

Red Cross in new rescue bid in Homs

AFP, Damascus

The Red Cross made a new attempt yesterday to bring out people trapped in the besieged Syrian city of Homs, two of them wounded Western journalists, after a first successful rescue of civilians.

The humanitarian effort came after Arab and Western states urged Damascus to "immediately cease all violence" to allow access, more than three weeks into a deadly assault on rebels in Syria's third largest city. But forces of embattled President Bashar al-Assad resumed their shelling of Homs' Baba Amr district yesterday, and attacked elsewhere, killing at least 41 civilians across the country, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. 16 troops were also killed, sources said.

In Homs, the International Committee of the Red Cross was negotiating on Saturday to resume evacuations from Baba Amr, it said.

The spokesman confirmed the Red Cross and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent on Friday evacuated seven Syrians wounded in shelling by regime forces as well as 20 sick women and children. Eleven ambulances and other vehicles drove into Baba Amr, but only three ambulances left with hurt Syrians.

But they couldn't evacuate two wounded Western journalists and the bodies of two others, said the ICRC.

American reporter Marie Colvin and French photojournalist Remi Ochlik were killed on Wednesday when a rocket hit a makeshift media centre in Baba Amr, a rebel stronghold.

Assad's government accused rebels in Baba Amr of refusing to hand over Bouvier and the bodies of the two killed journalists to rescuers.

West has hegemonistic goals in Syria: China

US senators call for arming rebels

AFP, Beijing

Chinese state media yesterday accused the US and Europe of "harbouring hegemonistic ambitions" in Syria, after Western and Arab nations ratcheted up pressure on Bashar al-Assad at a meeting in Tunisia.

In a commentary Beijing's official Xinhua news agency said that "most of the Arab countries have begun to realise that the United States and Europe are hiding a dagger behind a smile".

"In other words, while they appear to be acting out of humanitarian concern, they are actually harbouring hegemonistic ambitions," it said.

Xinhua claimed that the Friends of Syria conference -- which was boycotted by both China and Russia -- "concluded with a consensus on avoiding a militarisation of the conflict in Syria".

But the meeting of more than 60 foreign ministers saw calls for Arab peacekeepers to

intervene and for the opposition to be armed, as well as a US warning that Assad would pay a heavy price for defying international will.

Meanwhile, three top US senators on Friday called for "responsible nations" to help the Syrian opposition, including providing weapons to defend themselves against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham and Independent Senator Joe Lieberman said in a statement "tangible actions" were urgently needed to "ensure that the Syrian people have the means to protect themselves against their attackers."

The senators also said aerial surveillance drones should be used to monitor movements of Assad's troops so the information could be reported to the regime's opponents. Some unmanned drones already are being used "to monitor sites containing weapons of mass destruction," the statement said.

Mandela admitted to hospital

AFP, Johannesburg

Nelson Mandela was admitted to hospital yesterday with a long-standing abdominal complaint but relatives and officials said the 93-year-old former South African leader's health is good.

President Jacob Zuma's office announced his hospitalisation, but a granddaughter insisted there was nothing to worry about, while the ruling African National Congress called it a planned check-up.

"Madiba has had a long-standing abdominal complaint and doctors feel it needs proper specialist medical attention," the presidency said in a statement, using Mandela's affectionate nickname.

Mandela remains a crucial figure in South Africa, beloved for leading the nation from the dark days of white-



minority rule to democracy and freedom.

Any health scare sparks national fears as he has become increasingly frail in his later years. His last major public appearance was at the closing ceremony of the football World Cup in July 2010.

Mandela was hospitalised early last year for an acute respiratory infection. Since then, he has divided his time between Johannesburg and his rural home village in the Eastern Cape, some 800 kilometres from the country's economic hub.

Mandela was released from 27 years in prison on February 11, 1990, and oversaw South Africa's path to its first democratic vote in 1994 when he was elected its first black president after decades of white-minority rule.

He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993 and served one term before stepping down in 1999.

N Korea vows 'sacred war' against South, US

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea threatened yesterday to wage a "sacred war" in response to joint military exercises planned by its arch-rival South Korea and the United States, saying it was determined to keep Washington from imposing its political will on it.

