

Syria accepts Annan peace plan

AFP, Beijing

Syria has accepted a proposal crafted by Kofi Annan that aims to end bloodshed in the strife-hit country...

Monitors say over 9,100 people have been killed in Syria over the past year as President Bashar al-Assad's regime cracks down on protests...

"The Syrian government has written to the Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan accepting this six-point plan, endorsed by the United Nations Security Council..."

Annan is currently in Beijing on a trip aimed at shoring up support for his six-point plan, which also calls for a daily two-hour humanitarian ceasefire and access to all areas affected by the fighting in Syria.

He held talks with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who pledged his support for his mediation efforts -- as did Russian President Dmitry Medvedev when Annan visited Moscow over the weekend.

Beijing earlier called on all parties in Syria to cooperate with Annan, while Wen told the envoy that China believed his mediation efforts "will lead to progress in seeking a solution to the Syrian issue".

According to Fawzi, Annan has written to Assad asking Damascus to "put its (plan's) commitments into immediate effect". He has also urged the release of people detained over the past year of the uprising against Assad's regime.

As news of Syria's acceptance emerged, the restive country's opposition factions met for a second day in Istanbul to agree on common objectives for their nation's future ahead of a weekend "Friends of Syria" conference.

Syria's fragmented opposition has struggled to remain united in the face of the regime's deadly crackdown and the Istanbul talks are aimed at shoring up ranks and securing international recognition.

On the ground, meanwhile, Syrian forces pressed their assault across the country with at least eight people, including three women, killed overnight in clashes with rebel troops, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, left, chats to India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh before a working lunch at the 2012 Seoul Nuclear Security Summit at the COEX Center in Seoul yesterday.

Maoists kill 11 troops in India

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

At least 11 Indian paramilitary personnel were killed and 29 others injured in a landmine blast yesterday set off by Maoists in Gadchiroli district of western state of Maharashtra.

A total of 40 troops of Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) were travelling in a bus and were going from Pushtola to Gatta for an operational duty when the blast took place at about 11:30am, CRPF officials said.

Two helicopters have been deployed for evacuating the troops to hospitals in Gadchiroli and nearby areas as the condition of a few security personnel was said to be critical while two are in coma.

Earlier, reports reaching the CRPF headquarters in New Delhi had put the number of dead at 15.

Fierce clashes break out at Sudan borders

BBC ONLINE

Clashes have broken out in oil-rich border areas between Sudan and South Sudan in what has been called the biggest confrontation since the countries split last July.

UN chief Ban Ki-Moon appealed both countries, which fought a long civil war before the South seceded from Sudan, to calm down.

South Sudan President Salva Kiir said his forces had seized a key oil field - a claim denied by Sudan.

Sudan state radio says President Omar al-Bashir has put off next week's visit to South Sudan for a summit.

The clashes were first reported late on Monday and continued for a second day yesterday.

"After a day of attacks by air and ground troops on Monday, this morning we heard the Antonov [aircraft] return, and dropped two bombs," Gideon Gatpan, information minister for South Sudan's Unity state, told the Reuters news agency.

Sudan said there were limited clashes along the border with South Sudanese troops.

It blamed a Sudanese rebel group from the western Darfur region - the Justice and Equality Movement - for taking advantage of the situation to attack the Heglig area. A Sudanese Armed Forces spokesman denied there had been any fighting inside the oil fields.

Both nations claimed that their opposition attacked first. Several sources said the clashes were the heaviest since the countries separated last year.

Obama, Gilani vow to rescue alliance

AFP, Seoul

US President Barack Obama and Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani vowed yesterday to rescue a troubled anti-terror alliance, which almost ruptured over 10 months of mistrust and recriminations.

The leaders met on the sidelines of a nuclear security summit in Seoul, in the highest-level exchange between the two sides since the killing of Osama bin Laden in a clandestine US raid on Pakistani soil last May which chilled ties.

More recently a new breach opened up over the mistaken killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers in November in US air strikes, which prompted Islamabad to curtail American drone strikes and cut Nato supply lines into Afghanistan.

"There have been times -- I think we should be candid -- over the last several months where those relations have had periods of strains," Obama told reporters as the meeting opened.

