

Syrian forces bombard Homs after Arab peace proposal

REUTERS, Amman

Syrian forces bombarded districts of Homs and attacked other cities yesterday after Arab states pledged support for the opposition battling President Bashar al-Assad and called for international peacekeepers to be sent to the country.

Tank fire was concentrated on two Sunni Muslim neighbourhoods that have been at the forefront of an 11-month-old uprising against Assad, activists said.

"Mortar rounds and bombardment from BTRs (infantry fighting vehicles) are heavily hitting Baba Amro. We do not have numbers for any casualties because there is no communication with the district," activist Mohammad al-Hasan told Reuters from Homs.

Activists said 23 people were killed on Sunday, adding to a toll of more than 300 since the assault on Homs began on February 3.

The renewed barrages served as an emphatic response to Arab League moves to boost the opposition campaign against Assad, who is resisting

calls to step down after 11 years of authoritarian rule.

Meeting in Cairo on Sunday, Arab League ministers proposed a joint United Nations-Arab peacekeeping force for Syria and pledged to provide political and material aid to the opposition.

However, the plan faces all kinds of obstacles. World powers are divided over how to resolve the crisis and Russia and China, who vetoed a UN Security Council resolution on Syria on February 4 are unlikely to welcome foreign intervention.

In Moscow, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Russia was studying the Arab proposal for a peacekeeping mission but wanted more details. He said violence should end before any such mission takes place and international pressure should focus on the Syrian opposition as well as the government.

"In other words, it is necessary to agree to something like a ceasefire but the tragedy is that the armed groups that are confronting the forces of the regime are not subordinate to anyone

and are not under control," Lavrov said.

China's Foreign Ministry yesterday backed what it termed the Arab League's "mediation" but offered no clear sign of support for its call for peacekeepers.

"Relevant moves by the United Nations should be conducive towards lessening tension in Syria, pushing political dialogue and resolving differences, as well as maintaining peace and stability in the Middle East, rather than complicating things," ministry spokesman Liu Weimin told a regular news briefing.

Russia and China were both heavily criticized by the West for blocking the draft UN resolution that backed an Arab League call on Assad to step down.

But the United States and European powers are reluctant to get dragged in militarily, fearing this would be more risky and complicated - given Syria's position along crisscrossing fault lines of Middle East conflict -- than the Nato-led air support that helped Libyan rebels oust Muammar Gaddafi last year.



Investigators work at the scene of a vehicle that exploded near the Israeli embassy in New Delhi yesterday, injuring an Israeli diplomat and another person. PHOTO: AFP

Maldives welcomes C'wealth 'coup' probe

AFP, Male

New Maldives President Mohamed Waheed yesterday welcomed a Commonwealth mission to investigate the ousting of his predecessor after overnight clashes during protests in the restive capital Male.

Waheed agreed to a Commonwealth ministerial probe into the dramatic fall of Mohamed Nasheed, the nation's first democratically elected leader who came to power in 2008, spokesman Masood Imad said.

"The president welcomes the Commonwealth mission," Imad told AFP. "Please come here and see the exact situation. We want not only the Commonwealth, but others too to come and see what really happened."

The nine-member Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), which deals with serious violations of the 54-nation bloc's political values, decided on the mission after an emer-



Mohamed Waheed

gency telephone conference on Sunday.

The Commonwealth Secretariat said the mission would "ascertain the facts surrounding the transfer of power, and to promote adherence to Commonwealth values and principles".

Ex-president Nasheed insists he was removed in a military-backed coup following weeks of opposition protests. On Sunday, he rejected a US call for compromise and the formation of a unity government.

His Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) supporters clashed with police in the capital on Sunday night as MDP lawmakers complained that one of their colleagues had been arrested and tortured in the southernmost atoll of Addu.

An AFP correspondent saw police use pepper spray to break up a group of about 200 people and arrest at least three demonstrators who shouted anti-government slogans.

Nasheed insists that the way out of the crisis is a quick election and he has threatened to take to the streets to protest.

"We want an election and we will campaign for it," Nasheed told large, cheering crowds at the event that started late Saturday and ran into the early hours of Sunday.

His remarks came after US assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs Robert Blake spoke out against snap polls, asking both sides in the Maldives to make "compromises".

Nato admits killing Afghan children

REUTERS, Kabul

Nato-led forces in Afghanistan said yesterday they had mistakenly killed a group of children in an air strike that has enraged the government, and said their deaths may have been linked to an anti-insurgent operation in the area.

