

Damascus rocked by fighting

Annan team arrives
AFP, Beirut

Fierce clashes between rebel troops and Syrian forces rocked a Damascus district bristling with security facilities yesterday, just hours before experts sent by peace envoy Kofi Annan arrived in the capital.

The fighting, the heaviest in Damascus since a revolt against President Bashar al-Assad's regime erupted a year ago, came as the capital was still reeling from deadly weekend bombings.

On the diplomatic front, a mission sent by UN-Arab League special envoy Kofi Annan arrived in Damascus for talks on a monitoring operation to end the bloodshed.

"The mission has arrived. There are five people with expertise in political, peacekeeping and mediation," Ahmad Fawzi, spokesman for Annan, told AFP.

"They will be staying for as long as they are making progress on reaching agreement on practical steps to implement Mr Annan's proposals," he added.

State television said three "terrorists" and a

security force member were killed in the clashes that erupted early morning in the upscale and heavily guarded Mazzeh neighbourhood of Damascus, where several security facilities are housed.

It said several people were also wounded on both sides.

Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, said at least 18 security troops were wounded in the fighting that broke out before dawn in Mazzeh.

"The clashes were the strongest and the closest to security installations in the capital since the outbreak of the revolt a year ago," Abdel Rahman told AFP.

He said that by 4:00 am the fighting had ebbed.

Mourtada Rasheed, an activist in Damascus, said blasts and heavy shooting could be heard in Mazzeh as well as two other districts, Qaboon and Arbeen.

A resident of Mazzeh, located near the presidential palace and home to several embassies, said locals were terrified by the sound of gunfire.



Young people walk away from the "Ozar Hatorah" Jewish school yesterday in Toulouse, southwestern France, where four people (three of them children), were killed and two seriously wounded when a gunman opened fire. This is the third gun attack in a week by a man who fled on a motorbike.

ROW OVER NEW CASES Khmer Rouge judge quits

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodia's UN-backed war crimes court was rocked yesterday by the second resignation of an international judge in recent months amid a row over whether to pursue more former regime members.

Swiss co-investigating judge Laurent Kasper Ansermet said that his authority to investigate possible third and fourth cases at the tribunal had been constantly blocked by his Cambodian counterpart.

"Judge Laurent Kasper-Ansermet considers that the present circumstances no longer allow him to properly and freely perform his duties," a statement released by the court said.

In October, German judge Siegfried Blunk quit the court, blaming government interference.

Maldives president opens parliament amid protests

AP, Male



The new president of the Maldives addressed lawmakers and opened Parliament amid vehement protests by the opposition yesterday, nearly six weeks after he took office in a contentious power transfer that his predecessor has called a coup.

Authorities used tear gas earlier in the day as several hundred demonstrators blocked roads and shouted slogans calling for the resignation of President Mohammed Waheed Hassan. Hassan was prevented from opening Parliament on March 1 amid protests by opposition lawmakers.

Hassan was vice president when he replaced President Mohamed Nasheed last month after his predecessor resigned following weeks of public protests and a loss of support from the military and police.

Nasheed later claimed that he was forced to resign at gunpoint in what he called a coup. He demanded that Hassan resign immediately and call fresh elections. Hassan says the power transfer was constitutional.

Television footage yesterday showed security staff in the Parliament building forcibly removing four opposition lawmakers as they were trying to stop Hassan from making his opening speech.

A fire raged at a market close to the street demonstrations, and military personnel and firefighters doused it.

After a few hours' delay, Hassan made his speech in which he called for national unity. However, street protests continued.

In yesterday's speech, Hassan said the Maldives' constitution does not allow a presidential election before July 2013 and an early poll would require constitutional amendment.

Suu Kyi's party decries 'unfair treatment'

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's political party yesterday decried what it described as "unfair treatment" by the authorities ahead of April 1 by-elections.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) said in a statement that people in one village in northwest Sagaing were forced by the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to attend one of its meetings.

It said the army-backed USDP had also donated about \$440 for a local school and promised the same amount again if the party wins in next month's polls, without saying whether it was USDP or government funds.

"This is unacceptable and against the election laws," the statement said.

The party also said that in the constituency of Kawhmu near Yangon where Suu Kyi is standing for a seat in parliament, the names of 413 dead people were found on the voter list.

