

Syria's SNC gets world's backing

Rebel fighters to get salaries; Damascus rejects recommendations

AGENCIES

"Friends of Syria" member countries recognised the opposition Syrian National Council yesterday as the "legitimate representative" of all Syrians, the Anatolia news agency said.

In the final statement of the second "Friends of Syria" conference, "the Syrian National Council has been recognised as the legitimate representative of all Syrians," said Anatolia.

It follows the SNC's pleas for recognition at the conference in Istanbul.

"We want the recognition of the SNC as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people," SNC head Burhan Ghalioun told the meeting.

On the ground, violence continued to rage in Syria, with more than 40 people reported killed, a day after more than 60 people died across the country.



Supporters of Syrian President Assad protest yesterday outside the venue where the "Friends of Syria" conference was being held.

In the latest violence, activists reported attacks by security forces in areas near the Iraqi border to the east, and the Jordanian frontier to the south.

The UN believes at least 9,000 people have died in the year-long

revolt against Assad's rule.

The second "Friends of Syria" meeting opened with more than 70 representatives discussing ways to pressure President Bashar al-Assad to end violence and to support the Syrian opposition.

Meanwhile, the opposition Syrian National Council announced yesterday said rebels fighting the government of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria will be paid salaries.

Money will also be given to soldiers who defect from the government's army, the SNC added, after a "Friends of the Syrian people" summit in Turkey.

Conference delegates said wealthy Gulf Arab states would supply millions of dollars a month for the SNC fund.

Damascus dubbed the gathering of some 70 Western and Arab foreign ministers in Istanbul as the "enemies of Syria", and key players remained absent, including Russia, China and Iran.

At a news conference, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu warned Syria that Kofi Annan's six-point peace plan - which Damascus has agreed to in principle - was "not open-ended".

His comments were echoed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton who said there was "no more time for excuses and delays" by the Assad government. "This is a moment of truth," she said.

The BBC's Jonathan Head, in Istanbul, says the decision to pay rebel fighters is a significant step by the SNC in recognising the central role the armed insurgency is now playing in their campaign to oust President Assad.

Some countries at the conference - notably Saudi Arabia - have been openly calling for insurgents in Syria to be given weapons. But others - including the US and Turkey - oppose the move, fearing it could fuel an all-out civil war.

The united front displayed by the gathering was undermined by the pointed absence of Russia and China, which have repeatedly balked at any international resolutions that would require President Assad to stand down.

Time running out for diplomacy

Hillary warns Iran

AFP, Riyadh

The United States wants concrete results at talks between Iran and world powers on April 13 in Istanbul on Tehran's nuclear programme, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Saturday, warning that Iran's window for a peaceful resolution will "not remain open for ever."

The US secretary of state made clear that time is running out for diplomacy over Iran's nuclear programme.

"Our policy is one of prevention, not containment," she told a news conference in the Saudi capital after talks with her Gulf Arab counterparts, confirming that the venue would be Istanbul as preferred by Iran.

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi announced the date last Wednesday.

"It is incumbent upon Iran to demonstrate by its actions that it is a willing partner and to participate in these negotiations with an effort to obtain concrete results," she added.

"What is certain, however, is that Iran's window to seek and obtain a peaceful resolution will not remain open for ever."

US President Barack Obama has made clear that there is still time for diplomacy to work "provided Iran comes to the talks prepared for serious negotiations," she said.

Israel has brandished the threat of possible military action against Iran's nuclear sites, while the United States has put its energies into sanctions and diplomacy but has not ruled out the military option.

No serious complaints in Myanmar vote: Asean

AFP, Phnom Penh

Voting in Myanmar's historic by-elections is going "rather smoothly", ASEAN chief Surin Pitsuwan said yesterday, adding that despite claims of ballot irregularities he had not heard "anything serious".

"All of our people are there reporting that everything seems to be going rather smoothly," Surin told AFP in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh, where officials are preparing for a summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Voters in Myanmar flocked to the polls yesterday for elections expected to sweep opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi into parliament for the first time as part of dramatic political reforms.

Observers from ASEAN were among those invited by Myanmar to monitor the elections.

