

Activists fear all-out assault on Homs

Iran navy ships dock in Syria

AFP, Damascus

Activists fear an all-out assault yesterday on Homs, with Syria's embattled regime building up troops around the flashpoint city and activating a security alert in Damascus after surprise protests.

The reported buildup comes as the top US military officer, General Martin Dempsey, warned any intervention in Syria would be "very difficult" and that it was "premature" to arm the unrest-swept country's opposition movement.

Meanwhile, two Iranian warships have docked at the Syrian port of Tartus, state television reported yesterday, adding that their crew would be training Syrian sailors.

"The two ships, one which is a supply vessel and the other a destroyer have docked in Tartus, a port city north west of Damascus, and as per a bilateral agreement they will be involved in

training the Syrian navy," the report said, without indicating when the vessels went into port.

Activists and Syrian state media reported that at least 14 people were killed on Sunday, adding to the more than 6,000 people who have died in the Syrian government's 11-month crackdown on dissent.

"Infantry troops arrived yesterday (Sunday) in Homs," Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, told AFP on the phone yesterday.

A Homs-based activist voiced fears of an imminent attack on Baba Amr, the main rebel stronghold in the central city, speaking of "unprecedented military reinforcements coming from Damascus."

"News has been leaked to us from army officers about a bloody attack that will burn everything in Baba Amr," Hadi Abdullah of the General

Commission of the Syrian Revolution said on Sunday.

"We were expecting the attack two nights ago, but it could have been just delayed because of the snowstorm," he said.

Abdullah said regime forces pounded the defiant city for the 15th straight day on Sunday, with Baba Amr being shelled at the rate of four to five rockets a minute.

The Homs districts Bab Sbaa, Bab Dreib and al-Safsafa were being targeted with sporadic shelling.

Abdel Rahman was cautious about the timing of the expected attack.

"We do not know when the attack might happen," he said.

Meanwhile, regime forces remain on alert in Damascus after two days of large and unexpected protests, and after a call for a "day of defiance" was observed in restive neighbourhoods, according to activists.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of Pakistani Islamist groups and political parties hold their party flags as they shout slogans during an anti-US protest rally in Islamabad yesterday. Several thousand Pakistanis poured onto the streets of Islamabad, chanting "death to America" and demanding holy war at a rally whipped up by right-wing, religious and banned organisations.

Sarkozy gains on rival after launching campaign

AFP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy was gaining on his Socialist rival after officially announcing his re-election bid last week but still faces a tough challenge, a poll indicated yesterday.

The OpinionWay poll for newspaper Le Figaro showed Sarkozy with 27 percent of intended votes in the first round, up 1.5 points from the previous poll and within striking distance of Socialist candidate Francois Hollande with 29 percent.

Meanwhile, Sarkozy rallied his troops Sunday with a call for the French people to stand with him against a defeatist elite and to defend the traditional values of a strong France.

"I want to ask you something, here, tonight in Marseille, Help me. Help me unite the people of France. You are the people of France," he declared, as the French national anthem, named after the city in which he spoke, rang out.

Addressing 10,000 cheering and flag-waving supporters in a conference centre in



the rough-and-ready southern port of Marseille, he won his biggest applause for attacks on his Socialist rivals and poll frontrunner Francois Hollande.

Hollande's support was stable for the first round, but he remained the clear favourite to win a second-round run-off, with 56 percent to Sarkozy's 44 percent.

Far-right candidate Marine Le Pen of the National Front (FN) saw her support fall by 1.5 points to 16.5 percent of intended votes while centrist Francois Bayrou's support was stable at 13 percent.

"The gap is narrowing between the two main candidates in the presidential election, who are widening the gap with the other candidates," Le Figaro wrote.

Centre-right Sarkozy announced his candidacy on Wednesday for the two-round vote, to be held on April 22 and May 6.

He has since held a series of campaign events including a rally in Marseille on Sunday in which he called for the French people to stand with him to defend the traditional values of a strong France.

44 killed in Mexico prison riot

AFP, Monterrey

At least 44 inmates were killed in a Mexican prison riot on Sunday, just days after a deadly inferno in a jail in Honduras, again highlighting overcrowding in Latin American prisons.

The deaths occurred as clashes broke out in early Sunday between rival gangs at Apodaca prison, which was holding some 3,000 inmates despite an official capacity of 1,500.

The prison population in Mexico and Central America has swollen in line with the region's increasingly important role in the cocaine trafficking trade, meaning outdated facilities are straining at the seams.

Families gathered Sunday outside the Apodaca prison, located some 30 kilometres from the northern city of Monterrey, awaiting news of loved ones in a desperate scene.

