

# Obama pledges end to Afghan war

Signs post 2014 deal; Taliban reply with Kabul assault, seven killed

BBC ONLINE

US President Barack Obama yesterday pledged to "finish the job" and end the Afghan war, addressing the US public live from a military base in Afghanistan.

Speaking a year after Osama Bin Laden's killing, Obama thanked US troops and hailed plans to end combat operations.

He arrived in Kabul on a surprise visit lasting a few hours to sign an accord on future Afghan-US ties with President Hamid Karzai, ahead of a Nato summit.

Hours after his speech, Taliban bombers attacked a heavily fortified guesthouse used by Westerners in Kabul, announcing the start of their annual "spring offensive" in defiance of calls from US President Barack Obama.

Afghan officials said at least two suicide bombers targeted a residential compound popular with

## BIN LADEN KILLING ANNIVERSARY



Osama Bin Laden



Barack Obama

foreigners in the eastern part of the capital.

They said at least four of those killed were from a nearby school. Seventeen people were wounded. The Taliban later claimed responsibility for the attacks.

The Taliban said the assault was a riposte to Obama's Afghanistan visit.

Earlier, Obama said signing the

pact with President Karzai was "a historic moment" for both nations.

In the speech, beamed back to prime-time evening audiences in the US, the president said that at the forthcoming Nato summit, to be held in Chicago later this month, the alliance would "set a goal for Afghan forces to be in the lead for combat operations across the country next year".

Nato has already committed to withdrawing from combat operations in Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

"I will not keep Americans in harm's way a single day longer than is absolutely required for our national security," Obama said. "But we must finish the job we started in Afghanistan, and end this war responsibly."

Correspondents say Obama's words appear to be aimed at showing American voters he is pursuing a strategy to wind down the war, while reassuring Afghans in the face of a continuing Taliban insurgency.

About 23,000 of the 88,000 US troops currently in the country are expected to leave Afghanistan by the summer, with all US and Nato combat troops out by the end of 2014.

"It is time to renew America," Obama said towards the end of his remarks.

"The Iraq war is over. The number of our troops in harm's way has

been cut in half, and more will be coming home soon. We have a clear path to fulfil our mission in Afghanistan, while delivering justice to al-Qaeda."

During the speech, Obama outlined the agreement he had just signed with Karzai.

According to the US president, the document outlines plans for training Afghan forces and supporting counter-terrorism efforts, as well as "Afghan commitments to transparency and accountability".

Obama also spoke of a "negotiated peace" with the Taliban, saying that if insurgents broke with al-Qaeda, and followed the "path to peace", there could be reconciliation.

He also rejected calls to leave Afghanistan in advance of the 2014 Nato timeline, saying "we must finish the job we started in Afghanistan, and end this war responsibly".

# Laden lamented Qaeda 'disaster'

AFP, Washington

Osama bin Laden bemoaned "disaster after disaster" inflicted by the US onslaught on al-Qaeda before his death a year ago and even mulled changing his terror group's name, a top US official said.

President Barack Obama's top counter-terrorism aide John Brennan on Monday also argued that a US drone campaign had left al-Qaeda seriously weakened, and unable to replace wiped-out leaders.

Brennan said in a speech in Washington that the terror group was losing "badly," was a "shadow" of its former self, and that its core leadership would soon be "no longer relevant."

He said the al-Qaeda leader's frustration at the demise of his group, which was behind the September 11 attacks in 2001, poured out in documents seized from his Pakistan compound by US Navy SEAL commandos who killed him a year ago.

"He confessed to 'disaster after disaster'" for al-Qaeda, Brennan said, noting that some of the captured material would be published online this week by the Combating Terrorism Center at the US Military Academy at West Point.

Brennan also said that subsequent US operations to wipe out senior al-Qaeda leaders in Pakistan had left the group reeling.

Brennan also claimed that the administration's tactics against al-Qaeda had made it harder than ever for the terror network to plan and execute large-scale, catastrophic attacks. "Today, it is increasingly clear that compared to 9/11, the core al-Qaeda leadership is a shadow of its former self," he said.

## Drone strikes are legal, ethical: US

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama has ordered more openness about the secretive drone war pouncing al-Qaeda in Pakistan, a top official said Monday, mounting the firmest defense yet of the program.

In a landmark speech on counter-terrorism "ethics," Obama aide John Brennan insisted the program was legal, ethical, proportional and saved US lives.

"Broadly speaking, the debate over strikes targeted at individual members of al-Qaeda has centered on their legality, their ethics, the wisdom of using them, and the standards by which they are approved," Brennan said.

He argued that the strikes were ethical, proportional and conformed to US efforts to spare innocent civilians from being caught up in the crossfire.

