

Syria faces growing isolation

Nations recall ambassadors; Russia stands firm behind regime

AFP, Brussels

The European Union stepped up pressure on Syria yesterday as several nations recalled their ambassadors from Damascus and the bloc considered new sanctions to cut the regime's access to cash.

Meanwhile, visiting Russia's foreign minister yesterday said after talks in Damascus that President Bashar al-Assad was "fully committed" to ending the bloodshed in Syria even as regime tanks pounded the city of Homs for a fourth straight day.

Sergei Lavrov said he had had a "very useful" meeting with Assad and that Moscow was eager to work towards a solution based on the peace proposals of the Arab League.

Lavrov said Syria was pressing ahead with the reform programme Assad promised in a series of speeches last year and would soon announce the timetable for a referendum on a new constitution to replace the current one which enshrines the dominant role of his Baath party.



Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with Syrian President Assad yesterday in Damascus

France, Italy, and Spain announced they were bringing back their envoys for consultations, after Britain, Belgium and the United States took similar steps in protest at the regime's relentless crackdown on protesters.

Gulf states announced they would also withdraw their envoys, while Turkish Prime Minister Recep

Tayyip Erdogan said Ankara will launch a new initiative "with those countries who stand by the Syrian people, not the regime".

The 27-member EU began discussing new measures against Syria's central bank and a ban on gold and gems after China and Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution backing the League plan

aimed at ending the violence.

Another diplomat said the sanctions could target Syrian central bank transactions as well as a ban on the sale of gold and other precious metals -- similar to measures taken against Iran last month.

A spokesman said the EU continues to support Arab League efforts to end the 11-month-old crackdown, which rights groups say have claimed the lives of about 6,000 people.

Meanwhile, at least 21 civilians and four soldiers were killed yesterday in violence across Syria, the majority of them in the flashpoint central city of Homs, activists said.

"At least nine civilians, including a woman, were killed by gunfire and shelling as (troops) attempt an assault on the Khaldiyyeh neighbourhood of the city," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said in a statement.

The Britain-based group said four Syrian troops were killed in the assault on Khaldiyyeh, while six other civilians were killed in shelling of the Baba Amr neighborhood.

RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

Santorum challenges Romney obama eyes second term

AFP, Golden

Republican White House hopefuls vying in three presidential votes were unlikely yesterday to knock Mitt Romney off his front-runner perch, despite a surge from conservative rival Rick Santorum.

Caucuses were being held in Colorado and Minnesota, with a third contest in Missouri, as the candidates eye a long slog through February, in the battle to be crowned the Republican Party's 2012 presidential nominee.

Polls suggest Romney should triumph easily in western Colorado although there is a tighter race in Minnesota, where last-placed Santorum is hoping to snatch a win.

Polls out Monday showed Romney winning by 37 percent in Colorado, with Santorum in second with 27 percent.

In the heartland state of Minnesota however, the two men's fortunes are reversed with Santorum, a Catholic former Pennsylvania senator, holding an unexpected lead of 33 percent to 24 percent for Romney.



Santorum, who has seen his campaign flag after triumphing in the first vote in Iowa is hoping to carry Minnesota with the help of its large base of evangelical Christian and ultraconservative Tea Party voters.

Missouri's vote, meanwhile, is being dubbed a "beauty contest" as the state will only award its delegates after a March 17 caucus.

Boosted by rising US jobs figures, president Barack Obama's approval rating has hit the magical 50% mark and he has opened up a double-digit lead over his likely Republican opponent in November, a poll showed on Monday.

The poll by the Washington Post and ABC television found Obama reaching the 50% barrier - seen as a critical threshold for an incumbent seeking reelection - for the first time since Osama bin Laden was killed.



Mohamed Nasheed Dissident to president

AFP, Male

Mohamed Nasheed, the first democratically elected leader of the Maldives, was a former political prisoner who rose from grassroots activism and journalism.

