

Arabs take Syria crisis to UN

Fresh violence kills 34

AFP, Damascus

An Arab League team is to take the 10-month-old crisis in Syria to the UN Security Council, as activists said security forces launched an assault on a protest hub near the Syrian capital yesterday.

UN human rights chief Navi Pillay, meanwhile, said the United Nations could not keep track of the death toll in Syria's unrest that has already cost more than 5,400 lives.

At the Cairo-based Arab League, the organisation's chief Nabil al-Arabi said he and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim Al-Thani were to head to New York on Saturday to seek support for an Arab plan on Syria.

They are to "hold a meeting with the UN Security Council on Monday to seek ratification of the Arab League decision on Syria," for President Bashar al-Assad to hand power to his deputy, Arabi said.

Arab League ministers last week urged Assad to delegate powers to his vice president and clear the way for a national unity government within two months, a plan which Damascus has ruled out as interference in its internal affairs.

A rights group said Syrian security forces killed 34 civilians, including 10 children, in clashes across the country yesterday.

Separately, seven deserters and eight regular soldiers died in clashes, according to the rights group, among them a colonel killed in Homs, a protest hub in central Syria.

According to diplomats at the United Nations, European and Arab governments are drafting a new text they hope to put to a vote in the Security Council early next week.



The Global Fund board chairman Simon Bland, left, and Microsoft founder and US billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates pose next to a cutout of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair to promote the Global Fund's 10th anniversary during the World Economic Forum annual meeting yesterday in Davos.

Gates donates \$750m to fight AIDS

AFP, Davos

Microsoft founder Bill Gates yesterday unveiled a \$750 million donation to the UN Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, saying the downturn must not trigger a fall in aid.

"These are tough economic times, but that is no excuse for cutting aid to the world's poorest," said Gates, who is attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, the annual get-together of global and financial elite.

"The Global Fund is one of the most effective ways we invest our money in every year."

The new commitment is in addition to the \$650 million that the Gates Foundation has already contributed since the Global Fund was launched 10 years ago at Davos, said a statement.

Since stepping back from the helm of Microsoft in 2006, Gates has devoted most of his time working with his wife on the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

West urged not to turn back on hungry during austerity

AFP, Davos

Leaders of the war against hunger yesterday said the financial crisis must not be used as an excuse by the richer world to renege on commitments, warning a failure to act would fuel unrest and immigration.

Ministers, business leaders and UN officials gathered at the annual Davos forum said that while the world was now producing more food than ever, there were also more mouths to feed and that a billion people were afflicted by hunger.

"Each morning nearly a billion people will wake up and be unsure how to fill even this humble cup," said Josette Sheeran, executive director of UN's World Food Programme told a debate here as she raised a modest plastic beaker.

"If people don't have food they have three options -- they can revolt, they can migrate, they can die."

The recent famine in parts of Somalia

and food riots that have erupted in cities across Africa in the last few years have shown that a continent whose population is due to more than double by 2050 is already struggling to cope.

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft and now one of the world's most prominent

philanthropists, said that high death rates from illnesses such as malaria and pneumonia could be attributed to the lack of food.

Britain's Overseas Development minister Andrew Mitchell, whose government has taken flak domestically for ringfencing its aid budget while slashing other areas of public spending, said it was vital not to leave the

most vulnerable even more exposed.

"It's extremely important that at a difficult time in the international economy, richer countries stand by their commitments and promises to the poorest who are hit first and foremost," he told AFP.

French Agriculture Minister Bruno Le Maire said that it was vital that the West remembered that food security was not only an economic but also a moral issue.

But he admitted that "there is a risk that leaders in the west will go away from this issue of food security" at a time of financial crisis.

Le Maire said one way to avoid a repeat of crises such as the recent severe shortages of food in east Africa was to build up stockpiles.

Jose Graziano da Silva, the new head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, insisted that it was not a question of not enough food to go round but rather how to distribute it -- especially in Africa.



