

Libya hits back at ICC warrant for Gaddafi

AFP, Tripoli

Gaddafi's government has hit back at an International Criminal Court arrest warrant for war crimes against the Libyan leader, charging the tribunal was just a tool of European powers.

On the ground, rebel fighters on yesterday captured a large arms depot from pro-Gaddafi forces in the desert near their mountain enclave southwest of Tripoli in big boost to their resupply, an AFP correspondent at the scene said.

Human rights bodies and the West, meanwhile, hailed the ICC's move on Monday that came on the 100th day of a Nato bombing campaign.

Libya rejected the warrants issued for Gaddafi, 69, his son Seif al-Islam, 39, and the head of Libyan intelligence, Abdullah al-Senussi, 62, for atrocities committed in a bloody uprising that began mid-February.

The ruling is a "cover for Nato which is still trying to assassinate Gaddafi",



said Libya's justice minister, Mohammed al-Gamudi.

Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Kaaïm said the ICC "functions as a European foreign policy vehicle."

"It is a political court which serves its European paymasters," he said, adding: "Our own courts will deal with any human rights abuses and other crimes committed in the course of conflict in Libya."

In the latest fighting around the

southwestern mountains, the rebels captured a network of bunkers in the desert around 25 kilometres (15 miles) south of the hilltown, an AFP correspondent at the scene said.

The capture of large numbers of rockets, machine guns and other munitions was a major boost for rebel hopes of driving on Tripoli from the frontline on the other side of the Nafusa Mountains, which now lies just 50 kilometres (30 miles) from the capital.

Hundreds of rebel fighters, accompanied by local civilians, combed through the warren of caches, some of which had been blown up in air strikes but others of which remained intact.

The rebel fighters overcame heavy multiple rocket fire from loyalist troops to seize their booty. Rebel commanders said they also ambushed a government convoy, destroying three vehicles.

Nato said warplanes under its command hit three tanks and six armoured personnel carriers in the Zintan area on Monday.



Clad in white radiation protection gear, activists of Greenpeace hold a banner denouncing Tokyo Electric Power Corporation (Tepco) before its shareholders meeting in Tokyo yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Condemned Sudanese leader

Bashir arrives late in China

AFP, Beijing



Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir arrived in China yesterday for talks with President Hu Jintao, as the United States and rights groups criticised Beijing for hosting an alleged war criminal.

Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity that occurred in Sudan's western Darfur region, where about 300,000 people have died since 2003.

An AFP journalist saw Bashir's presidential plane touch down in Beijing in the early hours, a day later than planned, after Sudan's foreign ministry said it was forced to choose a "new route" while flying over Turkmenistan.

Hidden treasure found under

Nepalese palace

AFP, Kathmandu

Workers renovating a former royal palace in the Nepalese capital have discovered a huge stash of gold and silver ornaments weighing more than 300 kilograms (661 pounds), the government said yesterday.

Three boxes of treasures, thought to be more than 500 years old, were hidden in a store room under the sprawling 16th-century Hanuman Dhoka palace, a Unesco world heritage site, a spokesman for the culture ministry told AFP.

"There are coins and ornaments that look like offerings to the gods and goddesses," said the spokesman.

Syria's exiled opposition seeks Russian support

REUTERS, Moscow

Members of Syria's opposition in exile said they would use a visit to Moscow yesterday to urge Russia to condemn a violent crackdown on protests in the Middle Eastern nation.

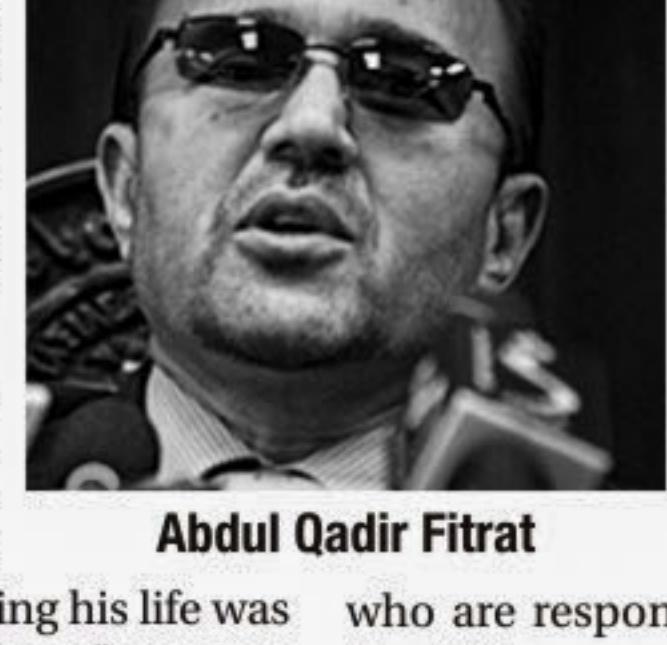
Opponents of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad were due to meet Moscow's Africa envoy Mikhail Margelov, who has been involved in Russian efforts to mediate in North Africa and the Middle East -- regions that have been hit by a wave of popular uprisings.

