

Violence spreads as Syria toll hits 5,000

Russia, Iran extend support for regime

REUTERS, Amman

Security forces shot dead 17 people in Syria yesterday and rebels killed seven police in an ambush, activists said, after the UN human rights chief put the death toll from nine months of protest against President Bashar al-Assad at 5,000.

The UN tally includes civilians, army defectors and those executed for refusing to shoot civilians, but not soldiers or security personnel killed by opposition forces, Navi Pillay said.

The Syrian government has said more than 1,100 members of the army, police and security services have been killed and state media reported 17 military funerals yesterday for victims of "terrorist armed groups."

Pillay said Syria's actions could constitute crimes against humanity, issuing a fresh call for the UN Security Council to refer the situation to the International Criminal Court.

The sharp rise in the death toll is bound to lend weight to those arguing for increased

international intervention to stop the bloodshed in Syria which some fear is increasingly drifting towards civil war.

Meanwhile, Russia and Iran yesterday extended their support for the embattled regime condemning Western accusation of massacre and call for harsher sanctions.

The standoff between Moscow and the West over Syria intensified when Russia slammed as "immoral" Western accusations it was blocking UN action condemning the regime's deadly crackdown.

"There are those who refuse to put pressure on the armed, extremist part of the opposition and are at the same time accusing us of blocking the UN Security Council's work. I would call this position immoral," Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said.

Meanwhile, Iran's parliament yesterday passed a bill for a free trade agreement with Syria in a show of support for President Bashar al-Assad's regime beset by protests and international pressure.



A historical moment: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Unesco Director General Irina Bokova and officials attend the flag-raising ceremony for the Palestinian flag at the Unesco Headquarters in Paris yesterday.

Pakistan to impose tax on Nato

BBC ONLINE

Pakistan is considering charging millions of dollars in annual taxes on Nato trucks and fuel tankers, officials told the BBC on Monday.

The charges might include taxes on fuel in addition to port and storage fees, they said.

The supply route is a lifeline for Nato troops but Pakistan closed it last month after 24 of its soldiers were killed in a Nato air strike.

Thousands of tankers are now stranded.

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

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

God particle 'may have been glimpsed'

BBC ONLINE

The most coveted prize in particle physics - the Higgs boson - may have been glimpsed, said researchers reporting at the Large Hadron Collider (LHC) in Geneva yesterday.

The particle, also called the God Particle, is purported to be the means by which everything in the Universe obtains its mass.

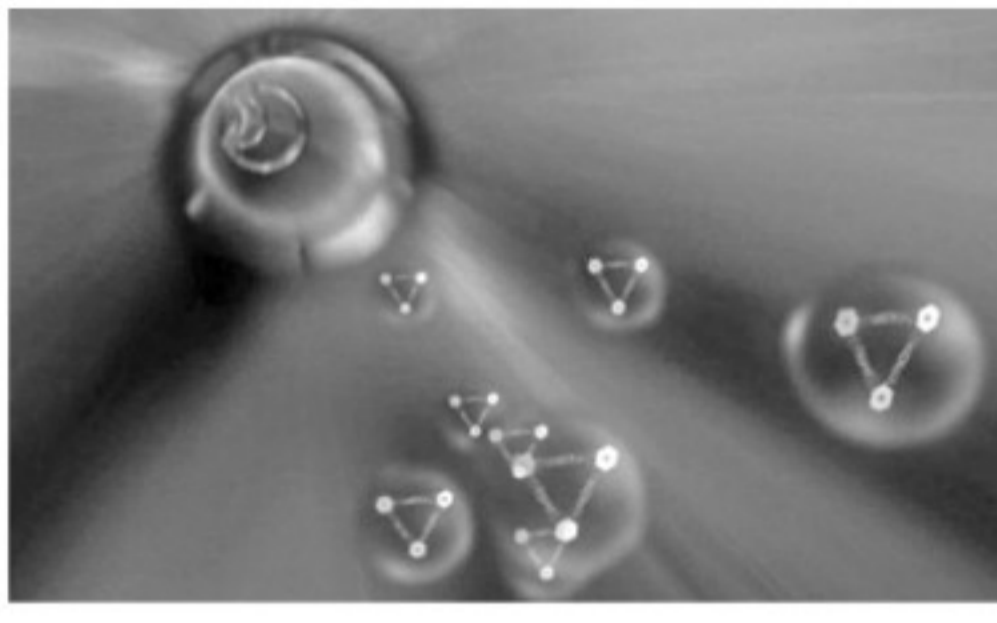
Scientists say that two experiments at the LHC see hints of the Higgs at the same mass, fuelling huge excitement.

But the LHC does not yet have enough data to claim a discovery.

