

Assad calls Syria polls on May 7

Regime accused of planting landmines as violence kills dozens

AFP, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad yesterday announced parliamentary elections for May 7, even as monitors said violence raged in flashpoint provinces and rebel fighters killed 22 regime troops in ambushes.

The announcement came as UN-Arab League peace envoy Kofi Annan said he was expecting a response from Assad to "concrete proposals" to halt Syria's bloodshed and Russia stepped in with a proposal for international observers.

State news agency SANA said Assad, who has proposed a programme of reforms in the face of an unprecedented revolt, has set May 7 as the date for legislative elections under a new constitution passed in February.

The elections would be the third such polls since Assad came to power in 2000, but the first under a multi-party system as authorised

under the new law.

Annan, speaking to reporters in Ankara after meeting with Syria's opposition, said he was "expecting to hear from Syrian authorities today since I left some concrete proposals for them to consider."

He was referring to weekend meetings in Damascus with Assad, after which he had expressed optimism the crisis could be resolved peacefully.

Against that backdrop, the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR said yesterday that around 30,000 Syrians had fled to neighbouring countries and another 200,000 had been displaced inside the country, quoting Syrian Red Crescent data.

Human Rights Watch said yesterday Syria has planted landmines near its borders with both countries, along routes used by refugees fleeing the country.

"The Syrian regime is trying to prevent people from going in and



from fleeing the country," said Nadim Houry, deputy director of the group's Middle East and North Africa division.

Russia, accused of having shielded its ally Syria, yesterday said it will press Damascus to accept international monitors who could observe the implementation of a "simultaneous" ceasefire between government troops and armed rebels.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Russia was discussing the proposal with both the Arab League and at the United Nations, where a Security Council ministerial meeting debated the Syrian crisis on

Monday.

Meanwhile, China and Arab countries agree on the need to find a "political solution" to the crisis in Syria, Chinese envoy Zhang Ming said yesterday after talks in Cairo with Arab League officials.

He told reporters he was on a mission to discuss a six-point Chinese initiative and talk with Arab officials ways of reaching "international agreement and finding a peace solution" to the Syria violence.

Under pressure from Western powers for twice blocking with Russia resolutions against Syria at the UN Security Council, China unveiled this month a six-point plan, calling for an immediate end to the conflict.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, meanwhile, announced that a second "Friends of Syria" conference would take place in Istanbul on April 2, following an initial forum in Tunis on February 24.

In the latest violence, pro-government newspaper Al-Watan said regime forces recaptured the rebel stronghold of Idlib after several days of shelling, while activists said pockets of resistance remained from rebel fighters.

More than 40 people were reported killed in violence across Syria yesterday, including 23 members of the security forces, as a pro-government daily said the regime had captured the rebel city of Idlib.

The Observatory said at least 14 civilians were killed in the central province of Homs, in Idlib, Aleppo in the north and the Damascus region town of Douma, while another soldier died in Aleppo.

Despite international pressure and growing clamour for foreign intervention, Assad's regime has pushed on with its brutal crackdown on a year-long revolt that has killed more than 8,500 people, mostly civilians, according to activists.

Israel, Gaza militants agree on 'fragile' truce

Four days of violence kills 25

AFP, Gaza City

Israel and militants in Gaza began observing an Egyptian-brokered truce yesterday after four days of violence, which officials on both sides warned could flare up again.

The ceasefire was holding after more than 72 hours of cross-border fighting in which 25 Gazans were killed, most of them militants, and 200 rockets were fired at Israel.

Under the deal, which came into force at 1:00 am (2300 GMT on Monday), both Israel and militants from Islamic Jihad, who were responsible for the lion's share of the rocket attacks, agreed to hold their fire.

More than 15 hours later, the nascent truce appeared to be largely holding.

However, both parties were quick to warn, however, that the agreement would be short lived if the other side stepped out of line.

News of the agreement emerged early on Tuesday after Cairo brokered what an Egyptian intelligence official described as a "comprehensive and mutual" truce.

The current round of violence kicked off on Friday with Israel's assassination of the head of the radical Popular Resistance Committees (PRC).

The strike prompted militants to fire hundreds of rockets and mortar rounds into southern Israel, wounding people. In response, the air force carried out dozens of raids air, targeting militants and weapons facilities.

Mosque arson attack triggers outrage in Belgium

AFP, Brussels

Belgium's Muslim community was in shock yesterday after a man set fire to a Shia mosque in Brussels, leaving the imam dead in an act some linked to tensions between Shia and Sunnis.

As investigators interrogated the suspect, a self-described Muslim in his mid-30s, members of the Shia and Sunni communities met to ensure calm after the arson attack late Monday, which also left two other people injured.

