

Assad defiant, vows victory

Arab monitor quits accusing Syria of war crimes

REUTERS, Amman

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad vowed yesterday to vanquish "foreign conspirators" plotting to end his rule, and an Arab League observer quit Syria, accusing the authorities of committing war crimes.

Assad, fighting 10 months of pro-democracy protests, greeted thousands of rapturous supporters in a Damascus square, only a day after breaking a six-month public silence.

The crowd shouted "Shabiha forever, for your eyes, Assad," a reference to loyalist militiamen, mostly members of Assad's minority Alawite sect, who have gained a fearsome reputation for their part in suppressing protests against the president.

Assad's wife Asma and their two children joined him for his surprise appearance in the capital's central Umayyad Square.

"I belong to this street," Assad, 46, said, adding Syria faced foreign conspirators. "We

will make this phase the end for them and their plans. We are going to win without any doubt."

His remarks followed a 100-minute speech on Tuesday in which he mocked the Arab League, vowed to hit "terrorists" with an iron fist and promised reforms, but with no hint that he would relinquish the power he inherited from his father in 2000.

Meanwhile, one Arab League monitor, Anwar Malek, said he had resigned because the mission was powerless to prevent what he said were the "scenes of horror" he had seen in the restive city of Homs.

"The mission was a farce and the observers have been fooled," the Algerian told Al Jazeera English television. "The regime isn't committing one war crime but a series of crimes against its people," he added.

The Arab League, which suspended Syria in November for failing to halt its crackdown on protests, sent an observer mission in December that has not stopped the bloodletting. 400 have been killed since then, said UN.

Blast kills nuke scientist in Iran

Tension grows as Tehran blames Israel, US for killing

AFP, Tehran

An Iranian nuclear scientist was killed in a Tehran car bombing yesterday that the Islamic republic immediately blamed on Israel and the United States, worsening a tense international stand-off over its atomic programme.

Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi told state television the attack would not stop Iran making "progress" in its nuclear activities.

Iranian officials noted that the assassination method -- two men on a motorbike attaching a magnetic bomb to the target's vehicle -- was similar to that used in the killings of three other of its scientists over the past two years.

Iran's parliament erupted with yells of "Death to Israel" and "Death to America" after yesterday's attack.

Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan, deputy director at Iran's Natanz uranium enrichment facility, died immediately in the blast, which occurred in front of a university campus in east Tehran.

His driver/bodyguard later died of his wounds, the Fars and ILNA news agencies reported. A third occupant of the Peugeot 405 was wounded and in

FOUR KILLED IN TWO YEARS

January 12, 2010: Massoud Ali Mohammadi, a particle physicist, is killed when a booby-trapped motorcycle explodes in Tehran.

November 10, 2010: Majid Shahriari, a key member of the country's Atomic Energy Agency, is killed in a car blast.

July 23, 2011: Gunmen shoot dead Dariush Rezaei-Nejad, a senior scientist.

hospital.

He was specialised in making polymeric membranes to separate gas. Iran uses a gas separation method to enrich its uranium.

Iran's atomic energy organisation said "the futile actions by the criminal Israeli regime and America will not disrupt the path the Iranian people have chosen" and nuclear activities will continue.

There was no immediate Israeli reaction to the accusations.

Three other Iranian scientists were

killed in 2010 and 2011 when their cars blew up in similar circumstances. At least two of the scientists had also been working on nuclear activities.

Yesterday's killing sharpened an international confrontation over Iran's nuclear programme in which threats and counter-threats are being increasingly backed with militarised displays of muscle.

Western nations, the United States at the fore, are steadily ratcheting up sanctions on Iran with the aim of fracturing its oil-dependent economy.

Iran has responded by saying it could easily close the Strait of Hormuz -- a chokepoint for 20 percent of the world's oil at the entrance to the Gulf -- if it is attacked or if sanctions halt its petroleum exports.

It has also threatened to unleash the "full force" of its navy should the United States redeploy an aircraft carrier to the Gulf, where the US Fifth Fleet is based.

The United States said in return that it would keep sending its warships to the region, warning that closing the strait would be a "red line" that Iran should not cross.

Row grows over Scottish referendum

AFP, London

Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond fuelled a tense constitutional clash with London yesterday, insisting that his government can organise its own independence referendum in 2014.

London announced on Tuesday it would give Edinburgh legal powers to hold a vote on a break-up of the 300-year-old union, but said it would be unlawful unless done with London's approval of the timescale and conditions.

