

All set for South Sudan's independence today

AFP, Juba

Just hours before south Sudan becomes independent, a mood of joyful expectation swept through its capital yesterday, with crowds dancing in the streets amid last-minute preparations for today's historic ceremony.

World leaders started to arrive on the eve of independence, including UN chief Ban Ki-moon.

"The people of south Sudan have achieved their dream. The UN and the international community will continue to stand by south Sudan. I am very happy to be here," Ban told reporters at the UN airport in Juba.

The UN Security Council yesterday adopted a resolution creating a UN mission in South Sudan that will include 7,000 peacekeepers and 900 civilians tasked with helping the fledgling nation.

Earlier in the day, processions of ex-veterans, soldiers and civilians, including women's groups, marched through the city centre in the hot sun, some dressed in traditional clothing, playing drums and dancing.

The main ceremony will include military parades, prayers, raising the newly proclaimed Republic of South Sudan's flag and the country's first president, Salva Kiir, signing the transitional constitution.

Millions of southern Sudanese, and foreign

dignitaries including 30 African leaders, will mark the birth of the world's newest nation.

Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir repeated his claim to stand by the new nation on Thursday, while adding that good future relations between the two countries depends on secure borders and non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

Southern officials have said that Bashir will be the main guest of honour.

But French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe and British Foreign Minister William Hague will represent their country in the ceremony.

Among the US delegation flying to Juba are Washington's ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, Colin Powell, former secretary of state and a key figure in the CPA negotiations, and US envoy to Sudan Princeton Lyman.

South Sudan's celebrations come after more than 50 years of conflict between the southern rebels and successive Khartoum governments that left the region in ruins, millions of people dead and a legacy of mutual mistrust.

The 2005 comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) that finally ended the conflict, and which was signed under intense pressure from foreign countries, particularly the United States, Britain and Norway, paved the way for a referendum on southern independence in January.



PHOTO: AFP

Women from a cultural dance group parade through Juba, the capital of soon-to-be independent South Sudan yesterday, a day before South Sudan secedes from the north and becomes the world's newest nation.

North Sudan recognises South Sudan

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan yesterday announced its official recognition of the new Republic of South Sudan a day before its southern neighbour becomes the world's newest nation.

"The Republic of Sudan announces that it recognises the Republic of South Sudan as an independent state, according to the borders existing on January 1, 1956, Minister of Presidential Affairs Bakri Hassan Saleh said in a statement broadcast on state television.

"The government of Sudan is committed to implementing the comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) and to resolving all the post-referendum issues," Saleh added.

Sudan's President Bashir vowed after the referendum results were announced that his government would be the first to recognise an independent south.

YEMEN UNREST

Protesters reject US, Saudi interference

AFP, Sanaa

Tens of thousands rallied in Sanaa yesterday to "reject" Yemen's dependence on the United States and Saudi Arabia, saying badly burned President Ali Abdullah Saleh was "politically dead" after a TV appearance.

Meanwhile, thousands of Saleh supporters staged a rival rally in the capital's southern district on what they have named "The Friday of thanks" over Saleh's health, chanting "The people want Ali Abdullah Saleh."

In Sittine Road, west of Sanaa, anti-Saleh protesters gathered carrying banners reading: "Saudis and Americans, keep out of Yemen's affairs" and "Ali Saleh is politically dead."

A similar rally took place in Yemen's second-largest city Taiz, south of Sanaa.

Saleh, 69, has been hospitalised in Saudi Arabia, and out of the public eye, since he was badly injured in a bomb attack at his presidential palace last. Amid growing speculation over his condition, he finally appeared on Yemeni television on Thursday night.

In his Thursday speech, Saleh said he had undergone "more than eight successful operations and accused "elements of terrorism" and elements "linked to the terrorists" of having targeted him in the attack, without saying who he was referring to.

US accuses Iran of arming Iraqi militants

AFP, Washington

Iran is stepping up its support for Shia militants in Iraq, supplying them with more sophisticated weapons, the top US military officer said Thursday.

Admiral Mike Mullen said Iran had made a decision to curtail its support for Shia factions in 2008 but has now increased its activity in Iraq, sending in lethal arms that were being used against American forces.

