

Warn Iran of 'last chance' before war

Report says US told Russia to convey message

AFP, Moscow

The United States has asked Russia to warn Iran it has a last chance in negotiations expected in April to avoid military strikes against its nuclear programme, a report said yesterday.

Russia's Kommersant daily said US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had told Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that the talks between Iran and world powers were a "last chance" to resolve the crisis.

"She asked her Russian colleague to make this clear to the Iranian authorities" as Washington has no diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic, the newspaper said.

Their discussion took place after Monday's UN Security Council meeting on Syria in New York, it added.

The newspaper said that a precise date and location for the talks is still being decided. Turkey's Foreign Minister Ahmet

Davutoglu said last month he expected the discussions to start in April at the latest.

The report gave no further details on the kind of military action Tehran faced but it said Russian diplomats at the United Nations believed it was a "matter of when, not if" Israel would strike against Iran.

Israel, as well as its main ally the United States, has repeatedly refused to rule out using force against Iran over its nuclear programme, which the West suspects is aimed at making nuclear weapons, a claim denied by Tehran.

Russia has always warned in public that military action against Iran risked having catastrophic consequences and has said that the crisis must be solved diplomatically.

But Kommersant said the Russian military was now at a state of "mobilised readiness" and a special Russian commission had already drawn up a "top secret" action plan for ensuring the security of Russian citizens in the case of a military strike against Iran.



Activists of NGOs demonstrate to protest against hydroelectric dams yesterday in the southern city of Marseille, on the sidelines of the 6th World Water Forum. The forum aims at resolving worsening problems of water scarcity and pollution.

PHOTO: AFP

China PM calls for quick reforms

BBC ONLINE

China's Premier Wen Jiabao has delivered a strong warning about the "urgent" need for reforms, without which, he said, tragedies such as the cultural revolution could still happen.

He was speaking after his last National People's Congress (NPC) news conference yesterday.

He added that China's decision to cut its economic growth target to 7.5% for 2012 was essential to sustain growth.

He also spoke on US-China trade links, relations with Taiwan and said that China would step up currency reform.

He stressed that China needed to press on with both political and economic reforms.

Reforms, he added, had to be "gradual and orderly" and were essential for the country's economy.

This was the last NPC meeting before a leadership transition begins later this year. Wen opened the meetings last week with a speech that cut the economic growth target and addressed land and military issues.

The once-in-a-decade transfer of power will begin in October. Vice-President Xi Jinping is widely expected to take over the party leadership from President Hu Jintao, and Vice-Premier Li Keqiang is tipped to succeed Wen.

Wen was speaking to both domestic and foreign journalists after the closing of the parliament session.

As he began the news conference, he was visibly emotional, saying that he was "sorry" for economic and social problems in the last decade.

Responding to a question, he said that the desire for democracy in the Middle East must be "respected and truly responded to".

"I believe this trend towards democracy cannot be held back by any force," he said.

Syrian army seizes another rebel city

Russia, China narrow gap with world on Syria, says US

AFP, Damascus

Regime forces seized another rebel city, activists said yesterday, as UN-Arab League mediator Kofi Annan and Russia urged President Bashar al-Assad to speed up efforts to end the bloodletting in Syria.

On the eve of the first anniversary of an anti-Assad revolt, the opposition suffered setbacks on both the military and political fronts as its Syrian National Council (SNC) coalition was hit by resignations.

International peace envoy Kofi Annan, meanwhile, said he had received Assad's response to proposals which he submitted in talks with the Syrian leader last week but had more questions which needed to be addressed without delay.

On the ground, "since last night there has been no more fighting," said Nouredin al-Abdo, an activist in Idlib, confirming that the city in northwestern Syria had fallen after a four-day assault by regime forces.

The army launched its assault on

the rebellious province of Idlib near the Turkish border on Saturday.

It also came as Assad's regime responded to UN-Arab League proposals to end a 12-month crisis that has killed more than 8,500 people, mostly civilians, according to activists.

Meanwhile, the United States yesterday said that Russia and China have moved closer to the rest of the world's condemnation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's deadly crackdown in Syria.

Russia and the Arabs agreed on "unhindered humanitarian access," an end to the violence, the establishment of up a mechanism for "objec-



tive monitoring" in the country, and no foreign intervention. China then welcomed the plan.

"They begin to close some of the gaps," US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said.

Nuland indicated she was encouraged by further statements from Moscow and Beijing, which have been criticized by Washington for twice vetoing UN Security Council resolutions condemning the Syria violence.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Wednesday criticized Assad for the "big delay" in reform in Syria, saying Damascus was failing to swiftly

follow Moscow's advice. Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao called for an immediate truce and for protection of civilians, adding: "China respects the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people for change and for the pursuit of their own interests."

However, it was not immediately clear whether both powers were any more likely to back any new UN resolution on Syria.

Assad on Tuesday issued a decree setting May 7 as the date for parliamentary elections under a new constitution adopted in February. But Washington immediately dismissed the planned vote as "ridiculous."

And Amnesty International yesterday warned of the "nightmarish world of systematic torture" faced by detainees.

