

# Syria's Assad blames unrest on saboteurs, vows reforms

Opposition says 'revolt' must go on

AGENCIES  
Syrian President Bashar al-Assad said yesterday "saboteurs" were behind unrest against his rule and that political accommodation could not be reached with gunmen.

In just his third speech since the demonstrations began four months ago, Assad appeared tense as he pledged to pursue a national dialogue on reform and held out the prospect of expanding recent amnesty.

But he said: "We have to distinguish between (protesters, and others who have legitimate demands) and saboteurs. The saboteurs are a small group that tried to exploit the kind majority of the Syrian people to carry out their many schemes," reports Reuters.

No political solution was possible with people carrying weapons, he said. Meanwhile, the coordination

committee, an umbrella group of activists calling for street protests, called for "the revolution to carry on until all its aims have been achieved."

"We consider any dialogue useless that does not turn the page on the current regime," it said in a statement received by AFP. Assad's speech on the three-month-old unrest only served to "deepen the crisis."

As Syrian forces swept through the northwestern border region with Turkey, blocking refugees fleeing a military crackdown, Assad called on the 10,000 who have already crossed the frontier to come home.

"There are those who give them the impression that the state will exact revenge, I affirm that is not true.



The army is there for security," he said in the speech at Damascus University.

A committee on national dialogue will meet in the next few days and invite more than 100 personalities to discuss the criteria and mechanism for constitutional reform, he said. He set a one-month target date for presenting recommendations.

Syria's military operation along the Turkish border follows the biggest protests in four months of anti-Assad unrest on Friday which a violent clampdown has failed to quash.

Security forces shot dead up to 19 protesters on Friday, rights groups said.

In addition to the more than 10,000 Syrian refugees now in Turkey,

a further 10,000 are sheltering close to the border just inside Syria in the olive groves and rich farmland around the town of Jisr al-Shughour, Turkish officials said.

But Syrian human rights campaigner Ammar al-Qurabi said the army was now stopping those still inside Syria from leaving.

"The Syrian army has spread around the border area to prevent frightened residents from fleeing across the border to Turkey," he told Reuters.

Qurabi also accused pro-government forces of attacking people trying to aid the refugees as they fled.

The violence so close to its border challenges Turkey's foreign policy of "zero problems with neighbors" that has seen it befriend the Middle East's autocratic rulers while presenting itself as a champion of democracy.



PHOTO: AFP  
Syrian refugees gather for a protest against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the Turkish Red Crescent camp in the Yayladagi district of the Turkish city of Hatay, two kilometers from the Syrian border, yesterday.

## Pak police detain girl in suicide vest

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani police said yesterday they detained a nine-year-old school girl allegedly strapped with a bomb and told to blow up a police checkpoint in the country's troubled northwest.

Although her intentions could not be confirmed independently, it was the first time such a young girl has been reported carrying explosives in Pakistan and could signal a disturbing new tactic for the Taliban and other militants.

She was arrested about 50 metres from the Islam Darra police checkpoint on the outskirts of Taimargara, the main town in the district of Lower Dir, where Pakistan in 2009 fought to put down a Taliban insurgency.

## Trial of deposed Tunisian president begins

BBC ONLINE

The trial in absentia of ousted Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali has begun, a day after the former leader denied all charges against him.

Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia on 14 January following a popular rising.

He faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted on various charges, including corruption and drug trafficking.

His lawyers said the trial was an attempt by Tunisia's interim government to divert attention from their failure to restore stability in the country.

The Saudi authorities have yet to respond to an extradition request from Tunisia for Ben Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi, and there seems little likelihood of them being brought to justice in person.

The Tunisian authorities have been



Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali

preparing several legal cases against Ben Ali, but yesterday's trial will initially cover charges relating to money, weapons and drugs allegedly left behind in his palaces.

Almost 2kg (4.4lb) of drugs, believed to be cannabis, and \$27m (£16.4m; 18.7m euros) in cash were allegedly discovered. Ben Ali is also being investigated on suspicion of murder, abuse of power, trafficking of archaeological artefacts and money laundering.

Speaking through his Beirut-based lawyers on Sunday, Mr Ben Ali mounted a defence of his 23 years as president, which many Tunisians say was marked by autocratic rule, corruption and human rights abuses.

"He would like everyone to know this criminal prosecution is only a false and shameful image of victor's justice," a statement said.

## India's foreign minister visits Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Indian's foreign minister arrived in Myanmar yesterday for Delhi's first high-level contact with the new government in a country where it is keen to counter China's growing influence.

Once a staunch supporter of Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, India began engaging with the ruling junta in the mid-1990s over security and energy issues.

Underscoring the close ties, Foreign Minister S.M. Krishna will be received by new President Thein Sein in the capital Naypyidaw on Wednesday, a day after talks with counterpart Wunna Maung Lwin, a Myanmar government official said.

## Nato admits Libya air strike led to civilian deaths

REUTERS, Tripoli

Nato has admitted it destroyed a house in Tripoli in which Libyan officials said nine civilians were killed, an incident likely to sow new doubts inside the alliance about its mission in Libya.

The air strike was the clearest case yet of Nato bombing causing multiple civilian casualties, and comes at a time when Nato is already under strain from a campaign that is taking more time and resources than it expected.

A Nato statement said a military missile site was the intended target of the air strikes but that it appeared one of the weapons did not strike that target.

