

# Obama's UN speech sparks angry Palestinian protests

AFP, Ramallah

Angry Palestinians yesterday protested in the streets of Ramallah and Gaza after a UN speech by US President Barack Obama which was seen as unashamedly pro-Israeli.

More than 1,000 Palestinians carrying signs denouncing Obama gathered outside the West Bank headquarters of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas before marching into the city centre shouting: "It's shameful for America to support the occupation."

And in Gaza City, around 300 women held a protest outside the UN headquarters, shouting anti-Obama slogans as Hamas security forces watched them without intervening.

Obama's address to the UN General Assembly, in which he reiterated his opposition to the Palestinian bid for UN membership, and empathised with Israel's struggle in a hostile region without mentioning the occupation or Jewish settlements, has sparked almost unanimous condemnation across the

Palestinian territories.

"America is the head of the snake," bellowed demonstrators in Ramallah as they held up signs deriding Obama for his address, in which he warned the Palestinians there would be "no shortcuts" to peace.

"Shame on those who pretend to be democratic," read one placard as the throng marched to the city centre, where on Wednesday more than 15,000 people had gathered for a festival of support for the UN membership campaign.

The Palestinian workers union said it would call for rallies outside US embassies across the Arab world today.

Commentators, politicians and ordinary people alike said Obama's speech, which came just two days before Abbas formally requests UN membership for a Palestinian state, proved Washington was incapable of serving as an impartial broker in matters related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Obama's speech reflects the American bias towards the Israeli occu-

pation and it proves that the continuing Arab and Palestinian bet on the Americans is wrong," said Sami Abu Zuhri, a spokesman for Gaza's Hamas rulers.

Commentators in the three main Palestinian newspapers all took the same angry and disappointed tone over the US president's remarks.

Al-Ayyam newspaper carried a cartoon showing Obama delivering his address with a speech bubble in the shape of a Star of David coming from his mouth.

Writing in Al-Quds, the biggest-selling Palestinian newspaper, Arab Israeli MP Ahmed Tibi said Obama's speech had tried to cosy up to the wave of uprisings sweeping the region while completely ignoring the plight of the Palestinians.

"In the same speech in which Obama praised the uprisings and revolutions by the Arab people against tyranny and oppression, he declined to even mention Israel's occupation of Palestinian land," he wrote.

## West seeks time buying ploy to avert UN crisis

REUTERS, New York

A scenario is emerging derived by the west that might prevent an Israeli-Palestinian diplomatic train wreck at the United Nations this week but analysts and officials say it will require near perfect timing and diplomacy to pull it off.

Under the scenario, described by people familiar with the diplomacy, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas would submit a letter seeking full UN membership on Friday and the UN Security Council will postpone action on it for weeks.

The so-called Quartet -- the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States -- would then issue a finely-balanced statement giving each side enough political cover to agree to resume peace talks, possibly within weeks.

Abbas will give UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon a letter on Friday seeking full membership, a step he vowed to take in a September 16 speech in Ramallah.

Under UN rules, Ban must immediately put application before Security Council members.

The current president of the Security Council, Lebanese UN Ambassador Nawaf Salam, would then establish a committee to review and assess the application. Standard practice is to complete this within 35 days, but this can be waived.

In theory, this would prevent an immediate vote, give more time for diplomacy to get the two sides back into talks, and spare Washington the anger of Arab allies at seeing it side with Israel again.

## 'Gaddafi running out of options'

REUTERS, Sirte

Libya's interim rulers said yesterday they had further consolidated their control over Sahara desert towns that had been among Muammar Gaddafi's last strongholds, and said Gaddafi himself was running out of places to hide.

But a spokesman for the fugitive Libyan leader told Reuters that forces with the new government had killed over a hundred people while trying to capture Gaddafi's birthplace of Sirte, though there was no independent confirmation of this.

Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC), the country's de facto government after Gaddafi was swept from the capital last month, is anxious to show that it is establishing military control over the country and can govern Libya effectively.

Progress has been slow in seizing the towns of Sirte and Bani Walid, with military ineptitude hampering the advance. Reuters saw one fighter blow his own head off and kill a comrade while handling a rocket propelled grenade.

Until now some parts of Sabha, the traditional base for Gaddafi's own tribe about 800 km south of Tripoli, had been occupied by fighters loyal to him.

The council says its forces have now also taken control of Jufra, to the north-east of Sabha, and the nearby oasis towns of Sokna, Waddan, and Houn.

The NTC official said the manhunt for Gaddafi, in hiding for weeks though he occasionally issues defiant audio messages, was drawing closer to its target.

"There is no whole tribe or city on Gaddafi's side," said Bani. "I'm asking everyone in the south who has any news about the tyrant or his loyalists... to notify the legal bodies about them."

# Civil war looms in Yemen

Fighting rages in capital for the fifth day

AFP, Sanaa

Street battles raged yesterday between rival troops as well as between warring tribesmen, as violence which has already killed dozens spread across Yemen's capital, raising the spectre of civil war.

