

# Sanctions hit Assad's wife

Annan to travel China, Russia next week

AGENCIES

EU foreign ministers yesterday imposed a travel ban and asset freeze on the UK-born wife of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and other family members.

Asma al-Assad is among 12 people added to the sanctions list, which already includes her husband.

However, the ban cannot stop her from travelling to the UK, said British officials.

The 36-year-old, who is of Syrian descent but spent much of her life in west London, has generally played a low-key role in the regime.

However, in February she wrote to Britain's Times newspaper to explain why she thought her husband was still the right man to lead Syria.

In the last weeks, the first lady dubbed a "rose in the desert" by Vogue, became the focus of sharp criticism after Britain's Guardian newspaper released e-mails showing the ruling couple shopping for luxury goods as the country slid into bloody chaos.

Other members of Assad's family have also been added to the sanctions list. The



Asma al-Assad

AFP news agency says these include Assad's mother, sister and sister-in-law.

The EU already has extensive sanctions in place against Syria. These include a ban on arms sales and imports of Syrian

oil. In recent weeks, the Damascus government has stepped up its efforts to crush pockets of rebellion in cities including Homs and Hama.

Assad has promised political reform, but observers and his opponents have dismissed his plans as window-dressing. Meanwhile, UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan will travel this weekend to Moscow and Beijing to discuss the crisis in Syria, his spokesman said yesterday, adding that a team sent to Damascus has returned.

At least 62 people, more than half of them civilians, were killed in violence across Syria on Thursday, a monitoring group said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 35 civilians were killed in military operations in the central provinces of Hama and Homs, as well as in Idlib province in the northwest and in Daraa in the south.

Fierce clashes also killed 18 soldiers and nine army deserters across the country, the Britain-based Observatory said.

# EU nods at Somali pirate base attacks

BBC ONLINE

The European Union yesterday agreed to expand its mission against Somali pirates, by allowing military forces to attack land targets as well as those at sea.

In a two-year extension of its mission, EU defence ministers agreed warships could target boats and fuel dumps.

The BBC's security correspondent Frank Gardner says the move is a significant step-up in operations, but one that also risks escalation.

Up to 10 EU naval ships are currently on patrol off the Horn of Africa.

They have policed shipping routes and protected humanitarian aid since 2008. The extension means they will stay until at least December 2014.

An EU official said the new mandate would allow warships or helicopters to fire at fuel barrels, boats, trucks or other equipment on beaches, according to Agence France-Presse.

Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margallo told reporters: "The EU plan is to allow attacks on land installations when ships are assaulted at sea," adding that "much

care" would be taken to avoid civilian deaths. A two-decade war has wrecked Somalia, leaving it without a proper government.

The transitional government only controls the capital Mogadishu, while al-Shabab militants, who recently joined with al-Qaeda, hold large swathes of territory.

The EU says the main tasks of the mission are the protection of vessels of the World Food Programme delivering food aid to displaced people in Somalia, and the fight against piracy off the Somali coast.

Brussels also said the Somali government had told the UN secretary general that it accepted its new offer of collaboration.

The statement also said "a budget of 14.9m euros (£12.4m; \$197m) is provided for the common costs of the prolonged mandate".

In February world leaders agreed to boost support for measures to fight piracy, terrorism and political instability in Somalia, at a conference held in London.

The summit agreed a seven-point plan promising more humanitarian aid, support for African Union peacekeepers and better international co-ordination.

# World slams coup in Mali

AFP, Bamako

Mali's putschists faced a global backlash yesterday with African security chiefs calling an emergency meeting after mutinous soldiers staged a coup just a month before a planned election.

In Bamako, few people ventured out on the second day of the takeover by soldiers who forced President Amadou Toumani Toure to flee as they revolted against the government's handling of a Tuareg-led insurrection in the north.

Mali's woes are viewed as a fallout of the demise of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, which employed the nomadic Tuareg who returned armed and jobless from Libya to their desert homes last year and intensified a decades-long independence battle.

The military, one of the continent's weakest according to analysts, was overwhelmed. It has blamed the government for lack of support to battle the Tuareg rebels. Mali is also threatened with a food crisis due to drought.

The international community reacted swiftly, roundly condemning the military junta and demanding a return to civilian rule, while the World Bank and African Development Bank suspended development aid after Mali's first coup in 21 years.

European Union ministers called yesterday for a return to constitutional rule.

"We do hope that the constitution will be restored very quickly and that we will see a return to law and order," EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said.

Amnesty International denounced the coup said at least three people had been shot dead, with 28 wounded, while the Red Cross in the country said it had treated 40 people for mostly bullet wounds.

# Israel allows fuel to Gaza

REUTERS, Gaza

Israel allowed nine fuel tankers to cross into the Gaza Strip yesterday to ease a severe power shortage triggered by a dispute over supplies between Egypt and the enclave's Hamas Islamist rulers.

