

Russia pushing Syria into civil war

Says Hillary; Russia adamant, says will continue to support regime

AFP, Copenhagen

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton yesterday criticised Russia's resistance to UN action on Syria, warning that its policy of propping up the Assad regime could contribute to a civil war.

The Russians "are telling me they don't want to see a civil war. I have been telling them their policy is going to help contribute to a civil war," she told a mainly student audience on a visit to Copenhagen.

She warned that unless unchecked, the deadly violence in Syria could lead to civil war or even develop into a proxy war because of Iran's support for the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon also warned yesterday that Syria risks a "catastrophic civil war".

"The massacres of the sort seen last weekend could plunge Syria into a catastrophic civil war, a civil war from which the country would never recover."

Meanwhile, Syrian rebels have warned they will resume their defence of civilians if the government does not return to the peace plan by today.

Hillary said she had spoken on Wednesday with the international envoy on Syria, Kofi Annan,



Hillary Clinton

who is trying to expand his mandate to be able to deal more effectively with Damascus.

"We have to bring the Russians on board because the dangers we face are terrible," said Hillary, who is in Denmark on the first leg of a Scandinavian tour.

She said the absence of UN support for action in Syria, due mainly to Russia's opposition, "makes it harder" to respond to the crisis, as the international community did last year in Libya.

"Remember you have Iran deeply embedded in Syria -- their military are coaching the Syrian military. The Quds Force, which is a branch of the military, is helping them set up these sectarian militias.

"We know it actually could get much worse than it is," she said.

A massacre last week of more than 100 people



Vladimir Putin

in the city of Houla, allegedly by government-backed forces, and the discovery of new execution-style killing since then has raised the pressure for international action.

But Russia has adamantly refused to go against its close ally Syria with President Vladimir Putin warning that Moscow will not change its position under pressure.

"Russia's position is well-known. It is balanced and consistent and completely logical," Interfax quoted Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying.

Expanding on her earlier remarks about Russia, she said the United States was still focused on supporting Annan's efforts rather than going outside the United Nations.

Many of her conversations over the next few days would be held "with particular attention paid to the Russians," she said.

"They are vociferous in their claiming that they are providing a stabilising influence. I reject that. I think frankly they are in effect propping up the regime."

And battles raged in Syria as regime troops and rebel forces clashed across the country yesterday, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, adding that at least 14 people were killed, including a young boy.

Enrichment 'not step towards bomb'

Says Ahmadinejad; US sees window closing on Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran's president has insisted enriching uranium to 20 percent "is our right" and not a step towards a bomb, as a US envoy warned the window for dialogue over Tehran's nuclear programme was closing.

The enrichment activity, which world powers are trying to curb in fraught talks with Iran, "is one of our rights in terms of international law", President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Wednesday in an interview with the satellite television network France 24.

"There have been lies about our programme... Enriching uranium to 20 percent is not a step towards a bomb," he insisted, speaking Farsi through translators.

Ahmadinejad hinted however that Iran could be open to stopping 20 percent enrichment -- if world powers offers significant concessions.

"If others do not wish for us to fully benefit from this right, they need to explain to us why. And also they have to say what they are willing to give to the Iranian people in exchange."



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

largely fruitless talks with Iran, the US ambassador said Washington would not continue such dialogue forever.

"We don't intend on continuing talks for talks' sake. The window is closing," he told participants attending an international security conference at the university.

Neither the US nor Israel has ruled out the option of a military strike, but the administration of President Barack Obama has made clear it favours diplomacy over force at this stage.

The UN Security Council has issued six resolutions demanding Iran suspend all uranium enrichment. It has also imposed four sets of sanctions on Iran.

Spate of blasts kill 16 in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A spate of bombings in Baghdad yesterday killed at least 16 people and wounded dozens more, shattering a relative calm with the capital's deadliest violence in weeks.

Roadside bombs and explosives-packed cars detonated across a half-dozen neighbourhoods in the north, south and west of Baghdad, underlining persistent security concerns.

Overall, 16 people were killed and at least 56 wounded in the attacks, an interior ministry official and two medical sources said.

