

Syrian embassies in Europe, ME stormed

AFP, London

Dozens of Syrian protesters were arrested yesterday after storming their country's embassies in cities in Europe and the Middle East, smashing windows and setting fire in one case.

Missions in London, Athens, Cairo, Kuwait City and Jeddah were targeted in protests yesterday, following a similar raid on the regime's embassy in Berlin the previous day.

The attacks came as Syria's opposition said troops had committed a "massacre" overnight, killing more than 200 people in the central city of Homs, and as the UN Security Council readied for a crucial vote.

Demonstrators smashed windows and tried to break into the Syrian embassy in London, hours after six protesters were arrested for entering the building overnight.

Scuffles broke out between riot police and around 200 protesters outside the plush property in London's Belgrave Square, which is home to a string of embassies.

A Scotland Yard spokesman said five people had been arrested for gaining access to the building after the demonstration started around 2:00 am. A sixth person was arrested for assaulting an officer.

In Athens, about 50 mostly Syrian protes-

tors broke into their country's embassy, smashing windows and painting anti-government slogans on the walls, a police source said. Police detained 12 Syrians and an Iraqi.

In Cairo, dozens of activists tore down the gate to the embassy in the upscale Garden City neighbourhood, ransacked the mission and set fire to its ground floor.

An AFP correspondent said the embassy's walls were charred and broken glass littered the ground, along with damaged furniture and computers.

In Kuwait City, hundreds of angry Syrians and local activists stormed the embassy, removing the flag and destroying utilities, the interior ministry said, adding that some 40 people were arrested.

In Jeddah, dozens of Syrians demonstrated outside the consulate, chanting "with our souls, with our blood, we sacrifice ourselves for the martyrs," before being dispersed by security forces.

A day earlier in Berlin around 20 protesters broke into the Syrian embassy and "destroyed furniture, hung a flag from a window" and wrote slogans on the walls. All were arrested but released after police took their details.



A protestor holds a sign during a demonstration against the Bashar al-Assad regime's crackdown on pro-democracy protests, outside the Syrian embassy in central London yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Egypt clashes enter third day

AFP, Cairo

Police fired tear gas and birdshot at protesters yesterday in the third day of deadly clashes in Cairo, as anger at the ruling military boiled over after 74 people died in football-related violence.

The police responded after dozens of protesters threw stones at officers guarding the interior ministry headquarters hundreds of metres (yards) from the Egyptian capital's iconic Tahrir Square.

In the canal city of Suez, two people died in clashes overnight from birdshot wounds, medics said. Hospital officials said nine people have been killed in Cairo and Suez since the start of the violence.

Five people were also wounded in overnight clashes outside police headquarters in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria, state media reported.

Mullah Omar sent letter to Obama to end war

Taliban denies report

AGENCIES

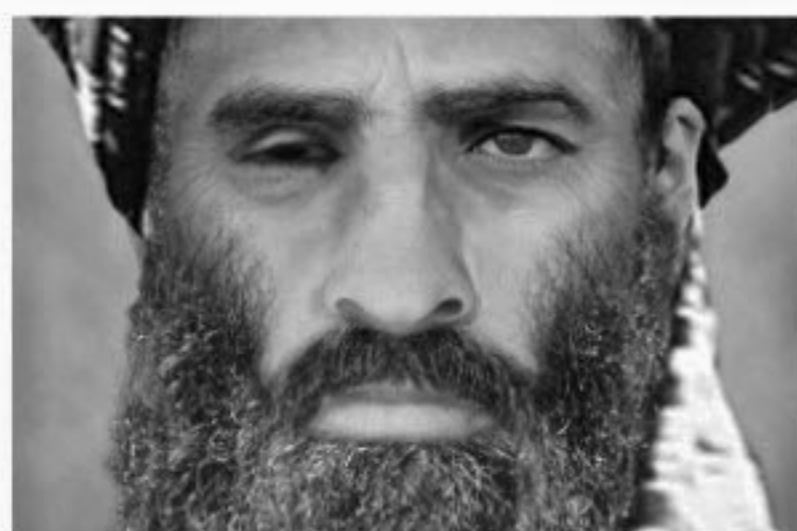
Reclusive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar wrote to President Barack Obama last year indicating an interest in talks key to ending the war in Afghanistan, current and former US officials told The Associated Press.

However, the Afghan Taliban yesterday denied the report.

"Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan rejects this baseless rumour with the strongest of words," a statement on the Islamist group's website said, using the name by which the Taliban often calls itself.

Omar is the spiritual leader of the Taliban movement, and directs the organisation's guerrilla military campaign. He was the de facto head of state in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan prior to the US invasion that toppled the Taliban government in 2001.