The delivery of around 450,000 liters of industrial diesel was the first to Gaza's only power station coming via Israel in almost a year after Hamas softened on its resistance to accepting supplies from its Jewish neighbor.

The fuel crisis has crippled Gaza in recent weeks. Petrol pumps have run dry and its 1.7 million residents suffer major electricity black outs.

# US Senate approves insider trading bill

AFP, Washington

The US Senate has approved legislation to strengthen ethics rules by forbidding lawmakers from buying stocks based on information they gather while performing their duties.

After several weeks of discussions, the Senate approved the bill Thursday by a vote of 96-3, paving the way for President Barack Obama to sign it into law. The House approved its version of the bill last month by 417-2.

The bill forbids not only elected officials but also congressional and White House staff from buying some stock products if they have inside information.

Elected officials would also have to report any purchases they make on the stock exchange of more than \$1,000 within 90 days.

Members of Congress and the administration often get private briefings from top corporate executives.

President Barack Obama, who had called for such a law during his State of the Union address earlier this year, welcomed the legislation, calling it "a good first step" and vowing to sign it into law.

"In the months ahead, Congress should do even more to help fight the destructive influence of money in politics and rebuild the trust between Washington and the American people," he added in a statement.



A Sri Lankan vendor arranges newspapers in Colombo yesterday. Sri Lanka's media reacted angrily to a US-led resolution demanding a war crimes probe and said the island had done well to go down fighting at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

PHOTO: AFP

# IAEA chief accused of pro-western bias over Iran

GUARDIAN ONLINE

The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the nuclear watchdog at the heart of the growing Iranian crisis, has been accused by several former senior officials of pro-western bias, over-reliance on unverified intelligence and of sidelining sceptics.

Yukiya Amano, a veteran Japanese diplomat, took command of the IAEA in July 2009. Since then, the west's confrontation with Iran over its nuclear programme has deepened and threats of military action by Israel and the US have become more frequent.

At the same time, the IAEA's reports on Iranian behaviour have become steadily more critical. In November, it published an unprecedented volume of intelligence pointing towards past Iranian work on developing a nuclear weapon, deeming it credible.

However, some former IAEA officials are saying that the agency has gone too far.

Robert Kelley, a former US weapons scientist who ran the IAEA action team on Iraq at the time of the US-led invasion, said there were worrying parallels between the west's mistakes over Iraq's supposed weapons of mass destruction then and the IAEA's assessment of Iran now.

"Amano is falling into the Cheney trap. What we learned back in 2002 and 2003, when we were in the runup to the war, was that peer review was very important, and that the analysis should not be left to a small group of people," Kelley said.

"So what have we learned since then? Absolutely nothing. Just like [former US vice-president] Dick Cheney, Amano is relying on a very small group of people and those opinions are not being checked."

Other former officials have also raised concerns.

They point to Amano's decision, in March last year, to dissolve the agency's office of external relations and policy co-ordination (Expo).

Expo cautioned against the publication of IAEA reports that the Bush administration might use to justify military action.

