

UN aid chief starts Syria mission

Assad vows to crush terrorism as powers mull new resolution

AFP, Damascus

The UN humanitarian chief started a mission to Syria yesterday to urge the regime to allow aid into battered protest cities, a day after President Assad vowed to crush terrorism and pursue on reforms.

Valerie Amos flew in for a two-day visit, after an international outcry over President Bashar al-Assad's previous refusal to let her in, and is to be followed by UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan on Saturday.

And Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said in talks with Amos that Syria is ready to cooperate with the visiting UN humanitarian delegation.

After the talks, Valerie Amos led a Syrian Red Crescent team to the devastated Baba Amr district of the city of Homs.

It was not clear what food or medicines the Red Crescent staff had been able to take with them into Baba Amr.

Relief teams have been waiting since Friday to move into the district, but the authorities blocked them citing danger from unexploded ordnance.

Meanwhile, the five major UN Security Council powers held talks Tuesday on a new US-led attempt to pass a resolution demanding an end to Syria's deadly attacks on protesters.

The new draft resolution, obtained by AFP, "demands" that the Syrian government "immediately" cease all violence, withdraw security forces from protest cities and release prisoners held over the protests.

The draft then adds that the council "calls" on opposition groups to "refrain from all violence" once these conditions are met.

The proposed resolution also



"demands that the Syrian authorities immediately allow unhindered humanitarian access" to all cities.

The Russian and Chinese envoys did not comment on the draft following the talks with fellow permanent members

of the United States, Britain and France.

But Russia's deputy foreign minister, Gennady Gatilov, said earlier the new US resolution was unbalanced.

Several diplomats said, on condition of anonymity, that there would be no developments until UN-Arab League special envoy Kofi Annan and UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos have finished their missions to Syria this week.

On the ground, tanks and troop carriers were headed for the embattled province of Idlib in northwest

Syria yesterday, said the Syrian National Council, the main opposition alliance.

It also said "several people were killed" in bombardment of Maaret al-Numan, another town in Idlib province.

On Tuesday, at least 16 people were killed as Syrian regime forces launched a major assault on Herak, a town in the southern province of Daraa, a monitoring group said.

Syrian Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said yesterday the overall death toll since last March has now reached almost 8,500, with civilians accounting for three-quarters of those killed and the rest made up of soldiers, security forces and rebels.

Meanwhile, in contrast to Qatar and Saudi Arabia which have supported the arming of the rebels, Egypt's Foreign Minister Mohammed Amr warned that such intervention would lead to a civil war, his ministry said yesterday.

Military action on Syria would be a mistake

Says Barack Obama

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama Tuesday described the violence in Syria as "heartbreaking," but cautioned there was no simple solution, warning unilateral military action would be a mistake.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has "lost legitimacy" of his people. And the actions that he is now taking against his own people is inexcusable," Obama told a White House press conference.

"On the other hand, for us to take military action, unilaterally, as some have suggested, or to think that somehow there's some simple solution, I think is a mistake."

On Monday, top Republican Senator John McCain called for US air strikes on Syrian forces to protect population centers and create safe havens for opponents of the regime.



"Time is running out," McCain said, with the United Nations reporting more than 7,500 people killed in Syria in the past year. He added "the only realistic way" to save civilian lives was "with foreign air power."

But Obama cautioned the situation was not the same as in Libya, when the United States used its air force to

back a Nato no-fly zone.

In Libya, the United States "had the full cooperation of the region, Arab states, and we knew that we could execute very effectively in a relatively short period of time. This is a much more complicated situation," he said.

"Ultimately, this dictator will fall, as dictators in the past have fallen. But the notion that the way to solve every one of these problems is to deploy our military, you know, that hasn't been true in the past, and it won't be true now," Obama added.

New Iran talks should calm 'drums of war': Obama

Israel cautiously welcomes talks

REUTERS, Washington/brussels

President Barack Obama said an announcement of six-power talks with Iran offered a diplomatic chance to defuse a crisis over its nuclear program and quiet the "drums of war."

EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who represents the United States, Russia, China, France, Britain and Germany in dealings with Iran, announced yesterday a fresh bid to allay suspicions that Iran is developing nuclear weapons after weeks of consultations with the other powers.

A date and venue have yet to be agreed for the talks, proposed by Iran after a year's diplomatic standoff that has increased fears of a slide into a new Middle East war.

Meanwhile, Israel yesterday cautiously welcomed the planned resumption of big-power nuclear talks with Iran, insisting that Tehran be denied the means to turn uranium into bomb fuel.

