

Battles in Qaeda-held Yemen town kill 45

New protests called for Saleh's exit

REUTERS, Sanaa

At least 45 people were killed in an al-Qaeda-held town in the latest violence in Yemen and protesters took to the streets of the capital yesterday to demand that President Ali Abdullah Saleh stay in exile.

The army said it had killed 30 Islamist militants, including a local al-Qaeda leader, in the southern town of Zinjibar. A local official said 15 soldiers had been killed in the battles for control of the town seized by militants about 10 days ago.

The fighting was another symptom of instability in Yemen, whose leader left for Saudi Arabia at the weekend for surgery on wounds suffered in an attack on his palace in Sanaa.

Demonstrators, who have been trying to topple Saleh for months,

called a "million-man march" in Sanaa to pile pressure on him to stay away and hand over power permanently.

The volatile situation in Yemen, which lies on vital oil shipping lanes, alarms Western powers and neighbouring oil giant Saudi Arabia, who fear that chaos would enable the local al-Qaeda franchise to operate more freely there.

They see Saleh's absence for medical treatment in Riyadh as an opportunity to ease the president out of office after nearly 33 years ruling the

impoverished Arab nation.

"We are calling for a peaceful and orderly transition," US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Monday.

Yemen's acting leader, Vice President Abu-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, said Saleh would return within days.

Saudi officials say it is up to Saleh whether he returns home or not, but they and their Western allies may want to revive a Gulf-brokered transition deal under which the Yemeni leader would quit in return for immunity from prosecution.

"Saleh's departure is probably

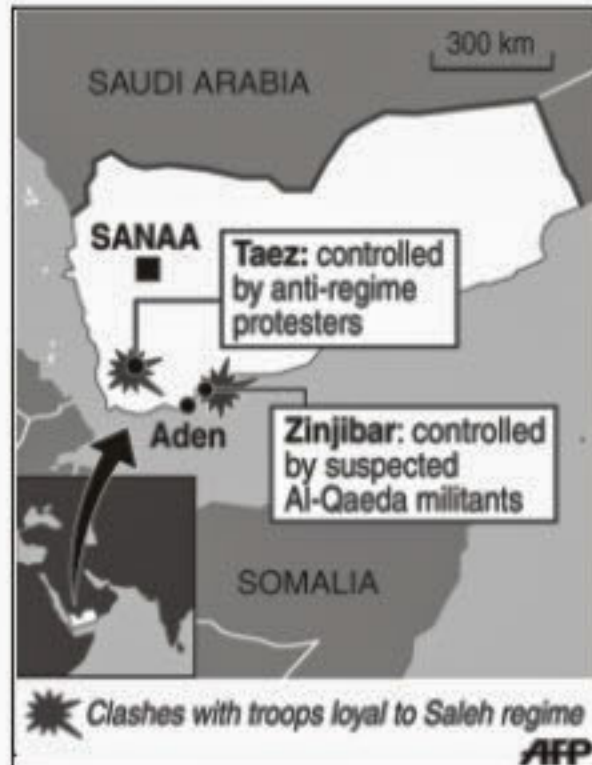
permanent," said Robert Powell, Yemen analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

"The Saudis, as well as the US and European Union, are pushing hard for him to stay in Saudi Arabia, as they view the prospect of his return as a catastrophe.

Some of Saleh's opponents have accused the president of deliberately letting AQAP militants take over Zinjibar to demonstrate the security risks if he lost power.

The fighting has reduced Zinjibar, once home to more than 50,000 people, to a ghost town without power or running water.

A Saudi-brokered truce was holding in the capital after two weeks of fighting between Saleh's forces and tribesmen in which over 200 people were killed and thousands forced to flee.



US Lawmaker admits lewd pictures



AFP, New York

Anthony Weiner

Pressure was building yesterday on New York congressman Anthony Weiner, who openly wept as he refused to resign amid stunning admissions that he lied about extramarital online and phone sex with several young women.

