

# Syria killings spike as diplomacy heats up

AFP, Damascus

Syrian security forces yesterday stepped up a deadly crackdown on dissent, as activists said almost 100 people died in two days of violence ahead of a bid to condemn Damascus at the UN Security Council.

The head of the Arab League monitoring mission in Syria said that, since Tuesday, unrest had soared "in a significant way," especially in the flashpoint central cities of Homs and Hama and in the northern Idlib region.

The violence, which for the first time cost lives Friday in Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, "does not help prepare the atmosphere ... to get all sides to sit at the negotiating table," General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi said.

For the second day, Syrian forces kept up their attacks on Homs, where dozens have been killed, as Western and Arab nations rushed to unveil a draft UN resolution that would condemn a crackdown that has killed more than 5,400 since March.

The pre-dawn assault on Homs, and

reports of similar offensives against Hama and other cities, came hours after the United Nations said it could no longer keep track of the death toll.

The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights said security forces killed at least 23 civilians yesterday, while 12 soldiers were killed in attacks on the military.

Updating its toll for Thursday's violence across the country, the Observatory said 62 people were killed, including 33 in Homs.

The latest wave in the government crackdown, now in its 11th month, comes as the West tries to ride diplomatic momentum sparked by last weekend's surprise call by the Arab League for Assad to step down.

Western and Arab nations were to hold talks in New York later yesterday on a draft resolution denouncing the Assad regime that has been blocked by strong resistance from Damascus allies Beijing and Moscow.

In Cairo, where the Arab League is based, dozens of Syrian regime opponents stormed their country's embassy, an AFP reporter said.



Syrian government supporters dance in front of a poster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during a pro-regime rally in Damascus yesterday.

# Saudi to recognise Syrian rebels

AFP, Kuwait City

Saudi Arabia will recognise the Syrian National Council as the "official representative" of the Syrian people, a senior member of the opposition group said in remarks published yesterday.

"Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal told an SNC delegation he met in Cairo last week the kingdom will recognise the Council as the official representative of the Syrian people," SNC executive council member told Kuwait's Al-Rai newspaper.

He did not say when Riyadh will make the move or whether it will be joined by its five partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which this week announced that it was following Saudi Arabia's lead in pulling out its representatives from the observer mission to Syria.

# AHEAD OF FLORIDA PRIMARY Romney, Gingrich trade barbs

AFP, Jacksonville

Republican White House hopefuls Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich traded blows on immigration, space policy and wealth in a feisty debate ahead of the all-important Florida primary.

Meanwhile, a poll showed Mitt Romney has opened up a nine-point lead on Newt Gingrich in a new Florida poll released yesterday.

Romney -- once seen as the obvious nominee to challenge President Barack Obama in November but now tied with Gingrich in the polls -- came out swinging Thursday, dismissing suggestions he is anti-immigrant and dodging taxes.

"The idea that I'm anti-immigrant is repulsive," Romney said, showing a flash of steel seldom seen in his campaign.

"It's simply the kind of over-the-top rhetoric that's characterized American politics too long," the former Massachusetts governor added to audience cheers.



"I think you should apologize for it and recognize that having differences of opinions does not justify labeling people with highly charged epithets."

Immigration has been high on the agenda in Florida, which has a large Hispanic bloc.

The high stakes of the debate, just five days ahead of Tuesday's vote in the Sunshine State, were evident in the terse exchanges on almost every issue, and from the relative lack of discussion about Obama.

Such was the heat of early exchanges that Gingrich offered a truce: "How about if the four of us agree for the rest

of the evening, we're going to talk about issues?"

The offer was quickly knocked down when Gingrich refused to answer for earlier comments about Romney's Swiss and Cayman Island bank accounts.

Instead Romney, a multimillionaire former businessman, went on the attack.

"Wouldn't it be nice if people didn't make accusations somewhere else that they weren't willing to make here?" Romney asked rhetorically.

Romney also ripped Gingrich's plans to establish a permanent base on the moon, largely with private funding.

"It may be a big idea, but it's not a good idea," Romney said, suggesting that if a manager came to him with the proposal, the manager would be fired.

Each of the first three nominating contests had different winners -- former senator Rick Santorum in Iowa, Romney in New Hampshire and then Gingrich in South Carolina -- upending the race as the candidates headed to Florida.

# Iran could ban EU oil exports

REUTERS, Tehran

A law to be debated in Iran's parliament yesterday could halt exports of oil to the European Union as early as next week, the semi-official Fars news agency quoted a lawmaker as saying on Friday.

