

# UN admits Syria truce not holding

## Students killed in anti-regime protest

AFP, Damascus

The UN admitted a shaky three-week-old truce in Syria is not holding but said the number of observers would be doubled within days, as violence erupted yesterday near Damascus and the northern city of Aleppo.

The latest unrest, in which at least four students were killed and dozens injured according to a monitoring group, followed a deadly day for the army Wednesday when rebels killed 22 troops.

The students were killed in a campus raid yesterday that human rights monitors said could mark a turning point for the second-largest city Aleppo in the more than 13-month uprising.

The four students died and 28 more were wounded, three of them critically, when government forces and armed supporters stormed the dormitories at Aleppo University following a campus demonstration, a monitoring group said.

Sources said some 200 students were also arrested during the night-time raid.

Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Britain-

based Observatory, said the events could mark a turning point for Syria's second city and commercial powerhouse, which has remained relatively calm since the uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's regime broke out in March last year.

"The city of Aleppo hasn't joined the anti-regime revolt thus far but the seriousness of these events will push residents to mobilise in solidarity with the students," he told AFP.

Following the violence, the university, the country's second-largest, announced it was suspending classes until final exams on May 13.

Despite the bloodshed, the head of a UN military observer mission said his team was having a positive effect, although the ceasefire was not holding.

The United Nations has 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.

More than 9,000 people have been killed in Syria since the anti-regime uprising broke out in March 2011, according to UN estimates while the Observatory puts the figure at more than 11,100.



Journalist hold placards reading "We are guarantors of the constitutional right to information" and "There is no democracy without journalism" during a demonstration to mark the World Press Freedom Day yesterday in Madrid. The World Press Freedom Day raises awareness on the importance of press freedom and reminds governments of their duty to respect it in theory and practice.

# Attack on market kills 34 in Nigeria

AFP, Kano

Gunmen armed with explosives killed at least 34 people in northeastern Nigeria when they attacked a cattle market and burned it to the ground, residents and officials said yesterday.

The attack Wednesday night in the city of Potiskum was said to be in reprisal for an incident earlier in the day when a gang sought to rob the market but were fought off by traders who caught one of the attackers, police said.

The man who was caught was doused in petrol and a tyre was placed around his neck before he was burnt to death, according to police and residents.

"A group of gunmen armed with around 20 explosives and assault rifles attacked the Potiskum cattle market," police spokesman Toyin Gbadegesin told AFP.

# Egypt military vows fair polls after clashes

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's military rulers yesterday vowed that this month's presidential election will be fair and moved to assure the public it would hand over power, a day after a deadly attack on an anti-military protest.

"We are committed to fair elections 100 percent. We don't have any candidates. All the candidates are respectable Egyptians," said Major General Mohammed al-Assar of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces.

Assar was speaking at a news conference as an uneasy calm returned to Cairo's streets following clashes that killed 20 people outside the defence ministry on Wednesday, according to medics.

"We want to stress the commitment of the armed forces... of not using violence against the people. The armed forces belong to the people," said Assar, who put Wednesday's toll at nine dead and more than 160 injured.

The general, an aide to the defence minister, said the security forces had intervened "positively" to stop the bloodshed and to ensure stability, more than a year after a popular uprising toppled veteran president Hosni Mubarak.

Assar said the military would transfer power by the end of June.

The presidential election is scheduled for May 23 and 24 and a run off for June 16 and 17 if there is no outright winner in the first round.

# Sudan says it seeks peace with South

AFP, Khartoum

Khartoum yesterday said it seeks peace with South Sudan and hopes the small country responds favourably to African Union and UN resolutions for ending hostilities.

While recommitting Khartoum to African Union (AU) efforts to end hostilities between Sudan and South Sudan, Sudan's foreign ministry's statement was vague in its response to a United Nations resolution backing the AU plan.

The UN Security Council on Wednesday ordered Sudan and the South to halt hostilities in 48 hours or face possible sanctions, giving diplomatic muscle to AU efforts to end violence and get peace negotiations started.

# Missile shield over Europe Russia warns of 'dead end' in talks

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday said its dispute with the United States over missile defence was near a "dead end" and warned it might have to deploy new rockets in Europe to take out elements of the controversial shield.

"We have not been able to find mutually-acceptable solutions at this point and the situation is practically at a dead end," Defence Minister Anatoly Serdyukov told a televised conference on missile defence issues.

The comments came just hours before Russian generals were to sit down for crunch talks with a special team Washington dispatched ahead of next month's official deployment of the first elements of the new shield.

Russia has argued vehemently against a defence system the United States is deploying to protect its European allies against any attack from enemy states such as Iran that the West fears are seeking to develop a nuclear weapon.

Officials in Moscow fear the shield may harm its own nuclear deterrence and have warned of unleashing a massive new armament programme if Washington failed to allay its concerns.

Chief of Staff General Nikolai Makarov said one option was for Russia to station short-range Iskander missiles in its Kaliningrad exclave near Poland in a long-discussed move that has gravely alarmed Eastern European states.

