

Syria regime has lost legitimacy

Accuses UN chief; UN reaches massacre site, West seeks sanctions

AGENCIES

The Syrian regime has "lost its fundamental humanity" and no longer has any legitimacy, Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary general, said on Thursday as he described a massacre of around 90 villagers as "shocking and sickening" and demanded that the killers be brought to account.

The UN monitors yesterday finally reached the site of the new massacre in Syria at a second attempt, activists said, as Western powers pressed at the United Nations for sanctions against Damascus.

International envoy Kofi Annan, meanwhile, called for "additional pressure" in the wake of the latest massacre as he held talks with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

At least 55 people were killed on Wednesday in an assault on Al-Kubeir, a Sunni farming enclave circled by Alawite villages in the central province of Hama, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The UN observers were fired on Thursday when they first tried to investigate the slaughter.

According to preliminary evidence, troops had surrounded Al-Kubeir and militia entered the



Hillary Clinton and Kofi Annan

village and killed civilians with "barbarity," UN chief Ban Ki-moon was quoted as telling the UN Security Council.

He said the situation in Syria was close to breaking point and the danger of civil war was imminent and real.

Damascus denied responsibility and, as it has

done repeatedly in the past, blamed foreign-backed "terrorists," using its term for rebels fighters.

In all, at least 18 people were killed so far yesterday, following at least 58 people a day earlier.

UN-Arab League envoy Annan said in Washington as he entered talks with Clinton that he would discuss "how we can put additional pressure on the government and the parties to get the plan implemented."

Diplomats in New York said that Britain, France and the United States would quickly draw up a Security Council resolution proposing sanctions against Syria over the bloodshed.

Russia, with support from China, has refused US calls to put greater pressure on Assad, whose family's four-decade regime has been a key ally of Moscow since the Cold War era.

In Moscow, Clinton's point man on Syria, Fred Hof, met Russian diplomats in a bid to persuade Russia to back Assad's removal.

But Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov said after the meeting that Russia had no information about a leadership change being planned in Damascus and pointedly failed to

Blast hits bus in Pakistan, kills 19

AFP, Peshawar

A bomb blast ripped through a Pakistani bus yesterday, killing 19 people, including seven women and a child, on the outskirts of the northwestern city of Peshawar, police said.

More than 40 others were wounded in the attack on a bus rented by the government to take staff home after work in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

It was the deadliest attack in months on Peshawar, which has long been a flashpoint for a local Taliban insurgency targeting government officials, security forces and ordinary civilians.

The city runs into the semi-autonomous tribal belt that US officials consider a safe haven for al-Qaeda and insurgents fighting both in Pakistan and across the border in Afghanistan.

Pakistan fumes at Panetta's remarks

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday reacted strongly to US defence secretary Leon Panetta's remarks questioning its actions in tackling terrorism, saying the sharp comments only added an "unhelpful twist" in the already oxygen-starved ties.

Pakistan's ambassador to the US Sherry Rehman said the remarks have further reduced the space for narrowing bilateral differences, that have been hit by a series of conflagrations in the recent past.

"This kind of public messaging from a senior member of the US administration is taken very seriously in Pakistan, and reduces the space for narrowing our bilateral differences at a critical time in the negotiations," Rehman said in a statement.

"It adds an unhelpful twist to the process and leaves little oxygen for those of us seeking to break a stalemate," she said. Panetta had said in Kabul on Thursday that the US was losing patience with Pakistan on the issue of militant safe havens on the Pakistani side of the border with Afghanistan.

Panetta's remarks on the need for Pakistan to do more to tackle militancy and extremism, made during a visit to India and Afghanistan, have irked the Pakistan government.

While in New Delhi, Panetta said the US would continue drone strikes against militants in Pakistan's tribal belt despite protests from Islamabad that the attacks violate its sovereignty.

Panetta's remarks came at a time when the two countries are set to resume key negotiations on ending a six-month blockade of Nato supply routes to Afghanistan.

Iran, IAEA open new talks on nuke access

China urges Iran to be 'flexible'

AFP, Vienna

The UN nuclear watchdog yesterday held fresh talks with Iran in Vienna, where it was expected to push for access to a suspected testing site near Tehran.

The agency's chief inspector Herman Nackaerts and deputy director general Rafael Grossi were meeting Iran's envoy to the agency, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, to try to get greater access to Tehran's contested nuclear programme.

The International Atomic Energy Agency is especially interested in the Parchin military base near the Iranian capital, where it believes suspicious explosives testing was carried out before 2003 and possibly after that.

Western powers and Israel suspect Iran of trying to develop a bomb behind the veil of its civilian nuclear programme, a charge denied by Tehran, which says it is developing civilian atomic power.

During talks in Beijing, China's President Hu Jintao yesterday urged his Iranian counterpart Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to cooperate with the IAEA, state Xinhua news agency reported.

