

Libyan rebels push towards Tripoli

Regime denies negotiation claim

REUTERS, Al-Qawalish

Rebel fighters seized a village south of the Libyan capital and another group advanced towards Tripoli from the east on Wednesday in the biggest push in weeks towards Muammar Gaddafi's main stronghold.

Rebels firing their rifles into the air in celebration poured into the village of Al-Qawalish, just over 100 km southwest of Tripoli, after a six-hour battle with pro-Gaddafi forces who had been holding the town.

Rushing through an abandoned checkpoint where government troops had left tents and half-eaten bread in their rush to get away, the rebels ripped down green pro-Gaddafi flags, said a Reuters reporter in the village.

Farther north, on Libya's Mediterranean coast, rebel commanders said they had pushed westwards from the city of Misrata, taking them to within about 130 km of Tripoli. But they were taking casualties from government artillery.

The advances came as reports proliferated

that Gaddafi --under pressure from a five-month uprising against his rule, sanctions and a Nato bombing campaign -- was seeking a deal under which he would step down.

His government has denied any such negotiations are under way, but a senior Libyan official told Reuters on Wednesday there were signs a solution to the conflict could be found by the start of August.

The rebel advances followed weeks of largely static fighting. Heavily armed Gaddafi forces still lie between the rebels and Tripoli, and previous rebel advances have either bogged down or quickly turned into retreats.

But with Al-Qawalish now in rebel hands, they can advance northeast to the larger town of Garyan, which controls the main highway leading into the capital.

The rebels began firing rockets and mortars towards Al-Qawalish at dawn, sending cries of "Allahu Akbar!" or "God is greatest!" echoing through groves of olive, almond and fig trees with each outgoing blast.



A four-year-old Somali boy waits behind a fence with others in hope to be recognised as a refugee which will entitle him to receive food rations on a regular basis. Hundreds of thousands of refugees are arriving in the camp, hoping to find food and water as a severe drought continues to decimate the region.

PHOTO: AFP

Boat sinks off Sudan killing 197 migrants

BBC ONLINE

About 200 people drowned in the Red Sea when a boat carrying migrants to Saudi Arabia sank off Sudan's coast after catching fire, Sudanese media said yesterday.

Only three people have been rescued, according to the Sudanese Media Centre, a state-linked news agency.

A governing party official told the BBC he believed the passengers were Somalis likely to be fleeing the drought.

It is the worst drought in 60 years. Its effects have been compounded by the violence in Somalia, which has been racked by constant war for more than 20 years.

The Red Sea is a well-known trafficking route for migrants wanting to reach Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

The boat had set sail from Sudan's Red Sea State.

No job for Thaksin

Says Thailand's newly elected leader

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's next leader Yingluck Shinawatra yesterday dismissed mounting speculation that her brother Thaksin, who was ousted in a 2006 coup, will be given an official role under her tenure.

Yingluck dismissed media reports that said Thaksin, who lives in self-imposed exile in Dubai to avoid a jail term for corruption, was likely to become a government trade envoy promoting the kingdom's exports abroad.

"It's not true, there is no such position appointed," Yingluck told reporters in Bangkok for a meeting with economic advisers.

"There is no role for Thaksin. He is only giving moral support and advice," she said.

Ethno-political clashes kill 24 in Pakistan

AFP, Karachi

Another night of violence blamed on political and ethnic tensions in Pakistan's biggest city Karachi killed at least 24 people, officials said yesterday.

"We have got reports that at least 24 people have fallen victim to targeted killings since Tuesday evening," Sharfuddin Memon, an official of the southern Sindh province's home ministry, told AFP.

He said the police had arrested 12 men with guns and ammunitions for alleged involvement in the targeted killings.

A security official said tensions in the city's western Orangi and Qasba neighbourhoods, where gunmen were still opening fire intermittently, had left streets deserted and markets closed.

"Police and paramilitary troops are on the patrol in the troubled neighbourhoods to avert further violence," Memon said.

Feelings are running high between the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and Awami National Party (ANP), which represent different ethnic communities and straddle volatile political fault lines.

