

Rebels accused of abuses in Syria

AFP, Beirut

Syria's armed opposition is carrying out serious human rights abuses, including the kidnapping, torture and execution of security force members and government supporters, a rights group said yesterday.

And suffering the latest setback in their bid to oust President Bashar al-Assad, rebel fighters were forced to flee the eastern Syrian city of Deir al-Zor yesterday in the face of a fierce army assault.

The New York-based watchdog said that while the one-year revolt in Syria had started as a largely peaceful uprising, it had transformed into an armed insurgency, especially since early February, when the government launched large-scale attacks against opposition strongholds throughout the country.

The rights group said it had documented cases of kidnappings, torture and executions by opposition groups, often with a sectarian motive.

Syria's population of 23 million is predominantly Sunni Muslim, while the ruling

Alawites, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, form the minority.

According to HRW, members of the rebel Free Syrian Army, made up of defectors and sympathisers, were also kidnapping soldiers as well as Iranian nationals, some of them civilians.

Meanwhile security was tightened in Damascus yesterday after a spate of deadly clashes, activists said, as the UN Security Council prepared to thrash out a statement warning Syria over its crackdown on dissent.

Fresh clashes broke out in the capital while security forces killed at least 16 civilians in violence across the country, according to monitors and activists.

Despite recent successes, Assad still faces significant outside pressure. Ally Russia signaled yesterday it would support a UN statement backing a mission by envoy Kofi Annan to end the bloodshed so long as there was no ultimatums.

In addition, Moscow joined calls for both the army and rebels to grant daily ceasefires that would enable humanitarian missions to areas of Syria worst hit by the fighting.



Two-year-old Quobra Kompalemba, who suffers from severe malnutrition and bronchitis, receives milk through a catheter on Monday at a hospital in Diapaga, eastern Burkina Faso. At least 20 million people are threatened by famine this year in Sahel region according to the NGO Action Against Hunger.

PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar to allow by-polls observers

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar will allow about two dozen poll observers from its Southeast Asian neighbours to visit the country for next month's closely watched by-elections, the Asean regional bloc said yesterday.

The April 1 polls, which will see Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi stand for a seat in parliament for the first time, are viewed as a key test of the military-backed government's commitment to budding reforms.

Myanmar has invited Asean to send five observers and 18 parliamentarians to witness the vote, at which 48 seats are at stake, the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations said in a statement.

A 2010 election which swept the army's political allies to power was marred by widespread complaints of cheating and intimidation.

