

Mali soldiers claim seizure of power

REUTERS, Bamako

Renegade soldiers said they seized power in Mali yesterday and ordered its borders closed, threatening to reignite instability in a Saharan region shaken by the conflict in Libya.

The overnight coup bid was led by low-ranking soldiers angry at the government's failure to stamp out a two-month-old separatist rebellion in the north of the west African state.

Heavy weapons fire rang out throughout the night as the presidential palace came under attack. The whereabouts of President Amadou Toumani Toure, who oversaw a decade of relative stability, are unknown.

Mali's neighbours, the United Nations and world powers from Paris to Washington called for a return to constitutional rule.

The 7,000-strong army has for weeks sought better weapons to fight northern Tuareg rebels bolstered by heavily armed ethnic allies who fled Libya after fighting for ousted leader Muammar Gaddafi.

Members of the newly formed National Committee for the Return of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDR) read a statement on state television saying they had taken over.

"The CNRDR... has decided to assume its responsibilities by putting an end to the incompetent regime of Amadou Toumani Toure," said Lieutenant Amadou Konare, spokesman for the CNRDR.

"We promise to hand power back to a democratically elected president as soon as the country is reunified and its integrity is no longer threatened," said Konare, flanked by about two dozen soldiers, in a statement marred by sound problems.

Government and military sources told Reuters the mutineers entered the presidential palace overnight after it was vacated by Toure and his entourage.

A loyalist military source and two diplomats told Reuters they believed Toure was sheltering in a military camp run by soldiers still loyal to him. The 63-year-old was due to stand down at an election set for April.

French police kill 'al-Qaeda' shooting suspect

AFP, Toulouse

French police shot dead yesterday a self-declared al-Qaeda militant wanted for a series of killings of soldiers and Jews, ending a tense 32-hour siege in the south of France.

The seven killings shocked France, home to western Europe's largest Jewish and Muslim minorities, and raised questions about intolerance and security failures in the midst of a hard-fought presidential election campaign.

Mohamed Merah, who admitted shooting dead three soldiers and three children and a teacher at a Jewish school, also tried to shoot his way out of the siege in Toulouse after police from the elite RAID force entered his flat.

Police said the 23-year-old burst out of the bathroom, opening fire on officers before jumping out the window of his first-floor apartment, still firing as he fell, in a desperate bid to escape.

"He was killed by RAID shooters while trying to escape," a police source told AFP. "He was dead by the time he hit the ground."

Interior Minister Claude Gueant said Merah was "shooting very violently" when he emerged from the bathroom.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian demonstrators wave national flags and placards calling for the release of prisoners held in Israeli jails during a protest in the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday.

Afghan corpse video shows US depravity: Zawahiri

REUTERS, Dubai

The head of al Qaeda has called footage of US Marines appearing to urinate on the corpses of Afghans proof of Western depravity that underlines the need to fight "crusader" forces in the country.

In a video posted to an Islamist site yesterday, Ayman al-Zawahiri - who replaced Osama bin Laden last year after US troops killed him in Pakistan - called the images that emerged online in January a divine message.

"God has exposed America with a tape... which shows Marines urinating on the body of an Afghan holy warrior," he said in a message delivered in Arabic.

"This the truth of their Western, Zionist, godless civilization; these are their values and their view of the rest of humanity generally and Muslims specifically."

"Noble Afghan, the road has become clear and the path apparent: either stand under the banner of Islam as a holy warrior... or ignominy in this world and disgrace in the next," he said, adding: "You have seen how the crusaders regard you, and what your fate is at their hands."

Zawahiri's recording follows - but does not refer to - the massacre of 16 Afghans by a US soldier this month and the burning of Korans at a Nato military base which enflamed sentiment towards Western troops in Afghanistan.

NEWS IN brief

Malaysian security laws must uphold rights: Ban

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

UN Chief Ban Ki-moon yesterday urged Malaysia to observe international human rights standards when formulating new laws to replace a tough security act that is marked for abolition.

