

Syria approves new constitution

REUTERS, Amman

Syrian artillery pounded rebel-held areas of Homs yesterday as President Bashar al-Assad's government announced that voters had overwhelmingly approved a new constitution in a referendum derided as a sham by his critics at home and abroad.

While foreign powers argued over whether to arm the rebels, the Syrian Interior Ministry said the reformed constitution, which could keep Assad in power until 2028, had received 89.4 percent approval from more than eight million voters.

Syrian dissidents and Western leaders dismissed as a farce Sunday's vote, conducted in the midst of the country's bloodiest turmoil in decades, although Assad says the new constitution will lead to multi-party elections within three months.

Officials put national voter turnout at close to 60 percent, but diplomats who toured polling stations in Damascus saw only a handful of voters at each location. On the same day, at least 59 people were killed in violence around the country.

The outside world has proved powerless to halt the killing in Syria, where repression of initially peaceful protests has spawned an armed insurrection by army deserters and others.

Qatar joined Saudi Arabia in advocating arming Syrian rebels, given that Russia and China have twice used their vetoes to block any action by the United Nations Security Council.

"I think we should do whatever is necessary to help them, including giving them weapons to defend themselves," Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani said in Oslo.

Arab countries should help lead a military force to provide a safe haven for anti-Assad forces inside Syria, he added.

Assad says he is fighting foreign-backed "armed terrorist groups" and his main allies - Russia, China and Iran - fiercely oppose any outside intervention intended to add him to the list of Arab autocrats unseated by popular revolts in the past year.

China called US policy in the region "super-arrogant" and Russia's Vladimir Putin warned against any action that bypassed the UN Security Council, where Moscow has a veto.

Shells and rockets crashed into Sunni Muslim districts of Homs that have already endured weeks of bombardment as Assad's forces, led by officers from his minority Alawite sect, try to stamp out an almost year-long revolt against his 11-year rule.

TALIBAN BOMB ATTACK Nine killed in Afghan Nato base

AFP, Kabul

A Taliban suicide car bomber targeting Nato troops at an airport in eastern Afghanistan killed nine people yesterday, on a seventh day of violence over the burning of the Quran at a US airbase.

The insurgents also said they were behind an attempt to poison foreign troops, as the death toll from unrest and protests that spread to even usually peaceful parts of the war-ravaged country hit about 40.

Six civilians, an Afghan soldier and two local guards were killed in the bomb attack on the military base at Jalalabad airport, but Nato troops escaped unhurt.

The Taliban said it was revenge for the Quran burning.

Assassination bid on Putin foiled

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian and Ukrainian security services have foiled a plot to assassinate Vladimir Putin after next week's presidential election, Ukraine's SBU counter-intelligence agency said yesterday.

Russian pro-government Channel One television said Ukrainian special services in the Black Sea port of Odessa had held two men linked to a group seeking an Islamist state in Russia's North Caucasus.

"I can officially confirm that they were preparing an (assassination) attempt on Putin," said Marina Ostapenko, a spokeswoman for the SBU.

Ostapenko said two men were under arrest. One was seized in Odessa after being wounded in an explosion at an apartment in the city on January 4 which also killed another alleged plotter.

The second man, who was on the international wanted list, was arrested a month later after initially escaping, she said.

"We found him in an apartment and detained him without a single shot being fired on February 4," she said.

Some Russians reacted with skepticism, making clear on social network sites that they did not believe the report or suggesting the timing of the announcement was intended to attract sympathy for Putin before the March 4 election.

Opinion polls show Putin, a former KGB officer who crushed separatists during a war he launched in the Chechnya region in the North Caucasus before he became president, will easily win the election and reclaim the post he held from 2000 until 2008.

But he faces a growing opposition protest movement and wants to secure outright victory on Sunday, averting a runoff that might dent his authority.

The appearance of broad electoral fraud in December parliamentary elections has stirred skepticism about Putin largely among liberals and nationalists in the cities of Moscow and St Petersburg. The internet has been used to mobilise anti-Putin protests over the last three months.

One person, identified only as zilnur, said on his Russian-language Twitter feed: "I am watching the news on TV - Putin uncovered an assassination attempt on himself. Just before the election... Clowns."



Iran gov't's talks offer 'satisfactory'

Says Swedish minister

REUTERS, Brussels

An offer of negotiations from Iran is "basically satisfactory" and talks with global powers on Tehran's nuclear program could start soon, Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt said yesterday.

Facing sanctions that could cripple its oil exports, Iran said this month it wanted to resume the talks frozen since January last year. But six big powers, represented by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, have yet to respond to the offer.

"We had a letter from the Iranians which was basically satisfactory," Bildt told reporters in Brussels before a meeting of European Union foreign ministers. "Now it's a question of the timing of those particular talks... I don't know, but I don't think it's going to take too long."

A spokeswoman for Ashton said on Saturday that consultations between European governments and China, Russia and the United States were still going on to decide whether to engage Iran's approach.

The EU and US have said concerns over Iran's atomic activity have increased since a new report by the International Atomic Energy Agency last week.

Bomb blast kills 5 after Pak ministers' meeting

AFP, Peshawar

A bomb killed at least five people and wounded another 17 yesterday, targeting a public meeting attended by provincial ministers in volatile northwestern Pakistan, police said.

