

Italy calls for halt to hostilities in Libya

China, France back rebels; Arab League voices concern

AFP, Tripoli

Italy called yesterday for a halt to Libyan hostilities to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid as the civilian death toll mounted and state media said Nato was bombing highway traffic checkpoints.

On the diplomatic front, China said it recognises Libya's opposition National Transitional Council (NTC) as an "important dialogue partner."

"We have seen the effects of the crisis and therefore also of Nato action not only in eastern and southwestern regions but also in Tripoli," Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini told a parliamentary committee meeting in Rome.

"I believe an immediate humanitarian suspension of hostilities is required in order to create effective humanitarian corridors," while negotiations should also continue on a more formal

ceasefire and peace talks, he said.

"I think this is the most urgent and dramatic point," Frattini continued.

France, which has taken the lead in military operations against Muammar Gaddafi, immediately ruled out any pause in the Libya campaign.

"The coalition and the countries that met as the Abu Dhabi contact group two weeks ago were unanimous on the strategy: we must intensify the pressure on Gaddafi," French foreign ministry spokesman Bernard Valero told reporters.

Nato has been forced to defend the credibility of its air war after the alliance admitted firing a rogue missile that the Libyan regime says killed nine civilians, including children, in Tripoli.

The blunder -- an embarrassment for a mission that prides itself on protecting Libya's people from the regime -- came on the heels of a friendly fire

incident last week in which a column of rebel vehicles was hit by Nato warplanes.

The outgoing head of the Arab League Amr Mussa too voiced concerns about Nato's bombing campaign, in an interview with a British newspaper yesterday.

"When I see children being killed, I must have misgivings. That's why I warned about the risk of civilian casualties," he said.

Libyan state television and official news agency JANA meanwhile reported that Nato warplanes had carried out raids on the towns of Khoms and Nalut in western Libya.

Nato denied the allegation.

China meanwhile said it recognised Libya's rebel opposition as an "important dialogue partner", in a further sign of Beijing's willingness to get more deeply engaged in the Libyan conflict.



US First Lady Michelle Obama participates in a community service project at Vhuthilo Community Centre in Soweto township, Johannesburg, South Africa, yesterday. The US first lady urged young people of Africa to end the AIDS epidemic in a speech at a landmark Soweto church.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

China frees dissident artist Ai Weiwei



REUTERS, Beijing

Dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, detained since April, was released on bail yesterday, state media said, citing Beijing police.

The agency, in a late evening announcement, said the artist had been freed "because of his good attitude in confessing his crimes as well as a chronic disease he suffers from."

Argentina's Kirchner launches reelection bid

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentine President Cristina Kirchner on Tuesday evoked the loss of her hugely popular late husband as she announced her reelection bid against the backdrop of sky-high inflation.

At a televised event at the Casa Rosada (Pink House), the official seat of government in Buenos Aires, Kirchner shrugged off concerns over her health as she rallied supporters to give her a second

Russian opposition party denied registration

AFP, Moscow

The Russian justice ministry said yesterday it would not register an opposition party known for its fierce criticism of Vladimir Putin, denying it an opportunity to take part in upcoming polls.

Last month, former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov, former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov and several other politicians submitted documents to register a new opposition party they dubbed the People's Freedom Party known in

Google breaks billion-visitor barrier on Internet

AFP, San Francisco

Figures released on Tuesday by industry tracker comScore credited Google with being the first online operation to attract more than a billion visitors in a single month.

Slightly more than a billion people went to Google websites in May in what comScore billed as an unprecedented turn-out on the Internet.

Microsoft websites were closing in on the milestone with more than 905 million "unique visitors" for the month, according to comScore. Facebook had the third most visited Web addresses.

China urges US to stay out of sea dispute

REUTERS, Beijing

China urged the United States yesterday to leave the South China Sea dispute to the claimant states, saying that US involvement may make the situation worse, its most direct warning to Washington in recent weeks.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Cui Tiankai's comments to a small group of foreign reporters ahead of a meeting with US officials in Hawaii this weekend come amid the biggest flare-up in regional tension in years over competing maritime sovereignty claims in the South China Sea.

Tension has risen in the region in the past month on concern that China is becoming more assertive in its claim to waters believed to be rich in oil and gas.

Part of the waters are also claimed by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam.

"The United States is not a claimant state to the dispute in the South China Sea and so it's better for the United States to leave the

dispute to be sorted out between claimant states," Cui said.

"While some American friends may want the United States to help in this matter, we appreciate their gesture but more often than not such gestures will only make things more complicated," he said.

"If the United States wants to play a role, it may counsel restraint to those countries that have been taking provocative action and ask them to be more responsible in their behaviour," he said.

