

# Annan optimistic after more talks

UN Security Council set for Syria clash

AGENCIES

UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan yesterday had a second round of talks with President Bashar al-Assad on ways to end months of violence in Syria.

Syrian state TV said Annan's first round of talks took place in a "positive" atmosphere.

Assad is reported to have said: "Syria is ready to make a success of any honest effort to find a solution for the events it is witnessing. "No political dialogue or political activity can succeed while there are armed terrorist groups operating and spreading chaos and instability."

A spokesman for Annan called the talks "candid and comprehensive".

On Saturday Assad rejected political dialogue while "armed terrorist groups" were operating in the country.

Meanwhile, the world powers are on course for a new diplomatic clash over Syria when foreign ministers from the main UN Security Council nations meet tomorrow.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and

foreign ministers Sergei Lavrov of Russia, William Hague of Britain, Alain Juppe of France and Guido Westerwelle of Germany will be among top officials at the event.

The US has drafted a fresh UN Security Council resolution but the state department said on Friday it was not optimistic that the text would be accepted.

Russia is poised to veto any resolution that undermines Syria's sovereignty, sources said.

Annan is trying to arrange a ceasefire and gain greater access for humanitarian aid agencies. He was due to move on to Qatar later yesterday.

Activists say troops are continuing an assault on the city of Idlib where Free Syrian Army fighters are holed up. At least 34 people, almost half of them civilisation, were killed yesterday, opposition groups said.

The UN says more than 7,500 people have died since unrest began a year ago.

International disagreements have paralysed action on Syria, with Russia and China opposing Western and Arab calls for President Assad to stand down.



PHOTO: REUTERS

A girl offers prayers for victims of the March 11, 2011 earthquake and tsunami at a seaside which was damaged by the disaster in Iwaki, Fukushima prefecture yesterday to mark the first anniversary of the earthquake and tsunami that killed thousands and set off a nuclear crisis.

## Suicide blast at Pakistan funeral kills 15

PESHAWAR, Pakistan

A suicide bomber blew himself up at a funeral near the northwestern city of Peshawar yesterday, killing at least 15 people and wounding more than 30 others, police and hospital officials said.

The blast, apparently targeting an anti-Taliban politician, went off near a graveyard where people had just offered funeral prayers, senior police officer Kalam Khansaid.

Peshawar police chief Imtiaz Altaf said about eight kilograms of explosives had been used in the attack.

Nobody claimed responsibility but Islamist militants have carried out several attacks in the area.

Police believe the deputy speaker of the provincial assembly, Khushdil Khan could have been the target.

## Gaza strikes to go on 'as long as necessary'

Says Netanyahu; new strikes hike death toll to 18

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel will continue air strikes against Gaza "as long as necessary," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday, giving no indication that a ground operation was likely for now.

"We extracted a high price from them and will continue to do so," he said at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting. "We will act as long as necessary."

His comments came as Israeli war planes carried out four air strikes on Gaza on Sunday morning, bringing the death toll in three days of clashes to 18.

Violence between Israel and Gaza militants erupted on Friday afternoon when an Israeli strike killed the leader of the ultra-hardline Popular Resistance Committees, sparking a bloody cross-border exchange.

Militants have fired more than 100 rockets and mortar rounds into southern Israel in the past



three days, wounding four people.

In remarks to public radio, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman justified the initial attack against PRC leader Zohair al-Qaisi, calling him "a ticking bomb." But he said a ground operation in Gaza was "not desirable," unless it had the clear goal of overthrowing the

territory's Hamas rulers.

Speaking before the cabinet meeting, Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz warned that "sooner or later, we will probably have to put an end to the Hamas regime, the terror regime, in Gaza."

And Environment Minister Gilad Erdan argued that a ground operation would be a dangerous diversion from Israel's current priority -- preventing a nuclear Iran.

"The Israeli interest is for the world to focus on sanctions on Iran, not on an Israeli military campaign."

## Mastermind of 9/11 set to face trial

AFP, Washington

Nine years after his arrest in Pakistan, self-proclaimed 9/11 mastermind Khaled Sheikh Mohammed could soon be back in court for the much-awaited "trial of the century."