With Israel speaking increasingly loudly of resorting to military action to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons, the talks could provide some respite in a crisis that has driven

up oil prices and threatened to suck the United States into its third major war in a decade.

Amid mounting speculation that Iran's nuclear sites could be attacked in coming months, Obama said that American politicians "beating the drums of war" had a responsibility to explain the costs and benefits of military action.

He said the notion that the United States needed to make a choice in coming weeks or months was "not borne out by facts."

But he said Washington would "not countenance" Iran getting a nuclear weapon, shortly after Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said the United States would take military action to prevent this happening if diplomacy failed.

"Military action is the last alternative when all else fails," Panetta told the annual policy conference of the biggest US pro-Israel lobbying group, Aipac. "But make no mistake, when all else fails, we will act."

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PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of protesters march through Johannesburg yesterday to protest new tolls on highways between Johannesburg and nearby Pretoria, which unions say are hurting the poor. About 10,000 people chanted "no to e-tolls" and "no to labour brokers" as they marched through the city centre.

RUSSIA ELECTION

Monitors reject Putin's win

REUTERS, Moscow

Opponents of Vladimir Putin branded his election victory an insult to the Russian people yesterday, trying to inject life into protests, which risk fading after his return to the Kremlin.

Their statement by the protest organisers signaled their determination to press on with demonstrations against the former KGB spy despite his triumph in Sunday's election and the detention of hundreds of people at rallies Monday.

But the message from the League of Voters, which unites nationalists, liberals and leftists as well as independent groups, offered little new for demonstrators increasingly demoralised by their inability to change a political system dominated by Putin despite three months of protest.

NEWS IN brief

WikiLeaks: Doubt over Laden being buried at sea

THE TIMES OF INDIA ONLINE

A huge controversy has erupted over the remains of slain al-Qaida chief Osama bin Laden and what exactly happened to them. Osama bin Laden was apparently buried in the waters of the north Arabian Sea, but there are now emails that suggest otherwise.

The new emails that were leaked and posted online by WikiLeaks raise serious questions as to whether Osama bin Laden was buried at sea or was he cremated in the US.

The emails were allegedly obtained by the hacker group anonymous from Stratfor, an organisation dealing with analysis of intelligence and geopolitical

Two Murdoch journalists in apparent suicide bids

REUTERS, London

Two senior journalists working for Rupert Murdoch's News International have apparently attempted suicide as pressure mounts at the scandal-hit publisher of the now-defunct News of the World.

Three sources close to the company told Reuters on Tuesday the two journalists at the Sun daily appeared to have tried to take their own lives. Investigations sparked by a phone-hacking scandal continue to expose dubious practices by present and past employees.

Eleven current and former staff of the Sun, Britain's best-selling daily tabloid, have been arrested this year on suspicion of bribing police or civil ser-

French breast implant boss jailed

BBC ONLINE

The founder of the French breast implant company at the heart of a global health scare has been jailed yesterday after failing to pay his bail.

Jean-Claude Mas, 72, was released on 100,000 euro (£83,000; \$131,000) bail in January, facing a charge of "involuntary injury".

Poly Implant Prothese (PIP) was shut down in 2010 after it was found to have used industrial-grade silicone gel.

Up to 400,000 women in 65 countries are thought to have had the implants.

The French government has advised 30,000 women to have their PIP implants removed, a call repeated in several other countries, including Germany and the Czech Republic.

US, N Korea envoys to finalise food aid

BBC ONLINE

Envoys from the United States and North Korea were meeting in Beijing to finalise details of a food aid deal yesterday.

The agreement to send aid was reached last week after Pyongyang agreed to halt nuclear activities and allow United Nations inspectors in.

The US has not sent food aid to North Korea since 2009. Special envoy Robert King said the talks aimed at ensuring that the food shipment - meant for a million North Koreans - reached the most needy.

"The food nutrition assistance programme that we are here to talk about is a complicated programme and we need to work out the details in terms of how we are going to carry that programme out," King told reporters before heading for the meeting.

North Korea has suffered persistent food shortages since a famine in the 1990s, and relies on foreign aid to feed its people. The 240,000 tonnes of food aid are intended for children and pregnant women, US officials said.

The deal was announced last week after three rounds of talks between the US and North Korea.

It has been welcomed cautiously by China, Russia, Japan and South Korea - countries involved, along with the US, in the six-party disarmament negotiations with Pyongyang, which broke down in 2009.

