

Syrian minister defects, joins rebels

US considering non-lethal aid as Annan opposes militarisation

AFP, Damascus

Syria's deputy oil minister resigned yesterday, becoming the most senior official to join the rebel ranks, as Washington revealed it is considering non-lethal aid to the insurgency.

The boost for the rebels came as UN-Arab League special envoy Kofi Annan appealed in Cairo to Syria's opposition to join his mission's efforts to resolve the conflict that has left thousands dead in the past year.

Abdo Hussameddin announced his resignation in a video posted by activists on YouTube, saying he was joining the revolt.

"I, the engineer Abdo Hussameddin, the deputy oil minister... announce my defection from the regime and my resignation," he said in the video.

"I am joining the revolution of the people who reject injustice and the brutal campaign of the regime, which is seeking to crush the people's demand for freedom and dignity," he added.

The defection was quickly welcomed by Syrian opposition leader Burhan Ghalioun, who told AFP he expects more government officials and politicians to do the same.

Meanwhile, former UN chief Annan and UN's special envoy to Syria, told reporters in Cairo he had urged "the Syrian opposition to come together to work with us to find a solution that will



Abdo Hussameddin Kofi Annan

respect the aspirations of the Syrian people."

Annan was in the Egyptian capital for talks with officials ahead of a trip to Damascus today.

"We will do whatever we can to urge and press the cessation of hostilities and an end to the killing and violence," he said ahead of talks with Foreign Minister Mohammed Amr.

"But of course the ultimate solution lies in the political settlement," Annan said.

Annan also warned of further militarisation in Syria which, he fears, will worsen a conflict that has left thousands dead in a year.

"I believe further militarisation will make the situation worse," he told reporters in Cairo after talks with Arab League Secretary General Nabil al-Arabi.

"I hope that no one is very seriously thinking of

using force in this situation," he said, adding that diplomatic efforts should be kept up.

And late on Wednesday, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said Washington was looking at delivering non-lethal aid to Syria's rebels, hinting at the first direct US assistance to the forces seeking Assad's downfall.

Asked by Senator Richard Blumenthal if the United States was ready to deliver communications equipment to Syrian rebels, Panetta said: "I'd prefer to discuss that in a closed session but I can tell you that we're considering an array of non-lethal assistance."

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, almost 8,500 people have died in the brutal government crackdown against a revolt that erupted last March.

Six people, including a child, were killed in violence across Syria yesterday, the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights said.

On Wednesday, UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos briefly visited the battered neighbourhood of Baba Amr, in the protest city of Homs, with a Syrian Red Crescent team.

However Amos was stopped from going into areas of Homs still held by the opposition, despite receiving assurances from Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem in earlier talks that she could go to any part of the country, her spokeswoman Amanda Pitt told AFP.

Russia says Libya training Syrian rebels

AFP, United Nations

Russia's UN envoy on Wednesday accused Libya of helping to train Syrian rebels to carry out attacks on Damascus government targets.

Allegations by Russian ambassador Vitaly Churkin over the rebels and Nato's attacks in Libya last year set off a diplomatic furor at the UN Security Council with Libya's interim Prime Minister AbdelRahim al-Kib.

"We have received information that there is in Libya, with the support of the authorities, a special training center for Syrian revolutionaries and these people are sent to Syria to attack the legal government," Churkin said.

"This is completely unacceptable according to all legal standards. This activity is undermining stability in the Middle East," he told a Security Council meeting on Libya.

Israel asks US for arms to aid Iran strike

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel has asked the United States for advanced "bunker-buster" bombs and refueling planes that could improve its ability to attack Iran's underground nuclear sites, an Israeli official said yesterday.

"Such a request was made" around the time of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington this week, the official said, confirming media reports.

But the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity given the sensitivity of the issue, played down as "unrealistic" reports that the United States would condition supplying the hardware on Israel promising not to attack Iran this year.

Netanyahu told Obama at a White House meeting on Monday that Israel had not yet decided on military action against Iran, sources close to the talks said.

Netanyahu has hinted that Israel could resort to force should Tehran - which denies suspicions that it is covertly trying to develop atomic bombs - continue to defy big powers' diplomatic pressure to curb its nuclear program.

The risk of an Israeli-Iranian war troubles President Barack Obama, who is up for re-election in November and has cautioned against kindling more Middle East upheaval. A Gulf conflict could send oil prices rocketing upwards.

A front-page article in the Israeli newspaper Ma'ariv yesterday said Obama had told Netanyahu that Washington would supply Israel with upgraded military equipment in return for assurances that there would be no attack on Iran in 2012.

Israel is widely assumed to have the Middle East's only nuclear arsenal but its conventional firepower may not be enough to deliver lasting damage to Iran's distant, dispersed and well-fortified facilities, many experts say.

NEWS IN brief

Carlos Slim tops Forbes rich list

BBC ONLINE

Mexican tycoon Carlos Slim has once again come top of Forbes magazine's annual list of the world's richest billionaires.

The magazine estimates that Slim, whose business interests range from telecommunications to construction, is worth \$69bn.