Nasheed, 44, who was educated in Sri Lanka and Britain, came to power after building a pro-democracy movement with local and foreign support in opposition to the 30-year autocratic rule of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

Gayoom, Asia's longest-serving leader, ruled the holiday paradise unchallenged for three decades between 1978 and 2008 and repeatedly threw Nasheed in jail over a period of six years.

Nasheed recounted once in a television interview that he spent 18 months in solitary confinement as his jailors tried to get him to confess to seeking to "overthrow" the state.

The media-savvy father of two daughters and holder of a degree in maritime engineering was at one point an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience.

He formed his Maldivian Democratic Party in exile but then returned home to a hero's welcome, sweeping 54 percent of the vote in the 2008 elections whose results brought people into the streets dancing and cheering.

Nasheed said after the election that he had "forgiven my jailors, the torturers" and that he wanted Gayoom "to grow old here" in the Maldives, saying it was "a test of our democracy how we treat" the former dictator.

The president, who was forced out yesterday by a police mutiny and three weeks of street protests by the opposition, used his mandate to build a reputation internationally as a campaigner against climate change.

In 2009, Nasheed held an underwater cabinet meeting in an effort to press the world to cap carbon emissions that cause global warming, which will lead to rising sea levels which threaten low-lying countries such as the Maldives.

He also shocked observers when he announced he wanted to buy a new home-land to relocate the population of his country, naming India, Sri Lanka and Australia as potential destinations.

But the environmental stunts had little impact locally in a country whose 300,000 Sunni Muslim population face more immediate concerns.

Graft, militant Islam shake Maldives

REUTERS, Male

(The essay was published before President Nasheed's resignation)

Few of the million or so tourists who visit the Maldives each year would catch even a whiff of the troubled politics or growing militant threat roiling the islands of one of the world's most renowned get-away-from-it-all destinations.

President Mohamed Nasheed, who initiated multi-party democracy in the Indian Ocean archipelago with an historic election victory in 2008, stands accused of adopting the autocratic methods of his predecessor and bitter rival, which he had pledged to abolish.

Last month, Nasheed ordered the military to arrest Criminal Court Chief Justice Abdulla Mohamed, accusing him of being in the pocket of former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom.

Nasheed's opponents have adopted a headline style of political Islam to savage his religious credentials.

The entry of that brand of Islam

into politics has unnerved practitioners of traditionally moderate Maldivian Islam and Western governments alike, and raised worries it could threaten the nation's toddler democracy.

In the outer islands of the Muslim archipelago, there are fears that hardline militant Islam is taking root.

The reason behind the arrest, Nasheed says, is because the judge, like the other 200-odd criminal court judges, was illegally sworn in for a life term and has blocked every attempt to bring multi-million-dollar corruption, rights abuse and criminal cases against Gayoom's allies and relatives.

"Gayoom is running the judiciary," Nasheed said. "When he lost the presidency, he was clever enough to carve out a territory and hide there, or get protected there. And none of the cases are moving."

So to make good on his electoral promise to enact a new constitution and establish an independent judiciary, Nasheed says he has acted outside of it.

"You have to push everyone to the brink and tell them 'You do this or we all fall'," Nasheed told Reuters in an interview at the presidential bungalow in Male, the capital island.

"I think it would be so wrong of me not to tackle this simply because I might fall or simply because people may raise eyebrows."

And it has done just that, draw-

NEWS ANALYSIS

ing private diplomatic rebukes from Western nations which backed his ascendancy to lead the archipelago of 1,200 islands out of 30 years of Gayoom's rule, which was widely criticized as dictatorial.

An Asian diplomat serving in Male said Nasheed was undermining the very institutions he was supposed to build.

"He is a champion of democracy by soul and heart, make no mistake about that," the diplomat told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

"But the worst thing that has happened here is people are doubting democracy and asking 'Did we do the right thing?'"

There have been nightly and sometimes-violent opposition protests since the judge's detention, prompting the government to get UN and Commonwealth assistance to break the impasse.

The protests have also prompted virulent attacks on Nasheed's Islamic credentials.

