

Coordinated attacks kill 162 in Nigeria

AFP, Kano
Coordinated bomb attacks targeting security forces and gun battles have killed at least 162 people in Nigeria's second-largest city of Kano, with bodies littering the streets yesterday.

A curfew was imposed on Kano in Nigeria's mainly Muslim north after it exploded into violence on Friday evening, with eight police and immigration offices or residences targeted.

The main newspaper in the north said that a purported spokesman for Islamist group Boko Haram had claimed responsibility for the violence, saying it was in response to authorities' refusal to release their members from custody.

Scores of such attacks in Nigeria's north have been blamed on Boko Haram.

Some 20 huge blasts could be heard in the city as a suicide bomber attacked a regional police office and a car bomb rocked the outside of state police headquarters after the attacker fled and was shot dead, police sources said.

A number of other police posts were targeted, including a secret police building, as well as immigration offices.

Gunshots rang out in several areas, and a local television journalist was among those shot dead as he covered the unrest.

An AFP correspondent counted at least 80 bodies in the morgue at Kano's main hospital, many of them with gunshot wounds. Around 100 people waited outside the morgue to collect their relatives' remains.

Residents also reported bodies in the streets, as officials from the Red Cross and the National Emergency Management Agency were working to collect corpses and deliver them to morgues.

A police source on condition of anonymity said dozens were killed.

President Goodluck Jonathan declared a state of emergency on December 31 in parts of four states hard hit by attacks blamed on Boko Haram.

But the limitations of the Nigerian authorities were recently highlighted when the alleged mastermind of a Christmas Day attack outside a church that killed 44 people escaped police custody in suspicious circumstances.

Attacks specifically targeting Christians have also given rise to fears of a wider religious conflict in the country, with Christian leaders warning they would defend themselves. Some have even evoked the possibility of civil war.

However, attacks blamed on Boko Haram have included a wide range of targets, including Muslims.



Occupy San Francisco protesters march through San Francisco's financial district to protest against major banks on Friday in California. And in Washington, demonstrators broke through police line during a protest outside the Supreme Court as they arranged "Occupy the Courts" rally. PHOTO: AFP

Powers offer talks as EU mulls tougher sanctions

AGENCIES
Major powers signalled on Friday their willingness to reopen talks about curbing Iran's suspected pursuit of nuclear weapons while the European Union sought to impose toughest sanctions to date against Iran.

The focus on diplomacy follows weeks of rising tensions between the West, which is seeking to cut Iran's oil sales, and Tehran, which has threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz through which almost one-fifth of oil traded worldwide flows.

While major powers stressed their openness to renewed talks, diplomats said they remained divided on their approach, notably on whether to let Iran keep enriching uranium at some level.

The group, known as the P5+1 and as the EU3+3, includes Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the

United States.
EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who represents the group, issued a statement making clear that a diplomatic path remained open to Iran despite tougher sanctions and fresh speculation of a military strike on its nuclear facilities.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State

IRAN CRISIS

Hillary Clinton struck a decidedly conciliatory tone at a news conference with German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle in Washington.

"We do not seek conflict. We strongly believe the people of Iran deserve a better future," she said. "They can have that future, the country can be reintegrated into the global community ... when their government definitively turns away from pursuing nuclear

weapons.
"We have to see a seriousness and sincerity of purpose coming from them."

In Beijing, China leaned on a visiting Iranian delegation, led by Supreme National Security Council Deputy Secretary Ali Baqeri, to return to nuclear talks, saying it was a "top priority," the Xinhua news agency said yesterday.

Meanwhile, foreign ministers from the 27-nation bloc meeting in Brussels on Monday are expected to agree to sanction Tehran's central bank -- and possibly other banks -- and announce an embargo on purchasing Iranian oil, EU officials and diplomats said.

In the build-up, French President Nicolas Sarkozy urged "much tougher, more decisive sanctions" as a means of avoiding military action while German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle warned Iran was endangering world peace.

Russia probes poll frauds

AFP, Moscow

Russian investigators yesterday said they had launched a probe into multiple violations during last month's parliamentary polls, ahead of a new report by Western observers.

Since the December elections, Russians have held unprecedented mass rallies against vote fraud in a major challenge to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's rule as he seeks a return to the Kremlin in March elections.

Russia's Investigative Committee yesterday said in a statement it had opened 26 criminal cases into possible violations during the December 4 polls, including ballot stuffing and bribing voters.