The milestone polls were marred somewhat by opposition allegations of ballot-paper irregularities, notably that wax had been put over the check box for Suu Kyi's party that could be rubbed off later to cancel

the vote.

Surin told AFP he was not aware of this particular complaint.

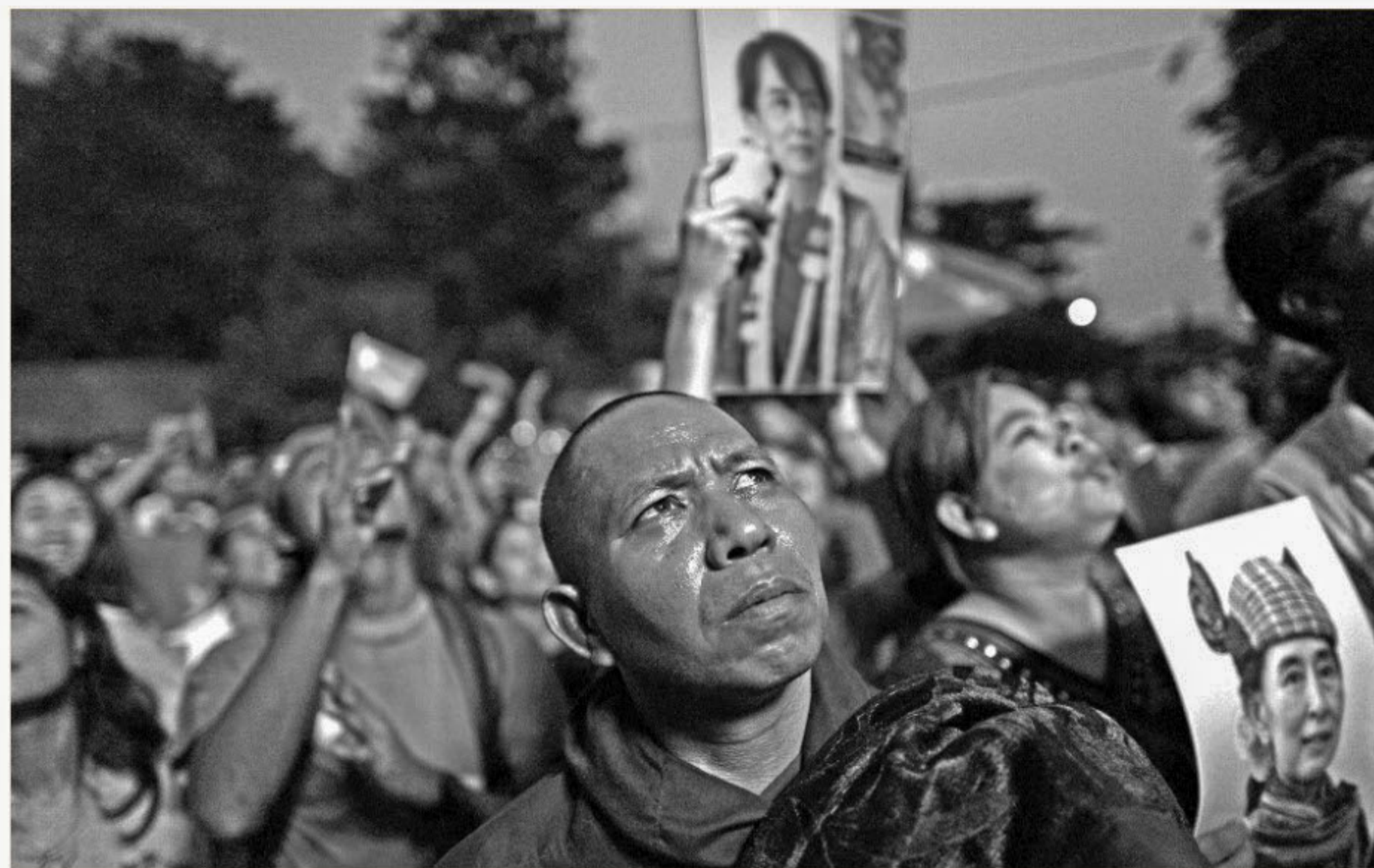
"I have not heard specific complaints but I understand that overall things are moving well and a lot of those complaints are very common in many elections in many countries too," he said. "So I have not heard anything serious."

