

# West clashes with Russia over Syria

Death mounts as revolt turning into insurgency

AFP, Damascus

Fresh bloodshed swept Syria yesterday after Western powers and the Arab League demanded immediate UN action to stop the regime's "killing machine" but holdout Russia said any vote needed more time.

Wrangling at the United Nations came as fierce clashes raged across Syria's powder keg regions between President Bashar al-Assad's security forces and rebel fighters of the Free Syrian Army.

At least eight civilians and 15 soldiers were killed during fierce fighting in the central Syrian city of Homs, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Activists said the unrest had killed nearly 200 people nationwide over the previous three days.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, backed by her French and British counterparts and Qatar's premier, led the charge on Tuesday for a tough UN resolution that would call on Assad to end the bloodshed and hand over power.

"We all know that change is coming to Syria. Despite its ruthless tactics, the Assad

regime's reign of terror will end," Clinton told the UN Security Council.

But yesterday, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov appeared to snuff out any hopes of an early vote.

"Attempts are being made to find a text that is acceptable to all sides and would help find a political solution for the situation in Syria. Therefore there is going to be no vote in the next days," he told Interfax news agency.

Russia, a longstanding ally of Assad and one of the regime's top suppliers of weapons, declared that the UN body did not have the authority to impose such a resolution. China voiced support for Russia's position.

Analysts warn that the conflict, between a guerrilla movement backed by growing numbers of army deserters and a regime increasingly bent on repression, has largely eclipsed the peaceful protests seen at the start of the uprising.

"It is the beginning of an all-out armed conflict," said Joshua Landis, head of the Centre for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma.



A woman walks under the snowfall in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi, with a statue of the Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin in the background. Severe cold gripped a large part of Europe since last week.

PHOTO: AFP

## Deadly cold snap kills 80 in Europe

AFP, Warsaw

Europe yesterday shivered in some of the coldest temperatures seen in decades as the death toll topped 80 and countries battled to clear snow from roads and railways.

At least 28 people froze to death overnight in eastern and central Europe, while countries further west and south began to feel the effects of a cold front spreading from Siberia.

In Ukraine, officials said 13 people had died of hypothermia over the past 24 hours, bringing the overall toll there to 43 over the past six days.

Most were homeless people who froze to death on the streets, but seven died in their homes and more than 800 sought medical help for frostbite and hypothermia as temperatures plunged to minus 30 degrees Celsius in some regions.

Deaths have been reported in Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and other parts of the continent.

## Romney wins big in Florida

Tells Obama to 'get out of the way'

AFP, Florida

Mitt Romney marched ahead with a commanding lead in the US Republican race for the White House after trouncing his main rival Newt Gingrich in a bitterly-fought Florida primary yesterday.

The margin of victory -- 46 percent to 32 percent -- dealt a bitter blow to former House speaker Gingrich, who faces a Herculean task to try to catch up with Romney, a multimillionaire businessman and former Massachusetts governor.

Gingrich, 68, shocked the party establishment when he thumped Romney, 64, in South Carolina earlier this month, but his support sank fast in the larger and more diverse state of Florida, and Romney now has all the momentum.

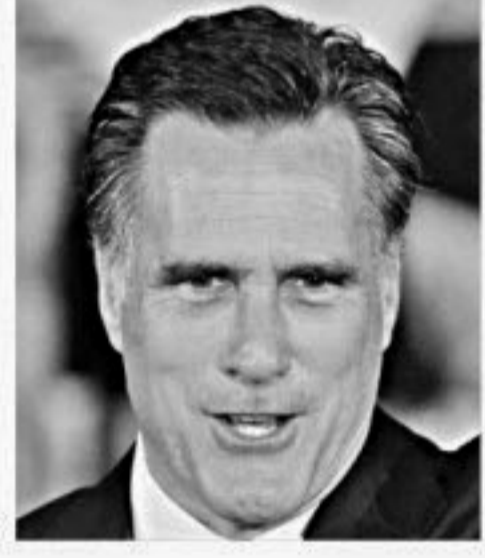
Romney's double-digit win in the Sunshine State demonstrated his strength in a key general election battleground, and he used his victory speech to urge Americans to evict

President Barack Obama from the White House in November.

"Mr. President, you were elected to lead. You chose to follow, and now it's time for you to get out of the way," he said, to chants of "Mitt! Mitt! Mitt!" from hundreds of supporters in a packed Tampa ballroom.

"President Obama wants to fundamentally transform America and make it something perhaps we wouldn't recognise. I want to restore to America the values and principles that made us the hope of the Earth," Romney said.

It was a warning shot at Democrats who have been salivating over the increasingly caustic tone of the Republican campaign -- marked in Florida by a heavy exchange of increas-



ingly personal attacks between Romney and Gingrich.