Hu also called on Iran to be "flexible and pragmatic" ahead of talks with the so-called P5+1 world powers -- the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany -- in Moscow on June 18-19.

On Thursday, Russia's President Vladimir Putin insisted Moscow supported Tehran's atomic programme as long as it was "peaceful."



PHOTO: THE HINDU

Police personnel make an effort to control a crowd who gathered for 'fish medicine' at Katedan sports complex, near Hyderabad, India yesterday. The stampede at the distribution of 'Fish Prasadam', an annual event attracting thousands of asthma patients from different parts of the country, left a person dead and 12 others injured.

Egypt agrees to elect constitutional panel

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's political parties on Thursday agreed on the formation of a commission tasked with drafting a new constitution, capping a row that lasted nearly three months, officials said.

The agreement was struck at a meeting between representatives of the political parties, including Islamists who dominate parliament, and Egypt's military ruler, Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, the sources said.

At the end of the meeting Tantawi called for a joint meeting of the lower and upper houses of parliament to take place next Tuesday to elect the 100 members who will sit on the constitutional panel.

According to delegates who attended the meeting, it was agreed that 39 seats will be allocated to representatives of the political parties within the People's Assembly, or lower house of parliament which is dominated by Islamists.

Another six seats will go to judges, while nine will be filled by experts in law, and one each for the armed forces, the police and the justice ministry.

Professional unions are to get 13 seats while public figures to be chosen at Tuesday's meeting will be given a total of 21 seats.

Five seats will also be allocated to Al-Azhar, the Cairo-based prestigious Sunni authority, and four to Christian churches in Egypt, including the country's largest the Coptic church.

At the meeting political parties also agreed that in the future any decision taken by the panel must be endorsed by 67 percent of the body -- an apparent move to ensure that Islamists will not have the upper hand, the delegates said.

Common enemy brings China-Russia together

NEWS ANALYSIS

AFP, Beijing

China and Russia are

presenting a united front against the West to boost their firepower on issues from Syria to Iran, but analysts say their alliance belies deep divisions.

The two countries' leaders used a regional summit in Beijing this week to put on a very public display of solidarity over the Syrian conflict, which has placed them at loggerheads with Western powers, and Iran's nuclear drive.

But Beijing and Moscow have long had an uneasy relationship dating from when each jostled to dominate the communist world, and analysts say their closeness now marks a marriage of convenience as they look to counter Western influence.

"Both Beijing and Moscow are becoming increasingly negative about the United States and Europe," said Jonathan Holslag, head of research of the Brussels Institute of Contemporary China Studies.

"The West has elicited the increasing anger of Moscow on a number of issues, ranging from missile defence, the modernisation of tactical nuclear weapons, to the intervention in Libya.

"Beijing sees its interaction with the US souring on maritime security and trade. It's aversion to the West that drives them closer."

Russian President Vladimir Putin, in Beijing after pointedly cancelling a trip to the United States, told Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao this week their interests "align perfectly in a great many areas, including in cooperating on the world stage."

Hu said a vow to bolster cooperation in the United Nations -- where veto holders China and Russia face pressure to act against Syria -- would allow them to "set the global political and economic order in a more fair and rational direction".

"Both China and Russia want to send a message to other greater powers, particularly the United States -- 'don't push me too hard'," said Zheng Yongnian, politics professor at the National University of Singapore. China and Russia declared they were

"decisively against" intervention or regime change in Syria -- where a bloody uprising has lasted 15 months -- and opposed the use of force over Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The display of unity also results from unease over a US decision to focus more on the Asia-Pacific. Washington announced last week that it would base 60 percent of its naval forces in the region by 2020.

"China and Russia seem to be coming under a lot of pressure from the United States, which is pulling out of Afghanistan and Iraq and putting more resources in the Asia-Pacific," said Willy Lam, professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

"So there is a need to display a common front... But China and Russia also have mutual suspicion -- both are giants in the same region of the world, so they also see themselves as long-term strategic competitors," he told AFP.

Jean-Pierre Cabestan, politics professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, pointed out that the two countries displayed a common strategy "on issues that for them are quite easy".

"But there are lots of issues that divide them... particularly oil and gas prices and the completion of pipelines," he said.

The two sides, for instance, have for years failed to sign off on a huge natural gas deal that could see Russia supply 70 billion cubic metres of gas a year directly to China, due to pricing disagreements.

There is scepticism that the relationship amounts to anything greater than political and economic expedience.

"What makes us and China truly like-minded besides a (common) stance on Syria and hostility towards the USA?" said an editorial in Russia's liberal newspaper Vedomosti on Thursday.

"Allies are the countries which while pursuing their policies take into account each other's interests, and if an ally is having problems they interfere to solve them," it said.

"There is and will be nothing of this kind between Russia and China. Not that Russia would not want it. It's just that China does not enter any truly binding alliances with

RELIGIOUS CLASHES Four killed in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Four people were killed yesterday in religious clashes in western Myanmar, where police opened fire and the authorities declared a curfew to tackle the escalating unrest, officials said.

