

Assad gives amnesty for uprising crimes

BBC ONLINE

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad has granted a general amnesty for all crimes committed during the 10-month uprising, state-run media report.

It would apply to army deserters who turned themselves in before the end of January, peaceful protesters and those who handed in unlicensed weapons, Sana state news agency is quoted as saying.

The UN says more than 14,000 people are in detention.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has urged Assad to end the violence.

"Stop the violence. Stop killing your people. The path of repression is a dead end," Mr Ban said in a speech at a conference on Arab world democracy in Beirut.

President Assad has issued several prisoner amnesties since the start of the uprising in March, but thousands of people are believed to remain in prison.



The BBC's Jonathan Head in neighbouring Turkey says the latest amnesty offer still does not address the issue of how the conflict may be brought to an end.

Tens of thousands of people across Syria continue to take to the streets calling for an end to the Assad regime - defying a crackdown that, the

UN says, has killed 5,000 people.

In a rare public address last week, President Assad again accused international powers of trying to destabilise Syria, and vowed to crush "terrorists" with an "iron fist".

On Saturday, the ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, said Arab countries should send troops into Syria to end the bloodshed.

"For such a situation to stop the killing... some troops should go to stop the killing," he told US television channel CBS for a programme aired yesterday.

It is the first time an Arab leader has publicly called for military intervention in Syria.



Taliban fighters stand with their weapons after they joined Afghanistan government forces during a ceremony in Laghman province yesterday.

Afghanistan militant leader ready for talks

AFP, Kabul

The leader of Afghanistan's second-biggest insurgent group said in an interview published yesterday that he was ready for "meaningful talks" with all parties to end the decade-long war.

The statement by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, head of Hezb-i-Islami, comes after an announcement by the main insurgent group, the Taliban.

But Hekmatyar was dismissive of the results of contacts he said Hezb-i-Islami had already had with Washington and the government of Hamid Karzai.

"We held talks with Kabul government as well as with the Americans on different occasions, but did not receive any acceptable and realistic plan from them worth mentioning," he told the Afghan Islamic Press news agency.

RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

Santorum secures key US evangelical backing

AFP, Washington

Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum has received a powerful shot in the arm as top US evangelical leaders endorsed his White House bid ahead of a crucial South Carolina primary.

The endorsement came after about 150 influential Christian conservative leaders met at a ranch outside of Houston, Texas, in hopes of rallying their forces around one candidate before the January 21 vote in the state where evangelicals and social conservatives make up 60 percent of the Republican electorate.

Meanwhile, Romney's team hit back Saturday at President Barack Obama's campaign for portraying him as a jobs destroyer.

Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council and one of the organizers of the meeting, said Santorum, a former US senator from



Rick Santorum



Mitt Romney

Pennsylvania, had received 85 out of 114 possible votes, thus securing the backing of the group.

The endorsement includes financial support from key religious conservative groups, Perkins explained Saturday without offering specifics.

Participants included James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family; Kelly Shackelford, president and CEO of the Liberty Institute; Don Wildmon, founder of the American Family Association; and Gary Bauer, president of American Values.

"You will see these organizations engaging openly on his behalf - especially

in the state of South Carolina," Perkins told reporters. "We believe that with strong consensus coming behind him that can aid in the fundraising that he will need to be successful in the primary."

Santorum finished a close second in the Iowa caucuses earlier this month, losing to frontrunner Mitt Romney only by eight votes. He was tied for fourth place with former House of Representatives speaker Newt Gingrich in New Hampshire.

Many social conservatives perceive Romney, a former Massachusetts governor, as a moderate and question his commitment to priority issues such as opposition to abortion and gay marriages.

But not everyone is convinced the endorsement will help Santorum defeat Romney.

The Reverend Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, believes the summit has just exposed the fault lines among religious conservatives.

Blast kills 16 Shiites in Pakistan

AFP, Lahore

A blast hit a Shiite Muslim religious procession killing 16 people and wounding 20 others in central Pakistan yesterday, police said, amid conflicting reasons for the explosion.

It may have been a bomb or as a result of an electrical explosion, police said in Punjab province, but Shiites have often been targeted in Pakistan before.

Fingers were pointed at fanatics in Pakistan after an unprecedented bomb attack targeting Shiite Muslims on December 6 in neighbouring Afghanistan killed more than 80 people.

The twin blasts in Kabul and in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif prompted fears that Afghanistan could descend into the sort of sectarian violence that has pitched Shiite against Sunni Muslims in Iraq and Pakistan.

No plans for Western military action on Syria, Iran: UK

AFP, London

Western nations have no immediate plans for military action to stop the repression of protests in Syria or to halt Iran's nuclear programme, British Foreign Secretary William Hague said yesterday.

