

Rebels ambush Syrian troops

29 killed as strike hits regime

AFP, Damascus

Army defectors killed at least eight Syrian troops yesterday in an act of revenge after security forces shot dead 21 civilians, activists said, while strikes were observed in several areas.

"At least eight soldiers were killed in an ambush on four military jeeps travelling in the village of Al-Asharna on the outskirts of (the central city of) Hama," said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The violence comes as Western nations seek tough action against Syria at the UN Security Council, where President Bashar al-Assad's regime has support from his veto-wielding ally Russia.

Meanwhile, a three-day civil disobedience campaign was observed in parts of Syria, including the central cities of Hama and Homs, Idlib to the northwest and in Daraa, activists said.

Yesterday's ambush marked the second such insurgent attack in as many days.

"Twenty-one civilians were shot dead by the military and security forces across Syria, among them 11 in the Hama region" 210 kilometres north of Damascus, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said in a statement.

More than 5,000 people -- including some 300 children have been killed in the uprising so far, the UN said on Monday and recommended the Assad regime's crackdown be referred to the International Criminal Court.



PHOTO: AFP

Egyptian men line up to vote in Giza district, southwest Cairo, yesterday during the second round of parliamentary voting. Islamists who swept to victory in the first stage of Egypt's parliamentary elections were looking to extend their winning streak in a second round of voting.

2nd round of voting starts in Egypt

AFP, Cairo

Egyptians poured into polling stations yesterday in the second round of landmark elections that will shape the country's political future following a popular revolt, with many backing Islamists who have already emerged as front-runners.

Some 18.8 million Egyptians are eligible to cast their ballots in this round of the first legislative polls since Hosni Mubarak was toppled in February, bringing an end to his 30-year-rule.

Hundreds lined up outside polling stations in a third of Egypt's provinces, where voting kicked off at 8:00am.

The election's first stage on November 28 saw Islamist parties crush their liberal rivals, mirroring a pattern established in Tunisia and Morocco following a string of popular uprisings across the region.

'The protester' named Time's person of year

AFP, New York

Time magazine named the collective "protester" around the world as its person of the year yesterday, citing the change brought by street demonstrations from Arab countries to New York.

The shared honour for protesters beat the traditional individual contenders, who included Admiral William McRaven, commander of the US mission to kill al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden.

"There's this contagion of protest," managing editor Richard Stengel said on NBC television. "These are folks who are changing history already and they will change history in the future."

The magazine, featuring a cover photo of a female Arab protester, goes on the news-stands tomorrow.

Last year, the magazine picked Facebook

founder Mark Zuckerberg, whose competitors included another 21st century communications guru, WikiLeaks maestro Julian Assange.

This time, the list centered on heavy-weight political figures such as McRaven, Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei, and influential Republican Congressman Paul Ryan.

There were also an emotional nod for Kate Middleton, who was credited for putting a spring back in the British monarchy's step with her wedding to Prince William.

However, in the end, the selection committee was unanimous in backing street protesters: "the men and women around the world, particularly in the Middle East, who toppled governments, who brought democracy and dignity to people who hadn't had it before," Stengel said.



Vandals attack disused Jerusalem mosque

BBC NEWS

Israeli vandals set fire to a disused 12th Century mosque in the centre of Jerusalem and left graffiti insulting the Prophet Muhammad on its walls yesterday.

Jerusalem's mayor denounced the attack, which caused no structural damage. The incident is being linked to a wave of attacks by Jewish settlers and right-wing extremists angered by what they see as Israeli government attempts to restrict settlement building.

The Nebi Akasha mosque is located in the middle of an ultra-Orthodox part of Jerusalem.

Israeli media reports say it has not been used as a place of worship since Israel's war of independence in 1948, though it was recently renovated and turned into a municipal storage facility.

On Tuesday protesters broke into an Israeli army base in the West Bank. They set tyres alight and damaged vehicles inside the Ephraim Brigade's headquarters near Qalqilya, officials said. The brigade's commander was also slightly injured when his vehicle was pelted with stones.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called the violence "intolerable" and told security forces to "act aggressively" against those responsible.

'US at risk of sliding into war with Iran'

AFP, Washington

The United States appears headed on a collision course with Iran that could lead to a war with 'disastrous' consequences, a former advisor to ex-president Jimmy Carter has warned.

"We think we are going to avoid war by moving towards compulsion," Zbignew Brzezinski, who was national security advisor to Carter in the late 1970s, told an audience at an Atlantic Council think tank event in Washington late Tuesday.

Brzezinski said he was concerned about an escalation in "rhetoric," as the US approach to Iran's nuclear program appeared solely focused on forcing Tehran to comply with international demands, leaving Washington little flexibility.

"A lot of small decisions are being made which in the meantime narrow your freedom of choice in the future," he said.



Zbignew Brzezinski

Tuesday's gathering featured four former national security advisors, including President Richard Nixon's powerful deputy Henry Kissinger.

Brzezinski warned repeatedly of his concerns that the United States could stumble into a war with Iran.

"If we slide into a conflict with Iran, in this or that fashion, the consequences for us will be disastrous, disastrous on a massive scale and also globally at the same time," he said.

Brzezinski was in office in 1979 when America's ally, the Shah of Iran, fell from power in a revolution that resulted in an Islamic theocracy in Tehran.

Tensions have grown between Iran and the United States in recent months as Washington has pushed for stricter sanctions to punish Tehran over its nuclear activities and amid speculation Israel may be weighing possible pre-emptive military action.

NEWS IN brief

Kuwaiti swears in new cabinet

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Sabah yesterday swore in the new cabinet with only minor changes to the government that resigned in November over allegations of corruption.

