

UN declares famine in southern Somalia

AFP, Nairobi

The UN officially declared famine in two parts of southern Somalia yesterday as the world slowly mobilised to save the 12 million people battling hunger in the region's worst drought in 60 years.

The United States urged the al-Qaeda-inspired rebels controlling the area to allow the return of the relief groups they expelled two years ago while aid groups warned many would die without urgent action and funding.

"The United Nations declared today that famine exists in two regions of southern Somalia: southern Bakool, and Lower Shabelle," a statement by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for Somalia said.

The region is Somalia's breadbasket and the UN said that an estimated 3.7 million people -- or nearly half of the war-torn country's population -- were facing a food crisis.

"If we don't act now, famine will spread to all eight regions of southern

Somalia within two months, due to poor harvests and infectious disease outbreaks," UN humanitarian coordinator for Somalia Mark Bowden told reporters.

UN's definition of famine:

- Acute malnutrition of more than 30 percent of children
- Two deaths per 10,000 people a day
- Access to less than four litres of water and 2,100 kilocalories a day
- Complete loss of assets or income
- Large-scale displacement of people and civil strife

"If we are not able to intervene immediately, tens of thousands more Somalis may die," the UN added.

Somalia, which has been affected by almost uninterrupted conflict for 20

years and become a by-word for "failed state", is the worst affected nation but parts of Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Djibouti are also hit.

Famine implies that at least 20 percent of households face extreme food shortages, acute malnutrition in over 30 percent of people, and two deaths per 10,000 people every day, according to UN definition.

Malnutrition rates in Somalia are currently the highest in the world, with peaks of 50 percent in certain areas of southern Somalia, Bowden said.

Over 78,000 Somalis have fled to seek refuge in neighbouring Ethiopia and Kenya in the last two months.

The Food and Agricultural Organisation appealed yesterday for \$120 million for the 12 million drought victims in the Horn of Africa.

Aid group Oxfam said only \$200 million of the needed one billion had been provided.

UN agencies will hold a meeting Monday in Rome over the drought-sparked humanitarian crisis.



A displaced Somali mother attends her malnourished child at southern Mogadishu's Banadir hospital on Tuesday where medics have said most of the displaced children are ill and have been treated for severe malnutrition. Mortality rate in June reached 7.4 deaths per 10,000 a day, triggering an outcry from international community for help.

PHOTO: AFP

Serbia arrests last war crimes fugitive Hadzic

AFP, Belgrade

Serbia yesterday arrested Goran Hadzic, the one-time Croatian Serb rebel leader accused of mass murder and the last remaining fugitive wanted by the UN war crimes court in The Hague.

Hadzic, 52, faces 14 counts of crimes against humanity and war crimes for the murders of hundreds of people and deportation of tens of thousands of Croats between 1992-1993 by troops under his command.

Tadic said Hadzic was arrested in the idyllic mountain region of Fruska Gora near the northern city of Novi Sad around 8:00am. Sources close to the investigation told AFP Hadzic was "unrecognisable" and changed his appearance drastically from the dark-haired bearded man in his wanted poster.

Hadzic, a former warehouse employee at an agricultural plant, rose to prominence as the president of the self-



Goran Hadzic

proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK) with the backing of late Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic.

He was seen as a "yes man" who wielded little real power compared with other wartime Serb leaders.

The European Union hailed the arrest as an "important" step forward in Serbia's bid for EU membership while Serbian President Boris Tadic said it was the end of a "difficult" chapter for Serbia in its dealings with The Hague court.

Hadzic is notably wanted in connection with the massacre by Croatian Serb troops under his command of 250 Croats and other non-Serbs taken from a hospital in Vukovar after the city fell to Serbian troops following an almost three-month siege in November 1991.

The siege of Vukovar and the subsequent massacre is one of the darkest periods in the 1991-95 Croatian war.

Anti-Saleh coalition formed in Yemen

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen's opposition is to form a coalition to unite its various strands ahead of the return of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is hospitalised in Saudi Arabia, a spokesman said yesterday.

A preparatory committee on Tuesday night approved the creation of a "national coalition council," Ahmed al-Sabri, the spokesman for the committee, told AFP.

The aim is to bring together the Common Forum parliamentary opposition parties, the young protesters, the Southern Movement, which advocated southern secession but in May said it would support a federal system, northern Shiite rebels, civil society representatives and others, Sabri said.

The preparatory committee would announce the national coalition council on August 1, he said.

Its mission would be to relaunch protests against Saleh, who was wounded in an early June bomb attack on his Sanaa palace and has been hospitalised in Saudi Arabia for more than five weeks, he added.