The letter, intended for President



Barack Obama, reportedly complained that the United States had not done enough to establish good faith for negotiations, such as arranging the release of Taliban prisoners held in the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The White House itself was "skeptical" the letter was actually from Mullah Omar, the official said, though others within the administration believed it was authentic.

Preliminary, clandestine meetings between US and Taliban representa-

tives began last year, after the Obama administration shifted course and decided to explore peace talks while fighting was still fierce.

The message arrived when those early contacts had gone all but dormant, however, because of leaks to the press that sent the chief Taliban emissary briefly underground.

Those preliminary sessions opened the way for more formal talks that the US officials now publicly welcome. The Obama administration is now considering release of five top Taliban leaders from Guantanamo as a starting point for negotiations.

The five would be sent to custody in the Gulf nation of Qatar, where the Taliban plan to establish an office.

The Taliban last month said it would open a political office in Qatar, suggesting the group may be willing to engage in negotiations.

Pak PM to discuss Afghan peace in Qatar

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani will discuss peace efforts for war-torn Afghanistan with Qatar's leadership during an official visit next week, an official said yesterday.

"Yes the reconciliation process in Afghanistan would come under discussion during the talks with Qatar's leadership," a senior Pakistan government official told AFP.

Pakistan's foreign ministry was not immediately available for comment.

The Taliban, ousted from power by a US-led invasion in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, announced last month they planned to set up a political office in Qatar ahead of possible talks with the United States.

UN team heads to Maldives to defuse crisis

AFP, Colombo

The United Nations is sending a delegation to the Maldives for talks after the government asked for international help to end a crippling stand off with the judiciary, the UN said yesterday.

The UN Department of Political Affairs, headed by Assistant Secretary-General Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, will arrive Thursday in the Maldives, a tiny archipelago in the Indian Ocean, a UN official said in a release.

Anti-government activists have been protesting against President Mohamed Nasheed, who ordered the arrest last month of the head of the country's criminal court on charges of misconduct and favouring opposition figures.

Criminal Court Chief Justice Abdulla Mohamed's arrest triggered a wave of street protests and clashes with police in the crowded capital, Male, on an almost daily basis for the past two weeks.

The island's Supreme Court and prosecutor general have called for Mohamed's release, but he remains in military custody.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's

spokesman Martin Nesirky said in the statement the mission will look at ways to help support Maldives in its transition to democracy.

"The mission will meet with government officials, opposition leaders and civil society representatives to both discuss the current situation and identify opportunities to support the democratic transition," Nesirky said.

Nasheed, a former political prisoner, was elected in 2008 when the Maldives staged its first democratic presidential election, unseating the long-serving autocratic regime of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

But there have been a long-running string of demonstrations in the country spearheaded by Gayoom's opposition Dhivehi Raiyyithunge Party, calling on Nasheed to resign.

Last month, Foreign Minister Ahmed Naseem wrote to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Commonwealth asking them to "urgently dispatch" a team of jurists to resolve the crisis.

Naseem said the judicial impasse represented "a systemic failure."

US changing visa rules to attract the highly-skilled

IANS, Washington

To make America more attractive to highly-skilled foreign students and workers, the United States has announced a series of reforms, including changes in the F-1 and H-1B visa rules, that may benefit professionals from India.

The interim measures are aimed at improving the competitiveness of US companies in the world market and stimulating US job creation before comprehensive immigration reforms for "fixing our broken immigration system," the Department of Homeland Security announced.

The proposed changes include providing work authorisation for spouses of certain H-1B holders and allowing outstanding professors and researchers to present a broader scope of evidence of academic achievement.

Also proposed is expanding eligibility for 17-month extension of optional practical training (OPT) for F-1 international students to include students with a prior degree in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

The changes would also allow for additional part-time study for spouses of F-1 students and expand the number of Designated School Officials at schools certified by DHS to enrol international students.

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services will launch Feb 22 its Entrepreneurs in Residence initiative with an Information Summit in Silicon Valley, California to discuss how to maximize current immigration laws' potential to attract foreign entrepreneurial talent.

India court rejects home minister prosecution bid

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court yesterday threw out a petition to prosecute the country's powerful home minister in a massive corruption scandal over the alleged mis-selling of mobile telephonic licences.

The plea "to summon Chidambaram as an accused is dismissed," Special Judge OP Saini told the courtroom in a brief statement.

The ruling came as a huge relief to the Congress-led coalition government, whose reputation has been battered by the telecom scandal, alleged to have cost the treasury up to \$39 billion, and a string of other graft cases.