The gunbattles come after efforts to implement a Gulf-sponsored peace deal failed due to what its sponsors said were the soaring tensions between troops loyal to Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and opponents of his regime.

At least four civilians were killed when they were caught in the crossfire of the fighting that broke out early yesterday between Republican Guard troops commanded by Saleh's son Ahmed, and dissidents loyal to General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar, witnesses and medics said.

They said two women and a man were shot by snipers positioned on rooftops near and overlooking Change Square, the base of the anti-government protesters.

Another man died from wounds sustained when a mortar shell smashed into the square. Nine people were also wounded in the blast and several tents set up by protesters caught fire, according to witnesses.

yesterday's deaths bring the toll in the

capital to 89 since Sunday.

Fighting erupted later yesterday in Sanaa's northern Al-Hasaba district, when gunmen loyal to powerful dissident tribal chief Sheikh Sadiq al-Ahmar traded fire with followers of Saghir bin Aziz, a tribesman loyal to Saleh, witnesses said.

There was no indication of casualties from that fighting, which an AFP correspondent said was rapidly spreading to other neighbourhoods.

"The city is empty. Schools, banks and businesses are shut as the ghost of war looms over Sanaa," one resident told AFP.

The soaring levels of violence have raised long standing fears that Yemen, which is facing a Shiite rebellion in the north and the growing influence of al-Qaeda in the south, is slipping towards full blown civil war.

Speaking to AFP late Wednesday, United Nations envoy Jamal Benomar said the deteriorating security situation, and the reluctance of both sides to reach a political resolution, raises "the risk of civil war breaking out."

The latest wave of fighting broke out on Sunday when swarms of protesters marching from Change Square towards the city centre in a bid to extend their sit-in came under fire from Saleh's forces.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian men and women, *inset*, protest Obama's speech at UN and chant slogans yesterday during a demonstration in support of Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas' bid for statehood recognition at the United Nations yesterday in Gaza City.

## New US drone bases in Africa

AFP, Washington

The United States is building an array of secret new drone bases to conduct strikes against al-Qaeda targets in Somalia and Yemen, according to the Washington Post.

One of the new installations is being set up in Ethiopia, a close US ally in the fight against the Islamist Shebab that controls much of Somalia, while another is being established in the Seychelles, the Post reported late Tuesday.

A small fleet of so-called "hunter-killer" drones -- able to fire Hellfire missiles and satellite-guided bombs -- already based on the Indian Ocean archipelago resumed operations this month after a pilot mission demonstrated that they could effectively patrol Somalia from there, it said.

## NEWS IN brief

### India-Nepal quake toll rises to 110

AFP, Chungthang

Military helicopters yesterday reached remote villages in northeast India cut off for four days by a strong earthquake which killed at least 110 people across four countries.

Terrified local people reported how their houses were destroyed by boulders careering down the mountainside, flattening walls and crushing people inside when the 6.9-magnitude earthquake struck on Sunday evening.

Landslides and rockfalls have blocked all roads into the north of Sikkim, leaving rescue teams battling to evacuate the injured by air and relief organisers still uncertain about the scale of the destruction.

In Gangtok, the state capital of Sikkim, officials

### Rio to kick off world's biggest music fest

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Rock in Rio, the world's biggest music festival, is to kick off today in the city of its birth, with Rihanna, Shakira, Coldplay and Lenny Kravitz sharing the billing.

Tickets to the week-long event have been snapped up by 700,000 people who will crowd into a specially built "City of Rock" that is to be the site of the future Olympic Village when Rio hosts the 2016 Olympic Games.

Other artists to belt out tunes at the festival include Elton John, Stevie Wonder, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Jamiroquai, Metallica, Maroon 5, Guns N' Roses, and Brazil's top singers such as Ivete Sangalo.

### Israel embassy officials leave Cairo again

AFP, Cairo

Four officials from the Israeli embassy in Cairo returned to Israel yesterday, after a short trip to assess damage at the mission headquarters after it was attacked by protesters, a report said.

The September 9-10 attack on the Israeli embassy in Cairo forced the evacuation of staff including ambassador Yitzhak Levanon.

Crowds smashed through an external security wall, tossed embassy papers from balconies and tore down the Israeli flag. It was the worst incident since Israel set up its mission in Egypt, the first Arab country

## US in \$5.85 billion Taiwan jet upgrade

### China says deal will harm ties

AFP, Beijing

The United States announced a \$5.85 billion upgrade of Taiwan's fighter jets Wednesday, triggering swift rebuke from China.

It also summoned the US ambassador and warned that the move would undermine warming military relations.

China, which claims Taiwan as part of its territory, urged the United States to cancel the deal and said it had jeopardised recent improvements in military ties between the two world powers and affected relations with Taiwan.

But analysts said the deal, which stopped short of selling new planes to Taiwan, would probably not be as damaging as an earlier arms package that led to a break in China-US military exchanges in 2010.

Vice foreign minister Zhang Zhijun urged Washington to "immediately cancel the wrong decision" and summoned US Ambassador Gary Locke to protest against the deal, branded a "huge mistake" by China's top newspaper.

