

New Libyan govt gets UN seat

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly yesterday gave Libya's UN seat to the National Transitional Council which toppled Muammar Gaddafi. The 193-member assembly voted 114 to 17 to let representatives of the council take over Libya's UN mission in the face of opposition from left-wing Latin American governments. The move allows interim government leader, Mustafa Abdel Jalil, to attend next week's UN gathering of world leaders in New York. Jalil is to meet US President Barack Obama and other key leaders on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. A group made up of Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba and other left-leaning governments sought a vote to stop the NTC getting the UN seat.

Palestinians to go with UN bid

US, EU's frantic efforts to abandon bid fail

REUTERS, Ramallah

President Mahmoud Abbas said yesterday he would demand full membership of the United Nations for a Palestinian state when he goes to the UN General Assembly next week, setting up a diplomatic clash with Israel and the United States. "We are going to the United Nations to request our legitimate right, obtaining full membership for Palestine in this organization," Abbas said in a televised speech. "We are going to the Security Council," he added, to rapturous applause from his audience of Palestinian leaders in Ramallah, signaling his determination to press ahead despite efforts by US and European officials to dissuade him. Both Israel and its main ally, the United States, firmly oppose the initiative, arguing that a Palestinian state can only be created through direct negotiations. The Palestinians say almost 20 years of on-off direct talks on statehood envisaged by interim peace accords have hit a dead end for reasons including Israel's refusal to stop expanding settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, lands it took in the 1967

Arab-Israeli war and which Palestinians want, along with the Gaza Strip, for an independent state. The last round of the US-backed talks between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu collapsed nearly a year ago when the Jewish state declined to extend a partial moratorium on West Bank settlement building. A full halt to such construction on territory the Palestinians say they need for a viable state is one condition they have set for a resumption of negotiations. Israel withdrew settlers from tiny, coastal Gaza in 2005. Abbas said the UN step would not "end the occupation," but would strengthen the Palestinians' hand. Washington has already said it will veto any statehood resolution in the Security Council and some US politicians have said they will try to cut American aid to the Palestinians, totaling some \$500 million a year, if they refuse to back down. A statement from Netanyahu's office issued after the speech said the Palestinians were "systematically" avoiding direct talks with Israel. A flurry of diplomacy led predominantly

by the European Union has sought to avert the UN showdown by seeking a deal that would bring about a return to talks within weeks, diplomats say. However, the mediation is struggling in the face of long-standing disagreements over the terms of reference. Failing that, the EU has also been trying to avoid a Security Council confrontation by persuading the Palestinians to accept a diluted upgrade to their status at the United Nations, where they are currently recognized as an "entity." If Washington does veto the resolution, as expected, the Palestinians could then go to the full UN General Assembly. It does not have the power to grant them full membership, but could recognize Palestine as a non-member state. Such a move would give the Palestinians possible access to other international bodies, including the International Criminal Court, from where it could seek to sue Israel over its longtime occupation of the West Bank. On Thursday, Netanyahu announced that he, too, would address the United Nations to set out Israel's objections to the manoeuvre. "The approach to the United Nations to

seek full membership for the state of Palestine is a done deal and irreversible," Abbas said, following discussions with the diplomatic Quartet's envoy Tony Blair. But the United States has threatened to veto the move if it is made in the UN Security Council, saying it would harm prospects for peace talks and that a Palestinian state can only result from negotiations with Israel. "It doesn't bring the two sides closer together. It would not bring the Palestinians any closer to statehood, and we believe that it would be counterproductive to that goal," said White House spokesman Jay Carney Thursday. "Our approach is one that we think is in the interests of helping the Palestinians reach their ultimate goal, and the only way they're going to reach that goal is through direct negotiations with the Israelis." The Arab League on Tuesday threw its support behind Abbas's initiative. Arab foreign ministers, who began efforts in July to organize backing for the Palestinian bid, decided to set up a team comprising the League head and six League members to further pursue the controversial statehood application.



