

Pakistan to keep Nato convoy ban

US vacates air base following deadline

AGENCIES

Pakistan may continue its blocking of Nato convoys into Afghanistan for several weeks, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani told the BBC yesterday.

Pakistan stopped the convoys in protest at US air strikes which killed 24 of its troops at two checkpoints on the Afghan border last month.

Gilani refused to rule out closing Pakistan's airspace to the US.

He also denied rumours President Asif Ali Zardari had suffered a stroke and the army was trying to oust him.

The air strikes on 26 November marked a low point in relations between Washington and Islamabad, which have long been strained by the US-led military campaign against militants in Afghanistan.

In a wide-ranging interview with the BBC,

Gilani said Pakistan and the US needed to trust each other better.

"Yes there is a credibility gap, we are working together and still we don't trust each other," Gilani said.

Meanwhile, the United States yesterday vacated a Pakistani airbase following a deadline given by Islamabad.

Pakistan's military said in a statement that the last flight carrying US personnel and equipment had left Shamsi airbase, in the southwestern province of Baluchistan, completing a process that began last week.

"The control of the base has been taken over by the Army," the statement said.

The base was widely believed to have been used in covert CIA drone attacks against the Taliban and al-Qaeda commanders in northwest Pakistan's tribal areas, which border Afghanistan.



A Palestinian demonstrator flashes the victory sign in front of Israeli soldiers during clashes in the West Bank yesterday. Clashes broke out after the funeral of activist Mustafa al-Tamimi, who died after being hit by an Israeli tear gas canister. Israeli troops responded with clouds of tear gas.

Nine killed in fresh Syria clashes

BBC ONLINE

At least nine people died yesterday in fresh clashes in Syria as opposition activists called a general strike.

Two people died in clashes between troops and deserters in the northern Idlib province, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

There were also reports of clashes between defectors and troops in the south, near the border with Jordan.

The UN estimates more than 4,000 people have died in the nine-month uprising, including 307 children.

Many of those casualties have been reported to be in Homs, one of the main centres of anti-government protests.

Syria severely restricts access to foreign media so reports of unrest cannot be verified.

Post-Gbagbo polls held in Ivory Coast

AFP, Abidjan

Ivoriens voted yesterday to elect a new parliament in a poll boycotted by the party of former strongman Laurent Gbagbo, who is awaiting trial in The Hague for crimes against humanity.

With Gbagbo sitting in an International Criminal Court (ICC) cell, the coalition backing President Alassane Ouattara is widely expected to gain a majority of the 255 seats in the new assembly.

The vote comes only a year after the poll that brought the world's top cocoa producer, once a beacon of stability in the west African region, to the brink of civil war in a conflict that claimed some 3,000 lives.

Palestinians are 'invented' people

Says US presidential hopeful

AFP, Washington

Leading Republican White House contender Newt Gingrich has sparked outrage by saying the Palestinians are an "invented" people, which seemed to call into question long-held US policy on statehood.

Gingrich's comments were the most hawkish to date from any Republican vying to take on President Barack Obama in November 2012's national election, and came as his rivals upped the bidding to gain key support from Jewish voters.

In a sign he could abandon the US position on a two-state solution for Israel and the Palestinians, Gingrich said the Jewish people had the right to a state, but did not confirm if Palestinians should have the same privilege.

"Remember there was no Palestine as a state. It was part of the Ottoman Empire,"



Newt Gingrich

Gingrich told The Jewish Channel in an interview released on Friday.

"We've had an invented Palestinian people, who are in fact Arabs, and were historically part of the Arab community," he said.

"They had a chance to go many places. And for a variety of political reasons, we have sustained this war now since the 1940s, and I against Israel think it's tragic," the candidate said.

Republicans aiming for the presidency have declared an unshakable commitment to Israel, while criticizing Obama's policy toward the Jewish state.

But Gingrich's campaign was later forced to backtrack and a statement was issued that said the candidate did in fact favour the same two-state solution espoused by Obama and previous US presidents.

Post-poll clashes kill 4 in DR Congo

BBC ONLINE

Four people were killed in the DR Congo capital Kinshasa yesterday after incumbent Joseph Kabila's victory in presidential polls was announced on Friday.

Police shot dead three looters, with one woman hit by a stray bullet, according to national police chief General Charles Bisengimana.

The main opposition candidate Etienne Tshisekedi has also claimed victory. The government branded Tshisekedi's move "illegal and irresponsible".

The Carter Center, which had 26 teams of observers monitoring the elections, said the results "lack[ed] credibility".

Celia Sanchez: Was she Fidel Castro's lover?

BBC ONLINE

Few doubt that the female revolutionary Celia Sanchez played a key part in the life of Cuban leader Fidel Castro, but just how intimate the two of them really were is a debate still going on, 30 years after her death.

Celia Sanchez was at the heart of the Cuban revolution for over two decades and after meeting Fidel Castro in 1957, she became his indispensable aide.

There has been speculation they were lovers. But neither Sanchez when she was alive, nor Castro, ever addressed the rumours. Outside Cuba, little has been written about the role Celia Sanchez played until her death in 1980.