"Iran is very directly supporting extremist troops which are killing our troops," Mullen told reporters at Pentagon.

Mullen also said the arms were flowing into Iraq with the full knowledge of Iran's leadership.

UN moves to ease Libya sanctions

US House votes to bar military aid to rebels

AFP, Benghazi, Washington

Fearing an acute shortage of medical and other essential supplies, Libya's rival factions are in talks with the United Nations to ease international sanctions on the war-torn nation, AFP has learned.

Well-placed UN officials said representatives from Libya's rebel council and Muammar Gaddafi's regime held talks last week with the World Health Organisation aimed at drawing up a list of items for sanctions relief.

Aid groups across Libya have reported shortages of basic items such as vaccines and painkillers. They say stockpiles in the Gaddafi-controlled west and the rebel-held east have been rapidly depleted by nearly five months of war.

If the two sides could reach a deal on which items are needed on both sides of the

Libyan front line, diplomats said it would be up to Tripoli to send a formal request to the UN sanctions committee in New York.

The details do not yet appear to have been agreed, but could involve Libyan assets abroad being unfrozen to pay for goods, or cash being transferred to the World Health Organisation to procure goods on Libya's behalf.

Meanwhile, the US House of Representatives on Thursday rejected cutting off funds for Nato-led operations in Libya but voted to forbid the Pentagon from arming, training, or advising the strife-torn nation's rebels.

By a 225-201 margin, lawmakers debating an annual US Defence Department spending bill adopted an amendment restricting Washington's ability to help fighters looking to overthrow longtime Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi.

US executes Mexican inmate

UN condemns act

AFP, Geneva

The United States violated international law by executing a Mexican national who was denied his consular rights, UN human rights chief Navi Pillay said yesterday.

Texas carried out the controversial execution of Leal Garcia on Thursday, despite calls for reprieve from both the White House and Mexican government.

"The execution of Garcia places the US in breach of international law," she added.

At least 51 Mexicans on death row in the US, including Garcia, were not informed after their arrests that they could get legal help from the Mexican consulate, a violation of the Vienna Convention.

Garcia, 38, was executed at 6:21pm Thursday in a Huntsville, Texas prison for the 1994 rape and murder of a 16-year-old girl, state officials said.

Israel bars 'flytilla' activists

AFP, Ben Gurion Airport

Officials at Israel's main airport yesterday refused entry to 69 people they said were pro-Palestinian activists, and said most would be repatriated on the first available flights.

Immigration spokeswoman Sabine Hadad said that four people had already flown out of Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv, and the remainder were in custody waiting to travel.

"They are from Spain, the Netherlands, many from France, Bulgaria, the United States, Germany," she told AFP. "Legally they have been refused entry, they are not in Israel."



PHOTO: AFP

Space shuttle Atlantis blasts off from launch pad at Kennedy Space Center, Florida yesterday. This historic lift off marks the end of 30-year-old US shuttle program.

Egypt's mass demos target new rulers

AFP, Cairo

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets across Egypt yesterday to defend the uprising that toppled president Hosni Mubarak, directing their anger at the new military rulers over the slow pace of reform.

In the capital, flag-waving protesters packed Tahrir Square, epicentre of the protests that ousted Mubarak in February, after a mass weekly Muslim prayer service.

Tents were pitched in the middle of the square, and a large sun shade provided relief from the scorching sun and temperatures of 37 degrees Celsius (about 99 Fahrenheit).

"Our revolution continues," read one banner.

Holding a large sign, one man complained: "We haven't felt any change. We removed Mubarak and got a field marshal."

He was referring to Hussein Tantawi, head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces which took power in February and has vowed to pave the way for a democratic system.

But the armed forces, hailed as heroes at the start of the uprising for not siding with Mubarak, have come under fire from local and international rights groups for alleged abuses.

Among the key demands at Friday's protests are ending military trials of civilians, sacking and trying police officers accused of killing protesters and the thorough and transparent trials of former regime officials.

