

Syria violence rages despite truce

30 killed; France tells UN to hurry

AFP, Damascus

Violence in Syria claimed the lives of another 30 people yesterday, as France said the UN-backed peace plan was "seriously compromised" and that the deployment of monitors should be speeded up.

UN-Arab envoy Kofi Annan had urged a rapid deployment of the full, 300-strong observer team agreed by the UN Security Council, and French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said they should be on the ground in a fortnight, not three months.

At the moment, there are only 15 observers in the country.

Juppe said that May 5, when Annan is to present his next report on the peace process, will be "a moment of truth."

"The Damascus regime does not respect the commitments it made. Repression is continuing," Juppe said, after meeting Syrian opposition members.

If the UN mission "is not working, we

cannot continue to accept the defiance of the regime" and the international community will have "to move on to other things to stop the tragedy."

At least 27 civilians were killed across the country, including in cities visited by monitors, taking to around 300 the number of people who have died since a ceasefire technically went into effect on April 12, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Three soldiers died in clashes with armed rebel groups in the southern province of Daraa, cradle of the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad.

Annan has branded the bloodshed "unacceptable" as he and world powers called for the speedy deployment of the 300 observers.

His spokesman Ahmad Fawzi acknowledged that the truce aimed at ending 13 months of violence that the United Nations says has killed more than 9,000 people remained "extremely fragile".



A protestor dresses as Rupert Murdoch, centre, as he holds puppets depicting British Prime Minister David Cameron, left, and Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt during a demonstration outside the High Court in Central London yesterday.

New law bans religious parties in Libya

AFP, Tripoli

Libyan authorities on Tuesday passed legislation governing the formation of political organisations which rules out religious, regional and tribal platforms and bans foreign funding.

"Political parties and associations should not be built on the basis of regional, tribal or religious affiliation," a member of the ruling National Transitional Council told AFP.

"They cannot be an extension of a political party abroad or receive foreign funding," said Mustafa Landi, a member of the legal committee.

Political organisations of any kind were banned for decades under the iron-fisted rule of Muammar Gaddafi, who was toppled and killed in last year's popular uprising.

Iran undecided on nuclear bomb

Says Israel military chief

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's armed forces chief-of-staff does not believe Iran will take the decision to build a nuclear bomb, he told an Israeli newspaper in an interview published yesterday.

Speaking to the left-leaning Haaretz newspaper, Lieutenant General Benny Gantz said Iran was going "step-by-step to the place where it will be able to decide if it wants to manufacture a nuclear bomb."

"It still hasn't decided yet whether to go the extra mile," he was quoted as saying, expressing a view also held by the administration of US President Barack Obama.

As long as its nuclear facilities were unprotected from attack, "the programme is too vulnerable from (Iran's) perspective," Gantz said.

Iran has already developed the capacity to enrich uranium to 20 percent, which is used



Benny Gantz

to create medical isotopes, but going "the extra mile" would mean working to enrich to 90 percent -- the level needed to make nuclear weapons.

"If the supreme religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei wants, he will move forward towards acquiring a nuclear bomb, but along the way, a decision must still be taken," he said.

"In my opinion, he would be making a huge mistake if he does so, and I don't think he will want to go the extra mile," Gantz said.

"I think that the Iranian leadership is made up of very rational people."

Gantz said 2012 would be a very important year, but he was reluctant to describe it as make-or-break.

He also said the growing campaign of diplomatic pressure and international sanctions imposed on Iran was beginning to work.

FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL POLLS Sarkozy rules out deal with far-right

REUTERS, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy ruled out any deal with the far-right National Front of Marine Le Pen, backed by nearly a fifth of voters in a presidential election first round, to give them cabinet jobs or help them win seats in parliament.

Sarkozy said yesterday that listening to Le Pen's backers did not mean he could envisage far-right ministers in a conservative-led government.

"There will be no pact with the National Front," he told France Info radio, saying there were too many issues on which the parties disagreed to imagine giving the party cabinet posts.

An opinion poll showed two-thirds of Sarkozy supporters want him to break with past policy and strike an alliance with the Front after Le Pen's 17.9 percent score on Sunday made her 6.4 million backers key to a May 6 presidential runoff.

