

Syria vows to meet ceasefire deadline

AFP, Damascus

Syria yesterday announced that it will cease military operations against rebel fighters from today, the day set by peace envoy Kofi Annan as the deadline for a halt to 13 months of bloodshed.

Annan said he had received a written pledge from Damascus to halt military operations from dawn on Thursday, despite renewed assaults on protest hubs on Wednesday that killed 1 civilians, according to monitors.

"It has been decided to stop these (military) operations from Thursday morning," state television quoted a defence ministry official it did not identify as saying.

The decision was taken after regime forces "completed successful operations in combating the criminal acts of the armed terrorist groups and enforced the state's rule over its territory," the official added.

Armed forces will "remain on standby to retaliate against any attack by the armed terrorist groups against civilians, the security services, armed forces, or private or public property," the official said.

Annan received a letter from Foreign Minister Walid Muallem setting out the undertaking in writing, his spokesman said.

The UN and Arab League envoy had expressed cautious optimism that his peace plan could still be salvaged, despite the renewed bloodshed yesterday.

Speaking in Tehran, Annan said he expected the situation to be "much improved" by Thursday's ceasefire deadline if both sides respected his six-point peace plan.

"If everyone respects, I think by six o'clock (0300 GMT) on Thursday the 12th... we should see a much improved situation on the ground," he said.

Damascus had given "further clarifications" over how it would implement its side of the plan, he added.

"What they mean and want is an assurance that the other forces, the opposition forces, would also stop the fighting so that we could see cessation of all the violence," he said.

Damascus's sympathisers on the UN Security Council, Beijing and Moscow, also piled pressure on the regime to abide by the peace plan.



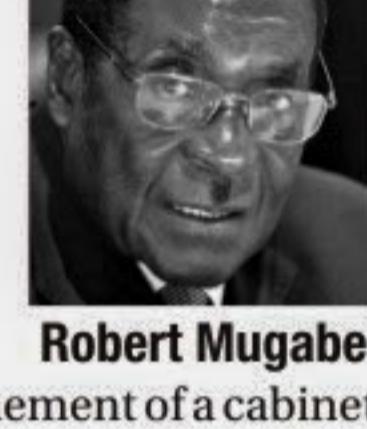
PHOTO: AFP

Evacuated Acehnese residents are pictured at open ground in front of the historic Baiturrahman grand mosque in the capital Banda Aceh after a powerful 8.6 earthquake hit the western coast of Sumatra in Aceh province, Indonesia yesterday. The massive earthquake struck off Indonesia's Sumatra Island, US and Indonesian monitors reported, prompting an Indian Ocean-wide tsunami alert. However, the alert was lifted later.

NEWS IN brief

Mugabe deathbed reports dismissed

GUARDIAN ONLINE



Robert Mugabe

Officials in Zimbabwe yesterday dismissed as "hogwash" reports that President Robert Mugabe is close to death in a Singapore hospital.

Speculation about the 88-year-old's condition spread like wildfire after his absence forced the postponement of a cabinet meeting.

Two senior officials from Mugabe's Zanu-PF party also denied the report, which originated on a small news site, the Zimbabwe Mail, claiming that Mugabe was "battling for his life" in a Singapore hospital. They said he was on an Easter break with his family.

S Korea votes in tight polls

AFP, Seoul

Rival parties were neck-and-neck yesterday in South Korea's closely contested legislative election, a key test of sentiment before December's presidential vote, according to exit polls conducted by three major television stations.

The polls showed a tight race between President Lee Myung-Bak's conservative New Frontier Party (NFP) and the main opposition centre-left Democratic United Party (DUP).

The ruling party is struggling to preserve its parliamentary majority to pave the way for a second successive presidential victory in eight months' time. The NFP had 165 seats in the outgoing parliament against 89 for the DUP.

Netanyahu, Fayyad to meet next week

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will meet his Palestinian counterpart Salam Fayyad in Jerusalem next week, a spokesman from the Israeli leader's office told AFP.

A Palestinian official had on Tuesday said the two men would meet on April 17, and yesterday, Netanyahu's spokesman Ofir Gendelman confirmed the date.

"The meeting will take place in Jerusalem, probably at the prime minister's office," he told AFP.

Officials on both sides had previously confirmed the two were to meet in the coming weeks but had not named a date or a venue.

Nobel prizes to be announced October 8-15

AFP, Stockholm

The 2012 Nobel prizes will be announced between October 8 and 15, the Nobel Foundation said yesterday, with Helmut Kohl, Bill Clinton, the EU and WikiLeaks suspect Bradley Manning in the running for the Peace Prize.

