

# Syria claims revolution over

## Hillary seeks next move after meeting Arab leaders

AFP, Damascus

Syria's regime declared Saturday it has defeated those seeking to bring it down while reiterating support for a UN-Arab peace plan, as its troops reportedly shelled rebels in the city of Homs.

Foreign ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi, cited by the official SANA news agency, also said Syrian troops would only draw back from urban areas once the security situation is stable.

The United Nations says more than 9,000 people have been killed in the crackdown by forces of President Bashar al-Assad on an Arab Spring-inspired uprising that began a year ago with pro-democracy protests.

"The battle to topple the state is over, and the battle to solidify stability... and move on towards a renewed Syria has begun," Makdissi said in an interview originally carried on state television.

The spokesman said the Assad government's focus was also to "rally visions behind the reform process" and "prevent those who seek to sabotage reform."

Troops would only withdraw from residential zones once they were secure, Makdissi said, adding UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan acknowledged there were "illegitimate armed elements within the opposition".



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal.

Annan appealed for an immediate ceasefire on Friday, as monitors said at least 39 people -- all but seven of them civilians -- were killed in Syria as security forces sought to crush the revolt.

She took part in a key meeting later on Syria crisis where The United States and Gulf Arab states urged envoy Kofi Annan to produce a "timeline for next steps" in his peace plan for Syria if President Bashar al-Assad fails to stop the bloodshed.

But there are differences over how to help the Syrian people in their bid for democracy. Saudi Arabia and its neighbour Qatar have called for arming the opposition. But an Arab League summit in Baghdad this week rejected the option of arming any side, and called on all parties to engage in a "serious national dialogue."

In another positive gesture, Syria has agreed to admit a UN team of experts to examine conditions for a possible observer mission in the violence-swept country, its foreign ministry said in a statement.

In Washington, the Treasury Department announced it was targeting Defence Minister Dawoud Rajiha as well as the army's deputy chief of staff and the head of presidential security, in its latest round of sanctions against Damascus.

The monitoring group also reported heavy

# Triple bomb attack kills 10 in Thailand

AFP, Yala

Three bomb attacks minutes apart killed 10 people and wounded more than 100 on yesterday in the main town in Thailand's insurgency-hit far south.

The blasts hit the centre of Yala town around midday as families were out shopping, in the most deadly attack in five years in the Muslim-majority south of mainly Buddhist Thailand.

Several shop houses near the blast sites were set on fire and many parked cars and motorcycles were damaged by the powerful explosions.

A Yala city policeman added: "The bombs went off about 10 minutes apart."

A complex insurgency, without clearly stated aims, has plagued Thailand's far south near the border with Malaysia since 2004, claiming thousands of lives, both Buddhist and Muslim, with near-daily bomb or gun attacks.

# Mali junta seeks help amid rebel gains

AFP, Bamako

Mali's embattled coup leader Captain Amadou Sanogo has called for outside help as advancing Tuareg and Islamist fighters seized ground, including a key northern town, from overwhelmed soldiers.

"The rebels continue to attack our country and terrorise our people," coup leader Sanogo told journalists at the junta's headquarters in Bamako.

"The situation is now critical, our army needs support from Mali's friends to save the civilian population and protect Mali's territorial integrity."

Heavy gunfire broke out yesterday as Tuareg rebels entered the main city of northeast Mali, in a relentless advance on an army struggling with the aftermath of a coup, a local official said.

Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara, current chairman of the Economic Community of West African States, meanwhile said the regional bloc had put 2,000 troops on standby to intervene if necessary.

The Mali army said early yesterday it had pulled its troops out of two towns in the country's northeast, hours after Tuareg separatist rebels forced them out of the strategic town of Kidal.

The appeal from Sanogo came Friday as the week-old junta, already frozen out by its foreign allies, stares down possible economic sanctions from neighbouring countries, demanding a return to democracy, which could cripple the landlocked nation.



Amadou Sanogo

# Land Day protests kill 1 in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli gunfire killed a 20-year-old man and wounded another 51 people as thousands rallied across the West Bank and Gaza to mark Land Day, medical sources said.

Demonstrations also took place in annexed east Jerusalem and across Israel, as well as in Jordan, southern Lebanon and Syria on Friday to mark the annual event that commemorates the deaths of six Israeli Arabs at the hands of Israeli forces during protests against land confiscation in 1976.