## PROTEST AGAINST MILITARY RULE Protesters attacked in Egypt, 20 killed

AFP, Cairo

Thugs attacked an anti-military protest near the defence ministry in Cairo yesterday and 20 people were killed, officials said, in the politically tense run-up to the first post-uprising presidential election.

The dawn assault sparked fierce clashes between the unidentified attackers and the protesters, who have been there for days calling for an end to military rule, with both sides hurling petrol bombs and rocks, the official said.

The army deployed troops in central Cairo to quell the clashes, a military source told AFP.

Four presidential candidates announced they had temporarily suspended their campaigns over the killings.

The protesters, supporters of Salafist politician Hazem Abu Ismail, have been camped out since Saturday after the electoral commission barred the popular hard line Islamist from contesting the upcoming presidential election.

The electoral commission on April 14 barred 10 candidates, including the Muslim Brotherhood's Khairat El-Shater and the former president's intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, from standing in the poll to choose Mubarak's successor.

The first round of the presidential election is scheduled for May 23-24, and the SCAF has promised to hand over power to the winner by the end of June.



Unidentified Egyptians (top) throw stones at anti-military protesters during clashes in the Abbassiya district of Cairo yesterday. Thugs attacked the anti-military protest near the defence ministry and at least 20 people were killed, officials said, in the politically tense run-up to the first post-uprising presidential election.

## N Korea ready for 3rd nuke test: Expert

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has apparently finished preparations for a third nuclear test and is awaiting a political decision to go ahead, a South Korean nuclear expert said yesterday.

"The North has apparently finished technical preparations for a third nuclear test. What is left now is a political decision," the expert told journalists on condition of anonymity.

The expert also said the communist state is likely to use highly enriched uranium (HEU) for any test, and may have produced enough of it to make between three and six bombs in addition to its plutonium stockpile.

There has been widespread speculation the North will stage a test following its failed launch of a long-range rocket last month.

## NEWS IN brief

### Hungary gets new president

AFP, Budapest

The Hungarian parliament yesterday confirmed Janos Ader, a co-founder of Hungary's ruling Fidesz party and close ally of Prime Minister Viktor Orban, as the country's new president.

Ader, 52, who was nominated by Orban last month after Pal Schmitt stepped down over a plagiarism scandal, received a majority votes in the Fidesz-controlled parliament as expected.

A mostly ceremonial role, the Hungarian president

### 1 in 7 US newspapers now digital

AFP, Washington

Nearly one of seven newspapers read in the United States is now a digital one, an industry group said Tuesday.

The Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) said that in the six months to March 31, some 14.2 percent of newspapers were read as digital editions, including smartphone and tablet computer versions.

That marked a huge leap from a year ago when 8.66

### NY judge rejects DSK immunity

AFP, New York

Former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn must face a civil trial over an alleged sex assault in New York, a judge here ruled Tuesday, rejecting his last ditch attempt to claim diplomatic immunity.

The judge hearing the suit brought by Nafissatou Diallo ruled Strauss-Kahn had lost immunity because he'd resigned from the International Monetary Fund well before the civil action was lodged.

Diallo alleges the French politician forced her into oral sex when she went to clean his room last year on

### Tymoshenko Trial: Austria to boycott Euro 2012

BBC ONLINE

Austria's government yesterday said it will boycott all Euro 2012 matches in Ukraine amid rising anger at the treatment of jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko.

The Austria team did not qualify for the tournament, co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine, but Chancellor Werner Faymann said it was "a political signal".

Five European presidents - from Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy and Slovenia - have said they will not attend a Ukrainian summit of Central and East

## Eritrea leads world in press censorship

AFP, New York

Eritrea has surpassed North Korea as the world's top press censor, with Syria and Iran placing third and fourth in a new list published Wednesday by the Committee to Protect Journalists.

The New York-based rights group said Eritrea had climbed to the top of the list by banning all foreign media and controlling every detail of the local media's coverage through its information ministry.

Syria has ratcheted up press restrictions since the outbreak of a popular revolt against President Bashar al-Assad a year ago, leaping from ninth on the CPJ's 2006 list to third in the latest one.

Iran has meanwhile "mixed high-technology techniques such as Web blocking with brute-force tactics such as mass imprisonment of journalists to control the flow of information and obfuscate details of its own nuclear program."

Rounding out the list of the top 10 press censors was Equatorial Guinea, Uzbekistan, Burma, Saudi Arabia, Cuba and Belarus.

The CPJ drew up the list based on 15 benchmarks, including the blocking of websites, the absence of privately-owned or independent media, restrictions on journalists' movements and security service monitoring of journalists.

For this list, the group only considered countries in which restrictions are imposed by the government and not cases like Mexico and Somalia where journalists are often forced to censor themselves because of crime or unrest.

## MAY DAY RALLIES Dozens held in Occupy US protests

AFP, New York

Thousands of Occupy protesters marched on Wall Street in New York in the highlight of a May Day "general strike," while police arrested dozens in sporadic clashes on the US West Coast.