The air strike took place last Wednesday near the village of Giawa, in eastern Kapisa province, and followed similar bombings that have stoked tension between the government and Nato over a civilian death toll that has risen annually for five years.

The children were killed as Nato aircraft and ground forces attacked insurgents on open ground in Najrab of Kapisa, said Brig Gen Carsten Jacobson, a spokesman for Nato.

US used NGOs to create chaos in Egypt: minister

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian minister seen as the driving force behind impending trials of democracy activists, including 19 Americans, had told investigators that Washington funded their groups to create a state of prolonged chaos in Egypt, official media reported yesterday.

International cooperation minister Fayza Abul Naga, believed to be the instigator of a judicial probe into foreign-funded civil society groups, made the accusation in testimony to the investigating judges in October.

Abul Naga, one of the few remaining ministers from president Hosni Mubarak's era, added that the United States and Israel wanted to hijack Egypt's uprising that toppled Mubarak a year ago to serve the interests of Washington and the Jewish state.

"The United States and Israel could not create a state of chaos and work to maintain it in Egypt directly, so they used direct funding to organisations, especially American, as



Fayza Abul Naga

a means of implementing these goals," the official MENA news agency quoted her as saying, in the first public disclosure of the claims.

The impending trials of 44 activists, including 19 Americans, have deepened a rift between the traditional allies, with the State Department hinting that the crackdown could

jeopardise American aid to Egypt.

Abul Naga said "the January 25 uprising came as a surprise to the United States, and it slipped from its control when it transformed into a people's revolution."

"That was when the United States decided to use all its resources and instruments to contain the situation and push it in a direction that promotes American and also Israeli interests," the agency quoted her as saying.

MENA reported that a judicial investigation into the funding of several civil society groups found that the United States had diverted aid promised for infrastructure to the NGOs.

NEWS IN brief

Suspected Bali bomber on trial in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

A Muslim militant arrested in the same Pakistani town where US commandos later killed Osama bin Laden stood trial in Indonesia yesterday on charges including murder for the 2002 Bali bombings.

Umar Patek, 45, faces five other counts, including bomb-making and illegal firearms possession, and prosecutors say they will push for the death penalty.

Amid a security lockdown, with anti-terrorism units deployed in Jakarta, Patek arrived at the court in an armoured police vehicle, giving a two-thumbs up gesture with his handcuffed hands, but said nothing.

Myanmar promises EU to hold fair vote

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar's military-backed government assured visiting top EU officials yesterday that upcoming by-elections heralding the opposition's return to mainstream politics will be democratic.

"We have taken the necessary measures so that the upcoming by-elections will be free, fair and credible," lower house speaker Shwe Mann told EU development commissioner Andris Piebalgs, speaking through an interpreter.

Piebalgs also held private talks with President

Turkmen president re-elected

AP, Ashgabat

Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov won a new five-year term by capturing 97 percent of the vote, election officials said yesterday, but a Western expert called the vote a democratic sham.

All of Berdimukhamedov's seven opponents raised his leadership in their campaigns, making the authoritarian leader's victory in Sunday's election a mere formality. Berdimukhamedov improved on his 2007 performance, in which he secured his first term in this Central Asian nation with 89 percent of the vote.

Central Election Commission chief Orazmyrat Niyazliyev called the vote democratic and said it contributed to national unity.

China VP warns against US military focus

AFP, Washington

China's likely next leader Xi Jinping warned the United States against plans to boost its military strength in Asia as he prepared for a closely watched visit to Washington starting yesterday.

China's vice president, who is tipped to rule the rising Asian power until 2023, called on the United States to prioritize economic growth and promised anew that Beijing would address foreign concerns about its currency's value.

In a written interview with The Washington Post, Xi said the Pacific Ocean had "ample space" for both China and the United States but insisted that Asian countries were concerned foremost with "economic prosperity."

"At a time when people long for peace, stability and development, to deliberately give prominence to the military security agenda, scale up military deployment and strengthen



military alliances is not really what most countries in the region hope to see," Xi said.

"We welcome a constructive role by the United States in promoting peace, stability and prosperity in the region. We also hope that the United States will fully respect and accommodate the major interests and legitimate concerns of Asia-Pacific countries," he said.

US President Barack Obama, while seeking to trim vast military spending in response to budget pressure, has vowed to boost power in Asia where a number of nations have voiced concern at what they charge is a more assertive China.

