

Al-Qaeda still a threat: Hillary

AFP, Istanbul

Al-Qaeda is still a spreading and imminent threat, US Secretary of State said yesterday, as she joined major world powers in Istanbul for a meeting to curb terrorism. "The core of al-Qaeda that carried out the 9/11 attacks may be on the path to defeat, but the threat has spread, becoming more geographically diverse," Hillary said at a speech that kick started the Global Counterterrorism Forum meeting. "We will always maintain our right to use force against groups such as al-Qaeda that have attacked us and still threaten us with imminent attack." Although the group has lost serious blood after its core leadership ranks were destroyed, she said, "the danger from terrorism remains urgent and undeniable."

Dozens killed in Syria massacre

US, UK say Assad must go; Russia says killings as provocations

AFP, Damascus

Pro-regime militiamen swept through farmlands in central Syria slaughtering dozens including women and children, activists said yesterday, sparking opposition calls for increased military raids by armed rebels. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 55 people were killed in Wednesday's assault on Al-Kubeir, a small Sunni farming enclave surrounded by Alawite villages in the central province of Hama. Most of the victims were members of a single family. The reported massacre, which Damascus denied had occurred, was condemned as "brutal and sickening" by British Prime Minister David Cameron and as "unconscionable" by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who insisted it was time for President Bashar al-Assad to go. Russia, which with China this week came out strongly against intervention and regime change in Syria, called the killings "provocations" aimed at undermining UN-Arab League envoy Kofi Annan's six-point plan to end the violence. "There are 49 confirmed and identified victims in Al-Kubeir, the majority of them from the Al-Yateem family," said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Britain-based Observatory. "Among the dead are 18 women and children,"



David Cameron Hillary Clinton

he said. Earlier reports from opposition groups had put the death toll at between 87 and 100. The Observatory was joined by the exiled opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Muslim Brotherhood in blaming the killings on shabiha militiamen loyal to Assad's regime. They and activists, citing survivors and witnesses, said the militiamen stormed into the small settlement on Wednesday afternoon armed with guns and knives after regime forces had pounded it with shells. They then went on a killing spree, hacking, stabbing and shooting residents as they tried to flee. Meanwhile, the head of the UN observer mission in Syria, Major General Robert Mood, said the Syrian army was preventing his monitors from reaching the region.

The Syrian government denied responsibility, saying in a televised statement: "What a few media have reported on what happened in Al-Kubeir, in the Hama region, is completely false." The Al-Kubeir incident comes after at least 108 people were killed in a two-day massacre that began on May 25 near the central town of Houla, most of them women and children who were summarily executed, according to the United Nations. In Istanbul, Hillary Clinton squarely laid the blame for the massacre on Damascus. "The regime-sponsored violence that we witnessed in Hama yesterday (Wednesday) is simply unconscionable," she told a news conference. She said a solution to the Syria crisis required a ceasefire, a transfer of power and the formation of a representative interim government. Her comments set the stage for a renewed diplomatic stand-off after Russia and China said this week they were strongly against intervention and regime change. In Beijing on Thursday, leaders of a grouping led by Russia and China issued a statement opposing military intervention in the Middle East. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) also called for a "peaceful resolution of the Syrian problem through political dialogue" in a statement released at the end of a two-day summit.

Russia backs Iran's peaceful nuke drive

AFP, Beijing

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday told his Iranian counterpart that Moscow supports Tehran's atomic programme as long as it is "peaceful". "We have always supported the right of the Iranian people to modern technologies, including the peaceful use of atomic energy," he told Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on the sidelines of a regional security summit in Beijing. "But I want to emphasise that it is peaceful that we are talking about. You know our position." The West believes Iran is trying to develop an atomic bomb under cover of a civilian programme but Tehran insists its intentions are purely peaceful, and the situation has brought about a shakystandoff. The talks between the two leaders at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit -- the first since Putin returned to the Kremlin for a third term -- come as Russia prepares to host the latest round of global talks on Iran. The June 18 and 19 meeting between world powers and Iranian negotiators will try to find a diplomatic solution to the current standoff over Tehran's nuclear programme. Putin's comments also come after leaders of the SCO's member states issued a statement Thursday opposing any use of force in Iran, saying it could threaten global security.