"Nato regrets the loss of innocent civilian lives and takes great care in conducting strikes against a regime determined to use violence against its own citizens," said Lieutenant-General Charles Bouchard, commander of Nato's operations over Libya.

"Although we are still determining the specifics of this event, indications are that a

weapons system failure may have caused this incident," he said.

Reporters taken to the residential area in Tripoli's Souq al-Juma district by Libyan officials early on Sunday saw several bodies being pulled out of the rubble of a destroyed building.

Later, in a hospital, they were shown the bodies of two children and three adults who, officials said, were among those killed in the strike.

Libyan Foreign Minister Abdelati Obeidi said the Nato strike was a "pathetic attempt ... to break the spirit of the people of Tripoli and allow small numbers of terrorists to cause instability and disorder in the peaceful city."

"We will never forgive, we will never forget, we are here; on our land, united with our leader, ready for peace and ready for the fight for our freedom and honour," he told a news conference.

But a spokesman for the rebels fighting to end Muammar Gaddafi's 41-year rule said the Libyan leader was to blame.

## UN nuke chief urges plant risk checks

REUTERS, Vienna

The chief of the United Nations nuclear agency called yesterday on countries with nuclear power plants to carry out a "thorough and transparent risk assessment" of all their reactors within 18 months.

Yukiya Amano, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), also said an urgent international response was needed to help address public safety concerns caused by Japan's atomic crisis.

He made the remarks in a speech to open an international meeting on strengthening nuclear safety after Japan's Fukushima accident three months ago, the world's worst nuclear emergency in a quarter of a century.

"We need to respond urgently to the public anxiety," Amano said. "An international response is essential."

He has asked IAEA officials to review safety standards and report back to him in 12 months on how to strengthen them.

## RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

### Medvedev wants new term

AFP, Moscow

President Dmitry Medvedev yesterday added to the uncertainty surrounding Russia's 2012 presidential polls, saying he wanted a second term but would not stand against powerful predecessor Vladimir Putin.

With just nine months left before the March elections, neither Medvedev, 45, nor Putin, 58, have announced their candidacy amid warnings from businesses that the uncertainty was now hurting the investment climate.

In an interview with the Financial Times whose full transcript was released by the Kremlin, Medvedev kept up the intrigue but also appeared to dismiss definitively specula-



tion that he and Putin could both stand.

"I will tell you one thing: I believe that any leader who holds the post of president simply must want to run," he said.

"Another issue is whether he will take this decision or not, this decision stands somewhat apart from his wishes," Medvedev said.

The interview appeared riddled with mixed messages, with the Kremlin chief saying Russia needed political competition yet expressing concern that running against Putin could hurt the country's development.

"The thing is that Vladimir Putin and I still largely represent the same political force," Medvedev said.

## Real culprits left out

FROM PAGE 1  
Voicing strong resentment, she told The Daily Star that the charge sheet does not identify the masterminds behind Kibria's killing.

"We are utterly frustrated over the supplementary charge sheet and we will file a no-confidence motion against it," Asma told The Daily Star over the phone.

She also said the family and their well-wishers will form a human chain in front of the National Press Club within two to three days.

"I am talking to my son, daughter and relatives to work out a protest programme. We are considering forming a human chain," Asma said.

"This charge sheet is farcical; real culprits are not identified in it," she observed adding that the investigation team did not bother to talk to Kibria's family.

Asked about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's assurance last month that she would look into the matter, an emotional Asma said, "What she [Hasina] had said was nothing but an eye-wash. She lacks feelings for him [Kibria] and sincerity about the murder case."

"I believe there is some mystery as to why the masterminds have not been exposed. I think they [Awami League] do not want to identify the real culprits."

rally at Baidyer Bazar in Habiganj on January 27, 2005.

Police yesterday pressed charges against 24 people including former state minister for home Lutfozzaman Babar and Harkatul Jihad al Islami leader Mufti Abdul Hannan in the murder case.

Of those charge-sheeted, 14 were found to have been involved in the gruesome killing in fresh investigation.

Talking to The Daily Star on May 25, Asma Kibria said she had learned that masterminds behind the murder were not identified in the supplementary charge sheet and that she would not accept it.

She also said she had told the home minister and the attorney general that she would stage demonstrations if the charge sheet was not revised.

Earlier that day, confusion arose over submission of the charge sheet. The police authorities at first said the investigation officer had already submitted the charge sheet to the Habiganj Judicial Magistrate's Court.

However, within an hour, they retracted their statement and said the charge sheet could not be submitted, as the judicial magistrate was not at the court.

Home Secretary Abdus Sobhan Sikder later said the charge sheet was not submitted on May 25 for further scrutiny.

## US confirms Taliban peace talks

BBC ONLINE

Outgoing US Defence Secretary Robert Gates has confirmed that the US is holding "outreach" talks with members of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Gates said talks were "preliminary" but that a political solution was the way "most of these wars end".

It is the first time the US has acknowledged such contact and comes a day after Afghan President Hamid Karzai said peace talks had started.

The US is due to start withdrawing its

97,000 troops from Afghanistan in July.

It aims to gradually hand over all security operations to Afghan security forces by 2014.

"There's been outreach on the part of a number of countries, including the United States," Gates told CNN.

Gates, who will leave office at the end of the month, said the first step had been to ensure the contacts were genuine and influential Taliban members.

Karzai said on Saturday that peace talks involving Afghan officials, the US and other "foreign militaries" were taking place and were "going well".

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