The Dhivehi Quamee Party (DQP), run by the urbane former attorney general Hassan Saeed, issued a pamphlet accusing Nasheed of attempting to undermine Islam by bringing in Christianity, establishing diplomatic relations with Israel and of doing business with Jewish businessmen.

On Twitter, opposition-linked groups or individuals have called for Nasheed's impeachment and, in at least one case, beheading under sharia law.

But while the political fray goes on with all eyes on the 2013 presidential election, Maldivian intelli-

gence officers and Western officials say hardline Salafist and Wahabist groups are gaining political ground in the more distant atolls and making a beachhead in Male.

The capital island is home to almost 200,000 of the Maldives' 330,000 people, all Sunni Muslims. It is also home to the majority of the estimated 30,000 people on the islands who are addicted to heroin, according to UN estimates.

"It's potentially a tropical Afghanistan. The same forces that gave rise to the Taliban are there -- the drugs, the corruption and the behaviour of the political class," a Colombo-based Western ambassador who is responsible for the Maldives told Reuters on condition of anonymity.

"The Salafists are taking over atoll after atoll. They work on the ground and it is insidious. Nero is definitely fiddling while Rome burns."

None of the 931,000 well-heeled tourists who came in 2011 to visit desert islands swathed in aquamarine seas, ringed by beaches of icing-sugar sands, would get a hint of that.



Sarkozy spends £10,000 a day on food!

ANI, London

French President Nicolas Sarkozy spends £10,000 a day on food and keeps 121 cars at his Elysee Palace, a new book says.

In the book titled L'argent de l'Etat (Money from the State), socialist MP Rene Dosiere describes what he sees as extraordinary excesses by the French president and accuses Sarkozy of "ignoring the most elementary principles of separation between private and public accounts," the Daily Mail reported.

Sarkozy has cancelled the annual £500,000 palace garden party, but this doesn't go far enough, according to Dosiere.

Just last week, he sent a medical team to Ukraine on board a state-owned private jet to attend to one of his sons, Pierre, and fly him back to Paris at the expense of £22,000.

His fleet of cars is double the size of predecessor Jacques Chirac's and cost, annually, £100,000 to insure and a whopping £275,000 to fuel.

Then there are his huge travel costs. He wrote that Sarkozy never seems to linger anywhere to meet locals and absorb their culture. His total annual expenditure comes to £95 million.

US eases sanction on Myanmar

BBC ONLINE

The US has eased one of the sanctions it levels against Myanmar amid a series of political reforms in the country.

The partial waiver, signed on Monday, will allow Myanmar to receive limited technical assistance from international financial institutions.

The move came on the same day that the elections commission affirmed pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi's candidacy to run in a by-election.

According to the US state department, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton signed a partial waiver of restrictions under the "Trafficking Victims Protection Act" in response to encouraging reforms underway in that country.

This would allow institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to conduct assessment missions in the country.

Other US sanctions against Myanmar, however, remain in place.

Suu Kyi - a Nobel Peace laureate who spent years under house arrest - is seeking office in the rural township of Kawhmu, southwest of Rangoon.

The NLD is contesting all available parliamentary seats in the upcoming by-elections.

14-party

FROM PAGE 20

the programme at Jatrabari intersection,

Matia, also agriculture minister, came down heavily on BNP Chairperson Khaleeda Zia, saying, "Khaleeda wants to protect the war criminals as she maintains close links with them."

At Gulistan, AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif said, "When the people are demanding trial of the war criminals, the BNP chairperson is out to protect them... But the people will not side with the supporter of war criminals."

Participating in the human chain Gabtoli, AL Presidium Member and Home Minister Sahara Khatun said the BNP-Jamaat alliance is engaged in various conspiracies and is also organising undemocratic programmes to foil the trial of war criminals.

Justice will be upheld through completion of trial

of the war criminals, and no conspiracy against the trial will achieve its evil design, said AL leader and Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, joining the programme at Ittefaq intersection.