"But I welcome the fact that the parliament of Pakistan is reviewing, after some extensive

study, the nature of this relationship.

Both leaders expressed a desire to stabilise and secure the situation in the long Afghan war, which has been beset by setbacks, including a massacre of Afghan civilians by a US soldier and attacks on Nato troops by their colleagues in the Afghan security forces.

"We are both interested in a stable and secure Afghanistan and a stable and secure region," Obama said.

Gilani said, "We are committed to fighting against extremism. We want stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"We want to work together with you," he told Obama.

Pakistani lawmakers have demanded an American apology and taxes on Nato convoys in recommendations put to parliament, to be debated as a possible precursor to reopening Nato supply lines for the Afghan war.

Obama said he believed that the parliamentary review and discussions in the United States would produce a balanced approach that respected Pakistani sovereignty and US national security.

NUCLEAR TERRORISM
World urges action

AFP, Seoul

World leaders yesterday called for strong action to combat the threat of nuclear terrorism, including minimising civilian use of highly enriched uranium (HEU), which can be turned into bombs.

"Nuclear terrorism continues to be one of the most challenging threats to international security," said a joint communique at the end of a two-day summit in South Korea bringing together leaders or top officials from 53 nations.

"Defeating this threat requires strong national measures and international cooperation."

Meetings on Monday were overshadowed by North Korea's planned rocket launch, scheduled to take place between 12 and 16 April.

Pyongyang says the launch is peaceful and is intended to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of North Korea's founding leader Kim Il-sung.

The leaders, including US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao, stressed the "fundamental responsibility" of all nations to safeguard nuclear material and keep it out of the hands of terrorists.

It also urged all countries to accede to international conventions on protecting fissile material, and reaffirmed the central role of the UN's atomic watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

One of the key points in the communique was an emphasis on the need to secure stocks of HEU, which is used to make weapons but also in nuclear power plants and medical devices.

The communique called for nations to

minimise the use of HEU, with nations encouraged to announce by the end of 2013 how they would do so.

This could include the conversion of reactors from HEU to low-enriched uranium fuel which cannot be weaponised.

The communique called for effective inventories and tracking mechanisms for nuclear material and the development of forensics capacities to determine its source.

The leaders also welcomed "substantive progress" on national commitments made at the first nuclear security summit in Washington in 2010.



NEWS IN brief

N Korea to go with rocket launch

AFP, Seoul

North Korea insisted yesterday it would go ahead with its satellite launch, nubbing a call from US President Barack Obama to drop the plan and accusing him of a "confrontational mindset".

"We will never give up the right to launch a peaceful satellite, a legitimate right of a sovereign state and an essential step for economic development," a foreign ministry spokesman told the official KCNA news agency.

The spokesman was responding to Obama's comments Sunday and Monday during a visit to South Korea for a nuclear security summit.

The US leader said his country was not hostile to the North's people but denounced the rocket launch scheduled between April 12-16.

US seeks Asia, ME missile shields

REUTERS, Washington

The United States is seeking to build regional shields against ballistic missiles in both Asia and the Middle East akin to a controversial defence system in Europe, a senior Pentagon official disclosed on Monday.

The effort may complicate US ties with Russia and China, both of which fear such defences could harm their security even though the United States says they are designed only to protect against states like Iran and North Korea.

Such shields could help counter perceived threats to their neighbors from Iran and North Korea and help defend the United States from any future long-range missiles that the two countries might develop, she told a conference co-hosted by the Pentagon's Missile Defence Agency.

Tunisia edges away from Sharia

BBC ONLINE

Officials from the largest party in Tunisia's governing coalition said they will not support moves to enshrine Islamic law in the new constitution.

Senior members of the moderate Islamist Ennahda Party said the wording of the old constitution, which proclaims Islam as the state religion, would remain.

A group of ultra-conservative Muslims known as Salafis had demanded the introduction of Sharia.

Ennahda has been under growing pressure to declare its position on the issue.

The BBC's Jon Leyne says that the news will disappoint the increasingly vocal conservative minority, but it will bring relief to liberals and secularists who fear a tide of Islamism sweeping across the region.

