

Blasts hit Syria security sites

27 killed, dozens wounded; Kofi Annan fears escalation of violence

AFP, Damascus

Two huge bomb blasts killed at least 27 people in the heart of the Syrian capital yesterday, state media said, as international envoy Kofi Annan warned of regional fallout from the year-long bloodshed in Syria.

The early morning "terrorist" attacks, apparently car bombings timed minutes apart, targeted criminal police headquarters in the Duwar al-Jamarek area and air force intelligence offices in Al-Qasaa district, state television said.

97 seven people were also wounded in the attacks.

The state broadcaster ran footage of a charred body inside the mangled remains of a smouldering vehicle in Duwar al-Jamarek (Customs Roundabout).

The facade of a multi-storey building was totally gutted by the impact of the other blast and several cars destroyed.

A spate of bombings have hit Syria's big cities in recent months



amid growing concerns that al-Qaeda has taken advantage of the uprising against Assad.

The opposition has accused the regime of having stage-managed the attacks.

But commentators on state television blamed Qatar and Saudi Arabia,

the main critique of Assad's regime.

An Arab diplomat, on condition of anonymity, told AFP that Saudi Arabia, which closed its embassy in Damascus this week, was delivering military equipment to Syrian rebels.

And UN-Arab League peace envoy Annan on Friday warned of a

regional "escalation" of the deadly conflict in Syria and urged the UN Security Council to close ranks to put pressure on Assad.

The former United Nations chief, who met Assad in Damascus last weekend, has ordered a team of UN experts to Syria, on a trip starting today, to discuss a possible ceasefire and international monitoring mission, his spokesman said.

Annan told the Security Council that he has had a "disappointing" response from Assad so far to his proposals.

Syria's foreign ministry said the country would cooperate with Annan and at the same time pursue its crackdown on "armed terrorist gangs," which it holds responsible for the year of bloodshed.

Apart from Annan's technical team, the UN and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation are to send experts to Damascus this weekend on a Syrian government-led humanitarian mission to protest cities devastated in shelling by security forces.

IMF urges urgent fund for Palestine

REUTERS, Washington

The International Monetary Fund yesterday urged donors to meet their aid pledges to the Palestinian Authority, warning that unless funding was forthcoming it would be forced to cut public wages and social benefits to address a deepening fiscal crisis.

The IMF said the aid-dependent Palestinian economy had entered a "difficult phase" with a severe liquidity crunch worsening since last year due to a drop in aid from Western backers and wealthy Gulf states and Israeli restrictions on trade.

An IMF report released yesterday, prepared for a donor meeting on Palestinian aid in Brussels next week, estimated a financing gap of about \$500 million. The Palestinian authority is relying on donor aid to cover its 2012 budget deficit projected to reach \$1.1 billion.

Most Palestinian aid comes from the United States, the European Union and Arab nations, allowing the Palestinian Authority to pay the salaries of public workers and benefits.

But the United States, which is trying to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, cut off funding last year when Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas defied calls from Washington and made a unilateral bid for statehood recognition at the United Nations.

Palestinian officials say more than \$150 million of US aid is frozen.

The IMF said just \$800 million of \$1 billion in promised budget support was disbursed in 2011. In addition, development aid was only \$169 million compared with \$370 million committed by donors.



Assange may run for Aussie parliament

REUTERS, Sydney

The founder and leader of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, plans to run for a seat in Australia's upper house of parliament, the anti-secrecy group announced on Twitter yesterday.

The comments could not be immediately confirmed.

Australian-born Assange, 40, is currently under house arrest in Britain and fighting extradition to Sweden for questioning over alleged sex crimes.

"We have discovered that it is possible for Julian Assange to run for the Australian Senate while detained. Julian has decided to run," WikiLeaks tweeted yesterday.

The earliest Senate election would not be until late 2013.

The group also tweeted that it plans to field a candidate to run against Prime Minister Julia Gillard in her home seat of Lalor in Victoria.

The Swedish warrant stems from Assange's encounters in August 2010 with two women who were then WikiLeaks volunteers. They accuse him of sexual assault. He says they consented.

WikiLeaks burst onto the global news agenda in 2010 when it released secret footage and classified US military files and diplomatic cables about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, drawing a furious response from the US government.

Gaddafi spy chief held in Mauritania

BBC ONLINE

The intelligence chief of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi has been arrested in Mauritania, reports said yesterday.

Officials said Abdullah al-Senussi was detained at Nouakchott airport.

Senussi, 63, was Gaddafi's brother-in-law, and has been described as one of his most trusted aides.

He fled Libya when Gaddafi was ousted and killed last year after an uprising and months of fighting. He is wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

Mauritanian security officials said Senussi was arrested during the night as he arrived on a regular flight from the Moroccan city of Casablanca on a false Malian passport.