Both the rival political parties claim the dead included their activists and supporters.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan says 490 people were killed in targeted killings in the first half of this year. Last year, 748 people were killed. The figure for 2009 was 272.

Cargo plane crash kills 9 in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

An Azerbaijani cargo plane carrying supplies for the Nato mission in Afghanistan crashed into treacherous mountains killing all nine crew on board outside the Afghan capital Kabul, officials said yesterday.

The plane took off from Baku at 9:26pm Tuesday with 18 tons of supplies for the US-led mission and crashed as it tried to land at Bagram air base to the north of Kabul, officials said.

"Our teams have recovered the wreckage of the plane. Unfortunately all nine crew members have been killed, there are no survivors," said Afghan transport ministry spokesman Nangyalai Qalatwal.

The nine crews were from Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

Amnesty slams Syria for crimes against humanity

Troops kill 22 in flashpoint city

AFP, Damascus

Syrian troops killed at least 22 people in an assault on the flashpoint central city of Hama that prompted US calls for an immediate pull-back, human rights activists said yesterday.

Troops also wounded more than 80 people as they pushed through improvised roadblocks put up by residents after massive anti-government protests in the city of some 800,000 people, the National Organisation for Human Rights said.

"A large number of Hama residents have fled either to the nearby town of Al-Salamiya or towards Damascus," the rights group's chairman Ammar Qurabi said, adding that there were "continued search and kill operations and arrests in the city."

London-based watchdog Amnesty International accused the authorities of committing crimes against humanity in its deadly crackdown on the unprecedented anti-government protests that have swept the country since mid-March.

Landslide kills 18 in China

AFP, Beijing

A landslide triggered by torrential rain left 18 people dead and two others injured in northern China, the local government said yesterday, as weather officials warned of more downpours to come.

The landslide tore through the town of Lueyang in Shaanxi province on Tuesday, engulfing 12 houses, the county government said in a statement.

Rescuers pulled out 17 bodies and three survivors, one of whom later died in hospital, the government said.

Local flood authorities in Sichuan said a further seven people had been killed and 13 were missing due to heavy rains since June 30.

At least 279 people had died in China in natural disasters in June alone -- a large portion of whom were killed by rain-triggered accidents such as floods and mudslides.

Russia to claim Arctic border expansion

AFP, Moscow

Russia will next year submit a claim to the United Nations on expanding its borders in the Arctic, a top official said yesterday, in a move that could spark tensions with its polar neighbours.

Russia is hoping its claim will win it an additional million square kilometres of territory and the rights to explore for more gas reserves in the energy-rich Arctic.

It had alarmed its Arctic neighbours including Canada and Norway when it planted a flag on the ocean floor under the North Pole in 2007 in a symbolic staking of its claim over the region.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had said last month that Russia would "strongly and consistently" defend its interests in the Arctic although it remained in constant contact with its regional partners over the issue.

The five Arctic nations -- Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States -- are locked in a tight race to gather evidence to support their claims amid reports that global warming could leave the region ice-free by 2030.

The Arctic seabed is believed to hold 90 billion barrels, or 13 percent of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30 percent of the gas resources yet to be found, according to the US Geological Survey.

Russia signed a treaty with Norway last September to end a 40-year dispute over a 176,000-square-kilometre (67,950-square-mile) maritime area straddling the two countries' economic zones in the Barents Sea and the Arctic Ocean.



Nepalese riot police scuffle with exiled Tibetans during their attempts to celebrate the Dalai Lama's 76th birthday in Kathmandu yesterday. Riot police arrested three Tibetan exiles.

PHOTO: AFP

Bahrain jails 3 for spying for Iran

AFP, Dubai

Bahrain has sentenced one of its citizens and two foreigners to 10 years in prison for spying for Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Akhbar al-Khaleej newspaper reported yesterday.

Bahrain's high criminal court sentenced "three defendants to 10 years in prison for spying for the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, one of them a Bahraini and two others" who worked as diplomats in Iran's embassy in Kuwait and were sentenced in absentia, the daily reported.

The prosecution said the three "spied from 2002 until April 2010 in the Kingdom of Bahrain and abroad," and gave the Guards economic and military information, Akhbar al-Khaleej said.