"A competitive primary does not divide us, it prepares us and we will win," Romney said.

But in a sign of how bitter the campaign has become, Gingrich broke with tradition by neither congratulating Romney nor calling him after the vote.

The economy seemed to be on the minds of many voters in Florida, including businessman Paul Jackson, who said he voted for Romney because "he has the best chance of beating the president -- the current president."

Despite the stinging defeat, Gingrich promised to wage a long-haul battle all the way to the August 27-30 convention, which will formally crown a nominee to go head-to-head against Obama on November 6.

"This will be a two-person race between the conservative leader, Newt Gingrich, and the Massachusetts moderate," he told supporters in Orlando, referring to Romney.

## Four Britons admit London bomb plot

AFP, London

Four British Islamists inspired by a former al-Qaeda leader admitted in court yesterday to plotting to blow up the London Stock Exchange in 2010.

The men belonged to a group of fundamentalists who plotted a spate of mail bomb attacks during the run-up to Christmas that year and discussed launching a "Mumbai-style" atrocity, Woolwich Crown Court in London heard.

Mohammed Chowdhury, 21, and Shah Rahman, 28, admitted preparing for acts of terrorism at London Stock Exchange.

Brothers Gurukanth Desai, 30, and Abdul Miah, 25, both from Cardiff in Wales, admitted the same count.

## US sees diplomatic solution in Iran

UN positive after nuke talks

AFP, Washington

Sanctions and diplomacy may yet persuade Iran to give up its nuclear program, as its leaders have shown a rational "cost-benefit approach" in their calculations, senior US officials said.

Meanwhile, the chief UN nuclear inspector returned from a visit to Tehran on Wednesday saying there was still "a lot of work" to do, with Iran's foreign minister saying the team did not visit any atomic sites.

"We had three days of intensive discussions about all our priorities. We are committed to resolving all the outstanding issues and the Iranians said they are committed too," Herman Nackaerts told reporters at Vienna airport.

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi told the Fars news agency that the talks were "good" and it was agreed to continue them in the future.

The top US intelligence officials suggested that military conflict with Iran was not inevitable, despite soaring tensions with Tehran and a war of nerves over the strategic Strait of Hormuz, a key oil trade choke point.

"We judge Iran's nuclear decision-making is guided by a cost-benefit approach, which offers the international community opportunities to influence Tehran," Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

"Iranian leaders undoubtedly consider Iran's security, prestige, and influence, as well as the international political and security environment, when making decisions about its nuclear program," he said.

The comments by senior intelligence official echoed President Barack Obama's assessment in his State of the Union address last week, when he said "a peaceful resolution" remains possible with Iran.

## NEWS IN brief

### Iraq to host Arab summit

AFP, Baghdad

The Iraqi capital is to host the next regular Arab summit on March 29, the Arab League assistant secretary general, Ahmed ben Hilli, announced yesterday in Baghdad.

"We've agreed on all the logistical and security arrangements. Arab economy ministers will meet on March 27, foreign ministers on the 28th and heads of state on March 29," he said at a press conference with Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari.

The summit was originally due to be held last March 29 in the Iraqi capital but was delayed due to the turbulence of the Arab Spring that last year swept away long-term rulers of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

### Assange takes case to UK top court

AFP, London

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange took his 13-month fight against extradition to Sweden to England's highest court yesterday.

Seven judges are hearing the 40-year-old Australian's appeal over two days at the Supreme Court and are not expected to return their judgment for several weeks.

Assange, who has been living on bail under virtual house arrest while awaiting the outcome of his case, denies the rape allegations made by two women in Sweden, and insists the sex was consensual.

If the court rejects his appeal, the former computer hacker will have exhausted all his options in Britain but he could still make a last-ditch appeal to the European Court of Human Rights, prosecutors have said.

### Aisha Gaddafi offers deal for saif

AFP, The Hague

Aisha Gaddafi wants to provide "concrete" information to protect the interests of her brother Saif al-Islam, who is wanted for crimes against humanity, the International Criminal Court said on Tuesday.

Gaddafi's lawyer Nick Kaufman delivered the request to the ICC, which immediately made it public.

Muammar Gaddafi's daughter underscored in the appeal that she wanted to "protect the interests of her brother."

Saif, 39, who was arrested on November 19, is in the custody of the military council of Zintan, a town 180 kilometres southwest of Tripoli.

The ICC denied on Monday that it had agreed that Gaddafi's most prominent son can be tried in Libya, saying it had not come to a decision.

## Britain sends new warship to Falklands

AFP, London

Britain said Tuesday it was sending a new state-of-the-art warship to the Falklands, but insisted the deployment was purely routine despite rising tensions over the islands' sovereignty.