Both Sarkozy and Socialist Francois Hollande, who beat the conservative by 28.6 percent to 27.2 percent on the first round and leads opinion polls for the runoff, are striving to respond to the protest vote without angering traditional supporters.

France holds a parliamentary election in June and Le Pen, whose party has no seats in the outgoing legislature, hopes to capitalize on the surge in her vote in the presidential contest.

UK govt under fire for Murdoch empire links

AFP, London

Press tycoon Rupert Murdoch's son got regular confidential updates from the British government over News Corp's bid for full control of pay-TV giant BSkyB, a press ethics inquiry heard Tuesday, sparking a row.

A string of emails from the Murdochs' media empire, read out in a dramatic day of evidence at the Leveson inquiry, revealed the closeness and frequency of News Corporation's contacts with advisors to culture minister Jeremy Hunt.

News Corp was forced to drop its attempt to take control of the highly profitable BSkyB in July after its British newspaper wing was engulfed by a phone-hacking scandal at the News of the World tabloid.

However, media baron Rupert Murdoch yesterday tried to downplay his influence on British politics, saying in his first appearance at a press ethics inquiry he had never asked a prime minister for anything.

"I've never asked a prime minister for anything," Murdoch told the judge-led

inquiry sitting at the Royal Courts of Justice, as he discussed ties going back as far as premier Margaret Thatcher in the 1970s.

However, Emails and texts apparently showed that Hunt's office leaked information to US-based News Corp. about its bid for full control of the highly profitable BSkyB.

Hunt, who is lead minister for the Olympic Games which open in London on July 27, was charged with the decision on whether the takeover should be allowed to go ahead.

Cameron's spokesman insisted the premier had full confidence in Hunt but the premier was expected to face a grilling at Wednesday's Prime Minister's Questions session in parliament.

Britain's newspapers suggested the Murdoch family were exacting revenge after the government distanced itself from News Corp in the wake of the hacking scandal.

"Murdochs turn tables on Cameron and Hunt," said the Financial Times on its front page, while the Daily Mail carried the headline: "Revenge of the Murdochs".



Gingrich to quit White House race

AFP, Washington

Newt Gingrich has decided to quit the US presidential race and will announce next Tuesday that he is no longer seeking the Republican nomination, sources quoted by US media said.

The former speaker of the House of Representatives will "more than likely," endorse presumptive Republican nominee Mitt Romney as he announces either the suspension or the end of his own campaign, a source told Fox News.

NBC news said on its website that Gingrich would suspend his campaign on Tuesday May 1, and could endorse Romney.

The news came after Mitt Romney effectively claimed the Republican presidential nomination as he reveled in a five-state primary sweep and urged voters to help him oust President Barack Obama in November.

With wins Tuesday in Connecticut, Delaware, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, according to US media forecasts, Romney essentially kicked off his general election campaign after months of tangling with Republican rivals.

"Tonight is the start of a new campaign," Romney told ecstatic supporters in New Hampshire -- scene of his first Republican primary victory back in January and a potentially pivotal general election battleground.

Einstein 'world's worst husband'

ANI, London

Albert Einstein may be regarded as one of the world's most important scientists but despite his innumerable professional successes, he found it hard to sustain a thriving personal life, according to a new book.

This book, Einstein: His Life and Universe, Walter Isaacson has described how Einstein found maintaining a harmonious love life a battle he would never win.

In fact, so pragmatic was Einstein's approach to love, that when he found his 11-year marriage to fellow scientist Mileva Maric was floundering, he issued a list of outrageous rules that he believed would allow the two to remain together for the sake of the children, the Daily Mail reported.

Shockingly the list demanded Maric continue to act as maid to her erstwhile husband - yet should expect no affection or attention in return.

The scientist ordered that she keep his rooms tidy, bring him three meals a day (to be eaten in his room), keep his clothes and laundry in good order, and keep his bedroom and study neat (she should not use his desk, of course).

There would apparently be no benefits to Maric in return. In fact, Einstein specified in his list of conditions, printed in Isaacson's book (via website listsofnote.com), that she must not expect Einstein to either sit with her, or accompany her outside of the house - and she must stop talking when he requests.

However, just a few months after he issued his misogynistic manifesto, she left Einstein in Berlin and moved with their sons to Zurich. After five years she filed for divorce and in 1919, it was granted.

