

SYRIA UNREST

Troops round up hundreds near northern town

REUTERS, Amman

Syrian troops rounded up hundreds of people in a sweep through villages near Jisr al-Shughour yesterday, fleeing residents said, after President Bashar al-Assad's army retook the rebellious town.

Nearly 7,000 Syrians have already fled the region around Jisr al-Shughour, seeking sanctuary in neighboring Turkey, while thousands more are sheltering close to the frontier in rural areas just inside Syria, activists say.

Yesterday's wave of arrests followed an army assault on the northwestern town, with troops backed by helicopters and tanks regaining control one week after authorities said 120 security personnel were killed in fighting they blamed on "armed groups."

Some residents said the killings followed a mutiny, or a refusal by some troops to shoot protesters who had joined nationwide demonstrations calling for an end to Assad's rule.

Refugees from Jisr al-Shughour,

sheltering on the Syrian side of the border with Turkey, said the military was combing villages to the east of the town and arresting hundreds of men between the ages of 18 and 40, in a pattern seen in other military crackdowns since the unrest started in March.

One person who escaped from Jisr al-Shughour, called Khaled, said two mosques had been hit by tank shelling and the bodies of three fleeing residents, a man, a woman and a child laid on a road 2 km north of the town.

Mustafa, a 39-year-old mason who fled on Sunday, said there were nine bodies in Jisr al-Shughour and seven on the outskirts.

"This would be a relatively light death toll," one activist in Damascus said. "The shelling and firing have been indiscriminate and we have been fearing a higher death toll,"

Syrian rights groups say 1,300 civilians have been killed since the start of the uprising. One group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, says

more than 300 soldiers and police have also been killed.

The government says the protests are part of a violent conspiracy backed by foreign powers to sow sectarian strife.

Army units "have taken total control of Jisr al-Shughour and are chasing remnants of the armed terrorist gangs in the woods and mountains," the Syrian news agency said on Sunday.

It said a soldier and two armed men were killed in clashes around the town. The army defused explosives planted on bridges and roads, and uncovered mass graves containing mostly mutilated bodies of 10 security men killed and buried by armed groups.

Syria has banned most foreign correspondents, making it difficult to verify accounts of events.

A man identifying himself as a Syrian army defector, whose comments were translated by Britain's Sky News television, said anti-government forces had set traps to delay the military advance and let people escape.



PHOTO: AFP
Yemeni men greet each other outside a tent set-up close to where anti-government protestors continue demanding resignation of Yemen's wounded leader President Ali Abdullah Saleh, in Sanaa yesterday.

NEWS IN

brief

Berlusconi faces referendum humiliation

AFP, Rome

Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi faced the prospect of fresh humiliation yesterday following local election defeats, after Italians flocked to the polls to vote in opposition-backed referendums.

Although the government had urged its supporters to stay away, turnout in the vote on Sunday and yesterday was above the 50 percent required for a move to scrap Italy's plans to return to nuclear power to have legal force.

Another referendum targeted a law passed by Berlusconi's government last year that has allowed the legally-embattled prime minister to stay out of court, in a sign of simmering discontent with the Italian

Germany recognises rebels as fighting rages in Libya

AFP, Benghazi

Germany yesterday gave official recognition to Libya's rebels, amid a surge in fighting across the country and as Gaddafi said over a chess game he would not step down.

Mikhail Margelov, the special envoy of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, said in Moscow meanwhile he would visit Tripoli next week to hold talks on the Libya conflict.

German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said after meeting rebel leaders in their capital Benghazi that Germany recognises their National Transitional Council as the "sole legitimate representative" of the Libyan people.

"We want a free Libya, in peace and democracy

UN labour group should do more in Myanmar, says Suu Kyi

AFP, Geneva

Myanmar's renowned opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi called on the UN's labour rights organisation to expand its work in her country, where complaints about forced labour have risen dramatically.

Speaking by video conference to the International Labour Organisation's 100th General Assembly, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner urged the ILO "to help usher in an era of broad-based social justice", in Myanmar.

Suu Kyi applauded the ILO's "attempt to eliminate forced labour and the recruitment of child soldiers", and said she hoped for "progressively closer cooperation" between the organisation and those committed to change in Myanmar.



PHOTO: REUTERS
A car sinks into a hole caused by an earthquake in the southern New Zealand city of Christchurch yesterday.

TURKEY PARLIAMENTARY POLLS Erdogan promises consensus after win

REUTERS, Ankara

Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party has scored a resounding third consecutive election victory, but he will need to seek consensus to push ahead with a planned new constitution.

Erdogan, whose AK has transformed Muslim Turkey into one of the world's fastest-growing economies and ended a cycle of military coups, won some 50 percent of the vote in Sunday's election.