Interior Minister Joelle Milquet suggested inter-religious strife may be to blame after the suspect stormed into the Rida mosque with an axe, a knife and fuel, shouting about the conflict in Syria.

ROW OVER RARE EARTH EXPORT US, allies bring China at WTO

BBC ONLINE

The US, Japan and the European Union have filed a case against China at the World Trade Organization, challenging its restrictions on rare earth exports.

US President Barack Obama announced the filing at the White House, accusing China of breaking agreed WTO rules. Beijing has set quotas for exports of rare earths, which are critical to the manufacture of high-tech products from hybrid cars, to flat-screen TVs.

It is the first WTO case to be filed jointly by the US, EU and Japan.

They argue that by limiting exports, China, which produces more than 95% of the world's rare earth metals, has pushed up prices.

"We've got to take control of our energy future and we cannot let that energy industry take root in some other country because they were allowed to break the rules," Obama said in a Rose Garden press conference.

"If China would simply let the market work on its own we would have no objections."

China has denied the allegations in the WTO case, saying that it had enforced the quotas to ensure there was no environmental damage caused due to excessive mining.

The 17 metals are used in electrical products, as well as many renewable energy devices.



PHOTO: AFP

Leaders pose for a family picture around the International Forum Committee President, Benedito Braga (1st step L) yesterday during the 6th World Water Forum in Marseille, southern France. A global meeting on water opened in France with demands to provide billions of poor people with clean water and decent sanitation and address the spiralling demands of the future.

NEWS IN brief

Le Pen to run in French polls

AFP, Paris

French far-right candidate Marine Le Pen has secured the backing of enough local government officials to run in the two-round presidential election, party sources said on Monday.

Le Pen, who heads the anti-immigrant National Front party, now has the required 500 signatures from local mayors and other elected officials to stand in the April-May vote, the sources said.

Opposition Socialist candidate Francois Hollande is currently tipped to beat President Nicolas Sarkozy in the two-round election to be held on April 22 and May 6. Poll result shows, Le Pen to come third in the election.

All French presidential candidates must have the signed endorsement of 500 elected local officials -- of which there are around 42,000 in France -- by a March

UN troops jailed in Haiti for rape

BBC ONLINE

Two United Nations peacekeepers from Pakistan have been sentenced to a year in prison and sacked from the army for raping a 14-year-old boy in Haiti.

The soldiers were found guilty by a Pakistani military tribunal in Haiti and will serve their terms back home.

The attack in Gonaives in January was not the first time UN peacekeepers have been accused of assault. Last year, five Uruguayan soldiers were accused of sexually assaulting a teenage boy at a UN base.

Monday's ruling was the first time that UN personnel have been tried and sentenced while still in the country.

There have also been demands that UN soldiers should be stripped of their immunity and be tried by

Man sentenced 6,060 years in jail

BBC ONLINE

A court in Guatemala yesterday sentenced a former soldier to 6,060 years in prison for his role in the massacre of 201 people during the civil war.

Pedro Pimentel Rios, 55, was extradited from the US last year.

He is the fifth former soldier to be convicted for the killings in the village of Dos Erres in 1982.

The sentence is largely symbolic as the maximum actual term is 50 years but it comes amid renewed moves to try those implicated in civil war atrocities.

The massacre at Dos Erres was one of the most violent episodes in Guatemala's brutal 36-year civil conflict. A special unit of the Guatemalan army known as the Kaibiles stormed the village where they suspected residents were supporting or sheltering left-wing guerrillas.

Over three days, the soldiers systematically killed hundreds, shooting or bludgeoning them to death and throwing bodies down a well.



KONY 2012 Jolie calls for warlord's arrest

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Angelina Jolie has joined those calling for the arrest of Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony, following a controversial viral web video that has now been viewed by more than 70 million people.

The 30-minute film posted on YouTube, the most viewed video in the history with over 100 million viewers, by the charity Invisible Children calls for the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army militia to be arrested and asks for more intervention by the US government.

It has won praise from millions of viewers but also criticism from human rights activists and Ugandan journalists.

Joseph Kony is accused of abducting more than 30,000 children and using them as fighters in his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) outfit. The LRA is encouraged to rape, mutilate, and kill civilians often with blunt weapons. It has also displaced at least 2.1 million people.

The Oscar-winning actor, who is a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations, said: "I've been to Uganda and Congo and been to the International criminal court myself ... he's the one we all want to see in jail, so I think it's great that more people are talking about it."

Jolie, along with Bill Gates, Justin Bieber, was targeted by the people behind Kony 2012 as one of 20 "culturemakers" they hoped would call for the warlord's arrest.

RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

Tight race in Mississippi, Alabama

AGENCIES

Voters in Alabama and Mississippi were casting ballots yesterday in tight three-way race Republican hopefuls seeking the nomination to challenge President Barack Obama in November.