Libyan officials have been unable to confirm the reports. Correspondents say Senussi, nicknamed "the butcher", is one of the last significant members of the regime still at large.

Libyan, Arab and western sources describe him as a thugish figure who would personally beat and abuse prisoners.

He was thought to have been responsible for purges of opponents within the regime in the 1980s and 90s, and for the deaths of 1,200 political prisoners at Tripoli's Abu Salim prison in 1996.



Abdullah al-Senussi

ROW OVER ROCKET LAUNCH PLAN N Korea gets US threat, rare China rebuke

AFP, Seoul

North Korea announced Friday it would launch a rocket carrying a satellite next month, sparking widespread condemnation and US threats that it could put much-needed food aid in jeopardy and received a rare rebuke from China.

The United States, Japan and South Korea said the plan, announced just 16 days after Pyongyang agreed to suspend long-range missile tests in return for the US food aid, would breach a UN ban imposed after previous launches.

Blast-off will be between April 12 and 16 to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of founding leader Kim Il-Sung, North's state television said.

The US State Department called the proposed launch "highly provocative" and a threat to regional security. And it voiced doubt over whether it could move ahead with providing food aid to North Korea if Pyongyang followed through

with its threat.

"Were we to have a launch, it would create obviously tensions and that would make the implementation of any kind of nutritional agreement quite difficult," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said.

China put rare public pressure on ally North Korea over the reclusive state's plan to launch a long-range rocket which is raising tension in the region.

Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Zhijun expressed China's "worry" when he met North Korean ambassador Ji Jae Ryong on Friday, the Xinhua news agency said.

"We sincerely hope parties concerned stay calm and exercise restraint and avoid escalation of tension that may lead to a more complicated situation," Xinhua yesterday quoted Zhang as saying.

Though he stopped well short of condemning the planned launch, Beijing only rarely goes public with pressure on the isolated North which relies heavily on its giant neighbor for its economic survival.

NEWS IN brief

Australia braces for cyclone

AFP, Sydney

A severe tropical cyclone smashed into Western Australia's north coast yesterday, forcing residents to bunker down as they waited for the destructive gale-force winds to pass.

Cyclone Lua, upgraded to a Category 4 storm -- five is the highest -- hit the sparsely populated Pilbara region and was moving inland, with winds estimated at 250 kilometres at its centre near the shore.

The small communities of Pardoo and Walla were expected to be worst hit, with the Bureau of Meteorology warning winds of up to 160 kilometres per hour from Port Hedland to Bidyadanga, near the resort town of Broome.

Commercial flights into the area have been

Former Nazi death camp guard dies

AFP, Berlin

Former Nazi death camp guard John Demjanjuk, sentenced to five years in a German prison last year in one of the last major trials of its kind, has died at the age of 91, police said yesterday.

The Ukrainian-born Demjanjuk had been found guilty of more than 27,000 counts of accessory to murder during the six months he was a guard at the Sobibor death camp in 1943.

The ailing Demjanjuk was sentenced by a Munich court in May 2011 after a trial lasting 18 months.

Police in the southern state of Bavaria said he died in a home for the aged in the town of Bad Feilnbach, adding that prosecutors would now conduct a routine investigation into the cause of death.

Chavez back in Venezuela

REUTERS, Caracas

Venezuela's Hugo Chavez flew home on Friday after cancer surgery in Cuba, vowing to conquer the illness and win an October presidential election despite the need for radiation treatment.

"Who said the path was going to be easy?" said Chavez, 57, in an emotional speech to the nation on the runway. "I have promised I will live, and to this end I will give my all!"

The socialist president's return to Venezuelan soil after an absence of three weeks in Havana reasserts his leadership, calms anxiety among supporters and quells whispers of a succession struggle behind the scenes.

Yet little is known about what kind of cancer Chavez has or how serious it is. So big questions remain as to whether he is fit enough to campaign for an October 7 election that has turned into the biggest political fight of his 13-year rule.

RAIL TICKET PRICE ROW Mamata asks Trivedi to resign

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress party yesterday asked its lawmaker and Indian Railway Minister Dinesh Trivedi, who has earned his party's wrath for hiking passenger fares in the rail budget, to quit in grace but the latter insisted that Mamata should make the demand in writing. Trinamool Congress parliamentary chief whip Kalyan Banerjee, who spoke to Trivedi over telephone, asked him to resign from the railway minister's post and make a graceful exit or face dismissal.

Kalyan said Trivedi told him that he wanted the party's decision to be conveyed in writing by Mamata who is also the West Bengal Chief Minister.

The Trinamool chief whip told Trivedi that it was not fair on his part to insist on a party directive in writing, pointing out that when he became a minister he had not insisted in writing about it from Mamata.

3 Gaibandha men

FROM PAGE 20

written statement said his husband was riding a motorbike on February 23 with two pillow passengers on his way home at Boalia village of Gobindaganj upazila in Gaibandha.

