

Syria peace plan on track: UN

Massive rallies held amid violence

AFP, Damascus

Thousands of Syrians rallied yesterday, braving regime gunfire to show their determination to oust Bashar al-Assad, as the office of international envoy Kofi Annan said his peace plan is "on track."

The demonstrations came as forces cracking down on dissent reportedly killed at least 14 civilians, including a protester, only hours after UN peacekeepers urged Damascus to make the first move to end nearly 14 months of bloodshed.

"The Annan plan is on track and a crisis that has been going on for over a year is not going to be resolved in a day or a week," the UN-Arab League envoy's spokesman, Ahmad Fawzi, told journalists in Geneva.

"There are signs on the ground of movement, albeit slow and small.

"Some heavy weapons have been withdrawn, some heavy weapons remain. Some violence has receded, some violence continues. And that is not satisfactory, I'm not

saying it," Fawzi said.

Protesters yesterday emerged from mosques after weekly prayers across the country, calling for President Assad's ouster, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

One person was killed in the capital's Al-Tadamon district as government forces used gunfire to disperse demonstrators, said the Britain-based watchdog.

Troops also opened fire on demonstrators in various other cities and towns, according to activists.

More than 600 people have died in violence since the truce, according to the Observatory.

Overall, the watchdog estimates that more than 11,000 people have been killed since the outbreak of the revolt against Assad's regime.

Among Friday's casualties were a couple and their child killed by gunfire in the northern city of Aleppo, scene of a bloody raid by government forces the day before in which four university students died.



Egyptians protest against the military rule in Cairo's Tahrir square yesterday. Heavy gunfire could be heard as clashes between troops and anti-military protesters spread around the defence ministry in Cairo and street battles raged in side roads, an AFP reporter said.

Saudi orders reopening of Egypt mission

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi King Abdullah yesterday ordered the return of the kingdom's ambassador to Egypt and the reopening of the mission after it was shut last week in the wake of angry protests, state news agency SPA said.

The king "instructed the kingdom's ambassador to Cairo to resume his post on Sunday, and ordered the reopening of the embassy and the consulates in Alexandria and Suez," SPA reported, quoting an unnamed official.

Riyadh on Saturday recalled its ambassador after angry protests outside the Saudi embassy in Cairo over the arrest of an Egyptian human rights lawyer in the Gulf kingdom which claimed he was in possession of drugs.

WORLD PRESS DAY

UN leader outraged at mounting media deaths

AFP, United Nations

UN leader Ban Ki-moon on Thursday led international outrage at the growing number of journalist killings, as the bodies of two dead photographers were found in Mexico on World Press Freedom Day.

Ban told a press freedom at the UN headquarters that journalists now face "dire threats" and highlighted that more than 60 were killed in 2011.

Amid international tributes to journalists such as Marie Colvin of the United States and Remi Ochluk of France who were killed in the Syrian protest city of Homs in March, some press freedom groups say this year could see an even worse media death toll.

Mexican security forces on Thursday found the dismembered bodies of two missing photographers -- Guillermo Luna Varela and Gabriel Huga -- in a canal in the eastern state of Veracruz, authorities said.



The UN secretary general said "countless" reporters "face intimidation, harassment and censorship at the hands of governments, corporations and powerful individuals seeking to preserve their power or hide wrongdoing and misdeeds."

"Impunity for those who attack or threaten journalists remains disturbingly prevalent," he added, calling attacks on journalists "outrageous".

Reporters Without Borders said even before the bodies of the Mexican photographers were found, 22 reporters and six bloggers and "citizen journalists" have already been killed since the start of the year.

According to Reporters Without Borders, five journalists have been killed in Somalia this year, four in Syria -- including Colvin and Ochluk -- two each in Bangladesh, Brazil and India, and one in Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand.

Japan to go nuke-free for 1st time since 1970

AFP, Tokyo

Japan is set to go without nuclear energy for the first time since 1970 from today, when the last operating reactor shuts down for maintenance, heightening fears of a looming power crunch this summer.

Only one of Japan's 50 reactors -- at the Tomari nuclear plant in northernmost Hokkaido -- is operating at present, but it is scheduled to stop for maintenance work which will last more than 70 days.

Resource-hungry Japan relied on nuclear energy for about one-third of its electricity demand until a massive earthquake and tsunami in March last year caused reactor meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi plant.

Utility firms managed to make up much of the power shortfall after the nuclear accident by imposing scheduled blackouts on offices, factories and households while cranking up the use of thermal plants and gas turbines.

Since the disaster there has been lingering public distrust over nuclear energy and all but the one reactor at the Tomari plant are suspended for extra safety checks.