The Peace Prize will be announced on October 12 in Oslo by the Norwegian Nobel Committee.

The list for the peace prize is known to comprise the names of 231 individuals and organisations.

Among the people known to have been nominated for this year's honour are former US president Bill Clinton, ex-German chancellor Helmut Kohl -- who led his country's reunification process -- and Ukraine's ex-premier and now jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko.

Santorum clears way for Romney vs Obama battle

AFP, Washington

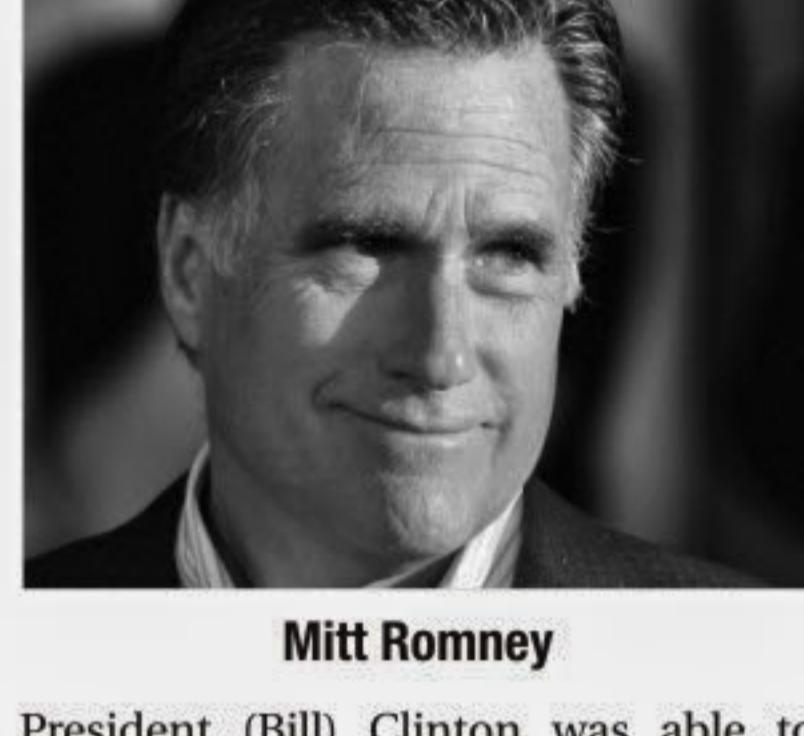
Rick Santorum's exit from the White House race Tuesday marked a symbolic starter shot for the general election campaign, allowing all-but-certain Republican nominee Mitt Romney to turn his full attention to President Barack Obama.

Several analysts and experts told AFP it was game on in what is shaping up as a monumental battle between a challenger with the best ground game in the Republican field and the deep-pocketed, well-organised machinery of a fiery incumbent seeking another four years in the White House.

There are still nominating contests in 19 states including delegate-rich New York, Pennsylvania, Texas and California, and two other candidates stubbornly refuse to go away. But experts agree that the Republican race has run its course, with a Romney nomination a foregone conclusion.

While he no longer needs to campaign for the Republican nomination, Romney can rest on his laurels.

In 1996, Bob Dole stopped campaigning after he secured the nomination, and



Mitt Romney

President (Bill) Clinton was able to increase his advantage in the polls.

That means working to convince core Republicans like evangelical Christians -- Santorum's traditional base, many of whom are skeptical of Romney -- as well more moderate Republicans and independent voters that Romney is their man.

Meanwhile Romney must forge ahead with drilling into the president's policies, which Romney argues have failed to speed up the recovery from the worst recession in decades.

He did that straight away Tuesday. Shortly after Santorum's capitulation, Romney took to the stump, and while he applauded his Republican rival for making "an important contribution to the political process," he swiftly pivoted to Obama.

The president's "policies have by and large been devastating to small business," Romney told supporters in Wilmington, Delaware.

The White House, which has essentially treated Romney as the de facto Republican nominee for several months, appeared ready for the head-to-head matchup.

"It's no surprise that Mitt Romney finally was able to grind down his opponents under an avalanche of negative ads," Obama reelection campaign manager Jim Messina said in a statement.

"But neither he nor his special interest allies will be able to buy the presidency with their negative attacks. The more the American people see of Mitt Romney, the less they like him and the less they trust him."