UN under pressure to intervene in Syria

US mulling closure of embassy amid raging violence

AFP, Damascus

Pressure is mounting on the Arab League to seek UN intervention amid growing exasperation that the bloc's hard-won observer mission in Syria has failed to staunch 10 months of killing.

The US State Department said Friday it was so concerned at the growing death toll, as the Syrian regime cracks down on pro-democracy protests, that it is considering closing its embassy in Damascus.

"We have advised the Syrian government that unless concrete steps are taken in the coming days we may have no choice but to close the mission," the State Department said in a statement.

And despite widespread criticism of the Arab League's observer mission its deputy chief of operations, Ali Jarush, told reporters Friday that it was likely to be extended by a month.

Human Rights Watch said the observers' presence had failed to rein in the Syrian regime's crackdown, with activists reporting 506 civilians killed and another 490 detained since the monitors first deployed on December 26.

It urged the regional bloc "to publicly recognise that Syria has not respected the League's plan and work with the Security Council to increase pressure on the authorities and effectively curtail the use of fire power."

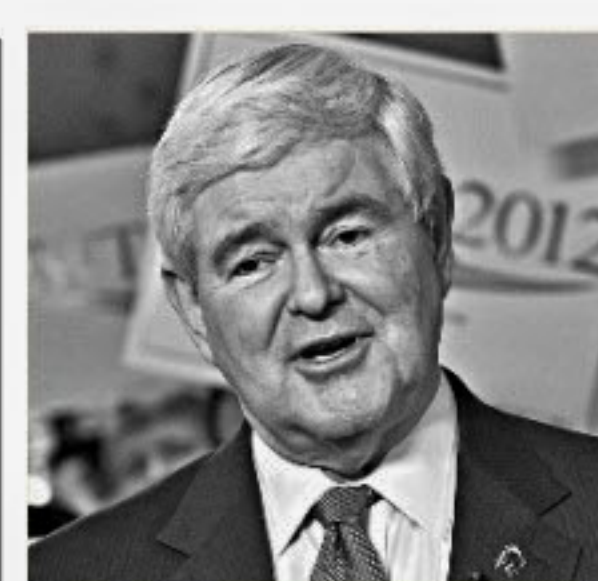
The head of the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), Burhan Ghaliun, headed to Cairo to lobby Arab ministers to refer the observer mission's findings to the UN Security Council for tough action.

An SNC spokesman told AFP in Cairo that the group is "preparing a counter report" to the one Dabi is due to submit to the pan-Arab body.

A tough Security Council resolution on Syria has been blocked by veto-wielding permanent members China and Russia. Moscow insists the opposition is as much to blame for the violence as the regime.

Deadlock in the Security Council over Syria has raised the stakes of an Arab solution to the crisis.

Meanwhile, a roadside bomb killed 11 detainees being transported in a Syrian prison truck in Idlib province in the northwest yesterday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.



Newt Gingrich

Polls open in key S Carolina primary

AFP, South Carolina

Voters began casting ballots in South Carolina yesterday for in a pivotal Republican presidential primary, in which former House speaker Newt Gingrich eyes an upset win.

Balloting began across the state at 7:00am, as scheduled.

Gingrich and longtime frontrunner Mitt Romney crisscrossed the state ahead of the primary, mindful that no Republican since 1980 has captured the party's nomination without first winning this southern bastion.

A Clemson University poll released on the eve of the primary here showed Gingrich with a six-point lead over Romney, 32 to 26 percent, with Texas Congressman Ron Paul in third place with 11 percent and former US senator Rick Santorum at nine percent.

NEWS IN brief

S Sudan stops oil production

AFP, Juba

South Sudan has ordered the shutdown of oil production that provides some 98 percent of its revenue, amid a deepening row with Khartoum over pipeline fees, the government said on Friday.

Khartoum admits to taking some South Sudanese oil destined for export as compensation until an agreement, but the South has said this is theft.

"The Council of Ministers decided today that in light of the present quantities of oil being taken by Khartoum" it would halt production, Minister of Information Barnaba Marial Benjamin told AFP.

The South split from Sudan in July last year, taking with it 75 percent of the country's oil production.

Hamas chief wants to quit

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal, who survived a 1997 Israeli assassination bid, has confirmed he wants to step down after eight years in the post, the Islamist movement said yesterday.

"Political bureau chief Khaled Meshaal has notified Hamas's consultative council that he does not wish to be a candidate for the movement's future leadership," a statement said.