Finding the Higgs would be one of the biggest scientific advances of the last 60 years. It is crucial for allowing us to make sense of the Universe, but has never been observed by experiments.

This basic building block of the Universe is a significant missing component of the Standard Model - the "instruction booklet" that describes how particles and forces interact.

Two separate experiments at the



LHC Atlas and CMS - have been conducting independent searches for the Higgs. Because the Standard Model does not predict an exact mass for the Higgs, physicists have to use particle accelerators like the LHC to systematically look for it across a broad search area.

At a seminar at Cern (the organisation that operates the LHC) on Tuesday, the heads of Atlas and CMS said they see "spikes" in their data at roughly the same mass: 124-125 gigaelectronvolts (GeV).

Guido Tonelli, spokesperson for the CMS experiment, said: "The excess is most compatible with a Standard

Model Higgs in the vicinity of 124 GeV and below, but the statistical significance is not large enough to say anything conclusive.

None of the spikes seen by the experiments is at much more than the "two sigma" level of certainty.

A level of "five sigma" is required to claim a discovery, meaning there is less than a one in a million chance the data spike is down to a statistical fluke.

Another complicating factor is that these tantalising hints consist only of a handful of events among the billions of particle collisions analysed at the LHC.

Professor Rolf-Dieter Heuer, director-general of Cern told BBC News: "We can be misled by small numbers, so we need more statistics," but added: "It is exciting."

If it exists, the Higgs is very short-lived, quickly decaying - or transforming - into more stable particles. There are several different ways this can happen, which provides scientists with different routes to search for the boson.

Russia vote to stand despite protests

AFP, Moscow

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's spokesman said Monday the results of Russia's contested parliamentary polls will stand despite a wave of street protests and a probe by the election authorities.

"Even if you add up all this so-called evidence, it accounts for just over 0.5 percent of the total number of votes," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told AFP in a telephone interview.

His comments followed an order from President Dmitry Medvedev for election officials to look into reports of vote-fixing.

Meanwhile, Russia's rebel billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov on Monday said he would challenge Vladimir Putin in the March presidential poll.

Palestinian flag raised at Unesco headquarters

AFP, Paris

The Palestinian flag was raised for the first time yesterday above a UN agency, the Unesco headquarters in Paris, in a diplomatic victory won despite stiff resistance from the US and Israel.

President Mahmud Abbas looked on as the flag was raised and the Palestinian anthem played, just weeks after Palestine won admission to Unesco in move that sparked fury and reprisals from Washington and Israel.

Abbas said Unesco's admission of Palestine was a key first recognition that he hoped others will follow.

"This admission is a first recognition of Palestine. ... Our admission is a source of pride. Palestine, the land where civilisations met... is having a new rebirth," he added.

"Today we are members of Unesco and we hope we can have an independent state, living side-by-side with Israel in a spirit of peace," said the upbeat Palestinian president. The Palestinians were admitted to the

body in late October, when the Unesco general assembly voted 107-14 to make Palestine its 195th member.

The result angered the United States, Israel's staunch ally. Washington immediately suspended its funding to the UN body. The US cash freeze deprived Unesco of 22 percent of its budget, leaving a hole of \$65 million this year and a \$143 million shortfall for 2012-2013.

Washington has also voiced disappointment to Paris as it supported the Palestinian Unesco bid.

Israel, for its part, took its own retaliatory measures, by deciding to accelerate settlements in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank and freezing the transfer of funds to the Palestinian Authority.

Faced with international criticism, Israel later lifted its freeze on the funds.

Admission to Unesco has had no impact on the Palestinians' bid for full UN membership. They still need nine votes out of 15 in the Security Council, but the United States has made clear that it would veto the bid.

NEWS IN brief

Tunisia makes Marzouki president

AFP, Tunis

Tunisia's opposition Moncef Marzouki yesterday was sworn in as the country's first elected president since the north African nation's revolution sparked the Arab Spring.

"Our mission is to promote our Arab-Muslim identity and be open to the world. To protect the veiled (women) and girls in niqab as well as those who aren't veiled," he said, adding that he would safeguard health, education and women's rights.

Calling for national reconciliation, he challenged the opposition "to participate in the nation's political life and not confine itself to a role of observer."

4 killed in Belgium lone wolf attack

AFP, Liege

A lone gunman armed with grenades opened fire on a square packed with children and Christmas shoppers in the eastern Belgian city of Liege yesterday, killing three people and wounding 75.

Officials named the gunman as Nordine Amrani, 33, a known criminal who had been summoned by police that morning but who never showed up.

Among the three passers-by killed when Amrani went on his shooting spree near the city's courthouse was a 15-year-old boy who died instantly and a 17-year-old boy and 75-year-old woman who died later in hospital.

