warplanes battered Moamer Gaddafi's command network in Tripoli, the alliance said yesterday ahead of a visit to Libya by an envoy from Russia, which has raised concerns about the military campaign.

Five powerful blasts rocked Tripoli late Sunday after three waves of explosions during the day, as warplanes overflew the city which has been the target of intense Nato raids for the past two weeks.

In a statement, the military alliance said it conducted "intensive and sustained strikes against pro-Gaddafi facilities in Tripoli throughout the day and night," including command and control centres.

"We will continue to erode (the Gaddafi regime's) foundations until the violence against the Libyan population ends," it quoted Lieutenant General Charles Bouchard, commander in chief of the Nato mission, as saying.

Nato also reported strikes against three military vehicles in the vicinity of the strategic oil town of Brega and an armoured vehicle near rebel-held Misrata, Libya's third city.

The latest salvos came as Russian media-

tor Mikhail Margelov prepared to head to the Libyan rebel stronghold of Benghazi after Moscow voiced concerns about the Nato operation sliding towards a land campaign.

Margelov, President Dmitry Medvedev's Africa envoy, told Russia's RIA Novosti news agency he would meet rebel leaders including Mustafa Abdul Jalil, head of the National Transitional Council that controls eastern Libya around Benghazi.

His spokesman in Moscow said he would arrive in Benghazi today morning and that the trip would exclude a visit to the Libyan capital.

Medvedev announced at the G8 summit last month that he would be sending the envoy to Libya, as Moscow seeks to present itself as a potential mediator and expresses growing alarm over the continued conflict.

"A drawing out of the armed conflict will worsen the humanitarian situation not only in Libya but also in neighbouring states that are taking on Libyan refugees," Margelov told RIA.

Moscow has expressed alarm as Nato's air campaign to enforce a UN-mandated no-fly zone to protect civilians entered a new phase with the deployment of British and French attack helicopters over the weekend.

US drone strikes kill 18 in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

US missiles killed 18 militants in Pakistan's tribal district of South Waziristan yesterday, destroying compounds and a vehicle in the deadliest drone strikes for months, local officials said.

Three strikes were reported just days after Pakistani officials said they believed senior Al-Qaeda commander Ilyas Kashmiri had died in a similar attack late Friday, also in South Waziristan which borders Afghanistan.

Washington has called Pakistan's semi-autonomous northwest tribal region the most dangerous place on Earth and the global headquarters of Al-Qaeda, where Taliban and other Al-Qaeda-linked networks have carved out strongholds.

Strauss-Kahn pleads not guilty to sex crime

AFP, New York

Fallen IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn launched what promises to be a long campaign to clear his name yesterday, pleading not guilty to charges that he tried to rape a hotel maid.

Arriving at the court, grave-faced, with his wife, Anne Sinclair on his arm and his defense team, Strauss-Kahn was met with shouts of "shame on you" by around 100 women dressed as hotel maids protesting outside.

The chants were so loud they could be heard through the 13th floor of the courtroom where he entered his formal plea before Judge Michael Obus. The next court hearing was set for July 18.

Strauss-Kahn, 62, was one of the most influential people in the global economy and widely considered to be a leading contender for the French presidency until his shocking arrest on May 14 on an Air France plane about to depart New York for Paris.



He pleaded not guilty to all seven counts, including attempted rape, in what prosecutors say was a brutal assault on a 32-year-old immigrant from west Africa sent to clean his luxury suite at Manhattan's Sofitel.

Strauss-Kahn, who swapped his fine suits for prison garb before being granted bail a week after his arrest, said through his high-profile lawyer, Benjamin Brafman, that he intends to fight hard.

Before the hearing, Brafman indicated in a letter filed in court that he was unhappy with media leaks airing the evidence, which claims to show that the French politician's semen was found on the maid's shirt.

In the US pre-trial process known as "discovery," parties are obliged to answer questions about their opponent's evidence collection. Prosecutors have told Brafman that he will be given materials, but in the proper time.

In an interview broadcast Sunday, Brafman told France's M6 television show "66 Minutes" that his client will be acquitted.

Malaysia to offer amnesty to illegals

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia is to offer amnesty to some of its two million illegal immigrants in a plan to ease labour shortages in the plantation and service industries, a senior minister said yesterday.

"(It's) not legalising them to be citizens but legalising them to stay (and work in Malaysia) legally," Hishammuddin Hussein, who is responsible for internal security, told reporters.

With one of Asia's largest populations of foreign labourers, Malaysia relies heavily on immigrants, especially from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, to clean homes, care for children and work in construction, plantations and factories.

Many of the illegals are poorly paid Indonesians who work long hours in menial jobs shunned by locals.

