

Syria puts new constitution on vote

Military assault kills 30 more; Red Cross rescue mission fails

AFP, Damascus

Syrians were called to the polls yesterday to vote on a new constitution in the face of opposition calls for a boycott and deadly violence that Washington said made the exercise "laughable."

The new text ends the legal basis for the five-decade stranglehold on power of the ruling Baath party but leaves huge powers in the hands of President Bashar al-Assad.

The opposition says the changes are cosmetic and that only Assad's ouster will suffice after 11 months of repression by his security forces that human rights groups say have left more than 7,600 people dead.

On Saturday alone, 98 people were killed, 72 of them civilians, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

As polling was under way, the Britain-based watchdog reported new violence around the country that left 16 civilians and 14 security force personnel dead.

In the central city of Homs -- under assault by regime forces for more than three weeks -- shelling resumed of the rebel dis-



Supporters of President Assad rally after voting yesterday.

trict of Baba Amro, dashing Red Cross hopes of a lull to allow the evacuation of two wounded Western journalists.

Syrian state television aired live footage from a number of polling stations around the country and reported that "large number of voters" had turned out.

"I am voting because this is the outcome of reforms introduced by the president, and

if they succeed, we will have a democracy, not like in Libya and elsewhere," Balsam Kahila, 32, told AFP after voting in the capital at the finance ministry where she works.

Asked whether she thought it was right to hold the referendum in the thick of bloodshed, she said: "I am voting in spite of the armed gangs," using the term employed by the regime to refer to rebel fighters and mutinous troops.

At the voting centre, many did not bother to use the booth, showing to everyone their choice of "yes" to the new charter.

Outside, at the main Seven Fountains Square, large crowds gathered brandishing Syrian flags as pro-Assad anthems blurred from loudspeakers.

In the southwestern city of Sweida, in the heartland of the Druze minority, Maria, in her forties, said she voted without hesitation in favour of the new constitution, although she said it was not enough.

In Homs, no voting appeared to be taking place, activist Hadi Abdullah told AFP after touring parts of the city where rebels are active.

Assad unveiled the proposed new national charter earlier this month, in the latest step in what he says is a cautious process of reform.

Damascus's allies, Beijing and Moscow, which have blocked action against the regime at the UN Security Council, have expressed support for the process.

But White House spokesman Jay Carney rejected the vote: "It's actually quite laughable -- it makes a mockery of the Syrian revolution."

Drawn up by a committee of 29 people appointed by the president, the new charter would drop the highly controversial Article 8 in the existing charter, which makes Assad's Baath party "the head of state and society."

ILLEGAL FOREIGN FUNDING

Egypt begins trial of NGO activists

AFP, Cairo

Egypt yesterday started the trial of dozens of democracy activists including Americans on charges of receiving illegal foreign funding, despite Washington's insistence that the charges be dropped.

A prosecutor in the court in a Cairo suburb read out the charges against the defendants, saying their alleged acceptance of the illicit funds had "detracted from the sovereignty of the Egyptian state."

They are also accused of operating their groups illegally.

Most of the 43 defendants did not show up in court. An AFP correspondent said the 14 defendants who did appear denied they had committed crimes when asked by the judge.

Each one answered the judge in Arabic, and one defendant told AFP during a recess that the defendants in the court's black metal cage were all Egyptian.

After the brief hearing, the judge adjourned the trial to April 26, allowing the defendants who had appeared in court released until then. The first hearings in Egyptian trials usually allow the defendants to register their pleas and lawyers to make their demands.

Judicial sources said that along with 19 Americans, the remaining defendants were Norwegian, German, Serbian, Egyptian, Palestinian and Jordanian.

Britain leads dash to explore for oil in war-torn Somalia

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Britain is involved in a secret high-stakes dash for oil in Somalia, with the government offering humanitarian aid and security assistance in the hope of a stake in the beleaguered country's future energy industry.

Riven by two decades of conflict that have seen the emergence of a dangerous Islamic insurgency, Somalia is routinely described as the world's most comprehensively "failed" state, as well as one of its poorest. Its coastline has become a haven for pirates preying on international shipping in the Indian Ocean.

David Cameron last week hosted an international conference on Somalia, pledging more aid, financial help and measures to tackle terrorism. The summit followed a surprise visit by the foreign secretary, William Hague, to Mogadishu, the Somali capital, where he talked about "the



UK PM with his Somali counterpart in London summit on Somalia.

beginnings of an opportunity" to rebuild the country.

The Observer can reveal that, away from the public focus of last week's summit, talks are going on between British officials and Somali counterparts over exploiting oil reserves that have been explored in the arid north-eastern region of the country.

British involvement in the future Somali oil industry would be a boon for the UK economy and comes at a

time when the world is increasingly concerned about the actions of Iran, the second-biggest oil producer in Opec.

Hashi, in charge of brokering deals for the region's oil reserves, also said Somalia was looking to BP as the partner they wanted to "help us explore and build our oil capacity".

