

Gulf Arabs quit Syria mission

Urge world pressure; regime slams 'plotters'

AGENCIES

Saudi Arabia's Gulf allies joined Riyadh yesterday in pulling out of an Arab League monitoring team to Syria, risking the collapse of a mission whose presence has not halted violence in a 10-month-old revolt against President Bashar al-Assad.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualeem said his government was still considering whether to let the monitors stay for another month and criticised the Arab League for calling Assad to step down.

"Enough of the Arab solutions from now," Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said, accusing the Arabs of "plotting" to internationalise the crisis and taking decisions while "knowing that they will be rejected" by Damascus.

"Definitely the solution in Syria is not the solution suggested by the Arab League, which we have rejected," he told a news conference. "They have abandoned their role as the Arab League and we no longer want Arab solutions to the crisis."

Syria is becoming an Arab and international pariah for its harsh response to an uprising against Assad in which thousands of civilians, soldiers and policemen have been killed.

Envoys to the Cairo-based League will meet later in the day to discuss whether the monitoring mission has a future, Sudan's ambassador to the 22-member body, Kamal Hassan Ali, said.

A League official said 55 Gulf Arab observers were being withdrawn from the 165-strong monitoring team.

The Arab League demanded Sunday that Assad step down in favour of a unity government to end the bloodshed, but said the observers should stay in Syria for another month.

Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said at the time his country was quitting the mission because Syria had not implemented any part of an Arab peace plan agreed in November.

The Arab League's demand for a change of government in Syria puts more pressure on the UN Security Council to overcome its divisions and take a stand on the bloodletting there.

The Arab observers deployed late last month to assess Syria's compliance with an earlier Arab League plan.

Syrian foreign minister said Russia could not accept foreign intervention in Syria, a longstanding ally. "That is a red line," he added.



Thailand Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra poses at the Taj Mahal monument in Agra yesterday. Shinawatra is in India for a four-day state visit as the chief guest of India's 63rd Republic Day celebrations on January 26.

PHOTO: AFP

Blasts targeting Shias kill 12 in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A spate of bomb attacks in and around Baghdad, the deadliest of which targeted Shia areas in the capital, killed at least 12 people yesterday, officials said.

The violence comes amid a political standoff in Iraq pitting the Shiite-led government against the main Sunni-backed political bloc, stoking sectarian tensions barely a month after US troops completed their withdrawal.

In the deadliest attack, two bombs exploded within half an hour of each other in the capital's Sadr City Shiite bastion, killing six people and wounding 32, an interior ministry official said.

The first bomb ripped through a group of workers at around 6:45am while the second exploded outside a bakery. Among the wounded were two women and a child.

The bombings are the latest in a spate of attacks against Shias, which have risen since US forces completed their withdrawal from Iraq on December 18.

Pak army, intel chiefs meet PM

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's powerful army and intelligence chiefs met with the prime minister yesterday, state television reported, during the worst political crisis since a 1999 coup.

State television gave scant details on the high-powered meeting, which also included the foreign minister, saying only regional security, especially the situation in Afghanistan, was discussed.

Tensions are running high over a mysterious memo, allegedly drafted on the direction of the former ambassador to Washington, Husain Haqqani, which asked for US help in reining in the military.

Meanwhile, the memogate probe, which has launched to find out who is responsible for sending the alleged memo to US to curb army's influence, appeared at risk of collapsing yesterday as investigators ruled out travelling abroad to hear the testimony of the star witness.

Earlier, American businessman Mansoor Ijaz, who implicated President Asif Ali Zardari in the memo seeking US help to rein in Pakistan's powerful military, has refused to travel to Pakistan, citing fears for his safety.

His testimony is considered key to any case against the president, who faces frenzied speculation that he could be forced out of office over the scandal.

UK could boost military presence in the Gulf

BBC ONLINE

An escalation of a dispute with Iran could see Britain sending military reinforcements to the Gulf, Defence Secretary Philip Hammond said yesterday.

Sending HMS Argyll as part of an international warship flotilla through the Strait of Hormuz on Sunday was a "clear signal" to Tehran, he said.

Iran has threatened to close the strait in retaliation for sanctions against its oil exports.

In total, 35% of the world's tanker-borne oil passes through the strait.

Asked if more resources could be sent to the region, Hammond said: "The UK has a contingent capability to reinforce that presence should at any time it be considered necessary to do so."

He was speaking at a London press conference following the annual round of talks between UK and Australian foreign and defence ministers.

The European Union agreed sanctions on Monday to ban all new oil contracts with Iran and freeze the assets of Iran's central bank in the EU. Iran said the embargo is "unfair" and "doomed to fail".