After years of delays, a significant step took place last week when a former aide to Mohammed, Majid Khan, accepted a plea deal with US authorities that will require him to testify against other terror suspects at a tribunal at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

More than a decade after the 2001 attacks that left nearly 3,000 people dead on US soil, the 46-year-old extremist known simply as "KSM" remains the ultimate figurehead in a legal battle fought by two successive US administrations.

## Japan falls silent for tsunami victims

AGENCIES

With a moment of silence, prayers and anti-nuclear rallies, Japan yesterday observed one year since an earthquake and tsunami that killed over 20,000 and set off a radiation crisis that shattered public trust in atomic power and the nation's leaders.

The magnitude 9.0 quake, Japan's most powerful since records began, also triggered a serious nuclear accident at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

Thousands of people were evacuated as radiation leaked from the plant.

There were memorial services, and a minute's silence was observed at the moment the quake hit, 14:46 local time.

The main memorial ceremony was held at Tokyo's National Theatre, attended by Japan's Emperor Akihito, Empress Michiko and Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda.

"We shall not let our memory of the disasters fade," the 78-year-old emperor said in a brief televised address.

"I hope all the people will keep the victims in their hearts." Prime Minister Noda pledged to rebuild so that Japan could be reborn "as an even better place."

Much of Japan came to a standstill as the minute of silence was observed.

Warning sirens sounded across the north-east of the country at the precise time the quake struck, 14:46 local time. Bells and prayers also reverberated across the country.

The earthquake struck about 400km north-east of Tokyo on 11 March 2011.

Correspondents say that Japan is still dealing with the economic and political fallout of the disaster.

Although much of the debris has been cleared, survivors from the devastated north-east have complained about slow recovery efforts.

The Japanese authorities believe the reconstruction will cost more than 23 trillion yen over a decade.

## Rogue US soldier kills 16 Afghans

AGENCIES

A US soldier in Afghanistan yesterday shot dead 16 civilians and wounded others after entering their homes in Kandahar province, Afghan and Nato sources said.

He reportedly left his military base in the early hours of the morning, attacking at least two homes. Nine children are among the dead.

Nato said it was investigating the "deeply regrettable incident".

BBC correspondents expect there could be a furious backlash when news of the attack reaches the wider public.

The soldier has not been named but is thought to be a staff sergeant.

In Kandahar's Panjwai district, local people have reportedly gathered near the base to protest about killings, and the US embassy is advising against travel to the area.

Anti-US sentiment is already high in Afghanistan after US soldiers burnt copies of the Quran last month which killed at least 30 people.

## NEWS IN brief

### Santorum sweeps Kansas caucuses

BBC ONLINE

Rick Santorum has won a convincing victory in Kansas on Saturday in the latest stage in the race to become the US Republican presidential candidate.

Santorum was expected to do well in the strongly conservative state, where rivals Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich did not campaign.

He needed to do well in Kansas to keep alive his hopes of winning the ticket.

Meanwhile, Romney claimed victory in Wyoming, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands and the US Virgin Islands.

Santorum was under pressure to catch up on Romney since trailing him on Super Tuesday.

Romney won the lion's share of the 10 contests on Tuesday, taking the crucial swing state of Ohio by a narrow margin and racking up five other victories.

### Malaysian minister to resign over graft

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A Malaysian minister announced her resignation yesterday amid an alleged corruption scandal that has put pressure on Prime Minister Najib Razak's government ahead of looming elections.

Women's affairs minister Shahrizat Jalil has come under fire over the "cows-for-condos" scandal, with accusations that her family used government money meant for a cattle-rearing project to invest in luxury apartments.

Perceived corruption and economic mismanagement were among voters' key grievances in the last general election, when the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition suffered its worst results ever.

Shahrizat said she would step down as women, family and community development minister when her senatorship -- which before the scandal was expected to be extended -- ends on April 8, according to an aide.

### Pakistan bans three religious groups

DAWN ONLINE

The government banned on Saturday three religious/charity organisations working in the country.

According to a senior official of the interior ministry, with the latest ban imposed on Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), Al Harmain Foundation (AHF) and Rabita Trust (RT), the number of outlawed organisations and groups has risen to 38. The three organisations were outlawed by the United Nations in 2009 under a resolution adopted by the Security Council.