The latest victims are believed to have been killed by angry Muslims who torched Buddhist villages in Rakhine state along the Bay of Bengal.

State television announced late yesterday a night-time curfew in the unrest-hit areas.

Tensions have flared in Rakhine since 10 Muslims on a bus were killed by an angry Buddhist mob on Sunday who believed mistakenly that the perpetrators of the recent rape and murder of a Rakhine woman were onboard.

POWER SHORTAGE

Japan PM renews plea for nuclear restart

AFP, Tokyo

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda yesterday renewed his call for the re-firing of idle nuclear reactors, saying Japan could not do without atomic energy, but stopped short of ordering a restart.

Noda called on local authorities to allow operations to resume at the Oi nuclear plant in western Japan and pledged safety would remain a priority.

"Units number 3 and 4 should restart to support people's lives, that's my decision," Noda told a news conference. "Therefore I want to seek the understanding of local governments."

"Nuclear generation is an important power source (and) energy security is one of the country's most important issues." Japan's political classes have been tip-toeing around the unpopular issue of reactor restarts for months, wary of public distrust of the technology since the meltdowns at Fukushima in the aftermath of last year's tsunami.

But increasingly alarmist warnings of summer power blackouts, with some estimates suggesting certain areas could see electricity supply fall as much as 20 percent short of demand, have added urgency to the issue.

Myanmar urges to lift all sanctions

Signals reduced role of army in parliament

AFP, Singapore

Myanmar yesterday called for sanctions imposed on the country to be completely lifted as they are hurting efforts to attract foreign investment amid a historic reform drive.

U Ko Ko Hlaing, chief political adviser to President Thein Sein, said that without fuller access to the Southeast Asian nation companies were adopting a "wait and see" attitude.

"We need to lift sanctions, but still sanctions remain. It's only suspended, not totally lifted," he said at a forum in Singapore.

Myanmar has surprised observers with a series of reforms following the end of nearly half a century of military rule last year, leading Western nations to start rolling back sanctions.

But Hlaing added: "Without the total lifting of sanctions, only the suspension of sanctions, it doesn't work to persuade the long-term investors."

His comments came as Australia announced Thursday it will lift remaining sanctions against the country and more than

double its foreign aid to encourage democratic reforms.

Meanwhile, a top Myanmar official yesterday said the army's parliamentary representation may be reduced in the future, echoing recent comments by Defence Minister Hla Min.

Myanmar's armed forces retain much of their power with 25 percent of seats in parliament reserved for the military under the 2008 constitution enacted by the then ruling junta.

The majority of the other seats are occupied by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which is packed with former military men.

"There may be gradual change of the military representation in the parliament," Ko Ko Hlaing, chief political adviser to President Thein Sein, said at a forum in Singapore.

US secretary of state Hillary Clinton said Washington would keep broad sanctions in place an "insurance policy" against "back-

PHONE HACKING PROBE UK PM called on to testify

AFP, London

British Prime Minister David Cameron is to appear next week before an inquiry into press ethics sparked by the phone-hacking scandal at Rupert Murdoch's newspapers.

Cameron, whose government has been under fire over a series of revelations about its closeness to Murdoch's media empire, will give evidence on June 14.

His testimony is scheduled to take up a full six-and-a-half-hour day of the televised inquiry at London's Royal Courts of Justice, which is set to hear from several political heavyweights during the week.

Finance minister George Osborne is to testify on Monday, as will former prime minister Gordon Brown, according to the list published yesterday.

Last accounts of Abraham Lincoln's life revealed

AFP, Washington

A doctor's account of his frantic efforts to save the life of a fatally wounded president Abraham Lincoln has been rediscovered in the United States, after being lost to history for 150 years.

On April 14, 1865, Charles Leale happened to be in the same Washington theater as the US president, watching the play "My American Cousin," when he heard a gunshot and saw a man leap onto the stage.

Leale, 23, the first person to tend to Lincoln's wounds, documented the tragic encounter in a 21-page handwritten report.

A copy of Leale's notes from that tragic night found its way to the National Archives, America's massive repository of historical documents, where -- until last month -- it had been overlooked for a century and a half.

Lincoln -- who led the country into a bloody civil war, but preserved the union and ended



slavery -- was shot by assassin John Wilkes Booth, an actor and Confederate sympathizer.

The young physician, who had only received his medical degree about six weeks earlier, was the first doctor to see the dying president.

"I immediately ran to the President's box and as soon as the door was opened, I was admitted and introduced to Mrs Lincoln when she exclaimed several times, 'O Doctor, do what you can for him, do what you can!'"

I told her we would do all that we possibly could," Leale recounted.

Booth was tracked down by Union soldiers and was shot and killed on April 26, 1865.

More than two years after Lincoln's death, in July 1867, Leale sent a copy of his report, written longhand by a secretary, to a US congressional committee that was conducting an investigation of the president's assassination.