Defence ministry officials said the decision to send HMS Dauntless to the South Atlantic Ocean was long planned.

The Type 45 destroyer is due to head out on her maiden voyage in the coming months to replace the smaller Type 23 frigate HMS Montrose.

The Falklands dispute is especially sensitive as the 30th anniversary approaches of the war between Britain and Argentina over the barren islands.

Buenos Aires denounced what it called a "militarisation" of the dispute.

Prime Minister David Cameron angered Argentina last week by accusing it of "colonialism" over the British overseas territory which Buenos Aires claims belongs to Argentina.

That led Argentine President Cristina Kirchner to accuse Cameron of portraying her country as "violent" in the dispute.

Argentina's then-ruling junta launched an invasion on April 2, 1982. Britain restored its control following a 74-day war which cost the lives of 649 Argentine and 255 British troops.

Tensions over the 30th anniversary have been raised by the announcement that Prince William, Queen Elizabeth II's grandson and the second in line to throne, will soon spend six weeks on a routine deployment to the Falklands as an air force search and rescue helicopter pilot.



PHOTO: AFP

In this handout photograph released by the Presidential Palace, Afghan President Hamid Karzai talks with Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar during a meeting at the Presidential Palace in Kabul yesterday.

## Pakistan helping Afghan Taliban

Says a Nato report; Pak foreign minister denies

BBC ONLINE

The Taliban in Afghanistan are being directly assisted by Pakistani security services, according to a secret Nato report seen by the BBC.

The leaked report, derived from thousands of interrogations, claims the Taliban remain defiant and have wide support among the Afghan people.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar says her country has no hidden agenda in Afghanistan, in response to the leaked secret report.

Speaking at a news conference in Kabul with her Afghan counterpart yesterday, Khar said allegations in the report were "old wine in new bottles".

The report -- on the state of the Taliban -- fully exposes for the first time the relationship between the ISI (Pakistan's intelligence service) and the Taliban, BBC's Quentin Sommerville says.

It is based on material from 27,000 interrogations with more than 4,000 captured Taliban, al-Qaeda and other foreign fighters and civilians.

It notes: "Pakistan's manipulation of the Taliban senior leadership continues unabatedly". The report says that Pakistan is aware of the locations of senior Taliban leaders.

Refuting the report, Pakistan's foreign minister said "We can disregard this as a potentially strategic leak."

The two countries should stop blaming each other for cross-border problems, she added.

"Senior Taliban representatives, such as Nasiruddin Haqqani, maintain residences in the immediate vicinity of ISI headquarters in Islamabad," the report said.

"We have long been concerned about ties between elements of the ISI and some extremist networks," said US Pentagon spokesman Captain John Kirby, adding that the US Defence Department had not yet seen the report.

Adm Mike Mullen, former chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, has explained Pakistan's closeness to the Afghan Taliban by pointing to infiltration of its army by the religious right, but he also says it is part of a grand

strategy to increase leverage in the region via "proxies".

Despite Nato's strategy to secure the country with Afghan forces, the secret document details widespread collaboration between the insurgents and Afghan police and military.

Lt Col Jimmie Cummings, a spokesman for Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) in Afghanistan, said the document was "a classified internal document that is not meant to be released to the public".

"It is a matter of policy that documents that are classified are not discussed under any circumstances," he said.

The report also depicts the depth of continuing support among the Afghan population for the Taliban, our correspondent says.

It paints a picture of al-Qaeda's influence diminishing but the Taliban's influence increasing, he adds.

In a damning conclusion, the document says that in the last year there has been unprecedented interest, even from members of the Afghan government, in joining the Taliban cause.

## Facebook poised for \$5-10b IPO

AFP, New York

Eight years after its launch, social networking giant Facebook is poised to file papers for an initial public offering seeking to raise at least \$5 billion.

The prospectus for an IPO could be filed with the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) as early as Wednesday (US standard time) morning, according to US media reports, although they stressed there was still a possibility it could be delayed.

The Wall Street Journal broke the news of Facebook's impending IPO last week, saying the Palo Alto, California-based company planned to raise \$10 billion at a valuation of between \$75 billion and \$100 billion.

The \$10 billion target had been halved to a more conservative \$5 billion in reports emerging late Tuesday in The New York Times and International Financing Review.

The publications stressed, however, that \$5 billion was only a preliminary fund-raising target and could always be raised after gauging investor interest.

The initial IPO filing was not expected to specify how many shares were being offered or their list price.

Facebook shares are not expected to begin trading until at least May, once the IPO process is finalised.

With a deal size of \$10 billion, Facebook would slip into sixth place on the list of largest US IPOs between AT&T Wireless Group (\$10.62 billion) and Kraft Foods (\$8.68 billion), according to Renaissance Capital.