Wave of attacks across Iraq kill 49

AFP, Baghdad

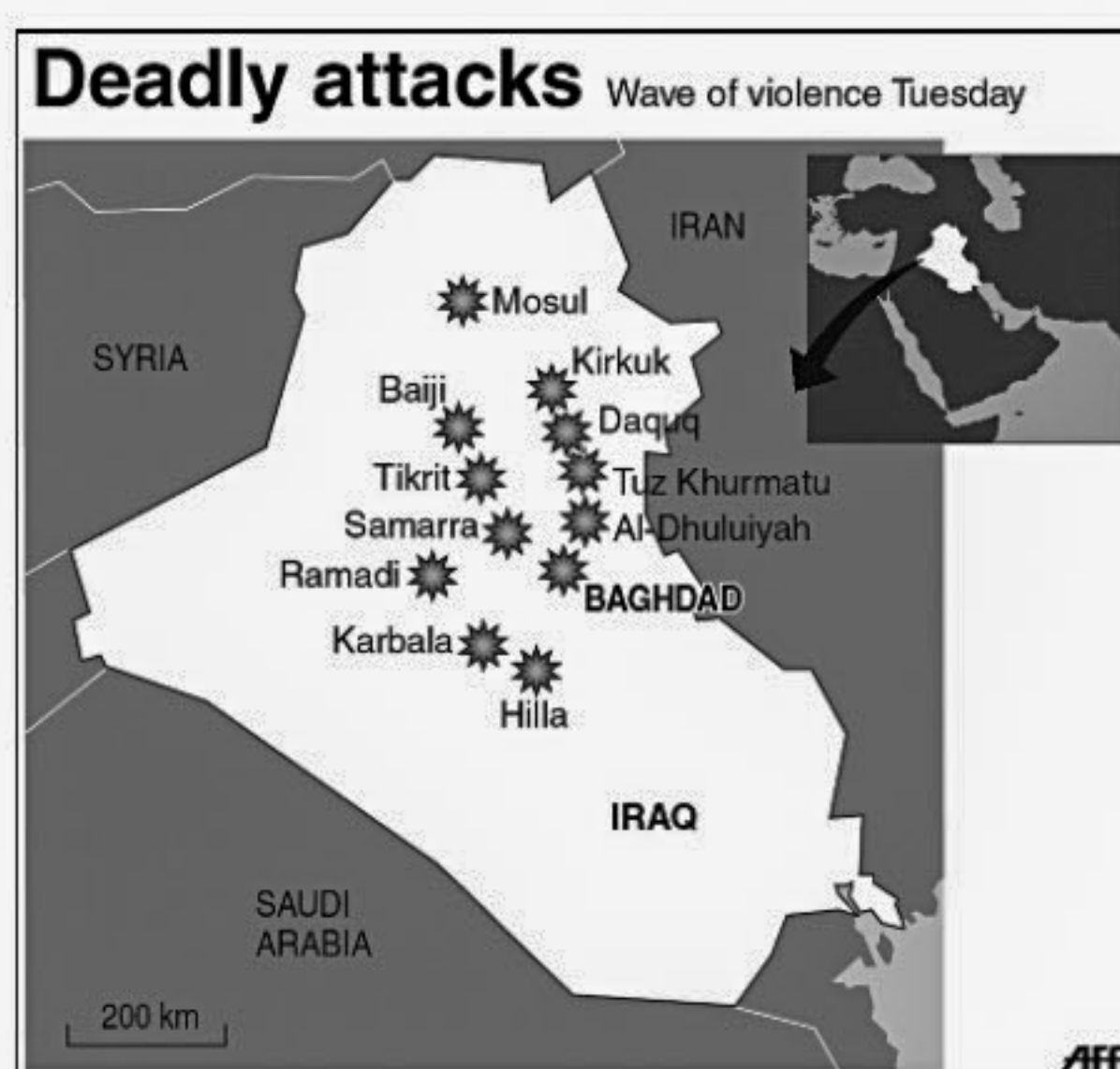
A wave of attacks in more than a dozen Iraqi cities yesterday killed at least 49 people on the anniversary of the US-led invasion of the country, just days before Baghdad hosts a landmark Arab summit.

The violence, which left more than 250 people wounded, bore the hallmarks of al-Qaeda, which typically tries to launch coordinated nationwide mass-casualty bombing campaigns, although no one immediately claimed responsibility.

Following the attacks, the government declared a week of public holidays from March 25 to April 1.

Arab leaders are expected in Baghdad for the March 27-29 Arab League summit.

It was swiftly condemned by Iraq's parliament speaker as a bid by the jihadist group



to derail this month's summit, while United Nations envoy Martin Kobler described the violence as "atrocious".

Bombings and shootings rocked 18 towns and cities spanning the northern oil hub

of Kirkuk and the Shia shrine city of Karbala, south of Baghdad, from 7:00am, in the deadliest violence to strike Iraq in more than two months.

In central Baghdad, a car bomb exploded in the car park opposite the foreign

ministry, killing 3 and wounding nine, officials said, underscoring concerns over Iraq's ability to maintain security for the meeting.

The deadliest attacks occurred in Kirkuk and Karbala, where 26 people died in total.

In ethnically-mixed Kirkuk, a suicide bomber blew up a vehicle at a police building, killing 13 people and wounding 60. All of the dead were police, as were the vast majority of those hurt.

In Karbala, two roadside blasts at the entrance to the city killed 13 people and wounded 48, according to provincial health spokesman Jamal Mehdi.

Hours before yesterday's foreign ministry attack, a car bomb set off by a suicide attacker in the centre of the capital killed five people and wounded 28, officials said. An early-morning gun attack

on a Baghdad church also left three police dead.

