

Putin braces for waves of protest

AFP, Moscow

Tens of thousands of Russians prepared yesterday to hold their biggest protest yet over a contested election that has sent Moscow's relations with Washington spiralling to a three-year low.

Saturday's rally in Moscow -- sanctioned by the police after days of talks with the opposition -- is expected to draw around 30,000 people to a square across the river from the Kremlin following last weekend's legislative polls.

But the opposition is also organising rallies in at least 14 other major cities in a rare outpouring of mistrust in a system put in place by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin when he first became president in 2000.

Sunday's vote was narrowly won by Putin's ruling party but accompanied by a flood of video footage shot by ordinary Russians and posted on the Internet appearing to show ballot stuffing and other widespread manipulation.

The protests that followed have posed a surprise challenge to Putin and saw the Russian strongman on Thursday launch a lacerating attack on US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for her expressions of concern.

Putin accused Hillary of deliberately sending a signal to the opposition to protest and the State Department of paying Russian groups to find fault with the elections.

The exchange between Putin and Hillary sets a tense tone to the Russian strongman's expected return to the Kremlin next year that could see him stay in power through 2024.



PHOTO: AFP

African immigrants take part in the 3rd Annual Human Rights March in Tel Aviv yesterday to mark International Human Rights Day which will be celebrated throughout the world today.

Bloodbath continues in Syria, 24 killed

AFP, Nicosia

Syrian security forces opened fire on civilians in several protest flashpoints yesterday, killing at least 24 people including four children, a rights group said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 10 civilians were killed in Homs and one outside the central city, while five died near Damascus, two in Daraa, cradle of anti-regime protests since March, four in the restive city of Hama and two in the northwestern province of Idlib.

The opposition Syrian National Council had earlier Friday warned of the dangers of a "massacre" in Homs, which activists say has been surrounded by government forces for the past two months.

'Detrimental response' to border attacks

Pakistan warns US, says Nato attack planned

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani yesterday warned the US and its Nato allies that any future cross-border attack would meet with a "detrimental response".

US-Pakistani relations plunged to a new low last month after a cross-border Nato air strike which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers.

Gilani made the comments while meeting army chief of staff General Ashfaq Kayani, the prime minister's secretariat said in a statement.

Pakistani security officials earlier said they had upgraded the air defence system on the Afghan border to make it capable of shooting down aircraft.

Meanwhile a senior Pakistani military officer said the last month's Nato air strike was pre-planned and warned of more attacks.

Major General Ashfaq Nadeem, director general of military operations, was also quoted by newspapers yesterday as saying that Pakistan, a strategic US ally, would deploy an air defence system along the border to prevent such attacks.

Nadeem made the remarks to a Senate committee on defence on Thursday.

The Daily Times said Nadeem described the attack as a plot. Another newspaper quoted him as saying it was a "pre-planned conspiracy" against Pakistan.

"We can expect more attacks from our supposed allies," the Express Tribune quoted Nadeem as saying at the senate briefing.

US and Pakistani officials have offered differing initial accounts of what happened.

Pakistan said the attack was unprovoked, with officials calling it an act of blatant aggression -- an accusation the United States has rejected.

Pakistan shut its border to Nato supply convoys on November 26, hours after the deadliest single cross-border attack of the 10-year war in Afghanistan.

The government also ordered the United States to leave the Shamsi air base in the south-west, widely reported to be a hub in the covert CIA drone war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Pakistan's border area with Afghanistan.

Japan extends sanctions against Iran

AFP, Tokyo

Japan yesterday decided to extend its sanctions on Iran after similar moves by other nations to beef up international measures against Tehran's nuclear programme.

The cabinet said it would increase the number of Iranian people and organisations subject to Japanese sanctions, said Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Yukio Edano.

The government added 106 organisations, one individual and three Iranian banks to its sanction list, bringing the total number to 267 organisations, 66 individuals and 20 banks, according to Jiji Press news agency.

The move will not add to restrictions on imports of crude oil from the Islamic republic, the fourth-biggest oil supplier to resource-poor Japan.