It said 1,387 other names of valid voters were left off the electoral roll and 259 names were listed more than once.

With its top ranks filled with former generals, the USDP claimed an overwhelming victory in a 2010 election that was marred by widespread complaints of intimidation and fraud.

Manmohan laments unruly coalition

AFP, New Delhi

India's premier blamed his unruly coalition yesterday for difficulties in passing economic reforms as he reacted to the resignation of a railway minister over a proposed hike in train fares.

"The difficult decisions we have to make (in ushering in economic reforms) are made even more difficult because we are a coalition government," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told parliament.

"We have to formulate policy with the need to maintain consensus," the 79-year-old premier from the Congress party added. "This was sharply brought out in presentation of the railway budget."

Railways Minister Dinesh Trivedi resigned



over the weekend after facing a mutiny in his Trinamool Congress Party, a minority party in the coalition whose leader Mamata Banerjee blasted the proposed hike in rates as "anti-poor."

The prime minister told parliament he accepted "with regret the departure" of Trivedi.

He noted that the minister -- in office since May 2011 -- had promised to carry out a "modernising" vision for the railways laid out by Banerjee, who served as the previous rail minister.

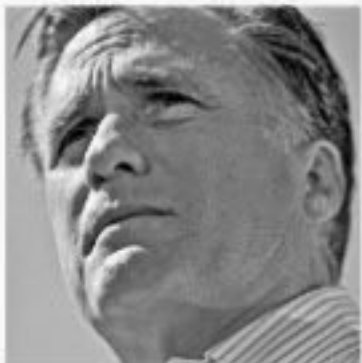
Singh appealed to fractious coalition allies to back reforms to spur growth of Asia's third-largest economy.

"This is an occasion we must eschew narrow partisan ends and stand united as a nation," Singh said.

NEWS IN brief

Romney scores big win in Puerto Rico primary

AFP, San Juan



Mitt Romney has scored a resounding win in Puerto Rico's Republican primary, a usually overlooked contest that has given him momentum in the hotly contested White House race.

With a final tally in late Sunday, the former Massachusetts governor had more than 83.4 percent of the vote, according to the State Elections Commission, or CEEPR, in the US territory.

His chief rival Rick Santorum stood a distant second with 7.7 percent. Former House speaker Newt Gingrich had two percent, just ahead of Representative Ron Paul's 1.1 percent.

Romney claimed victory and said he believes Puerto Ricans want a president with experience creating jobs.

Indonesia police shoot dead 5 suspected militants in Bali

REUTERS, Denpasar

Indonesian police shot dead five suspected militants planning attacks on the resort island of Bali, including one on a night club popular with foreign tourists, the national counter terrorism agency and police said yesterday.

The five men, who were shot dead in overnight raids on the island, were linked to the banned Jemaah Islamiah group, which carried out nightclub bombings on Bali in 2002 that killed 202 people, most of them Australian tourists, officials said.

The 2002 attacks were a watershed for Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population, forcing the secular state to confront the presence of violent militants on its soil. Bali, which is majority Hindu, is a global tourist destination.

Ramos-Horta concedes defeat in E Timor poll

AFP, Dili



East Timor's President Jose Ramos-Horta conceded defeat yesterday after the country held its second presidential election as a free nation at the weekend.

Saturday's election, which pitted the Nobel-laureate against 11 other hopefuls, is to go to a second round after none of the candidates garnered the 50 percent majority required by the constitution to secure an outright win.

The run-off is to be held on April 16 between the opposition Fretilin party's Francisco "Lu Olo" Guterres and former armed forces chief Taur Matan Ruak, based on preliminary results, election official Luiz Fernando Valls said.



Iraqis wave flags with the portrait of anti-US cleric Moqtada al-Sadr as hundreds of thousands of supporters of the Sadrist movement rally to mark the ninth anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, in the center of the southern city of Basra yesterday. They were demanding better living conditions and an end to corruption across the country.

Egypt court acquits Zawahiri brother

AFP, Cairo

An Egyptian military court yesterday acquitted Mohammed al-Zawahiri, the brother of al-Qaeda's leader Ayman, overturning a death sentence in a new trial, his lawyer and his son told AFP.

The court also acquitted Mohammed Islambouli, whose Islamist brother Khaled assassinated president Anwar Sadat in 1981, they said. They had been convicted of planning militant attacks.

