

Gaddafi surrounded

Say rebels; US confirms he is in Libya

AP, Tripoli

Libyan fighters have surrounded the ousted dictator Muammar Gaddafi, and it is only a matter of time until he is captured or killed, a spokesman for Tripoli's new military council said yesterday.

Anis Sharif would not say where Gaddafi had been found, but said he was still in Libya and had been tracked using high technology and human intelligence. Gaddafi is trapped within a 60 kilometre-radius area surrounded by rebels, he said.

"He can't get out," said Sharif, who added the former rebels are preparing to either detain him or kill him.

Locating Gaddafi would help seal the new rulers' hold on the country. The announcement came after convoys of Gaddafi loyalists, including his security chief, fled across the Sahara into Niger in a move that Libya's former rebels hoped could help lead to the surrender of his last strongholds.

Meanwhile, Mustafa Abdul-Jalil, the head of the Transitional Council - the closest thing to a Libyan government

now - warned that the loyalist town of Bani Walid had until Friday to surrender or else the former rebel forces would move in.

Some former rebels depicted the flight to Niger as a major exodus of Gaddafi's most hardcore backers. But confirmed information on the number and identity of those leaving was scarce given the vast swath of desert - over 1,600 kilometres - between populated areas on the two sides of the border.

In Niger's capital, Niamey, Massoudou Hassoumi, a spokesman for the president said Gaddafi's security chief had crossed the desert into Niger on Monday accompanied by a major Tuareg rebel.

The government of Niger dispatched a military convoy to escort Mansour Dao, the former commander of Libya's Revolutionary Guards who is a cousin of Gaddafi as well as a member of his inner circle, to Niamey.

Dao is the only senior Libyan figure to have crossed into Niger, said Hassoumi, who denied reports that Gaddafi or any member of his immedi-

ate family were in the convoy.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland told reporters, "We don't have any evidence that Gaddafi is anywhere but in Libya at the moment."

There has been intense speculation regarding the whereabouts of Gaddafi's inner circle and last week, Algeria, which like Niger shares a border with Libya - confirmed that the ousted leader's wife, his daughter, two of his sons, and several grandchildren had crossed into Algeria.

The anti-Gaddafi fighters who toppled his regime by sweeping into Tripoli last month have been struggling to uproot his bastions of support, particularly in the cities of Bani Walid, Sirte and Sabha. They say residents in those cities have been prevented from surrendering to the new post-Gaddafi rule because of former regime figures in their midst.

Nato said yesterday that it had made a number of airstrikes around Sirte - Gaddafi's hometown - hitting six tanks, six armored fighting vehicles and an ammunition storage facility, among other targets.



Petraeus vows better CIA

AFP, Washington

David Petraeus pledged on Tuesday to confront the many threats facing America as he took the reins of the CIA.

Wearing a business suit and burgundy tie, Petraeus took the oath of office on a Bible at a ceremony led by Vice President Joe Biden in the Roosevelt room of the White House, instead of CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

Petraeus, pointing to his experience as a four star general but stressing that he knew he faced a different challenge in his new post as the nation's spy chief, said he would seek to make the CIA "ever better."

France condemns govt crimes in Syria

Forces kill 12; Arab League visit put off

AFP, Moscow

France yesterday accused Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime of committing crimes against humanity and expressed hope that Russia would soon join sanctions against its old regional ally.

"The Syrian regime has committed crimes against humanity," French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said during talks with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. "The way it (the Syrian regime) suppressed the popular protests is unacceptable," France's top diplomat said after a round of Moscow meetings that included talks with President Dmitry Medvedev.

But both sides acknowledged that one of their most immediate disagreements concerned finding a peaceful solution to a Syria crisis that comes on the heels of a Libya war that also deeply upset Moscow.

But Lavrov gave no signs of being ready to ease a Russian position that last week saw Moscow lash the European Union for imposing a crippling oil embargo on the Arab state.

Moscow has instead been calling for

political dialogue and urging world powers to put more pressure on the opposition to engage in direct talks with Assad's regime.

The latest calls came after Syrian forces killed at least twelve people in a massive tank-backed raid on the flashpoint city of Homs yesterday, activists said.

The Britain-based group said "military reinforcements including 20 truckloads of soldiers entered the city," and that there was "intense gunfire in the market and governorate headquarters."