Children killed in China bus crash

AFP, Beijing

Authorities in eastern China said yesterday 15 primary school children were killed when the bus they were travelling in rolled into a river, in the latest fatal accident involving students.

The latest accident happened in Jiangsu province's Shouxian town after dark on Monday evening, a local Communist Party committee spokesman told AFP.

The official Xinhua news agency said the vehicle was carrying 29 students and had a maximum capacity of 52 people.

Former Blackwater firm renamed

BBC NEWS

The US security firm Blackwater at the centre of allegations that its guards killed civilians in Iraq is changing its name once more.

The company, known as Blackwater at the time of the events, became Xe Services in 2009. Now Xe is to become Academi.

A US judge threw out charges against five Blackwater guards over the deaths of 17 Iraqis in Baghdad in 2007.

Shoe hurled at Iran president

AFP, Tehran

Laid-off workers complaining about unpaid wages disrupted a speech by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Monday by shouting and throwing objects including shoes, news websites and an agency reported.

One of the men threw a "pair of shoes" at Ahmadinejad, according to a report by a little-known website, Ghasednews.ir, that was picked up by the mainstream Mehr news agency and the website of the TehranTimes newspaper.

Ghasednews.ir said the man was attacked by Ahmadinejad supporters and had to be rescued by security personnel.

State media and the president's office were silent on the reported incident.

Occupiers partially close US ports

AFP, Oakland

US "occupy" protesters claimed victory Monday in blockading ports along the West Coast and shutting down a major trade cargo hub in a new front on the anti-capitalist campaign.

At least one port was fully closed down, while freight traffic was disrupted at several others including in Oakland, where thousands of demonstrators rallied after a day of action from California to Alaska.

The protests were most high-profile in Oakland, where authorities wrote an open letter to protesters urging them not to shut down a port which handles some \$39 billion in imports and exports per year.

In Portland, where everything was at a standstill, things went to normal by Monday night.

Iran refuses to return US drone

AFP, Tehran

A US drone captured by Iran is now the property of the Islamic republic, Defence Minister Ahmad Vahidi said yesterday, dismissing a request by US President Barack Obama for its return.

"The American espionage drone is now Iran's property, and our country will decide what steps to take regarding it," Vahidi was quoted as saying by ISNA news agency.

"Instead of apologising to the Iranian nation, it (the United States) is brazenly asking for the drone back," Vahidi also said, according to another news agency, Mehr.

Iran "will not back down from defending the nation or its interests," Vahidi declared.

Obama on Monday acknowledged that Iran was holding the reconnaissance drone -- a bat-winged RQ-170 Sentinel -- by saying: "We've asked for it back. We'll see how the Iranians respond."

Iran last week displayed on state television what it said was the drone. A lawmaker said the Islamic republic was unlocking the aircraft's software and was going to reverse-engineer the drone.

The foreign ministry in Tehran was similarly dismissive of Obama's request.

Iranian officials have said a Revolutionary Guards cyberwarfare unit had hacked the aircraft's controls and brought it down.

Saudi woman beheaded for 'sorcery'

AFP, Riyadh

A Saudi woman was beheaded Monday after being convicted of practising sorcery the interior ministry said.

Amina bint Abdulhalim Nassar was executed in the northern province of Jawf for "practising witchcraft and sorcery," the ministry said in a statement carried by SPA state news agency.

Amnesty International said 73 have been beheaded in Saudi Arabia this year.

The London-based human rights watchdog condemned Monday's execution as "truly appalling," and called on the conservative kingdom to urgently halt the practice.

Rape, murder, apostasy, armed robbery and drug trafficking are all punishable by death under Saudi Arabia's strict Islamic sharia law.

Now clearly two Europes: Sarkozy

BBC ONLINE

The French president has said that there are now clearly "two Europes", following last week's summit in which the UK vetoed EU treaty changes.

Nicolas Sarkozy said he and Chancellor Merkel of Germany did everything they could to persuade the UK to sign up to the EU deal to tackle the debt crisis.

He told Le Monde the agreement marked "the birth of a different Europe".

UK PM David Cameron defended his decision, telling MPs he acted to protect the UK's financial sector.

Cameron said it was possible to be a full, committed and influential member of the EU, but to stay out of arrangements where they do not protect British interests.