But Salmond -- a nationalist who is widely regarded as one of the sharpest political operators in the British Isles -- has announced plans for Scotland to hold its own referendum in the autumn of 2014, on its own terms.

The issue could eventually end up at the United Kingdom's Supreme Court.

Salmond, whose Scottish National Party last year won the first majority in the Edinburgh assembly since it opened in 1999, said there was a "mandate for the Scottish parliament to organise and hold the referendum" on its own.

He indicated however that he was ready to strike a deal if Prime Minister David Cameron's government recognised it was lawful for the Scottish parliament to hold the referendum.

Cameron's Downing Street office also appeared to soften its stance yesterday, with a spokesman saying Cameron would "absolutely" take part in discussions with all parties including the SNP in coming weeks.

Scotland was an independent nation until 1707 when the Acts of Union united it with England and Wales.

Polls currently show a lack of support for independence among Scots, but Salmond is trying to tap nationalist sentiment as 2014 is the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn, a famous Scottish victory over the English.

WEF report lists new threats to globalisation

AFP, Geneva

The gap between rich and poor and a simultaneous surge in the youth population and that of retirees are among the factors threatening to sew the "seeds of dystopia", a new report warned yesterday.

The World Economic Forum warned in its Global Risks 2012 report that social upheaval and vulnerability to further economic shocks and risk were undermining the progress of globalisation.

It cited severe income disparity, chronic fiscal imbalances, rising greenhouse gas emissions, the growing threat from cyber attacks and a crisis in water supplies as the key danger factors.



PHOTO: AFP

New British Royal Navy destroyer HMS Daring, the first of the Royal Navy's new Type 45 destroyers, leaves the southern English harbour of Portsmouth yesterday on its maiden voyage for a seven-month deployment to east of the Suez. The warship is heading to the Gulf at a time when tensions are rife over Iran's threat to close the strategic Strait of Hormuz, a key transport route for oil.

Govt allows

FROM PAGE 20

The cumulative loss of BPC stood at around Tk 20,000 crore till January this year.

The total cost of loss will go up for supplying fuel to new power plants, and it will be difficult for BPC to store and supply large quantity of petroleum, read the letter.

Private companies have set up 16 rental and quick rental power plants with a total production capacity of 1,372MW. All but four of them run on furnace oil, according to Power Division sources.

Regarding the third sea port, the finance minister said the feasibility study of the port will take two to three years and the construction will take another 10 years. The project has been planned considering the

future needs of the country, he added.

The committee endorsed a proposal for import of two lakh tonnes of urea fertiliser from Saudi Arabia on state-to-state arrangement.

The meeting was followed by another meeting of the cabinet committee on purchase. It gave nod to a food ministry proposal for buying 60,000 tonnes of wheat from Ukraine at \$280 per tonne.

The purchase committee also okayed import of two lakh tonnes of Triple Super Phosphate (TSP) and Diammonium Phosphate (DAP) fertilisers from Tunisia.

Besides, a proposal for import of 25,000 tonnes of sugar was also approved.

BNP protests

FROM PAGE 20

Peelkhana BDR release issued by the Inter-Service Public Relation (ISPR) on the speech of BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia were 'unwarranted and unfortunate'.

The BNP press release said a good number of army officers were picked up in the last three years and reports on their disappearances and the lack of knowledge about their whereabouts by their families were carried by different newspapers and circulated through various social networks.

"Under the circumstances, it's normal to assume that the person whose whereabouts cannot be known is disappeared," the press release said adding that the opposition leader has stated about the disappearances of army officers.

It said Khaleda, in her speech, said about the government's sacking and harassing of military officers who had protested the

future needs of the country, he added.

"It's not understandable to them or the countrymen which words of the BNP chairperson speech is untrue," the release added.

The ISPR has been used to misinterpret the opposition leader's speech as the defence ministry remains under the prime minister, the BNP statement alleged.

The ISPR on Tuesday said the opposition leader's allegation of disappearance of army officials is false.

In a press release, the ISPR said Khaleda's speech telecast by the electronic media is 'confusing' and 'provocative'. "It was an attempt to tarnish the image of a disciplined force and create chaos," it said.

16 killed in Nigeria as chaos grows

AFP, Kano

Ethnic and religious violence in Nigeria claimed 16 more victims Tuesday, with gunmen killing eight in the north and a mob torching an Islamic school in the south, as a fuel strike added to the deadly tension.