"I believe the individual countries are actually playing with fire and I hope the fire will not be drawn to the United States."

While China has called for disputes to be resolved bilaterally, others, including the Philippines, have urged a multilateral approach.

Foreign Affairs spokesman Eduardo Malaya told reporters in Manila the disputes "affect not just the claimant countries but the entire region itself and beyond, and thus call for a multi-stakeholder approach." He did not mention the United States.

EU claim of vegetable ban end 'exaggerated' Says Russia

AFP, Moscow

A European Commission claim that Russia has agreed to immediately lift a ban on EU vegetable imports is "exaggerated", the head of Russia's consumer protection watchdog said yesterday.

"As far as the claim that it will happen immediately, these rumours are exaggerated," Rospotrebnadzor chief Gennady Onishchenko told the Interfax news agency after a Moscow round of vegetable ban negotiations.

He added that the talks ended with a reaffirmation of the principles agreed by European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev during summit talks on June 10.

Russia introduced its embargo on June 2 after the deadly E. coli outbreak in Germany and the two sides agreed at the June 10 summit to move toward a certification system that could pave the way toward a resumption of trade.

About one-fifth of its vegetables imports come from the 27-nation bloc.

A spokesman for the European Commission in Brussels had earlier said he expected the agreements reached yesterday to lead to an imminent resumption of Russian imports.

"We are heading towards an immediate resumption of European vegetables, based on EU certificates that will explain to the Russian authorities that in each EU state there are labs and a surveillance and verification system," said Frederic Vincent, the commission's health spokesman.

Obama urges ceasefire in Sudan

REUTERS, Washington

US President Barack Obama yesterday urged leaders of north and south Sudan to build on their agreement to ease tension in the disputed region of Abyei by undertaking an immediate cease-fire in Southern Kordofan.

"The situation in Southern Kordofan is dire, with deeply disturbing reports of attacks based on ethnicity," Obama said in a statement.

The oil-rich region is in the north but is also home to thousands of south-aligned fighters, which the north sent forces to confront earlier this month.

Human rights activists say the north has targeted the Nuba population. Khartoum denies the accusation.

Bahrain court jails 8 reform activists for life

AFP, Dubai

A Bahrain court yesterday sentenced eight opposition activists to life in prison for "plotting to overthrow" the kingdom's Sunni rulers during Shiite-led protests that rocked the Gulf kingdom, news agency BNA reported.

The National Safety Court of first instance also jailed 13 others for terms ranging from two to 15 years on similar charges, the state news added.

The eight activists who received life terms include Hassan Mashaima, head of the Shiite opposition Haq movement, and Abdulwahab Hussein, who leads the Shiite Wafa Islamic Movement, as well as Shiite rights activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja, who is also a Danish citizen.

MAID BEHEADING ROW Indonesia bans maid travel to S Arabia

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia will suspend sending domestic helpers to Saudi Arabia after the beheading of a maid convicted of murdering her Saudi employer, a minister said yesterday.

"The Indonesian government has decided to impose a moratorium on sending workers to Saudi Arabia," said Labour Minister Muhaimin Iskandar.

The report did not provide further details but local media indicated the move was aimed at domestic workers, who make up about 70 percent of the 1.2 million Indonesian workers in the Gulf state.

The suspension will take effect on August 1 and will remain until the Saudi government agrees to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to protect Indonesian workers' rights, Iskandar said.

Parliament on Tuesday urged the government to stop sending workers overseas without agreements to guarantee their rights, while key members of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's cabinet have been forced to quit over the persistent abuse of Indonesian migrant workers abroad.

Saudi Arabia apologised earlier yesterday for failing to inform Indonesia of the Saturday beheading with a sword of migrant worker Ruyati binti Sapubi, 54, while Jakarta formally protested to Riyadh over the execution.

Obama has failed to lead on climate: Al Gore

Warns human civilisation at great risk

AFP, Washington

Former US vice president and environmental activist Al Gore has accused President Barack Obama of failing to lead on climate change, warning that the very survival of civilization was at stake.

In an impassioned essay in Rolling Stone magazine, Gore sympathized with the challenges facing his fellow Democrat and lambasted big business, political donors, the media and Congress for their role on climate change.

Gore credited the administration with moving the United States "slightly" forward on the issue but said Obama "has thus far failed to use the bully pulpit to make the case for bold action on climate change."

"President Obama has never presented to the American people the magnitude of the climate crisis," wrote Gore, who narrowly lost the 2000 presidential election and won the



2007 Nobel Peace Prize for his advocacy on climate change.

"Here is the core of it: we are destroying the climate balance that is essential to the survival of our civilization. This is not a distant or abstract threat; it is happening now," Gore wrote.