Somali Prime Minister Abdiweli Mohamed Ali said his government had little choice but to entice western companies to Somalia by offering a slice of the country's natural resources, which include oil, gas and larger reserves of uranium.

"The only way we can pay [western companies] is to pay them in kind, we can pay with natural resources at the fair market value."

Britain is not the only country looking to develop Somalia's vast natural resources. Last month oil exploration began in Puntland by the Canadian company Africa Oil, the first drilling in Somalia for 21 years.

Suicide attack targets Nigeria church, kills 3

AFP, Lagos

A suicide bomber smashed his explosives-laden car through the gates of a packed church during Sunday service in Jos, central Nigeria, killing three people and injuring dozens, church leaders said.

Witnesses said a black car crashed through the gate of a perimeter fence and exploded a few metres from the wall of an 800-seater church hall in the volatile city.

The attack is the latest in a country grappling with almost daily bomb and gun assaults, most of them blamed on the Islamist sect Boko Haram.

Mark Lipdo, another church member and activist with the Christian human rights Stefanos Foundation, said pieces of human flesh littered the church premises and dozens of parked cars had been destroyed.

Romney leads Santorum ahead of Michigan battle

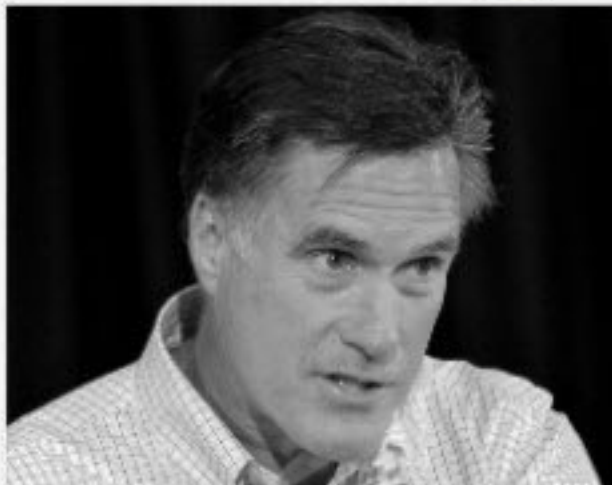
REUTERS, Michigan

White House hopefuls Mitt Romney and Rick Santorum battled over who was the most conservative Republican on Saturday and knocked President Barack Obama over soaring gasoline prices as the high-octane race in Michigan moved toward a still-uncertain finish.

With three days to go before voting starts in the state where Romney grew up, the two top contenders worked to shore up local support in a bid to keep momentum as the unpredictable race for the Republican presidential nomination rounds the next bend.

The winner in Michigan where a win could establish one of them as the frontrunner heading into Super Tuesday on March 6, the biggest voting day of the US campaign season.

Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts and longtime front-runner for the nomination, has the most to lose if



Mitt Romney



Rick Santorum

Michigan falls out of his grasp.

A Santorum win in the Rust Belt state would be a sharp blow to Romney's political standing, already dented by the former Pennsylvania senator's recent victories in Colorado, Minnesota and Missouri.

But a lackluster performance by Santorum in Wednesday's Republican debate and concern among party stalwarts about his electability have given Romney an opening.

An average of polling data by RealClearPolitics showed Romney with a slight lead over his chief rival in Michigan. In Arizona, which also holds a primary contest on Tuesday, Romney was projected to beat Santorum handily.

NEWS IN brief

Marie Colvin to be buried in Syria

CNN ONLINE

The body of Marie Colvin, a veteran correspondent for The Sunday Times of London who was killed in a shelling attack in the Syrian city of Homs, will likely be buried inside Syria, her mother said Saturday.

Rosemarie Colvin said aid workers, who have been trying for days to remove her daughter's body from the war-ravaged country, tried again Saturday but ultimately determined that the situation was too dangerous.

The younger Colvin, 56, a New York native who was the only British newspaper journalist inside the Homs neighborhood of Baba Amr, was killed alongside French journalist Remi Ochlik in a bombing attack earlier this week.

Mandela fine after routine check

AFP, Cape Town

Nelson Mandela is fine after a minor diagnostic procedure to probe persistent abdominal pain, South Africa's defence minister said yesterday as the country anxiously awaited his release from hospital.

The 93-year-old former president was hospitalised Saturday for what President Jacob Zuma's office described as "a long-standing abdominal complaint", putting South Africa on edge over the increasingly frail health of its beloved icon.

South African President Jacob Zuma had said Saturday that Mandela would be discharged either Sunday or Monday.

Rumours over his health flare up periodically, and his public appearances have grown increasingly rare. The last was at the final of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Powerful quake rocks Taiwan

AFP, Taipei

A shallow 5.9-magnitude earthquake sent people fleeing onto the streets in Taiwan's second-largest city Kaohsiung yesterday and rail services were temporarily suspended, but no casualties were reported.

The quake struck 57 kilometres east of the southern city at 10:34am at a depth of just four kilometres, the US Geological Survey said.