Hishammuddin said the scheme to legalise the workers would allow them to gain employment and not be exploited by human traffickers.

The minister did not specify who among Malaysia's illegal immigrant population would be offered the chance to stay, nor were the terms under which they would be granted asylum immediately clear.

Malaysia is also seen as a staging post for trafficking gangs moving people from Afghanistan and Myanmar to Indonesia and Australia.

Malaysia hopes to launch the programme in July.

Opposition wins Portugal election

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

Portugal's centre-right Social Democrats (PSD) have won the country's general election, defeating prime minister Jose Socrates' Socialists who had sought a \$114bn bailout that will bring deep spending cuts.

The PSD captured 38.6 per cent of Sunday's vote against 28 per cent for the Socialists, the interior ministry said after only the results of votes cast abroad were left to count.

The result leaves the PSD short of a majority but party leader Pedro Passos Coelho said he would immediately seek to form a coalition government with the conservative CDS-PP party which won 11.7 per cent of the vote.

The parties are expected to work fast yesterday to form a majority. Paulo Portas, the CDS-PP leader, has said he is ready to rule together with the Social Democrats.

In his victory speech, Passos Coelho vowed that Lisbon will do "everything possi-



Pedro Passos Coelho

ties," he said.

The bailout is conditional on measures that include tax hikes, a freeze on state pensions and salaries and a reduction in unemployment benefits as well as their duration.

"The years ahead are going to require much courage on the part of all of Portugal. This is going to be difficult but it is going to be worth it," Passos Coelho said.

Outgoing prime minister Socrates quit the leadership of the Socialist Party after conceding defeat.

"This defeat is entirely mine and I want to assume full responsibility for it," he said in an address to party supporters in Lisbon.

Syria blocks Palestinian protesters; toll rises to 23

AP, Majdal Shams, Golan Heights

Syrian police blocked dozens of pro-Palestinian protesters from approaching the Israeli frontier yesterday. The toll of demonstrators killed trying to break through into the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights rose to 23.

Syrian police set up a pair of checkpoints, including one a half-mile from the border. Nearly 20 protesters, some waving Syrian flags, began walking down a hill leading to the border when two police officers blocked their advance by extending their arms.

Protesters passed Syrian and UN outposts without impediment on Sunday and during a similar border rush three weeks ago, and it was not clear why Syrian security forces intervened yesterday.

The repeated attempts to challenge the borders play into widespread Israeli fears that the Palestinians will not make do with a state on lands captured in 1967, but want to take over all of historic Palestine, including present-day Israel.

Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak suggested that the Syrian regime might have instigated Sunday's border unrest and similar unrest three weeks ago to deflect attention from its crackdown on its own protesters. At least 35 Syrians died in a government crackdown in the country's north over the weekend.

Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Palmor said Israel would file a complaint to the UN later yesterday "concerning the Syrian regime's cynical manipulation of its own citizens in order to generate violent incidents on the border."



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli soliders patrol along the ceasefire line between the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Syria, as seen from the Druze village of Majdal Shams yesterday.

KASHMIRI KILLING Pakistan put on alert

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistani law enforcement agencies have been put on alert in the federal capital and northern parts of the country to prevent possible suicide attacks to avenge the killing of al-Qaeda-linked terrorist Ilyas Kashmiri in a US drone attack.

The National Crisis Management Cell (NCMC) of the Interior Ministry sounded a general alert to law enforcement agencies in Islamabad and Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provinces after receiving an intelligence report on possible attacks.

The NCMC asked law enforcement agencies to tighten security at military installations and sensitive establishments, the Dawn newspaper quoted its sources as saying.

Kashmiri, the leader of the banned Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami was reportedly killed in a US drone strike in South Waziristan on Friday.

The terrorists have plans to launch motorcycle-riding suicide bombers against targets, the report said.

NEWS IN brief

Mladic's army pension unblocked: lawyer

AFP, Belgrade

Serbia has unblocked the pension of Ratko Mladic, the former Bosnian Serb army chief who was transferred to the UN war crimes court last week, Mladic's lawyer told AFP yesterday.

The account to which his military pension of some 800 euros (\$1,200) a month was being transferred had been frozen since 2005 while Mladic was on the run.

"His son (Darko) already retrieved the sum of some 4.7 million dinars (49,000 euros, \$72,000) some time last week," Mladic's family lawyer Milos Saljic told AFP by phone.

17 dead in Indonesia ferry accident

AFP, Jakarta

Seventeen people were killed yesterday after a ferry capsized in the waters off Indonesia's Borneo island after it was hit by strong waves, a report said.

Thirty-three survivors were being treated at local hospitals after the accident which took place around noon in the sea off South Kalimantan province, Antara state news agency reported, quoting a health official.

Police confirmed the accident but were unable to



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