

Snipers halt NTC assault on Sirte

Hungry, panicked civilians surge out of the besieged town

AGENCIES

Fighters for Libya's new rulers have been forced to regroup on the edge of Sirte, after pro-Gaddafi snipers halted a two-week old assault on the ousted despot's hometown.

And in Bani Walid, the only other stronghold of forces loyal to Moamer Kadhafi, the National Transitional Council's (NTC) fighters appeared to have opened another front on Friday.

As the fighting raged, Human Rights Watch called on the NTC to stop militia groups from making arbitrary arrests and abusing prisoners, including with beatings and electric shocks.

The New York-based group said it found evidence of torture after visiting 20 detention facilities in Tripoli.

As the NTC forces faced stiff resistance on the battlefield Friday, doubts grew that Gaddafi's vocal spokesman Mussa Ibrahim had been captured after reports he had been seized while disguised as a woman, complete with veil.

AFP correspondents on fronts east and west of Sirte said the former rebels had made no advances.

One NTC fighter was killed and 11 wounded, a medic said, as Nato warplanes and drones flew overhead without striking.

The prolonged battle for Gaddafi's hometown, besieged from three fronts, has raised concern for civilians trapped inside the city of about 100,000 people, with each side accusing the other of endangering them.

At least 15 civilian cars were seen leaving Sirte's eastern gate, while about

1,000 evacuees were registered 50 kilometres west of the city, NTC officials said.

Several residents told Reuters they were leaving Sirte because they had not eaten for days.

"I am not scared. I am hungry," said Ghazi Abdul-Wahab, a Syrian who has lived in the town for 40 years, patting his stomach.

Abdul-Wahab said he had been sleeping in the streets with his family after a Nato airstrike hit a building next to his house, making him fear his home could also be struck.

Gaddafi loyalists and some civilians were blaming Nato air strikes and shelling by the forces of the National Transitional Council (NTC) for killing civilians.

Nato and the NTC deny that.

Awlaqi killing reignites US debate on rights

Obama hails killing, says major blow to al-Qaeda

AFP, Washington

The killing of US-born al-Qaeda cleric Anwar al-Awlaqi has rekindled the debate over how far Washington can go in hunting down and assassinating alleged terror suspects who are American citizens.

Awlaqi, killed in Yemen with several other suspected militants, had been at the centre of a court case filed last year challenging the US government's right to target its own citizens for assassination which highlighted questions about constitutional rights.

President Barack Obama said the killing of Awlaqi was a "major blow" to al-Qaeda, and marked a "milestone in the broader effort to defeat" the terror network.

He said Awlaqi's killing in an air raid in Yemen was a tribute to the US intelligence community and to Yemen's cooperation

with the United States in a common anti-terror campaign.

Many US lawmakers and other Americans cheered the news of Awlaqi's death, but civil rights backers said the case raises serious questions.

Glenn Greenwald, a prominent civil liberties lawyer and commentator, said there had been no effort to indict Awlaqi on any crimes and that there was "substantial doubt" about his involvement in any crimes.

"He was simply ordered killed by the president: his judge, jury and executioner," Greenwald wrote on Salon.com. "What's most amazing is that its



Anwar al-Awlaqi

citizens will not merely refrain from objecting, but will stand and cheer the US government's new power to assassinate their fellow citizens, far from any battlefield, literally without a shred of due process," he added.

Last year, civil liberties groups filed a lawsuit on behalf of the cleric's father, Nasser al-Awlaqi, saying it was unconstitutional for the CIA to order the death of an American citizen without due process.

A judge dismissed the case without ruling on the merit of the suit, but said it raises serious constitutional issues.

Pardiss Kebriaei, an attorney at the Center Constitutional Rights who worked on the lawsuit, said that if Awlaqi were indeed killed by US forces or with their help, it would be illegal.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which also was part of the legal case, also denounced the killing.

STATEHOOD BID AT UN Palestinians have to wait for answer

AFP, United Nations

A UN Security Council decision on Palestinian membership of the United Nations will take several weeks, diplomats said Friday after the first meeting of a membership committee on the bid.

The international powers want to hold up any decision to give more chance to desperate efforts to get the Palestinians and Israelis back into direct talks, diplomats said.

Some "substantive" discussion of the Palestinian application was held Friday, but the committee mainly focused on how to handle the bid and only agreed to hold a new session next week, said Britain's UN ambassador Mark Lyall Grant.

"There will be several meetings" before the committee makes a recommendation to the Security Council, France's UN envoy Gerard Araud told reporters.