Deputy Information Minister Abdo al-Janadi said on Saturday that Saleh would return home "soon."

The council aims to end divisions among the various components of the opposition.

Also illustrating divisions among opposition members, a group of protesters on Saturday announced the creation of a 17-member "presidential council" to run the country in the event of Saleh's departure, which has not been well-received by other sections of the opposition.

Egypt cabinet to be sworn in today

AFP, CAIRO

The new Egyptian cabinet is due to be sworn in today, a military official said, three days behind schedule after last minute negotiations and the prime minister's admission to hospital.

The new cabinet had been due to take the oath of office on Monday, but the ceremony was postponed for a day amid protests over the embattled premier's choice of ministers.

On Tuesday, the government said that Sharaf had been admitted to hospital overnight suffering from exhaustion and would spend the day resting before finalising the new cabinet.

Sharaf, who heads a caretaker government, had hoped the sweeping reshuffle would persuade protesters to end a sit-in at Cairo's Tahrir Square.

News Corp to emerge as a stronger company Says Murdoch, leaves Britain

AFP, Sydney

Embattled Rupert Murdoch yesterday vowed News Corp. would bounce back from the phone-hacking scandal, saying he would never tolerate such behaviour at his global media empire.

"I want all of you to know that I have the utmost confidence that we will emerge a stronger company," he said in a message to staff, seen by AFP.

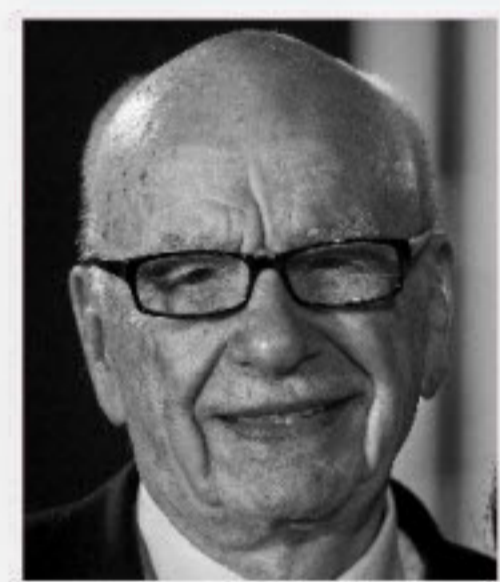
"It will take time for us to rebuild trust and confidence, but we are determined to live up to the expectations of our stockholders, customers, colleagues and partners."

He flew out of Britain yesterday, ending a turbulent 11-day visit.

The 80-year-old chief executive was questioned for more than two hours by parliamentarians in London on Tuesday over the phone hacking scandal.

In Australia, Prime Minister Julia Gillard warned Murdoch's local operations they faced some "hard questions" as calls intensified for a media inquiry following the British hacking scandal.

News Limited chief John Hartigan has insisted there has been no similar wrongdoing in Australia.



NEWS IN brief

WHO calls for ban on 'unreliable' TB blood tests

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organisation warned yesterday that millions of blood tests conducted every year to diagnose tuberculosis are unreliable and putting patients' lives in danger.

"Based on the evidence, (these) tests lead to misdiagnosis and mistreatment of patients. They are a waste of time and resources," Mario Raviglione, director of the WHO Stop TB Department, told reporters.

"We are calling on governments to ban the use of

Riots hit Malawi capital

BBC ONLINE

Riots broken out in Malawi's capital yesterday, Lilongwe, as opposition groups protest against President Bingu wa Mutharika's government, said sources.

The BBC's Joel Nkhoma in the city says protesters are burning barricades and looting property.

The authorities have banned live broadcasts of the riots.

The trouble started after a court ruled on Tuesday that nationwide protests, called against the high cost of living, were illegal.

Russia arrests ex-nuclear official 'for stealing research'

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday announced the arrest of one of its most senior former nuclear officials for allegedly pocketing state research grants and stealing other people's work off the Internet.

The Rosatom state nuclear corporation said deputy general director Yevgeny Yevstratov oversaw a team of scientists that received 50 million rubles (\$1.7 million) in research assistance before being

Typhoon strikes Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Typhoon Ma-On swerved away from Japan's Pacific coast yesterday, leaving one person dead and dozens of others injured and damaging a centuries-old castle in Kyoto, officials and reports said.

The storm system, packing winds of up to 108 kilometres per hour, was located 140 kilometres (88 miles) offshore late yesterday, slowly heading east and further from the main island of Honshu.



A man lays down next to a fountain yesterday in New York to try and beat the heat. The weather is responsible for at least 13 deaths in the central United States, which has seen a string of days with temperatures topping 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.7 Celsius) coupled with very high humidity.