The result boosted financial markets. The Turkish lira strengthened against the dollar, while bonds also gained as investors saw the result forcing the AK Party to compromise with other parties to replace the constitution, which was written almost 30 years ago during a period of military rule.

"The new constitution requires consensus and dialogue with other parties and the society at large," Cengiz Aktar, a professor at Istanbul's Bahcesehir University, told Reuters.

"We will see if Erdogan is ready for these with his majority or will he go his own way and impose his own views on Turkey -- in which case we will have difficult times."

Though Erdogan failed to win enough seats to call a referendum on a planned new constitution, the vote marked AK's biggest electoral tally since it first came to power in 2002, and Turkish newspapers lauded his success.



E coli death toll reaches 36 in Germany

AFP, Berlin

The death toll from a killer bacteria outbreak rose to 36 yesterday, German health officials said, one day after warning that more fatalities cannot be ruled out.

The Robert Koch Institute (RKI), Germany's national disease agency, said 3,228 people had fallen sick from the virulent EHEC (enterohaemorrhagic E. coli) or the linked kidney ailment haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS).

On Sunday, German officials said 34 people had died in the country, but upped that figure to 35 yesterday.

"For many days the number of new infections from EHEC or HUS communicated to the RKI has declined in the country," the agency said in a statement that confirmed the new toll.

Quakes hit Christchurch again

REUTERS, Wellington

A series of powerful tremors rattled the quake-prone New Zealand city of Christchurch yesterday, destroying buildings and sending boulders tumbling down hillsides nearly four months after a quake killed 181 people.

There were no reported fatalities. New Zealand's Civil Defense said 10 people suffered minor injuries in the quakes, with the strongest put at a magnitude of 6.0 at 2.20 p.m. (10:20 p.m. ET on Sunday) local time.

Buildings were evacuated and infrastructure damaged across the city, still trying to recover from the February 22 6.3 magnitude earthquake.

Lebanon's PM-designate forms new govt

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon's prime minister-designate Najib Mikati yesterday announced the formation of a new 30-member cabinet in which the powerful militant group Hezbollah and its allies hold the majority.

The billionaire Sunni businessman announced his government line-up following nearly five months of arduous negotiations over key portfolios including the interior, justice and telecommunication ministries.

Mikati vowed that his cabinet would be one that represents all Lebanese.

His predecessor, the Western-backed Saad Hariiri, was forced to resign in January after Hezbollah and its allies pulled their ministers from the national unity government.

YEMEN TURMOIL Govt-opposition talks stalled amid clashes

REUTERS, Sanaa

Talks between Yemen's vice president and the opposition stalled yesterday after the country's acting leader ignored the opposition's demand that President Ali Abdullah Saleh quit immediately.

Saleh, forced to seek medical treatment in Saudi Arabia for wounds suffered in an attack on his palace earlier this month, has refused to leave office despite nearly six months of street protests and several diplomatic attempts to remove him.

Fresh clashes broke out in the southern province of Taiz yesterday after the army advanced on militants who attacked them and destroyed several armored vehicles, a local official said.

In Zinjibar -- the provincial capital that fell to Islamists -- a security source said Yemen's army killed two al Qaeda militants and injured several others on yesterday, while one soldier was killed and a further seven injured.

Political paralysis and long-standing conflicts with Islamist insurgents, separat-

ists and rebel tribesmen have fanned Western and regional fears of Yemen collapsing into chaos and giving al Qaeda a stronghold alongside oil shipping routes.

A member of a group of opposition parties calling on Saleh to step down said the country's vice president Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi declined to discuss the president's fate.

"Security, food and electricity issues were discussed," said Sultan al Atwani, referring to the shortages that have all but paralyzed the capital in the aftermath of fierce battles between Saleh's forces and a general who turned on him.

"The political side was not discussed, because the other side said it still needed time and was preoccupied with those matters, as well as the ceasefire," he said.

The third collapse last month of a Gulf-brokered deal to nudge Saleh from power ushered in two weeks of fighting between his forces and those of General Ali al-Mohsen al-Ahmar that engulfed the capital, claimed at least 200 people and forced thousands more to flee.

South Sudan blames north for airstrike

REUTERS, Khartoum

South Sudan's army said northern warplanes bombed its territory yesterday, after fighting in the border state of Southern Kordofan spread across the ill-defined north-south border.

The northern army has been battling southern-aligned troops in Southern Kordofan, the north's main oil state, since June 5. Humanitarian organizations fear a mounting death toll, although few casualties have been confirmed so far.

South Sudan is due to become independent on July 9.

Analysts see Southern Kordofan as a flashpoint in the build-up to the split because it is home to thousands of fighters who sided against Khartoum during the last civil war.

The southern army accused the northern military of bombing its territory in Unity state Friday and again yesterday.

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