A win for front-runner Mitt Romney in the conservative Deep South would be a landmark breakthrough for his campaign.

The stakes are also high for Newt Gingrich, who will face mounting pressure to quit if he cannot win.

Rick Santorum is hoping to muscle Gingrich out of the race and turn it into a head-to-head against Romney.

Public Policy Polling's survey published on Monday gave Romney an unexpectedly strong showing in Alabama, where he was leading on 31%.

Gingrich was snapping at his heels in the state one point behind, while Santorum was in third place by the same margin.

The votes take place as two surveys indicated a fall in approval

for President Obama, amid anger at escalating petrol prices.

In Mississippi, the opinion pollster placed Gingrich ahead of Romney by 33% to 31%, with Santorum on 27%.

The fourth candidate, Texas Congressman Ron Paul, who has not campaigned actively in either state, was trailing far behind.

Public Policy Polling also found that 52% of Mississippi voters believe President Barack Obama is a Muslim, while just under half of respondents in Alabama thought the same.

The Romney campaign argues that his rivals cannot catch him in the hunt for delegates needed to become the Republican nominee, who will challenge Mr Obama for the White

House in November.

Mitt Romney so far has 454 delegates where Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich trail at 217 and 107 delegates respectively. A candidate needs 1,144 delegates to win.

Alabama and Mississippi together have 90 delegates, and both states award them proportionally.

Hawaii and American Samoa also hold caucuses yesterday.



Newt Gingrich

Mitt Romney

Rick Santorum

POLL CAMPAIGN, 2007

Sarkozy had Gaddafi's funding

AGENCIES

Nicolas Sarkozy received up to £42million from Colonel Gaddafi to fund his election as French president, a report on Monday revealed.

Extraordinary evidence made public in Paris is said to prove that the two former close allies had an illegal financial arrangement which propelled Sarkozy to power in 2007.

The revelation will provide terrific ammunition for the political enemies of the French premier and it may also strike a chord of fear into his friends abroad.

French jets were the first to attack Gaddafi's tanks in a brutal military campaign which ended with the Libyan leader being murdered.

Eyebrows were first raised when Colonel Gaddafi was honoured with a state visit to Paris in late 2007. He was referred to as the 'Brother Leader' by the French, and allowed to pitch his trademark tent next to the Elysee



Sarkozy and Gaddafi in better times

Palace.

Now this governmental briefing note published by Mediapart, the hugely respected investigative website, asks huge questions of

Sarkozy's motives - and his basic decency.

It points to numerous visits to Libya by the PM and his colleagues which were aimed at securing funding.

One, which is referred to in the note as having taken place on October 6, 2005, led to 'campaign finance to NS (Nicolas Sarkozy, then an ambitious interior minister)' being 'totally solved'.

The revelations follow Gaddafi's son and former heir, Saif-Al Islam Gaddafi, last year stating unambiguously that Libya had financed Sarkozy's election.

'The first thing we want this clown to do is to give the money back to the Libyan people. He was given the assistance so he could help them, but he has disappointed us. Give us back our money.'

The Elysee Palace would not comment on the revelations.

Half of Brits think Everest is in UK!

DAILYMAIL ONLINE

British geography teachers may wish to look away now. Half of the British adults think that Everest - in the Himalayas is the UK's tallest mountain, according to new research.

In the survey of 2,000 people, 20.6 per cent could not list England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as the four countries comprising the United Kingdom.

And many thought Stonehenge, a well-known heritage site in UK, heritage was a foreign site.

Many experts believe that advances in technology and the easy availability of online search engines that provide instant answers to any question anywhere, any time, means people now don't need to store geographical information like they did before the internet.



PHONE HACKING

Rebekah Brooks re-arrested

AFP, London

British police investigating tabloid phone hacking have re-arrested Rebekah Brooks, ex-editor of the News of the World and one-time top aide to media mogul Rupert Murdoch, it was reported yesterday.

Sky News said Brooks, 43, was among six people held on suspicion of perverting the course of justice following dawn raids by officers investigating hacking at the newspaper, which Murdoch shut down last July.

Brooks was arrested for the first time last year on suspicion of phone hacking and bribing public officials, just three days after she resigned as head of the tabloid's publisher, News International.

She has always denied any wrongdoing.

Police confirmed the arrest of a 43-year-old woman from Oxfordshire, west of London, but did not name her.

Brooks lives in Oxfordshire with her racehorse trainer husband Charlie Brooks, a close friend of Prime Minister David Cameron. Charlie Brooks was also reportedly among those arrested yesterday morning.

News International did not immediately make any comment on the arrests, nor did Brooks' personal spokesman.