The statement was issued by the North's National Defence Commission a day after the secretive state held its first round of talks with the United States since the young and untested Kim Jong-un took office in December upon the death of his father.

"Now that a war has been declared against us, the army and people are firmly determined to counter it with a sacred war of our own style..." said the statement, carried by the state KCNA news agency.

"The US imperialists are the sworn enemy keen to launch another war of aggression to

impose an 'American style political mode' upon us..." The sacred war, it said, would use "strong means unknown to the world."

Pyongyang has periodically used the term "sacred war" to counter what it sees as a threat from the South and its US ally.

The United States and South Korea have scheduled to separate sets of war games next week. The North raised its level of military alert since the allies staged a live-fire artillery drill last week near a disputed sea border off the west coast -- also near a South Korean island bombarded by the North after a similar drill in 2010.

The latest drill, described by the South as routine, took place without incident.

The attack on the island of Yeonpyeong in November 2010, in which four people, including two civilians, were killed, was the first on civilians since the end of the 1950-53 Korean War.

NEWS IN brief

US drone crashes in NW Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

A US drone crashed in northwest Pakistan's tribal district near the Afghan border late yesterday, officials said.

The unmanned reconnaissance aircraft came down in the mountainous Machikhel area about 30 kilometres east of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan region, which is frequently targeted by drone strikes against Taliban and al-Qaeda militants, military and security officials said.

"A US drone crashed, apparently due to some technical fault," a military official in the northwestern city of Peshawar told AFP.

The crash site has been surrounded by militants, one security official said, refusing to confirm claims by some Taliban that the drone was shot down by insurgents. Militants had taken away parts of the wreckage, he said.

Bin Laden site being demolished

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani security forces yesterday began demolishing the compound where Osama bin Laden was killed in a covert US raid in May in the northwestern garrison town of Abbottabad, police and witnesses said.

The compound where bin Laden lived for several years has been under the control of the security forces since the al-Qaeda leader was killed by US Navy SEALs.

Police have been deployed at the outer cordon and army troops are around the compound, manning the inner cordon, he said.

Witnesses said troops blocked access to the compound, brought heavy machinery and barred journalists from taking pictures or coming close to the site.

Berlusconi bribery trial thrown out

AFP, Milan

An Italian court threw out bribery charges against former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi yesterday under the statute of limitations, bringing the five-year trial to an end.

Prosecutors had called for a five-year prison term for Berlusconi, who was accused of having paid off his former British tax lawyer David Mills to provide false testimony in his favour in two trials in the 1990s.

Judge Francesca Vitale spent three hours considering the verdict after defence lawyers presented their final arguments, but took less than a minute to tell a packed courtroom that she ruled that the case had run out of time allowed by law.

Berlusconi's lawyers refused to comment. The media magnate, who has always protested his innocence, was not in court.

Successor to Saleh sworn in

Deadly blast overshadows Yemen power transfer

AFP, Sanaa

Mansur Hadi vowed to press the fight against al-Qaeda in Yemen as he took the oath yesterday as the first president in Sanaa since 1978 after a year of turmoil and bloodshed.

The event was overshadowed by a suicide blast as a bomber blew up a vehicle outside a presidential palace in southeastern Yemen yesterday, killing 26 elite troops.

A military official said the bombing in the Hadramawt provincial capital Mukalla bore the hallmark of al-Qaeda.

Veteran strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh, who arrived back from medical treatment in the United States in the early hours, is to formally hand over the reins of power in a ceremony at the presidential palace on Monday.

The handover will put the seal on a hard-won November transfer of power deal, under which Saleh agreed to step

down in return for a controversial promise of immunity from prosecution over the deaths of hundreds of people during 10 months of protests against his rule.

The uprising split the security forces, left the two largest cities Sanaa and Ta'izz divided into rival zones of control and sparked a loss of central government control that al-Qaeda loyalists exploited to seize large swathes of the south and east.

Deafening applause filled the parliament chamber as Hadi rose for the ceremony which was broadcast live by state television.

In an address to the nation straight afterwards, the new president said he



Mansur Hadi

had the political legitimacy to meet the challenges after winning overwhelming endorsement in a Tuesday election in which his name was the only one on the ballot paper.

He vowed to "turn a new page in the building of a new Yemen which unites all its citizens."