He is followed by Microsoft founder Bill Gates on \$61bn, and US investor Warren Buffett on \$44bn.

Slim, 72, has now topped the list for three years in succession.

Mukesh Ambani, Indian business tycoon, has topped the list in India. Ambani, 54, has amassed a \$22.3bn fortune and is ranked 19th in the global rich list, the magazine said.

Gayoom's son in Waheed cabinet

PTI, Male

Maldives president Mohammed Waheed on Wednesday inducted seven new ministers of state into his cabinet including Ghassan Maumoon, the youngest son of former dictator Maumoon Gayoom.

The appointment of Ghassan has led to fresh speculation about the role of Gayoom in the current regime with his imprints now finding place in all important ministries of the current regime.

On Monday, Waheed had picked up two more Gayoom-era officials to fill up the crucial cabinet berths of foreign affairs and finance. With the new appointments, former loyalists of Gayoom's regime dominate Waheed's cabinet that also has Gayoom's

1,000 a day die in childbirth

AFP, Geneva

About 1000 women die each day in childbirth or from preventable complications related to pregnancy, humanitarian group Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) said yesterday.

"Worldwide, at any time, 15 percent of pregnancies incur the risk of a potential fatal complication," said Kara Blackburn, responsible for women's health at MSF in a statement to mark International

Pakistan charges Laden's widows

BBC ONLINE

Osama Bin Laden's three widows have been charged by Pakistan with illegally entering the country.

Interior Minister Rehman Malik said the women, reported to be two Saudis and a Yemeni, had been charged but did not say when the hearing took place.

The wives and about 10 children were taken into custody last May when US commandos raided their safe house.

The three women had been living in the compound in Abbottabad that Navy Seals attacked, killing Bin Laden.

Malik told reporters in Islamabad that "only the adults had been charged" and the children were free to return to their native countries if their mothers agreed.

Legal experts say the maximum term the women could get is five years.

It is not clear if these three women are Bin Laden's only widows - it has been reported that he had up to six wives.

Last June, a Pakistani commission was charged with investigating how the al-Qaeda leader had managed to stay in Pakistan undetected.



A woman holds a bunch of mimosa, held as a symbol of celebration in Russia and Italy, to celebrate the International Women's day yesterday in Rome, Italy.

India coalition govt rules out mid-term polls

Trinamool to stay in coalition

PTI, Chennai

Ruling out a mid-term poll in the wake of Congress' setback in the recent Assembly polls, Union Minister Jayanthi Natarajan yesterday said the Manmohan Singh-led government will complete its term and asked opposition parties not to nurture hopes of destabilising it.

"There is no question of a mid-term poll. The Union government will last its full term," she said in Chennai.

With opposition parties being elected to power in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Goa, she said they should concentrate on good governance in their States.

Meanwhile, Railway minister and senior Trinamool Congress member Dinesh Trivedi yesterday said his party will not rock the UPA boat, and continue to support the government.

Asked about his comment in a newspaper that early elections could happen, he said it was an individual analysis.

"As far as the party is concerned, we are with the UPA and the government." However, he did not deny that in his individual capacity he had analysed the political situation.

US urges more China role in world issues

PTI, Washington

Observing that China has a seat at virtually every table and a role in virtually every institution of importance in the world, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said that no problem in the world today can be resolved without the United States and China.

"We and others around the world are looking for even greater leadership from China. China and the United States cannot solve all the problems of the world together. But without China and the United States, I doubt that any of our global problems can be solved," Hillary said in a major foreign policy speech.

Delivering the remarks at think-tank the US Institute of Peace to mark the 40th anniversary of the China visit by the then US President Richard Nixon, Hilary said the US



Hillary Clinton

wants China to be a full stakeholder, embracing its role as a major global player, to help strengthen the international system that makes its own and its success possible.

Hillary said its power, wealth, and influence have pushed China rapidly to a new echelon in the international order.

China, she noted, has already shown increased leadership on some regional and global issues, like countering piracy and sustaining the global economic recovery.

"But we do believe China will have to go further to fully embrace its new role in the world to give the world confidence that it is going to, not just today or on one set of issues, but for the long run, play a positive role that will enhance security, stability, and prosperity," Hillary said.

S Korea holds firing drill near tense border

AFP, Seoul

South Korean troops mounted a live-fire exercise near the tense border with the North yesterday amid high tensions and in the face of Pyongyang threatening retaliatory strikes.

The one-hour exercise in Pocheon, the first of its kind this year near the land border, was a regular drill involving about 170 tanks, self-propelled howitzers, helicopters and four warplanes, a Defence Ministry spokesman told AFP.

Kim Sang-Ki, South Korea's army chief of staff, who watched the exercise, said: "We must hit back strongly and promptly if provoked by the enemy."

The drill followed live-fire drills staged by North Korea troops earlier this week near the disputed Yellow Sea border.

Tensions remain high across the world's last Cold War frontier, despite Pyongyang saying last week it would suspend its nuclear tests and uranium enrichment programme in return for US food aid.



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