Palestinian officials said a total of 318 people were injured in clashes, of whom 51 were wounded by Israeli fire.

# 'ETHNIC CLEANSING' IN LIBYA Tribal chief seeks outside help

AFP, Tripoli

The head of Libya's Toubou tribe on Friday called for international intervention to halt what he called the "ethnic cleansing" of his people after deadly clashes in the southern oasis of Sabha.

The clashes erupted Monday after Arab tribesmen accused the Toubou of killing one of their people. The first three days of clashes cost more than 70 lives, Libyan government spokesman Nasser al-Manaa said on Wednesday.

The violence raged on yesterday as at least 16 people were killed in new clashes. Eight people were reported killed and several wounded in clashes in Sabha on Thursday.

"We demand that the United Nations and European Union intervene to stop the ethnic cleansing of the Toubou," said Issa Abdel Majid Mansur, a former opposition activist against the ousted regime of slain dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

He accused Arab tribes in Sabha of bombarding a power station. Telecommunications were also cut off, Mansur said.

The Toubou are black oasis farmers by tradition who also have connections beyond Libya's borders. They live in southern Libya, northern Chad and in Niger.



This combination of pictures shows Malaysia's iconic Petronas Twin Towers, photographed illuminated, left, before Earth Hour and unlit, right, during Earth Hour in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Millions of people were expected to switch off their lights for Earth Hour in a global effort to raise awareness about climate change.



PHOTO: AFP

# Army-Qaeda clashes kill 29 in Yemen

AFP, Aden

At least 29 people were killed in heavy fighting yesterday between the army and suspected al-Qaeda militants in Yemen's southern province of Lahij, officials said.

"Seventeen soldiers were killed in the fighting," which erupted when the Islamist fighters attacked army positions in Mallah, a town in Lahij, an army officer on the ground told AFP.

Eleven others were missing and "believed dead," said the same source.

An official in the al-Qaeda stronghold of Jaar, southeast of Lahij, said 12 militants were also killed.

# Pakistan foils plot to attack parliament

## Says Pak interior minister

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's interior minister yesterday revealed that police foiled a plot to attack parliament during a presidential address and said a finance ministry official had been arrested.

"I commend the Islamabad police, they have foiled a plot to attack the parliament during president's address to the joint session," Rehman Malik told reporters.

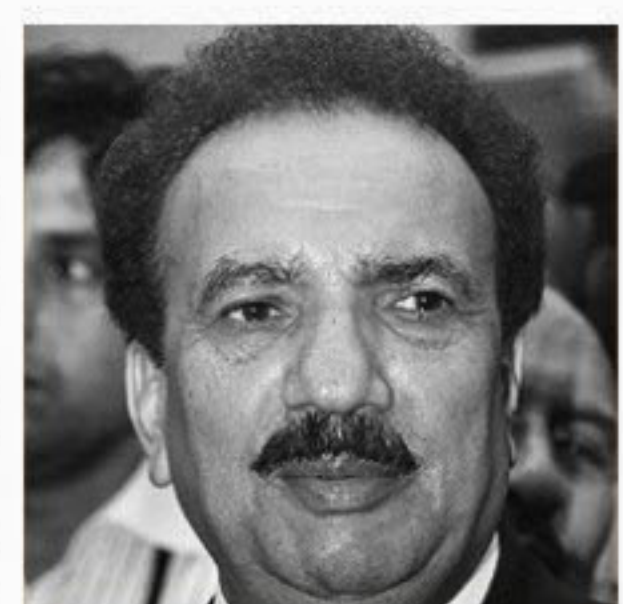
"Police has arrested a suspect and an official of the finance ministry involved in the plot."

President Asif Ali Zardari addressed the joint sitting of the federal parliament on March 17 amid tight security.

Islamabad's government district is home to Western embassies, parliament, the presidency and the ISI intelligence headquarters and has seen several bombings and suicide attacks.

In October last year, police unearthed a major plot and seized a large quantity of arms and ammunition in a raid on a house in a suburb of the capital.

Islamist militants have killed more than 4,900 people across Pakistan since government troops raided an extremist mosque in Islamabad in July 2007.



Rehman Malik

# LatAm backs Argentina over Falklands

AFP, Brasilia

Thirty years after the Falklands War, Latin America is closing ranks behind Argentina's sovereignty claim over the disputed islands and reviving a bid for control in the resource-rich South Atlantic.

