

# 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.

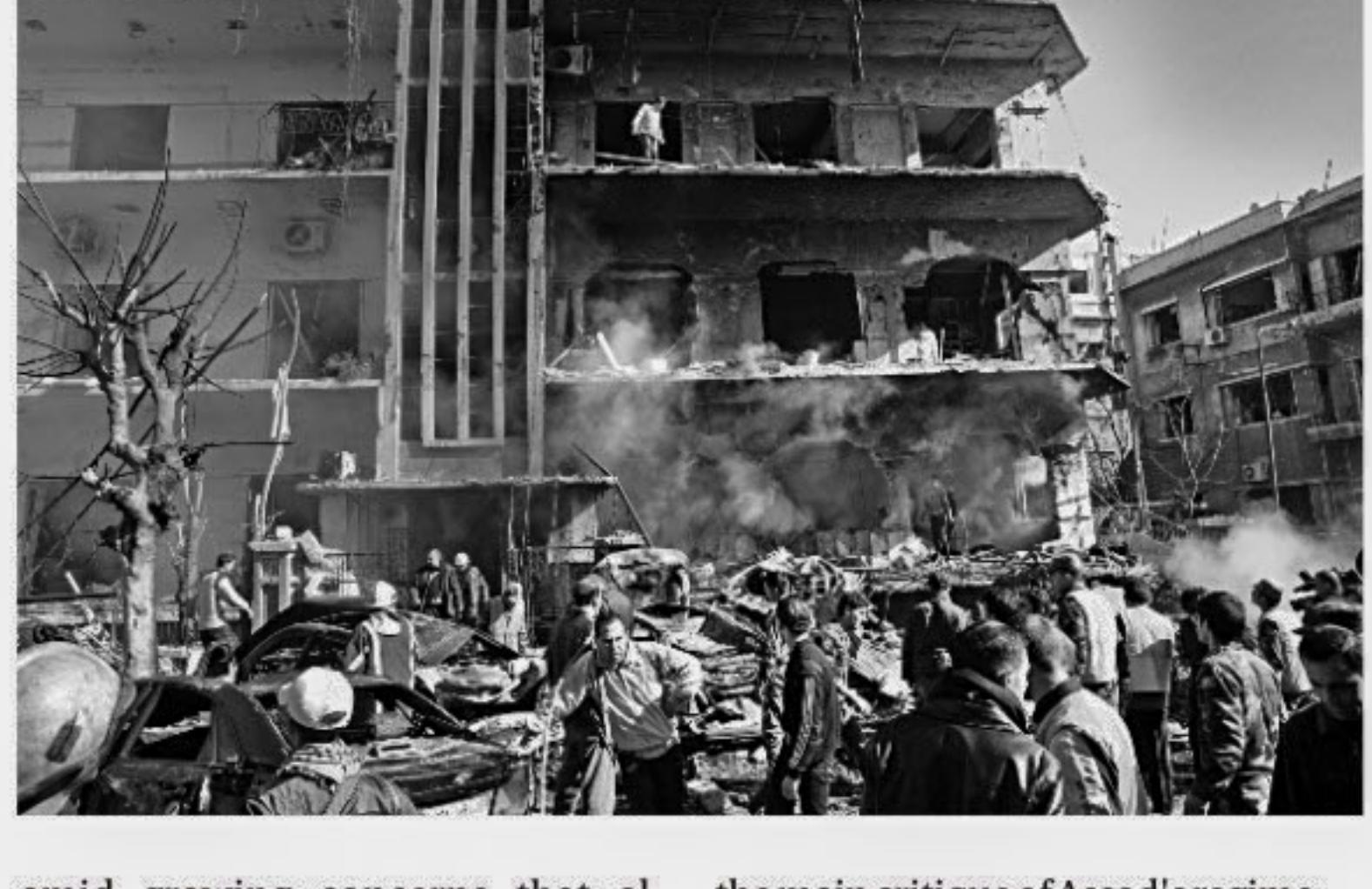
The early morning "terrorist" attacks, apparently car bombings timed minutes apart, targeted criminal police headquarters in the Duwar al-Jamarek area and air force intelligence offices in Al-Qasaa district, state television said.

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.

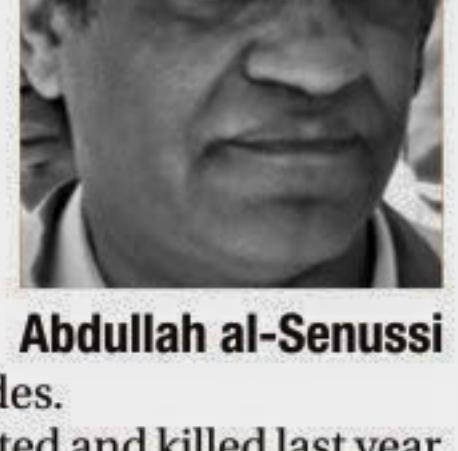
He fled Libya when Gaddafi was ousted and killed last year after an uprising and months of fighting. He is wanted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

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.

## US suspect in Afghan massacre identified

AFP, Washington

A US soldier who allegedly shot dead 16 civilians in Afghanistan was being held in a US military jail in Kansas yesterday as his name and new details about the veteran's past emerged.

The soldier, identified Friday by US media as US Army Staff Sergeant Robert Bales, had served three combat tours in Iraq, and was on his first deployment to Afghanistan.

Bales allegedly left his base in the southern province of Kandahar before sunrise Sunday, entered an Afghan village and opened fire, killing men, women and children. The incident has plunged US-Afghan relations into the deepest crisis since the 2001 US-led invasion.

Outraged locals wanted Bales to stand trial in Afghanistan, but the US military quickly flew him out of the war-torn country.

Bales's attorney Browne said that his client had gotten angry about a serious injury that a comrade sustained the day before the massacre, but held no animosity toward Muslims.

Bales, the father of young children, was also upset because after his extensive Iraq duty he did not believe he would be deployed to Afghanistan, according to US news reports.

The suspect appears to have been drinking the night of a shooting, a violation of US combat rules.

Bales may have "just snapped" due to a combination of stress, alcohol and domestic issues, another unnamed official told the New York Times on Thursday.

## 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 Luca, 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 Wallal 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 reassures 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.

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."

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

The Rab-12 team in their uniform raided the house on

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

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

In

the two-hour meeting

## 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 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

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.