Amid the sectarian and social turmoil, Nobel literature prize laureate Wole Soyinka, one of the country's most respected voices, warned that the continent's most populous nation was heading toward civil war.

A three-day old general strike has paralysed the country and sent President Goodluck Jonathan's government -- already battling a spate of bloody attacks by the Islamist sect Boko Haram -- into crisis mode.

In the latest attack blamed on Boko Haram, gunmen killed eight people, including five police officers, in a pub in Potiskum town in the northern state of Yobe before speeding off on a motorcycle.

A doctor said eight bodies were brought to the local morgue, including "five policemen, a bartender, a customer and a 10-year-old girl".

Gunmen also killed three people in an attack on a Christian village in northern Nigerian Bauchi state, police and community leaders said.

The unrest in the city started Monday amid protests against the government's January 1 scrapping of fuel subsidies, which caused petrol prices to more than double, sparking widespread anger.

Khmer Rouge trial UN concerned over judge's legal limbo

AFP, Phnom Penh

The United Nations voiced concern yesterday over Cambodia's delay in appointing a foreign judge to the Khmer Rouge tribunal, paralysing probes into two cases strongly opposed by the government.

Swiss judge Laurent Kasper-Ansermet arrived in Phnom Penh last month as the UN's choice to replace a German judge who abruptly quit in October over government's opposition.

"The United Nations has since made every effort to secure the appointment of the judge," UN chief's spokesman told AFP, adding Cambodia had "an obligation" to appoint the reserve choice in the case of a vacancy.

RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

Romney takes winning streak to S Carolina

AFP, New Hampshire

Mitt Romney heads to the US South yesterday as the clear Republican frontrunner to take on President Barack Obama after a commanding win in the second presidential nominating contest in New Hampshire.

The former Massachusetts governor and millionaire venture capitalist immediately looked to South Carolina's January 21 primary, hoping a victory there and in Florida on January 31 could effectively anoint him the nominee.

Obama "has run out of ideas. Now, he's running out of excuses. And tonight, we are asking the good people of South Carolina to join the citizens of New Hampshire and make 2012 the year he runs out of time," he said late Tuesday after winning the New Hampshire primary.

Public opinion polls showed Romney leading his more conserva-

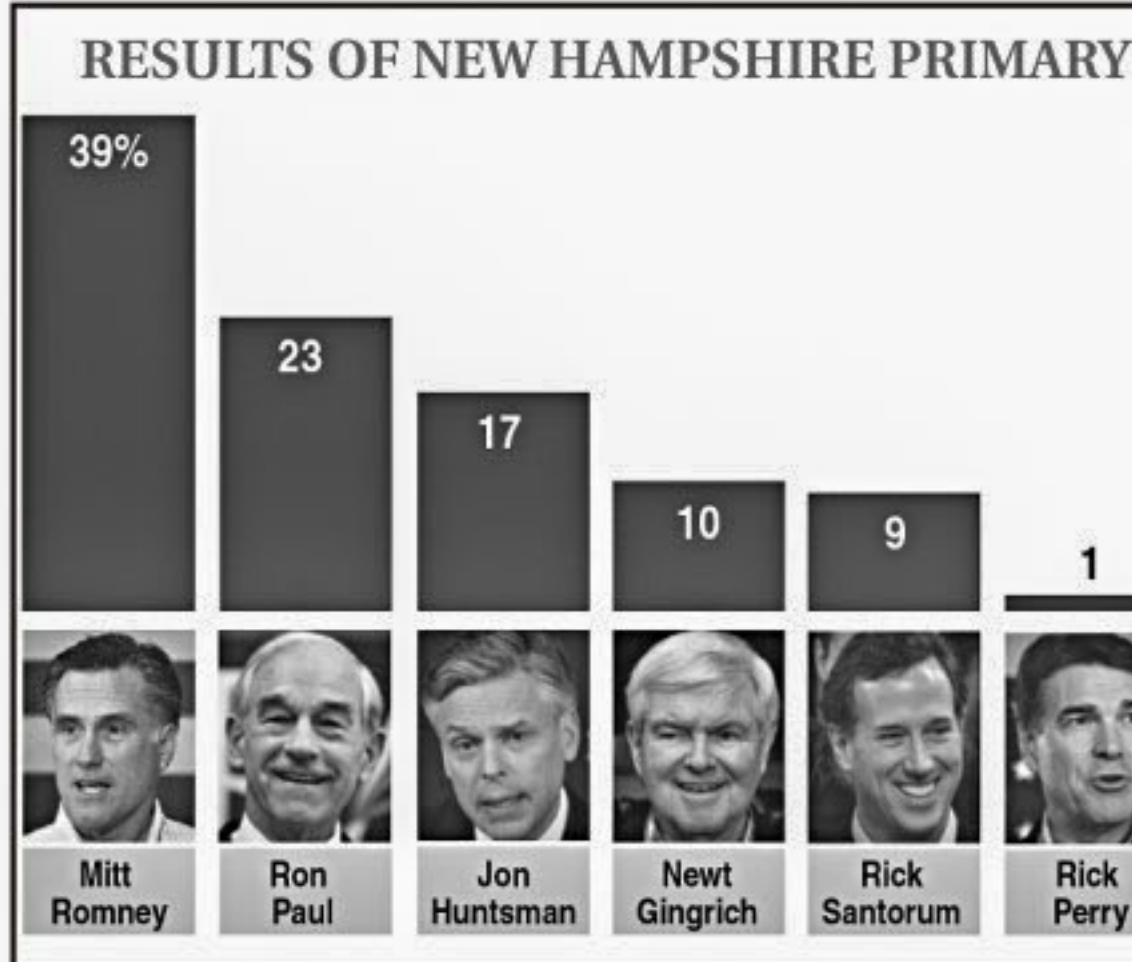
tive rivals in both of the next battlegrounds -- large states where his well-oiled, well-funded campaign machine could roll up the opposition.

