



Romney back on track with Maine win

AFP, New York

Mitt Romney has gotten a sorely needed boost in the rocky race for the Republican presidential nomination, winning a non-binding contest in Maine and a straw poll among conservatives after a trio of unnerving losses.

The former Massachusetts governor edged out Texas congressman Ron Paul by fewer than 200 votes in the Maine caucuses Saturday, and outpolled former senator Rick Santorum in the straw poll at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington.

Though largely symbolic, those wins spelled relief for a candidate whose frontrunner status was again put in question Tuesday when Santorum scored upset victories in Colorado, Missouri and Minnesota.

The results were a blow to Paul, who had hoped to get his first victory of the 2012 campaign, but he told supporters gathered in Portland that he considered the result a near-win.

Despite Romney's wins, however, the Republican race to pick a standard bearer to run against Obama in November remained unsettled.

A prolonged Republican nominating fight would be more likely to hurt Romney and help come-from-behind contenders like Santorum or former House speaker Newt Gingrich.

In the Maine caucuses, Romney won 39 percent of the vote to 36 percent for Paul, who spent much time campaigning in the state even though no delegates were at stake.

Syria crisis intensifies

Arabs to back rebels, call for joint UN force

AFP, Cairo

Arab countries yesterday held a key meeting in Cairo in a renewed push to end Syria's bloody 11-month crackdown on dissent, as fighting escalated, even spilling over into Lebanon.

The Arab League agreed to open contacts with Syria's opposition and to ask the United Nations to form a joint peacekeeping force to the unrest-swept country, a statement said after the meeting.

Arab diplomats "will open channels of communication with the Syrian opposition and offer full political and financial support, urging (the opposition) to unify its ranks," the statement added.

They would also "ask the UN Security Council to issue a decision on the formation of a joint UN-Arab peacekeeping force to oversee the implementation of a ceasefire," it said.

After marathon talks in Cairo, the 22-member bloc also announced it had formally ended its own observer mission to Syria, which was suspended last month because of an upsurge in violence.

But Syria later condemned the Arabs decision. In a statement Damascus said it "categorically" rejects the Arab

League's recommendations.

The Gulf monarchies have already ordered their envoys home from Syria and expelled Damascus's ambassadors, joining mounting pressure on Assad over the killings of civilians.

On the ground, activists reported that 14 people were killed in a relentless assault by forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on the central protest city of Homs.

All but one of them died in Baba Amr, a rebel stronghold in the city which armed forces have targeted for more than a week, killing at least 500 people, according to activists.

It also reported fierce clashes on the northern edge of nearby Rastan, where a woman was killed when a rocket hit her home. Elsewhere, snipers shot dead a child in Daraa, cradle of the 11-month uprising against Assad's regime.

Meanwhile, the head of a controversial Arab League observer mission to Syria has resigned, an Arab League official told AFP yesterday.

The resignation of General Mohammed Ahmed Mustafa al-Dabi was due to be officially announced at a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo later in the day, the official said,

without saying why the Sudanese former military intelligence officer had quit.

Syrian government newspaper Ath-Thawra yesterday accused the Arab nations of being in the pay of Western powers.

State television yesterday aired live footage of an official funeral for the 28 people it says were killed in twin car bombs that ripped through the northern city of Aleppo on Friday.

The Syrian authorities blamed "terrorists" for the attacks, but the rebel Free Syrian Army accused the regime of launching them "to steer attention away from what it is doing in Homs, Zabadani and elsewhere."

Forty-five people were killed nationwide Saturday, mostly civilians, said the Britain-based Observatory.

In Lebanon, a 17-year-old girl was among three people killed and 23 were wounded in clashes Saturday between Sunni hostile to Syria's regime and Alawites who support it, a security official said.

And Pope Benedict XVI yesterday made an urgent appeal "for an end to the violence and bloodshed" in Syria and urged "its political authorities to choose dialogue and peace."

Al-Qaeda backs Syria uprising in new video

AFP, Beirut

Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has voiced his support for the Syrian uprising in a new video message released on jihadist Internet forums, US monitors said yesterday.

In the video titled "Onwards, Lions of Syria", Zawahiri criticised the Syrian regime for crimes against its citizens, and praised those rising up against the government, SITE Intelligence Group said.

"Don't depend on the West or America, or the Arab governments and Turkey," he said, according to the SITE translation. "(They) had deals, mutual understanding and sharing with this regime for decades."