Santorum bowed out Tuesday, pledging to do what he can to help defeat the Democratic incumbent in November.

NUKE TALKS Iran to offer 'new initiatives'

AFP, Tehran

Iran is to present "new initiatives" at nuclear talks with world powers in Istanbul on the weekend, the official leading the country's negotiating team, Saeed Jalili, said yesterday without elaborating.

"The Iranian delegation will have new initiatives and we hope that the other party will have a constructive approach," he told Iran's Arabic-language network Al-Alam.

Jalili, who is close to Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, also warned Western nations taking part to not try to add to its coercive pressure on Iran.

"The language of threat and pressure has never yielded results and only reinforces the determination of the Iranian people," he said.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad echoed that statement in separate comments carried by the official news agency IRNA.

N Korea fuels rocket

AFP, Pyongyang

Defying worldwide calls to back down, North Korea yesterday said it is fuelling a rocket for launch during a landmark anniversary as it gave its young leader a new title to bolster his authority.

PyonYang has scheduled the launch in a five-day window starting today. It says the "historic" event is a centrepiece of celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of the birth of founding leader Kim Il-Sung on April 15.

The rocket is ostensibly designed to put an observation satellite in orbit, but the United States and allies say it is in fact a ballistic missile test by the nuclear-armed state in violation of a United Nations ban.

The anniversary will celebrate the family dynasty which has ruled the impoverished nation since 1948 and cement the power of the founder's grandson Kim Jong-Un, who took over after his own father Kim Jong-Il died in December.

Teamwork made man brainier

AFP, Paris

The second had two individuals trapped in a car in a snowdrift and having to weigh whether to cooperate to dig themselves out or just sit back and let the other do it.

In both cases, the individual would gain more from selfishness.

But the researchers were intrigued to find that as the brain evolved, the individual was likelier to choose to cooperate.

McNally pointed out, though, that cooperation has a calculating side. We do it out of reciprocity.

McNally said teamwork and bigger brains powered off each other.

"Transitions to cooperative, complex societies can drive the evolution of a bigger brain," he said.

"Once greater levels of intelligence started to evolve, you saw cooperation going much higher."

The study appears in *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, a journal published by Britain's de-facto academy of sciences.

DRUG VIOLENCE 28 killed in Mexico

AFP, Acapulco

At least 28 people were reported killed in Mexico in the past 24 hours, including seven whose bodies were found in a vehicle in the Pacific resort city of Acapulco, authorities said Tuesday.

Outside Acapulco, nine people were killed in the western state of Michoacan, eight in northern Nuevo Leon and four others in northern Coahuila in gangland-style killings amid a wave of drug-related violence across Mexico.

Gangland-style killings, kidnappings and extortion have risen in Mexico amid a military offensive on organized crime launched by President Felipe Calderon in December 2006.

Drug-related violence is blamed for more than 50,000 deaths across the country in the past five years.

TENSION RISES BETWEEN SUDAN-SOUTH SUDAN

Clashes ignite war fears

Oil conflict between Sudan and South Sudan



AFP, Juba

Sudan and South Sudan on Wednesday ordered mass civilian mobilisations for defence as their armies battled along their contested border, raising the spectre of a return to all-out war.

A day after Southern troops seized the contested oil-producing Heglig region from Khartoum's army amid heavy artillery bombardments and airstrikes, the parliaments in Juba and Khartoum called for preparation for conflict.

South Sudanese Speaker James Wani Igga told parliament: "Khartoum might be meaning a real war... If you don't defend yourself, you will be finished, so you should go and mobilise the people on the ground to be ready."

"It is an ugly development at the border. We have to be vigilant to all the points as they are attacking us in all corners," said Igga, a deputy chairman of the South's ruling party, to loud applause by lawmakers.

Sudan's parliament called for a

"mobilisation and alert" of the population, and halted African Union-led talks with Juba over their protracted dispute over oil, border demarcation, contested areas and citizenship issues.

The foreign ministry accused Juba of the worst violation of its territory since independence.

Fierce fighting raged yesterday as Sudanese warplanes bombed contested regions on the border with South Sudan, the second day of violence there.

South Sudanese troops held positions in the disputed Heglig oil field, seized on Tuesday from Khartoum's troops.

The clashes follow border fighting that erupted last month, the most serious unrest since Juba's independence last July.

On Tuesday, an AFP correspondent on the South Sudanese frontline heard heavy artillery shelling and multiple airstrikes for around an hour, with one bomb dropped by aircraft landing less than a kilometre away.