Car bombs in Hilla, south of Baghdad, and Ramadi, west of the capital, killed four people and wounded 44, officials said.

Separate gun and bomb attacks in Salaheddin province killed six people, including a city councillor, police said. Gunmen also killed a member of the Shabak minority in the main northern city of Mosul.

Security forces also said they defused six more car bombs.

Yesterday's violence was Iraq's deadliest day since January 14, when 53 people were killed in a suicide bombing outside the southern port of Basra.

The attacks come on the ninth anniversary of the beginning of the US-led invasion of Iraq which ousted Saddam Hussein.

TMC to quit UPA if humiliated: Mamata

AGENCIES

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in an interview to CNN IBN on Monday said that her party will quit the United Progressive Alliance, if humiliated.

She, however, said that, as a coalition partner, Trinamool Congress was committed to the UPA.

"There are some issues... I am not angry. I can't disclose the entire story to the press. I am with a particular alliance. I can't comment against that. There is decorum in democratic system," Mamata told CNN-IBN.

Pointing out that every political party has some political commitment to the people, the West Bengal Chief Minister said "I am only committed to keep my commitment also."

Asked whether she would withdraw support to the government, she said "I am committed to UPA-II because we had contested the election together. I want to keep my manifesto promise. Unless, until they throw us out, we would continue with respect, whatever they may give to us."

At the same time, she added, "if there is humiliation, you have to take a decision. Until there is humiliation, we will abide by our commitment."

Her statement assumes significance as she has been repeatedly giving headaches to the government by opposing various measures like NCTC, FDI in retail, fuel price and railway fare hike.

Defending her decision to sack railway minister Dinesh Trivedi, the Trinamool Congress chief said that Trivedi had kept her and the party in the dark about the hike in passenger fare.

She also said that it was her right to decide who would become the railway minister, as railway ministry has been given to Trinamool.



Mukul Roy India's new rail minister

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Trinamool Congress leader Mukul Roy, a trusted aide of Mamata Banerjee, was sworn in as India's new railway minister yesterday, replacing Dinesh Trivedi who was forced to resign.

Roy, 57, was sworn in as a cabinet minister at a special but brief ceremony by President Pratibha Patil at the Rashtrapati Bhawan. The oath-taking ceremony of Roy was attended also by Vice President Md Hamid Ansari, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, UPA chairperson and cabinet ministers including ministers of Trinamool Congress.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh accepted Roy as the new railway minister after a 20-minute meeting with Mamata here on Monday.

Roy, a junior minister for shipping in Singh's council of ministers, represents West Bengal in the Rajya Sabha, and had served as the junior minister for railways in 2011.



Mamata Banerjee and Manmohan Singh in better times

NEWS IN brief

North Korea invites IAEA

AFP, SEOUL

North Korea has invited UN inspectors to monitor a nuclear freeze deal with the United States, insisting the pact remains in force despite its shock announcement of a planned satellite launch.

Next month's scheduled launch, which would defy a United Nations ban, has sparked widespread complaints that the communist state is testing long-range missile technology which could one day deliver a nuclear warhead.

Washington says any launch would breach the bilateral deal announced on February 29, which offered major US food aid for a partial nuclear freeze.

The North, led since December by the young and untested Kim Jong-Un, insists otherwise, and said it was inviting inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) back three years after expelling the UN division.

15 killed in train collision in India

AFP, Lucknow, India

Fifteen people were killed yesterday in a train accident in north India, an official said, amid a political row over a plan to raise fares to pay for a safety upgrade on the network.

A train travelling across Uttar Pradesh state crashed into an overloaded jeep carrying 19 people as it tried to pass an unmanned crossing in Mahamaya Nagar district, 296 kilometres from state capital Lucknow.

The cash-strapped train system has a notoriously bad safety record, with a recent official report revealing almost 15,000 people are killed every year crossing rail tracks -- a figure that the government described as a "massacre".

