



## Putin declines to back Syria regime

AFP, Moscow

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin stopped short of backing Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian crisis, saying Russia had no special relationship with his regime and refusing to predict that the president would stay in power.

With pressure mounting on Moscow to harden its line against Assad, Putin called on both the Damascus regime and opposition rebels to agree a ceasefire but also criticised the West for backing the rebels in the conflict.

"We have no special relationship with Syria," Putin told foreign news executives late Thursday at a meeting at his suburban Moscow residence ahead of Sunday's presidential elections in Russia.

Alluding to Assad's future, he said both sides had to sit down and agree "what reforms there will be and what will be the consequences of these reforms."

"But now we have to get them to stop killing each other," he added.

Russia in February outraged the West by vetoing, along with China, a UN Security Council resolution condemning the Assad regime for the violence.

Some analysts saw the Security Council veto as a warning from Putin to Western states that Russia would pursue a tough foreign policy if, as expected, he returns to the Kremlin after Sunday's presidential elections.

# Aid convoy reaches Homs

## Massacre feared; foreign journos out of Syria

REUTERS, Beirut

A Red Cross aid convoy prepared to enter the shattered Baba Amro district of Homs yesterday after a Syrian official declared the area "cleansed" and the opposition spoke of a massacre by President Bashar al-Assad's forces.

The residential district became a symbol of resistance to Assad after government troops surrounded it with tanks and artillery and shelled it intensively for weeks, killing and wounding civilians cowering in its ruined buildings.

Rebels withdrew on Thursday in a key moment in the year-old uprising. An official at Syria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates said the army had "cleansed Baba Amro from the foreign-backed armed groups of terrorists."

Activists said Syria's army had begun hunting down and killing insurgents who had stayed to cover their

comrades' retreat, although the reports could not be verified. They said 10 young men were shot dead on Friday.

In Geneva, the United Nations human rights body reminded Assad of his obligations under international law. "We are alarmed at reports starting to come out of the Baba Amro district of Homs after it was taken over by government forces yesterday," spokesman Rupert Colville said.

Meanwhile, the two French journalists who were trapped in Homs had been evacuated and headed home on Friday.

A plane transporting reporter Edith Bouvier and photographer William Daniels left Beirut for Paris, the French embassy in the Lebanese capital said, and was to land around 6:00pm local time at a military airport.

French officials announced late Thursday that Bouvier, 31, and Daniels, 34, had escaped to Lebanon

after being trapped for days under bombardment in the central Syrian city of Homs.

In Beirut, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said Syrian authorities had agreed that the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the ICRC could enter Baba Amro to evacuate casualties and to take food and medicine to civilians trapped by the fighting and siege.

"We have positive indications from the Syrian authorities to go in. We are ready to enter Baba Amro to evacuate first the sick and wounded and to take food and medical supplies," Samar al-Kadi, ICRC spokeswoman in Beirut, told Reuters.

The ICRC later said a convoy had reached Homs and was preparing to enter Baba Amro. The rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) said on Thursday it was leaving the district -- normally home to 100,000 residents. Only a few thousand people remain.

Conditions in the heavily bombed district are hellish. TV footage showed heavy snow and freezing weather, with residents lacking electricity or fuel for heating. There is also a shortage of food and medical supplies.

Barely a building has escaped damage from artillery shelling and many are pock-marked with bullet holes.

In a rare show of unity with Western powers, Russia and China joined other Security Council members at the United Nations in expressing "deep disappointment" at Syria's failure to allow the UN humanitarian aid chief Valerie Amos to visit the country, and urged that she be allowed in immediately.

France announced it would shut its Syrian embassy and was ready to step up support of the rebels if the UN Security Council cleared the way for such a move. British Prime Minister David Cameron said Syria's rulers would be held to account.

## EU leaders sign new treaty to fight crisis

AFP, Brussels

European Union leaders yesterday signed a treaty designed to force governments to adopt balanced budgets through a "golden rule" or face fines.

The Treaty for Stability, Co-ordination and Governance, the bedrock response to a two-year public debt crisis that forced bailouts for Greece, Portugal and Ireland, was signed by 25 of the bloc's 27 leaders.

It will take effect once the first 12 of the 25 states have ratified the pact.

Ireland has already announced plans for a referendum before the treaty can apply there.

If states do not ratify the treaty, they will be blocked from bailout funding from a related rescue firewall being set up as of July this year. In the pact, states that fail to adequately implement the sharpened rules in national law will be dragged before the European Court of Justice.

The treaty updates the EU's Stability and Growth Pact, first agreed in the 1990s and last reformed in 2005.

Few of the 25 states approving the treaty are within the EU's traditional deficit ceiling of 3.0 percent of GDP.

Under the so-called "golden rule," a country's structural deficit should be capped at 0.5 percent of gross domestic product. Countries with debts comfortably below the 60-percent-of-GDP EU threshold will get more leeway, up to 1.0 percent of GDP for the structural deficit, which does not include one-off effects such as debt repayments.

## US activists fly out of Egypt, defusing row

AFP, Larnaca

US pro-democracy activists who had been on trial in Egypt were in Cyprus yesterday after flying out of Cairo, an airport official said, following the lifting of a travel ban on them.

On Thursday night, Egypt's official MENA news agency reported that 15 foreigners had left for Larnaca, including eight Americans.

MENA said the non-American passengers comprised a Norwegian, three Serbs, two Germans and a Palestinian.

Cairo airport officials had said 17 foreigners, including nine Americans, had left, and it was not immediately clear why there was a discrepancy in the figures.

The Cypriot airport official said the private aircraft was due to leave on Friday, without mentioning the other nationals, and it was unclear whether the Americans would travel on it or take commercial flights.

