



Assad feels no guilt over crackdown

BBC ONLINE

Syria's president said yesterday that he feels no guilt about his crackdown on a 10-month uprising as he did his best to protect the people, despite reports of brutality by security forces.

In an interview with the US network ABC, Bashar al-Assad said he had given no orders for violence to be used against protesters but admitted "mistakes" were made.

He said he did not own the security forces or the country. However, Assad said the UN was not credible as it accused the regime of committing crime against humanity.

Assad's interview comes a day after the US announced that its ambassador in Syria, Robert Ford, would return to Damascus after he was withdrawn in October because of security concerns. France's ambassador returned on Monday.

Responding to questions from veteran presenter Barbara Walters about the brutality of the crackdown, Assad said he did not feel any guilt.

"I did my best to protect the people, so I cannot feel guilty," he said. "You feel sorry for the lives that has [sic] been lost. But you don't feel guilty - when you don't kill people."

The security forces were not his, nor did he command them, the Syrian president said.

"There was no command, to kill or to be brutal," he said.

"I don't own them, I am president, I don't own the country."

Syria conditionally nods to Arab plan

US, France envoys reinstated

AFP, Damascus

Syria wants Arab League sanctions to be lifted as its price for allowing in observers to monitor the deadly violence that has gripped the country for nearly nine months, as international pressure grows.

The Cairo-based League was on Tuesday studying Syrian conditions that would allow monitors into the country, as President Bashar al-Assad's regime showed no let-up in its crackdown on dissent.

The 22-member pan-Arab body, which has also suspended Syria, has threatened Damascus with new sanctions if it fails to comply with the monitors plan.

A letter from Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem sent to the League and published in the Syrian press on Tuesday demanded the complete overturn of Arab League sanctions imposed on November 27.

Away from the political arena, violence continued in a crackdown the United Nations says has killed more than 4,000 people since mid-March.

Syrian army deserters took on regular

soldiers trying to assault Dael in the southern flashpoint province of Daraa, activists said, as Assad's regime said it had foiled "terrorists" from entering from Turkey.

It also reported five civilians shot dead on Tuesday. Nearly 50 more people were killed in Syria since Monday.

The United States and France on Tuesday sent their ambassadors back to Syria to champion protesters, demanding that the regime protect the envoys who had been pulled out due to safety fears.

In Switzerland, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed the need for a post-Assad Syria to protect the rights of minorities, ethnic groups and women.

"A democratic transition... means setting Syria on the path of the rule of law and protecting the universal rights of all citizens regardless of sect, or ethnicity or gender," she told members of the opposition Syrian National Council.

In addition to its suspension from the Arab League and sanctions, Syria has also been hit by a raft of EU and US sanctions.

India U-turns on retail reform plans

AFP, New Delhi

India on Wednesday suspended plans to open its \$470 billion retail sector to foreign supermarkets such as Wal-Mart, in a major U-turn forced by an outcry from small shopkeepers and opposition MPs.

The climbdown was a grave embarrassment for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government, which had announced the retail reform with great fanfare just two weeks ago.

Anger over the planned reforms united trade unions, influential state leaders and opposition lawmakers who have paralysed parliament over the issue.

"The decision to permit 51 percent (foreign direct investment) in multi-brand retail will be suspended till a consensus is developed through consultations," Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee told parliament.

Egypt PM names new cabinet

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's caretaker premier named a new cabinet yesterday charged with tackling worsening crime and a sliding economy after the first round of elections showing a landslide victory for Islamist parties.

Interim PM Kamal al-Ganzuri announced his administration following nearly two weeks of delays, reportedly caused by problems in finding a suitable candidate to fill the highly sensitive interior ministry post.

Ganzuri, speaking to reporters on Tuesday night, called on all political parties to pull together behind his administration, billed as a "national salvation government."

Meanwhile, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (Scaf) also announced it had granted Ganzuri "presidential powers," giving him greater control to run the country but no oversight of the armed forces or judiciary.