Earlier in the day the diplomat told reporters that the ASEAN teams on the ground reported "full enthusiasm, full alert, full awareness of all parties involved in the by-elections".

"It's a good omen for Myanmar," he said.

Myanmar's poor human rights record and iron-fisted suppression of political dissent have often hijacked ASEAN gatherings in the past, much to the embarrassment of more democratic member-states.

But Myanmar President Thein Sein will attend the summit on Tuesday and Wednesday in Phnom Penh basking in the glow of foreign approval for recent reforms in his country.



A Buddhist monk joins supporters of Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy celebrating outside the party headquarters in Yangon yesterday. Myanmar's opposition claimed a historic victory for pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi in her bid for a seat in parliament, sparking scenes of jubilation among crowds of supporters.

EU, Australia hint at easing sanctions

AFP, Phnom Penh

The European Union looks set to ease some sanctions on Myanmar in April if today's by-elections go smoothly, but the EU trade commissioner said the bloc would not rush to lift key trade curbs.

The EU already removed a travel ban on certain Myanmar officials earlier this year to encourage reform efforts after decades of military rule.

Further restrictions, which Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht described as political sanctions mostly "aimed towards individuals", could be eased when EU foreign ministers meet in Brussels on April 23.

Meanwhile, Australia yesterday said it was closely monitoring elections in Myanmar and could ease sanctions if the vote is judged to be free and fair.

Zardari to make visit to India

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari is likely to visit Ajmer on April 8 to offer prayers at the holy shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti.

The visit is intended to be purely for religious purposes. However, Indian government is looking for a possibility to add some political discussions during his daylong visit.

"While as of now, the visit is purely for religious purposes, efforts are being made so that some political discussions could also take place during the daylong trip of Zardari," sources said yesterday.

The Pakistani president had last met Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Russia in 2009.

The sources feel that as happens in India-Pakistan relationship, many decisions would be taken closer to the date of Zardari's visit.

If Zardari's visit to Ajmer materialises, it will come in the backdrop of a thaw in India-Pakistan ties at present. The two nuclear-powered countries have put the peace talks back on track after a hiatus of two years in the wake of the deadly terror attack in Mumbai, India's financial capital, in November, 2008.



TRIBAL CLASHES Libya PM announces truce

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's interim government on Saturday announced a ceasefire aimed at ending six days of deadly tribal clashes in a southern desert oasis that cost more than 150 lives.

"We announce that reconciliation efforts have resulted in an accord on a ceasefire," premier Abdel Rahim al-Kib told reporters in the capital, adding that "calm now prevails in Sabha," 750 kilometres to the south.

At least 16 people were reported killed on Saturday alone in and around the oasis city before the truce deal was announced.

The fighting between Toubou fighters and Arab tribesmen erupted on Monday after Arab tribesmen accused the Toubou of killing one of their own.

UK mulls to legalise web surveillance

BBC ONLINE

The government will be able to monitor the calls, emails, texts and website visits of everyone in the UK under new legislation set to be announced soon, according to a report.

Internet firms will be required to give intelligence agency GCHQ access to communications on demand, in real time. The Home Office says the move is key to tackling crime and terrorism, but civil liberties groups have criticised it.

Attempts by the last Labour government to take similar steps failed after huge opposition, including from the Tories. A new law - which may be announced in the forthcoming Queen's Speech in May - would not allow GCHQ to access the content of emails, calls or messages without a warrant.

But it would enable intelligence officers to identify who an individual or group is in contact with, how often and for how long.

In a statement, the Home Office said action was needed to "maintain the continued availability of communications data as technology changes".

But Nick Pickles, director of the Big Brother Watch campaign group, called the move "an unprecedented step that will see Britain adopt the same kind of surveillance seen in China and Iran".

Even if it is announced in the Queen's Speech, any new law would still have to make it through Parliament, potentially in the face of opposition in both the Commons and the Lords.

Cuba declares holiday in honour of Pope

AFP, Havana

Cuba's President Raul Castro has decreed this year's Good Friday a holiday, granting a request Pope Benedict XVI made during this week's visit, the Communist Party newspaper Granma said Saturday.