The activists worked with five foreign NGOs accused of receiving illicit foreign funds and operating without licenses.

Their departure is expected to ease tensions with Washington, which had urged Egypt's military rulers to resolve the case, which American officials and legislators had said could imperil US aid to its key Middle Eastern ally.



An Iranian woman votes at a polling station in Tehran yesterday. Iran voted for a new parliament in the first nationwide elections since a bitterly contested 2009 poll that returned Ahmadinejad to power, posing a new test of his support among conservatives.

## Iran votes in test for Ahmadinejad

AFP, Tehran

Iran was electing a new parliament in the first nationwide poll yesterday since a bitterly contested 2009 vote that returned President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power, posing a new test of his support among conservatives.

The elections, to fill the 290 seats in parliament, are being boycotted by Iran's main opposition and reformist groups, the leaders of which have been under house arrest for a year.

Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, casting his ballot moments after polling began, urged a high turnout from the 48-million strong electorate to boost "the future, prestige, security and immunity of the country," according to state television.

The elections are essentially a struggle between conservatives who back Ahmadinejad and a hardline current that despises him. Each claims stronger fealty than the other to Khamenei.

Unlike in the wake of Ahmadinejad's disputed 2009 victory, no protests were expected in these elections.

But Iran's police chief, Ismail Ahmadi Moghaddam, said security forces were "fully prepared" to counter any problems.

Final official results of the polls would be announced Sunday or Monday, the interior ministry said.

## RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

# Candidates eye a magic no: 1,144

AFP, Washington

Momentum is crucial in the state-by-state race for the Republican nomination, but in the long slog of the US presidential campaign the candidates are also chasing an elusive magic number: 1,144.

That's the threshold of delegates to the Republican National Convention in August that a candidate must win to secure the party's nomination -- and almost 40 percent of it will be up for grabs next week on "Super Tuesday."

Super Tuesday essentially ended the Republican contest in 2008, but a more fractured race is expected next week, when 10 states, including key battleground Ohio, vote simultaneously on March 6.

And with more proportional allocation of delegates introduced by the party since the last general election, the Republican race could carry on for

months.

In the complex Republican Party nominating process, delegates are awarded by each state, sometimes on a proportional and/or non-binding basis, until one candidate reaches the 50-percent-plus-one mark needed for victory.

Eleven states have held voting contests so far. Romney has won six of them, Santorum four, and former House speaker Newt Gingrich one.

While Romney has won just over 50 percent of the total delegates to date, he has little wiggle room, and more than 100 of the delegates to the convention are Republican National Committee members who can vote for anyone.



Americans appear to be less focused on the specifics of delegates, and more about trends, issues, and electability -- at least for the moment.

But the delegate battle between Romney and Santorum came under the spotlight Thursday, when a row erupted over how party leaders in Michigan apportioned its 30 delegates after the state's bitterly contested Tuesday primary.

Romney beat ex-senator Santorum by three percentage points in Michigan, but because of proportional distribution, they split 28 of the delegates, 14 each. The party awarded the two delegates both to Romney, prompting Santorum's campaign to

accuse Michigan party insiders of "political thuggery."

Romney on Tuesday is likely to win in states such as Massachusetts, Vermont and Virginia, but he's in a battle royale for Ohio, with 66 delegates at stake, against Santorum, who is ahead in Tennessee (58 delegates) and Oklahoma (43).

If the race continues to be this tight it is possible that no winner will emerge before the Republican National Convention in late August, in which case a victor would have to be decided by backroom brokering among the delegates.

An analyst said he sees about a one-in-four chance of a brokered convention -- something that hasn't happened in decades.

"All of us political scientists have our mouths watering; we'd love to see it," he said.

## Dalai Lama accused of plotting Tibet 'turmoil'

AFP, Beijing

China's top political advisor has accused followers of the Dalai Lama of plotting to create "turmoil" in the country's Tibetan-inhabited areas as the anniversary of deadly 2008 riots approaches.

Jia Qinglin, who is ranked number four in the Communist Party leadership, made the comments at a meeting Thursday attended by the police minister and officials from Tibet and four Tibetan-inhabited provinces.

"Currently the Dalai clique is plotting to create disturbances in Tibet and in Tibetan-inhabited areas in four provinces," said Jiang, referring to followers of the Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama.

"Party and governments at all levels must side with the masses and implement all working measures to resolutely smash the plots of the Dalai clique to bring turmoil to Tibetan-inhabited areas."

Beijing has blamed the Dalai Lama, who fled to India in March 1959, for recent unrest in Tibet and nearby areas, including a series of self-immolations by Buddhist monks and nuns.

Jia, who heads the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a type of lower parliament, also ordered officials to increase their presence in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, according to the comments posted on the central government's website.

China's top leader in Tibet has ordered increased controls over the Internet and mobile phones during the period, according to state media reports.

Tibetans have long chafed at China's rule over the vast Tibetan plateau, accusing Beijing of curbing religious freedoms and eroding their culture and language.

Beijing insists that Tibetans enjoy religious freedom and have benefited from improved living standards brought on by China's economic expansion.



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## Apple, Google most admired firms

AFP, Washington

Apple topped the list of most admired companies for the fifth year in a row, based on a Fortune magazine survey released Thursday showing Google as number two and Amazon number three.

Google was in second place for the third consecutive year while Amazon moved up from seventh place, giving the tech giants the top three spots in the magazine's survey of 3,855 American executives, directors, and securities analysts.

Apple, which is now the largest firm based on market value, ranked first in all of Fortune's "key attributes" in the sector.

After the top three, the next on the list, in order were Coca-Cola, IBM, FedEx, Berkshire Hathaway, Starbucks, Procter & Gamble and Southwest Airlines. The top non-US firm on the list was Germany's BMW, ranked 14th.

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