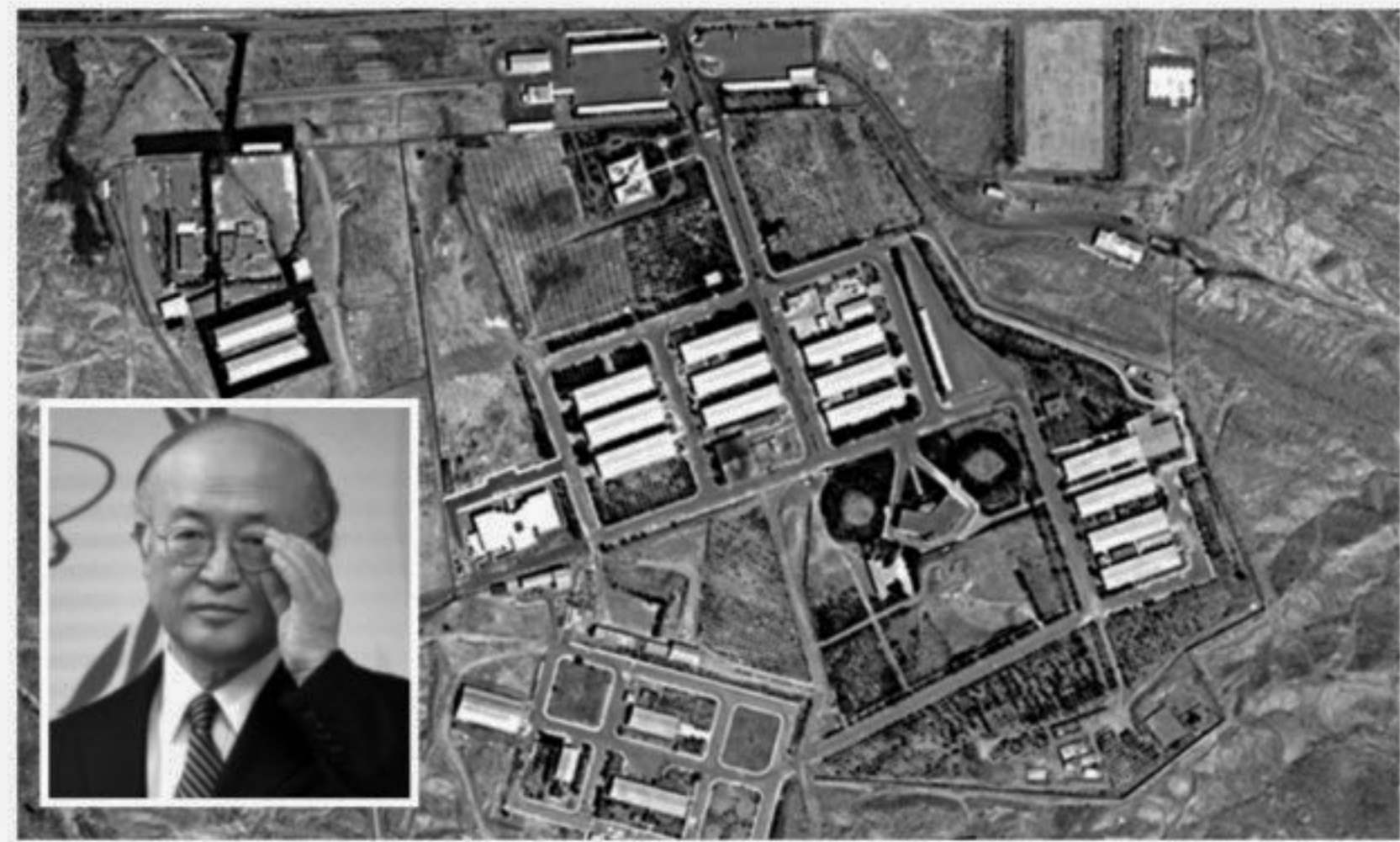
"There has been a concentration of power, with less diversity of viewpoints," a former agency official said, adding that Amano has surrounded himself with advisors who have the same approach to Iran.

Hans Blix, a former IAEA director general, also raised concerns over the agency's credibility. "The agency has a certain credibility. It should guard it by being meticulous in checking the evi-

dence. If certain governments want a blessing for the intelligence they provide the IAEA, they should provide convincing evidence. Otherwise, the agency should not give its stamp of approval." Blix said he could not say for certain whether that had happened under Amano's watch.

The IAEA would not comment on the criticisms, under a policy which avoids entering public debate.

Some of the controversy around Amano's management dates to his election in 2009, when he narrowly beat Abdul Minty, a South African diplomat who championed the interests of developing countries.



Aerial view of a nuclear facility in Iran, inset, Yukiya Amano

The election was extremely polarised and bitter. Amano was strongly supported by the US and its allies.

The acrid taste left by the election was heightened by the US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks which revealed Amano's assiduous courting of American support.

In an October 2009 cable, the US charge d'affaires, Geoffrey Pyatt, wrote: "Amano reminded [the] ambassador on several occasions that he would need to make concessions to the G-77 (the developing countries group), which correctly required him to be fair-minded and independent, but that he was solidly in the US court on every key strategic decision, from high-level personnel appointments to the handling of Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program."

In an earlier cable in July that year, the Americans recount discussions with Amano on the future of officials, particular in Expo, "some of whom have not always been helpful to US positions". Last year, the named officials were

moved to other jobs, out of the inner core which drafts the quarterly reports, like the controversial one on Iran in November.

"The main beneficiaries of the Amano reign have been US policy and the Japanese nuclear power industry. There has been no space between Amano and Barack Obama," said Joseph Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund, a Washington-based non-proliferation organisation.

He added: "On Iran, the difference is like night and day. ElBaradei (the former head of IAEA) constantly sought a diplomatic solution, while Amano

wields a big stick and has hit Iran hard and repeatedly."

Kelley, in particular, questions the agency's focus on a bus-sized steel vessel supposedly installed in an Iranian military site at Parchin in 2000, which the November report said was for "hydrodynamic experiments".

"You don't do hydrodynamic testing of nuclear bombs in containers," he said. "All of such tests would be done at outdoor firing sites, not in a building next to a major highway."

Kelley also says the suggestion in the November report that weapons experimentation could be continuing is based largely on a single document, which ElBaradei had rejected as dubious.

Jim Walsh, an expert on the Iranian nuclear programme at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said that US intelligence had become more certain over recent years in its judgment that Iran ceased weaponisation work in 2003.

"Amano has been way out in front of the US on this," Walsh said.

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