# Rocket row UN sanctions N Korea firms

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council on Wednesday ordered sanctions against three "very significant" North Korean state firms over the country's failed rocket launch, US ambassador Susan Rice said.

But the assets freeze imposed against three enterprises said to have financed and organised the North's missile and nuclear programs could soon be followed by a new UN sanctions battle if the North carries out a feared nuclear bomb test.

The United States, European Union, South Korea and Japan had proposed adding 40 companies, organizations and individuals to the UN sanctions list. But China, the North's closest ally, rejected the bulk of the names, diplomats said.

# Libya grants immunity to former rebels

AFP, Tripoli

Libyan authorities granted immunity to former rebels who fought to oust Muammar Gaddafi's regime and has criminalised any glorification of the former leader, in laws passed yesterday.

"There is no punishment for acts made necessary by the February 17 revolution," read the law published on the National Transitional Council's website.

The immunity covers "military, security or civilian acts undertaken by revolutionaries with the aim of ensuring the revolution's success and its goal," the NTC added.

February 17 marks the start of a popular uprising which led to the collapse of Gaddafi's regime last year.

It was unclear if the law includes acts committed after October 23, when the NTC declared Libya's liberation following the capture and killing of strongman Gaddafi.

Rights groups say war crimes were committed by both sides during the 2011 conflict and warn of torture in detention centres run by militias made up of former rebels.

In further legislation to govern the country's transition the NTC criminalised the glorification of Gaddafi or his regime. "Praising or glorifying Muammar Gaddafi, his regime, his ideas or his sons... is punishable by a prison sentence," said the text of the law read out to reporters by a judicial official after a high-level meeting.

# China urges US to respect each others concerns

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Hu Jintao yesterday called for the United States and China to respect each other's concerns, amid a row over a dissident who fled to the US embassy.

Speaking at the start of two-day talks in Beijing, Hu called for cooperation between the world's two largest economies and warned that any worsening of relations posed "grave" risks for the world.

"Given the different national conditions, it is impossible for China and the United States to see eye-to-eye on every issue," Hu said at the talks, attended by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner.



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Chinese President Hu Jintao attend the opening ceremony of the US-China meet in Beijing yesterday.

"We should approach our differences in the correct way and respect and accommodate each other's interests and concerns. We should properly manage differences through dialogue and by improving mutual understanding," he said.

Earlier, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told China that it cannot deny the "aspirations" of its citizens as she opened talks in Beijing marred by a row over a Chinese dissident.

"We believe that all governments do have to answer to citizens' aspirations for dignity and the rule of law and that no nation can or should deny those rights," Hillary said as she opened the annual Strategic and Economic Dialogue.

# Nepal to form national unity government

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai will disband his cabinet and form a new national unity government in a bid to end the country's political deadlock, an aide said yesterday.

The Maoists currently rule with support from fringe parties but have agreed to dissolve the coalition administration and offer portfolios to the main opposition groups, the Nepali Congress (NC) and United Marxist Leninist (UML).

"We have always advocated for the formation of a national unity government. But the NC and the UML didn't support us and we had to form a coalition government without them," the premier's spokesman Ram Rijan Yadav told AFP.

"As per (the) agreement, the prime minister will dissolve the cabinet and will form another cabinet. We will try our best to include all the parties represented in the parliament," he said.

"Prime minister Bhattarai is holding talks with opposition leaders and he will dissolve the cabinet only after the portfolios for the upcoming ministers have been decided," he said.

Maoist rebels fought the government in a bloody conflict from 1996-2006 that left 16,000 dead before the insurgency turned to mainstream politics and swept to power in elections in 2008.

The parliament has a May 27 deadline to agree on a new constitution but the process has been delayed by disagreements over how to divide the country into federal states and which form of governance it should adopt.

Bhattarai is widely expected to remain in office until the constitution is in place before allowing the Nepali Congress to lead a new government.

He was made prime minister in August last year after his predecessor on the UML, Jhulanath Khanal, failed to make headway over the constitution and completing the peace process.



# Gingrich quits White House race

AFP, Arlington

Former House speaker Newt Gingrich dropped his erratic campaign for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination Wednesday, but pledged to remain in the public eye as an "active citizen."

"Today, I am suspending the campaign. Suspending the campaign does not mean suspending citizenship," Gingrich said in the Washington suburb of Arlington, Virginia, with his wife Callista at his side.

His exit leaves only Ron Paul, an anti-tax and anti-war veteran Texas congressman, officially in the race against presumptive nominee Mitt Romney.

The 68-year-old Gingrich, best known for his polarising term as leader of the House of Representatives in the 1990s, enjoyed brief spurts of success after a chaotic start to his presidential campaign.

But ultimately, Gingrich won just two nominating contests since the start of the state-by-state race in January -- in his home state of Georgia and in South Carolina -- and was a distant third in the fight to take on US President Barack Obama in November.