The article from the 1959 constitution states: "Tunisia is a free, sovereign and independent state, whose religion is Islam, language is Arabic and has a republican regime."

Chocolate may help keep people slim

BBC ONLINE

People who eat chocolate regularly tend to be thinner, a new research published in Archives of Internal Medicine suggests.

The findings come from a study of nearly 1,000 US people that looked at diet, calorie intake and body mass index (BMI) - a measure of obesity.

It found those who ate chocolate a few times a week were, on average, slimmer than those who ate it occasionally.

And it appears it is how often you eat chocolate that is important, rather than how much of it you eat. The study found no link with quantity consumed.

According to the researchers, there is only one chance in a hundred that their findings could be explained by chance alone.

Executions surged worldwide in 2011

BBC ONLINE

The number of executions carried out worldwide surged in 2011, mainly centred in the Middle East, Amnesty International's said yesterday in its annual report on the death penalty.

The group said Iraq, Iran and Saudi Arabia were most responsible for the increase.

But it also noted that China executed more people than the rest of the world put together.

Overall however, fewer countries now practise the death penalty, the group noted.

It said the number of countries using capital punishment has fallen by a third, compared to a decade ago.

"Only 20 countries are known to have carried out executions, which means that 178 are not carrying out executions," Amnesty's general secretary Salil Shetty told the BBC.

According to the review released yesterday, at least 676 people were executed in 20 countries in 2011, according to Amnesty, compared with 527 in 23 countries in 2010.

The number of confirmed executions in the Middle East rose by almost 50%, to 558, it said.

It said most were in Iran, which sent 360 people to their deaths, many of them for offences under new anti-drug laws brought in last year.

The group also condemned as "shameful" the US's use of the death penalty, noting that it was the only Western democracy to execute prisoners last year.

The US ranked fifth in the world in capital punishment, with 43 people executed last year. The figure fell slightly from 2010, when 46 people were executed.

Strauss-Kahn charged in sex probe

BBC ONLINE

Former International Monetary Fund boss Dominique Strauss-Kahn has been charged over alleged involvement in a prostitution ring.

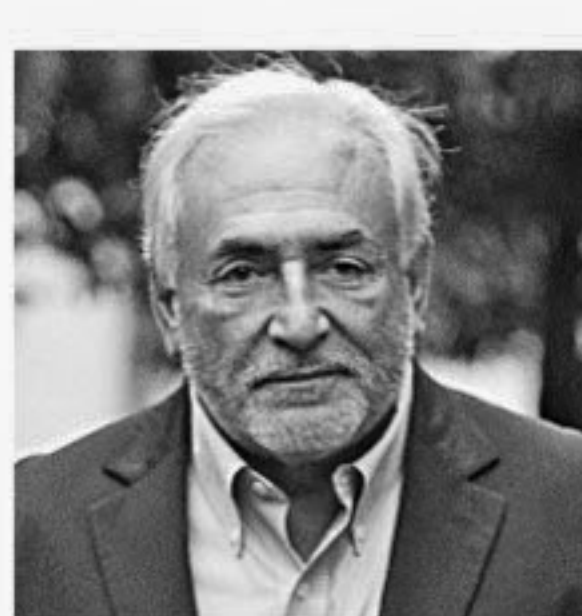
He was charged after being questioned by magistrates in the northern city of Lille.

Strauss-Kahn has admitted attending parties where the authorities believe prostitutes were provided by a gang.

But he denies knowing that the women were paid prostitutes.

Last May he resigned from the IMF after being accused of attempting to rape a hotel maid in New York. The charges were later dropped.

The maid is now bringing a civil case against Strauss-Kahn, which is due to start in New York



today.

He has always denied any wrongdoing.

The three investigating judges in Lille are looking into what has become known in France as the "Carlton affair", named after the hotel where several orgies are said to have been held.

They are examining allegations that business associates of Strauss-Kahn were involved in a prostitution ring, and mis-using corporate funds. They have placed Strauss-Kahn under formal investigation.

Consorting with prostitutes is not against the law in France, and Mr Strauss-Kahn has acknowledged that he was at some of the parties with the women.

Last month he was held in police custody for 48 hours at the start of his formal questioning.



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