Workers at the Tomari plant will move the control rod into reactor No. 3 at about 5:00pm (0800 GMT) on Saturday, which will lower power generation to zero, a spokesman at Hokkaido Electric Power Co. (HEPCO) said.

The long-term future of the reactor -- and Japan's nuclear energy policy -- remains uncertain.

INDIA RIOTS 9 convicted over Gujarat killings

BBC ONLINE

A court in India has convicted nine people of burning three people to death in their home during the religious riots in Gujarat state 10 years ago.

Thirty-two others were acquitted of the crime which took place in Ode village in Anand district.

More than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed when riots erupted after 60 Hindu pilgrims died in a train fire in 2002. It was one of India's worst outbreaks of religious violence in recent years.

Last month, the court sentenced 18 people to life imprisonment for the murder of 23 Muslims in the same village. Five others were given seven years and another 23 were acquitted.

Blast targets busy pak town square, 24 killed

Taliban claim responsibility

AFP, Khar

A teenage suicide bomber targeted police in a bustling Pakistan town square yesterday, killing at least 24 people and wounding dozens in the tribal area near the Afghan border, officials said.

The Taliban claimed responsibility, saying it had wanted to kill the local chief and deputy of a tribal police force recruited by the government to help defeat the Islamist insurgency in the northwest.

Both died in the attack in Khar, the main town of Bajaur district, after a bomber who intelligence officials said was aged 14 to 16 detonated explosives strapped to his chest.

Bajaur has been one of the toughest battlegrounds in Pakistan's fight against a northwestern Taliban insurgency. The military conducted major offensives there in 2008 and 2009 and has repeatedly declared it secure.

Yesterday's blast was the deadliest bombing in Pakistan since February 17, when 31 people were killed by a suicide attack on Shiite Muslims in the tribal district of Kurram.

Raids were later carried out in the surrounding areas of Khar and two men aged 17 and 18 were arrested and suicide jackets found, he said.

At least five policemen, including the local tribal police chief and his deputy, were among the dead and 46 people were wounded. Shops and a restaurant were destroyed.

AL to go tough

FROM PAGE 1

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, AL Organising Secretary Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury said, "We will go tough against those who will try to hinder development activities. We won't spare anyone who will try to create anarchy in the name of movement."

He added that the AL would stay alert in the streets to thwart BNP's anti-government movement.

Khalid, however, said they believe "the opposition leaders who go into hiding and are not courageous enough to face charges won't be able to wage a movement to unseat this government".

The main opposition BNP has announced that after May 6 it would take up programmes even harsher than hartal to press the government for return of its missing leader Ilias Ali, withdrawal of "false charges" against its top leaders and reinstatement of the caretaker government system to hold the next parliamentary election.

In last 12 days, the BNP-led 18-party alliance has enforced five dawn-to-dusk shutdowns and staged demonstrations across the country to protest the disappearance of Ilias Ali and his driver.

Ilias, one of the organising secretaries of the BNP and a former lawmaker, went missing in the early hours of April 18.

AL high-ups say since the government has been trying its best to find out Ilias, there is no logic in calling hartal.

Besides, they add, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself has assured Ilias' wife Tahsina Rushdir Luna of doing everything necessary to trace her husband.

On the two cases filed against the BNP leaders on charges of involvement in blasts and vandalism during hartal hours, AL leaders said the senior BNP leaders must accept responsibility when one bus driver had been burned alive and many vehicles smashed or torched

by hartal pickets.

The ruling party leaders also said the charges had been brought against the opposition leaders as they had threatened to "set the country on fire".

About the opposition's demand for withdrawal of the charges, AL Joint General Secretary Mahbub Alam Hanif said, "The law will take its own course and no one is above the law."

On April 29, Tejgaon police filed a case against 44 leaders and activists of the BNP-led 18-party alliance for torching a vehicle near the Prime Minister's Office that day.

The accused include BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam, standing committee members Mirza Abbas, Goyeshwar Chandra Roy and Hannan Shah, joint secretary general Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, lawmaker Shahiduddin Chowdhury Anee and Liberal Democratic Party chief Oli Ahmed.

The same day, Shahbagh police accused 28 opposition leaders in a case in connection with two explosions on the secretariat compound. Mirza Fakhrul is the main accused in the case.

Blasts kill 14 in Russia

AFP, Moscow

A double car bombing in Russia's troubled North Caucasus killed at least 14 people and injured more than 120 just days before Vladimir Putin returns to the Kremlin, officials said yesterday.