UN hails progress in women's rights

Says discrimination major threat

AFP, New York

Women around the world enjoy more rights than ever before but still face discrimination in the workplace and far too often fall victim to violence at home, a UN report said Tuesday.

The document issued by UN Women, the new agency headed by Chile's former president Michelle Bachelet, hailed the progress women have made at the ballot box, noting that "virtually universal" suffrage now is the rule around the world, compared to a century ago when just two countries allowed women to vote.

But even as women enjoy greater influence and political rights, restrictions in the personal realm have slowed their progress.

"Too often women are denied control over their bodies, denied a voice in decision-making and denied protection from violence," the report said.

"Some 600 million women, more than half the world's working women, are in vulnerable employment, trapped in insecure jobs, often outside the purview of labor legislation," it said.

The document said there are some 186 countries worldwide that have ratified an international convention endorsing the eradication of discrimination against women.

The report also found women's wages are as much as 30 percent less than those received by men.

Japan to 'stress test' all nuclear reactors

AFP, Tokyo

Japan said yesterday it will run "stress tests" on all its nuclear reactors in the wake of the Fukushima Daiichi atomic accident sparked by the March 11 earthquake and tsunami disaster.

The ongoing crisis, the world's worst atomic accident since Chernobyl 25 years ago, has ignited debate in Japan about the safety of nuclear power, which before the disaster accounted for a third of its electricity needs.

The centre-left government ordered a round of initial tests on the quake-prone country's other atomic plants after the disaster, and said the new stress tests aimed to reassure the public that the facilities are safe.

Speaking on television, Trade, Economy and Industry Minister said: "We are planning the stress tests to gain the understanding of local residents. We will get further confidence from the people and will restart operations at some plants."

He did not give details of what the tests would entail or when they would start, saying only they would commence soon.

An official at his ministry told AFP that the tests would be modelled on those announced recently by the European Union.

Following the Fukushima crisis, the EU ordered tests for its 143 nuclear plants, saying it would look at how they could withstand extreme and multiple disasters previously considered unthinkable.

Pakistan bars Laden family from leaving

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani commission investigating how Osama bin Laden lived undetected for years in the country has ordered the government not to repatriate his surviving family without its consent.

Pakistan took custody of the al-Qaeda leader's two Saudi and one Yemeni widows and around 10 of their children, after US Navy SEALs killed him on May 2.

Pakistan has given CIA agents access to the wives but the commission's move is likely to delay their departure.

The four-member panel, chaired by a supreme court judge, has the authority to summon anyone and a security official told AFP that bin Laden's family would be no exception. There is no timeline for it to complete its investigation.

NEWS IN brief

Iceland's Hekla volcano 'ready to erupt'

AFP, Reykjavik

One of Iceland's most feared volcanoes, Hekla, looks ready to erupt, with measurement instruments showing likely magma movement, an Icelandic geophysicist told AFP Wednesday.

The volcano is close to the ash-spewing Eyjafjoell, which last year caused the world's biggest airspace shut down since World War II, affecting more than

Australia lifts Indonesia live cattle ban

AFP, Sydney

Australia announced yesterday that it would lift the ban on live cattle exports to Indonesia and resume trade with additional safeguards in place to address animal cruelty concerns.

Indonesia immediately welcomed the announcement, which will see livestock trading resume in time for Eid-al Fitr celebrations of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan at the end of August.

Lone boat heads to Gaza as flotilla stalls in Greece

AFP, Jerusalem

A lone French yacht was yesterday headed for Gaza after sneaking out of Greek waters in defiance of a ban on the departure of aid ships aiming to run Israel's blockade on the coastal strip.

The MV Dignite/Al Karama, which left Greek waters early on Tuesday with 12 on board, is heading slowly towards Gaza, a spokesman for the French Boat to Gaza campaign told AFP, saying they had not yet given up hope they would be joined by others.

Chinese to be taught in all Swedish schools

AFP, Tockholm

Within a decade, all Swedish primary schools should offer Chinese lessons, Sweden's education minister was quoted as saying Wednesday, insisting the move was needed to improve competitiveness.

"Not everyone in the business world speaks English. Chinese will be much more important from an eco-