

Arab League fears civil war in Syria

Russia says sanctions aim only at regime ouster

AFP, Damascus

Arab League head Nabil Elaraby said yesterday he feared a possible civil war in Syria that could have consequences for neighbouring countries, as longtime Damascus ally Moscow kept up its opposition to calls for tougher action against the regime, saying they were flagrant attempts to bring about its downfall.

"Yes I fear a civil war and the events that we see and hear about now could lead to a civil war," said Elaraby, whose body deployed the monitors on December 26 to check whether Syria was respecting an Arab peace plan.

Meanwhile, both France and Syria announced investigations into the death of French TV correspondent Gilles Jacquier, the first Western newsman to die in Syria since anti-regime protests erupted in March.

Security forces were out in strength

as they have been each Friday for the main weekly demonstrations.

Security force fire killed one protester in Idlib province in the northwest and another in the central city of Hama, a human rights watchdog told AFP in Nicosia.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 20,000 people had turned out in the Idlib town of Ariha calling for the overthrow of the regime, and another 15,000 in the Damascus suburb of Douma.

The rallies, following a day in which security forces killed 15 civilians in their crackdown, come after the largest civilian opposition group agreed to boost ties with the rebels.

They agreed to "formulate a detailed plan, to include the reorganisation of FSA units and brigades, and the creation of a format to accommodate within FSA ranks additional officers and soldiers,

especially senior military officials, who side with the revolution," it added.

Formed from deserters from the regular army who mutinied over the regime's deadly crackdown, the FSA says it has some 40,000 fighters under its command.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov rejected Western-proposed amendments to a draft Security Council resolution on Syria which Moscow circulated last month.

"Unfortunately, the West's approach radically differs from ours," Gatilov said. "Judging by the contents of their proposed amendments, their goal is clearly aimed at removing Assad's regime in Damascus," he said.

Gatilov said that Russia had full confidence in much-criticised Arab League observer mission in Syria since December 26 to oversee a deal to end the bloodshed.



PHOTO: AFP
Myanmar blogger and prominent political activist Nay Phone Latt celebrates with relatives upon his release from detention in Hpa-an, in the country's eastern Karen state yesterday. Myanmar pardoned a number of prominent prisoners yesterday under a major prisoner amnesty.

Gilani called UK, fearing coup

AP, Islamabad

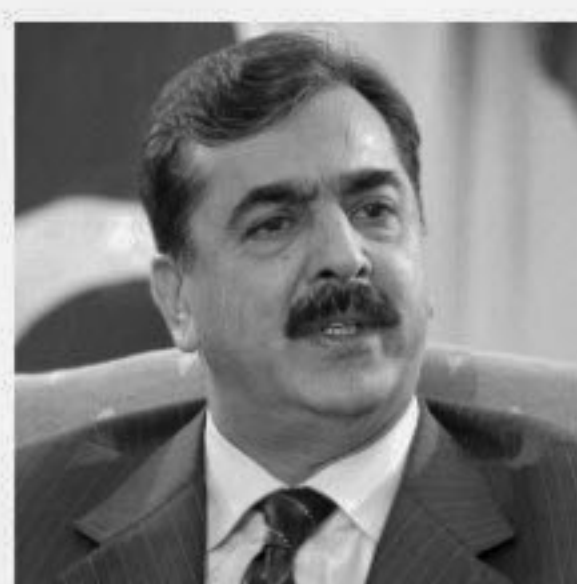
Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani telephoned the top British diplomat in the country this week expressing fears that the Pakistani army might be about to stage a coup, a British official and an official in Islamabad said yesterday.

The Pakistani and British governments denied the report, which comes as tensions between Pakistan's army and government have soared in recent days, leading to speculation that the army might try to oust the civilian leadership.

Pakistani leaders have often looked to foreign powers, especially the United States and Gulf countries, to intervene in domestic affairs, mediate disputes between feuding power centers or "guarantee" agreements between them.

The army, which has staged four coups in Pakistan's history and is believed to consider itself the only true custodian of the country's interests, has never liked the civilian government headed by the prime minister and President Asif Ali Zardari.

But a scandal centered on an unsigned memo sent to Washington last year asking for its help in heading off a supposed coup has put the military and the government on a



seeming collision course. The note enraged the army, which was still smarting from the humiliation of last year's unilateral American raid that killed Osama bin Laden.

The reported phone call, which one official said was "panicky," would suggest a genuine fear at the highest level of the Pakistani government that army might carry out a coup or support possible moves by the Supreme Court to topple the civilian leadership.

Gilani asked High Commissioner Adam Thomson for Britain to support his embattled government, according to the officials, who didn't give their names because of the sensitivity of the issue. It's unclear if the British government took any action.