The attacks late Thursday outside Dagestan's main city, which authorities said may have been triggered by suicide bombers, were the deadliest in the Caucasus in months and smashed any illusion of increasing stability.

The power of the blasts sent huge yellow flames into the night sky, reduced cars to burned wreckage and left a crater in the ground, television pictures showed.

Why has the Queen never visited Greece?

BBC ONLINE

Queen Elizabeth II is probably the most well-travelled monarch ever. She has been to 116 countries on official state visits as Queen, but not Greece. Why? The Queen has travelled from the tiny island nation of Tuvalu in the Pacific, to Russia, China, Chile, Ghana, Australia and almost everywhere in between.

So it may seem surprising that she has never made the relatively short hop over to the birthplace of her husband, Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh.

Prince Philip is a "Greek prince," says royal historian Hugo Vickers, so it is an "interesting" omission.

The reason, he believes, is because of the fraught history of the monarchy in Greece, which affected Prince Philip's immediate family.

"Prince Philip doesn't like Greece, because they put his father [Prince Andrew] on trial, and he might have been executed," says Vickers.

"In 1922, they all had to flee." Prince Philip was a baby at the time and rarely returned.



It is not completely true that the Queen has never been to Greece - she did go there at the invitation of King Paul, Prince Philip's cousin, in 1950, but that was before she became Queen.

He lives in London, still considers himself king, and has a close personal relationship with the Queen, according to Michael Binyon, foreign affairs specialist at The Times newspaper.

All of this has "made things difficult" says Vickers. But he also suspects the Queen may have never been invited by the Greek president to make a state visit.

Prince Philip did go to Athens to visit his mother before she moved to London in the 1960s - but he would travel on his own, says Vickers.

Israel is another notable omission from the Queen's list of state visits.

Security is a major factor in this case, but, says Binyon, the biggest problem is diplomatic sensitivity over visiting Jerusalem. Israel regards Jerusalem as the capital, but it is not recognised as such by Western nations, who base their embassies in Tel Aviv instead.

Four fasting students

FROM PAGE 20

demanding resignation of the VC of the university. They were rushed to Enam Medical College Hospital in Savar.

Three more students had joined them yesterday to give momentum to their movement, while two teachers taking part in the same programme called off fasting yesterday morning.

Even though the teachers, under the banner of "Shikkhak Samaj", called off their agitation Thursday evening after meeting the prime minister, students said they would continue with their agitation until VC Shariff Enamul Kabir resigned.

Students, under the banner of Jahangirnagar Sangskritik Jote and Shontrasher Biruddhe Jahangirnagar, have been

agitating since Tuesday demanding removal of the VC and protesting assault on cultural activists by pro-ruling party Chhatra League on April 28.

Meanwhile, expressing solidarity with the agitators, a number of former students of the university brought out a procession on campus to press home their four-point demand, including the VC's resignation.

Their other demands are punishment of the Chhatra League activists involved in the beating up of cultural activists, judicial enquiry into the killing of JU student Zubair Ahmed and holding of elections of students' union (Jucsu).

Zubair, a fourth-year student of English department succumbed to his injuries on January 9 after he was attacked by the Chhatra

League activists. RESIGNATION RUMOUR A rumour spread around campus yesterday that the VC resigned after meeting Chancellor of the university President Zillur Rahman.

VC Shariff Enamul Kabir neither met the president nor did he resign.

However, the VC had called on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Thursday hours after a delegation of the agitating teachers met her at the Prime Minister's Office.

Hasina assured both pro and anti-VC factions of teachers of making a decision after consulting with the chancellor of the university.

FRENCH ELECTION

Sarkozy narrows gap, but not enough to win

BBC ONLINE

Socialist Francois Hollande was on track to defeat right-wing incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy as France saw the final day of campaigning yesterday before its presidential election run-off.

Opinion polls suggest the incumbent president has cut Hollande's lead slightly but is still trailing his Socialist challenger by some 6%.

Analysts say he needs a major reversal in fortunes to win tomorrow.

He suffered a blow when centrist Francois Bayrou, who took 9.1% in the first round, backed Mr Hollande.

The president has been courting the votes



of the supporters of far-right National Front (FN) leader Marine Le Pen.

She has already said she will be leaving her ballot blank rather than vote for Sarkozy or his rival.

Le Pen, who attracted 6.4 million votes in the first round, said on Thursday that the election was over as Mr Sarkozy was "beaten a long time ago".

The two rival candidates engaged in a heated televised debate on Wednesday night, watched by an estimated 17.9 million people.

On Thursday, they held their final mass rallies in friendly territory: Sarkozy in the southern port of Toulon and Hollande in the south-western city of Toulouse.

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