"The whole process will take several weeks and there is of course a link to the Quartet efforts," one Western diplomat told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas made a historic bid for UN membership on September 23. But the United States has vowed to veto the application if it comes to a Security Council vote.

The diplomatic Quartet on the Middle East -- the United States, Russia, European Union and United Nations -- has launched a new bid to get direct talks resumed with a firm timetable for an accord.

Abbas plans visit to Colombia

AFP, Bogota

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas is planning to visit several Latin American countries including UN Security Council member Colombia to discuss his bid for UN member state status, officials said Friday.

"We are coordinating the date, which would be the week of October 10," said Colombian Foreign Minister Maria Angela Holguin.

"It is important for president Abbas to relay his position in person to different presidents."

Abbas will hold talks with Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos in Bogota as part of a tour that will also take him to Honduras and the Dominican Republic.

The Palestinian leader also plans to visit Portugal, another Council member.



Palestinian protesters carry a wounded comrade during clashes in the West Bank village of Nabi Saleh between locals and Israeli soldiers after a march organized by the village's residents to protest the expansion of the nearby Jewish settlement of Halamish on late Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Iran rejects Palestinian UN bid

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader rejected the Palestinians' U.N. statehood bid on Saturday, saying any deal that accepted the existence of Israel would leave a "cancerous tumor" forever threatening the security of the Middle East.

As leader of a country under a long-standing threat of military action from Israel and the United States, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned the Jewish state and its allies to expect "paralysing blows".

"Any plan that seeks to divide Palestine is totally rejected," said Khamenei.

"The two-state scheme is nothing but a capitulation to the demands of the Zionists or the recognition of the Zionist regime on Palestinian land," he declared.

NEWS IN brief

Cigarette vending machines banned in England

AFP, London

Cigarette vending machines were banned in England yesterday, a move the government hopes will cut the numbers of children smoking.

Anyone caught selling cigarettes from the machines, usually found in pubs and clubs, could face a fine of £2,500 (\$3,900, 2,900 euros). Pubs will still be able to sell cigarettes from behind the bar.

Health Secretary Andrew Lansley said the ban would be useful to curb youngsters from growing the habit of smoking.

The British Heart Foundation charity said that around 200,000 youngsters start smoking regularly in England each year, with around 11 percent of regular smokers aged 11 to 15 getting their cigarettes from vending machines.

Rare flu-like virus on the rise: US

AFP, Washington

A rare virus has killed three people and sickened nearly 100 in Japan, the Philippines, the United States and the Netherlands over the past two years, US health authorities said Friday.

The culprit is human enterovirus 68 (HEV68), and its respiratory symptoms can be particularly dangerous to children, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in its Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

In six separate clusters of the virus that showed up worldwide, patients commonly experienced cough, difficulty breathing and wheezing.

The highest number of cases were found in Japan, where local public health authorities reported more than 120 cases last year.

Dutch city bans 'drug tourists'

BBC ONLINE

A ban on some foreign tourists came into force yesterday in the cannabis-selling coffee shops of the Dutch border city of Maastricht.

City authorities say the influx of tourists buying soft drugs is threatening public order and causing major traffic problems.

Coffee shop owners say the ban won't work and will hit the local economy.

However, the ban does not apply to visitors from Germany and Belgium who are the majority of foreign customers.

The move comes ahead of a proposed nationwide crackdown being discussed in the Dutch parliament.

The BBC's Anna Holligan says the ban is being seen as a test case that could be implemented in other Dutch towns and cities.

Syria dissidents meet in Turkey amid crackdown

AFP, Damascus

Representatives of Syria's six-month-old protest movement and opposition parties met in Turkey yesterday a united front against Bashar al-Assad's regime after violence claimed at least 21 more lives.

Clashes between security forces and deserters killed 11 people in a village of Hama province on Friday, while another eight died during a crackdown on protests in flashpoint Homs, human rights activists said.

Two men died yesterday wounds after being shot by security forces at Harasta and Qudshay near Damascus, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Local Coordination Committees group put Friday's death toll at 23.

Thousands of protesters had taken to the streets on Friday, the Muslim weekly day of prayer and a lightning rod in the protests against President Assad in which the United Nations says 2,700 people have been killed.

In Istanbul, the Syrian National Council, which is trying to unite opponents to Assad's regime, was holding negotiations behind

closed doors.

Several opposition movements are trying to reach an alliance, SNC member Khaled Khoja told AFP.

"We have been holding discussions for several days with Burhan Ghalouj; there are also Kurds and representatives of tribes," he said.