The British Foreign Office, however, said in a statement yesterday there was "no phone call on this matter."

The prime minister's office also said Gilani had "not spoken to the British High Commissioner in this regard."

A Supreme Court commission is probing the memo affair. Any ruling from the court that strengthens suspicions that Zardari may have had a hand in the memo could be politically damaging to him.

57 killed in new S Sudan clashes

AFP, Juba

New ethnic clashes in South Sudan's troubled Jonglei state have killed 57 people, the government of the world's newest nation said late Thursday.

Information Minister Barnaba Marial Benjamin said that in the latest clash "57 people got killed, and most of them are women and children. The men among them are only 11."

Around 60 members from the Murle tribe dressed in military uniforms carried out the raid, taking over 20,000 cows from the rival Nuer tribe area as part of an ongoing cattle vendetta.

South Sudan has declared Jonglei a national "disaster area" while the United Nations has said it will launch a "massive" emergency operation to help some 60,000 people affected by the violence.

Myanmar in key prisoner release

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar pardoned prominent dissidents, journalists and a former premier yesterday under a major prisoner amnesty, intensifying a surprising series of reforms by the army-backed regime.

Western powers have demanded the release of political detainees languishing in jail in the country formerly known as Burma before they will consider lifting sanctions on the regime and its cronies.

Yesterday's amnesty included members of the "88 Generation Students" group, which is synonymous with the democratic struggle in Myanmar and was at the forefront of a failed 1988 uprising in which thousands died.

The mass pardon, which looked set to be the most significant yet under the nominally civilian government which took office last year, was hailed by democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party as a "positive sign".

Amnesty International welcomed the release as "a major step forward."

At least two high-profile student activists involved in the 1988 protests were among those granted amnesty, along with a leading Shan ethnic minority leader and a prominent monk involved in the 2007 "Saffron Revolution".

"Years of international calls to release long-detained political prisoners seem to have pushed the government to finally do the right thing," said deputy Asia director for New York-based Human Rights Watch, Elaine Pearson.

"The next step for Burma's government is to allow international monitors to verify the whereabouts and conditions of remaining political prisoners."

The authorities said about 650 inmates would be included in total, but how many were dissidents was not immediately known. Campaigners called for the release of all remaining political prisoners, whose exact number is unclear.

British Foreign Secretary William Hague said the amnesty showed the regime was committed to change.



Court martial sought against Manning

AFP, Washington

A US military tribunal is recommending a court martial for Army Private Bradley Manning for allegedly funneling thousands of classified US documents to WikiLeaks, the US Army said Thursday.

"The investigating officer concluded that the charges and specifications are in the proper form and that reasonable grounds exist to believe that the accused committed the offenses alleged," according to the US Military.

"He recommended that the charges be referred to a general court martial."

The charges include aiding the enemy, wrongfully causing intelligence to be published on the Internet knowing it is accessible to the enemy, and theft of public property or records.

Manning, 24, was the focus of a seven-day hearing last month to determine whether or not he should face a court-martial for what authorities have described as one of the most serious intelligence breaches in US history.

Manning, who served in Iraq from November 2009 until his arrest the following May, faces life in prison if convicted.

The young soldier from Oklahoma, who was trained on various intelligence systems by the US military, is accused of giving WikiLeaks a massive trove of US military reports from Iraq and Afghanistan, classified State Department cables, Guantanamo detainee assessments and videos of US airstrikes.

NEWS IN brief

Court orders new test on Breivik

AFP, Oslo

An Oslo court yesterday ordered a new psychiatric evaluation of Anders Behring Breivik, who killed 77 people in twin attacks in July, after an earlier and widely contested test found him criminally insane.

"Due to the gravity of this case, the criminal responsibility (of Behring Breivik) must be examined again," Oslo District Court judge Wenche Elizabeth Arntzen told a news conference.

Two new experts, Agnar Aspaas and Terje Toerissen, were named to evaluate the 32-year-old rightwing extremist's sanity.

In late November, two court-appointed psychiatrists concluded that Behring Breivik was suffering from paranoid schizophrenia and should be considered criminally insane and therefore not accountable for his actions.

'Urination' US Marines identified

AFP, Washington

The US Marines believe they have identified the troops seen urinating in a shocking video on the corpses of insurgents in Afghanistan, a senior American military official said Thursday.

The Pentagon has identified their originating base in the United States, said the official, effectively confirming the pictured men were US personnel.

US cable network CNN quoted an unnamed US Marine official as saying the military branch was "confident" the troops in the inflammatory video were from the 3rd Battalion 2nd Marine Regiment, based at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

The unit deployed to Afghanistan, mainly in Helmand province, in early 2011.