Musharraf summoned on March 22

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani authorities yesterday posted a summons demanding that former military ruler Pervez Musharraf return from exile and appear before the country's top court on March 22.

The notice was glued to the gate of Musharraf's farm house after he failed to respond to repeated calls to appear over the December 27, 2007 murder of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Musharraf, who has lived in self-imposed exile in London and Dubai since stepping down in 2008, delayed plans to return home this year indefinitely after the government warned he would be arrested upon arrival.

The notice asks Musharraf to appear in the Supreme Court on March 22 with documents proving his identity as a Pakistani citizen.

Breivik charged with 'acts of terror'

BBC ONLINE

Anders Behring Breivik, who confessed to killing 77 people and injuring 151 in Norway, has been formally charged with committing acts of terror.

Defence lawyers went to his prison near the capital, Oslo, to present their client with the charges.

Prosecutors have indicated they consider Breivik mentally ill and will seek to have him committed to psychiatric care rather than jailed.

Breivik is expected to go on trial on 16 April.

He has been charged under a paragraph in Norway's anti-terror law that refers to violent acts intended to disrupt key government functions or spread fears in the population.

"The defendant has committed highly serious crimes of a dimension we have no previous experience with in our society in modern times," prosecutor Svein Holden told reporters in Oslo.

If convicted, Breivik faces a maximum penalty of 21 years in prison.

The prosecution said last week it was prepared to accept Breivik was criminally insane and therefore not responsible for his acts, and as such it might not call for a prison sentence.

However, it reserved the right to alter that view if new elements emerged about his mental health by the end of the trial.



Libya leader, OIC vow to foil autonomy bid

AFP, Tripoli

Libyan leader Mustapha Abdel Jalil yesterday said he would defend national unity "with force" if necessary, after tribal leaders and a political faction declared autonomy for an eastern region.

"We are not prepared to divide Libya," Abdel Jalil said as he called on leaders in the eastern Cyrenaica region to engage in dialogue and warned them against remnants of the regime of slain leader Muammar Gaddafi in their ranks.

"They should know that there are infiltrators and remnants of Gaddafi's regime trying to exploit them now and we are ready to deter them, even with force," he said in televised remarks during a conference in Misrata to draft a national charter.

"The national charter contains provisions that protect this nation and it is like a constitution for Libya's future," Abdel Jalil said of the document, which hasn't been made public yet.

Meanwhile, the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) urged Libyans to remain united after tribal leaders and a political faction declared autonomy for an eastern region.

OIC Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu urged Libyans "to preserve national unity and territorial integrity of Libya," in a statement received by AFP.

A faction of tribal and political leaders in the oil-rich east of the country is trying to carve out a semi-autonomous territory and has called for a federal system of governance.

On Tuesday, they unilaterally declared the region of Cyrenaica as autonomous but recognised the ruling National Transitional Council as the country's legitimate representative in foreign affairs.

Libya was a federal union from 1951 to 1963 during the monarchy of Idris Senussi, which split the country into three states -- Cyrenaica, Tripolitania and Fezzan.

Israel troops carry out Gaza incursion

AFP, Gaza City, Palestinian Territories

Israeli troops entered northern Gaza yesterday, briefly sealing the Erez border crossing between the Palestinian territory and Israel, Hamas officials said.

"Occupation forces moved into the northern Gaza Strip and began bulldozing work and closed the Erez crossing to travellers," the interior ministry of the Islamist movement Hamas which rules Gaza said in a statement.

Witnesses told AFP that two Israeli bulldozers accompanied by three tanks had moved into the area and were levelling land near the border.

The Israeli military confirmed the incursion, saying only "the army entered the area to stop terrorist activities."

France has too many foreigners

Says Sarkozy

BBC ONLINE

French President Nicolas Sarkozy has said there are too many foreigners in France and the system for integrating them is "working more and more badly".

In a TV debate, Sarkozy defended his plan to almost halve the number of new arrivals if re-elected next month.

Sarkozy is trailing in the opinion polls behind the Socialist candidate Francois Hollande.

He is also competing for conservative voters with the far-right National Front party led by Marine Le Pen.

The president said while immigration could be a boon for France, it needed to be controlled more tightly through tougher qualification rules for residency.

Sarkozy, whose father was a Hungarian immigrant, also said he wanted to restrict some benefit payments to immigrants who had been in the country for 10 years.

He has often made controversial comments on race and immigration issues, sharply dividing opinion in France.

He has said that if re-elected, he will reduce the number of immigrants to France from 180,000 a year to 100,000 and introduce tighter controls on access to welfare benefits.