Ghalouj, a France-based academic, was recently designated leader of a rival opposition group, the National Transitional Council, which has Islamist and nationalist supporters.

"When the SNC meets, there will be a new assembly which will be expanded to these new movements," Khoja said, adding that the meeting scheduled for Saturday would now not take place before Sunday at the earliest because of the negotiations.

Elsewhere on the political front, Syria's ambassador to the United States Imad Mustapha was called in to the State Department and "read the riot act" about an attempted attack on US ambassador Robert Ford.

The UN Security Council remains divided over whether to threaten Assad's regime with sanctions over its deadly crackdown on dissent.

Plane flies into ferris wheel

AFP, Sydney

An ultralight plane crashed into a ferris wheel at a small town fair in Australia yesterday, narrowly missing two children, and dangled from the structure for hours before its occupants could be rescued.

Locals were stunned to see the Cheetah S200 fly into the ferris wheel at the Old Bar Festival near Taree, about 250 kilometres north-east of Sydney, and become wedged in its metalwork.

A nine-year-old boy and a 13-year-old girl who were on the ride at the time of the accident were rescued unharmed after about 90 minutes, police said.

But the 53-year-old pilot of the ultralight and his 32-year-old passenger were forced to wait for another hour and 15 minutes before they could be retrieved.

Egypt police clear Tahrir Square

REUTERS, Cairo

Egyptian riot police yesterday cleared Cairo's Tahrir Square of protesters who had wanted to stage a sit-in following a demonstration demanding an end to emergency laws and a speedy transfer of power to civilians from military rulers.

Around 100 protesters had stayed in the square after the demonstration held on Friday.

Riot police with shields and batons arrested 10 people when protesters threw stones at them, state news agency MENA said, but activists in the square told Reuters the stone throwers were not part of their group.

Soldiers and security forces stayed away from the square on Friday but the ruling military council had warned demonstrators against attacking public facilities.

Activists vowed to return to Tahrir Square to keep up the pressure on the military council should demands not be met.

"We are planning to hold a big sit-in as we have three demands, an end to emergency law, an end to military trials of civilians and speeding up trials of previous top officials," Mostafa el Hag, a 28-year-old singer and activist said.

"We are waiting to see what the military council says on Sunday," he said.

About 60 political parties and groups, including the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, have threatened to boycott an upcoming parliamentary election and set a deadline of Sunday for the military council to meet their demands.

W Germany wanted to buy reunification

AFP, Berlin

West Germany was prepared to pay the Soviet Union billions of marks in the 1960s to buy reunification, according to the weekly Der Spiegel, which went on sale yesterday.

The then chancellor Christian-Democrat Ludwig Erhard (1963-1966) hoped to obtain Germany's reunification in return for "two billion dollars a year for 10 years", or 100 billion Deutsche marks, a member of the chancellery at the time told the magazine.

The "Erhard plan" was to have been put to the USSR, then led by Nikita Krushchev (1953-1964), by the United States, according to declassified CIA documents, the weekly said.

Deemed "immature and unrealistic" by US diplomats at the time, who gave it little chance of success, the plan was never adopted.

Germany, divided into four occupation zones at the end of World War II, became two states, the Federal Republic of Germany (West) and the German Democratic Republic (East) in 1949.

It recovered its political and territorial unity on October 3 1990, exactly 21 years ago on Monday.

German reunification was brought about by the peaceful revolution in the East which culminated with the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989.

MJ 'MURDER' TRIAL Doctor lied to paramedics

AFP, Los Angeles

Michael Jackson may have died up to an hour before emergency paramedics even arrived, and his doctor then lied about the star's condition and the key drug that killed him, a court heard Friday.

Conrad Murray was also described as looking like a "deer in the headlights" when a paramedic surprised him in Jackson's bedroom, collecting items shortly after the seemingly-dead star was loaded into an ambulance at his LA mansion.

Murray could be jailed for up to four years over Jackson's death at his mansion in the plush Holmby Hills district of Los Angeles, where the star was rehearsing for a series of comeback shows in London.



A combo of images showing (top L-R) Syrian poet Adonis, Israeli author Amos Oz, Swedish poet Tomas Transtroemer, (bottom L-R) Somalia's author Nuruddin Farah, Japan's author Haruki Murakami and Hungary's author Peter Nadas who could be potential candidates to win the Nobel Prize for literature. Though the Swedish academy stays tight lipped, given the current situation in the Middle East, Syrian poet Adonis or even Israeli author Amos Oz could be well-placed this year.

PHOTO: AFP