"If American politicians feel that the United States can... irresponsibly and randomly damage China's core interests without paying the price, this is a major and huge mistake," said the People's Daily.

Taiwan first lodged a request to buy 66 F-16 C/D fighters -- which have better radar and more powerful weapons systems than its F-16 A/Bs -- in 2007 in response to China's growing military muscle.

## Three car blasts kill six in Russia

REUTERS, Moscow

Six people were killed and at least 50 injured when three car bombs exploded in the capital of the Muslim Dagestan region in Russia's North Caucasus, an Interior Ministry source and Islamist rebels said yesterday.

The first car detonated in Makhachkala on Wednesday at 7:30 pm, killing at least four people and injuring five passers-by, said the source, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Two more car bombs exploded after midnight, killing one policeman and a civilian, the source told Reuters. At least 50 people were also injured.

## Pakistan 'supported Kabul embassy attack': US

BBC ONLINE

The most senior US military officer yesterday accused Pakistan's spy agency of supporting the Haqqani group in last week's attack on the US Kabul embassy.

"The Haqqani network... acts as a veritable arm of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency," Adm Mike Mullen told a Senate panel.

Some 25 people died in last Tuesday's 20-hour attack on Kabul's US embassy and other official buildings.

Pakistan's interior minister earlier denied links with the Haqqani group.

Rehman Malik told the BBC Pakistan was determined to fight all militants based on its border with Afghanistan.

Pakistani officials have consistently denied links with militant groups.

The dead included 11 civilians, among them children, along with at least four police and 10 insurgents.

## 'Land rush' warning in Africa

BBC ONLINE

An increasing number of land deals are displacing farmers and leaving poor communities homeless, campaigning charity Oxfam warned.

It says up to 227m hectares have been sold or leased worldwide since 2001.

Half of all deals that have been verified are in Africa, amounting to an area the size of Germany - 35m hectares, Oxfam says.

Vulnerable communities in Uganda and South Sudan have been affected.

The report also focuses on Honduras, Guatemala and Indonesia.

'Frenetic competition'

The organisation's Chief Executive, Barbara Stocking, said the "blinkered scramble" for land by investors was ignoring the needs of those who live on the land and depend upon it for their survival.

"Many of the world's poorest people are being left worse off by the unprecedented pace of land deals and the frenetic competition for land."

Oxfam says that among the worst affected by these so-called land grabs are

women, who despite producing up to 80% of food in some poor countries, are often more vulnerable as they have weaker land rights.

"Investors, no matter how noble they pertain to be, cannot sweep aside the needs and rights of poor communities who depend on the land they profit from," she said.

The organisation said that land grabs had accelerated especially since 2008, when soaring prices highlighted the issue of food security.

It said an increasing demand for food, combined with climate change and the increase of agricultural land being used to grow biofuels, meant that the number of such deals would be likely to only rise in the future.

It called on the EU to scrap its target of obtaining 10% transport fuels from renewable sources by 2020 - which has fuelled the planting of crops for biofuels - and asked investors and governments to implement policies to ensure land deals are fair and those affected are properly consulted.

## 2m sick from Pak floods

AFP, Islamabad

Two million Pakistanis have fallen ill from diseases since monsoon rains left the southern region under several feet of water, the country's disaster authority said yesterday.

More than 350 people have been killed and over eight million people have been affected this year by floods that officials say are worse in parts of Sindh province than last year, when the country saw its worst ever disaster.

Malaria, diarrhoea, skin disease and snake bites were among the health problems facing two million people across 23 Sindh districts, said Irshad Bhatti, spokesman of National Disaster Management Authority.

## Move was on

FROM PAGE 1

election manifesto would include a number of measures to promote good governance and weaker the "winner-take-all" ethos, which is common in Bangladeshi politics.

On November 25, AL chief Sheikh Hasina announced if her party was voted to power, it would take initiatives, including requesting names from the opposition parties for the post of deputy speaker to make parliament effective.

The announcement came at a meeting with a UN election assessment team.

After AL-led grand alliance's landslide victory in the December 29 elections, LGRD Minister Syed Ashrafur Islam at a meeting with Moriarty on January 20, 2009 also spoke about empowering the opposition parties in parliament.

Moriarty in another cable sent to Washington on January 21 wrote Ashraf had stressed the importance of giving the rival BNP a meaningful role in the government even though the party won only about 10 percent of the parliament seats.

"He [Ashraf] said the BNP would get a number of committee chairmanships proportionate to its representation in the new Parliament, including leadership of some important committees," Moriarty said.

"Although he did not provide specifics, Ashraf noted opposition parties traditionally were offered the chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee, which acts as the budget watchdog."

But the reality appeared different.

The ruling AL did not offer the deputy speaker post to the main opposition BNP in the ninth parliament that began its journey on January 25, 2009.

It also did not give chairs of important committees like the public accounts committee to BNP lawmakers. The BNP MPs were made chairmen of the two parliamentary standing committees on fisheries and livestock and environment and forest ministries.