Hadi promised to restore security across his impoverished nation "without which no economic development would be possible." He vowed to continue the fight against al-Qaeda as a patriotic duty.

Official results released late Friday gave Hadi 99.8 percent of valid votes cast in the election in which turnout reached 60 percent nationwide.

Saleh urged Yemenis to give their support to his successor. But he refused to accept the justice of the uprising against his rule, insisting that there had been "conspiracy from abroad" and that Yemenis had "foiled this conspiracy".

Islamists attack kills 14 cops in Nigeria

AFP, Kano

Suspected Boko Haram Islamists razed a police station and killed 14 people, whose bodies were found burned, in an overnight raid in Nigeria's northeastern city of Gombe, witnesses said yesterday.

The city was put under lockdown, with no residents allowed in public, after the gun and bomb assaults where attackers also tried to break into a prison in a failed attempt to free the inmates, witnesses and local radio said.

Boko Haram, responsible for a wave of recent raids in northern and central Nigeria, have repeatedly claimed its members are being illegally held in state prisons and have demanded their release.

Many of Boko Haram's recent attacks have targeted the police. Suspected members of the group also gunned to death five worshippers inside a mosque on Friday as evening prayers ended in Kano, Nigeria's second largest city.

Boko Haram's violent campaign has intensified in recent months and on Thursday Nigeria's top military chief said the group has formed links with al-Qaeda's north Africa branch, known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.

A jail guard told AFP late Friday that prison officers battled Boko Haram gunmen who tried to gain entry to the prison in an apparently failed bid to free group members being held there. However, he said that the prison was intact.

Anti-Putin march draws thousands

AFP, Saint Petersburg

Russian protest leader Alexei Navalny led thousands through the streets of Vladimir Putin's native city yesterday demonstrating against his likely return to the Kremlin in March 4 polls.

The demonstration was called a day before thousands more plan to link hands around Moscow in a symbolic show of frustration with the ex-KGB spy's decision to seek a third presidential term after dominating Russia for 12 years.

The 35-year-old Navalny has gained prominence among Russia's Internet-savvy youth for waging a tireless web campaign to expose state corruption.

No hard evidence Iran building bomb: Report

AFP, Washington

US intelligence analysts continue to believe there is no hard evidence that Iran has decided to build a nuclear bomb, The New York Times reported yesterday.

Citing unnamed US officials, the newspaper said the latest assessments by US spy agencies are broadly consistent with a 2007 intelligence finding that concluded that Iran had abandoned its nuclear weapons program.

The officials said that assessment was largely reaffirmed in a 2010 National Intelligence Estimate, and that it remains the consensus view of America's 16 intelligence agencies, the report said.

The Times said there was no dispute among American, Israeli and European intelligence officials that Iran had been enriching nuclear fuel to become a nuclear power.

But the Central Intelligence Agency and other intelligence agencies believe that Iran has yet to decide whether to resume a parallel program to design a nuclear warhead -- a



An aerial view of a nuclear compound in Iran

program they believe was essentially halted in 2003, the paper noted.

Intelligence officials and outside analysts believe there is another possible explanation for Iran's enrichment activity.

Rather than building a bomb now, Iran may want to increase its power by sowing doubt among other nations about its nuclear ambitions, The Times said.

Some point to the examples of Pakistan and India, both of which had clandestine nuclear weapons programs for decades before they actually decided to build bombs and test their weapons in 1998, the paper noted.

US to bolster defences in Hormuz strait

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon has notified US lawmakers of plans to bolster US defences in and around the Strait of Hormuz to be prepared for a military response against Iran, a report said Friday.

New mine-detection and clearing equipment as well as improved surveillance capabilities are part of the planned build-up, said the Wall Street Journal, citing defense officials briefed on the requests.

The Pentagon also wants to modify ship weapons systems to best deal with Iranian attack boats in the Strait, said the report.

The moves highlight efforts to boost US military capabilities amid heightened tension with Iran and rising speculation of a strike from Israel over Iran's nuclear program.



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton poses for a picture with participants in a Town Hall meeting at the Baron d'Erlanger Palace in Carthage yesterday. Hillary yesterday pledged that Washington would help Tunisia rebuild its economy and cement democracy, as the cradle of the Arab Spring struggles with reforms.

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