The bomb went off soon after chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Amir Haider Hoti, and other ministers in his provincial cabinet had left the meeting in the town of Nowshera.

It was the third bomb in five days to hit the northwest, which in recent months had seen a decline in violence linked to a local Taliban insurgency directed against a government allied to the US-led war against terror.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of Majlis Ulma Nuzamia Pakistan shout slogans during a protest in Lahore yesterday. Pakistan strongly condemned the Quran desecration incident in Afghanistan's Bagram airbase, the country's foreign ministry said in a statement.

NEWS IN brief

New evidence casts doubt in Lockerbie case

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Fresh scientific evidence unearthed by a Scottish legal review undermines the case against the man convicted of being responsible for the Lockerbie aircraft bombing, an investigation for Al Jazeera has found.

The Scottish Criminal Case Review Commission (SCCRC) report details evidence that would probably have resulted in the verdict against Abdel Baset al-Meghrabi, a Libyan man convicted of carrying out the bombing of Pan-Am flight 103 in 1988, being overturned.

'Lockerbie: Case Closed', an hour-long documentary aired on Al Jazeera yesterday, examines the evidence uncovered by the SCCRC as well as revealing fresh scientific evidence which is unknown to the

Iran state TV says Oscar win a victory over Israel

AP, Tehran

Iran's state TV described the country's first foreign language film's Oscar win yesterday as a victory over archfoe Israel, a rare nod of approval toward a movie industry often criticised by Iranian hardliners.

The official reaction to the victory of "A Separation" in Sunday's Academy Awards ceremony was cast mostly in nationalist terms amid a mounting showdown between Israel and its Western allies over Tehran's nuclear programme.

The Israeli film "Footnote" was in the competition against director Asghar Farhadi's movie, which explores troubles in Iran society through the story of a

Wikileaks publishes confidential emails from Stratfor

BBC ONLINE

Whistleblowing website Wikileaks has begun publishing the first of more than five million confidential emails from US-based security think tank Stratfor.

The group said the documents would reveal Stratfor's "web of informers, pay-off structure, payment-laundering techniques and psychological methods".

Stratfor's computers were hacked by the activist group Anonymous in December. Stratfor boss George Friedman said at the time anyone looking for signs of a vast conspiracy would be disappointed.



Australian PM wins leadership ballot

REUTERS, Canberra

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard convincingly won a leadership vote against rival Kevin Rudd yesterday, just as opinion polls showed her unpopular minority government clawing back voter support despite the bitter fight to head the party.

In a victory news conference, Gillard said the battle in the Labor party had been "ugly" and that Australians were fed up with the political brawl, but promised her government would now unite and put voters first, adding she was convinced Labor could win the next election due by mid-2013.

"Today I want to say to Australians... the leadership question is now determined," said Gillard, who won the vote 71 to 31, ending former foreign minister Rudd's hopes of returning as prime minister before the next election.

"I understand that many Australians will have their doubts that after this fight Labor will come together in a united way. We have come together before and we will do so now," she said.

"I absolutely believe that united we can win the next election. I will take Labor to that election and I am confident we can win that election."

Leading pollster Newspoll yesterday showed that Labor was recovering some ground, rising two points to 47 percent, though it still lags the opposition's 53 percent.



Nepal bomb blast kills three

AFP, Kathmandu

At least three people were killed and seven wounded in an explosion near government offices in Kathmandu yesterday, police said, in the first bomb attack in the Nepali capital for three years.

The device, which went off at 1:25pm in a busy area where workers were heading out of offices on their lunch breaks, killed two people instantly while a third died in hospital, officials and police said.

A little-known organisation calling itself the Unified Ethnic Liberation Front claimed responsibility, Home Minister Bijay Kumar Gachhadar said, although their agenda remains unclear.

"We will take action against the group. This is a political group which the police are investigating," he told AFP.

Lankans protest US move over 'war crimes'

AFP, Colombo

Tens of thousands of ruling party supporters led by cabinet ministers staged demonstrations across Sri Lanka yesterday protesting Washington's moves to censure Colombo over alleged war crimes.

At least five cabinet ministers led crowds in Colombo where they chanted slogans against Washington's plan to move a resolution against Sri Lanka at the UN Human Rights Council which opened in Geneva yesterday.

"We are here to protest the action the US is trying to take against us," Energy Minister Champaka Ranawaka said.

"America is trying to break up our country," said Labour Minister Gamini Lokuge.

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE 2012 Bill Clinton, Manning among nominees

REUTERS, Oslo

Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki, alleged WikiLeaks whistleblower Bradley Manning, and former US president Bill Clinton may be among the hundreds of nominees for the 2012 Nobel Peace Prize, rights activists say.

The list of nominees, which is now officially closed for this year, is secret and Nobel officials would not comment on its contents. But experts have begun speculating about who is on the list and some people eligible to nominate candidates have publicized their suggestions. The committee added the final names for consideration on Friday.

"It could well be that they look to Tunisia," veteran Nobel-watcher Jan Egeland, European director of Human Rights Watch, said yesterday after the five-member Norwegian Nobel Committee said it was considering two hundred and thirty-one names.

"It's the only shining success story of the Arab Spring so far." Marzouki, a human rights activist who became Tunisian president in December, "would symbolize the whole peaceful transition from authoritarian repression to democracy," said Egeland.

Other known candidates are former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the architect of Germany's post-war reunification, as well as the European Union itself.

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