Rights groups say 1,300 civilians have been killed in demonstrations in a three-month revolt against Assad's rule.

Syrian authorities say more than 250 soldiers and

Afghan central bank chief flees to US

AFP, Kabul



Abdul Qadir Fitrat

Afghanistan's central bank governor has resigned and fled to the United States, saying his life is in danger over a corruption probe targeting influential figures connected to the government.

President Hamid Karzai's government yesterday dismissed the claims made by Abdul Qadir Fitrat, chairman of Da Afghanistan Bank, insisting his life was not under threat and calling him a "runaway governor".

"I announce my resignation from the position of governor of the central bank of Afghanistan immediately," Fitrat said in a statement issued as he visited the United States, where he reportedly has permanent residency.

"Unfortunately, central bank's independence on regulatory and supervisory matters has recently been undermined by the repeated interference of high-level political

authorities," he said. The governor has claimed his role in an investigation into the near-collapse last year of Kabul Bank, the war-torn country's largest private lender, had put him in peril.

"My life was completely in danger and this was particularly true after I spoke to the parliament and exposed some people who are responsible for the crisis of Kabul Bank," he was quoted as saying by the BBC.

In April, Fitrat named in parliament high-profile figures who were allegedly involved in corruption scandal amounting to nearly \$1 billion at Kabul Bank, which handles the pay of thousands of Afghan civil servants.

The bank was founded in 2004 by Sher Khan Farnood, a leading international poker player. Its co-owners included Mahmood Karzai, a brother of President Hamid Karzai, and a brother of Vice President Mohammad Qasim Fahim.

Egypt court dissolves local councils

AFP, Cairo

A Cairo court yesterday ordered the dissolution of local councils, whose representatives were elected under the regime of ousted president Hosni Mubarak, a judicial official told AFP.

Judge Kamal Lamei of the Supreme Administrative Court "has ordered the dissolution of the local councils following several lawsuits accusing the councillors of belonging to (Mubarak's) National Democratic Party," which is now dissolved, the official said.

The ruling, which came ahead of local elections due to take place in 2012, can still be appealed and it would now be up to the government on how to proceed, said the official.

FUKUSHIMA NUKE PLANT Radioactive water leakage found

REUTERS, Tokyo

Tonnes of radioactive water were discovered yesterday to have leaked into the ground from Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant, the latest in a series of leaks at the plant damaged in a March earthquake and tsunami, the country's nuclear watchdog said.

More than three months after the disaster, authorities are struggling to bring under control damaged reactors at the power plant, 240 km (150 miles) north of Tokyo.

About 15 metric tonnes of water with a low level of radiation leaked from a storage tank at the plant on the Pacific coast, the Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency said.

Plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Co (Tepco) said it was investigating the cause of the leak which was later repaired.

Vast amounts of water contaminated with varying levels of radiation have accumulated in storage tanks at the plant after being used to cool reactors damaged when their original cooling systems were knocked out by the March 11 disaster.

Dealing with that radioactive water has been a major problem for Tepco, which is trying to use a decontamination system that cleans water so it can be recycled to cool the reactors.

But the system has encountered technical glitches and officials have said the water could spill into the Pacific Ocean unless the system was operating properly.

Israel arrests 4 Hamas MPs

AFP, Nablus

Israeli troops yesterday arrested four Hamas MPs in the northern West Bank, Palestinian security sources and officials from the Islamist group said.

Three of them were arrested in the early hours in the northern city of Nablus, while a fourth was picked up in Salfit, a town some 15 kilometres (nine miles) further south, they said.

In Nablus, troops arrested three MPs -- Nawaf Amer, who is also a journalist for the Al-Quds television channel, Fuad Khoafash, director of the Ahrar centre for prisoners and human rights, and Firas Jarrah, a former prisoner.

Khmer Rouge genocide suspect walks out of trial

AFP, Phnom Penh

Khmer Rouge survivors reacted with dismay yesterday as a top regime leader walked out of his genocide trial for a second day and a co-defendant sought acquittal under a 15-year-old amnesty.

The elderly suspects' defiant attitude underlined the challenges facing Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court in a case long awaited by victims of the 1970s communist movement, which wiped out nearly a quarter of the population.