The opening round of the first elections since Mubarak's fall wrapped up on Tuesday, showing a crushing victory for Islamist parties over their disorganised and fragmented liberal rivals.

The Muslim Brotherhood, banned for decades by Mubarak, said its Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) had won 36 out of 54 individual seats up for grabs in the first phase of the multi-stage parliamentary polls.

In a separate party vote, which will see more than a 100 seats distributed, it won 36.6 percent while the hardline Islamic fundamentalist party Al-Nur came second with 24.4 percent.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Islamist parties on Tuesday to "embrace democratic norms and rules" and respect women's rights and free religious practice.

Yemen forms unity govt

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen's Prime Minister-designate Mohammed Basindawa said yesterday he had finalised his new unity government and would disclose the line-up later in the day.

"The government has been formed and we will announce it formally this evening," Basindawa told AFP in the Yemeni capital Sanaa.

"We have agreed on all the names," he added.

Half of the new cabinet ministers will be from the opposition, while loyalists of embattled President Ali Abdullah Saleh will make up the other half, a condition stipulated in the Gulf brokered power-transfer deal signed by Saleh on November 23.

The newly formed transitional cabinet will carry out government duties for three months, after which elections will be held.

Anti-Putin protests rock Russia

Hundreds arrested; Gorbachev calls for new polls

AGENCIES

Hundreds of people took to the streets of Moscow for a third successive day yesterday to demand an end to Vladimir Putin's 12-year rule, defying a crackdown by tens of thousands of police reinforced by crack Interior Ministry troops.

Russia Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev yesterday called for Russia's elections to be re-run due to fraud as the opposition vowed new rallies contesting the results despite further mass arrests.

Riot police in helmets roughly dragged over 550 protestors into detention vans Tuesday evening in central Moscow but the opposition warned they would stage a major protest organised via the Internet at the weekend.

Amid growing international alarm, Gorbachev said the results of Sunday's poll should be invalidated and new elections held due to "numerous falsifications and rigging."

Vladimir Putin's United Russia party won the polls with a sharply reduced majority,

amid signs the prime minister's once-invincible popularity might be waning.

The opposition says that the ruling party's performance would have been even worse in free polls.

The conduct of the polls, which OSCE-led observers said were slanted in favour of United Russia, raised international concern. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the elections were neither free nor fair.

The Russian foreign ministry protested that Hillary's comments were "unacceptable".

Russia's liberal newspapers hailed the protests, saying the opposition had finally found a voice against the domination of Putin.

State television news has virtually ignored the demonstrations, and the morning bulletin on Channel One did not contain a single mention of the protests.

But with the authorities clearly nervous, police said that more than 51,000 police were guarding the city streets, among them 2,000 army conscripts, in a heightened security regime.



PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of South African youths form a giant lion head on a beach in Durban yesterday, to call for urgent action on climate change, on the sidelines of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The event was in partnership with international artist John Quigley and supported by the "tck tck tck Global Campaign for Climate action."

US presidents have longer life-span

REUTERS, Washington

Gray hair and a wrinkled brow beset most US presidents soon after they take office, but a study Tuesday said most live longer than average men due to their wealth and access to medical care.

Some research has suggested that US presidents age twice as fast as regular people while in office, so University of Illinois at Chicago demographer S Jay Olshansky decided to see if that was indeed the case.

His study, published in the December 7 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association, excludes the four who were assassinated: Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy, James Garfield and William McKinley.

"Of 34 deceased presidents who died of natural causes, 23 lived longer than expected with accelerated aging, with a mean age at death of 78.0 years, while their estimated age at death (with accelerated aging) was 67.0 years," he wrote.

Accelerating aging means that for each day a president spent in office, two days of life were subtracted from the estimated lifespan of men at his age in the year he took office.

In other words, a four-year term would take eight years off a life.

So most leaders of the free world have lived an average of 11 years longer than would be expected if they aged twice as fast while in office.