Denmark to get first female PM

AFP, Copenhagen

Denmark's centre-left was celebrating victory yesterday after narrowly winning a general election to end a decade in opposition, ushering in the nation's first woman prime minister. "We did it!" opposition leader Helle Thorning-Schmidt told ecstatic supporters, as near final results showed her bloc had won Thursday's vote. "We made history today," added the the Social Democratic leader destined to become Denmark's first woman head of government. After 99.6 percent of votes had been counted, it was clear the centre-left bloc headed by Thorning-Schmidt had taken 89 seats in Denmark's 179-seat parliament against 86 for exiting Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen's centre-right government and parliamentary supporters. "Earlier this evening I called (opposition leader) Helle Thorning-Schmidt. I congratulated her and told her she now has the chance to form a new government," Rasmussen told his disappointed supporters. Rasmussen, whose Liberal Party remained the country's biggest and gained a seat from the 2007 election, to 47, insisted his opponent's government would not last. The centre-right defeat spells an end to the powerful influence wielded by the populist, anti-immigration Danish People's Party (DPP).

Syrian forces kill 20 in anti-Assad protests

REUTERS, Amman

Syrian forces shot dead 20 people yesterday and flooded rural areas around Damascus with troops to try to end six months of demonstrations against President Bashar al-Assad, activists said. Despite the heavy deployment, activists reported protests on the edges of the capital, the northern province of Idlib bordering Turkey and other parts of Syria. Banners proclaimed protesters were "on course to bring down the regime." After storming several cities in August to crush protest centers, the Syrian army has swept through rural districts in recent weeks, hunting down activists and army defectors, carrying out widespread arrests and killing dozens of people. State television broadcast an interview on Thursday night with one of the most prominent military deserters, appearing to recant claims made when he defected and saying he had never been ordered to fire on protesters. It was not clear how Lieutenant-Colonel Hussein Harmoush, who announced his desertion in June, ended up back in

Damascus. Turkey's foreign ministry denied reports it had handed him over to Syrian authorities, saying it would be out of the question to return anyone against their will. The operations in the north have led to renewed refugee flows into Turkey, Turkish officials say, and on Thursday night Syrian forces crossed 200 meters (yards) into Lebanese territory in pursuit of fugitives, according to the Lebanese army. Lebanese sources said a Lebanese man was wounded in gunfire. Activists said most of yesterday's killings occurred in the countryside around the city of Hama and in Jabal al-Zawiya, a rugged region near Turkey, both scenes of military operations in the last week. Protesters were also killed on the edge of Damascus, including a 12-year-old boy, and in Homs, 165 km to the north, the activists said. The Local Coordination Committee, a grassroots activist group, said 27 people died yesterday, though that figure included a handful who died from wounds suffered earlier.



Libyan National Council Fighters (NTC) stop their convoy on the outskirts of Sirte yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Libya fighters surge into two Gaddafi bastions

Meet fierce resistance; UK, France accused of 'colonising'

AFP, Sirte

Fighters loyal to Libya's new leaders surged yesterday into the city of Sirte and into Bani Walid oasis, two of fugitive Muammar Gaddafi's few remaining bastions but had to retreat facing fierce resistance, officials and an AFP reporter said. But Anti-Gaddafi forces had to Retreat from Bani Walid after meeting fierce resistance from those loyal to the ousted Libyan leader, reports said. On the political front, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan arrived in Tripoli, boosting international support for the National Transitional Council (NTC) a day after Britain's David Cameron and France's Nicolas Sarkozy became the first foreign leaders to visit the new Libya. An AFP reporter reported heavy fighting in the early afternoon at the

airport on the western side of Sirte, with NTC fighters firing rockets at Gaddafi loyalist guards, who replied with mortar fire. Columns of NTC fighters backed by tanks launched the assault late morning on Sirte, 360 kilometres west of Tripoli, after a first attack the previous day was repulsed by loyalists, who set up sniper nests on rooftops. The NTC said it had lost 11 fighters on Thursday, with 34 wounded. It added that 40 Gaddafi loyalists had been captured. Turkish premier Erdogan flew from Tunisia to Tripoli airport, where he was greeted by NTC chief Mustafa Abdel Jalil. The Turkish premier began his tour in Egypt, where he received a rapturous welcome, confirming his rising regional status. Cameron and Sarkozy are immensely