"The United States is the only nation that can rally a global effort to save our future. And the president is the only person who can rally the United States," he said.

Gore lashed out at those who ask if human-made climate change is real, noting that nine of the hottest years in recorded history were in the last 13 years.

He pointed to extreme events including floods that displaced 20 million last year in Pakistan, major fires or drought in places from Russia to Texas to Australia, and accelerating loss of polar ice that threatens to raise sea levels and deluge low-lying islands and coasts.

Syria warns against outside interference

AFP, Damascus

Syria strongly rejected on Tuesday any foreign intervention over its deadly crackdown on a pro-democracy revolt and singled out its former colonial ruler France, which is pressing the UN Security Council to act.

"We can reach consensus despite opposing points of view," Foreign Minister Walid Muallem told a Damascus press conference. "No one outside (Syria) can impose on us their point of view."

And while not directly accusing neighbouring Turkey of meddling, Muallem hinted that Ankara, which has called for democratic reforms in Syria and is hosting thousands of fugitives from the government's crackdown, should "reconsider its position."

"We say to those in Europe who are criticising us that they should stop interfering in Syrian affairs and sowing trouble in

order to apply plans contrary to Syrian national interests."

Muallem said that sanctions against Syria adopted by the 27-nation bloc were tantamount to economic warfare.

Since the mid-March outbreak of disturbances in Syria, "not a single European leader has come to Syria to discuss what is going on," he said. Instead, "they have begun imposing a series of sanctions that today are hitting the livelihood of Syrians, which is equivalent to war."

Muallem accused France of pursuing a "colonialist agenda under the guise of human rights" and said French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe had colonial "illusions."

More than 1,300 civilians have been killed and some 10,000 people arrested, according to Syrian rights groups, in the crackdown that has seen troops dispatched to crush revolt in cities across the country.

CONFIDENCE VOTE Greek govt survives

BBC ONLINE

The Greek government won a critical vote of confidence yesterday as it struggles to win support for extra austerity measures and avoid a debt default.

Prime Minister George Papandreou's new cabinet was approved in parliament by 155 votes to 143, with two abstentions.

MPs will now be asked to approve 28bn euros (£25bn) of cuts, tax rises, fiscal reforms and privatisation plans.

Eurozone ministers say the legislation must be passed to receive a 12bn-euro loan Greece needs to pay its debts.

Papandreou reshuffled his cabinet last week after weeks of demonstrations against his handling of the crisis.

Shady realtors choke Turag

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foreshores, but also destroyed the marine ecology and biodiversity in the area and caused massive pollution, noted Munir.

He termed it an unmindful killing of a river. "I am trying to save the river environment only, but it is the foremost duty of BIWTA to save the river itself."

The owner of Star Housing project alone has earth-filled at least 10,000 square-foot of the river bed and 60,000 square-foot of the foreshores, mentioned BIWTA officials.

Golam Faruq Panna, managing director of Star Housing, admitted he has earth-filled two acres of land on the river bed and foreshores at a cost of Tk 40 lakh during the last two

years.

"So far none has asked me to stop the work," he told The Daily Star adding, he neither had permission from Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkhya (Rajuk) nor DoE or the BIWTA licence for earth-filling.

Md Sharif Afzal Hossain, Dhaka river port (Sadarghat) officer and deputy director of BIWTA, however, claimed he served notices upon all the river encroachers and filed cases with Shah Ali Police Station at Mirpur, which yielded no effective result.

According to BIWTA records, it served notice on Golam Faruq on March 3 and filed a case against him on the 28th.

The realtor has in fact earth-filled an area of

around five acres with 20 lakh cubic foot of sand and reportedly sold out plots and finally disappeared, said Munir Chowdhury.

The enforcement team excavated a portion of the filled-up area and piled it up throughout yesterday. It would take at least a week to clear off the earth, he added.

Police have filed charge sheet against four accused including Faruq, said Md Anisur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Shah Ali Police Station.

The law enforcers could not arrest the accused as they have been absconding, added the OC.

Asked why BIWTA could not stop the encroachment at an initial stage, Sharif Afzal attributed it to non-cooperation of police.

"We had to wait for the rainy season to mobilise the equipment like tugboat, pontoon and excavator to the site," he added.

A signboard of Akij Group at the site claims 75 decimals of land next to Star Housing on the wetland lying between the embankment and river foreshores.

Contacted over the phone, Finance Manager Abul Islam of the company said they would develop plots for a housing project for their officials.

But later he mentioned it would not be possible because the land is earmarked as a flood-flow zone in the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) of the capital.

"We will go on with the project in case the government permits," he added.