US defends Pakistan aid despite row

Evacuating air base

REUTERS, Brussels

The US State Department on Tuesday defended aid to Pakistan amid calls from senators for a full review of whether economic and military assistance there serves the US national interest.

"We believe our assistance to Pakistan still continues to provide dividends for the American people in trying to grow and strengthen Pakistan's democratic institutions, boost its economy," said spokesman Mark Toner.

"In the long term, you know, those are the kinds of things we're seeking to achieve," he told reporters one day after Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham made a full-throated call for reevaluating the aid.

His comments came shortly after US Senate Intelligence Committee Chair Dianne Feinstein said that cutting assistance to Pakistan would be unhelpful but warned that calls to do so had strong congressional support.

Relations slid to a new low last month when Nato air strikes killed 24 Pakistani soldiers on the Afghan border.

The attack sparked fury in Pakistan, which blocked ground supply routes for Nato forces in Afghanistan, ordered a US air base to evacuate and pulled out of Monday's international conference on Afghanistan in Germany.

Meanwhile, reports claim that the United States is evacuating the Shamsi air base that enraged Pakistani government asked to leave.

Zardari's heart attack spreads rumour

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's embattled President Asif Ali Zardari have to undergo an operation in a Dubai hospital after suffering a minor heart attack, officials said yesterday but refuted claims of media reports that he may resign.

The unpopular 56-year-old head of state flew to the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday after falling ill in the midst of a major scandal over alleged attempts by a close aide to seek US help to limit the power of Pakistan's military.

His illness sparked media reports that he is contemplating resignation, but loyalists have ruled out any question that he may step down.

"He had a minor heart attack on Tuesday. He flew to Dubai where he had an angioplasty. He's in good health now," Mustafa Khokhar, adviser to the prime minister on human rights who sits in the cabinet, told AFP.

"There's no question of any resignation," he added.

NEWS IN brief

Blasts kill 28 pilgrims in Iraq

AFP, Hilla

A wave of bomb attacks targeting Shiite pilgrims in Iraq killed 28 people and wounded 78 Monday, a day before the peak of the Ashura religious commemorations, security officials and medics said.

It was the bloodiest day in Iraq since October 27, when at least 32 people were killed and 71 wounded in twin blasts in Baghdad.

In Monday's deadliest attack, a car bomb blasted pilgrims in the Neel area north of Hilla south of Baghdad, in central Iraq, security officials said.

Baghdad was also hit by bomb attacks against Shia pilgrims, with at least 10 people killed and 30 wounded.

No attack on Syria using Turkey

AFP, Ankara

Turkey said yesterday it would not let its territory be used to launch attacks against other countries after Syria said it had foiled a bid by "terrorists" to infiltrate from the Turkish border.

"Turkey is not allowing any armed groups (to launch attacks) against other countries," a Turkish diplomat who declined to be named told AFP, when asked about the Syrian news reports.

Turkey is home to around 7,500 refugees who have fled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's deadly crackdown.

Israeli ex-president jailed for rape

AFP, Tel Aviv

Israel's disgraced former president Moshe Katsav yesterday began a seven-year jail sentence after being convicted on two counts of rape and other sexual offences.

The former head of state, who turned 66 on Monday, entered Ma'asiyahu prison near Tel Aviv.

He was convicted in December 2010 of two counts of rape, sexual harassment, indecent acts and obstruction of justice after an 18-month trial which included harrowing accusations, and portrayed him as a sexual predator who routinely harassed his female staff.

Pearl Harbor anniversary observed

AFP, Honolulu

The United States yesterday marked the 70th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor with memorial services, lowered flags and silence at the moment the history-changing assault began.

Ceremonies were scheduled from Pearl Harbor in Hawaii to Washington DC on the US East Coast to remember the 2,400 Americans who died on December 7, 1941 when Japan launched a devastating surprise offensive on the US Pacific Fleet.

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