popular among ordinary Libyans for their role in ending the fugitive strongman's 42 years of iron-fisted rule. Gaddafi's spokesman Mussa Ibrahim, however, accused them of coming to plunder Libya's riches. "The visit marks the start of a project of colonisation of Libya," Ibrahim charged in a telephone call late on Thursday to Syria-based Arrai television. "They are hurrying to collect the fruits of the fall of Tripoli... because they obviously fear the arrival of America and other countries wanting a slice of the cake," he said, without disclosing where he was phoning from. "They hurried to Tripoli to make secret deals with the collaborators and the traitors, and to take the control of oil and investments under the pretext of rebuilding," Ibrahim said.

Berlusconi scandal deepens

AP, Rome

Prosecutors say an Italian businessman recruited about 30 girls to attend parties at Premier Silvio Berlusconi's homes, selecting them for their looks and age and paying some of them to have sex with the Italian leader. They allege that between Sept 2008 and May 2009 Gianpaolo Tarantini recruited women of "young age, slender frame," and told them what to wear and how to behave at the parties, according to a newly filed court document. The prosecutors have now wrapped up their investigation into Tarantini's activities. Berlusconi is not under investigation in the case. But the revelations are proving a further embarrassment for the scandal-plagued leader.

NEWS IN brief

Hillary says Iran will free 'spy' hikers



AFP, San Francisco US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Thursday that she was confident Iran would free two US hikers convicted of spying and rejected concerns about the delay in their release. "At this point we are not at all concerned because we have received word through a number of sources, publicly and privately, that the decision will be executed... and that we will see their return to their families," she said. Clinton, speaking to reporters after talks with Australia in San Francisco, said that it was not unusual for Iran to take time in implementing decisions and declined to speculate on whether there was a rift inside the regime.

Paris bans Muslim street prayers

BBC ONLINE

A ban on saying prayers in the street, a practice by French Muslims unable to find space in mosques, has come into effect in the capital, Paris. Interior Minister Claude Gueant has offered believers the use of a disused fire brigade barracks instead. The phenomenon of street prayers, which see Muslims spreading mats on footpaths, became a political issue after far right protests. France is home to the biggest Muslim minority in Western Europe.

Crew safely return to Earth after crash

AFP, Moscow

Three spacemen made a safe delayed return from the International Space Station yesterday as Russia again pushed back the launch of their replacement crew because of a recent rocket crash. Space officials said the Soyuz capsule landed on its side in the wind-swept steppes of the ex-Soviet republic of Kazakhstan at 0400 GMT. A smiling but weary commander Alexander Samokutiyayev was extracted from the Soviet-designed capsule first and carried to a seat in the arms of Kazakh rescue workers under a dazzling blue sky.