Yesterday's deadliest attack struck in the north Baghdad neighbourhood of Shuala, where a car bomb killed at least 13 people and wounded 32, medical officials said.

A total of 126 Iraqis were killed in violence in April, according to official figures.



PHOTO: AFP

Young schoolchildren wear anti-smoking masks during a 'No Tobacco' rally in Kolkata yesterday. World No Tobacco Day is observed around the world every year on May 31 and is one of the important World Health Awareness days organised by the World Health Organisation.

Are Americans ready for a Mormon president?

AFP, Washington

Mitt Romney's faith emerged as little more than a subordinate issue on the US campaign trail, but with the Republican nomination securely in his grip, are American voters now ready for a Mormon president?

The candidate made history late Tuesday as the first from his religion to win the nomination of a major political party, and the achievement helps show how far the acceptance of Mormonism has come since its founding in the United States nearly two centuries ago.

A President Romney could be a golden opportunity for a church aiming to broaden its base across the United States and internationally, but it is also fraught with risk.

Romney, who outlasted several rivals in a bruising primary battle, has become the unlikely flagbearer of a Republican movement heavily influenced by evangelical Christians, some of whom have called Mormonism a "cult."

But despite persistent skepticism about the faith -- a Bloomberg News poll from March shows more than one in three Americans hold an unfavorable view of the Mormon church -- associate professor Brandon Rottinghaus of the University of Houston said Wednesday he thinks Americans are ready for a Mormon president.

Mormons self-identify as Christian, though some of their beliefs differ from mainstream Christianity. Mormons believe in the Bible, as well as other books of scripture, such as the Book of Mormon. They have a unique view of cosmology, and believe that all people are spirit-children of God. Central to Mormon faith is the belief that God speaks to his children and answers their prayers.

Romney is not the first Mormon to seek the White House. Founder Joseph Smith ran in 1844, in part to press for greater civil liberties for members of his nascent church.

And Jon Huntsman, a former Utah governor, was a candidate this year, but his campaign failed to gain traction and he dropped out in January.

With the general election now in full swing, Obama and Romney are hammering each other over economic policy. But character and personal background form a piece of the puzzle, and Romney's faith will likely come under some scrutiny.

For many Mormons, like Aaron Sherinian, a public relations professional in Washington, Romney's nomination marks "a chance to talk about who we are, what we believe."



SC judge shot dead in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Gunmen on a motorbike shot and killed a Nepalese Supreme Court judge yesterday in the capital Kathmandu, sparking fears of lawlessness amid a political vacuum in the Himalayan country.

Judge Rana Bahadur Bam, who was under investigation for corruption, was being driven from a temple early in the day when the gunmen pounced, shooting him six times and injuring two others in the car, doctors and police said.

The shooting punctured an uneasy peace in the capital, days after Nepal's Constituent Assembly, which had been considering the case for Bam's impeachment, disbanded having failed to agree on a new constitution.

The killing came as thousands of police patrolled the streets while feuding political factions vie for power in the troubled Himalayan nation.

NEWS IN brief

India gets new army chief

AGENCIES

Gen Bikram Singh, an infantry officer, yesterday took over as the 25th Chief of the Indian Army succeeding Gen V K Singh whose 26-month tenure was mired by controversies.

59-year-old Gen Bikram Singh will have a tenure of two years and three months in the top post. Prior to his appointment as Army Chief, Gen Bikram was commanding the Kolkata-based Eastern Army Command.

His predecessor General Vijay Kumar Singh took the government to the Supreme Court in an unprecedented dispute over his retirement due to confusion over his date of birth.

Vijay Kumar, known as an anti-graft campaigner, embarrassed the government in March by alleging that he was offered a \$2.8 million bribe in 2010 to fix a supply contract, a complaint, which was not followed up by the authorities.

Somalia aid meet opens in Istanbul

AFP, Istanbul

Representatives from 54 countries gathered in Istanbul yesterday to find a path towards a better future for Somalia, ravaged by civil war and the lack of a stable government for the last two decades.