"On Sunday, parliament will have to approve a 'double emergency' bill calling for a halt in the export of Iranian oil to Europe starting next week," Hossein Ibrahim, vice-chairman of parliament's national security and foreign policy committee, was quoted as saying.

Parliament is pushing for the export ban to deny the EU a 6-month phase-in of the embargo on Iranian oil that the bloc agreed on Monday as part of a raft of tough new Western sanctions aimed at forcing Iran to curb its nuclear program.

# US plans to cut troops, invest in future

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon on Thursday proposed taking some 100,000 troops off active duty as the debt-ridden United States winds down a decade of war, but vowed new investments to exert power in Asia and the Middle East.

With pressure mounting to balance the US books, President Barack Obama's administration sought a 13 percent cut in Army numbers including pulling back two brigades from Europe as well as retiring older ships and planes.

"We are at a strategic turning point after a decade of war and substantial growth in defence budgets," Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said as he unveiled a preview of the Pentagon's 2013 budget requests.

Panetta vowed to maintain US power in the Middle East and Asia -- where China's growing military has concerned the United States and its allies -- including by modernising submarines and funding a next-generation bomber.

Panetta called for funding to station littoral combat ships in Singapore and patrol

craft in Bahrain -- part of the US strategy of forward-deploying its military to strategically placed US allies.

The budget is far from a done deal. Panetta is hoping to ward off calls for steeper cuts backed by some members of his Democratic Party, while Republicans seeking to defeat Obama in November elections have resisted any cuts to the military and instead prefer reductions on social benefits at home.

But Miriam Pemberton, a research fellow at the left-leaning Institute for Policy Studies, said that "these are only-in-Washington cuts," as reductions are primarily to money that the Pentagon planned for expansion.

Panetta proposed a \$613 billion budget for the year starting in October which is nine percent below the 2012 request.

Even with cuts, the US military budget remains far larger than those of other countries. China, which has the world's second largest military budget, said it was devoting 601.1 billion yuan (\$91.1 billion) in 2011, although many foreign experts believe that the actual figure is higher.

# WikiLeaks sparks US intel reform

AFP, Washington

The WikiLeaks document dump, which saw hundreds of thousands of classified US files leaked, rattled US intelligence officials, forcing them to implement reforms to prevent another such breach.

James Clapper, director of national intelligence, said changes were being put in place over the next five years that would create a "new security architecture," making it infinitely harder to disclose America's secrets.

The "terrible event," which saw sensitive US diplomatic and military cables exposed for public scrutiny, "caused us to make some changes," Clapper told a Washington think-tank, acknowledging the "challenge" ahead.

"We have to do more to protect data and ensure that the information we are giving is actually going to an authorized recipient," he said.

Chief among the changes are improvements in "labeling" and digital "tagging" of diplomatic cables, Clapper said during remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

At the same time, he said, US officials are eager to ensure information that is intended to be shared can be disseminated without major additional hurdles.

Corin Stone, an assistant director of national intelligence for policy and strategy, said, "Basically, we seek to restore confidence."

The WikiLeaks scandal has "fundamentally broken trust" in the intelligence community, Stone said. "To restore confidence, we must strengthen security in sharing information."

# Gaddafi 'lives on in our hearts'

AFP, Bani Walid

Residents of the Libyan oasis town of Bani Walid, long a bastion of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, are resigned to the country's new leadership but say the slain dictator lives on in their hearts.

The town, which was one of the last towns to fall to the rebels last year and was the scene of new violence earlier this week, fared well during the Gaddafi era when it was a major recruitment ground for his regime's elite troops.

"Muammar is in our hearts. If someone here tells you otherwise, he is lying," said Salahuddin al-Werfelli, 19.

"A revolution, what revolution? The new authorities represent (French President Nicolas Sarkozy and some European countries, not Libyans," he said with clear contempt for the UN-mandated Western military support the rebels received during last year's uprising.

In public, residents insisted they were supporters of the "February 17 Revolution" that overthrew Gaddafi but in private they expressed nostalgia for his ousted regime.

"We are forced to adapt but 99 percent of Bani Walid's population still loves



Muammar," said Boubakar, a 24-year-old law student.

"Our house was given to my father by Muammar," said Boubakar, who lives near the former rebel militia base which was at the centre of Monday's fighting and which still bears the scars of the ferocious exchanges. Burnt-out cars and empty bullet cases lie all around.

The details of the clashes in the sprawling oasis, 170 kilometres southeast of Tripoli, which killed seven people and wounded 12, remain the subject of some dispute.