Meanwhile, the United Nations' food agency said the civil unrest is putting 1.4 million people at risk from hunger in Syria, which must raise cereal imports by around a third to offset a loss in local output.

School bus crash in Switzerland kills 28

AFP, Sion

Distraught families of victims of a horrific school bus crash in a Swiss Alpine tunnel that killed 28 people flew to the scene yesterday, still unaware if their children were alive or dead.

The coach bringing 46 children and four teachers back to Belgium from a skiing holiday hit a concrete wall late Tuesday in the motorway tunnel near the town of Sierre.

It was unclear what caused the accident. A total of 22 children from two Catholic primary schools were killed, along with the teachers and both coach drivers, and 24 reported injured.

The injured, three of whom were said to be in a coma, were taken by ambulance and helicopter to four hospitals as fire crews worked for hours to cut them free from the twisted wreckage of the coach.

Belgium announced a day of national mourning, while the Swiss parliament observed a minute's silence for the victims.

Belgian Prime Minister Elio Di Rupo and Swiss President Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf were due to visit the site of the crash later yesterday.

As well as Belgians, the children included 10 of Dutch nationality and one Pole, authorities said.

Police in the southern Valais canton told reporters early Wednesday that the tragedy was "unprecedented" and that even seasoned rescuers had been traumatised.

The injuries were so bad that the death toll could well rise, sources added.

NEWS IN brief

Sarkozy takes poll lead

REUTERS, Paris

President Nicolas Sarkozy overtook Socialist challenger Francois Hollande for the first time Tuesday in an opinion poll on the first round of France's April-May election after attacking the European Union's trade and immigration policies.

The poll showed that Sarkozy would still lose to Hollande in a second-round runoff, however, albeit by a narrower margin of nine points, down from 13 points a fortnight ago.

Having trailed Hollande for months, the Ifop/Fiducial survey showed that Sarkozy had suddenly leapfrogged ahead of him. It put Sarkozy's first-round score at 28.5 percent, up from 27 percent at the end of February, and ahead of Hollande, who slipped to 27 percent from 28.5 percent.

Encyclopaedia Britannica ends its famous print edition

BBC ONLINE

After 244 years reference book firm Encyclopaedia Britannica yesterday decided to stop publishing its famous and weighty 32-volume print edition.

It will now focus on digital expansion amid rising competition from websites such as Wikipedia.

The firm, which used to sell its encyclopaedias door-to-door, now generates almost 85% its revenue from online sales.

Companies across the globe have been trying to boost their online presence in a bid to cash in on the fast-growing market.

Various newspapers, magazines and even book publishers have been coming up with online versions of their products as an increasing number of readers access information on high-tech gadgets such as tablet PCs and smartphones.

Suu Kyi makes her first TV speech

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi called for "freedom from fear" and further moves towards democracy in a leaked video of her first televised campaign speech to be aired yesterday.

"Unless people get human rights with freedom from fear, a democratic system cannot be established and developed," Suu Kyi said in the video, echoing the title of her well-known political essay "Freedom from fear."

"Only under the rule of law can people really feel the taste of freedom by really getting protection of the law," she said, ahead of April 1 by-elections in which the pro-democracy icon is standing for parliament for the first time.

Santorum wins double in Deep South

AFP, Birmingham

Republican presidential hopeful Rick Santorum scored a startling double win Tuesday in the Deep South, boosting his claim to be the true conservative alternative to frontrunner Mitt Romney.

Santorum's dramatic come-from-behind victories in Alabama and Mississippi gave his bid for the nomination to take on President Barack Obama in November elections a huge shot in the arm and were a stinging rebuke for Romney.

The results were also bad defeats for former House speaker and southern native Newt Gingrich, as the two states were seen as must-wins for his flagging campaign.

With 99 percent of precincts reporting, Santorum, a former US senator, was ahead in Alabama with 35 percent of the vote, with Gingrich and Romney tied for second place on 29 percent, according to CNN figures.

In neighboring Mississippi the race came down to the wire, with Santorum on 33 percent, Gingrich at 31 and Romney at 30, with 99 percent of votes counted.

Hours after the double defeat Romney however, secured consolation wins in the island state of Hawaii -- Obama's birthplace -- and in American Samoa, according to mediareports.

Romney had earlier issued a statement congratulating Santorum on his double victory, but insisted he remained best placed to win the nomination.

But experts said Santorum's win may open up the race to be the White House nominee.

And Gingrich, who faces calls to quit and allow conservatives to coalesce around Santorum, said he would fight all the way to the Republican convention in Tampa, Florida in August.

Congo warlord convicted in first ICC verdict

AFP, The Hague

The International Criminal Court yesterday convicted Congolese militia chief Thomas Lubanga of war crimes for conscripting children into his rebel army, the tribunal's first ever verdict.

Lubanga, 51, was found guilty in The Hague of abducting children as young as 11 and forcing them to fight and commit atrocities in a bloody war in a gold-rich region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Rights groups hailed the judgment, saying it sent a strong message to those who force young children to kill -- including Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony, now the target of an international activist campaign.

"Today's verdict will give pause to those around the world who commit the horrific crime of using and abusing children, both on and off the battlefield," said Amnesty International's Michael Bochenek.