The official newspaper said the decision was taken Friday by the council of ministers, but Castro had told the pope moments before he left that his request would be granted.

Benedict called for the Good Friday holiday -- which marks Jesus's crucifixion and is the holiest day on the Christian calendar -- during a mass in Revolution Square on Wednesday, the high point of his March 26-28 visit.

Granma said Castro agreed that Good



Friday on April 6 would be made a holiday "in consideration of His Holiness and the happy outcome of this transcendent visit to our country."

He said a decision on whether to make the holiday permanent would be left to the national leadership.

Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi said the decision was a "very positive sign."

"The Holy See hopes that this will be good for the participation in religious celebrations and Easter," Lombardi said in a statement.

During the visit, Benedict criticized the US economic embargo on Cuba for imposing an "unfair burden" on Cubans, but also called for "respect and promotion of freedom."

'Hoodie' jackets in focus after US teen's shooting

AFP, Washington

Until just a few weeks ago, the "hoodie" was seen as just another article of clothing, a favorite garment of rumpled American teenagers and casually clad vacationers.

But the popular cloth jacket with attached hood has become a subject of controversy -- as well as a badge of protest and outrage -- following the fatal shooting in late February of a hoodie-wearing African-American youth by a community watch volunteer.

Since the death last month of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, there have been scores of protests across the United States -- many with hoodie-wearing demonstrators -- demanding justice for the slain youth.

Protesters have been calling for the arrest and prosecution of the shooter George Zimmerman, removing his suit jacket on the floor of the House of



A supporter wears a hoodie as others gather during a candlelight vigil at a memorial to Trayvon Martin in Florida, USA. Inset, Trayvon Martin.

Representatives to reveal a hoodie and lift the hood over his head. He also put on a pair of sunglasses.

"Racial profiling has to stop," he declared on the House floor.

"Just because someone wears a hoodie does not make them a

hoodlum," he said.

There was a similar protest in California's state legislature when lawmakers in the capital Sacramento donned hoodies to urge the federal government to conduct a thorough probe of the shooting.

Martin's fatal shooting has become another flashpoint in America's recurring debate over race and colorblindness -- or the lack of it -- in the US criminal justice system.

Many African Americans and civil rights leaders have called it a case of racial profiling: In calls to a police emergency number on the night of the shooting, Zimmerman, 28, described a black male wearing a hoodie and looking "real suspicious."

Geraldo Rivera, a Fox News commentator, said that Martin died because of what he was wearing.

California Assemblyman Steven Bradford, who took part in the

protest by lawmakers there, said that a double standard is at work.

"How can a young man with nothing more than candy in his hand and a soft drink be gunned down and now be accused of causing his death simply by what he was wearing?" he said, referring to how Martin had just bought Skittles fruit-flavored sweets and iced tea before the killing.

Johns Hopkins University professor Lester Spence said the hoodie has galvanized public attention -- both positive and negative -- because it is a graphic, yet readily accessible symbol.

But he said it would be simplistic to think that the hoodie trumps the issue of race in this incident.

"It wasn't the article of clothing. When (Zimmerman) called (police) about suspicious people, he was calling about black people. Then the issue becomes that we attach the hoodie to race after the fact," he said.

Japan backs US World Bank pick

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's government yesterday threw its backing behind Jim Yong Kim, the US nominee to be the next World Bank chief, as the Korean-American physician visited Tokyo.

"He substantially understands the positions of developing countries," Japanese Finance Minister Jun Azumi told reporters after meeting Kim, who was in Tokyo as part of a global "listening tour".

"He would be a suitable person to take the leadership of the World Bank," Azumi said.

US President Barack Obama last month tapped Dartmouth College president Kim, known for his work in global health campaigns against AIDS in Africa, to lead the World Bank.

Since the World Bank's founding in 1944, Washington has always chosen its president. But this year, it faces two challengers in Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala of Nigeria and Jose Antonio Ocampo of Colombia.

Kim is therefore seeking to drum up support from major emerging economies on his tour, which is also taking in Brazil, China, India and Mexico among other stops.