Prime Minister Najib Razak last year said he would replace Malaysia's Internal Security Act (ISA), which allows detention without trial and has been widely criticised for decades as a tool to suppress dissent.

"I hope the government will ensure that the replacement laws will be in full compliance with international human rights standards," the UN secretary-general said in a speech in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur before meeting Najib.

Najib has been scrapping or amending a range of decades-old laws criticised as oppressive and outdated in an attempt to win back voters, who dealt the government its worst election results ever in 2008.

Yemen's Saleh party hampering transition

AFP, Sanaa

Opponents of ex-president Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen's new coalition government accused members of his party of trying to hamper political transition in the country, a statement said yesterday.

Two days after all but two members of Saleh's General People's Congress (GPC) walked out of a cabinet meeting, his opponents charged that GPC figures were behind "smear campaigns" against Prime Minister Mohammed Basindawa.

These campaigns "reveal non-national inclinations that aim to harm national reconciliation and the missions of the unity government," said the statement by the Common Forum, an alliance of

Lanka should punish civil war crimes

REUTERS, Geneva

Sri Lanka should ensure government troops who committed war crimes during the final stages of its war against Tamil rebels are brought to justice, the UN Human Rights Council said yesterday.

Despite heavy lobbying by a 70-strong team from Colombo, the Geneva-based forum adopted a resolution put forward by the United States urging the Sri Lanka government to implement the recommendations of an official Sri Lankan probe. That commission called for the prosecution of soldiers guilty of misconduct.

Tens of thousands of civilians were killed in 2009 in the final months of Sri Lanka's 25-year civil war, a United Nations panel said last year, as government troops advanced on the ever-shrinking northern tip of the island controlled by Tamil forces fighting for an independent homeland.

The panel said it had credible allegations of serious violations committed by both the government and Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Sri Lanka's government has consistently denied allegations that it targeted civilians, though it has acknowledged that some were killed as troops advanced north.

Hillary warns of terrorism, instability over water

AFP, Washington



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned yesterday of the risk of terrorism, political instability and conflict over competition for scarce water supplies worldwide over the next few decades.

Clinton highlighted such risks that were outlined in the unclassified version of a report on global water security -- which she had requested -- that was released yesterday by the National Intelligence Council.

"I think it's fair to say the intelligence community's findings are sobering," Clinton said about the report that focuses on the potential water problems between now and 2040.

A summary of the report said North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia "will face major challenges coping with water problems," particularly as a result of population growth and increased economic demand.

Climate change is a third factor likely to be more strongly pronounced in the later decades.

"As the world's population continues to grow, demand for water will go up but our fresh water supplies will not keep pace," Clinton said in a speech at the State Department.

Clinton underscored concerns in the report that terrorists could attack dams and other infrastructure ensuring supplies of water to people, agriculture or industry. Or water could be used as a "political tool," she said.

"These difficulties will all increase the risk of instability within and between states," she said.

"Within states they could cause some states to fail outright. And between and among states, you could see regional conflicts among states that share water basins be exacerbated and even lead to violence," she said.

13 killed in Turkish clashes

BBC ONLINE

Seven Kurdish rebels and six Turkish police officers have been killed in clashes in the far south-east of the country, reports say.

Turkish forces launched a large-scale operation against the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) near Mount Cudi, in the province of Sirnak, on Wednesday.

Helicopter gunships were used in this, the largest attack on rebels in 2012.

Correspondents say the fighting was sparked by tensions surrounding the Kurdish New Year celebrations, Novruz.

Five of the officers died on Wednesday, while another was killed yesterday, security officials said.

On Sunday, police in the south-eastern city of Diyarbakir used tear gas and water cannon to prevent thousands of Kurds from holding a demonstration timed to coincide with Novruz. The unrest later spread to other Turkish cities. PKK rebels recently have stepped up their operations, correspondents say.

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