AL lawmaker HNAShequr Rahman, who was chief of the parliamentary standing committee on estimate, replaces Oli. Dharendra Chandra Debnath Sambhu from the same party is the new chief of the estimate committee.

Oli, now abroad, could not be reached for comments. The reshuffle also saw AL lawmaker SK Muzibur Rahman removed as chairman of the standing committee on the communications ministry. With Muzibur in the saddle, the committee had been very vocal against the then communications minister Syed

US slaps new sanctions on Iran

BBC ONLINE

US President Barack Obama has placed stricter sanctions on Iran's government, including its central bank.

In an executive order, Obama said he was freezing all Iranian government assets held or traded in the US.

On Sunday, Obama said the US and Israel were "in lockstep" in their policy towards Iran.

Concerns have grown in Israel and the West that Iran is developing nuclear weapons, although Tehran says its nuclear programme is entirely peaceful.

The new US sanctions include blocks on the Central Bank of Iran, imposed "in light of the deceptive practices" of the bank to conceal transactions already banned.

13 JS bodies reshuffled

FROM PAGE 20

ruling alliance deputies in parliament had demanded action against him for the comments.

AL lawmaker HNAShequr Rahman, who was chief of the parliamentary standing committee on estimate, replaces Oli. Dharendra Chandra Debnath Sambhu from the same party is the new chief of the estimate committee.

Oli, now abroad, could not be reached for comments.

The reshuffle also saw AL lawmaker SK Muzibur Rahman removed as chairman of the standing committee on the communications ministry. With Muzibur in the saddle, the committee had been very vocal against the then communications minister Syed



PHOTO: AFP
In this handout photograph provided by Haveeru News Service, mutinying Maldivian police are seen amid a cloud of tear gas as they confront the military in Male yesterday. A group of policemen in the Maldives disobeyed orders and joined anti-government protesters in what the president's office described as a "mutiny".

Abul Hossain. He has been replaced by his party colleague Mostafa Faruk Mohammad.

AL legislator Fazle Rabbi Mia, who was chief of the public assurance committee, has been given the charge of the standing committee on the law ministry, while Ali Ashraf from the same party has been made chief of the assurance committee.

AKM Rahmatullah, AL lawmaker, has been picked to lead the standing committee on the information ministry. The standing committees on the law and information ministries had been without anyone in charge since their then chiefs -- Suranjit Sengupta and Obaidul Quader -- were made railway and commu-

Malaysian venture

FROM PAGE 1

He said it is still unclear what will be the conditions of the financing from Malaysia. And if there is no competitive bidding, the cost for building the bridge will remain unknown.

At the same time, the government will have to accept the cost in bridge making process even if it goes above the present estimate, he warned.

Besides, payback period of the money and method of repayment should be examined carefully, added Khan.

Construction of the road-rail bridge became uncertain when the World Bank in August last year suspended a \$1.2 billion loan alleging corruption in the pre-bidding process.

The government signed a deal with the WB in April last year, according to which, Bangladesh would repay the loan at 0.75 percent interest in 40 years, including a 10-year grace period.

AF Nesaruddin, a partner of chartered accountant firm Hoda Vasi Chowdhury & Co, also expressed worries saying cost of fund might go up if the government arranges finance from Malaysia to

construct the bridge.

"The World Bank's finance to build the Padma bridge will be cheaper. But if the government raises finance from private sector of Malaysia, cost of fund will increase," he said.

Referring to the Public-Private Partnership (PPP), he said toll to cross the bridge may be higher if the bridge is built under PPP.

The government now is going to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Malaysia on February 21 to construct the 6.15-kilometre bridge after Malaysia has formally offered its assistance.

Confirming the MoU, Communications Minister Obaidul Quader said loan interest and other issues will be finalised through negotiations once the MoU is signed.

Malaysian official news agency Bernama reported on Saturday that a consortium comprising experienced Malaysian construction companies will be set up to undertake the \$2.19 billion (RM 6.6 billion) Padma bridge project after the Bangladesh government accepts Malaysia's technical and financial proposals on the project.