A decade after the ICC was launched, presiding Judge Adrian Fulford read its first verdict, finding Lubanga was guilty of "conscripting and enlisting children under the age of 15 and used them to participate in hostilities".

Prosecutors told the court that militia under Lubanga's control had abducted children as young as 11 from homes, schools and football fields to serve as soldiers, and that young girls were used as sex slaves.

The warlord, who has denied the charges against him, will be sentenced at a date yet to be determined, the court said. He could face 30 years in jail or, if judges decide the crimes were exceptionally grave, life in prison.



Thomas Lubanga

HC clears way

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and Anu Jaigirdar.

Delivering a verdict on four separate petitions, the HC asked the District and Sessions Judge's Court, Dhaka, to complete the trial as soon as possible after receiving the copy of this judgement.

The HC also vacated its earlier order that stayed the case proceedings against the four accused on August 24, 1998.

The bench of Justice M Enayetur Rahim and Justice Sheikh Md Zakir Hossain yesterday came up with the verdict rejecting four separate petitions filed by the accused for quashing the proceedings against them.

Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filed the case with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's court, Dhaka on April 2, 1997 saying that the accused were involved in fraudulent activities between July and December of 1996 in violation of section-17 of the Securities Ordinance 1969. The Chief

Metropolitan Magistrate's court the same day took the charges into cognisance and issued warrant of arrest against the accused.

Following four petitions moved by the accused, the HC in 1998 stayed the proceedings of the case and issued separate rules asking the SEC to explain as to why the proceedings of the case should not be quashed.

The HC yesterday delivered the verdict after holding hearing on the rules for the last two days.

Delivering the verdict, the HC observed that the trial court, on the basis of evidence and documents, would decide whether the accused are guilty or innocent.

Therefore, the HC should not interfere with the proceedings of the trial court, it added.

Lawyer AKM Ali appeared for the SEC during yesterday's hearing. He said there are 13 other cases related to the 1996 share scam currently pending with different courts.

Massacre will not deter Afghan mission: Panetta

REUTERS, Camp Leatherneck

US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told troops in Afghanistan yesterday that the massacre of 16 Afghan civilians by an American soldier should not deter them from their mission to secure the country ahead of a 2014 Nato withdrawal deadline.

In Washington, President Barack Obama said after meeting with British Prime Minister David Cameron he did not anticipate any "sudden" change in US plans for the pace of withdrawing troops from Afghanistan.

Panetta arrived in Afghanistan amid heightened tensions over the kill lists. At around the time he landed at a major Nato airbase, an Afghan man drove a stolen pickup trucks at high speed onto a runway ramp and crashed into a ditch, Pentagon officials said.

In an earlier incident, a motorcycle bomb blast in Kandahar city that killed an Afghan intelligence soldier and wounded two others, as well as a civilian.

A roadside bomb also killed eight civilians in southern Helmand province, where Panetta began a two-day visit by meeting with US and coalition forces at two bases, Afghan provincial officials said.

Panetta's trip had been scheduled before Sunday's shootings in two Kandahar villages, but gained added urgency as political pressure mounted on Afghan and US officials over the unpopular war, now in its 11th year.

Forty percent of Americans said the shooting spree had weakened their support for the war, according to an online poll by Reuters/Ipsos.



Leon Panetta

Voters prefer candidates with a deeper voice: Study

BBC ONLINE

Voters in elections are more likely to pick candidates with a deeper voice, a new study has suggested.

Researchers at two US universities made recordings of both male and female speakers and then altered the pitch of their subjects' voices.

In the study, published in Proceedings of the Royal Society B, listeners "voted" more frequently for the "candidate" with the lower voice.

Researchers now want to test their findings in a real political situation.

Previous research has found that the pitch of a human voice can strongly influence how people are perceived.

Yahya Khan

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civilian members of the administration.

The head of state was escorted to President's House by a heavy contingent of the Pakistan army. Indeed, the only symbols of the state of Pakistan in Bangladesh were to be found in the cantonments and President's House. Elsewhere, the Bangladesh flag was seen atop every building, private as well as public.

In distant Peshawar, Air Marshal Asghar Khan called for an immediate transfer of power to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. In his view, Mujib was Pakistan's last hope and unless he was allowed to take charge of the country, Pakistan would face a break-up.

He roundly condemned Z A Bhutto's demand of the previous day that power be transferred to the Awami League in East Pakistan and to the People's Party in West Pakistan. But Bhutto remained undeterred. He repeated his demand on the

ground that, in his view, the principle of strict majority rule did not apply to Pakistan. He noted that no constitution could be framed by ignoring the interests of the people of West Pakistan. His comments drew flak from other politicians in the west wing, who thought he was advocating a new two-nation theory (following Jinnah's in the 1940s) in the country.

In Dhaka, Bangabandhu announced a new series of measures aimed at continuing the non-cooperation movement. He congratulated the people of Bangladesh for the resolute manner of their struggle and predicted that such determination could not go in vain.

Meanwhile, processions continued to march toward Bangabandhu's residence, asking him to declare independence and also to acquaint themselves with the new directives that were being issued by the Awami League every day.