DRAFTING OF NEW CONSTITUTION IN EGYPT Army will have final say

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Egypt's ruling generals have put themselves on a collision course with the country's new parliament after declaring that MPs will not have the final say over the drafting of a fresh constitution.

The revelation is likely to escalate tensions once again between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (Scaf) and an increasingly confident Muslim Brotherhood, which looks set to dominate the new assembly once voting is completed and parliament opens for business, in March.

Millions of Egyptians have flocked to the polls in recent days to elect parliamentary representatives, whose primary role is to appoint a special body tasked with drawing up Egypt's first post-Mubarak constitution.

But after initial results indicated that political Islamists will form a majority in the new chamber, the military has moved swiftly to rein in their powers and ensure its own well entrenched political and economic privileges remain intact under any future civilian government.

In a rare interview with foreign media, Major General Mokhtar el-Mulla a leading member of Scaf said the upcoming parliament would not be representative of all Egyptian people, and that those appointed to write a fresh constitution must also be approved by the interim cabinet and a newly-created "advisory council" of intellectuals, civilian politicians and media personalities, both of which fall under the control of Scaf.

"This is the first stage in our democracy," said Mulla, who also insisted that details of the army budget must remain shielded from democratic oversight, even after the generals return to their barracks. "In the future, parliament may have the ability to do whatever it likes. However at the moment, given the unstable situation, parliament is not representing all the Egyptian people."

"This is not out of mistrust of the parliament," he continued. "What we are seeing is free and fair elections ... but they certainly don't represent all sectors of society."

Mulla denied claims that Egypt's so-called "democratic transition" was

under threat. He said that the process of writing a new constitution would begin in April next year, and that the document would then be put to a public referendum in June ahead of presidential elections later that month.

He acknowledged that the timetable had been designed to prevent any "specific groups" a thinly-disguised reference to Islamists dictating the country's political future for decades to come, but dismissed suggestions that the army's stance could provoke a backlash from the Brotherhood and other democratically elected civilian political groups which had been expecting to control the constitution-writing process themselves.

Meanwhile the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), on Thursday spurned the military-backed advisory council which would have a supervisory role in drafting the next constitution.

"Any attempt to intervene in parliament's work in drafting the constitution would be a violation of the people's choice," the party's spokesman said

Libya gives Lockerbie inquiry go-ahead

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Libya has given the green light for British police to visit the country to conduct investigations into the Lockerbie bombing and the assassination of PC Yvonne Fletcher, the British foreign minister Alistair Burt has said.

The governing National Transitional Council had stalled on earlier requests for officers to travel to Libya, but Burt said the new Libyan government, sworn in last weekend, would co-operate.

Libya's interior minister, Fawzy Abdel Aal, confirmed on Thursday he would agree to "the early return of the Dumfries and Galloway police in relation to Lockerbie", said Burt.

The minister, who is on a two-day visit to Tripoli, said Abdel Aal had made the same promise regarding the investigation into the killing of Fletcher, gunned down outside the Libyan embassy in London in 1984.

He said Libyan officials had given no dates for the visits, but expected it to happen soon.

Investigators in the UK are likely to view this as an important step forward. Detectives in London are keen to interview former Libyan diplomats who were stationed in the embassy at the time of the shooting, which saw diplomatic relations frozen with Libya.

Meanwhile, Libyan Prime Minister Abdel Rahim al-Kib said on Thursday that the issue of disarming former rebels who fought Muammar Gaddafi's forces is "more complex" than it appears, but hoped to demilitarise them soon.

His statement comes two days after the capital's city council requested militias from outside Tripoli to leave by December 20.



PHOTO: AFP

An activist of British charity Oxfam pretends to eat a piece of coal as a protest aimed at 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Unfccc) as she sits between bags reading "Let Them Eat Carbon" yesterday in Durban.

Israeli air strikes kill four in Gaza

Rockets fired in retaliation

REUTERS, Gaza

Violence has flared up between Israel and Gaza, with the Israeli air force killing four Palestinians and Palestinian militants firing rockets far across the border.