He called on Muslims to support the uprising and remove the current regime which he condemned as anti-Islam.

"I appeal to every Muslim and every free, honourable one in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, to rise to help his brothers in Syria with all that he can," Zawahiri was



Ayman al-Zawahiri

quoted as saying.

The al-Qaeda leader described the government of President Bashar al-Assad as a "pernicious, cancerous regime that suffocates the free people in Syria."

The video is the latest of a number in which the militant chief has attempted to exploit the Arab uprisings.

Meanwhile a US media report citing unnamed American officials said al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch was likely to have carried out bombings in Syria's second-largest city Aleppo on Friday which killed 28 people and wounded 235, as well as attacks in Damascus in December and January.

The attacks appeared to verify Assad's charges of al-Qaeda involvement in the uprising against his 11-year rule, said the McClatchy Newspapers chain.

The United States said last year that it believes Zawahiri, who has been in hiding since Washington declared a "war on terror" after the September 11, 2001 attacks, was still in Pakistan.

Charges against Zardari 'politically motivated'

Says Gilani; faces key indictment today

REUTERS, Islamabad

Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, in an interview broadcast on Saturday, said corruption charges against Pakistan's president were "politically motivated" and that the president had immunity as head of state.

Gilani's statements were aired on the eve of a hearing at which the premier faces indictment for contempt of court over his refusal to request the reopening of corruption cases against Zardari.

In the wide-ranging interview with Al Jazeera television, he also criticised US drone attacks on militants near the Afghan border as counterproductive and said Pakistan never authorised them.

Pakistan, he said, backed any Afghan-led peace plan to establish peace in the neighbouring country and in no way supported Taliban insurgents.



Yusuf Raza Gilani

"There had been a lot of cases against him, and they were all politically motivated," Gilani said, referring to Zardari.

"He has got immunity. And he has not got immunity only in Pakistan, he has transnational immunity, even all over the world."

Asked if he would rather resign for the sake of the president, Gilani said if convicted of contempt, he would automatically lose office, so there was no need for him to quit.

Today's expected indictment of Gilani pushes Pakistan's political crisis into a new phase. It is unlikely to lead to the fall of the government, but will continue to paralyse the country and further empower its military, analysts say.

The civilian-judicial confrontation stems from thousands of old corruption cases thrown out in 2007 by an amnesty law passed under former president Pervez Musharraf.



Riot police officers walk pass a fire yesterday as they clash protesters in front of the Greek Parliament in Athens. Greek police used tear gas on petrol bomb-throwing protesters outside parliament where lawmakers were debating a new austerity plan aimed at staving off bankruptcy.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Malaysia deports Saudi 'tweeter'

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia yesterday deported a young Saudi journalist wanted in his home country over a Twitter post about the Prophet Mohammed, defying pleas from human rights group who said he faced execution.

Hamza Kashgari, who was detained in Malaysia on Thursday after fleeing Saudi Arabia, has now left the country, national police spokesman Ramli Yousuf said.

Kashgari fled to Muslim-majority Malaysia after making comments on the microblogging site deemed insulting to the Prophet Mohammed, which triggered outrage and death threats.

Kashgari apologised but a committee of top clerics branded him "an infidel" and demanded he be tried in an Islamic court, while a Saudi Facebook page calling for his execution has attracted thousands of followers.

Insulting the prophet is considered blasphemous in Islam and is a crime punishable by execution in Saudi Arabia.

81 Mexicans kiled of swine flu

IANS, Mexico City

Eighty-one people have so far died of swine flu in Mexico this year, while at least 3,522 have been infected with the virus, health officials said.

From Jan 1 till Feb 9, there have been 3,882 confirmed flu cases, the health secretariat said in a statement.

Three seasonal viruses are currently active in Mexico -- AH1N1, AH3N2 and influenza B. The AH1N1 -- or swine flu -- has been the predominant one, with 91 per cent of the infections.

The AH1N1 virus broke out in Mexico in March-April 2009. By June 2010, around 1,300 deaths had occurred and more than 70,000 people had con-

TV bomb kills 7 in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

A bomb hidden in a television set exploded in a house in northwest Pakistan early yesterday, killing at least seven people, in an attack police believe was part of a local feud.

The blast took place in a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Peshawar, the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, which borders Afghanistan.