More MidEast peace talks today

REUTERS, Amman

Israelis and Palestinians will hold their third round of face-to-face meetings this year on Saturday in what diplomats hope might lead to the resumption of full peace talks, sources on each side said yesterday.

The exploratory discussions began on January 3 and followed a long break in negotiations after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas suspended talks 15 months ago over Israel's expansion of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Abbas on Thursday played down prospects of any breakthrough, telling members of his Fatah party that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had not put forward any new proposals.

Taiwan goes to polls today

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's presidential candidates were winding up a packed last day of campaigning yesterday, wooing floating voters who will decide the outcome of a tight race watched intensely in Beijing and Washington.

The choice in today's vote is essentially between the incumbent Ma Ying-jeou, who has overseen four years of improved ties with China, and his main challenger Tsai Ing-wen, a sceptic on closer mainland relations.

It is only the fifth time that Taiwan has held direct democratic presidential elections, and the race is considered too close to call, with recent surveys showing Ma leading Tsai by as little as three percentage points.

Taiwan has governed itself since 1949, but China claims it as part of its territory.



PHOTO: AFP
Lebanese people rally outside United-Nations headquarters in Beirut yesterday to protest the policies of the UN regarding the Middle East as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon arrives at the organisation's headquarters. Ban arrived in Lebanon for talks on a controversial UN-backed court probing the assassination of the country's ex-premier and on the bloodshed in Syria.

West out of options on Iran crisis

AFP, Paris

Western powers were drawing up plans yesterday for tougher sanctions on Iran, despite the reluctance of Russia and Asia to take part, diplomatic pressure having failed to halt Tehran's nuclear drive.

"We have no other tools. The only alternative would be to make concessions, and we're not ready to do that," said a senior French official, ruling out the option of military strikes pushed by some hawks in Washington and Israel.

Iran revived its nuclear programme in 2005, and the West has been trying to halt it ever since, alternating offers of talks with threats of isolation and slowly toughening up an array of unilateral and international sanctions.

The Iranian programme, which the West believes is designed to produce a nuclear weapon, has also been hit with a series of assassinations of its scientists and cyber-attacks on its computers.

But Tehran -- which insists it is

merely seeking to generate nuclear power and develop medical isotopes -- has ploughed on defiantly, ratcheting up its enrichment of uranium from 3.5 percent, through 4.8 to 20."

Once uranium is enriched to 90 percent it can be used to make an atomic bomb.

In parallel it has stepped up its ballistic missile programme, which could one day be ready to carry a nuclear

NEWS ANALYSIS

warhead, and threats to disrupt oil shipping in the strategic sea lanes of the Strait of Hormuz.

The United Nations has agreed four packages of international sanctions in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2010. Britain and the United States have recently also imposed tougher financial and trade sanctions of their own.

Now the European Union is on the point of stepping up its action, but

Russia, China and Japan have been less enthusiastic. Asia's energy-hungry powers fear soaring prices if Iranian oil is embargoed.

Japan initially appeared willing to back its traditional Western allies, but yesterday began to backtrack.

Russia warned yesterday that any oil embargo would be seen as an attempt to force regime change in Iran, rather than as a bid to halt enrichment.

But the recession-hit West no longer dominates international relations like it did at the start of the crisis in 2005. Rising economic powers also have a role to play, and will defend their interests.

Iran's giant neighbour Turkey says it will not feel bound by any sanctions unless they are endorsed by the UN Security Council, and India says it had no intention of reducing its imports of Iranian crude.

Diplomats in Vienna said yesterday that a high-level UN nuclear agency team will visit Iran late this month in another bid to clear up claims of covert weapons activities.

RIFT WITH TRINAMOOOL Congress moves to heal wounds

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

India's ruling coalition leader Congress party took the first step to stem the slide in its relations with its alliance partner Trinamool Congress (TMC) headed by Mamata Banerjee.

Congress leader in-charge of the party's affairs in Paschimanga Shakeel Ahmed said Thursday said, "We should avoid using harsh words against each other. We have directed our state leaders to refrain from it and expect that the TMC would reciprocate".

Ahmed praised Mamata and sought to remind the leaders from both the parties that the tension between them would only benefit their common rival left parties in the state.

Ahmed also dismissed media reports that Congress was planning to get rid of dependence on support of Trinamool Congress to run the federal government after Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections by roping in either the Samajwadi Party or Bahujan Samaj Party as its replacement in the central coalition UPA.

The strain was so much that Mamata had last week even dared Congress party to quit the alliance led by her in Paschimanga after the latter took to the streets against the West Bengal government on the issue of renaming a building after rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam.