

Syrian army pounds rebels

New move at UN, foreign journalists evacuated

REUTERS, Amman

Syrian forces shelled opposition strongholds, killing at least 25 people, yesterday and a wounded British photographer was smuggled out of Homs into neighboring Lebanon.

France said the UN Security Council was starting work on a draft resolution on the violence in Syria and the need to gain humanitarian access to Homs and other embattled areas.

"We hope Russia and China will not oppose the proposed resolution," French Foreign Ministry spokesman Bernard Valero said. "Given the emergency, it's time that all the council members, without exception, put a stop to this barbarity."

Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution a month ago that would have demanded an end to the bloodshed and backed an Arab League call for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down.

Activists said Assad sent units of an elite armored division, which is led by

his brother Maher, into Homs overnight. Tanks with the words "Fourth Division Monsters" painted on them moved close to the besieged Baba Amro district.

British photographer Paul Conroy, of London's Sunday Times, was spirited safely out of Homs into Lebanon. "He is in good shape and in good spirits," the newspaper said.

Conroy had been among several foreign journalists trapped in Baba Amro, where Marie Colvin, a veteran war correspondent also with the Sunday Times, and French photographer Remi Ochlik were killed in a bombardment on February 22.

Some Syrian activists said Edith Bouvier, a freelance reporter working for French daily Le Figaro, who has a broken leg, had also escaped. But there was no immediate confirmation.

Valero, the French Foreign Ministry spokesman, said he could not confirm or deny the report. "We ask people to be extremely cautious with this kind of information," he added.

An activist with the campaign group Avaaz, which said it had arranged Conroy's escape, said Bouvier and two other Western journalists were believed to be still in Homs.

In Hama province, security forces bombarded the town of Helfaya, a centre of protests in the uprising against Assad.

Activists said the 20 deaths of Sunni Muslim villagers there were among at least 100 killed in the province in the last two weeks in revenge for rebel Free Syrian Army attacks on security forces commanded by members of Assad's minority Alawite sect.

The reports could not be independently confirmed. Syrian authorities tightly restrict media access to the country.

Opposition groups say hundreds of civilians have been killed or wounded in the siege of Baba Amro and other rebellious districts in Homs, where terrified residents are enduring dire conditions, without proper supplies of water, food and medicine.



PHOTO: AFP

Members of trade unions participate in a rally during a nationwide strike in Ahmedabad yesterday. A nationwide strike called by trade unions including those affiliated with the government hit Indian cities, as millions joined the call for tighter labour laws and a minimum wage.

Nuclear Iran would 'choke' world economy: Israel PM

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday warned that a nuclear-armed Iran would control the major Gulf oil producers, send energy prices soaring, and "choke" the globaleconomy.

"Everyone needs to understand that if we're worried today about rising oil prices we shall be far more worried if Iran, heaven forbid, gains control over the energy centres in the Persian Gulf," he told a conference on environmentally-friendly economic growth.

"Iran would be able to dictate far higher oil prices and, by so doing, choke the world economy," he said in remarks broadcast on Israeli public radio.

"Anyone who is interested in stopping the manipulative use of oil production, its influence on world markets, the threats to the world's economies, must also for that reason enlist to stop Iran's nuclear race."

Israel and much of the international community fear Iran's nuclear programme masks a bid for weapons, a charge Tehran



denies.

The International Atomic Energy Agency said in a report on Friday that Iran had tripled its capacity to enrich uranium to 20-percent purity since November. The UN nuclear watchdog said Iran was now producing around 14 kilos of uranium per month, with around 105 kilos already stockpiled.

Enriching uranium to 20 percent is a major step towards purifying it to the 90-percent level needed for a nuclear weapon, although Iran denies intending to do so, saying its atomic activities are entirely peaceful.

"The agency continues to have serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear programme," the IAEA said in its report, two days after an inspection team returned from Tehran.

Israel, the sole if undeclared nuclear power in the Middle East, says all options are open to stop Tehran's ambitions, but it is under intense pressure from Washington and Europe not to launch a pre-emptive military strike.

Bus ambush in Pakistan kills 18

DAWN ONLINE

Sectorian gunmen ambushed a bus yesterday, killing 18 Shia Muslims in a usually peaceful region of northern Pakistan that neighbours the former Taliban stronghold of Swat, officials said.

The bus was stopped, before passengers were ordered off and shot in the mountainous district of Kohistan as it travelled from Rawalpindi to the northern city of Gilgit.

"Armed men hiding on both sides of the road attacked the bus," local police chief Mohammad Ilyas said.

"Eighteen people have died and eight wounded," he added. The ambush happened near the town of Harban, 130 miles (208 kilometres) north of the capital Islamabad.

Romney faces day of reckoning in Michigan

REUTERS, Southfield

Mitt Romney faces a day of reckoning today when Michigan votes to either grant him a big victory in the Republican presidential nomination battle or hand him a humiliating defeat.

Romney was born and raised in Michigan and his father was a popular governor, but conservatives are threatening to deliver the state to Rick Santorum, who is running neck-and-neck with Romney in the polls in the final hours before voting begins.

Most Michigan polls close at 8:00 pm EST.

Arizona votes as well on yesterday and Romney has a comfortable lead there, aided by the man who beat him in the 2008 Republican presidential campaign, Arizona Senator John McCain.

All eyes are on Michigan because a victory for Santorum on what is essentially Romney's home turf would raise questions about Romney's candidacy a week before a defining day of the 2012 campaign, March 6, the "Super Tuesday" when 10 states hold contests.

"I am going to win in Michigan and I'm going to win across the country," Romney said on Monday.

His aides, contemplating the possibility of a defeat, believe Romney could survive a loss in Michigan should it occur



because of this year's elongated nomination process.

"The bottom line is you want to win it but it is not as devastating as you guys want to make it out to be if we don't," said a senior Romney strategist.

Santorum, a former Pennsylvania senator, has made himself competitive in Michigan by pressing his conservative views on social issues and by spreading a blue-collar message about the need to rebuild the manufacturing base in the hard-hit Midwestern state.

"We've been traveling all over the state, and I'm really excited about the response. I think we're going to surprise a few people tomorrow night," Santorum said on Monday.

A Santorum win could upend the race and prompt the Republican establishment - concerned that Santorum's strong religious conservatism could make him unelectable - to search for a new candidate to join the race.

An unpredictable factor in Michigan was the ability of Democrats to vote in the Republican primary and try to thwart Romney by voting for Santorum, who many see as having little chance of defeating Democratic President Barack Obama in the Nov 6 election should he become the Republican nominee.

NEWS IN brief

Sonia Gandhi goes abroad for medical check up

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Nearly six months after undergoing a surgery abroad, Congress president Sonia Gandhi has travelled out of the country for a "routine check up" in connection with the treatment for her undisclosed illness.

"Congress president Sonia Gandhi has travelled abroad for routine check up after six months of her earlier treatment," AICC general secretary Janardan Dwivedi said here yesterday.

He said Gandhi, 65, would return in four to five days. Party sources said that Gandhi left for a foreign destination on Monday night without disclosing the nature of the check up.

Vietnam communist party vows internal reform

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam's communist party is debating how to tackle corrupt officials and reverse a "serious" moral decline among rank and file members in order to regain people's trust, state media reported yesterday.

Around 1,000 delegates, including the party's executive, the Politburo, are meeting in Hanoi this week to discuss ways to tackle corruption, rising inequality and "ideological decline," the official Nhan Dan paper reported.

"These are issues of great concern and pose the biggest risks for the ruling party," said party leader Nguyen Phu Trong at the opening of the three-day national conference.

80pc Indian-Americans to vote for Obama

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Indian-Americans would overwhelmingly vote for US President Barack Obama in the November presidential elections, while Mitt Romney has been named as favourite among the Republican presidential candidates, according to a latest opinion poll.

"Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney leads his nearest rivals Ron Paul by 24.1 percentage points and former Senator Rick Santorum by 33.4 percentage points," said the latest national opinion poll among Indian-Americans.



Myanmar relaxes grip on media

AP, Yangon

It was a newspaper article that just months ago, Myanmar's draconian state censors never would have approved.

It told how prison authorities crudely attempted to cure a scabies outbreak by wiping down naked inmates with medicine-laden brooms - a demeaning act that revealed the poverty of the nation's prisons and the decrepit state of its health care system.

"In the past it would've been a very dangerous thing to publish," said Zaw Thet Htwe, who wrote the story and was a political prisoner himself until last month. "It wasn't allowed."

But in a sign of just how much is changing in this long-oppressed nation, it was allowed. The article was not only published this month in the Health Journal, a Yangon-based weekly, but it hit the streets without having to be reviewed first by the government's infamous censorship body, the Press Scrutiny and Registration Department.

Yesterday, images of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, once a highly taboo figure, routinely appear on the front pages of everything except state-controlled media. And the days of buying foreign publications, only to find sensitive stories cut out, are over.

"It's much more relaxed," said Thiha Saw, chief editor of a news weekly called Open News, who said he's now able to write freely about fires, murders and natural disasters - all prohibited at various times in the past.

South passes resolution on N Korea refugees

BBC ONLINE

South Korea's parliament has passed a resolution demanding that China stops the repatriation of North Korean refugees.

The move follows a string of protests over the fate of some 30 North Koreans who are reportedly facing deportation from China and harsh repercussions.

The resolution was backed by 154 lawmakers yesterday.

They also called on the UN and other bodies to put pressure on Beijing to follow international law.

China says that the North Koreans are "illegal economic migrants" who must be returned home. Its stand on the North Koreans is not a new policy - it has been sending back those it finds within its borders for many years.

Release democracy activists

HRW calls on Bahrain

AFP, Dubai

Human Rights Watch yesterday called for the release of hundreds of Bahraini pro-democracy activists arrested after last year's uprising and for all charges against them to be dropped.

"Grossly unfair military and civilian trials have been a core element in Bahrain's crackdown on pro-democracy protests," HRW said. Cases "against everyone convicted on politically motivated charges" should be dropped.

The New York-based group also called for the release of at least four Shiite protest leaders who remain in prison for expressing anti-government sentiments and demanding political reform.

According to HRW, hundreds of Bahraini activists have been tried in special military courts set up after King Hamad declared a quasi state of emergency last March as his security forces crushed a month-long uprising in Manama.

The rights group said that by October, all the special military court cases had been transferred to civilian courts.

But "egregious violations of fair trial rights in political cases" continued in Bahrain's criminal justice system "with serious systemic problems," despite government pledges to reform, HRW said.

"Serious abuses included denying defendants the right to counsel and to present a defence, and failure to investigate credible allegations of torture and ill-treatment," it said, citing a 94-page report on judicial violations.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters shout from a makeshift barricade at the occupy protest camp outside Saint Paul's Cathedral in central London, early yesterday, as police and bailiffs evict demonstrators. Police and bailiffs moved to dismantle the anti-capitalist camp which sprang up outside London's St Paul's Cathedral in October last year, according to the city's local authority.

Putin says doesn't fear enemies

AP, Moscow

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin says he doesn't fear his enemies, a day after the state television reported security forces had foiled a plot to assassinate him.

Russia's Channel One reported Monday that forces had foiled an alleged Chechen-linked plot to kill Putin with powerful explosives - a claim likely to boost his support ahead of Sunday's presidential election.

Putin said yesterday that he knew about the plot, but wasn't intimidated. He was quoted by Russian newswires as saying he had been aware of enemies' intent to target him since he first became president 12 years ago.

INDIA'S ASSEMBLY POLLS 57 pc turnout in sixth phase UP election

THE HINDU ONLINE

An estimated 57 per cent votes were yesterday cast in the sixth and penultimate phase of Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls in 68 seats across 13 districts, popularly known as the Jat land, where voting was by and large peaceful.

"Barring minor incidents, polling process was peacefully over at 5 p.m and as per an estimate 57 per cent of 2.17 crore voters exercised their franchise," an Election Commission official said.

Yesterday's polls will decide the fate of 1103 candidates, including 86 women.

Police used mild force to disperse a local BSP leader and his supporters who created a ruckus at a polling centre at Singhani gate area in Ghaziabad on the outskirts of Delhi.

Thai 'Yellow Shirt' founder jailed

AFP, Bangkok

A court in Thailand yesterday sentenced one of the kingdom's most controversial political figures, media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul, to 20 years in prison for corporate fraud.

Sondhi is the founder of the royalist "Yellow Shirt" protest movement, which has played a major role in Thailand's colour-coded political conflict and helped to topple fugitive former premier Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006.

The Criminal Court in Bangkok convicted Sondhi of violating the Securities and Exchange Act in a case dating back to the mid-1990s, and gave him the maximum sentence possible, a court official told AFP.

He was accused by Thailand's Securities and Exchange Commission of falsifying documents used as collateral for a loan of almost 1.1 billion baht (36 million dollars) for his ASTV/Manager media empire.

Mass protests by the Yellow Shirts, formally known as the People's Alliance for Democracy, helped trigger the 2006 coup by royalist generals who ousted Thaksin, then seen as Sondhi's arch-enemy.

Thaksin now lives in self-imposed exile overseas to avoid a jail term imposed in his absence for corruption, but his younger sister Yingluck Shinawatra is the current prime minister.



Sondhi Limthongkul