The EU currently buys about 20% of Iran's oil exports.

Meanwhile, Australia's foreign minister Kevin Rudd said his country, whose exports to Iran have decreased, would also enforce the EU ban on Iranian crude oil exports.

"It is not just that we endorse the actions taken in Brussels for Europe, we of course will do the same for Australia," he said.

"The message needs to be delivered to the people of Iran, to the political elites as well as the government of Iran, that their behaviour is globally unacceptable."

US President Barack Obama has welcomed the EU sanctions, saying they show international unity against the "serious threat" posed by Iran's nuclear programme.

Assange to launch TV chat show

AFP, London

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said yesterday he was launching his own television chat show and promised interviews with "key political players, thinkers and revolutionaries".

WikiLeaks website said the show would go on air in mid-March in 10 weekly half-hour episodes.

It will feature "controversial voices from across the political spectrum -- iconoclasts, visionaries and power insiders -- each to offer a window on the world tomorrow and their ideas on how to secure a brighter future."

Describing Assange as "one of the world's most recognisable revolutionary figures," the whistleblowing website said it had licensing commitments covering more than 600 million viewers across cable, satellite and terrestrial networks.

WikiLeaks enraged the US administration by releasing tens of thousands of confidential documents about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and then a 'dump' of files revealing the thoughts of US diplomats on world leaders.

Assange, a 40-year-old Australian former computer hacker, is fighting extradition from Britain to Sweden where prosecutors want to question him over allegations that he raped and sexually abused two Swedish women.

England's highest court will next week hear Assange's appeal against his extradition.

Asia faces 'dragon baby' boom

TIME ONLINE

Monday marks the beginning of the Year of the Dragon, and Chinese communities around the world will celebrate with extravagant festivities, vibrant parades and an influx in consumer spending. But forecasters and health officials are anticipating another boost: a wave of births.

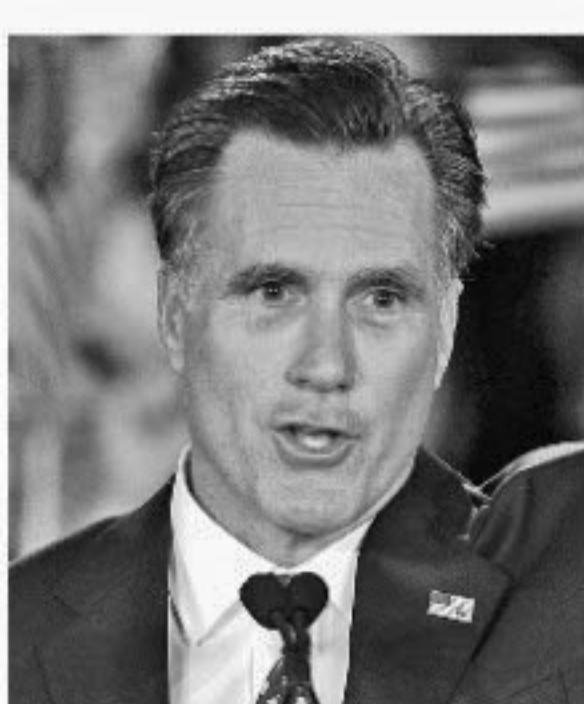
State news agency Xinhua says China is expecting a 5% increase in the number of babies born in 2012, the BBC reports. The dragon, considered the most auspicious zodiac sign in Chinese culture, is often associated with good fortune and intelligence and is believed to be the sign of those destined for success.

Dragon years typically generate more births than other years in the zodiac cycle, including in 2000, when Hong Kong saw a more than 5% increase in births. A recent poll conducted in Hong Kong revealed that 70% of couples desired "dragon babies," CBS reports.

In places like China, an already densely inhabited country with 1.3 billion people, the potential increase might put pressure on parents who must adhere to the country's one-child policy as well as compete for spots in the most elite schools. But in places like Taiwan, which carries one of the world's lowest birth rates, parents and government officials are embracing the baby craze.

But the boom will likely have little impact on long-term fertility rates. The year 2013 marks the year of the snake, and may ultimately see a decline in births.

Some famed dragon babies include martial arts star Bruce Lee, Spanish artist Salvador Dalí and President Bill Clinton.



Trailing in US race, Romney releases taxes

AFP, Florida

Stung by a series of setbacks, Mitt Romney yesterday heeded calls to release tax documents detailing his vast fortune and fired back at surging Republican White House rival Newt Gingrich.

The release of the documents to US media followed a fiery debate in which Romney -- trailing in recent polls -- painted Gingrich as a Washington "influence peddler" unfit to challenge President Barack Obama in November.