The fighting erupted on Thursday when an air strike on a car killed two militants, one of them from Gaza's governing Islamist group Hamas, whom Israel accused of planning to send gunmen to attack it through the neighbouring Sinai region of Egypt.

Palestinian militants responded to Thursday's air strike with a barrage of rockets, some of which landed near Beersheba, a city 35 km (30 miles) from Gaza. No one was hurt. Air-raid sirens summoned residents of southern Israel to shelters.

Another Israeli air strike followed before dawn yesterday, hitting a Hamas

training camp in Gaza City.

The blast flattened a nearby home, killing its owner and his 12-year-old son. The man's wife and five other children were wounded, hospital officials said.

In a statement expressing regret for the civilian casualties, the military said Palestinian rockets stored next to the camp had stoked the explosion.

Hamas accused Israel of a "massacre."

Palestinian militants stepped up rocket attacks as night fell. Three groups said they had fired more than a dozen projectiles across the border. Israel police said at least ten of them landed in Israeli territory, causing no casualties.

Witnesses in Gaza reported heavy activity of Israeli drones over head.

Hamas spurns peacemaking with the Jewish state but has in the past proposed truces as it sought to consolidate control over Gaza and negotiate power-sharing with the rival, Fatah.

Suicide blast hits Afghan mosque, kills 6

AFP, Asadabad

A suicide bomber yesterday attacked a mosque in eastern Afghanistan, assassinating a district police chief and killing at least five other people, a government official said.

The attack happened as worshippers were leaving the mosque after the main Friday prayers in the Ghazi Abad area of the eastern province of Kunar, which borders Pakistan, said provincial governor Fazullulah Wahidi.

The district police chief, an intelligence officer, two police and two civilians were among the dead, with eight other people wounded, he added. Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack.

All eyes on major carbon emitters

AFP, Durban

A growing coalition of countries demanding a new pact on greenhouse gases pressured China, the United States and India to follow suit as the UN climate talks were set to go into overtime yesterday.

With the outcome at Durban still wildly uncertain after 12 days of wrangling, Europe declared it had assembled a powerful alliance gathering nearly two-thirds of the world's nations.

They supported a "roadmap" leading to an accord, to be negotiated by 2015 which, for the first time, would bind all nations to legal commitments to tackle greenhouse gases, it said.

The alignment fractured unity in the developing bloc and split the four countries of the so-called BASIC group, comprising Brazil, South Africa, India and China.

"Today, agreement is within reach," said European Climate Commissioner Connie Hedegaard.

She cautioned, however: "Although there are these encouraging signs, we are definitely not there yet and time in Durban is now really short."

Those gathered around the EU flag comprised least developed countries, the African bloc, small island states and Brazil and South Africa, said Hedegaard.

Without naming names, Hedegaard said this left the United States, China and India to declare their hand. The US and China are the world's biggest emitters.

By mid-afternoon, conference chairman South Africa finally published a draft text. But it lacked the core demand of the EU-led coalition, which implied that many hours of haggling lay ahead.

Negotiations are officially scheduled to wind up late yesterday, though it is almost a tradition in meetings of the 194-nation UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Unfccc) for them to overrun.

The roadmap scheme aims at filling a void at a time when scientists are urging ever more radical action to curb carbon emissions driving the planet to worsening food, drought, rising seas and storms.



Kabila wins DR Congo vote

AFP, Kinshasa

Incumbent Joseph Kabila was declared the winner Friday of DR Congo's election but his rival Etienne Tshisekedi rejected the result and declared himself president, raising fears of civil unrest.

The elections, just the second in the Democratic Republic of Congo since back-to-back wars from 1996 to 2003, have raised fears of fresh unrest, and Tshisekedi made a veiled threat of violence if Kabila's win was allowed to stand.

Kabila, who has been in power since 2001, secured 49 percent of the vote while Tshisekedi got 32.3 percent, according to the provisional results which was delayed 11 days.

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