Former Arab League chief and presidential hopeful Amr Mussa joined the mass protests, telling demonstrators he supported their "legitimate demands of speeding up the trial of the former president," who is due to face trial on August 3.

Tarek al-Kholy, a leader of the April 6 protest movement that helped launch the January uprising, said the revolt's slogan "Change, Freedom, Social Justice" still applies.

Many dying in Somalia drought

US warns of a famine in the horn of Africa

AFP, Geneva

Many people, including children, are dying while fleeing serious drought in Somalia, the UN refugee agency said yesterday, warning that aid efforts are at risk of being overwhelmed by the large numbers of refugees arriving in camps.

"Many people are dying en route from what we hear," said Melissa Fleming, spokeswoman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

She could not give details on the death toll, but said there were "harrowing" accounts from mothers who had lost children on the way and others who were forced to leave sick family members behind.

About 1,700 Somalis are arriving daily at the Dollo Ado area in south-east Ethiopia in search of food and

water, while in neighbouring Kenya, about 1,400 are arriving daily in the overcrowded Dadaab refugee camp, said the UNHCR.

"Today we are warning that humanitarian efforts to help newly arriving Somali refugees in south-east Ethiopia are at risk of being overwhelmed without a more rapid and robust international response to the drought and displacement crisis in the Horn of Africa," said Fleming.

The US government has warned that the drought in the Horn of Africa is likely to worsen by the end of the year, putting parts of war-ravaged Somalia at risk of famine.

"Our experts... expect the perilous situation in the Horn of Africa to worsen through the end of the year," Nancy Lindborg, a senior

official at the US Agency for International Development (USAID), said Thursday.

She said in a normal season the two regions account for 71 percent of the total cereal production of southern Somalia.

"Famine conditions are possible in the worst affected areas depending on the evolution of food prices, conflict, and humanitarian response," she added.

UN had earlier warned that ten million people in the Horn of Africa have been hit by the worst drought in 60 years, with some areas on the verge of famine.

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'Putin sent to Russia by God'

AFP, Moscow

Vladimir Putin was sent to Russia by God to help it deal with its troubles in the early post-Soviet era, the Kremlin's top political adviser was quoted as saying yesterday.

"To be honest, I think of Putin as a person who was sent to Russia by fate and the Almighty at a difficult hour," Interfax quoted first deputy administration chief Vladislav Surkov as telling Chechen television.

Putin has remained the country's most popular politician and has a large number of fans and political supporters.

The Russian media in May reported that a small female sect believes Putin is the reincarnation of Paul the Apostle.

NEWS IN brief

Congo colonel accused of mass rape surrenders

AFP, Goma, Dr Congo

An army colonel accused with nearly 200 soldiers of mass rape in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo has surrendered with his men to the military, an army spokesman told AFP yesterday.

Some 248 Congolese women said they were raped by soldiers last month, local medical reports showed, in a part of the eastern DR Congo, a region the UN has called the world's "rape capital."

Berlusconi will not contest in 2013 election

AFP, Rome

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi confirmed yesterday that he will not run in the next elections in 2013 and will hand over the reigns of his party to Justice Minister Angelino Alfano.

"I will not be a candidate for the post of prime minister in the next elections," the 74-year old media mogul said in an interview with the left-wing Repubblica newspaper.

"The centre-right candidate will be Alfano. If I could I would already give it up," he added.

Hugo Chavez suffering from colon cancer

AFP, New York

President Hugo Chavez appears to be suffering from colon cancer. The Wall Street Journal reported late Thursday, citing two sources with close knowledge of the Venezuelan leader's condition.

A week after his condition was announced, following a weeks-long stay in Cuba, Venezuelan officials have yet to confirm the type of cancerous tumor was removed from the leftist leader during surgery in Cuba.

Twitter valued at \$8 billion

AFP, New York

US micro-blogging website Twitter is gaining value and is now worth an estimated \$8 billion, the New York Times reported yesterday.

The newspaper, citing two people briefed on the matter, said the popular website is in the process of raising \$400 million in a deal that has provided the latest estimation of its value.

A recent study by the Pew Research Center said 13 percent of online US adults use Twitter, up from eight percent in November 2010.

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