

Arabs halt Syria mission

Violence escalates; UN deadlocked on crisis

AFP, Damascus

The Arab League yesterday suspended its controversial observer mission in Syria, a day after the monitors' chief said killing had spiked this week, with the death toll approaching 200.

The announcement came as umbrella opposition group the Syrian National Council (SNC) said its leader would travel to New York to press the UN Security Council for protection from the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

SNC chief Burhan Ghaliun's trip comes amid a new bid by Arab and European states for UN action over the deadly 11-month crackdown on dissent, which has hit immediate opposition from staunch Syrian ally Russia.

It also comes as Arab Gulf States and Turkey called in Istanbul for global efforts to focus on bringing the bloodshed to an "immediate end" and paving the way for the initiation of a political transition in line with "legitimate demands of the people."

Arab League chief Nabil al-Arabi said



Saud Al Faisal Ahmet Davutoglu

"the decision to suspend the observer mission was taken after a series of consultations with Arab foreign ministers because of the upsurge of violence whose victims are innocent civilians."

According to a tally by AFP taken from reports by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and official Syrian media, 212 people, mostly civilians, have been killed since Tuesday.

He spoke after the Gulf Arab states and Turkey, which have led regional condemnation of Damascus, also called on Assad to accept an Arab League proposal for him to step down and turn over power to his deputy before forma-

tion of a unity government. Syria has categorically rejected the proposal.

"We hope Syria seriously evaluates the decisions of the Arab League, puts an end to repression against its people and start a reform process in line with the demands of the people," Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said.

Meanwhile, deadly clashes and an ambush on a bus transporting soldiers claimed at least 34 lives yesterday, according to activists and state media.

As the violence rages, wrangling continues over the wording of a draft UN Security Council resolution its supporters want put to the vote in the next week.

Russia made clear that the Arab and European draft formally submitted by Morocco on Friday crossed "our red lines."

Despite the mounting death toll, the Security Council has not adopted a single resolution on the crisis since the protests first erupted.

A previous European draft that would have threatened "targeted measures" against Assad's regime was vetoed by Beijing and Moscow in October.

US to set up floating commando base in ME

AFP, Washington

The US military plans to send a large floating base for commando teams to the Middle East amid rising tensions with Iran and intensifying fighting in Yemen, The Washington Post reported yesterday.

Citing unspecified procurement documents, the newspaper said the Navy is converting an aging warship it had planned to decommission into a makeshift staging base for the commandos in response to requests from the US Central Command.

Unofficially dubbed a "mothership," the floating base could accommodate smaller high-speed boats and helicopters commonly used by Navy SEALs, the report said.

Other Navy officials acknowledged that they were moving with unusual haste to complete the conversion and send the mothership to the region by early summer, said the report.

Navy documents indicate that it could be headed to the Persian Gulf, where Iran has threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz, The Post noted.

Meanwhile, The Wall Street Journal reported that the US military has concluded that its largest conventional bomb is not capable of destroying Iran's suspected most heavily fortified underground nuclear facilities.

But citing unnamed US officials, the newspaper said the military was stepping up efforts to make it more powerful.

The 13.6-ton "bunker-buster" bomb was specifically designed to take out the hardened fortifications built by Iran and North Korea. But initial tests indicated that the bomb, as currently configured, would not be capable of destroying some of Iran's facilities.

US military reaches further into Asia

NEWS ANALYSIS

AFP, Washington

The United States is forging ahead with plans to expand its military power in Asia, with the Philippines and other allies welcoming troops and the Pentagon devoting funds to design cutting-edge weapons.

Despite pressure to curb spending, President Barack Obama has made clear that he will put a top priority on maintaining the US military's dominant role in East Asia at a time when China is rapidly building its own armed forces.

After two days of talks, senior officials from the United States and the Philippines pledged Friday to enhance security cooperation. The former US colony is locked in increasingly acrimonious disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea.

In Manila, Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario said the Philippines was looking to doing more joint exercises with the United States as well as having a greater number of US troops rotate through the Southeast Asian country.

The offer comes two months after Obama, on a visit to Australia, announced that the United States would post up to 2,500 Marines in the northern city of Darwin by 2016-17.

The United States also plans to forward-deploy littoral combat ships in Singapore, a longtime US partner with a strategic position.

Such moves are in line with the strategy of US military planners, who want forces to be more agile and closer to potential trouble zones without the costs -- both financial and political -- of permanent bases.

Pentagon spokesman Captain John Kirby said: "We're going to rebalance our focus more to the Asia-Pacific, which is going to require a much more robust partnering

program than we've had in the past with many nations in that region."