Asked if there was a possibility of a no-fly zone in Syria like the one imposed over Libya last year, Hague said there was "no serious prospect" of a UN resolution on the subject.

"We haven't been looking at a no-fly zone," Hague told Sky News, saying it would be only effective in tandem with other measures, and that the Syrian regime had not been relying on air power to repress protests.

"There is no serious prospect certainly at the moment of the United Nations Security Council agreeing any resolution at the moment, let alone agreeing a resolution comparable to anything that happened in Libya."

But he said that if the current Arab League monitoring mission in Syria does not work "I hope they (the Arab League) will come to the UN and suggest a way forward that we can all get behind."



William Hague

Hague was also cool on suggestions by Qatar that Arab forces should be sent into Syria to stop the deadly 10-month crackdown on dissent by President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

On Iran, Hague warned that Tehran's "dangerous" nuclear drive threatened proliferation across the Middle East.

"We must not be put off further sanctions by bluster or statements from Iran," Hague said, adding that he hoped European Union foreign ministers would agree new measures when they meet on January 23.

"If it continues it will produce nuclear proliferation across the Middle East, which will then be extremely dangerous for the people of Iran, for the whole region and for the peace of the world."

Hague refused to rule out military action against Iran but said Britain was not calling for it.

"We've never ruled anything out, we've not ruled out any option, or we've not ruled out supporting any option, we believe all options should be on the table, that is part of the pressure on Iran, he said.

NEWS IN brief

Sarkozy promises more reform after France downgrade

AFP, Amboise

President Nicolas Sarkozy, in his first public reaction to France's credit rating downgrade, vowed yesterday to carry out more reforms to lead the country out of crisis.

He said he would give an address to the nation at the end of the month and would tell the French about "the important decisions that need to be made without delay."

"The crisis can be overcome provided that we have the collective will and the courage to reform our country," Sarkozy said at a memorial service for a former prime minister in the central French town of Amboise.

"We must resist, we must fight, we must show courage, we must remain calm," he said.

Nigeria strikes set to resume today, govt sees more talks

REUTERS, Abuja

Nigerian labour unions said they would resume nationwide strikes today, crippling the second largest economy in Africa, after failing to reach a compromise with the government over scrapped fuel subsidies.

However, the main oil union said it was maintaining the output of Africa's No. 1 crude producer, not joining walkouts for the time being, and the government said more talks were held yesterday despite the unsuccessful round the day before.

"There will be further negotiations today. The government is still open for dialogue. Further consultations will carry on today and by the evening something definite will have to come out," president-

US military chief to visit Israel

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli officials say that the U.S. military's top officer will make his first official visit to the Jewish state later this week.

Thursday's visit by Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey comes at a time of growing American concern that Israel may be preparing to attack Iran.

Israel's Defence Ministry yesterday confirmed the scheduled visit. It gave no further details, but Iran is likely to top the agenda.

The Obama administration is concerned that Iran's recent claim that it is expanding nuclear oper-

Survivors plucked from Italian shipwreck

REUTERS, Giglio

A South Korean honeymoon couple were plucked from a capsized Italian liner yesterday, more than 24 hours after it was wrecked, and rescue workers were struggling to save another person trapped on board.

Teams were painstakingly checking thousands of rooms on the Costa Concordia for nearly 40 people still missing after the huge vessel foundered and keeled over with more than 4,000 on board, killing at least three people and injuring 70.

The task is akin to searching a small town - but one tilted on its side, and largely in darkness and submerged in freezing water. Scores of divers were taking part.

Just after dawn yesterday, a team made voice contact with a third survivor still on board the ship. "We are doing the impossible to reach this person," coastguard spokesman Luciano Nicastro told Italian television.

After midnight, rescue workers had found the two South Koreans still alive in a cabin, after locating them from several decks

above, and brought them ashore, looking dazed but unharmed.

The captain of the luxury 114,500-tonne ship, Francesco Schettino, was under arrest and accused of multiple manslaughter, causing a shipwreck and abandoning ship, Italian police said.

Passengers, comparing the disaster to the movie "Titanic," told of people leaping into the sea and fighting over lifejackets in panic when the ship hit a rock and ran aground near the island of Giglio, late on Friday.

Two French tourists and a Peruvian crew member were dead and 38 people were unaccounted for.

The vast hulk of the 290-metre-long cruise ship, resting half-submerged on its side, loomed over the little port of Giglio, a picturesque island in a maritime nature reserve off the Tuscan coast. A large gash was visible on its side.