The two first met in 1957, but Sanchez had already played a crucial part in Castro's life.

After Castro made a disastrous landing in Cuba from Mexico in December 1956, it was her clandestine network of peasant families that was critical to the rebels' survival.

Celia Sanchez Manduley was born in 1920. She grew up in the tropical east of Cuba, known as Oriente.

When Fulgencio Batista took power in Cuba for the second time following a coup in 1952, Sanchez - like millions of Cubans - was outraged.

In July 1953, Castro made his first attempt to topple Batista, and attacked the Moncada barracks in Santiago. Sanchez joined Castro's July 26th Movement.

By 1957, in Batista's Cuba, Sanchez

was the country's most-wanted woman. When it became too dangerous for her to remain on the plains, she joined Castro up in the Sierra Maestra.

When Castro came to power in 1959, Sanchez remained his most valuable aide, and worked alongside him until her death.

Since she died of lung cancer in 1980, Sanchez has become an icon in Cuba. She is seen as someone who, above all, was devoted to the ideals of the revolution



Celia Sanchez with Fidel Castro

and to Castro. She never had a husband and there is no evidence she had any romance after the 1950s.

But in Miami, 92-year-old Huber Matos - one of Castro's comandantes in the guerrilla movement - tells a different story: "I went to Costa Rica to look for arms to take to the Sierra Maestra.

"When I returned in 1958, there was Celia Sanchez beside Fidel Castro and I realised their relationship wasn't just political, but intimate too."

But today in Cuba, Huber Matos is viewed by many as a man not to be trusted. He is a disgraced former comandante, who served 20 years in jail for treason and sedition.

UK could be 'isolated' by EU veto: Deputy PM

AFP, London

Britain could be "isolated and marginalised" by the European Union after vetoing a treaty aimed at ending the euro debt crisis, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said yesterday.

The Liberal Democrat party leader's comments saw him officially breaking ranks with Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, who was responsible for the veto at a summit in Brussels on Friday.

"I am bitterly disappointed by the outcome of last week's summit, precisely because I think there is now a real danger that over time the United Kingdom will be isolated and marginalised within the European Union," Clegg told the BBC.

"I don't think that's good for jobs in the City (of London financial services hub) or



Nick Clegg

elsewhere. I don't think it's good for growth. I don't think it's good for families up and down the country," he said.

Clegg had until now limited himself to expressing "regret" that Britain had ended up on the outside of a pact by the remaining 26 EU members agreeing to tight fiscal discipline aimed at saving the euro.

Speaking on Sunday, he also warned against anti-EU elements in the Conservatives pushing for Britain to leave the bloc altogether, saying it would leave Britain as a global "pygmy".

"I think a Britain which leaves the EU will be considered to be irrelevant by Washington and will be considered a pygmy in the world when I want us to stand tall and lead in the world," he said.

Armed groups clash in turf war in Tripoli

REUTERS, Tripoli

A gun battle broke out overnight when armed men in the vehicles of Libya's new national army tried to take control of Tripoli's international airport from a powerful militia, the commander of the airport's security force said yesterday.

It was the latest in a series of clashes between the rival militias which, in the absence of a fully-functioning central government, have wielded real power on the streets in Libya since a revolt forced out former leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Mukhtar Al-Akhdar, commander of a militia unit from Zintan, south-west of Tripoli, which controls the international airport, told Reuters a convoy of vehicles approached a checkpoint about 3 km from the airport.

He said the armed men in the convoy said they had come to take over security, and a gunfight then broke out.

"No one was killed. We have only two people injured on our side," Al-Akhdar said.

He said the row was defused after intervention from the head of the National Transitional Council (NTC) Mustafa Abdel Jalil, caretaker Prime Minister Abdurrahim El-Keib and Defense Minister Osama Al-Juwali.

NTC military spokesman Ahmed Bani did not comment on the details of the incident but said: "There is no political or other problem. The problem is now sorted out."

Libya's central government is becoming slowly more assertive and signalling that it is time for the militias -- which emerged from the seven-month war to end Gaddafi's rule -- to hand over to the new national police and army.

Tripoli city council has given militias from other towns until December 20 to return home.

Noriega en route to prison in Panama

AFP, Paris

Former Panama strongman Manuel Noriega flew out of France yesterday and headed home to more prison time two decades after being ousted in a bloody US invasion.

An Iberia plane carrying the former dictator took off from a Paris airport shortly after 0800 GMT and headed to Madrid, from where the 77-year-old was to begin the final leg of his journey home.

Noriega is due to arrive in Panama on an Iberia flight at 5:30pm, guarded by a delegation of six foreign ministry officials, police, doctors and a prosecutor who prepared the transfer in Paris.

After serving more than 20 years in prisons in the United States and France for drug trafficking and money laundering, Noriega will face three separate sentences of 20 years in Panama for crimes committed under his dictatorship, including the murder of critics.

The return of Noriega, on the CIA's payroll from 1968 to 1986 before he became an enemy of Washington, has sparked speculation over the possibility that he could reveal secrets about political figures and wealth amassed under his regime.



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