Gingrich, deeply critical of Romney during the nomination race, said his old rival was better than Obama, who is seeking a second term -- but stopped short of offering his full endorsement.

# Ex-girlfriend's diaries show Obama in love

AFP, Washington

Secret diaries of an Australian woman who was one of young Barack Obama's girlfriends, show the warmth and trust of the future president in love, but also hint at his reserve and "coolness."

Accounts of the 1980s romance between Genevieve Cook and a twenty-something Obama in New York were excerpted in "Vanity Fair" magazine from a forthcoming book called "Barack Obama: The Story" by author David Maraniss.

Cook, daughter of an Australian diplomat, remembered how "on Sundays Obama would lounge around, drinking coffee and solving the New York Times crossword puzzle, bare-chested, wearing a blue and white sarong," Maraniss wrote.

The book also includes accounts from Cook's diaries, which show how the romance grew and then cooled when the couple moved in together, according to



excerpts published in Vanity Fair magazine.

The account by Maraniss shows the young Obama trying to make sense of the different cultural and racial strands of his life, as the son of a white American woman and a Kenyan father who spent boyhood years in Indonesia.

He comes across as cerebral, searching, perhaps pre-tentious, brooding but earnest, and as an outsider -- traits, in one degree or another which another marked his lightning rise to the top of US politics two decades later.

"His warmth can be deceptive," Cook wrote. "He speaks sweet words and can be open and trusting, there is also that coolness."

In 1984 she commented in the diary: "Barack still intrigues me, but so much going on beneath the surface, out of reach. Guarded, controlled."

Cook, who met Obama at a Christmas Party in New York's East village in 1983, had not previously revealed the diaries.

# France polls too close to call Sarkozy fails to make impression in televised debate

AGENCIES

French President Nicolas Sarkozy made a last-ditch appeal to far-right voters yesterday after failing to land a knockout blow in a heated televised debate with Socialist rival Francois Hollande before tomorrow's presidential runoff.

Hollande, ahead in opinion polls by six to 10 points, was calm and unflappable during the nearly three-hour debate on Wednesday while the conservative Sarkozy, struggling to catch up with the moderate social democrat, appeared agitated and tense.

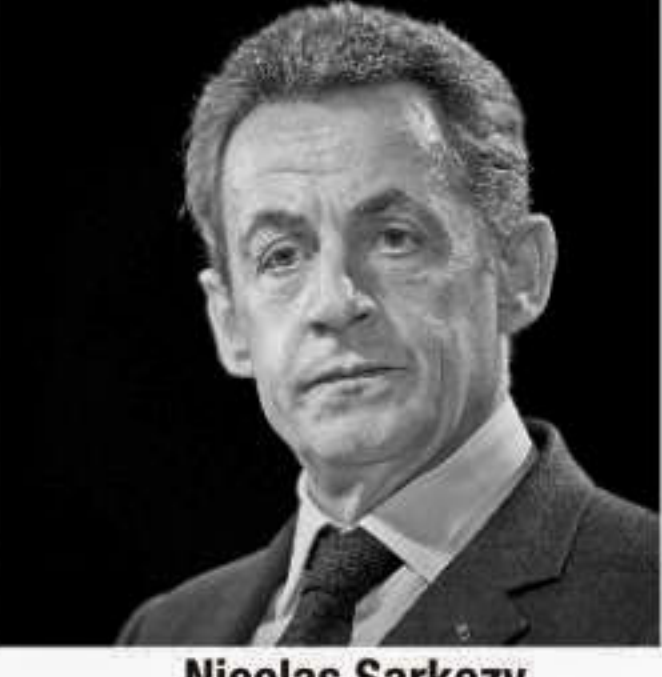
However Sarkozy said he believes tomorrow's presidential election runoff against Francois Hollande will be decided by the tightest margin.

Sarkozy yesterday said that no election had ever been so "undecided".

Hollande told French radio that the



Francois Hollande



Nicolas Sarkozy

final days of the campaign and the voter turnout could both affect the result.

Both candidates have stepped up their appeals to voters who backed National Front leader Marine Le Pen and centrist Francois Bayrou in the first round. Ms Le Pen, who attracted 6.4 million voters, said on Thursday that the election was over as Sarkozy was "beaten a long time ago".

During Wednesday's debate, the two candidates traded accusations, with the president calling Hollande a "little

slanderer", while his rival said Sarkozy shirked responsibility.

The programme, broadcast on TF1 and France 2, was also carried on four other smaller channels, and lasted two hours and 50 minutes, a record for a French election debate. But the audience was smaller than the 20 million people who

watched the event five years before. Sarkozy defended his record and said he had kept France out of recession. But Hollande said France was going through a "serious crisis" and was struggling with slow growth.

The BBC's Gavin Hewitt says it was a long, bad-tempered debate that left the impression that neither candidate liked each other. But French media suggested that neither candidate had landed a knock-out blow.