India's rail network carries 18 million people daily and is still the main form of long-distance travel

Einstein's love letters go online

THE TIMES OF INDIA ONLINE

A website launched by a university in Israel has catalogued more than 80,000 of Albert Einstein's collected papers and notes and personal correspondence, including love letters.

The website's launch -- marked simultaneously in Israel, at The Einstein Papers Project at the California Institute of Technology, and at Israeli embassies worldwide -- commemorated Einstein's 133rd birthday March 14 also observed as Israel's National Science Day, Xinhua reported.

Among the non-scientific documents are a letter to Azmi El-Nashashibi, editor of the Falastin newspaper, discussing a solution to the Jewish-Arab conflict, a postcard to his sick mother, a letter from a younger mistress,

JFK ASSASSINATION

Castro knew in advance!

ANI, London

Fidel Castro had prior knowledge that US President John F Kennedy was about to be killed, according to a new book by a retired CIA analyst.

Rumours about the Cuban leader's involvement in a plot to murder his fierce adversary have swirled for almost half a century since communist sympathiser Lee Harvey Oswald shot the US president during a trip to Dallas in November 1963.

Now author Brian Latell, who studied Cuban affairs as a CIA analyst in the 1960s and later became the agency's chief intelligence officer for Latin America, says he is certain that Castro at least knew the attack was going to happen.

On the morning of November 22, 1963, the day Kennedy was killed, Castro ordered a senior intelligence officer in Havana to stop listening for non-specific CIA radio communications and concentrate instead on "any little detail, any small detail from Texas", Latell claims in his new book 'Castro's Secrets - the CIA and Cuba's Intelligence Machine', set for release next month.

Four hours later, the airwaves came alive

with news that Kennedy was dead.

Latell also claims that Castro was aware that Oswald, who had been denied a visa to visit Cuba at the country's embassy in Mexico City, told staff there that he was going to murder Kennedy to prove his allegiance to the communist cause.

"Fidel knew of Oswald's intentions and did nothing to deter the act," the Daily Mail quoted Latell as saying in his book.

In an interview published in The Miami Herald, the author, now a respected senior lecturer on Cuba at the University of Miami, says he discovered the information in interviews with former Cuban intelligence officers, backed up by declassified US government documents.

"I don't say Fidel Castro ordered the assassination, I don't say Oswald was under his control. He might have been, but I don't argue that, because I was unable to find any evidence for that," he said.

Subsequent investigations by the US security agencies, and the official Warren Commission inquiry into Kennedy's assassination, looked at Castro's possible involvement but concluded that Oswald was a lone gunman acting independently.

DEADLY AIR STRIKES

Pakistan demands US apology

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistan parliamentary committee yesterday demanded an unconditional apology from the United States for a November air attack on its border post that killed 24 soldiers.

The committee also called for cessation of drone attacks inside Pakistan and reiterated the country's commitment to fighting terror and extremism.

Parliament opened a debate on recommendations by the parliamentary committee on national security, which called the attack a "blatant violation of Pakistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

The process is considered key to shifting relations with the US onto a more solid footing after they slumped to their lowest level in years; the reopening of Nato supply lines and resumption of high-level American diplomatic visits.

The panel recommended that Pakistan seeks "an unconditional apology from the US for the unprovoked incident" and said "taxes and other charges must be levied on all goods importing in or transiting through Pakistan".

Experts estimate Pakistan could earn \$1 million a day from the arrangement.

Parliament, which next meets on March 26, will debate the recommendations for several days before voting on whether to accept them.

KHMER ROUGE TRIAL

UN voices concern as judge quits

AFP, Phnom Penh

The United Nations expressed "serious concern" after a second judge quit Cambodia's war crimes court over a rift about whether to pursue more former members of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Swiss co-investigating judge Laurent Kasper-Ansermet resigned on Monday, saying his efforts to probe possible third and fourth cases had been constantly "blocked" by his Cambodian counterpart at the UN-backed tribunal.

"The situation at the continues to be of serious concern and the United Nations is examining it closely," a spokesperson for UN chief Ban Ki-moon told AFP in an email late on Monday.

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