PHOTO: AFP

SOUTH CHINA SEA ROW

Asean, China hail progress on disputes

AFP, Nusa Dua, Indonesia

Southeast Asia and China yesterday hailed "significant" progress toward resolving disputes in the South China Sea, a strategic waterway believed to contain vast energy reserves.

After nearly 10 years of negotiations, both sides announced an agreement on non-binding guidelines for the eventual implementation of a binding code of conduct governing activities in disputed waters and islands.

The guidelines were announced at a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) in Bali, Indonesia, ahead of the region's biggest security forum involving the United States on Saturday.

Asean Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan called the guidelines a "breakthrough" but Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario said they lacked teeth and substance. But Vietnam, another Asean claimant

which has accused China of taking an increasingly aggressive posture, said the agreement was a positive development.

Taiwan, China and Asean members Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei and Malaysia have overlapping claims to parts of the region.

In the latest incident to spark concern, five Filipino lawmakers flew to an island in the disputed Spratly chain to plant a Philippine flag on a government building in disregard of warnings from Beijing.

Tensions have risen markedly in recent weeks, with several incidents involving claims and counter-claims of aggression on the high seas and provocative movements of military forces.

The draft guidelines talk of "possible joint cooperative activities, measures and projects" and other confidence-building measures, but make no mention of when a binding code would be in place.

Rebels press offensive before Ramadan

Russia hosts Gaddafi diplomat

AFP, Benghazi

Libya's rebels ramped up a pre-Ramadan offensive on Wednesday, pushing Muammar Gaddafi's troops into retreat in the east and preparing a fresh attack from the south of Tripoli.

Rebels said they had chased the bulk of Gaddafi's eastern army from the oil town of Brega while encircling loyalists holed up among oil installations in the northwest of the town.

Meanwhile, Russia yesterday was to host Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's foreign minister in Moscow as it presses ahead with mediation efforts to end the conflict between his regime and rebel forces.

Foreign Minister Abdelati al-Obeidi will be the highest-ranking Kadhafi official to visit Moscow since the conflict with the rebels erupted and is expected to hold talks with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov.

As part of what now appears to be a country-wide effort to tighten the noose on Gaddafi before the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan begins around August 1, insur-

gents in the west said they were awaiting orders to start a fresh offensive from the Nafusa Mountains southwest of the capital.

During Ramadan, the endurance of even the hardest volunteers will be tested by desert battle without food and water during the daytime fast observed by the faithful.

But at Brega, rebel gains were stymied by vast quantities of anti-personnel mines planted by retreating loyalist forces and the difficulties in attacking an estimated 200 Gaddafi troops that are fighting from positions near economically vital petrochemical facilities.

That difficulty was laid bare late on Tuesday, when 24 rebel fighters died. It was by far the rebels' bloodiest day since the battle for Brega began almost a week ago.

Outside the town, rebel troops continued to clear minefields that are holding up their advance, while trying to dislodge Gaddafi's artillery to the west.

Rebel commanders from Misrata met French President Nicolas Sarkozy yesterday to press for more support, French campaigner for the rebel cause, Bernard-Henri Levy, told AFP.

Earthquake kills 13 in central Asia

AFP, Tashkent

A major 6.2 quake in Uzbekistan killed at least 13 people and injured 86 others, when it struck on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border in the remote Fergana Valley region, Uzbek officials said.

The quake struck at 1:35am (with the epicentre just inside neighbouring Kyrgyzstan but 42 kilometres southwest of the Uzbek city of Fergana, the US Geological Survey said.

"As a result of the earthquake, some old buildings were destroyed in the Fergana region," the Uzbek emergency ministry said.

It said that the quake registered 5.0 even in the capital Tashkent, some 235 kilometres away from the epicentre.

Syria warns envoys not to leave capital

AFP, Damascus

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem warned the French and US ambassadors yesterday not to travel outside Damascus after they both visited the flashpoint central city of Hama earlier this month.

"We will impose a ban on any (diplomatic) travel more than 25 kilometres outside Damascus, if the ambassadors continue to ignore (our) guidance," Muallem told the envoys at a meeting broadcast by state television.

"I hope that we will not be forced to impose the ban," he added.

"We did not expel the two ambassadors because we had hoped to maintain better relations in future."

Both US envoy Robert Ford and French ambassador Eric Chevallier visited Hama on July 7 amid repeated large demonstrations in the city against the rule of President Bashar al-Assad.

Damascus reacted furiously to the visit, accusing the US ambassador of seeking to undermine the stability of Syria and calling in both envoys for consultations on July 10.

The Syrian authorities accused the pair of travelling to Hama without authorisation but Washington insisted Damascus had been notified in advance.