UN nuclear inspectors to press Iran on weapons

AP, Tehran

UN nuclear inspectors starting a two-day visit to Tehran yesterday sought to meet Iranian nuclear scientists and visit a key military facility as they try to gauge allegations that Iran is pushing toward making an atomic weapon.

The trip is the second in less than a month by the International Atomic Energy Agency team, reflecting growing concerns over alleged weapons experiments - something Iran has so far both denied and refused to discuss.

Herman Nackaerts, a senior UN nuclear official, said in Vienna before the team departed on Sunday that he hoped for progress in the talks but his careful choice of words suggested little expectation the meeting will be successful.

The West suspects Iran's nuclear program is geared toward making weapons, a charge Iran denies, insisting it's for peaceful purposes only, such as power generation.

Iran's state radio said yesterday the inspectors hope to meet Iranian nuclear scientists and visit the Parchin military complex. The report said the IAEA had requested to visit Parchin, an Iranian military base and conventional weapons development facility outside of Tehran. The site has also been suspected of housing a secret underground facility used for Iran's nuclear program, a claim denied by Iranian authorities.

IAEA inspectors visited the site in 2005, but only one of four areas of potential interest within the grounds. At the time, the nuclear watchdog did not report any unusual activities but the Parchin site was prominently mentioned in the agency's report last year.

The report asserted that Iran constructed "a large explosives containment vessel" in which to conduct experiments on triggering a nuclear explosion, apparently 11 years ago, adding that it had satellite images "consistent with this information."

"Whatever the reasoning of the agency is, it proves the IAEA is not loyal to its previous commitments," the Iranian radio said. The tone of the commentary suggested the visit to the military complex would likely be denied.

The IAEA visit comes as Iran last week announced what it described as key advancements in its nuclear program, inserting the first domestically made fuel rod into a research reactor in Tehran and installing a new generation of Iranian-made centrifuges at the country's main uranium enrichment facility in the central town of Natanz.

Beyond concerns about the purported weapons work, Washington and its allies want Iran to halt uranium enrichment, which they believe could eventually lead to weapons-grade material and the production of nuclear weapons. Iran has been enriching uranium up to 20 percent, while uranium enriched to more than 90 percent can be used for a nuclear warhead.

NEWS IN brief

Saudi blames 'foreign parties' for Shia unrest

AP, Riyadh

A Saudi interior ministry official says "foreign parties" are instigating unrest in Shia-majority eastern regions, calling the protesters "the new terrorists."

The comments by the unnamed official were carried by the official Saudi Press Agency yesterday. Protesters from the country's Shia minority have held limited rallies for the past year in the east complaining of discrimination by the kingdom's Sunni rulers.

At least four protesters have been killed in clashes with security forces since November. Officials have blamed foreign meddling in an apparent reference to

Commonwealth report on Maldives within a week

AFP, Colombo

A Commonwealth panel will discuss the Maldives' membership within the next week following allegations that the ousting of the president was a breach of the group's democratic standards.

A three-member Commonwealth team completed investigations in the Maldives on Sunday and will report to a panel that deals with serious violations of the bloc's political values, the Commonwealth secretariat said in a statement.

"Our observations and recommendations will be presented to the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), which will meet in London in the coming week," the team said in the statement late

Mubarak deserves death penalty: Egypt prosecution

AP, Cairo

The chief prosecutor in the trial of ousted Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak has said in his closing remarks that the former president should be given the death penalty for the killings of protesters in last year's uprising.

Mustafa Suleiman says Mubarak clearly authorized use of live ammunition and a shoot-to-kill policy against peaceful protesters. Over 800 were killed in the crackdown from Jan. 25 to Feb. 11, 2011.

For this, Suleiman said yesterday, Mubarak and five co-defendants, including his longtime Interior Minister

Join politics

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politicians in a single category. "Politicians have contributions in both good and bad activities in Bangladesh and everyone should have the attitude of discarding the bad and accepting the good."

She claimed that a major part of the country's development in the last forty years had been achieved by governments run by the BNP.

Khaleda admitted to making mistakes and facing limitations in the past, but also claimed the BNP did not do any wrong intentionally.

She vowed to take lessons from the past and use the experience to run the country in future.

"We will not take revenge or act in jealousy. Rather, we will establish good governance and social justice. The media and judiciary will get real freedom. Reforms will be brought into the electoral system, parliament and the constitution," she noted.

A national consensus is necessary for a democratic and peaceful transition of power through an election, mentioned the opposition

leader. She said her party had already begun planning for a future Bangladesh.

Taking part in the discussion, some eminent citizens said people would go for a new political party if the existing ones failed to free politics from dishonesty.

Urging the political leaders, including Khaleda Zia, to nominate good persons at the next general elections, they stated that good governance and democracy would not flourish if bad persons were not removed from the political parties.

