

Syria govt trying to kill Annan plan

Says opposition chief; World powers condemn attacks

AFP, Tokyo

Syria's government wants to destroy the UN-brokered peace plan aimed at ending 14 months of civil conflict, opposition leader Burhan Ghalioun told reporters in Tokyo yesterday.

"The regime is now trying to kill this (Kofi) Annan plan, and by a new technique which is terrorism," Ghalioun said, a day after suicide bombers killed at least 55 people in horrific attacks in the capital Damascus.

Condemnation came from around the world after the deadliest blasts since the uprising began, with President Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime and the opposition trading accusations of responsibility for the carnage.

Ghalioun was adamant yesterday that Assad's government was behind the attacks, which also wounded nearly 400 people, and accused the authorities of colluding with outside bodies.

"The regime has operated very closely with al-Qaeda," he told reporters, adding that the bombings marked a change in tactics.

"We have to notice the timing of these bombings, the bombings started almost as soon as the regime removed heavy forces from the cities, we think there is a connection," he said.

The blasts during the morning rush hour further clouded a UN-backed ceasefire brokered by special envoy Annan that has failed to take hold since it went into effect on April 12.

Russia and China, which have stymied Western efforts to heap stronger condemnation on Assad's government, joined a UN Security Council denunciation of the attacks.



An image grab taken from a video uploaded on YouTube allegedly shows an anti-government demonstration in the Syrian town of Kafrruma in the restive Idlib region near the border with Turkey yesterday.

The 15 Security Council members "condemned in the strongest terms the terrorist attacks" in the Syrian capital, according to a statement.

The council called on all sides to "immediately and comprehensively" implement the six-point

peace plan of UN-Arab League envoy Annan, "in particular to cease all armed violence".

The explosions took place on a main freeway in the south of Damascus, in front of a nine-storey security complex whose facade was heavily damaged while nearby residential buildings collapsed.

"Is that the freedom you want? Students from schools and employees going to work are dead," shouted one man in the middle of the destruction.

Syria's interior ministry said the suicide attackers used a tonne of explosives, killing at least 55 people and wounding 372.

It added that emergency workers filled 15 bags with body parts, and that the blasts also destroyed around 200 cars.

Washington called the Damascus attacks "reprehensible" while Annan described them as "abhorrent". Russia and China separately called for a halt to the violence and urged all parties in Syria to cooperate with Annan's peace plan.

Ghalioun, the president of the Syrian National Council, said the Annan plan was toothless and too easy to ignore.

"If the regime fails to implement the plan, it will not get punished, and that is our concern."

"Assad feels that he can run away from the plan without any consequences."

"The Annan plan is in crisis today," said Ghalioun. "If the Syrian regime continues challenging it, if it continues using terrorism and bombing, it will be killed."

West behind deadly Syria bombings

Says Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday condemned the latest deadly bomb blasts to reel its ally Syria in a 14-month-old uprising and accused Western powers of orchestrating them.

"The terrorist acts were guided by (global) arrogance and the enemies of free nations," First Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi said, quoted by state news agency IRNA, using the Islamic republic's term for Western powers.

The twin blasts in Damascus on Thursday that killed at least 55 people "were carried out to halt (President) Bashar al-Assad's democratic reform process in Syria," Rahimi said.

The Syrian government and opposition traded blame for the bombings, which also left nearly 400 people wounded and clouded a tenuous UN-backed ceasefire that has failed to take hold since it went into effect on April 12.

The UN Security Council condemned the attacks, urging all sides to stick to the peace plan.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman also condemned the bombings and said it was in reaction to the parliamentary elections held by the Assad regime on Monday and dismissed by opposition groups as a sham.

"Resorting to such violent acts and targeting Syrian civilians reveals the strategy of those groups who stand against the will of the majority ... who voted in parliamentary elections," spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said.

Syria is the main Middle East ally of the Islamic republic, which has pledged its support to beleaguered Assad in the face of a deadly revolt against his regime since mid-March 2011.

US ELECTION 2012

Obama's support for gay marriage splits America

BBC ONLINE

Barack Obama has been both praised and criticised a day after he became the first sitting US president to publicly support gay marriage.

Social conservatives and religious leaders condemned his remarks.

Meanwhile, the Obama campaign attacked Republican Mitt Romney, who restated his opposition to same-sex marriage, as out of touch on the issue.

Obama travelled to the West Coast on Thursday for fundraisers in Seattle and Los Angeles likely to raise millions.

One fundraiser, to be held at the home of George Clooney, is expected on its own to raise \$15m (£9.3m), partially from a general raffle offering members of the public the chance to meet the Hollywood actor.

In the wake of his interview with ABC News, gay advocates applauded Obama's



remarks.

Human Rights Campaign President Joe Solmonese said that the president's comments would "inspire thousands more conversations around kitchen tables and in church pews".

But Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, labelled

Obama's remarks "deeply saddening".

"We cannot be silent in the face of words or actions that would undermine the institution of marriage, the very cornerstone of our society," he said in a statement. "The people of this country, especially our children, deserve better."

On Thursday morning, the Obama campaign sought to capitalise on the president's political gamble by releasing an internet video titled Mitt Romney: Backwards on Equality.

Underwear bomb spy 'was British'

Says US media

BBC ONLINE

The man who foiled a Yemen-based al-Qaeda "underwear bomb" plot was a British man of Middle Eastern origin, US media said yesterday.

UK officials declined to comment on the reports, but earlier this week the US said foreign agencies were involved in the operation.

The agent was sent by al-Qaeda to attack a US-bound plane, but left Yemen and gave the device to US intelligence.

Western passport-holders have long been seen as prime targets for militant groups seeking to plan attacks.

NBC News in the US also says UK intelligence agencies were "heavily involved" in his recruitment.

Cameron signs texts with 'love' to Brooks

AFP, London

British Prime Minister David Cameron signed texts to ex-Rupert Murdoch aide Rebekah Brooks "lots of love" and privately discussed the News of the World scandal with her, she told an inquiry yesterday.

In her long-awaited testimony at the Leveson Inquiry into the ethics of the press and its ties to politicians, she said Cameron also sent an "indirect" message of commiseration after she resigned from Murdoch's media empire.

Brooks, 43, was arrested in July over allegations of phone-hacking and bribing public officials. She and her racehorse trainer husband Charlie Brooks were rearrested in March on suspicion of perverting the course of justice.

Asked by counsel to the inquiry Robert Jay how Cameron signed his mobile phone text messages to her, Brooks replied, "He would sign them off DC in the main."



David Cameron



Rebekah Brooks

"Occasionally he would sign them off 'LOL', lots of love, until I told him it meant 'laugh out loud'."

Brooks was editor of the now-defunct News of the World from 2000 to 2003 and quit as chief executive of Murdoch's British newspaper wing News International in July 2011 after the hacking scandal erupted.

She said Conservative leader Cameron also asked her about phone hacking during a conversation in 2010, after a series of celebrities sued the News of the World over the interception of their mobile phone voicemails.

"Did we ever speak about it in those

two years (2010 and 2011)? Yes we did, but I do remember in 2010 having a more detailed conversation ... because that was when the civil cases were coming in and it became more newsworthy," she said.

"I think he asked me what the update was, I think it had been on the news that day, so I explained the story behind the news. No secret information, no privileged information, just a general update."

At one point Brooks said she was "very concerned" to avoid questions that could prejudice any criminal proceedings.

Brooks said Cameron had been friends for years with the family of her husband, with whom Cameron studied at the elite boarding school Eton.

Asked about a report in The Times that Cameron had sent a text message saying "keep your head up" after her resignation on July 15 last year, Brooks said the message was "along those lines".

NEWS IN brief

UN calls for Muslim refugee funds

AFP, Ashgabat

Syria, Sudan, and Mali are the biggest refugee hotspots, the UN refugee commissioner said yesterday at a conference in Turkmenistan, calling on governments to help alleviate a humanitarian crisis.

The conference on refugees in the Muslim world opened yesterday in the capital of Central Asia's most isolated country, organised by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

In 2011, the 57 members of the OIC took in 17.6 million people, including refugees and asylum seekers, said UNHCR's high commissioner Antonio Guterres in his opening remarks.

"The three most acute crises are Syria, Sudan, and Mali," he later told AFP on the sidelines of the conference, stressing the importance of finding the money to assist refugees amid an economic slowdown.

Afghan soldier kills US colleague

AFP, Kabul

An Afghan soldier opened fire on Nato troops in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, killing an American and leaving two others wounded, officials said.

The death brings to 20 the number of Nato soldiers killed by Afghan colleagues in at least 15 separate attacks so far this year.

The shootings have forced US-led troops to step up security and fanned tensions between Western soldiers and the Afghan security forces they are supposed to be training to take responsibility for the country by 2014.

"An Afghan army soldier turned his weapon against US soldiers inside an Afghan-US military base in Kunar province, killing one US soldier and injuring two others," said provincial police chief Ewaz Mohammad Naziri.

RAW faces music

THE HINDU ONLINE

The Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), India's external intelligence service, is facing allegations of incompetence after three Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives who, it claimed, were about to conduct a suicide-squad operation in western India turned out to be living at their homes in Lahore and to be businessmen, not terrorists.

The Mumbai police issued warnings earlier this week after receiving information on what they said was an imminent plot to target two of India's largest oil refineries: Reliance Industries' plant at Jamnagar in Gujarat and Mittal Energy's unit at Bhatinda, Punjab.