Police used tear gas during the protests Tuesday in Oakland, California, and Seattle, where windows were smashed, while some 20 people were detained in Portland, Oregon and 10 at Los Angeles airport.

Activists say they are protesting against corporate greed and the plight of ordinary people in an anemic economy. Similar protests were announced across dozens of US cities and in countries ranging from Spain to Australia.

## UN accuses both sides of violating truce in Syria

### Army suffers deadliest day since ceasefire

AFP, Damascus

Syria's army on Wednesday reportedly suffered its deadliest day in a ceasefire when rebel fighters killed 20 troops, in the latest violation of the three-week truce the UN says both sides are flouting.

The rebels killed 15 soldiers -- including two colonels -- in a dawn ambush in the northern province of Aleppo, where two rebel fighters also died, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The ambush occurred near Al-Rai village, after President Bashar al-Assad's forces had "scaled up military operations" there in the days since the truce took effect on April 12, said the watchdog.

Clashes near Damascus killed six troops, while the army shelled and torched activists' homes in eastern Deir Ezzor province and regime gunfire killed a civilian in southern Daraa, cradle of the 14-month uprising.

The latest bloodshed comes a day after the United Nations accused both the regime

and its opponents of violating the ceasefire that is part of a peace plan brokered by UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan.

The plan calls for a daily two-hour humanitarian ceasefire, media access to all areas affected by the fighting, an inclusive Syrian-led political process, a right to demonstrate and the release of detainees.

According to the UN, more than 9,000 people have been killed in Syria since an anti-regime uprising broke out in March last year, while the Observatory puts the figure at more than 11,100.

UN peacekeeping chief Herve Ladsous said Syrian troops have kept heavy weapons in cities, and that both the government and rebels have violated the truce.

Human Rights Watch accused the regime of committing atrocities in the eastern province of Idlib shortly before the truce took effect.

The New York-based watchdog accused regime forces of summary executions, arbitrary detentions and burning and destruction of civilian property.

## Suu Kyi joins parliament

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi was sworn in as a member of parliament yesterday, opening a new chapter in the Nobel laureate's near quarter-century struggle against authoritarian rule.

The 66-year-old, in the capital Naypyidaw for the ceremony, stood to read the brief oath in unison with 33 other members of her National League for Democracy party elected to the lower house in April, an AFP reporter said.

The oath hands Suu Kyi public office for the first time and marks a transformation in the fortunes of the opposition leader, who was held under house arrest for much of the last 20 years but is now central to the nation's tentative transition to democracy.

She had initially balked at taking the oath, specifically a sentence pledging to "safeguard" the army-created constitution.

But on Monday she backed down after the head of the nominally civilian government President Thein Sein refused to



offer concessions, explaining it was the "desire of the people" to see her party in office after breakthrough April 1 by-elections.

Speaking to reporters after Wednesday's ceremony the veteran dissident said, "I believe I can serve the interests of the people more than before".

She was then whisked away by car to Naypyidaw airport to return to Yangon.

The international community greeted her election as a step towards democracy and had urged Suu Kyi, who drew huge crowds on the campaign trail, to take her seat amid fears her refusal could stall the transition from military rule.

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, on a visit to Beijing, praised Myanmar's president for allowing the by-elections but said the United States was also looking ahead to the conduct of polls slated for 2015.

"This is an important moment for Burma's future," Hillary said in a statement, using Myanmar's former name. "A genuine transition toward multi-party democracy leading to general elections in 2015 will help build a more prosperous society."

The NLD is the main opposition force after securing 43 of the 44 seats it contested in the by-elections.

The party, which boycotted a controversial 2010 election, agreed to rejoin the political mainstream last year after a series of reforms by the government.

## UN Council threatens Sudans with sanctions

REUTERS, United Nations

The UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution yesterday that threatens Sudan and South Sudan with sanctions if the African neighbors fail to halt an escalating conflict and resume negotiations on disputes within two weeks.

The UN Council resolution on Sudan and South Sudan, former civil war foes that split when the south seceded last year, follows weeks of border fighting that have raised fears Khartoum and Juba could launch an all-out war after failing to resolve a string of disputes over oil revenues and border demarcation.

China, which has close trade relations with both countries, and Russia supported the resolution after several days of negotiations with council members during which they resisted the Western push for a threat of sanctions.

The resolution passed yesterday threatens both Sudan and South Sudan with "additional measures" under Article 41 of the UN charter, which allows the council to impose economic and diplomatic sanctions on countries that ignore its decisions.

The African Union's Peace and Security Council had asked the UN Security Council to pass a legally binding resolution to demand that Khartoum and Juba comply with an AU demand that both sides cease hostilities, withdraw troops from disputed areas and resolve all outstanding disputes.