Rescue workers including specialist diving teams were working their way through more than 2,000 cabins on the ship, a floating resort that boasted a huge spa, seven restaurants, bars, cinemas and discotheques.



French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe talks with Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi as he visits her in her home yesterday in Yangon. France's foreign minister said that the European Union would respond "in concrete terms" to recent reforms by Myanmar's regime, after a historic meeting with Suu Kyi.

Web addicts have brain changes

BBC ONLINE

Web addicts have brain changes similar to those hooked on drugs or alcohol, preliminary research suggests.

Experts in China scanned the brains of 17 young web addicts and found disruption in the way their brains were wired up.

They say the discovery, published in Plos One, could lead to new treatments for addictive behaviour.

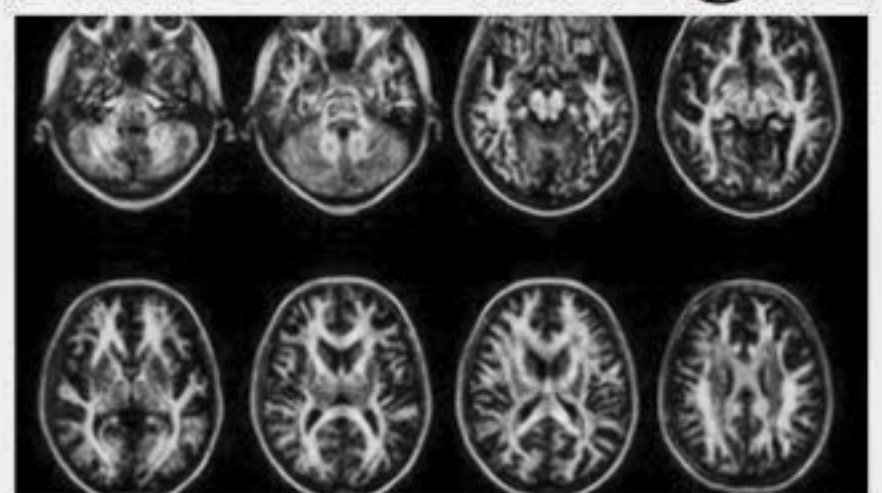
Internet addiction is a clinical disorder marked by out-of-control internet use.

A research team led by Hao Lei of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in Wuhan carried out brain scans of 35 men and women aged between 14 and 21.

Seventeen of them were classed as having internet addiction disorder (IAD) on the basis of answering yes to questions such as, "Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back or stop Internet use?"

Specialised MRI brain scans showed changes in the white matter of the brain - the part that contains nerve fibres - in those classed as being web addicts, compared with non-addicts.

There was evidence of disruption to connections in nerve fibres linking brain



Brain scans of white matter in the brain areas involved in emotions, decision making, and self-control.

Dr Hao Lei and colleagues write in Plos One: "Overall, our findings indicate that IAD has abnormal white matter integrity in brain regions involving emotional generation and processing, executive attention, decision making and cognitive control."

Prof Gunter Schumann, chair in biological psychiatry at the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College, London, said similar findings have been found in video game addicts.

He told the BBC: "For the first time two studies show changes in the neuronal connections between brain areas as well as changes in brain function in people who are frequently using the internet or video games."

Suu Kyi hints at possible govt role

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi said yesterday that she did not rule out taking a government position if she wins a parliamentary seat in upcoming by-elections.

"It depends on the circumstances and it depends (on) minister of what," the Nobel laureate replied when asked whether she would accept a government post if offered one.

When a reporter suggested the post of foreign minister, she laughed and replied: "I will have to think very seriously about that."

The 66-year-old, released from years of house arrest in November 2010 soon after a controversial election won by the military's political allies, plans to contest the April 1 by-election in a constituency near Yangon.

A nominally civilian government took power in Myanmar last year, ending almost five decades of outright military rule, but its ranks are filled with former generals.

Yesterday, Suu Kyi held talks with visiting French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe, the highest-level French diplomat ever to visit the country also known as Burma.

A total of 48 seats are up for grabs in the April vote -- 40 in the lower house, six in the upper house and two in regional assemblies.

China, Saudi ink energy deals

AFP, Riyadh

China signed energy deals with its top oil provider Saudi Arabia yesterday as its Premier Wen Jiabao visited the kingdom with tension over Iran's nuclear programme sparking fears of major oil supply disruptions.

The Chinese leader met King Abdullah yesterday, Saudi state news agency SPA said, adding that the two leaders "discussed regional and international developments, as well as cooperation between the two countries."

Saudi Arabia is the largest supplier of oil to energy-hungry China and bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to \$58.5 billion in the first 11 months of 2011, according to Xinhua Chinese news agency.