

New clashes rock Cairo

8 killed, scores wounded

AFP, Cairo

Violence raged in the administrative heart of Cairo yesterday as troops and police deployed in force after clashes with protesters against continued military rule left eight people dead.

Smoke billowed over Tahrir Square, the iconic focus of the protest movement that overthrew veteran president Hosni Mubarak in February, after two nearby government offices caught fire, an AFP correspondent said.

Demonstrators pelted security forces with rocks and petrol bombs as they fought running battles in the streets around the square and an adjacent bridge across the River Nile.

Prime Minister Kamal al-Ganzuri raised tensions by accusing the protesters of being counter-revolutionaries and denying that security forces had opened fire as they broke up a sit-in outside the nearby cabinet office launched against his nomination last month.

Troops and police moved to retake control of the area around the office early yesterday, erecting razor-wire barriers on access roads.

But after a few hours of calm, new clashes erupted between demonstrators and security forces, overshadowing the count in the second phase of the first general election since Mubarak's ouster.

The demonstrators want the military to hand power immediately to a civilian administration with full powers.

The military has said it will only step down once a president has been elected by the end of June in the final stage of a protracted transition.



Two women hold their dead children killed during the passage of tropical storm Washi at a village in Iligan City, on the southern island of Mindanao yesterday. The death toll from the tropical storm rose to 440 so far, with more than 200 others missing after widespread flash floods triggered by the storm in the southern Philippines.

PHOTO: AFP

US govt shutdown averted

AFP, Washington

US House of Representatives lawmakers approved a deal Friday to avoid a federal shutdown after a last-minute vote on a \$915 billion bill to fund the government through fiscal year 2012.

The huge package, expected to be approved by the Senate later Friday or early yesterday, was adopted by a 296-121 margin, aimed at preventing public buildings and government agencies from going dark after running out of money.

A vote in one of the two chambers is sufficient to prevent the government from shutting down.

The move comes after days of heated negotiations to break the impasse, one driven by pre-positioning for Democratic President Barack Obama's 2012 reelection bid and deep antipathy between the parties.

The latest grandstanding came as a new poll showed that public discontent with Congress was at a record high, with two in three voters saying most lawmakers should be kicked out of office in 2012.

UK is a Christian country

Says David Cameron

AFP, London

Britain is a Christian nation and should not be afraid of standing up for Christian values to help counter the country's "moral collapse", Prime Minister David Cameron said Friday.

In a rare foray into religion by a British premier, Cameron said "live and let live" had too often become "do what you please" in Britain.

The "passive tolerance" of immoral behaviour had helped fuel the August riots, excess in the banking industry and home-grown Islamist terror, he said.

"We are a Christian country. And we should not be afraid to say so," Cameron said at an event in Oxford to mark the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible.

"The Bible has helped to give Britain a set of values and morals which make Britain what it is today. Values and morals we should actively stand up and defend.

The alternative of moral neutrality should not be an option."

Cameron described himself as a committed but only "vaguely practising" member of the



David Cameron

Church of England, who was "full of doubts" about big theological issues.

"We've got stand up for our values if we are to confront the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations," he said.

"Moral neutrality or passive tolerance just isn't going to cut it any more.

Cameron said that along with the works of William Shakespeare, the King James Bible was a "high point of the English language".

"The Bible has helped to shape the values which define our country," he said.

"Responsibility, hard work, charity, compassion, humility, self-sacrifice, love, pride in working for the common good and honouring the social obligations we have to one another, to our families and our communities -- these are the values we treasure.

"Yes, they are Christian values. And we should not be afraid to acknowledge that."

"But they are also values that speak to us all -- to people of every faith and none. And I believe we should all stand up and defend them."

UN, US lift Libya financial sanctions

US defence secretary hails new Libya

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council and United States lifted sanctions on Libya's central bank in a bid to ease a cash crunch in a post-Gaddafi era as US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta has expressed confidence in Libya's new government on a visit to the country.

Panetta said Libya needed to unite fractious rebel groups, secure arms caches and build democratic institutions.

"This will be a long and difficult transition, but I am confident that you will succeed," he told a joint news conference with Prime Minister Abdurrahim al-Keib.

It follows a UN decision on Friday to lift sanctions on Libya's central bank and its investments subsidiary - which the BBC's Jon Donnison in Tripoli describes as a sign of confidence in the country's interim government.

The move cleared the way for Libya's new government to gain control of tens of billions of dollars frozen overseas, which it needs to pay public sector workers, rebuild war-torn towns and enhance its authority.

The UN council ended a freeze on the assets of the Central Bank of Libya and the Libyan Foreign Bank (LFB), which was ordered in February as part of sanctions against late strongman Muammar Gaddafi.

The White House said it had "rolled back most US sanctions on the government of Libya." The move unlocks all Libyan government and central bank assets within US jurisdiction.

The Tripoli authorities have stepped up calls in recent weeks to release the estimated \$150 billion frozen abroad to help pay salaries and keep services running.

On top of the \$30 billion held in the United States, Britain's Foreign Secretary William Hague said his government would immediately act to free about 6.5 billion pounds (\$10 billion) held in Britain.

Hague said Britain would pressure the European Union to quickly release frozen sums.

On a UN level, an arms embargo and an assets freeze against Gaddafi's family and associates remains in place, along with some financial institutions including Libya's key sovereign wealth fund.

Mamata's mother passes away

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Gayatri Devi, the mother of Paschimbanga Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee died at a state-run hospital in Kolkata today. She was 81.

She is survived by three sons and a daughter. Gayatri Devi was admitted to the hospital two weeks ago and was suffering from age-related ailments and was on life support system for the past fortnight.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh expressed his condolence on the death of the mother of Mamata Banerjee.

For Mamata her mother was a source of inspiration throughout her political career.

At a recent campaign meeting for the just-concluded Kolkata Dakshin Lok Sabha seat by-election, the Chief Minister had said "Amar Maai Amar Shob Kichhu. Ma Chhara Amar Kono Poribar Nei. Manushi-i-amar Poribar (My mother is my everything. Apart from her I have no other family. The people are my family).



Mamata with her mother Gayatri Devi

NEWS IN brief

US appoints new India emissary

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Friday named Nancy Powell, a career diplomat with wide experience in South Asia, to be the ambassador to India and fill a half-year vacancy.

Powell has served as US ambassador to Pakistan and to Nepal and holds the rank of career ambassador, a prestigious title given only to select career diplomats based on their service.

But US presidents in recent years have chosen political appointees for India in a bid to highlight the importance of the relationship between the world's two largest democracies.

Landslide, floods kills 11 in Colombia

AFP, Bogota

Eleven people were killed and four others reported missing Friday in Colombia after heavy rains caused a landslide and forced already swollen rivers to burst their banks, officials said.

Rescue workers in the central department of Caldas "recovered nine bodies" including four minors after a landslide buried two houses, a spokesman for the national risk management office told AFP.

The rainy season in Colombia, which began in September, has brought a wave of fatalities, with a total of 159 dead, according to official figures. More than 878,000 people have been affected by the rains.

Thai PM to meet Suu Kyi next week

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra said yesterday that she would meet Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi on a visit to the neighbouring country next week.

Yingluck will travel to Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw tomorrow for a meeting of Greater Mekong country leaders before visiting Yangon -- becoming the first Thai premier to meet Suu Kyi, a government spokesman said.

"I will attend the conference on Mekong energy cooperation in Myanmar and will take this opportunity to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi to exchange views and ideas," Yingluck said in her weekly live television broadcast.

Arabs threaten to take Syria to UN

AFP, Damascus

The Arab League yesterday threatened to take Syria to the UN over its deadly crackdown on dissent but an Iraqi mediator said he had "positive" talks in Syria aimed at defusing the nine-month crisis.

Iraqi National Security Advisor Falah al-Fayadh said he was heading to Arab League headquarters in Cairo after holding "positive" talks with President Bashar al-Assad in a bid to end the deadlock over a League peace plan.

"I am on my way to Cairo for a meeting with the Arab League after holding positive talks with President Assad," Fayadh told AFP after discussing an Iraqi initiative in Damascus.

But the Qatari prime minister warned that the Arab League would take Syria to the UN Security Council if it persisted in refusing to allow observers into the country to monitor the protection of civilians.