The documents show that Romney, a former venture capitalist and one of the richest people to ever seek the presidency, paid some \$6 million in the past two years on more than \$40 million of income, almost all from investments.

Romney attacked Gingrich's work for state-backed mortgage lender Freddie Mac, which many Republicans blame for the housing bubble and the ensuing recession, which hit Florida particularly hard.

"Freddie Mac was paying speaker Gingrich \$1.6 million at the same time Freddie Mac was costing the people of Florida millions of dollars."

A Rasmussen poll found Gingrich was now running at 41 percent in Florida, with Romney at 32 percent. Just last week, Romney had a 22-point lead in the Sunshine State.

OSCAR NOMINATIONS

'Hugo', 'The Artist' get most nods

AFP, Los Angeles

Martin Scorsese's lavish 3D adventure "Hugo" won 11 Oscar nominations yesterday, just ahead of hotly-tipped silent movie "The Artist" with 10 nods for Hollywood's top awards.

Tied for third were baseball movie "Moneyball" starring Brad Pitt and veteran director Steven Spielberg's equine epic "War Horse," which each got six nods for the Academy Awards, to be presented next month.

"Hugo"'s nominations included the best picture category, where it is up against eight other movies including "The Artist," which has been a favourite for the Oscars after a string of wins and nods in other awards show.

The Scorsese movie -- his debut in 3D -- is a visually rich tale set in 1930s Paris, about an orphan who lives in the walls of a train station and is obsessed with clock-making and early film pioneer Georges Melies.

"The Artist," which is a tribute to silent movie era, has already been nominated for best film by the Directors Guild of America (DGA) and won the top prize



Brad Pitt



Meryl Streep



George Clooney

(PGA) from the Producers Guild of America (PGA) last week -- both seen as key indicators of Oscars glory. It also won the Golden Globe award.

The other movies nominated for best picture are "The Descendants," "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close," "The Help," "Midnight in Paris," "Moneyball," "The Tree of Life" and "War Horse."

"The Artist" star Jean Dujardin was nominated for best actor, up against George Clooney in "The Descendants," Brad Pitt in "Moneyball," Gary Oldman in "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy" and Demian Bechir in "A Better Life."

Meryl Streep, as expected, received her 17th Oscar nomination for a gripping performance as former British

premier Margaret Thatcher in "The Iron Lady".

Also shortlisted were Glenn Close for cross-dressing "Albert Nobbs," Viola Davis from civil rights drama "The Help," Michelle Williams as Monroe in "My Week with Marilyn" and Rooney Mara from "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo."

Up for best foreign language film are "A Separation" by Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi, along with "Footnote" (Israel), "In Darkness" (Poland), "Monsieur Lazhar" (Canada), and "Bullhead" (Belgium).

The Oscars are to be presented at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood on Sunday, February 26.

ARMENIA GENOCIDE BILL

Turkey slams France, vows sanctions

AFP, Ankara

Turkey yesterday slammed as discriminatory and racist a bill passed by the French Senate making denial of the Armenian genocide a crime and vowed to impose unspecified sanctions against Paris on a "step-by-step" basis.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe appealed to France's "Turkish friends" for calm as Turks reacted furiously to the Senate's approval of the bill Monday.

"The proposal adopted in France is tantamount to discrimination and racism, and it violates freedom of thought," Erdogan said in an address to his lawmakers in parliament.

The Turkish premier, who dismissed the bill as "null and void," warned however that his Islamist-rooted government would punish Paris with retaliatory measures if French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose right-wing UMP party initiated the bill, signs it into law.

"We will implement our sanctions step by step, without any retreat," Erdogan declared. "We'll publicise our action



Tayyip Erdogan

plan according to the developments on the ground."

The measure, approved by a vote of 127 to 85 in the French Senate, makes it an offence punishable by jail to deny that the 1915 massacre of Armenians by Ottoman Turk forces amounted to genocide, drawing ire from Turkey.

Armenians say up to 1.5 million of their forebears were killed in 1915 and 1916 by the forces of Turkey's former Ottoman Empire.

Turkey disputes the figure, arguing that only 500,000 died, and denies this was genocide, ascribing the toll to fighting and starvation during World War I and accusing the Armenians of siding with Russian invaders.

When France's lower house passed the bill last month, Ankara recalled its envoy to Paris for consultations and froze political and military ties with Paris while vowing to impose "permanent" sanctions if the measure is finally adopted.

Erdogan's address yesterday was not as strong as expected, in line with continuing efforts by the Turkish envoy to lobby against the legislation.

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