

Deadly blasts rock Syrian cities

Amnesty accuses regime of executing citizens

AFP, Damascus

Blasts rocked Syria's capital and second city yesterday, killing several people, a watchdog said, accusing the government of carrying out the attacks to prevent funerals for anti-regime protesters.

The violence came just two days before a scheduled parliamentary election in Syria, where the regime of President Bashar al-Assad has been trying to crush an uprising since March last year.

One explosion went off in a car wash just as a bus was passing by in a suburb of Aleppo, the country's commercial hub and second-largest city in the north, said Rami Abdel Rahman of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

At least five people were killed in the blast, he told AFP in Beirut.

Two blasts also hit Damascus, Abdel Rahman said on the telephone from Britain. "One explosion occurred inside the city, and the other hit the periphery" where three soldiers were wounded, he added.

Television footage showed a mangled car

destroyed by one of the explosions that tore through a street of the capital.

Abdel Rahman accused the regime of carrying out the attacks to stop funerals a day after the security forces killed 30 anti-regime protesters, including nine in the Damascus districts of Kfar Sousa and Tadamon.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International accused Syrian forces of executing scores of suspected opposition sympathisers in the northern city of Idlib, often burning their bodies in piles or torching them in their homes then sending family members to find them.

Idlib residents who spoke to an Amnesty International official last month painted a dire portrait of a city at the mercy of regime troops and irregular loyalists who routinely sweep homes seeking dissenters to kill.

The Amnesty report, prepared by senior crisis adviser Donatella Rovera, gathered harrowing testimonies of victims and their families, caught up in a purge of Idlib and surrounding villages that has steadily intensified over the past six months.



PHOTO: AFP

Syrian anti-regime protesters and rebels hold the remains of fired ammunition as they greet UN observers in the village of Azzara in the province of Homs on Friday.

France goes to polls today

Hollande favourite as Sarkozy vows surprise

AFP, Paris

France held its breath yesterday on the eve of a presidential election that Socialist Francois Hollande was predicted to win despite incumbent Nicolas Sarkozy closing the gap after wooing the far-right.

Political speeches and new opinion polls have been banned since a particularly ferocious campaign ended on Friday night, but the last poll published ahead of the deadline forecast a 52-48 percent win for Hollande.

The Ifop-Fiducial poll said Sarkozy has clawed back six percentage points of voter intentions since the end of last week as he went all-out to enchant those who voted for far-right candidate Marine Le Pen in the first round.

With the Socialist's lead the narrowest since campaigning began, Sarkozy has vowed a surprise, while Hollande has stressed that nothing can be assumed about a first Socialist presi-



Nicolas Sarkozy

Francois Hollande

dential victory in over a quarter century.

French overseas territories were voting yesterday, before the mass of some 46 million voters goes to the polls on Sunday.

Hollande yesterday was spending with his partner Valerie Trierwiler in his political heartland Tulle in central France, while Sarkozy was with his wife, former supermodel Carla Bruni, and their baby daughter Giulia.

Hollande won the April 22 first round with 28.63 percent of the votes to

Sarkozy's 27.18 percent, and both candidates have been fighting for the votes of those whose candidates failed to make the run-off.

Le Pen, who won almost 18 percent in the first round, has said she will cast a blank ballot, and observers expect many of her supporters to do the same.

Ifop has forecast however that 55 percent of her voters would back Sarkozy and 19 percent Hollande.

Meanwhile, 84 percent of those who voted for the Communist-backed Left Front candidate Jean-Luc Melenchon in the first round -- 11 percent of votes -- said they would vote for Hollande.

Fears over low economic growth, rising joblessness and European Union-imposed austerity measures have worked in favour of the Socialists.

Many voters also disapprove of Sarkozy's flashy style during his five-year term, welcoming Hollande's vows to be a "normal president."

Tymoshenko to be treated in Ukraine

BBC ONLINE

Ukraine's jailed opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko yesterday agreed to be treated locally for a back problem, according to a visiting German doctor.

She had hoped to go abroad, but Ukraine's chief prosecutor has said prison inmates are not allowed to travel for medical treatment.

Tymoshenko is serving a seven-year sentence for abuse of office.

Several EU leaders have threatened to boycott Euro 2012 football games in Ukraine over how she is being treated.

Both the German and Russian governments had offered to treat her in their hospitals, but Ukraine has refused to let her leave the country.

US PRESIDENTIAL POLLS, 2012 Obama officially opens campaign

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama holds his first official reelection rallies at an unfortunate moment, as signs of the strong economic rebound he hopes to ride to a second term seem to be dimming.

Introduced by popular First Lady Michelle Obama, the president will seek to fire up the vast army of supporters that swept him into the White House four years ago, with "Ready to Go" rallies in swing states Ohio and Virginia.

The president is an older, wiser and perhaps less exciting candidate than the exhilarating prophet of hope and change who rocketed to prominence when he launched his first presidential campaign on a chilly winter day in 2007.

Now, Obama faces a complicated reelection fight in a polarised nation haunted by high unemployment, and sluggish growth has robbed him of the argument that he has restored nationwide prosperity.

But Obama plans to make the case that he averted a second Great Depression and that his rich Republican foe Mitt Romney wants to return to the policies of tax cuts for the wealthy and low regulation that unleashed the crisis.