Residents said the fighting pitted the May 28 Brigade of former rebel fighters against a group of heavily armed residents who had come to the base to seek the release of a relative from custody.

There is widespread resentment in Bani Walid towards the former rebels whose roadblocks criss-cross the town. Members of the brigade are accused of thefts and arbitrary arrests as well as other abuses.

A resident, who did not give his name, complained: "They talk about freedom and democracy, but these are only words."

Gaddafi's legacy is too deep rooted in Bani Walid to fade out.

# Sick politics obstacle

FROM PAGE 20

programme marking the seventh death anniversary of slain finance minister Shah AMS Kibria. Muhith presided over the event.

Bangladesh Foundation for Development Research organised the programme at Poet Sufia Kamal auditorium in the National Museum.

About Kibria, Muhith said he (Kibria) was a rare person in all respect. The killers of Kibria are still at large. A fresh investigation into the killing has been launched and it is now moving to a new direction, he said.

Meanwhile, in his speech Prof Barkat placed a 12-point agenda, including a call for making the country's political, administrative and judicial culture pro-people.

On the agenda, the finance minister said, "These areas pose the toughest challenge. Our government

has been already working on all the points mentioned in the agenda."

He, however, admitted that the government made the least progress in making the political, administrative and judicial culture more pro-people.

According to Prof Barkat, around 9.89 crore people of the country's 15 crore population are poor.

"But in reality the number is much higher. In market economy when commodity prices shoot up and employment does not increase in same proportion, the real income reduces. That is why, the lower income group should also be considered as poor people."

"That makes 12.43 crore poor people in the country," he said, adding that around 83 percent people of the total population are poor, not 32 percent as per government

statistics.

He said around five crore people are poor in terms of food intake while about nine crore are illiterate and deprived of education facilities. Around nine lakh people die in the country each year and half of them are below the age of five. Almost 50 percent of the death is poverty induced.

According to Prof Barkat, it would take 200 to 300 years to eradicate poverty at national level judging by the directions given in the constitution and the progress made on the issue so far.

He said the poverty in this country is man made, not caused by earthquakes or any other catastrophe. "We have to create an environment where no human being will be born as poor and everyone will be equal," concluded Prof Barkat.

# Mass procession

FROM PAGE 1

Malibagh and Moghbazar areas.

Meanwhile, tension is prevailing centring the programme as the ruling Awami League will hold a rally at Bangabandhu Avenue in the city the same day.

BNP standing committee member Brig Gen (ret) ASM Hannan Shah said the government has to face dire consequences if it tries to obstruct tomorrow's peaceful programme.

Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, joint secretary general of the party, said, "The government alongside the ruling party is trying to obstruct our peaceful programme in different ways but they will not succeed by declaring counter programme."

He also said they sought permission for using loudspeakers but the DMP commissioner is yet to respond.

Earlier, party's acting secretary general Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir told reporters that they have sent letters to home minister, home secretary and DMP commissioner seeking necessary cooperation to successfully organise the programme.

BNP chairperson from a mammoth rally in Chittagong declared the mass procession programme and the Dhaka rally for March 12 to mount pressure on the government for the reinstatement of caretaker government system.

The system had been scrapped last year through the fifteenth amendment to the constitution but the BNP maintains that no election will be allowed in the country without a caretaker government.

Khaleda herself sat with the party's Dhaka district and City unit leaders while Fakhru held a meeting with like-minded parties to make the procession a success.

Leaders, workers and supporters from all units of the city, and Dhaka and the adjacent districts will join the procession.

# INDIAN PRESIDENT ON CORRUPTION

# 'Don't bring down the tree'

THE HINDU ONLINE

In what appears an indirect reference to the civil society movement for a strong Lokpal, President Pratibha Patil on Wednesday said one should be cautious while bringing about reforms so as to not bring down the tree of democratic institutions itself.

"While bringing about reforms and improving institutions, we have to be cautious that while shaking the tree to remove the bad fruit, we do not bring down the tree itself," she said in her address to the nation on the eve of the 63rd Republic Day.

Emphasising the need for resolving issues through dialogue, she said: "Concord and not



Pratibha Patil

discord is the way forward for a country as large as India. Negativity and rejection cannot be the path for a vibrant country that is moving to seek its destiny. I do hope that in the spirit of national interest, matters of national importance are discussed and solutions found between different stakeholders."

Greeting the nation and complimenting citizens on their contribution to nation-building, she said India could take pride in its democratic record but as did any functional democracy it faced pressures and challenges. "There would be short-term pressures, but in this process the long-term goals must not be lost sight of."



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