Political parties have proved that they will be dishonest during the polls to ensure a victory by any means, eminent jurist Dr Shahdeen Malik told the meeting.

"Politicians have to understand that our politics should get out of its present state. Those who have bad perceptions among people must be removed from the parties," he insisted.

Economist Dr Binayak Sen questioned how democracy would flourish if the elected representatives were not good even if the polling

was acceptable to all.

Governance and administration will be different, if only honest and competent persons are nominated at the next elections, he maintained.

Prof Altafunnesa Maya, coordinator of Gonoshasthaya Kendra, said democracy cannot be established only by holding parliamentary elections peacefully. "Democracy should be given institutional shape through practising it properly everywhere."

"All the lawmakers have to join parliament under any situation and each party must ensure democracy within itself," she added.

Chaired by Sadek Khan, president of Gonoshasthaya Kendra Trust, the meeting was also addressed by woman activist Salma Khan.

Earlier on Saturday, addressing the inaugural session, Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus called for an alternative political culture in the country to be introduced as, in his view, politicians had failed to fulfil the aspirations of the people.

Santorum questions Obama's 'world view,' not faith

AP, Cumming

Rick Santorum on Sunday condemned what he called President Barack Obama's world view that "elevates the Earth above man," discouraging increased use of natural resources.

The GOP presidential candidate also slammed Obama's health care overhaul for requiring insurers to pay for prenatal tests that, Santorum said, will encourage more abortions.

A day after telling an Ohio audience that Obama's agenda is based on "some phony theology, not a theology based on the Bible," Santorum said he wasn't criticizing the president's Christianity.

"I've repeatedly said I don't question the president's faith. I've repeatedly said that I believe the president's Christian," Santorum told CBS' "Face the Nation."

"I am talking about his world view, and the way he approaches problems in this country. I think they're different than how most people do in America," he said in the broadcast interview.

The former Pennsylvania senator said Obama's environmental policies promote ideas of "radical environmentalists," who, Santorum argues, oppose greater use of the country's natural resources because they believe "man is here to serve the Earth." He said that was the reference he was making



Saturday in his Ohio campaign appearance when he denounced a "phony theology."

When pressed by reporters after he made the initial remark, however, Santorum made no mention of the president's environmental policies. Instead, he suggested that Obama practices one of the "different stripes of Christianity."

Santorum walked back those comments on CBS Sunday morning.

But later in the day, he again criticized Obama's "theology" - with no reference to his environmental policies - while speaking to more than 2,000 supporters gathered at a suburban Atlanta megachurch.

The president is "trampling on a constitutional right," Santorum said of the Obama administration's recent decision to allow employees of religious schools and hospitals to have birth control covered by their insurance policies.

"It is imposing his ideology on a group of people expressing their theology, their moral code," Santorum told those gathered in the First Redeemer Church, a megachurch that hosted former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee four years ago.

Obama's campaign said Santorum's initial remarks were another attack on the president's faith by Republican rivals in a nominating contest that has grown increasingly bitter and negative.

Ghulam Azam lent support

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Peace Committee, and promised to provide all-out assistance to the Pakistani army to maintain "law and order."

Malum said this while reading out the formal charges against Ghulam Azam before the tribunal.

Ghulam Azam, 89, is facing charges on 62 specific crimes against humanity committed during the 1971 war. He is one of the front men who actively helped the Pakistani military's attempt to foil the birth of Bangladesh.

The three-member tribunal headed by Justice Md

Nizamul Huq continued hearing the formal charges against Azam for the third day yesterday.

The formal charges contain 191 pages and 151 of them have so far been read out before the tribunal, which is scheduled to hear the charges tomorrow.

Yesterday's reading covered mostly charges of incitement committed by Ghulam Azam during 1971 when he was chief of Jamaat's East Pakistan unit.

There were numerous instances cited from newspaper reporting on Ghulam Azam's meetings with the

Pakistani military junta as well as his speeches at different party meetings.

Reading out from the charges, the prosecutor said Ghulam Azam referred to the movement for liberation as "loathed attack from India" while addressing different programmes.

As the ameer of East Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami, Azam was in an authoritative position. But he did not stop the Pakistani rulers or army from carrying out crimes against humanity, the prosecutor commented.

Therefore, he is not free from the charges, he added.

Earlier, Prosecutor Nurjahan Begum Mukta began reading out the formal charges. She gave examples of Azam's role as a superior leader in different crimes against humanity committed in 1971.

Azam was not brought to the tribunal yesterday from his prison cell at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University hospital due to his old age and physical weakness.

He is among six Jamaat and two BNP leaders now facing war crimes charges at the tribunal.

MEMBER REHAB

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E-mail: thmkt@totalgroup-bd.com, www.totalgroup-bd.com