EU agrees on border checks in visa-free area

AFP, Luxembourg

European Union nations yesterday agreed they can temporarily restore border checks within the visa-free Schengen area in case of a surge of illegal migrants, despite opposition from Brussels. Officials from Denmark, which currently holds the rotating EU presidency, said home affairs ministers from the 27-nation bloc had unanimously agreed to the move. "Disappointed by lack of European ambition among member states", said the EU's home affairs commissioner Cecilia Malmstroem, who opposed the move. The agreement will enable the 26 countries in the travel-free Schengen area to restore border controls for up to a year under "exceptional circumstances". Those circumstances, according to demands made by France and Germany earlier this year, are problems related to illegal immigration, which has emerged as one of Europe's most sensitive political issues amid the debt crisis, slow growth and mounting unemployment. The EU's Frontex agency that mans borders said in a report that registered illegal

crossings on the outer borders of the Schengen area shot up by 35 percent in 2011. Numbers rose from 104,000 in 2010 to 141,000 the following year, largely due to flows across the Mediterranean from the Arab Spring upheavals. But the second biggest hot-spot was the border between Greece and Turkey, which saw 55,000 detections last year. With low-cost flights to Turkey on the increase as war, chaos and poverty send people fleeing hot-spots from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Somalia, the flow is forecast to increase. Responding to the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, France and Germany in April sent Schengen counterparts a joint letter calling for drastic change. Currently, the Schengen treaty allows renewal of border controls in the case of a terror or security threat thrown up by sports or other events. But the draft approved by the ministers would allow a state within the Schengen area to reimpose border controls for six months, renewable for another six "when the control of an external border is no longer ensured due to exceptional circumstances".



Chinese President Hu Jintao, right, shakes hands with India's External Affairs Minister SM Krishna at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. Security in Central Asia, including the situation in Afghanistan, is set to be the focus of talks at a meeting in Beijing of a regional group dominated by China and Russia.

Global food prices post sharp drop in May: FAO

AFP, Paris

Global food prices fell sharply in May, dropping four percent from the previous month to their lowest level since September 2011, the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation yesterday said. The FAO's Food Price Index, a monthly measure of changes in a basket of food commodities, was nine points lower at 204 points, a statement said. That was "due to generally favourable supplies growing global economic uncertainties and a strengthening of the US dollar," it added. "Crop prices have come down sharply from their peak level but they remain still high and vulnerable due to risks related to weather conditions in the critical growing months ahead," FAO grain analyst Abdolreza Abbassian was quoted as saying. Meanwhile, the organization raised its forecast for global cereal production by 48.5 million tonnes, mainly on the expectation of a bumper maize crop in the United States. The FAO now expects 2012 output to set a record of 2.419 billion tonnes, which would be 3.2 percent higher than the 2011 record. "However, with planting still to be completed and much of the crop at very early stages of development, the final outcome will depend greatly on weather conditions in the coming months," the agency noted. On May 30, the FAO warned that one in seven people worldwide suffer from malnutrition in a report released ahead of a summit on sustainable development to be held in Rio de Janeiro June 20-22.

NEWS IN brief

Poll Charges: India's HM faces trial

AFP, New Delhi

India's Home Minister P Chidambaram could face a civil trial over allegations that he broke voting rules during the 2009 general election, following a court ruling yesterday. In a fresh blow to the beleaguered government, the court in Madurai city in the southern state of Tamil Nadu refused to throw out charges lodged by the politician who lost the vote to Chidambaram. The home minister, one of India's most high-profile public figures, is accused of "manipulating votes and indulging in corrupt practices" in the election, which was won overall by an alliance led by the Congress party. Chidambaram, who is likely to appeal the ruling, has previously rigorously denied all allegations of corruption.

Drug-resistant TB epidemic in China

AFP, Washington

China faces a "serious epidemic" of drug-resistant tuberculosis according to the first-ever nationwide estimate of the size of the problem there, said a US-published study on Wednesday. "In 2007, one third of the patients with new cases of tuberculosis and one half of the patients with previously treated tuberculosis had drug-resistant disease," said the study in the New England Journal of Medicine. Even more, the prevalence of multi-drug resistant (MDR) TB in new cases (5.7 percent) was nearly twice the global average, said the study. The data came from a survey of more than 4,600 Chinese people who were recently diagnosed or treated for TB.