He will also sketch a vision of an economy that benefits all Americans, not just the rich, and laud his foreign and security policies, including the killing of Osama bin Laden, which he says have kept Americans safe.

Republicans have scoffed at Obama's "official" launch, accusing him of conducting months of campaigning under the guise of official events linked to his presidential duties.

An average of national opinion polls by the RealClearPolitics website shows Obama with a narrow three-point lead over Romney -- 47 to 44 percent -- six months before election day on November 6.

The president's approval rating generally sits in the high 40s, just below the 50 percent figure that presidents need to feel confident about reelection.

The president is seen as more likable than Romney in most polls, and enjoys edges on national security, and among crucial demographic groups like women and Hispanic voters that could decide the election.



Barack Obama

Mexico drug war kills 23 in a day

BBC ONLINE

At least 23 people were killed on Friday in gruesome circumstances in the Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo, on the US border.

Nine bodies with signs of torture were found hanging from a bridge.

Hours later, 14 decapitated bodies were discovered in a vehicle, police said. Their heads were found in ice boxes dumped outside the mayor's office.

Nuevo Laredo is the scene of a feud between two of Mexico's biggest drug gangs, who are fighting for control of smuggling routes into the US.

A message left with the hanged bodies said they were members of the Gulf drugs cartel who had been killed by the rival Zetas gang.

Police said they believed the dead were members of a criminal gang, but could not confirm who was responsible.



A Belarus WWII veteran and a woman hold flowers during a memorial event devoted to Victory Day celebrations in Minsk yesterday. Belarus, Russia and some former Soviet Union countries will celebrate the 67th anniversary of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in WWII on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Europe braces for crunch Greek polls

AFP, Athens

Not only Greece but yesterday Europe also braced for an election that polls indicate will decimate the two main parties and fail to produce a clear winner, sparking market fears about fresh eurozone turmoil.

In comments widely quoted by Greek newspapers on the eve of today's vote, German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schauble said that if Greece's new government deviated from its commitments the country would have to "bear the consequences."

"Membership of the European Union is voluntary," the minister from the eurozone's chief contributor to Greece's 240 billion euros (\$314.0 billion) in bailouts and the main proponent of European belt-tightening was quoted as saying.

Greece has written off a third of its debts, is in its fifth year running of recession, one in five workers is unemployed, its banks are in a precarious position and pensions and salaries have been slashed by up to 40 percent.

With Portugal and Ireland also getting aid and Italy and Spain on shaky ground as well, last year there were worries of some sort of break-up of the eurozone. These fears have subsided in recent months but have not completely disappeared.

For markets, it is Greece's vote rather than France's presidential decider, also today, that "weighs heavier" in investors' minds, said Valerie Plagnol, director of research at the Credit Suisse bank.

Hitler had 'messiah complex'

AFP, London

Adolf Hitler had a "messiah complex" and became increasingly obsessed with the perceived Jewish "enemy within" as World War II turned against Germany, according to a secret 1942 assessment unveiled yesterday.

The British intelligence report, which lay apparently unread from the war until its recent rediscovery, found that the Nazi dictator turned to "Jew-phobia" as the likelihood of defeat increased.

The wartime analysis, now made public by the University of Cambridge, was commissioned by social scientist Mark Abrams and written by his colleague Joseph MacCurdy, a Cambridge academic.

Abrams thought that transcripts of Hitler's broadcasts could be close-read for propaganda and intelligence purposes, revealing hidden "latent content" and subconscious insights into the enemy's state of mind.

The newly re-aired analysis covered a radio speech Hitler gave on April 26, 1942.

"Its content would presumably reflect his morbid mental tendencies on the one hand and special knowledge available to him on

the other," the opening lines said.

An earlier report found three such tendencies, termed "shamanism", "epilepsy" and "paranoia".

"Shamanism" referred to Hitler's hysteria and compulsion to feed off whipped-up crowds, which was in decline. MacCurdy's report pointed to the "dull flatness" of delivery in Hitler's broadcast.

The other two were developing characteristics.

"Epilepsy" covered his cold and ruthless streak, combined with a tendency to lose heart when ambitions failed. MacCurdy's analysis found Hitler's speech showed him to be "a man who is seriously contemplating the possibility of utter defeat".

"Paranoia" was the third and most worrying tendency, exposed through the dictator's "Messiah complex", in which Hitler thought he was leading a chosen people on a crusade against evil incarnate in the Jews, the paper said.

It notes an extension of the "Jew phobia" and says that Hitler now saw Jews not just as a threat to Germany, but as a "universal diabolical agency".

US should return land to Indian tribes: UN

AFP, Washington

A United Nations investigator probing discrimination against Native Americans has called on the US government to return some of the land stolen from Indian tribes as a step toward combatting continuing and systemic racial discrimination.

James Anaya, the UN special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, said no member of the US Congress would meet him as he investigated the part played by the government in the considerable difficulties faced by Indian tribes.

Anaya said that in nearly two weeks of visiting Indian reservations, indigenous communities in Alaska and Hawaii, and Native Americans now living in cities, he encountered people who suffered a history of dispossession of their lands and resources, the breakdown of their societies and "numerous instances of outright brutality, all grounded on racial discrimination".

"It's a racial discrimination that they feel is both systemic and also specific instances of ongoing discrimination that is felt at the individual level," he said.

Close to a million people live on the US's 310 Native American reservations. Some tribes have done well from a boom in casinos on reservations but most have not.



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