Observers of US politics were debating Weiner's future after his nationally televised press conference Monday, where he said he was "deeply ashamed" for maintaining a string of lewd online relationships.

The 46-year-old Democrat admitted he had sent a close-up picture of an aroused male member in underpants to a woman in Seattle via his Twitter account.

For a week he hotly denied sending the picture and claimed to have been hacked, but wiping away tears, Weiner confessed: "The picture was of me and I sent it. I am deeply sorry for the pain this has caused."

He said he had been sending naughty pictures online and sexting with about six women over the years and "we had become friends".

But he said he had not met any of them and had not had a physical relationship outside his year-old marriage to Huma Abedin, an aide to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Pop king's 'Thriller' jacket to be auctioned

AFP, Los Angeles

The iconic black and red jacket worn by Michael Jackson in his "Thriller" video is to go under the hammer at a two-day Music Icons Exhibition in Beverly Hills.

The jacket is among 600 items that will go on sale at Julien's Auction Gallery, including memorabilia from musicians such as The Beatles, Madonna and Lady Gaga, Frank Sinatra, Elvis and Justin Bieber on June 25 and 26.

Jackson's Thriller jacket became the prototype for future costumes for the pop musician. The calf leather jacket includes an inscription by Jackson on the inside lining.

Estimated at a value of \$200,000 to \$400,000, a portion of the proceeds will go to The Shambala Preserve, which is home to Jackson's two Bengal tigers, "Thriller" and "Sabu."

Jackson's personal doctor, Conrad Murray has been charged with manslaughter after the pop icon died suddenly on June 25, 2009.

Prosecutors allege that Murray "abandoned his patient" after administering the powerful sedative propofol to help Jackson sleep.

Murray has denied the accusations and said that on the day of the 50-year-old singer's death, he administered only a small amount of the drug.



Michael Jackson

Obama backs Ban for 2nd UN term

AFP, United Nations

US President Barack Obama is supporting UN leader Ban Ki-moon for a second five-year term at the helm of the 192-member organisation, the White House said yesterday.

"President Obama welcomes United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's announcement that he will run for a second term, and the United States supports his candidacy," a White House statement said.

"Under Ban's leadership, the United Nations has played a critical role in responding to crises and challenges across the globe, including most recently supporting democratic transitions in Cote d'Ivoire, the conduct of the referendum on South Sudan's self-determination, and efforts to resolve... crisis in Libya."

Japan to report to UN on nuke crisis

Doubles radiation estimate

AFP, Tokyo

Japan will for the first time report to the UN nuclear watchdog that fuel in its crippled Fukushima plant may have melted through the bottoms of three reactor core vessels, a news report said yesterday.

The Yomiuri Shimbun daily report came a day after Japan more than doubled its estimate of the radiation released into the air from the plant in about the first week after it was hit by the March 11 seabed quake and tsunami.

Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency (NISA) now says it believes 770,000 terabecquerels escaped into the atmosphere in the first six days -- compared to its earlier estimate of 370,000 terabecquerels.

Almost three months after the March 11 disaster, Japan is preparing a report to be submitted this month to the UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which sent its own multinational fact-finding team to Japan recently.

Japan's government plans to tell the IAEA that fuel is assumed to have melted down and through the reactor pressure vessels of units one, two and three and into their outer steel containment vessels, said the Yomiuri.

Tokyo will also pledge to thoroughly reform its nuclear safety systems, including by separating the watchdog NISA from the ministry of economy, trade and industry, which promotes nuclear power, the Yomiuri said.

Nuclear weapons threat not decreasing: Study

AFP, Stockholm

More than 5,000 nuclear weapons are deployed around the world and nuclear powers continue investing in new weapon systems, making meaningful disarmament in the near future unlikely, a report published yesterday said.