The Hong Kong Observatory measured the quake at magnitude 6.0, while Taiwan's Seismology Centre put the magnitude at 6.1.

In September 1999, a 7.6-magnitude tremor killed around 2,400 people in the deadliest natural disaster in the island's recent history.

Iran warns 'attack will lead to Israel's collapse'

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Iran on late Saturday warned Israel against mounting an attack on its nuclear facilities amid rising international tension over its uranium enrichment programme.

General Ahmad Vahidi issued a statement warning Israel that an attack would lead to the collapse of the Jewish state.

The warning on Iran's state-run Press TV website came after a UN report said Iran had tripled its production rate of enriched uranium over the past three months.

Meanwhile diplomatic experts have warned that a pre-emptive attack on Iran's nuclear sites by Israel could draw the US into a new Middle East conflict.

"Israel can commence a war with Iran, but it may well take US involvement to conclude it," said Karim Sadjadpour, a Middle East specialist at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

If Israel's American-made strike planes managed to penetrate Iranian air space and bomb Iran's main nuclear facilities, some of which are underground, then Iran would be expected to retaliate.

Senegal votes in contentious election

AFP, Dakar

Senegal went to the polls yesterday in a contentious election in which President Abdoulaye Wade is seeking a third term, testing its credentials as one of Africa's most stable countries.

Hundreds of people lined up in polling stations around the west African nation as voting began at 0800 GMT in the poll pitting the 85-year-old incumbent against 13 opposition candidates in a wide-open race.

Some 5.3 million voters have registered to vote in the election which has been marred by weeks of deadly protests over Wade's candidacy which left six people dead, prompting international calls for calm.

Barack Obama has not ruled out using force to stop Iran from building a bomb. But his administration, joined by many allied nations, has counselled Israel to hold off.

Obama is due to meet the Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, at the White House on 5 March.

Iran's warning follows increasingly tough rhetoric from Israel about the need to halt Iran's nuclear development.

Israeli officials believe a pre-emptive strike must happen before the summer because Tehran is moving more of its nuclear installations underground.

Meanwhile, Israel's intelligence minister yesterday said the fall of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad would end an axis with Iran and its President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, benefiting Israel.

"There is an Assad-Ahmadinejad axis, a Tehran-Damascus axis," Dan Meridor told army radio. "Breaking this axis would be good for Israel."

Israel has watched closely the turmoil in Syria which is the major ally of Iran, Iran's arch rival.

Murdoch's new tabloid hits stands with ethics pledge

AFP, London

Rupert Murdoch's Sun on Sunday tabloid hit news stands yesterday, replacing the defunct News of the World with a pledge to meet high ethical standards after a "challenging" chapter in its history.

The 80-year-old media baron personally supervised the production late Saturday at a printworks in Hertfordshire, north of London, showing his support for what he hopes will be Britain's most-read Sunday newspaper.

The tycoon tweeted over the weekend that the first edition of the Sun on Sunday -- which means that the paper is now published seven days a week -- was a "fantastic achievement by great staff". In an editorial titled "A new Sun rises today" said the newspaper was appointing a so-called Readers' Champion to deal with complaints and correct errors, while also vowing that



its journalists would be ethical.

"Our journalists must abide by the Press Complaints Commission's editors code, the industry standard for ethical behaviour, and the News Corporation standards of business conduct," the editorial read.

"You will be able to trust our journalists to abide by the values of decency as they gather news," adding that the paper would also be "fearless, outspoken, mischievous and fun".

The Sun on Sunday was published more than seven months after Murdoch's News Corp was forced to close its top-selling Sunday tabloid, the 168-year-old News of the World, amid outrage over the hacking of mobile phone voicemails.

The launch of the paper has been seen as an attempt by Murdoch to wrong-foot both critics and staff reportedly angry that News Corp had given police the information that led to some of the arrests. It has also been seen as a way of reassuring News Corp shareholders in the US that the firm is trying to move on from the News of the World scandal.



LEADERSHIP ROW

Gillard set to win today's vote

REUTERS, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard was poised to win a leadership vote against rival Kevin Rudd today despite polls showing a government under her leadership would be decimated at the next elections due by late 2013.

Gillard said she was confident she would win the prime ministerial showdown against Rudd and hoped the result would end months of bitter leadership infighting within the ruling Labor Party and give the government time to reconnect with voters.

Rudd supporters also acknowledged Gillard was likely to win the leadership vote despite polls showing Labor had a better chance of an election victory under Rudd.

Rudd, who ignited the leadership crisis when he suddenly resigned as foreign minister in Washington on Wednesday, was dumped as prime minister in June 2010 after Gillard led an internal party coup, creating a damaging leadership rivalry.

Gillard went on to win dead heat elections in late 2010, securing a one-seat majority in the 150-seat parliament with support from the Greens and two independents.

A surprise Rudd victory could force an early election if he can't woo independent support, putting at risk the government's carbon tax and 30 percent tax on coal and iron ore mines, both due to start in July this year.