The two-day conference -- which follows a London meeting in February -- kicked off with discussions among senior officials, experts and businessmen on four key issues: water, energy, roads and sustainability.

On Friday, the conference will turn its attention to the political dimension of aid to Somalia, with the participation of UN chief Ban Ki-moon, Somali President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, as well as British Foreign Secretary William Hague.

5 killed as train derails in India

AFP, Lucknow

A passenger train travelling from eastern India to the Himalayan foothills derailed yesterday, killing at least five people as several carriages were thrown off the tracks, police said.

Emergency services rushed to the scene to rescue trapped passengers after the Doon Express crashed in the district of Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh state, 210 kilometres east of the state capital Lucknow.

The Doon Express connects the eastern coastal city of Kolkata with the town of Dehradun in

China detains hundreds of Tibet protesters

AFP, Beijing

Hundreds of people have been detained in Lhasa after two men set themselves on fire in the Tibetan regional capital, a US-based broadcaster said, as a young mother became the latest Tibetan to self-immolate.

Radio Free Asia said Chinese security forces had rounded up six hundred residents and pilgrims in the wake of Sunday's incident, the first major protest in the heavily guarded city since deadly anti-government riots in 2008.

More than 30 people have set themselves on fire in Tibetan-inhabited areas of China since the start of March 2011 in protest at what they say is religious and cultural repression by the Chinese authorities.

World ammunition trade tops \$4b a yr

AFP, New York

The world trade in ammunition now tops \$4 billion a year and is growing at a faster rate than the global trade in firearms, the Oxfam aid agency said Wednesday.

Oxfam's report, released ahead of new talks on an arms trade treaty in New York, estimates that about 12 billion bullets are made each year. It is a figure "enough to kill nearly every man, woman and child on the planet twice."

The trade in ammunition for small arms is worth \$4.3 billion, while the trade in firearms and light weapons is worth \$2.68 billion, according to the report, "Stop a Bullet, Stop a War."

Oxfam released the report to call for greater regulation of the trade, including in the arms trade treaty which is being negotiated. The next round of talks is scheduled for July.

The agency says only a minority of countries report on ammunition exports and there is hardly any monitoring by intergovernmental agencies.

Oxfam researchers found some of the biggest information gaps covers undocumented ammunition transfers to war-torn countries, such as Somalia and Afghanistan. The report says many bullets are diverted to the armed groups who prolong conflicts.

Of only 34 states that have publicly reported on arms exports since 2006, 28 mentioned their ammunition exports, including Britain, France and the United States.

N Korea constitution proclaims nuke status

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's new constitution proclaims its status as a nuclear-armed nation, complicating international efforts to persuade Pyongyang to abandon atomic weapons, analysts said yesterday.

An official website seen late Wednesday released the text of the constitution following its revision during a parliamentary session on April 13.

"National Defence Commission chairman Kim Jong-Il turned our fatherland into an invincible state of political ideology, a nuclear-armed state and an indomitable military power, paving the ground for the construction of a strong and prosperous nation," says part of the preamble.

The previous constitution, last revised on April 9, 2010, did not carry the term "nuclear-armed state".

Following Kim Jong-Il's death last December, the country revised the charter to consecrate achievements of the late leader, who was succeeded by his son Kim Jong-Un.

The North has been developing nuclear weapons for decades. Its official position has been that it needs them for self-defence against a US nuclear threat, but that it is willing in principle to scrap the atomic weaponry.

Under a September 2005 deal reached during six-nation negotiations, Pyongyang agreed to dismantle its nuclear programmes in return for economic and diplomatic benefits and security guarantees.

Pakistan tests fourth missile in a month

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday tested a fourth nuclear-capable cruise missile since India launched a new long-range weapon capable of hitting China last month.

The Hatf VIII air cruise missile has a range of 350 kilometres and can carry conventional warheads, the military said.

On April 20, India successfully test fired the Agni V capable of delivering a one-tonne nuclear warhead anywhere in rival China, marking a major advance in its military capabilities.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947. Each has carried out routine missile tests since both demonstrated nuclear weapons capability in 1998.



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