"Many ambulances were roaming the streets of the city," it added.

The Local Coordination Committees which organises the protests said one person was shot and killed as forces backed by tanks swept early morning into Homs, where communications and Internet services were cut in many neighbourhoods.

The security operations came hours after Syria requested the postponement of a planned visit by Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi in which he had been due to present a reform initiative of which Damascus had been strongly critical.

NEWS IN brief

Mubarak's trial resumes in Egypt

BBC ONLINE

The trial of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resumed yesterday in Cairo amid renewed uproar between defence and prosecution lawyers.

Some of the lawyers are reported to have withdrawn from the courtroom, saying it was too chaotic.

Security was tightened after Monday's session descended into scuffles both inside and outside the Cairo courtroom.

Mubarak, 83, faces charges of ordering the shoot-



Texas wildfires torch 1,000 homes

BBC ONLINE

Dozens of wildfires raging in rain-starved Texas are now reported to have engulfed more than 1,000 homes.

The biggest of the blazes - 26km wide - in rural Bastrop County, is burning out of control for a third day, having destroyed 600 homes.

Two people were reported to have died in the Bastrop blaze, a local sheriff said, amid hopes for calmer winds to help control the fires.

Texas has been suffering its worst drought since

Somali pirates release Danish family

AFP, Copenhagen

Somali pirates have released a Danish family, with three teenage children, and two other Danes who they took hostage in February, the Danish foreign ministry said yesterday.

"The seven Danes have been released and brought to safety," the ministry said in a statement, adding that all were doing well under the circumstances.

No details were provided on the release, but Danish press reports suggested a ransom had been paid.

The Johansen family, a couple in their 50s and their three teenage children, and two guests had been sailing some 300 nautical miles from Somalia

Israeli air strike kills one in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

An Israeli air strike on Gaza on Tuesday evening killed a militant and wounded a father and his two sons, medics and the militant group said.

The strike, east of the central city of Khan Yunis, killed Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) member Khaled Sahmud, 24, after militants fired a mortar round to push back an "Israeli incursion," the group said in a statement.

Witnesses said Israeli troops penetrated 100-200 metres into the Gaza Strip, east of Khan Yunis, on Tuesday afternoon.

Three civilians, a father and his two sons, were wounded in the attack, Gaza emergency services spokesman said.



Two women of the Indian Bishnois community attend the annual 'Khejadli' festival yesterday in Khejadli village some 26 km from Jodhpur city. The Bishnois are known as the conservationists to whom the preservation of animal and vegetable life is a religion and has been so from the early 15th century.

SUDAN CONFLICT Heavy fighting erupts again

AFP, Khartoum

Heavy fighting erupted in the capital of Sudan's embattled Blue Nile state on Tuesday evening, a witness said, a day after the newly installed military governor declared that the security situation had returned to normal.

"One hour ago, I heard gunfire and artillery bombardments in different parts of the city. The shooting lasted about 15 or 20 minutes," a Sudanese journalist in Damazin told AFP, adding that the city's power supply had been cut.

Deadly clashes erupted after midnight last Friday in Damazin, and quickly spread to other areas, as the third major conflict since May unfolded in southern districts just across the border from newly independent South Sudan.

44 killed as plane crashes in Russia

AFP, Moscow

At least 44 people were killed yesterday when a Russian jet carrying hockey players to their first match of the season crashed on takeoff in the latest blow to the country's tainted air safety record.

The Yak-42 passenger jet took off from Yaroslavl airport about 300 kilometres northeast of Moscow just as a two-day political forum expected to be attended by President Dmitry Medvedev got under way.

A source told Interfax that the plane suddenly start listing to the left and crashed about 500 metres away from the Tunoshna airport.

"According to the latest data, there were 45 people on board -- 37 passengers and eight crew. Forty-four people died in the crash and one person survived," a police official told the RIA Novosti news agency.

The local emergency ministry said the jet was taking members of the Lokomotiv

Yaroslavl ice hockey team to the Belarus capital Minsk for the their first match of the 2011-2012 season.

The team is trained by a Canadian national and has several foreign players on the roster posted on its website.