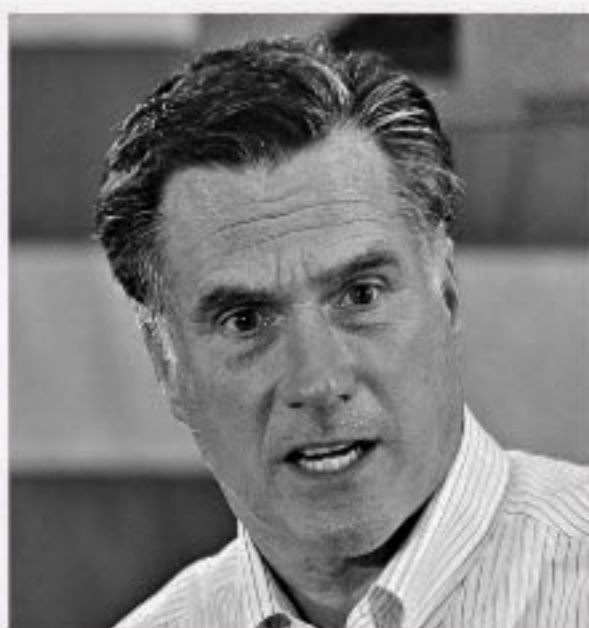
The Pentagon, under pressure to cut spending, unveiled a plan Thursday that would take some 100,000 troops off active duty, although the total would remain above the level before the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

China's territorial disputes with countries including Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam have grown rockier in recent years, with the Asian neighbors accusing Beijing of aggressive behavior.

US officials are careful in public not to describe China as a threat. They argue that Washington's hefty defense investment in post-World War II Asia has benefited China by allowing it to concentrate on domestic growth instead of external threats.

"The interest by Pacific Command and the interest from the United States is that this be a secure and stable and prosperous region of the world," Willard said.

However, four House Democrats --



Romney gains momentum in Florida

AFP, Cape Canaveral

Republican White House hopeful Mitt Romney stepped up his campaign in Florida yesterday after a new opinion poll showed he was gaining momentum in a race against archrival Newt Gingrich.

With only three days to go until the vital Florida primary, the two rivals barnstormed the huge battleground state which could prove a make-or-break stop in their battle for the Republican Party crown.

After a shock defeat by Gingrich in South Carolina last weekend and a slew of attacks, Romney's campaign got a fresh boost as he bids to be the party's nominee to take on Democratic President Barack Obama in the November elections.

A Quinnipiac University survey showed the former Massachusetts governor at 38-29 percent over former House of Representatives speaker Gingrich in Florida.

After a string of debates where he was criticised for lacking passion, Romney came out swinging, rounding on Gingrich for alleging he was against immigrants and dodged his taxes.

Immigration policy is high on the agenda in Florida, where the large Hispanic bloc forms a key constituency.

Romney already has a win in New Hampshire under his belt, and a victory in Florida on Tuesday could once again anoint him as the man to beat in the race.

Militia leader vows to retake Bani Walid

Torture claims cast doubts on NTC's authority

AGENCIES

A militia commander whose troops were driven out of the Libyan tribal stronghold of Bani Walid this week said on Friday that his forces were massing to recapture the town but were holding back at the government's request.

"It is our right to reenter Bani Walid and nobody can prevent us," Imbarak al-Futmani said in an interview with Reuters at his desert camp near Sadada, 50 km east of Bani Walid, a former Gaddafi stronghold.

Hundreds of fighters loyal to the interim government have surrounded the isolated town after hearing word that a pro-Gaddafi uprising had broken out.

On Monday, armed residents surrounded Futmani's brigade, who named themselves the "28th of May," after the date last year when Gaddafi loyalists executed a number of pro-democracy protesters in Bani Walid.

He is sceptical of any peaceful solution and saw more violence ahead.

"These pro-Gaddafis, they see us as rats,

like Gaddafi did," he said. "They are murderers and criminals, they will never intergrate into the new Libya because they know they will face justice now."

Sitting in his base, Futmani said the prime minister of Libya had asked him to hold off attacks to allow civilians to leave the town and, hopefully, for the assailants to surrender.

"The prime minister called me and asked me not to move and I accepted," he said.

Meanwhile, new evidence has emerged that supporters of the former Libyan leader, Col Gaddafi, have been tortured while in detention.

The BBC has been told by inmates at a jail in Misrata that they were beaten, whipped and given electric shocks.

International human rights groups have said such incidents are widespread in Libya.

The people running the Misrata detention centre told the BBC they were aware of inmates being taken away to be tortured, but were powerless to stop it.

Many detention centres are controlled by militias unaccountable to the government.



An activist from Ukrainian feminist group Femen shouts slogans during a protest yesterday against the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting in the Swiss resort of Davos. Three feminists braved the subzero chill going topless to protest against the World Economic Forum "gangsters" accusing them of inaction over fighting inequalities.

France to withdraw from Afghanistan early: Sarkozy

AFP, Paris

President Nicolas Sarkozy yesterday said that France would pull its forces out of Afghanistan a year earlier than planned, a week after the killing of four French servicemen by a renegade Afghan soldier.