All countries of the region back Buenos Aires in its bitter dispute with London over the remote South Atlantic archipelago and oppose any British military presence in the region, Colombian Foreign Minister Maria Angela Holguin said in late March.

On April 2, 1982, the then-ruling military junta in Argentina invaded the Falklands, igniting a 74-day war with Britain that cost the lives of 649 Argentine, 255 British troops and three Falkland islanders.

The war ended in defeat for Argentina, with Britain maintaining control over a territory it has ruled since 1833.

# COUP RUMOURS China cracks down on websites

AFP, Beijing

China has shut down websites, made a string of arrests and punished two popular microblogs after rumours of a coup linked to a major scandal that brought down a top politician.

Authorities closed 16 websites for spreading rumours of "military vehicles entering Beijing and something wrong going on in Beijing", the official Xinhua news agency said, citing the state Internet information office.

Police arrested six people, while the country's two most popular microblogs, run by Sina.com and Tencent, said they would stop users from posting comments to other people's posts until Tuesday.

The crackdown follows a surge in unsubstantiated online rumours about a coup led by security chief Zhou Yongkang, following the March dismissal of rising political star Bo Xilai.

Analysts say the political drama has exposed divisions in the ruling Communist Party as it prepares for a key leadership transition later this year.

Bo, removed as party chief of the southwestern metropolis of Chongqing after his former police chief fled to a US consulate and reportedly demanded political asylum, had been tipped to join the country's top echelons of power.

His downfall was only lightly covered by China's tightly controlled state media, opening the way for groundless rumours about a coup to spread on the Internet.

In another sign of the state's tight policing of the web -- known as the "Great Firewall" -- Xinhua said 1,065 people had been arrested since February 14 during an operation in Beijing to combat Internet crime.

# 3 share \$640m US lottery jackpot

AFP, New York

A record \$640 million lottery prize that sent the United States into a gambling frenzy has gone to as many as three winners, lottery officials and media said yesterday.

None of the players were identified but officials confirmed that winning tickets were sold near Baltimore, Maryland and Redbud, Illinois, and CNN reported a third winner in the state of Kansas.

"Redbud has a winner," Illinois lottery superintendent Michael Jones told the broadcaster.

"It's very important now for whoever has that winning ticket to sign the back of the ticket, put it in a safe place, reach out to us so we can begin the process of awarding the

person the prize," he said. The winning numbers -- 2, 4, 23, 38, 46 with Mega Ball 23 -- were announced here at 11:00pm.

There has been no official statement from Mega Millions lottery on the identity of the winners, but MSNBC television cited an unnamed Maryland lottery official in reporting the news.

The Washington Post, using similar sources, said the winning ticket had been sold in Baltimore County.

Experts warned it could be days or even weeks before somebody showed up to claim the prize as winners usually tend to hash out all the legal issues with their lawyers before taking that step.

# Myanmar to vote in landmark polls

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar was making final preparations for today's polls seen as a test of the military-dominated regime's reforms, in which opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is standing for the first time.

Many polling stations in the 45 constituencies spread across the country were already set up for the vote, which the Nobel laureate is contesting despite criticising it as not "genuinely free and fair".

A total of 160 candidates from 17 parties, including six new to the political stage, are contesting the polls.

The NLD is contesting 44 seats and estimates vary as to how many it could win. Thiha Saw of local weekly news journal Open News said he expected the party to win a little over 50 percent of the available seats. But bookies have predicted 32 seats for the NLD from betting -- technically illegal in Myanmar -- on the results.

The number of seats at stake is not enough to threaten the military-

backed ruling party's overwhelming majority in parliament but Suu Kyi described the vote as "a step towards step one in democracy".

The participation of "The Lady", as she is known, and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party has fuelled an explosion in the number of T-shirt vendors in the main commercial city of Yangon, with an every-increasing variety of styles, all of which would have been taboo just a year ago.

A carnival atmosphere pervaded the last day of campaigning in Myanmar on Friday.

Large flatbed trucks crammed with people, from young children to the elderly, travelled through the streets blaring music, including the popular campaign song about Suu Kyi "Our mom is back".

There was obvious glee at being able to display political allegiance freely.

