



Sarkozy declares re-election bid

BBC ONLINE

French President Nicolas Sarkozy has formally declared he will stand for re-election in the presidential polls on 22 April.

Sarkozy's candidacy has never been in doubt but he issued the confirmation during an interview on France's TF1 channel.

His main challenger in the election is the Socialist candidate Francois Hollande.

Opinion polls suggest Hollande will win both the first round and a run-off.

There are fewer than 10 weeks to go to election day, and Sarkozy said his decision had been "serious" and "not automatic".

But he said he believed he had the right policies for France over the next five years.

He said, "I took this decision because France, Europe and the world have for the last three years seen a series of unprecedented crises, which means that not seeking a new mandate from the French people would be abandoning my duties."

Sarkozy pointed to the growth in the French economy in the final quarter of last year, which he said was higher than all other major European economies.

He said, "There are still too many people unemployed but our reforms are beginning to have an effect."

He criticised Hollande for concentrating too much on attacking him.

Iran unveils nuke progress defying US-EU pressure

AFP, Tehran

Iran announced new strides yesterday in its nuclear programme, in a defiant blow to US and EU pressure to rein in its atomic activities and amid signs of an increasingly vicious covert war with Israel over the issue.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad unveiled on state television what was said to be Iran's first domestically produced, 20-percent enriched nuclear fuel for Tehran's research reactor.

He also said 3,000 more centrifuges had been added to his country's uranium enrichment effort.

Officials said new-generation centrifuges had been installed at Iran's Natanz nuclear facility that are able to produce three times more enriched uranium.

The developments underlined Tehran's determination to forge ahead

with its nuclear activities despite increasingly tough sanctions from the West -- and speculation that Israel or the United States could be months from launching military strikes against it.

Iran portrayed the advances as evidence it was only interested in peaceful nuclear goals, under the slogan "nuclear energy for all, nuclear weapons for none."

But the steps challenged the basis of four sets of UN sanctions and a raft of unilateral US and EU sanctions designed to halt a programme much of the West fears masks a drive for atomic weapons.

Attempts to defuse the soaring tensions over Iran's nuclear crisis through dialogue appear to making little headway.

Iran has repeatedly said it is ready to resume talks with world powers that collapsed a year ago.

And yesterday, it said had finally replied to a letter sent nearly four months ago by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton proposing a return to the talks.

So far, Russia and China have stood by Iran, criticising the Western sanctions on it as a barrier to the talks and refusing to comply with them.

But there were indications that the support was weakening, at least from Russia.

"We are concerned that the distance that separates Iran from the hypothetical possession of technologies to create nuclear weapons is contracting," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said in an interview published on Wednesday through his ministry's website.

"The Iranian side is indeed making progress in its nuclear programme," he told the specialised journal Security Index.



PHOTO: AFP
Relatives of inmates await outside the National Prison of Comayagua compound in Comayagua, Honduras, yesterday, where at least 272 prisoners were killed and scores injured when fire overnight tore through the prison in central Honduras, the Central American country's prisons director said. The prison held around 850 prisoners.

500m children 'at risk of effects of malnutrition'

BBC ONLINE

Half a billion children could grow up physically and mentally stunted over the next 15 years because they do not have enough to eat, the charity Save the Children says in a new report.

It says much more needs to be done to tackle malnutrition in the world's poorest countries.

The charity found that many families could not afford meat, milk or vegetables.

The survey covered families in India, Bangladesh, Peru, Pakistan and Nigeria. One parent in six said their children were abandoning school to help out by working for food.

A third of parents surveyed said their children complained about not having enough to eat.

The survey was carried out in the five countries - where, the agency says, half the world's malnourished children live - by international polling agency Globescan.

Save the Children said that a year of record food prices had worsened child malnutrition and could hit progress reducing child deaths.

"The world has made dramatic progress in reducing child deaths, down from 12 to 7.6 million, but this momentum will stall if we fail to tackle malnutrition," said Save the Children chief executive Justin Forsyth.

The agency wants the UK to lead the way in reducing hunger and protecting children from food price rises - starting with a Hunger Summit when world leaders are in London for the Olympics.

In its report, Save the Children says that one in four of the world's children have stunted growth - meaning their body and brain have failed to develop properly due to malnutrition.

Eighty percent of stunted children live in just four countries, the charity says.

Malnutrition contributes to the deaths of 2.6 million children each year, according to the report.

Syria's Assad offers vote, tanks shell rebel areas

REUTERS, Amman/beirut

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad offered yesterday to hold multi-party elections within four months, while his troops assaulted city districts held by rebels trying to oust him.

Under world pressure to end a crackdown that has cost at least 6,000 lives, Assad promised a referendum in two weeks' time on a new constitution leading to elections within 90 days.

Opposition figures spurned the offer and Assad made clear he was still intent on crushing the uprising with tanks and troops.

Meanwhile, The United Nations General Assembly will vote today on a new resolution calling on Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to put a stop to deadly attacks on civilians, diplomats said.

The resolution drawn up by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which was given to member nations on Tuesday, also expresses support for the Arab

League's plan to end the 11-month crackdown in Syria and calls for the naming of a UN special envoy.

The military unleashed a new offensive in Hama.

Artillery also shelled parts of Homs for the 13th day in a row. In Damascus, troops backed by armour swept into the Barzeh district, searching houses and making arrests, witnesses said.

France said it was negotiating a new UN Security Council resolution on Syria with Russia, Assad's ally and main arms supplier, and also wanted to create humanitarian corridors to ease the plight of civilians caught up in the violence.

He said a UN General Assembly vote Thursday on a non-binding resolution on Syria would be "symbolic." It follows a February 4 veto by Russia and China of a draft Security Council resolution that backed an Arab League call for Assad to quit.

The Arab League also wants a joint UN-Arab peacekeeping force to be deployed in Syria and has adopted a resolution that would allow its members to arm Syrian rebels.

Western powers are keen to see Assad go, but are wary of intervening in Syria, at the heart of a volatile region.

The referendum promise signalled that Assad wants to win the struggle on his own terms, rather than step down, as the United States, its European allies, Turkey and the Arab League demand.

According to state media, the draft constitution to be put to a vote on February 26 would establish a multi-party system in Syria, under Baath Party rule since 1963. Parliamentary elections would follow within 90 days of its approval.

It also said new parties cannot be based on a religion or regional interests, a clause that would exclude the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood or autonomy-seeking Kurdish parties.

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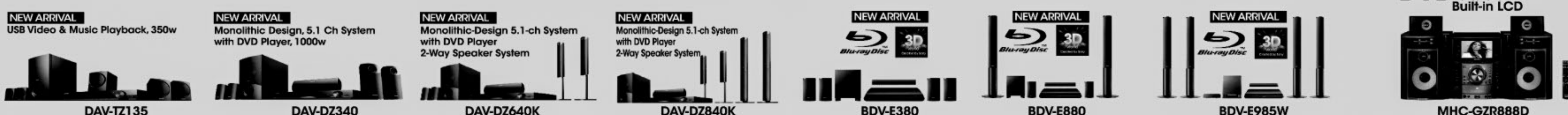
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