After meeting Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Paris, Sarkozy said France had decided to transfer security in the eastern Kapisa province, where most of the 3,600-strong French contingent is based and the scene of the shooting, to Afghan forces from March of this year.

"The pursuit of the transition and this gradual transfer of combat responsibilities will allow us to plan for a return of all our combat forces by the end of 2013," Sarkozy said, adding that 1,000 troops would return in 2012.

This decision was made "in agreement with president Karzai and in agreement with our allies, in an organised and reasonable way," he said.

"A few hundred" French troops would stay on after 2013 to train Afghan troops, Sarkozy said.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the French announcement was part of the "managed effort" to withdraw from Afghanistan.

Karzai is on a five-day European trip to sign long-term strategic partnership agreements aimed at bolstering support for Afghanistan's reconstruction and development.

He was next to travel to London to meet Prime Minister David Cameron. Most French -- 84 percent of them -- want their troops back home by the end of 2012, according to an opinion poll published this week.

Dutch govt approves burqa ban

IANS, The Hague

The Dutch government Friday approved a ban on face-covering clothing, such as a burqa, a niqab, a forage cap, or a full face helmet, reported Xinhua.

People going on the streets with one of these now risk being fined for up to 380 euros (\$499).

The burqa ban was already part of the government coalition agreement. In September 2011, the proposal was sent for advice to the council of state, which issued a negative opinion.

However, the cabinet neglected the advice.

In April last year, France introduced a burqa ban and became the first European country to ban people from concealing their faces in public in many manner.

Pakistan knew of Laden hideout: Panetta

Admits a Pak doctor's help in locating the top terrorist

AGENCIES

US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta believes someone in authority in Pakistan knew where Osama bin Laden was hiding before US forces went in to find him, he said in a TV interview to air today.

Intelligence reports found Pakistani military helicopters had passed over the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan where US Navy SEALs discovered and killed bin Laden last year, according to excerpts of an interview Panetta gave to CBS News.

"I personally have always felt that somebody must have had some sense of what was happening at this compound. Don't forget, this compound had 18-foot walls... It was the largest compound in the area.

The Pentagon chief said that concern played a significant factor in



Washington not warning Pakistan officials of the impending raid: "it concerned us that, if we, in fact, brought (Pakistan) into it, that -- they might... give bin Laden a heads up," he said.

Panetta acknowledged he did not have "hard evidence" Pakistan knew of the Al Qaeda leader's whereabouts.

Panetta also acknowledged publicly for the first time that a Pakistani doctor provided key information to the US in

advance of the successful Navy SEAL assault on Osama bin Laden's compound.

Panetta told CBS's 60 Minutes that Shakil Afridi helped provide intelligence for the raid on bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

Afridi ran a vaccination program for the CIA to collect DNA and verify bin Laden's presence in the compound. He has since been charged by Pakistan with treason. Panetta said he is "very concerned" for the doctor.

The Pakistani government had hoped to resolve the Afridi matter quietly, once media attention died down, perhaps releasing him to US custody, according to two Pakistani officials. They requested anonymity because the investigation into charges the doctor behaved treasonously was ongoing.

NEWS IN brief

IAEA team heads to Iran

REUTERS, Vienna

Senior United Nations nuclear inspectors headed to Tehran yesterday to press Iranian officials to address suspicions that the Islamic state is seeking atomic weapons.

The UN International Atomic Energy Agency hopes Iran, which has indicated readiness to discuss the issue for the first time since 2008, will end years of stonewalling on intelligence pointing to an intention to develop nuclear arms technology.

The outcome of the visit could determine whether Iran will face further international isolation, or whether there are prospects for resuming wider talks between Tehran and the major powers on the nuclear dispute that has sparked fears of war.

Occupy DC gets Monday ultimatum

AFP, Washington

The Washington offshoot of Occupy Wall Street has been given until noon on Monday to remove camping equipment or risk eviction from a park near the White House, park authorities said.

The National Park Service (NPS) issued notices Friday stating it would "commence enforcement" of regulations prohibiting camping and "temporary structures," at McPherson Square, where protesters have lived since October.

An NPS spokesman denied that the enforcement amounted to an eviction, but admitted that "we could" remove protesters from the site, which has doubled up as a temporary home and headquarters for the movement.

Thousands rally to back Putin

AFP, Moscow

Around 15,000 people yesterday thronged a city in the Russian Urals in rally organised by labour groups to show mass working class support for Vladimir Putin's bid for a new Kremlin term, police said.

The rally in Yekaterinburg appeared to be a move by the authorities and trade unions to show Putin retains broad workers' support after the mass protests against his rule mainly attended by the Moscow middle class.

The demonstrators held up pro-Putin banners including "Russia needs a strong president" and "We support a stable future", television pictures showed.

Regional police spokesman Valery Gorelykh told the Interfax news agency that the "meeting had proceeded calmly without any violations of the public order" and attracted some 15,000 people.