"Brother Number Two" Nuon Chea, wearing a woolly hat and his trademark sunglasses, refused to stay for the second day of proceedings focused on preliminary legal objections by his co-defendant Ieng Sary.

Nuon Chea said he would only return to "actively participate" when his own case was discussed, and was escorted out of court by security guards.

"Nuon Chea is a bad person. I am quite disappointed with his behaviour," said farmer Thein Ouen, 49, one of hundreds of people watching the hearing from the public gallery.

"He does not want to take part in the trial. We want him to tell us the truth about the Khmer Rouge, but he is trying to hide it."

On Monday the 84-year-old had left the courtroom after only half an hour in protest at the handling of the investigation and legal proceedings.

Suu Kyi delivers prestigious BBC annual lecture

AFP, Bangkok



The recent uprisings in the Middle East have given fresh hope to people in military-dominated Myanmar, democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi said.

"The universal human aspiration to be free has been brought home to us by the stirring developments in the Middle East," the Nobel Peace Prize winner said in a BBC radio lecture broadcast yesterday.

"The Burmese are as excited by these events as peoples elsewhere," she said, according to an official transcript.

"Do we envy the people of Tunisia and Egypt? Yes, we do envy them their quick and peaceful transitions. But more than envy is a sense of solidarity and of renewed commitment to our cause, which is the cause of all women and men who value human dignity and freedom," Suu Kyi added.

Pro-democracy protests in 1988 and 2007 were brutally crushed by the military rulers of Myanmar, also known as Burma.

Suu Kyi was freed in November after seven straight years of house arrest, less than a week

after an election that critics said was a charade aimed at preserving military rule behind a civilian facade in Myanmar.

She has previously said she wants to launch her first political tour of the country since her release, although a schedule has not yet been announced.

Security is a top concern for the party as Suu Kyi's convoy was attacked in 2003 in an ambush apparently organised by a regime frightened by her popularity.

The opposition leader, who turned 66 this month, has won international acclaim for her peaceful resistance in the face of oppression.

Space junk narrowly misses station

AFP, Moscow

A piece of debris travelling thousands of miles an hour narrowly missed the International Space Station yesterday in a harrowing incident that forced the crew to scramble to their rescue craft.

Russian space officials told news agencies the piece of space junk whizzed past only 250 meters (820 ft) from the 13-year-old orbiter -- a microscopic distance in space terms.

The Russian space agency separately issued a terse statement noting that "a situation occurred" involving "an object of unknown origin".

"After the object passed, the crew was allowed to return to their regular working schedule," said the statement.



Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (C), flanked by Cemil Cicek (L) and Bülent Arinc (R) attends a swearing-in ceremony in the Turkish Parliament in Ankara yesterday. Turkey's new parliament opened in a tense atmosphere as the main opposition and Kurdish deputies boycotted the ceremony in protest over law-makers kept in prison.

Rajapaksa denies Indian pressure over Tamil issue

PTI, Colombo



Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa yesterday denied that he had come under pressure from India to offer the minority Tamils a political solution, saying that any settlement to the matter will have to be approved by Parliament.

"There was no pressure from India on the thirteenth amendment of thirteen plus," Rajapaksa told reporters.

Responding to a query on the visit by Indian National Security Advisor Shiv Shankar Menon, Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao and Defence Secretary Pradeep Kumar, he said the Indians had only discussed with him routine bilateral issues.

The Indian officials visited Colombo early this month in the backdrop of a call by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa to impose economic sanctions on Sri Lanka.

Rajapaksa said Menon had indicated to him the proposal made by his own Cabinet minister Douglas Devananda on the need



for Sri Lankan parliament to thrash out the question of a political solution to the island's ethnic question.

He said appointing a parliamentary select committee on the ethnic question was not a delaying tactic.

"Any solution that comes up will have to be approved in parliament," the president said. "I will back any solution

approved by parliament."

"While having talks with political parties (with Tamil National Alliance) we can have PSC talks at the same time. If we wait for political party talks to end and then have PSC discussions, this will cause delays," he said.

The president said the election for the northern provincial council will be held "next year".

He wanted the parties to start preparing for the polls which will be the first ever for the council since separated from the east in the supreme court ordered merger of 2007.

OIC changes name to stress cooperation

AFP, Jeddah

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference, based in the Saudi city of Jeddah, yesterday changed its name to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.

The Islamist world's largest grouping said in a statement that the name change was approved by its 57 members at a conference in Astana, Kazakhstan, of its foreign ministers.

The change comes almost 42 years after the founding of the inter-governmental organisation in reaction to the August 1969 arson attack on Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest in Islam.

Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu has served as its secretary general since January 2005.