Sheikh Sabah urged Kuwaiti voters to abandon factional, sectarian and tribal allegiances while choosing representatives in an upcoming general election which he said would usher in a new era for the oil-rich Gulf state.

One week later, the emir dissolved parliament for

7.1 quake jolts PNG

AFP, Port Moresby

A violent 7.1-magnitude earthquake struck Papua New Guinea Wednesday, shaking buildings and prompting residents to run into the streets and causing panic in the highlands.

The quake, initially rated at 7.3, hit at a depth of 115 kilometres (71 miles) southwest of the coastal city of Lae and 223 kilometres from the capital Port Moresby, the US Geological Survey said.

Bangkok on New Year security alert

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's premier yesterday urged authorities to be vigilant after police said they were boosting security at top tourist spots and retail areas in the capital during New Year celebrations.

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra said she had instructed the army to monitor events during the festivities and she herself would be on standby.

The Bangkok Metropolitan Police have said areas such as the upmarket shopping mall Central World, where a countdown event will be held, and the Khao San Road backpacker district were put on high alert after an incomplete bomb was found

Far-right kills 2, self in Italy

AFP, Rome

An Italian far-right author shot dead two Senegalese vendors and wounded three in Florence on Tuesday before killing himself in a daylight shooting spree that prompted outpourings of grief in the historic city.

Witnesses said a gunman calmly opened fire on vendors and passer-bys killing two and wounding three more.

The white assailant, identified by authorities as 50-year-old Gianluca Casseri, then moved on to another place and wounded two more vendors.

Casseri was the author of fantasy novels including "The Key of Chaos" about a wizard, a mathematician

Iraq throws open doors to US firms

AFP, Washington

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki issued an open invitation for US firms to help rebuild Iraq Tuesday, as his oil-rich nation closes the door on a nearly nine-year American military presence.

Hailing a new stage in the country's history, Maliki declared his war-scarred nation was ready to construct a new economy, one that holds "limitless" opportunities for US firms.

"It is not now the generals but the businessmen and the corporations that are at the forefront" of Iraq's future, he told a business gathering.

"We are not satisfied with the number of US corporations in Iraq," he added. "All sectors of the economy are there, open for business for American business."



PHOTO: AFP

A woman lights a candle remembering the victims on the site of the December 13 shooting in Liege, Belgium yesterday. A lone gunman, Nordine Amrani (inset), armed with grenades went on a murderous spree on Tuesday killing 4 people and injuring more than a hundred. Later he shot himself in the head, a prosecutor said yesterday.

Rival Libyan demos rock Benghazi

AFP, Benghazi

Rival protests for and against Libya's ruling National Transitional Council on Tuesday packed squares in the eastern city of Benghazi, epicentre of the uprising which ousted Muammar Gaddafi.

Chants of "Down with the new regime!" from around 5,000 disgruntled anti-NTC protesters were met in equal voice and strength with slogans such as "The people want Mustafa Abdel Jalil!" from supporters of the NTC and its chief.

Abdel Jalil has been singled out since Monday by protesters in the city over his recent remarks that the North African country's new rulers were ready to forgive pro-Gaddafi fighters.

These protesters say there is a lack of transparency about the NTC's activities.

Libya's new rulers have been under fire for the first time after the ouster of Gaddafi in a brutal revolution which erupted in Benghazi in February and spread across the country before ending with his killing.

"It is not that we are attacking Mustafa Jalil

personally, but he is surrounded by corrupt NTC members. He is unable to control things," said one protester, Osama Obeidi, adding that demonstrators had a list of demands.

Their main demand, according to the list, was that top priority be given to former rebels and those wounded in the revolution.

It also said that NTC members must not participate in the election of a national congress.

Another anti-NTC demonstration was held on Tuesday outside the ruling body's office in Benghazi.

But not everybody in Benghazi was against the NTC. About 5,000 also filled the landmark Tahrir (Liberation) Square to demonstrate their backing for the NTC and Abdel Jalil.

Libya's new rulers have faced flak for other issues over the past few weeks, including from minorities such as the Berber community for not representing them in the new interim cabinet and from women's groups for marginalising them also.

The New-York based Human Rights Watch has also criticised the NTC over its lack of transparency.

UK PM challenged in cabinet over EU veto

Snubs calls to renegotiate with EU

AGENCIES

British Prime Minister David Cameron brushed aside calls yesterday to renegotiate an EU treaty after receiving a direct challenge in the cabinet on Tuesday over his using veto over a Euro deal.

And a possible rift in the ruling coalition was cooled down as Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg appeared beside him in parliament yesterday.

Conservative leader Cameron said he "made no apologies" for vetoing a new treaty at a eurozone crisis summit last week, a move which led to the other 26 European Union nations making an agreement without Britain.

Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg of the pro-Europe Liberal Democrats stayed away on Monday when Cameron made a statement to lawmakers on the issue, but he was



David Cameron

by his side at prime minister's weekly questions yesterday.

"I make no apologies for standing up for Britain," Cameron said.

As the European commission accused the prime minister of wrecking an EU-wide agreement to solve the debt crisis, Chris Huhne, the energy secretary, highlighted deep Liberal Democrat unease by telling Cameron that he had no authority from the coalition to veto a revision of the Lisbon treaty.

The decision by Cameron prompted most other EU member states to agree to sign a new treaty to underpin tough fiscal rules for the eurozone.

Cameron's comments came a day after European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso said that Britain's demands for its financial services industry to be exempted from EU regulation threatened to break up the single market.