Crossing the Sapmara area, the bike hit a Rab-5 car coming from the opposite direction and broke a rear view mirror of the car.

Incensed at this, Rab personnel got down from the vehicle and started beating up the three.

At one stage some locals gathered there and asked the law enforcers about the incident. The Rab men misbehaved with them triggering a scuffle.

The following day Rab-5 filed a case with Gobindaganj Police Station accusing 12 persons including the three abductees in this connection, mentioned Rokeya Begum.

Fearing arrest, about six accused including her husband went into hiding at one of their relatives' house at Kagil union in Gabtoli upazila.

Monday night and picked up the three, while the rest managed to flee the scene.

A Rab pick-up was parked outside the house during the raid.

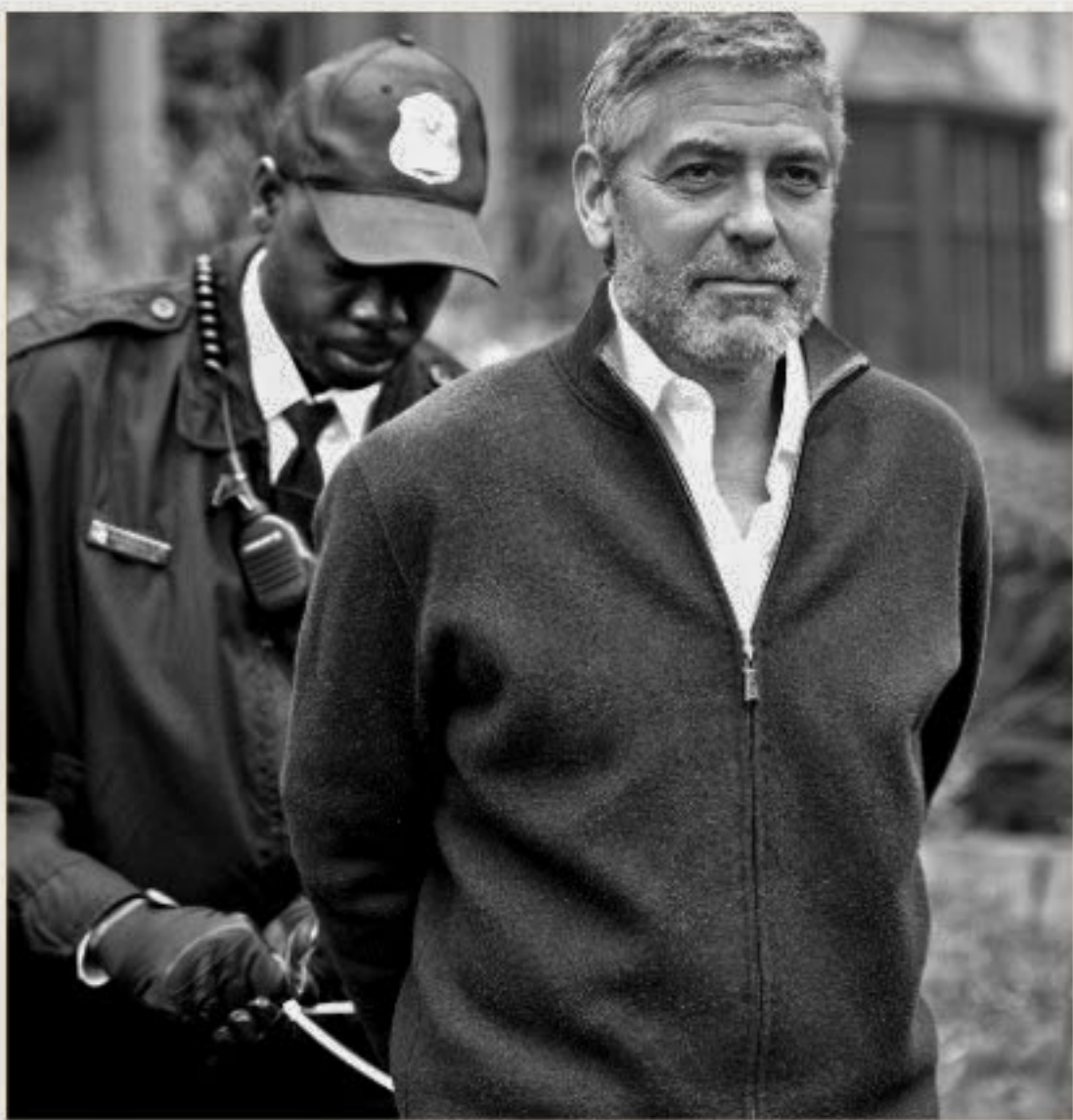
When their family members went to Rab-12 office the following day to complain about the incident, the Rab officials denied it.

Rokeya also alleged that Gobindaganj police on Sunday refused to record a general diary in this connection.