Senior Hamas figures have asked the Damascus-based Meshaal to reconsider, the statement said. They urged him to leave it to the consultative council to decide "on the basis of the higher interests of the movement," stressing that it was "not a purely personal matter."



Khaled Meshaal

Online news ad revenue beat print in China

AFP, Beijing

China's revenue from online advertising was higher than the equivalent in newsprint for the first time in 2011, a study by the market research firm iResearch said, quoted in the Global Times yesterday.

Web advertising in the world's second largest economy generated 51.19 billion yuan (\$8.11 billion), while newsprint advertising brought in 45.36 billion yuan, iResearch said, a trend it predicted would continue in 2012.

At the end of 2011, there were 513 million internet users in China, up by 56 million over one year. Some 194 million made purchases online -- an increase of 20.8%, according to the China Internet Network Information Center. In the third term of 2011, online ad revenue increased by 83.1% compared to the same period in 2010.

Aussie ruling party loses key ally

AFP, Sydney

The power base of Australia's ruling Labour Party was rattled yesterday when a key independent MP withdrew his support after Prime Minister Julia Gillard broke an agreement on gambling reforms.

Gillard's minority government held power with a wafer-thin majority of just two seats after deadlocked elections last year and this is now down to one after Andrew Wilkie cut ties.

It followed Gillard Saturday announcing a watered down reform plan to tackle problem slot machine gambling at pubs and clubs.

Some 600,000 Australians -- four percent of the adult population -- are estimated to play the poker machines at least weekly, with about 95,000 classed as problem gamblers in a study published by the Productivity Commission.

The commission recommended imposing loss limits to address the issue and Gillard promised to legislate the reforms by May and introduce them by 2014 as part of a deal with Wilkie to win his support for her government.

But under pressure from the pub and club industry, which pays hefty state government charges to have the money-spinning machines and says the reforms will cut their revenue, she has toned it down and pushed back the timetable.

Now, the government intends to only introduce a trial to require gamblers to preset a limit on what they are prepared to lose on high betting machines from the start of 2013.

A decision on its roll out will be deferred until 2016.

Yemen approves Saleh immunity law

AFP, Sanaa



Ali Abdullah Saleh

The Yemeni parliament yesterday adopted a law giving veteran President Ali Abdullah Saleh immunity from prosecution in return for stepping down under a Gulf-brokered transition deal.

The law adopted gives Saleh, in power since 1978, "complete" immunity, and also offers partial protection from legal action to his aides.

The final text says Saleh's lieutenants cannot face prosecution for "actions that were politically motivated and carried out in the exercise of their duties," but specifies that the amnesty "does not apply to acts of terrorism."

The transitional government of national unity, which is led by the parliamentary opposition, had submitted 11th-hour amendments on Friday reducing the scope of the amnesty offered to the president's aides following a public outcry.

The immunity pledge, which was a key element of the hard-won Gulf deal that Saleh signed in November, has been strongly criticised by Western human rights groups and the United Nations.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said earlier this month that anyone who had committed abuses during the mass protests in Yemen that erupted in January last year must not be allowed to evade justice.

FALKLANDS DISPUTE Call grows in Argentina to cut ties with UK

AFP, Buenos Aires

Protesters marched on the British embassy here Friday, burning the Union Jack, and demanding Argentina snap diplomatic ties with London in an escalating row over the Falkland Islands.

British Prime Minister David Cameron has sparked fury here after he called Argentina's attitude towards the South Atlantic islands "colonialist."

"We repudiate the statements of Cameron and of sending imperial troops to the Falklands," leftist leader Vilma Ripoll said Friday during the march.

"The government must move from words to deeds and break off relations right now with British colonialism."

About 100 protesters from the Free of the South Movement, led by former congressman and filmmaker Fernando "Pino" Solanas, burned a British flag a few meters from the embassy of Britain, which has claimed the Falklands since 1833.

"British out of the Falklands" and "The government should break off relations now" were among the slogans written on the protesters' banners.

The renewed tensions come months before the 30th anniversary of the brief, but bloody war between the two countries over the islands which started on April 2, 1982.



Political activists scuffle with Indian police during a protest in Srinagar marking the 22nd martyrdom anniversary of Gaw Kadal massacre where more than 52 people were killed and 250 sustained bullet injuries when Indian troops opened fire on January 21, 1990. Kashmir has been hit by an insurgency since 1989 that has left more than 47,000 people dead by official count. PHOTO: AFP



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