Initial investigations showed the bomb was planted in a rented television set which exploded in



Murdoch in trouble again

Flying to UK after Sun arrests

AFP, London

Rupert Murdoch will fly to London this week to meet journalists at The Sun after five senior staff at his flagship British tabloid were arrested over bribery allegations, sources said yesterday.

Publisher News International said Murdoch had given a "personal assurance" that The Sun would not face the same fate as its sister paper, the News of the World, which he closed in July amid a scandal over phone hacking.

The US-based media tycoon will come to London "later in the week", a person familiar with the matter told AFP, adding that Murdoch's visit had already been planned before the arrests happened.

Another source close to the matter said he would meet with journalists at The Sun, Britain's biggest selling newspaper.

A Ministry of Defence official, a member of the armed forces and a policeman were also arrested over allegations that journalists paid officials for information, police said.

They were held as part of a widening Scotland Yard probe into alleged corrupt payments by journalists to police and public officials in exchange for information.

Murdoch flew over to London in a hail of publicity when the hacking scandal broke. Within days the 168-year-old News of the World was shut down.

Saif Gaddafi to be tried in Tripoli

REUTERS, Tripoli

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son and one-time heir apparent of toppled Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, will be moved to a Tripoli prison within two months and then face trial, the chairman of Libya's National Transitional Council (NTC) said yesterday.

Three months after his capture in Libya's Sahara desert dressed as a Bedouin tribesman, Saif al-Islam remains at a secret location in the northwestern town of Zintan, reflecting a wider problem of powerful local militias and a weak central government in the North African country.

In an interview with Reuters, Mustafa Abdul Jalil said authorities were completing the construction of a prison in central Tripoli, begun under the late Muammar Gaddafi, to which Saif al-Islam would be moved.

"At this moment he is being interrogated and his trial will begin as soon as the prison facility is ready," Abdul Jalil said. "I can't give an exact timeframe in terms of weeks or months for this but it will not be more than two months."

Zintan commanders say they have kept Saif al-Islam in their remote mountain town, rather than hand him over to the NTC in Tripoli, to spare him the fate of his father.

Top US gen in Egypt amid NGOs row

AFP, Cairo

The US military's top general met Egypt's ruling field marshal on Saturday amid a row between the allies over impending trials of American pro-democracy activists.

The meeting in Cairo had been "long planned," according to General Martin Dempsey's spokesman, but officials were hoping Dempsey would persuade Cairo to back off the planned trials.

Colonel Dave Lapan said the general discussed with Tantawi and his Egyptian counterpart Sami Enan "a wide range of issues related to the long-standing security relationship between our two countries, including the issue involving US NGOs."

Dempsey had planned to hold a round-table discussion with journalists after the meetings, but it was called off with no reason given to reporters.

Egyptian judicial officials have announced plans to put dozens of pro-democracy activists, including 19 Americans, on trial over alleged illegal funding to foreign aid groups.

The move has shaken the Egypt-US alliance that has anchored America's Middle East policy for a generation and helped keep the peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours. Outraged at the charges, some senior US lawmakers have warned that Washington's aid to Egypt could be jeopardised if the prosecution goes ahead.

The United States currently provides about \$1.3 billion a year in aid to Egypt, one of the biggest packages offered to any nation.

Live in peace in the West

Laden told children

AFP, London

Slain al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden urged his younger children to go live peacefully in the West and get a university education, his brother-in-law said in an interview published yesterday.

Zakaria al-Sadah, the brother of bin Laden's Yemeni fifth wife Amal, told Britain's Sunday Times newspaper that the Saudi-born extremist believed his children "should not follow him down the road to jihad."

"He told his own children and grandchildren, 'Go to Europe and America and get a good education,'" al-Sadah told the Sunday Times.

Al-Sadah said bin Laden told them: "You have to study, live in peace and don't do what I am doing or what I have done."

Bin Laden was killed in a commando raid in May 2011 by US Navy SEALs at a house in



the garrison town of Abbottabad, northwest Pakistan, where he had been living for several years.

Al-Sadah said that in November he had seen his sister for the first time since she was shot in the knee during the raid, and had since been allowed to have a number of meetings with her in the presence of guards.

He said the three wives and nine children who were in the compound -- some are bin Laden's children and others are his grandchildren -- have been held for months in a three-room flat in Islamabad.

They are guarded by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) spy agency, he said.

The Sunday Times published what it said was the first photograph to show some of the young children from the compound: Two sons and a daughter, and two grandsons and a granddaughter.

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