BOFORS ARMS DEAL 'No evidence Rajiv Gandhi took bribe'

AFP, New Delhi

A former Swedish police chief yesterday said there is no evidence that late Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi took a bribe in an arms scandal that led to his defeat in 1989.

Sten Lindstrom, who led the probe and has identified himself as the whistle-blower, however said that Gandhi had "done nothing" to prevent a "cover-up".

Lindstrom also cleared top Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan and his family from any involvement in the scandal.

The whistleblower in one of India's biggest corruption scandals in the 1980s which tarnished then-prime minister Rajiv Gandhi broke cover yesterday to explain why he leaked crucial documents to the media.

Sten Lindstrom who was called "Swedish Deep Throat" for 25 years by the Indian media, has revealed he is the man who leaked documents relating to the investigation to reporter Chitra Subramaniam-Duella in an interview on the Indian media website The Hoot.



Rajiv Gandhi

"I knew what I was doing when I leaked the documents to you. I could not count on my government or Bofors or the government of India to get to the bottom of this," he told the interviewer.

Lindstrom said that "there was no evidence that he [former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi] had received any bribe" in the deal.

"But he watched the massive cover-up in India and Sweden and did nothing. Many Indian institutions were tarred, innocent people were punished while the guilty got away."

Sten Lindstrom, head of the Swedish police when the Bofors scandal broke in 1987, handed evidence seized during his investigation to Indian newspapers, including to journalist Chitra Subramaniam-Duella.

The case revolved around the sale of 410 artillery guns to India by Swedish arms group AB Bofors, which was subsequently accused of paying bribes of up to \$1.3 billion, notably to a businessman with links to Gandhi.

SECRET SERVICE SCANDAL Obama criticises rogue agents

BBC ONLINE

The US president yesterday described US Secret Service agents caught up in the Colombia sex scandal as "knuckleheads".

Speaking at a recording of an NBC chat show Obama said the vast majority of Secret Service agents performed their duties with no hint of controversy.

He described the country's Secret Service agents as "incredible".

"A couple of knuckleheads shouldn't detract from what they do. What these guys were thinking, I don't know. That's why they're not there anymore."

A total of eight agents have resigned after being involved in a night with alleged prostitutes while working in Colombia for a pan-American summit.

Two other agents will face administrative action after being cleared of serious misconduct and one has had security clearance revoked.

In a statement, the US Secret Service said the latest measures meant that all 12 of the agents involved in the night out in Cartagena, Colombia, had now been disciplined.

"At this point, all 12 have either been cleared of serious misconduct, resigned, retired, been notified of personnel actions to permanently revoke their security clearances, or have been proposed for permanent removal for cause," the agency said.

As well as the Secret Service men, who were in Colombia as part of an advance team preparing for Obama's visit to the Summit of the Americas, 12 members of the US military are also under investigation.

S Sudan leader cuts short China trip amid violence

AU gives rivals 3 months to settle row

AFP, Beijing

South Sudan's president Sylva Kiir will cut short his visit to China amid violence between the world's newest nation and Sudan, officials said yesterday, as Beijing announced plans to send a peace envoy.

The visit, which started Monday, was scheduled to last until Saturday and was to have included a trip to China's commercial hub. There was no indication when Kiir would leave the country.

The curtailment of Kiir's visit comes amid worsening tensions between his country and neighbouring Sudan, prompting him to accuse Khartoum of declaring war on South Sudan in a



Sylva Kiir

Sudan -- which gained independence last July -- at least 16 civilians were killed and 34 others wounded in Sudanese air raids on its neighbour's Unity state.

Chinese foreign ministry spokesman

Liu Weimin yesterday told reporters Zhong Jianhua -- China's special representative on African affairs -- would visit the two countries to "promote peace talks". He gave no further details.

China has been a key ally and the largest economic partner of diplomatically isolated Khartoum.

China has repeatedly called for an end to weeks of border hostilities that saw the South seize Sudan's most important oil field in the Heglig area on April 10 and hold it for 10 days.

Meanwhile, the African Union has given Sudan and South Sudan three months to reach a peace deal or face "appropriate measures," an AU official said Tuesday.

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