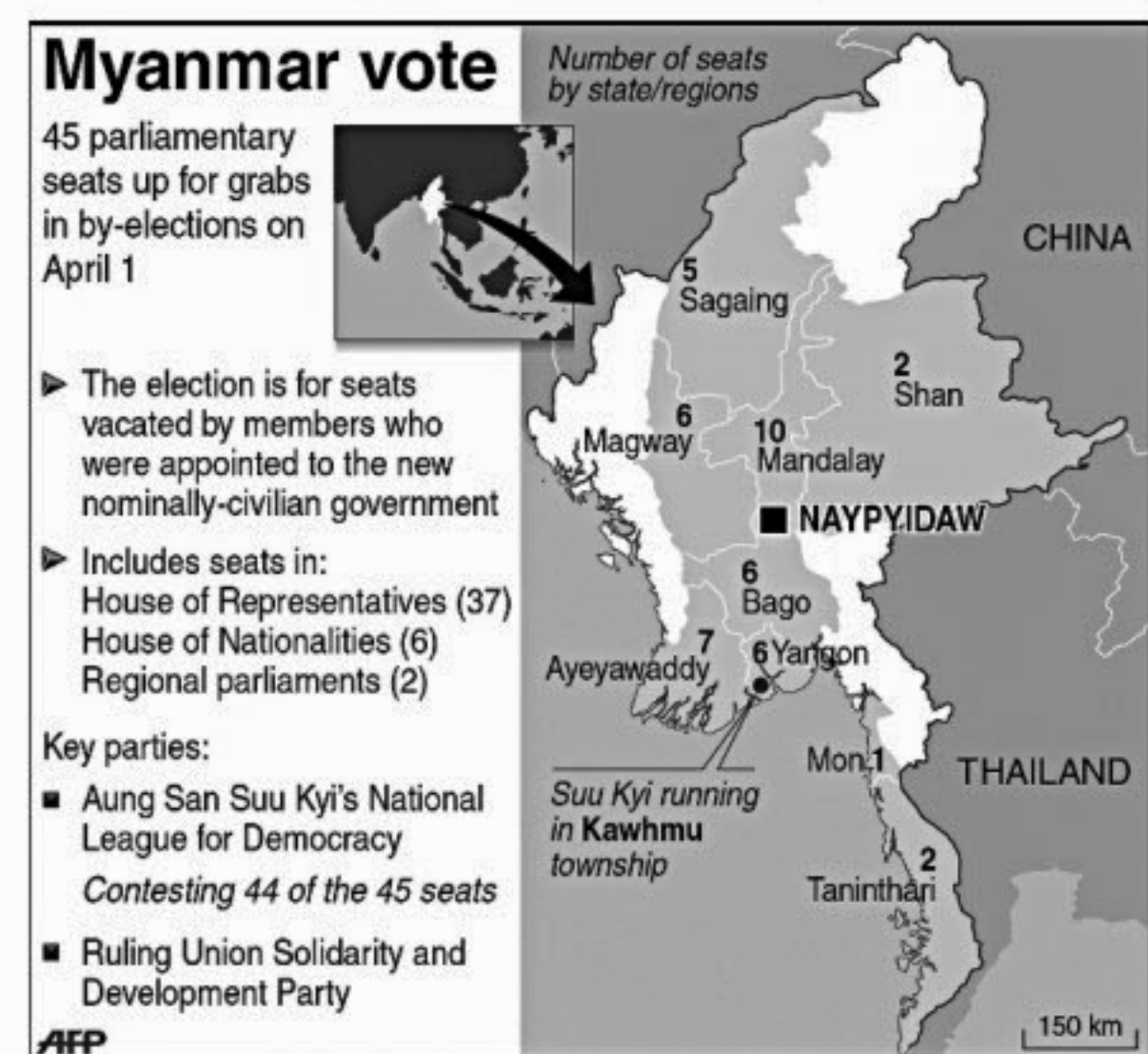
NLD supporters yesterday erected a giant LED screen outside the party headquarters in Yangon to broadcast the results as they come in.

Suu Kyi on Friday renewed complaints of irregularities in the run up to the by-elections, including vandalism of party posters and "intimidation".

But the 66-year-old, who was under house arrest during elections in 1990 and 2010, said she did not regret standing for parliament because the polls had boosted people's interest in politics after decades of outright military rule ended last year.

The NLD won a landslide election victory in 1990 but the junta never allowed it to take office. The party also boycotted the 2010 polls that swept the army's political proxies to power and were marred by complaints of cheating and intimidation.

Experts believe the regime wants the pro-democracy leader to win a seat in parliament to burnish its reform credentials and encourage an end to Western sanctions.



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