Regional party leader Subramanian Swamy, who brought the case against Chidambaram, had alleged the politician could have intervened to avert the telecom scandal which occurred in 2008 when he was finance minister.

The decision came days after India's



Chidambaram

and vowed to appeal against the ruling.

The maverick politician, who was stripped of his teaching duties last December by Harvard University for calling for destruction of mosques, called his fight to make Chidambaram a co-accused in the telecom case a "battle royal."

Swamy has enjoyed strong support for his case against Chidambaram from the main opposition Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

The former minister in charge of the mobile licence sale, A. Raja, is currently on trial accused of fraud and cheating.

Supreme Court scrapped 122 telecom licences awarded in the 2008 cut-price first-come, first-served sale, causing upheaval in the flagship sector.

Swamy, who has been a persistent thorn in the side of the Congress government, told reporters he was "surprised" at the judge's decision to appeal against the ruling.

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Police evicts Occupy DC, 2 held

AFP, Washington

Police in riot gear arrested at least two protesters yesterday after descending en masse at dawn on the Occupy DC encampment in downtown Washington to enforce a camping ban.

Two protesters were seen by AFP reporters being taken by police officers from the foot of an equestrian statue in McPherson Square after refusing a police order to leave.

Members of Occupy DC's legal team said two others had also been arrested.

About 50 riot police officers, some of them on horseback, and with a helicopter overhead, surrounded McPherson Square in the pre-dawn hours, but refrained from immediate action.

Russians stage rival protests over Putin

REUTERS, Moscow

Tens of thousands of Russians defied bitter cold in Moscow yesterday to demand fair elections in a march against Vladimir Putin's 12-year rule, and thousands of others staged a rally supporting the prime minister.

Opposition protesters also organized smaller protests in other cities across the vast country, one month before the March 4 presidential election which Putin is expected to win.

Putin was president from 2000 until 2008, when he ushered Dmitry Medvedev into the Kremlin because of a constitutional ban on three successive terms as head of state. Putin became prime minister but remained the dominant leader.

Temperatures far below freezing tested the power and perseverance of a street protest movement fuelled by suspicions of fraud in a December parliamentary election and dismay among some Russians over Putin's plan to rule at least six more years.

Opposition leaders said up to 100,000 people had joined their protest in Moscow, which appeared as large as the last December rally.

Police said up to 90,000 people were at the pro-Putin rally a few miles away in Moscow, but attendance at demonstrations in support of the former KGB spy has previously been swelled by the authorities ferrying in sympathisers by bus.



Manning to face court martial

GUARDIAN ONLINE

A US army officer has ordered a court martial for Bradley Manning, the soldier charged in the biggest leak of classified information in American history.

Military district of Washington commander Major General Michael Linnington referred all charges against Manning to a general court martial on Friday, the army said in a statement.

The referral means Manning, 24, will stand trial for allegedly giving more than 700,000 secret US documents and a classified combat video to WikiLeaks for publication. He faces 22 counts, including aiding the enemy, and could be imprisoned for life if convicted of that charge.

A judge yet to be appointed will set the trial date.

At a preliminary hearing in December, military prosecutors produced evidence that Manning downloaded and electronically transferred to WikiLeaks nearly half a million sensitive battlefield reports from Iraq and Afghanistan, hundreds of thousands of diplomatic cables.

In the December hearing at Fort Meade, Maryland, prosecutors also presented excerpts of online chats found on Manning's personal computer that allegedly documented collaboration between him and the founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange.

World facing 'perfect storm' of crisis

AFP, Munich

The head of environmental pressure group Greenpeace warned Friday the world faced a "perfect storm" of crises and was heading for what he termed a crisis of "epic proportions."

Speaking for the first time at the Munich Security Conference, Kumi Naidoo presented an apocalyptic version of the state of the world and accused leaders of "sleepwalking" into disaster.

"The moment of history we are in can be described as a boiling point or a perfect storm," he told the assembled gathering of world leaders, ministers, top brass and defence policy experts at the annual Munich gathering.

"We are seeing a convergence of multiple crises happening at the same time. A food crisis, climate crisis, poverty crisis ... and then of course the financial crisis and a demographic crisis and a global governance democratic crisis," he added.

"The bottom line is that too many of our leaders ... are sleepwalking us into a crisis of epic proportion," he claimed.

Greenpeace was invited for the first time to the conference, which has this year as its star turn US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and focuses on the rise of Asia and the impact on the transatlantic alliance.



A woman stands in a street covered with snow in Rome yesterday. Hundreds of people were plucked to safety after a ferry caught in a snow storm ran aground off Italy, as a vicious cold snap that has claimed over 250 lives across Europe refused to ease its clench. PHOTO: AFP