Two accidents involving Tu-134 and An-24 jets this summer that killed a total 54 people prompted Medvedev to call for most of the aircraft to be retired by January 1 and the rest taken out in subsequent months.

But that move was followed by a series of smaller air accidents as well as a Volga River boat disaster that killed 122 people who were taking a pleasure cruise.

The accidents have tarnished Medvedev's vision of a modern Russia that he promotes in messages ahead of presidential elections next year that can be also contested by Vladimir Putin -- his more nationalist mentor and prime minister.

Smoking trend on the decline in US

AFP, Washington

Fewer American adults are smoking, and those who still do are lighting up less, suggests a nationwide survey from the US Centres for Disease Control released on Tuesday.

Using data from 2005 to 2010, researchers with the US government agency reckoned that 19.3 percent of American adults -- or 45.3 million people over the age of 18 -- are smoking cigarettes, down from 20.9 percent in 2005.

"There are three million fewer smokers in America than there were five years ago," said CDC director Tom Frieden, elaborating

on the latest Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

Among smokers, the proportion of those who consume 30 or more cigarettes a day fell to 8.3 percent from 12.7 percent, although those who smoke nine or less cigarettes a day rose to 21.8 percent from 16.4 percent.

Smoking and exposure to second-hand smoking claim an estimated 443,000 American lives every year.

Getting Americans to smoke less has been US government policy since the 1960s. Under its Healthy People initiative, the Department of Health wants to bring the national prevalence of smoking to below 12 percent by 2020.

US concerned about Israel-Turkey row

Turkey to expel 3 Israeli diplomats

AFP, Washington

The United States expressed concern on Tuesday over a diplomatic row between its allies Turkey and Israel, urging them to "de-escalate" their dispute over an Israeli commando operation.

"We are concerned," said State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland after Ankara raised the stakes by announcing it was suspending military and defense industry ties with Israel.

The dispute stems from an Israeli commando raid in international waters on a Turkish vessel, the Marvi Marmara, that was taking aid to the Palestinian territory of Gaza.

The United Nations criticized Israel for using "excessive" force in the raid, which left nine people dead, but upheld Israel's right to impose a naval blockade on Gaza. Israel has refused Turkish demands for an apology.

Meanwhile, in a further escalation of tensions between Israel and Turkey, at least three Israeli diplomats are being expelled from the Israeli Embassy in Ankara, Israeli officials said Wednesday.

The Israeli consulate, however, appears to be unaffected by the Turkish downgrade of diplomatic relations with Israel.

On Tuesday, Turkey's fiery prime minister compared Ankara's once-close ally in the Middle East to a "spoiled boy" and announced additional sanctions would soon be imposed.

NAM supports Palestinian UN bid

AFP, Belgrade

The Non-Aligned Movement on Tuesday confirmed its support for a Palestinian bid for UN membership at a ministerial meeting here, Egypt's Foreign Minister Mohammed Kamel Amr said.

"We will continue to support the Palestinian endeavors during the 66th session of the General Assembly for the recognition of the State of Palestine on the basis of the borders of the 4th of June 1967 with East Jerusalem as its capital, and to seek its admission as a full member in the United Nations," Kamel Amr told a press conference at the end of the two-day meeting.

He could not however confirm that all 118 NAM member countries would vote in support of the bid for UN membership later this month.

Palestinian hits out at US policy

REUTERS, Ramallah

The United States is showing "disdain" for Arabs by trying to prevent the Palestinians from gaining statehood recognition at the United Nations, a senior Palestinian official said yesterday.

Washington fears the Palestinians' move at the United Nations, expected later this month, could further snarl flagging US efforts to revive Middle East peace talks, which broke down last year following a row over Jewish settlements.

David Hale, the US Middle East peace envoy, was due to meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas later yesterday in the latest American effort to halt the UN manoeuvrings and convince the two sides to return to direct negotiations.

Yasser Abed Rabbo, secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), said US policy now appeared confined to one point: Stopping the Palestinians from embarking on their diplomatic initiative at the United Nations.

"All this is being ignored and the only issue has become the issue of us not going to the United Nations," he told Voice of Palestine radio.

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas is due to present the bid for full UN membership on September 20 before the General Assembly despite opposition from the United States and Israel.

The Palestinians are seeking an independent state in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem -- territories occupied by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war.

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