With more than 95 percent of votes counted, Romney was set to win New Hampshire with about 39 percent, the first time since 1976 that a Republican non-incumbent wins this contest and the Iowa caucuses that precede it.

After surviving a furious 11th-hour onslaught from his Republican rivals, who tarred him as a callous corporate raider who put people out of work, Romney defiantly trumpeted his business experience as his

number-one asset.

Veteran Congressman Ron Paul of Texas, a small-government champion whose opposition to overseas military interventions has ruffled the party's establishment, was expected to come in second with



around 23 percent.

Former US envoy to China Jon Huntsman, who bet his political fortunes on a strong showing here, was on track to come in third with around 17 percent after a late surge tied to a strong weekend debate performance.

Former US House speaker Newt Gingrich was in fourth place at 10 percent, with Christian conservative former senator Rick Santorum close behind at nine percent.

Texas Governor Rick Perry, who skipped New Hampshire to go directly to South Carolina, clung to one percent.

In South Carolina, Romney may face stiff resistance from more hard-line conservatives who think he is a flip-flopper and from evangelical Christians wary of his Mormon faith, but he also has the backing of Governor Nikki Haley.

Outrage over Andaman 'human zoo' video



AFP, New Delhi

Rights campaigners and politicians yesterday condemned a video showing women from a protected and primitive tribe dancing for tourists reportedly in exchange for food on India's Andaman Islands.

British newspaper The Observer released the undated video showing Jarawa tribal women being lured to dance and sing after a bribe was allegedly paid to a policeman to produce them.

Under Indian laws designed to protect ancient tribal groups susceptible to outside influence and disease, photograph-

ing or coming into contact with the Jarawa and some of the Andaman aborigines is banned.

The tribe, thought to have been among the first people to migrate successfully from Africa to Asia, lives a nomadic existence in the lush, tropical forests of the Andamans in the Indian Ocean.

India's Tribal Affairs Minister V Kishore Chandra Deo yesterday promised to take action over the footage, terming it "disgusting", and the home ministry has sought a report.

Survival International, which lobbies on behalf of tribal groups worldwide, said the video showed tourists apparently enjoying "human zoos."

But state anthropologist A Justin, who works on the Andaman islands, questioned whether the scenes were out of date. Justin said the video appeared to be several years old.

In June last year, Survival International accused eight Indian travel companies of running "human safari tours" so tourists could see and photograph the Jarawa.

US drone kills 4 in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

The deadly US drone campaign in Pakistan's tribal zone resumed with a missile strike that killed four militants, two months after a Nato raid that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers.

The CIA campaign had reportedly been suspended to avoid worsening relations between the United States and Pakistan after the deadly November 26 incident, which eroded even more the thin veneer of trust between the warring allies.

The four militants were killed late Tuesday when two missiles struck their compound on the outskirts of Miranshah in North Waziristan, a lawless tribal region near the Afghan border.