Qaeda seeks suicide bombers on web

AFP, Baghdad

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has begun posting Internet advertisements offering training for suicide bombers to target the US, Israel and France, adverts on several jihadist web forums show. The advertisements ask for volunteers to get in touch via e-mail with details about their own experience and proposed targets, and were posted on a variety of jihadist forums, including Al-Fidaa, Shmoukh al-Islam and Honein. It said the targets of the attacks were "those who are fighting the Muslims and Islam" and specifically pointed to "economic, military and media interests of the enemy."

Israel to build 850 homes in West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed on Wednesday to expand the Beit El settlement by 300 homes after MPs voted down a bill to prevent the razing of buildings in one of its neighbourhoods. Netanyahu has come under attack for his decision to oppose legislation to circumvent the Supreme Court ruling, but insisted his government remained a champion of the settler movement. Palestine, US and UN slammed the decision to expand the settlements. Israel differentiates between "legal" settlements and "illegal" outposts, but the international community views all settlement on occupied territory as a violation of international law.

US reaching 'limits of patience' with Pakistan

AFP, Kabul

Defence Secretary Leon Panetta yesterday said that the United States was running out of patience with Pakistan for tolerating safe havens that allow insurgents to attack US troops across the border in Afghanistan. Panetta made the strong remarks after talks with Afghan Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak on the latest leg of an Asian tour that has taken him to Pakistan's arch-rival India, but not Islamabad in a sign of dire US-Pakistan relations. "It's an increasing concern that Haqqani safe havens still exist on the other side of the border. Pakistan has to take action from allowing terrorists in their country to attack our forces on the other side of the border," he said. "We are reaching the limits of our



Leon Panetta

patience here," he added. US officials most recently blamed the Haqqani network for a brazen 18-hour assault on Kabul in April -- the biggest to hit the Afghan capital in a decade -- which further rocked the stormy relationship between Washington and Islamabad. Ties between the two allies in the

war on terror have been in free fall since Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden in a covert raid on his Pakistani compound in May 2011 that was conducted without Islamabad's prior knowledge. The United States is most recently at loggerheads with Pakistan over Islamabad's six-month blockade on Nato supplies crossing overland into Afghanistan, imposed after US air strikes killed 24 Pakistani soldiers last November. Panetta said that in talks with Pakistan, the United States had made "very clear, time and time again" the need to crack down on Haqqani militants. Independent analysts have suggested that Pakistan is not capable of defeating the Haqqanis, a well organised and disciplined force that can command thousands of fighters.



Environmental activists from Greenpeace dressed as "coal demons" protest in front of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) during the 7th Annual Clean Energy meeting in Manila yesterday. The coal demons, painted black, called on the ADB to stop funding projects using coal in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam.

Web switches to IPv6, for breathing room

AFP, Washington

A new Internet standard giving the global network more room to grow came into effect Wednesday, a move that users probably won't notice. The switch occurred at 0001 GMT Wednesday, when Internet operators switched to a new standard called IPv6 that allows for trillions of "IP" numbers or addresses, up from the current 4.3 billion. Vint Cerf, one of the inventors of the Internet standard, who is now the "chief Internet evangelist" at Google, said the change gives the Internet room to grow. "When the Internet launched operationally in 1983, its creators never dreamed that there might be billions of devices and users trying to get online," he said. "Yet now, almost three decades later, that same Internet serves nearly 2.5 billion people and 11 billion devices across the globe. And we're running out of space."

The full transition will take several years, and old IPv4 devices and networks should continue to function as before. Some analysts say there may be some annoyances for people using older equipment, because the "path" to websites using compatible equipment may be different. Each piece of hardware -- including home computers, tablets and mobile devices -- has a unique IP address to connect to the Web. With about seven billion people on the planet, the IPv4 protocol doesn't allow for everyone to have a gadget with its own online address. The situation has been equated to not having enough telephone numbers for every user. Cisco is projecting that by 2016, there will be nearly 18.9 billion network connections, or nearly 2.5 connections for each person on earth, compared with 10.3 billion in 2011. If there are not enough addresses, neighbors will have to start sharing IP addresses, which can slow things down.