The council recently attracted large crowds at some of its public meetings in different cities where it lambasted both Islamabad and Washington.

The council may strongly react to the government's decision to ban one of its important members.

## Egypt Court clears 'virginity test' doctor

BBC ONLINE

A military court in Egypt has acquitted an army doctor accused of carrying out forced "virginity tests" on women protesters, state media reported yesterday.

Ahmed Adel was cleared because the judge found contradictions in witness statements.

The case was brought by one of the women, Samira Ibrahim, who said the "tests" took place after they had been detained during protests last year.

The victims said they were forced by the Egyptian army, while in detention, to submit to a five-minute-long so-called virginity test by a male doctor.

The army initially denied such tests had taken place, but a senior general, speaking anonymously, later admitted that they had happened.

## Mass wedding in Indian 'village of prostitutes'

AFP, Vadia

Eight young women whose mothers are sex workers were married in a so-called "village of prostitutes" in India yesterday under a plan to save them from being pushed into the world's oldest profession.

The event, held in the village of Vadia in the western state of Gujarat, was organised by Vicharta Samuday Samarthan Manch (VSSM), a non-profit group which works with marginalised nomadic communities.

The brides, all aged 18 or slightly older, were dressed in colourful saris with their grooms wearing fantail turbans as loud drummers accompanied the wedding party.

Women from Vadia village have worked in the sex trade for generations and the marriage ceremony was an attempt to break the cycle of exploitation, said Mittal Patel of VSSM.

"Marriage means that the young girls will be saved from the traditional profession of prostitution," she said. "Once the girl gets married or engaged, she cannot be forced into the flesh trade."

Another 12 girls aged under 18 were also engaged at the event, which was held 210 kilometres from Gujarat's main city of Ahmedabad.

Mittal said no one had previously wanted to marry a girl from Vadia, which is known locally as the "village of prostitutes". Men in the village are known to make money by pimping the women to clients.

## Tigers fall at the death again

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world champions last night even though they again failed to break the jinx.

Former Bangladesh captain Shakib was the last batsman out, bowled by Umar Gul, the right-arm paceman who brought back Pakistan into the game by removing Nasir Hossain who had associated a brilliant 89-run sixth wicket partnership with Shakib.

Bangladesh required another 38 runs from 39 balls when Nasir was bowled for 47 off 49 balls with three fours and a huge six against Saeed Ajmal over deep midwicket. But spinner Abdur Razzak made a big mistake trying to charge Ajmal who also dismissed Mashrafe Bin Mortaza in the same over after the returning paceman also went for a similarly foolish shot.

Shakib had been left helpless without any support from the tail but the left-hander once again showed his steely character during his splendid knock of 64 that came from 66 balls with four boundaries. Earlier Tamim Iqbal, who

was included in the squad after much drama, following BCB president AHM Mustafa Kamal's interference in the team selection, gave the critics a perfect answer as the left-hander hit 64 off 80 balls with six boundaries and one six.

The Pakistan innings was built around a 135-run opening partnership between Mohammad Hafeez and Nasir Jamshed. The partnership was broken when the latter fell victim to a run out for a 64-ball 54 that contained five fours and a six.

At 160 for 1, Pakistan was in a strong position to cross the 300 mark but Shahadat Hossain, returning to one-day cricket after a two year break, picked up three quick wickets and Shakib struck twice in the same over to dash their hopes.

Gul and Sarfraz Ahmed, however, rescued Pakistan and helped them put up a challenging total on the board. Pakistan had much to thank Gul for taking the score to the 250-plus mark. A leg-cutter from Mashrafe Bin Mortaza castled the Pakistani

paceman, but not before he had taken full toll with one six and two fours. Gul smashed a total of five fours and a six during his cameo 25-ball 39.

On the other hand, Hafeez missed his well-deserved hundred when the right-hander got a top edge from a short ball from pacer Shahadat Hossain to find the safe hands of Shafiqul Islam at square leg for 89 from 126 balls with the help of seven sweetly-timed boundaries.

The match was also marked by a peculiar catch from Shakib who missed the return catch of Shahid Afridi on the first attempt and got a hand to it just as it was dying down on the second; he palmed it towards Misbah where the ball ricocheted off the Pakistan captain's helmet and landed safely in Shakib's hand on the third attempt.



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