Peace treaty with Israel 'not sacred' Says Egypt PM

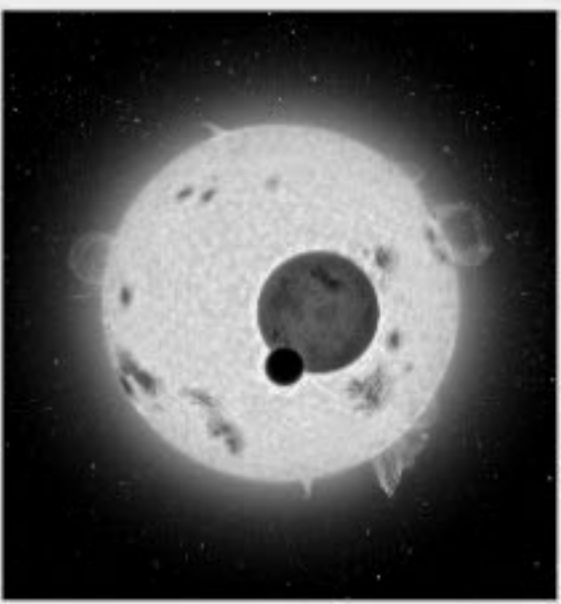
AFP, Cairo

Egypt's Prime Minister Essam Sharaf said on Thursday that the 1979 peace treaty with Israel "is not sacred," state-run MENA news agency reported, quoting remarks he made in an interview with Turkish television. "The Camp David treaty is always open to discussion or for modification if that is beneficial for the region and for a just peace. The peace treaty is not something sacred and there can be changes made to it," MENA quoted Sharaf as saying. Ties between Egypt and Israel took a blow last week after protesters ransacked the Israeli embassy in Cairo, forcing the evacuation of staff.

A planet with a double sunset

REUTERS, Washington

When the day ends on planet Kepler-16b there is a double sunset, scientists reported on Thursday in the journal Science.



In a scene reminiscent of science fiction, researchers using observations from Nasa's Kepler spacecraft have detected a distant planet orbiting two waltzing stars, the first time such a phenomenon has been confirmed. "This is really a stunning measurement by Kepler," said Alan Boss of the Carnegie Institution for Science, a co-author of the study. "The real exciting thing is there's a planet sitting out there orbiting around these two stars." Binary stars -- two suns turning around each other -- have been seen before, and astronomers have suspected planets exist around them, but Kepler's observations are the first to confirm it. Kepler's mission is to scour our section of the Milky Way galaxy for Earth-like

planets in the so-called "habitable zone" that is not too close and not too far away from the stars they orbit. The spacecraft does this by finding stars whose light periodically gets dimmer, which means there is an orbiting astronomical body -- a planet -- passing between the star and Kepler's instruments. This is known as a planetary transit. What made this find so eye-popping was that the stars were eclipsing each other as first one and then the other got in the way. And then a third eclipse indicated a planet was part of the system. If the notion of a planet with two suns seems familiar, it may be because it was displayed in the earliest "Star Wars" film on the fictional planet Tatooine, home of Luke Skywalker. Because both of its suns are smaller and cooler than our sun, Kepler-16b would be quite cold, with a surface temperature of around minus 100 to minus 150 degrees F, the study said.

China warns US oil firm after spill

AFP, Shanghai

China has told US oil giant ConocoPhillips to step up its efforts to seal leaks and clean up a spill off its north coast after finding oil was still leaking into the sea, state media reported yesterday. ConocoPhillips said last week it had halted production at its Penglai 19-3 oil field, China's biggest and the source of a June leak into Bohai Bay that has caused public anger and led to accusations of a cover-up. But China's State Oceanic Administration (SOA) said it had carried out checks over the past week and found that oil was still leaking near a drilling platform in the field.

Man charged over \$2 billion rogue trade

AFP, London

British police charged trader Kweku Adoboli over a \$2 billion fraud at Swiss bank UBS and he will appear in court later yesterday, a spokeswoman said. Prosecutors gave the green light for Adoboli to be charged over unauthorised trades at the bank's London offices. "City of London Police has since charged the 31-year-old with fraud by abuse of position and false accounting," the spokeswoman said. Adoboli, the son of a retired Ghanaian United Nations official, was arrested at the bank at 3:30 am (0230 GMT) Thursday, shortly before UBS announced that it had lost \$2 billion (1.46 billion euros) in unauthorised trading. The massive losses could force UBS to reduce the size of its investment banking unit and carry out sweeping job cuts, according to reports in Switzerland. The bank, which had to be bailed out by the Swiss state after it was badly hit by the subprime crisis in 2007-2008, had hoped to reap the benefits of 3,500 job cuts it announced last month. Now thousands more jobs could be slashed from its global workforce of 65,000, newspapers said. Adoboli is believed to have worked as a director of Exchange Traded Funds (ETFs) in the equities department of the bank's London offices near Liverpool Street station.