"More than 5,000 nuclear weapons are deployed and ready for use, including nearly 2,000 that are kept in a high state of alert," according to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

SIPRI's report said the world's eight nuclear powers -- Britain, China, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia and the US -- possess more than 20,500 warheads.

As of January 2011, Russia had 11,000 nuclear warheads, including 2,427 deployed, while the United States had 8,500 including 2,150 deployed, the report said.

The US and Russia have signed a Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that calls for a maximum of 1,550 warheads deployed per country.

However SIPRI argued that prospects for meaningful disarmament in the short term are grim as all eight countries seem committed to either improving or maintaining their nuclear programmes.

"The five legally recognised nuclear weapons states, as defined by the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty are either deploying new nuclear weapon systems or have announced their intention to do so," the report said, referring to Britain, China, France, Russia and the US.

India and Pakistan are "expanding their capacity to produce fissile material for military purposes," according to the report.

SIPRI Director Daniel Nord said south Asia, where relations between India and Pakistan seem perpetually tense, is "the only place in the world where you have a nuclear weapons arms race."

While Israel, which has never conclusively declared itself a nuclear weapons state but is almost universally assumed to be one, "appears to be waiting to assess how the situation with Iran's nuclear programme develops," SIPRI said.

E COLI OUTBREAK Europe-wide controls 'not needed'

EU offers €150m to farmers, death toll rises to 25

BBC ONLINE

The EU health commissioner has said yesterday the current E coli outbreak is limited geographically to northern Germany and does not need Europe-wide controls.

John Dalli also warned against releasing unproven information on the outbreak, saying it spread fear and adversely affected farm producers.

He was speaking ahead of emergency talks by EU agriculture ministers.

Efforts continue to find the source of the E coli outbreak, which has killed 25 people and sickened 2,400.

All the deaths, bar one in Sweden, have been in Germany. Twelve countries have been affected, with the cases outside Germany linked to travel there.

The latest focus has been on bean sprouts from a German farm in Uelzen, south of Hamburg. However, of 40 samples examined

from the farm, the first 23 tested negative.

The EU has proposed a 150m euro (\$220m) package of aid for farmers affected by the crisis, news agencies reported yesterday.

Dalli told the European Parliament: "I stress that the outbreak is limited geographically to the area surrounding the city of Hamburg, so there is no reason to take action on a European level. [EU-wide] measures against any product are disproportionate."

But he admitted that bans on certain products were a Europe-wide problem.

Russia has banned imports of fresh vegetables from the EU.

Dalli said: "We are in constant contact with third countries, including Russia. We are urging Russia to lift their ban; it is disproportionate."

Detailing how the crisis unfolded, he said that originally pinpointing cucumbers from Spain as the source had been wrong.



PHOTO: AFP

US President Barack Obama (R) looks on as German Chancellor Angela Merkel (C) shakes hands with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during an official arrival ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, DC yesterday.

South Sudan death toll tops 1,500: UN

REUTERS, Juba

More than 1,500 people have died this year in violence across southern Sudan, the United Nations said, ahead of the region's independence in July.

The underdeveloped region, roughly the size of France, has been beset by violence since southerners voted overwhelmingly in January to separate from the north and form their own nation.

The independence vote was the climax of a 2005 peace deal that ended a civil war which killed about 2 million people. North and south Sudan have fought for all but a few years since 1955 over ethnicity, religion, ideology and oil.

The threat of renewed war grew last month when the north used tanks and troops to seize the contested Abyei region that straddles north and south, overshadowing political instability within south Sudan.

At least 96,000 people have fled the Abyei crisis, the United Nations top humanitarian official in the south, Lise Grande, said on Monday, compounding problems for the south's government and humanitarian workers.

"Ninety-six thousand is the number of displaced we can account for, but with many fleeing into the bush the number may be even higher," Grande said, adding the U.N. had raised the total number of displaced in the south to more than 200,000, roughly double an estimate made in April.

Some 1,556 people have been killed in the south in the year to May 31, according to data released by the UN.