Iran ready for nuke talks

AFP, Tehran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said yesterday that Iran is ready to sit down with world powers for talks on its nuclear programme.

"They have this excuse that Iran is dodging negotiations while it is not the case..." the Iranian leader was quoted as saying by state media. "Why should we run away from the negotiations?"

Ahmadinejad was implicitly responding to comments made by Western officials urging the Islamic republic to return to negotiations.

Ahmadinejad also downplayed the effect of the newly imposed Western sanctions saying they would not hurt his nation.

"Once our trade with the Europe was around 90 percent but now it has reached 10 percent experience has shown the Iranian nation will not be hurt," he said.

Trapped Aussie PM 'rescued'

BBC ONLINE

Australian PM Julia Gillard and leader of the opposition Tony Abbott had to be rescued after becoming trapped by an angry protest, local media reported yesterday.

About 50 police escorted the pair from Canberra's Lobby restaurant after it was surrounded by some 200 supporters of the city's Aboriginal Tent Embassy.

The protests appear to have been aimed primarily at opposition leader Tony Abbott.

Abbott had angered activists earlier in the day by saying it was time the nearby Aboriginal Tent Embassy 'moved on'.

The pair had been at a ceremony for the inaugural National Emergency Medals.

Gillard stumbled after losing a shoe in the scuffle, but was caught by her personal security guard and managed to get into a waiting car.

The tent embassy was established in 1972 by four men as a protest against the prime minister of the time's refusal to acknowledge indigenous land rights.



NEWS IN brief

PNG hit by military mutiny

CNN ONLINE

A rebel commander said yesterday that he had seized control of the military in Papua New Guinea, exacerbating the political instability in the country.

The unrest in the military comes amid controversy in Papua New Guinea over who the rightful prime minister is.

The dramatic move appeared to be connected with a power struggle between Somare, who was ousted as prime minister last year, and current premier Peter O'Neill over leadership of the resource-rich but impoverished country.

Three high-rises collapse in Brazil

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Five bodies were found yesterday as rescue teams frantically searched through rubble for 16 people missing after three office buildings collapsed in the historic heart of Rio, officials said.

The collapse, apparently caused by structural problems, occurred late Wednesday near the municipal theater on the city's Cinelandia square, in a historic district bustling by day but nearly deserted at night.

Civil defence official Marcio Mota told AFP that two new bodies were located in the debris, bringing to five the number found so far.

Nigeria arrests 200 after attacks

AFP, Kano

Nigeria has arrested 200 people, mostly Chadian "mercenaries," after last week's attacks in the north, a police source said yesterday, as pressure mounts on the security forces to stem the violence.

Coordinated gun and bomb attacks in the northern city of Kano last Friday killed at least 185 people, the deadliest ever assault claimed by the shadowy Islamist sect Boko Haram.

They have been blamed for scores of other attacks across northern Nigeria.

There were indications the Chadians had been paid to participate in the recent attacks attributed to Boko Haram, the source added.

REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL RACE

Greatest show of idiocy: Castro

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Fidel Castro has lambasted the Republican presidential race as the greatest competition of "idiocy and ignorance" the world has ever seen, and also criticised the news media and foreign governments for seizing on the death of a Cuban prisoner to demand greater respect for human rights.

Castro's comments came in a long opinion piece carried by official media two days after a Republican debate in Florida presented mostly headline stances on what to do about the Communist-run island.

Cuba has become an important issue as the candidates court Florida's influential Cuban-American community in an effort to win the biggest electoral prize so far in the primary season.

Castro said he had assumed the candidates would try to outdo each other on the issue of Cuba, but nonetheless he was



Fidel Castro

appalled by the level of debate.

"The selection of a Republican candidate for the presidency of this globalised and expansive empire is and I mean this seriously the greatest competition of idiocy and ignorance that has ever been," he wrote.

Castro disputed accounts of the death of Wilman Villar Mendoza, a 31-year-old prisoner, saying he had not been a dissident and had not been on a 50-day hunger strike, as human rights and opposition groups claimed.

The Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, said during Monday's debate that Villar had died "fighting for democracy".

Romney's rival Newt Gingrich said he would authorise increased covert operations to bring down the Cuban government. And at another moment of the debate, Romney and Gingrich sparred over whether Castro's soul would go to heaven or hell.

Suranjit invites

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role of railway in business expansion. The Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI) hosted the event at its office auditorium in Motijheel.

The railways ministry is receiving funds for various development projects, especially for its broad-gauge tracks, from international donors including Asian Development Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, India and Korea. But its metre-gauge section is still open for investment, mentioned Suranjit.

The businessmen can invest in bridges, metre-gauge locomotives and coaches. They can earn back their investment by collecting toll, he pointed out.

According to him, the expansion of railway depends on a political decision to establish railway link between Bangladesh and Myanmar, China, Bhutan, Nepal and the north-eastern states of India.

DCCI, made 15-point recommendations to the minister for the revival of the state-run sector.

The proposals include investment under public-private partnership; drawing up appropriate project plans in line with the transport master plan; repair, modernisation and expansion of railway tracks; and setting up connectivity with India, China and Myanmar.

The business leader found 272 trains inadequate for the huge population of the country. He suggested expansion of the railway network to introduce more trains.

In his keynote speech, transport policy and planning specialist Dr M Rahmatullah said Bangladesh Railway needs to go for an aggressive marketing to gain market share in carrying petroleum products, food grains, and fertilisers.

Fazle Kabir, railways secretary, Kazi Akramuddin Ahmed, chairman of Standard Bank, addressed the seminar, among others.

No enclave exchange

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agreement, signed during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Dhaka in September last year, on enclave exchange largely due to the absence of a consensus on the issue, the newspaper said quoting official sources yesterday.

Efforts are on to secure Mamata's consent on the agreement on exchange of enclaves which would help bring down the curtains on a major irritant that has been there in India-Bangladesh ties since 1974.

Just prior to the Indian premier's arrival in Dhaka on September 6, Mamata took stand against the Teesta water-sharing deal which was almost set to be signed during Manmohan's visit.

Manmohan had to backtrack from translating the

FALKLANDS DISPUTE

Argentina decries UK PM's comment

BBC ONLINE

Argentina's president yesterday condemned the UK prime minister's claim last week that her government takes a colonialist attitude to the Falklands Islands.

Making her first public appearance after undergoing surgery, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner branded David Cameron's comment "nonsense".

A surgery scar was visible on her throat as she spoke at government headquarters in Buenos Aires.

This April marks 30 years since the start of the Falklands War.

"They are trying to paint us as bad guys, or violent guys and really, that is not who we are," Fernandez told a packed auditorium after 20 days of medical leave for thyroid surgery.

Cameron outraged many in Argentina last week when he accused the country of having a "colonialist" attitude over the disputed islands.

Protesters marched on the British embassy in Buenos Aires on Friday, burning the Union flag, and demanding that diplomatic ties with London be severed.

Libya accused of torturing detainees

AFP, Tripoli

Several suspected diehards of slain Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi have been subjected to torture and some have even died in detention centres run by armed militias, human rights groups said yesterday.

"Several detainees have died after being subjected to torture in Libya in recent weeks and months amid widespread torture and ill-treatment of suspected pro-Gaddafi fighters and loyalists," Amnesty International said.

The London-based watchdog said its delegates met detainees held in Tripoli, in Misrata and in smaller towns such as Ghariyan, who showed visible signs of torture inflicted in recent days and weeks.

"The torture is being carried out by officially recognised military and security entities, as well by a multitude of armed militias operating outside any legal framework," Amnesty International said.

In a separate statement, Doctors Without Borders said it had suspended its work in Misrata, Libya's third largest city, which withstood a devastating siege by Kadhafi's forces during last year's uprising.

"Detainees in the Libyan city of Misrata are being tortured and denied urgent medical care, leading the international medical humanitarian organisation Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) to suspend its operations in detention centres in Misrata," the group said, referring to itself by its French name.