The United States has moved in recent months to send troops to Australia and the Philippines. It has also sought to increase military ties with Vietnam and Singapore, while maintaining longstanding bases in Japan and South Korea.

HC rejects telecoms

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largest mobile phone operator, will not need to pay an additional Tk 236.8 crore for radio frequency, which it bought for 18 years in 2008, said Mehedi Hasan Chowdhury, a lawyer for GP.

However, the court upheld BTRC's decision that GP will have to pay the rest of the fees to the telecom regulator without excluding value added tax (VAT), said Barrister Khandaker Raza-E-Raquiab, a lawyer for the BTRC.

"Grameenphone's licence will be renewed after it pays its dues. We will hold a meeting after getting a certified copy of the verdict," Zia Ahmed, BTRC chairman, told The Daily Star.

For licence renewal, Grameenphone will have to pay Tk 238 crore to BTRC immediately, he told reporters at his office.

GP's licence expired in November last year. It has been operating under a special order since.

In a notice in October last year, BTRC asked GP to pay Tk 3,624 crore in licence renewal and spectrum assignment fees.

The amount included an additional Tk 236.8 crore in spectrum assignment fee -- a demand the court has declared illegal, added Mehedi.

The notice had also asked GP to pay all the money without excluding the amount it pays in VAT.

Currently, telecom operators pay charges to BTRC after deducting 15 percent they pay to the National Board of Revenue in VAT.

Challenging both the demands, GP filed a writ petition on October 23 the same year.

Meanwhile, GP in a statement said after yesterday's judgment it will be allowed to get 15 percent rebate after paying the same amount of VAT separately to NBR.

The verdict has also



Indian artist Harwinder Singh Gill displays a creation made with some 550 buttons to form a hearts sculpture on the eve of Valentine's Day in Amritsar yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

Iranians get back Internet email access

AP, Tehran

Many Iranian web users say their access to foreign email services such as Gmail, Yahoo mail and Hotmail appears to have been restored after a four day outage.

Elaheh Ansari and Reza Estiar are among dozens of Internet users who told The Associated Press that their access was back on Monday.

The semiofficial Mehr agency had said that more than 30 million people in the country were affected by the outage. Iran's national telecommunications company declined to comment.

Iran has occasionally restricted the Internet since the turmoil that followed the 2009 presidential elections and blocked websites including Facebook, Twitter, Voice of America and the BBC Farsi service.

India agrees to double

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Contacted last night, Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of independent think-tank the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said the proposed fees were only given that India uses almost limited waterways facilities.

However, once the Ashuganj port starts being used as a multi-modal transit point, the fees will need to be fixed afresh, Mustafiz noted.

At the meeting, India sought 17 additional facilities under the waterways protocol.

A shipping ministry official said the Indian officials proposed that Chandpur and Chhatak be treated as new ports of call. But Bangladesh declined to meet the demand with regard to Chandpur, as infrastructure deficiency is acute there. As for Chhatak, Dhaka asked Delhi to make a fresh proposal.

In 2010, Dhaka signed an agreement with Delhi, allowing India to use the Ashuganj river port for transit and trans-shipment.

ISI forced to show detainees in court

AFP, Islamabad

Seven men allegedly held by Pakistan's ISI appeared in court yesterday, an unprecedented development following orders from the country's highest court.

The case challenges perceptions that ISI operates above the law. The ISI is accused in the West of still maintaining links to the Taliban and Islamist militants, whom it historically sponsored.

The seven men appeared frail, weak, unable to talk and unable to walk properly when they appeared before chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, more than a year and a half after being allegedly arrested.

India has used the port on an experimental basis and sent goods to Tripura. However, Bangladesh does not allow the neighbouring country to move transit cargoes regularly, as it does not have adequate infrastructure.

At the just concluded meeting, New Delhi also proposed that it be allowed to use Ashuganj as transshipment port to move bulk cargoes between Kolkata and Agartala.

But Dhaka said it would not be possible until adequate infrastructure was in place.

India also proposed a transshipment of cargo from deeper draft vessels to shallow draft vessels at any point in Bangladesh.

Its other proposals included setting up of a customs station at Mongla port, inclusion of the Surma river in the existing protocol and introduction of passenger and cruise services on the protocol routes.

Bangladesh did not agree, saying there should be high-level meetings on those issues.