Contacted, Commanding Officer of Rab-12 Lt Col Anisuzzaman said they have no idea about such an operation.

"We didn't conduct any operation in Gabtoli after March 11. As far as I know, Rab-5 also didn't carry out any drive in the area," he mentioned adding, "Some criminal gangs commit robbery and abduction in Rab uniform. We are probing whether any such gang has committed the crime."

Rima Begum, wife of Bazlar, and Rashida Begum, wife of Mintu, were present, among others, at the press conference.



AFP, Washington

Actor George Clooney and several members of the US Congress were handcuffed and arrested Friday outside Sudan's embassy as they demanded an end to an offensive they fear will cause thousands to starve.

Swarmed by flashing cameras and TV crews, Clooney led more than one dozen prominent campaigners and his father to the steps of Sudan's mission in Washington's Embassy Row and ignored three warnings by police to leave.

crossing a police line.

The actor paid a clandestine visit several days ago to Sudan's South Kordofan, where aid groups say at least 250,000 people are at risk of imminent food shortages.

Clooney said he saw hundreds of people fleeing in terror to the hills and into caves in South Kordofan due to the constant buzzing of planes dropping bombs meant for insurgents but which frequently kill and maim civilians. "Best estimate are tens of thousands of people

PROTEST OVER SUDAN ATROCITIES Clooney arrested

Officers escorted the "Descendants" star and the other campaigners in plastic handcuffs to police vans. Hundreds of supporters chanted slogans nearby against Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir and hoisted banners reading, "Sudan: Stop Using Food as a Weapon."

Clooney, a longtime activist for human rights in Sudan, was released three hours later after paying a \$100 fine for

ple are going to die from starvation that is manmade. This isn't a famine, this is a manmade tragedy by the government of Khartoum to get these people to leave," Clooney told reporters after his release.

The conflict has severely impeded agriculture in the mountainous region, leading to fears of hunger. The United States has demanded that Sudan let in outside food shipments, but Khartoum is deeply suspicious of US intentions.

"We need humanitarian aid to be allowed into the Sudan before it becomes the worst humanitarian crisis in the world -- immediately," Clooney said to cheering supporters shortly before his arrest.

Clooney's arrest quickly became one of the top topics on Twitter, often with the tongue-in-cheek hashtag #FreeClooney. Many Internet users hailed Clooney for his activism, while others quipped that he "looks hot even when arrested."

Among others arrested outside the embassy included the actor's father, 78-year-old journalist Nick Clooney, and four members of the House of Representatives -- Al Green, Jim McGovern, Jim Moran and John Olver.

It's mere rumour

FROM PAGE 1

(BGB) in the Maungdaw township of Myanmar. The meeting was convened to ease the tension brewed over the reports of Myanmar massing troops on the border.

According to unconfirmed sources, the Myanmar government had mobilised troops at different points along the border near Naikkhangchhari, Ukhia and Teknaf upazilas after a UN-backed tribunal sustained Bangladesh's claim to 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic and territorial rights in the Bay of Bengal rejecting the claims of Myanmar.

Alarmed by such reports, BGB officials Thursday wrote for a flag meeting to their Myanmar counterpart.

In the two-hour meeting

held at the office of Nasaka sector-6, Lt Col Zahid Hasan, commander of BGB Teknaf battalion-42 and leader of the eight-member Bangladesh side, sought an explanation from Myanmar on its troops build-up.

"We have information that Myanmar had been mobilising troops at different points along the border, including Tumbro, Boliabazar and Maungdaw," Lt Col Zahid told the Nasaka officials.

In reply, U Theng Mi, leader of the 10-member Myanmar side, categorically denied the allegation.

He said the reports of troops mobilisation are nothing but rumours. "No situation has arisen which required reinforcement at

the borders," he added.

"There is no scope for Nasaka or any other forces to oppose the verdict of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea as the Myanmar government has accepted it," said Lt Col Zahid quoting Theng Mi as saying.

U Theng Mi said the lingering misunderstanding between the border forces of the two countries will end once the maritime boundary is demarcated. "The judgement would help us work better," he added.

The BGB delegation returned to Teknaf around noon.

Lt Col Zahid said he had rejected the Nasaka officials allegation that Bangladesh media was spreading the rumour of troops mobilisation.

Visiting several areas including Balukhali and Tumbro border on Thursday, Bashirul Islam, commander of BGB Chittagong sector, said he did not find any sign of troops mobilisation by Myanmar.

The verdict of the international tribunal in Hamburg, Germany on Wednesday gave Bangladesh a substantial share of the outer continental shelf of the Bay which would pave the way for offshore oil and gas exploration for the country.

The tribunal also awarded Bangladesh a full 12-mile territorial sea around the St Martin's Island overruling Myanmar's claim that the island be split into half and shared.