Arab foreign ministers will meet on Wednesday in Cairo to discuss taking the Arab peace plan to the UN, said Sheikh Hamad bin Jasssem Al-Thani at the end of a meeting in Doha on the Syria crisis.

"As Russia has gone to the Security Council, a proposal will be presented in the (Arab ministers') meeting on December 21 that the Arab League goes to the Security Council to present the Arab initiative," Sheikh Hamad said.

The 22-member Arab bloc has been trying to persuade Syria to receive observers to monitor the situation as part of a plan to end the bloodshed.

Elizabeth Taylor auction fetches \$150m

BBC ONLINE

A four-day New York auction of the belongings of Hollywood star Elizabeth Taylor has fetched more than \$150m, with one leather-bound film script selling for 50 times its estimate.

The late actor's script of The National Velvet, her first big film, sold for \$170,000 at the Christie's auction.

Earlier in the week, one of her necklaces featuring a 16th Century pearl sold for a record \$11.8m (£7.6m).

The star of Cleopatra died in Los Angeles in March at the age of 79.

Christie's chairman Marc Porter described the response to the sale as "nothing short of overwhelming with multiple bidders competing for every lot".

Part of the proceeds will go to The Elizabeth Taylor Aids Foundation, which she established in 1991.

The "Collection of Elizabeth Taylor" auction concluded on Friday night after four days of sales of jewellery, haute couture, furniture and memorabilia.

An online-only auction of some 1,000 items from the actress's estate finishes later on Saturday.

The Hollywood legend was renowned for her love of diamonds and emeralds - and received many as gifts from her twice husband Richard Burton.



Christie's employees at work during the "Collection of Elizabeth Taylor" sale at Christie's in New York.

France giving UK a 'good kicking'

AFP, London

France is giving Britain a "good kicking", deputy premier Nick Clegg said in an interview on Saturday, as the spat over each other's economies rumbled on.

Clegg warned against lurches into xenophobia and chauvinism, the day after telling French Prime Minister Francois Fillon to "calm the rhetoric" as Britain hit back at French criticism of its finances.

The deputy prime minister said it was important to "keep a level head while others are losing theirs", as he vowed to mend bridges in the European Union.

The cross-Channel row comes after Britain clashed with France at a dramatic EU summit last week when British Prime



Nick Clegg

Minister David Cameron refused to join members of the eurozone currency bloc in a new fiscal pact.

"We all need to go away, have a bit of hiatus, a bit of time to have Christmas, to eat some mince pies or whatever the French equivalent is. Everyone is a bit tired," Clegg told The Guardian newspaper.

The attack was sparked by a warning from US credit ratings agency Standard and Poor's that it could strip France of its triple-A ratings as a result of the eurozone crisis.

Christian Noyer, the governor of the French central bank, suggested on Thursday that the ratings agencies should consider downgrading Britain instead. And French Finance Minister Francois Baroin claimed the French economy was in better shape than Britain's.

Obama defends Israel ties

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama made a strong defense of his Israel policy Friday, saying no other US administration had done as much as to support the security of the all-important Jewish state.

Obama, who is seeking reelection next year, argues that he has a steadfast relationship with Israel, meeting its defence needs and intervening to help rescue Israeli diplomats caught in a siege in Cairo in September.

"I am proud to say that no US administration has done more in support of Israel's security than ours. None. Don't let anybody else tell you otherwise. It is a fact," Obama told the Union for Reform Judaism conference.

Saying his "commitment to Israel and Israel's security is unshakable," he pointed to US aid in battling fires in the northern Haifa region last year, as well as financial

support for Israel's Iron Dome missile shield meant to thwart regular rocket attacks.

Obama also spent diplomatic capital to halt the Palestinian drive for statehood recognition at the United Nations, putting him at odds with several US allies.

He was due to meet Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak on the sidelines of the Jewish community conference, amid high tensions between Iran and Washington and Israel over Tehran's nuclear program.

The US administration has "worked painstakingly" with its allies and partners to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions, which Western powers and Israel suspect are aimed at developing a nuclear weapon under the guise of a civilian energy program, Obama said.

And he again vowed to "take no options off the table," a thinly veiled threat of a possible military assault on Iran's nuclear sites.