"Thank God, he was found innocent," Zawahiri's son Abdelrahman told AFP by telephone after the verdict.

"We expect him to be released in the next few days," his lawyer Kamel Mandur said.

In 1998, Zawahiri and Islambouli were sentenced on charges of undergoing military training in Albania and planning military operations in Egypt.

Mandur said the trial also acquitted several other former militants including Sayyed Imam Fadl.

Hillary urges human rights in Iran

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called yesterday for respect for human rights and freedom of expression as she wished Iranians well on Nowruz, the Persian New Year.

"The people of the United States join you in welcoming the opportunities of this new year and the possibilities for strengthening ties of family and friends," Clinton said in a Nowruz statement.

"And as we face new challenges, we remain committed to our support for universal human rights and the freedom of expression -- rights that promote peace and progress. May your Nowruz be glorious, and all your days be Nowruz."

Millions of Iranians -- along with people of other Persian-influenced nations such as Afghanistan -- celebrate Nowruz with the start of spring, which is meant to represent renewal.

Iran and the United States have no diplomatic relations. Washington has repeatedly urged Iran's clerical regime to improve its record on human rights, including treatment of political critics and religious minorities.

In 2009, newly inaugurated US President Barack Obama used Nowruz to send an unprecedented overture to Iranians in which he offered to repair three decades of ill will through dialogue on disputes including Tehran's nuclear program.

Obama concluded that Iran failed to return the gesture and the regime shortly afterward clamped down on major street protests that erupted after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial reelection.

The Obama administration has since ramped up economic sanctions to pressure Iran to end its nuclear program, as Israel leads calls for the world to ensure that Tehran does not develop an atomic bomb.



Nato failed to investigate Libya civilian deaths: Amnesty

REUTERS, London

Nato has failed to properly investigate or provide compensation for civilian deaths caused by its air strikes during the seven-month operation in Libya that helped bring about the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, Amnesty International said yesterday.

Echoing similar criticisms aired this month by Russia, Amnesty said scores of Libyans, who were not involved in the conflict, had been killed or injured in Nato bombings but there had been no proper investigations into their deaths.

"Nato officials repeatedly stressed their commitment to protecting civilians," Donatella Rovera, Senior Crisis Adviser at Amnesty, said in a statement.

"They cannot now brush aside the deaths of scores of civilians with some vague statement of regret without properly investigating these deadly incidents."

Career Opportunity in International NGO

NETZ is looking for some highly competent professionals for its country office in Dhaka. All posts require frequent field visits.

Programme Manager, Livelihood

Salary: BDT.60,000-90,000/month plus other fringe benefits (provident fund, bonus and gratuity).

Tasks: Coordinate and supervise livelihood projects; ensure quality implementation of economic and social empowerment components for ultra poor including sustainability factors; provide support to PNGOs as per project objectives and partnership principles; contribute to conceptual and strategic development of the programs focusing on people's institution; provide guidance to team; ensure a high standard monitoring process and able to use lessons learnt to improve the project; liaise with relevant agencies; prepare reports; train staff; and facilitate meetings.

Qualifications: Masters in any discipline from any reputed university. 7 years experience from any reputed national/international NGOs in relevant field.

Finance Manager, Livelihood

Salary: BDT.60,000-90,000/month plus other fringe benefits (provident fund, bonus and gratuity).

Tasks: Monitor proper utilisation of grant fund, ensure compliance of the contract; ensure financial support to projects; ensure efficient use of financial and material resources; prepare and analyse budgets; procure materials; audit PNGO funds; check 100% vouchers of expenses by PNGOs; train staff on accounts and finance; coordinate, communicate and submit periodic financial reports and track expenditure; assist the management to take necessary actions.

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Qualifications: Masters in any discipline from any reputed university. Minimum 3 years experience in similar field from any reputed national/ international NGOs.

Salary is negotiable for all positions based on experience and quality. If you are an eligible candidate below 50 years old, committed to empowerment of ultra poor, progressive, gender sensitive, reliable, and trustworthy and have excellent proficiency both in Bengali and English and computer literacy please apply with a CV (4 pages) citing grades in all exams and a recent photo by post to: NETZ, House 40 (1st Floor), Road 4A, Dhanmondi, Dhaka 1209 latest by April 1, 2012.

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