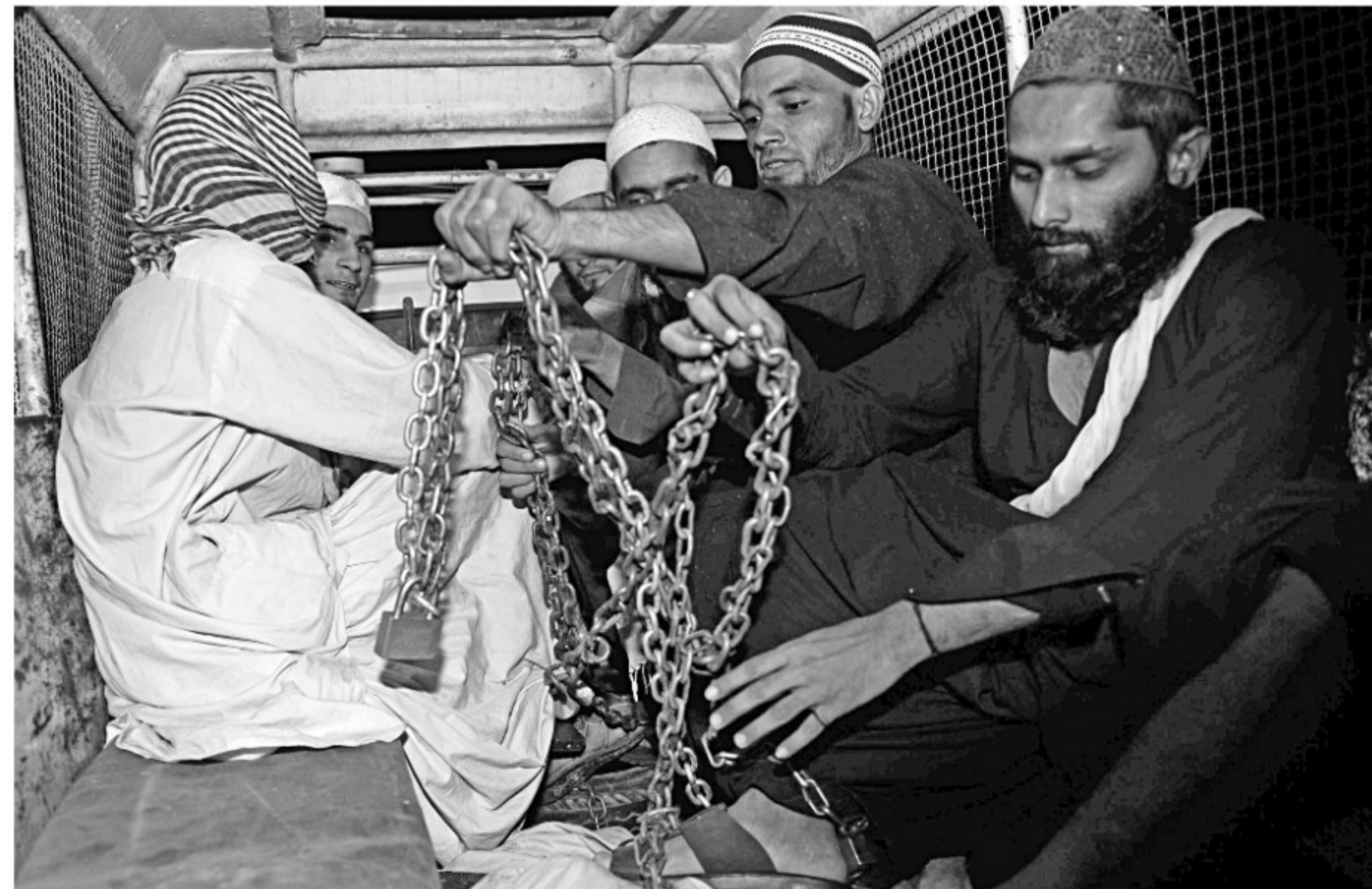
In an interview with Le Monde newspaper, Sarkozy said that there is one Europe "which wants more solidarity between its members and regulation, the other [is] attached solely to the logic of the single market".

European leaders agreed in Brussels to plans for deeper economic integration among the countries that use the euro, and in particular to impose sanctions on states that go over an agreed budget deficit limit.

The EU Economics Commissioner, Olli Rehn, said Britain's stance would be bad for the whole of the European Union.



Nicolas Sarkozy



Chained Pakistani students sit in a police vehicle after being rescued following a police raid on Madrassa Zakarya in Karachi late on Monday. Pakistani police rescued 45 students found chained in the basement during a raid late Monday on an Islamic seminary in the southern port city of Karachi.

4 killed as rivals clash in Libya

AFP, Zintan

Clashes erupted between former rebel fighters that toppled Gaddafi and a tribe seen as loyal to the fallen regime, killing four people, sources said on Monday.

The fighting, which broke out on Saturday near Zintan, a town 120 kilometres southwest of Tripoli, involved the former rebel Zintan brigade and members of the Mashashia tribe.

Mohammed al-Khabbasha, a military commander in Zintan, told AFP the tribesmen set up an authorised checkpoint in the area and arrested about 20 people, raising tension between the rival groups.

The Mashashia have however demanded the release of their own tribesmen.