Palestinians escalate hunger strike in jails

REUTERS, Gaza

Hundreds of Palestinians on hunger strike in Israeli jails said yesterday they would shun vitamin supplements and prison clinics in an escalation of their mass protest against detention conditions.

"We swear we will not retreat. We are potential martyrs. Either we live in dignity or die," prisoner organizers said in a letter announcing the move and which was read out by Ismail Haniyeh, head of the Islamist Hamas government in the Gaza Strip, during a demonstration.

An estimated 1,600 inmates out of 4,800 launched the hunger strike on April 17 to demand improved conditions in Israeli custody, such as an end to solitary confinement and more family visits. They have also challenged Israel's policy of indefinite detention without charge of suspected Palestinian militants.

The fate of the hunger strikers has touched a raw nerve among Palestinians, with daily support rallies in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, and political leaders warning that Israel could face new violence should any prisoner die.

Dozens of Palestinians, including militants and politicians who had served terms in Israeli jails in the past, have gone on hunger strikes in tents put up in solidarity in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which witnessed daily heavy attendance by residents and visitors from Arab and foreign countries.



People demonstrated yesterday in Skopje to protest against the arrest of six people over their involvement in last month's murder of five Macedonians, as Police continued a probe into a 20-member group of radical Muslims.

12 bodies found after Russia jet crash

AFP, Cijeruk

Indonesian rescuers yesterday found the bodies of 12 of the people killed when their Russian jet crashed into the face of a mountain during a sales flight.

Questions mounted over how the twin-engine Sukhoi Superjet 100, a new passenger plane with a veteran pilot at the controls, crashed into Mount Salak, a dormant volcano well-known to pilots as a peril.

"Today we reached the crash site... and we found 12 victims and they were all dead. We will continue the evacuation process," said Daryatmo, head of the national search and rescue agency, who goes by one name.

Man hurls shoe at Breivik during trial

AFP, Oslo

A family member of one of Anders Behring Breivik's 69 victims in his shooting massacre on Norway's Utoeya island last July threw a shoe at him in court yesterday, screaming "you killer, go to Hell!"

The shoe hit Breivik's lawyer and the incident, followed by applause, "bravos" and tears among onlookers in the courtroom, led to a temporary suspension of proceedings on the 17th day of the trial.

The attacker, a man of Iraqi origin whose brother was one of the 69 people Breivik killed on July 22, was quickly brought under control by security guards and escorted out of the courtroom as he continued to shout in English: "Go to Hell!"

The shoe attack was the first serious incident since the beginning of the 33-year-old



right-wing extremist's trial on April 16.

Breivik has been charged with committing terrorist acts when he on July 22 first bombed a government building in Oslo, killing eight people, before going on his shooting rampage on Utoeya, where the ruling Labour Party's youth wing was hosting a summer camp.

He has confessed to the acts he has refused to plead guilty, insisting his massacres were "cruel but necessary" to stop the Labour Party's "multicultural experiment" and the "Muslim invasion" of Norway and Europe.

The black shoe did not hit Breivik but did hit one of his lawyers, Vibeke Hein Baera, who sits between the accused and the onlookers.

"Luckily, it was just a shoe," Hein Baera told AFP after the incident.

Approve AIDS prevention medicine

Urge US experts

AFP, Washington

US health advisers on Thursday urged regulators to approve Truvada, made by Gilead Sciences, as the first preventive pill against HIV/AIDS instead of just a treatment for infected people.

The favorable vote came after clinical trials showed Truvada could lower the risk of HIV in gay men by 44 to 73 percent, and was hailed by some AIDS advocates as a potent new tool against human immunodeficiency virus.

However, many concerns were raised during a marathon 11-hour panel meeting in which about three dozens health care providers warned that the pill could boost risky behaviors and possibly lead to a drug-resistant strain of HIV.

France's 'Mr Normal', declares modest assets

REUTERS, Paris

Francois Hollande, the Socialist "Mr Normal" who will be sworn in as French president next week, says he is worth almost 1.2 million euros (\$1.5 million), considerably less than his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy.

Hollande, who campaigned on a promise to ditch the showbiz style that won Sarkozy the nickname of "President Bling Bling", says in a declaration published yesterday that his principal asset is a house on France's southern Riviera coast.

The declaration shows that Hollande, who rents his apartment in Paris but could now move into the presidential Elysee Palace, has declared assets of 1.17 million euros, primarily the house of 130 square meters in the chic Riviera village of Mougins.

Other assets declared are bank accounts worth 8,200 euros, a life insurance contract worth 3,550 euros and 15,000 euros of furniture, said the declaration.

The man who used to travel to work by scooter, and described himself as "Mr Normal" during campaigning, does not own a car, the declaration says.

Sarkozy, who hands the reins over to Hollande on May 15 and may go back to work as a lawyer, said in an official declaration in March he was worth about 2.7 million euros, up from 2.1 million when he took power in 2007.



Francois Hollande