

UN suspends Syria peace mission

Obama, Putin plan meet; opposition fears another massacre

AFP, Damascus

UN observers suspended their mission to Syria yesterday, blaming intensifying violence as troops rained shells down on rebel bastions including Homs, where the opposition warned a massacre was imminent.

Explaining the decision, mission head Major General Robert Mood spoke of an escalation in fighting and of the risk to his 300-strong team, as well as the "lack of willingness" for peace by the warring parties.

"There has been an intensification of armed violence across Syria over the past 10 days," General Mood said in a statement.

"This escalation is limiting our ability to observe, verify, report as well as assist in local dialogue and stability projects -- basically impeding our ability to carry out our mandate. It is also posing significant risks to our observers."

"In this high risk situation, UNSMIS (United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria) is suspend-



Protesters hold a placard during demonstration against the crackdown on pro-democracy protests in central London yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

ing its activities," Mood said.

The observers "will not conduct patrols and will stay in their locations until further notice," he said, adding that "engagement with the parties will be restricted."

Mood said the suspension would be reviewed daily, and that "operations will resume when we

see the situation fit for us to carry out our mandated activities."

In a statement, the SNC warned of a looming massacre in the flashpoint central city of Homs, which it said is besieged by 30,000 troops and pro-regime militiamen.

"Regime forces are escalating their shelling of the city of Homs in an unprecedented way," said the SNC, adding troops were "getting ready to carry out a savage attack that might massacre the city's remaining residents."

Violence in Syria has killed more than 14,400 people since an uprising against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad erupted in mid-March 2011, according to the Observatory.

The Observatory reported another 31 people killed yesterday, taking the countrywide death toll to 169 in the past three days.

Meanwhile, to break the diplomatic stand-off, the US State Department said US President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin would discuss differences over

Egypt votes for president amid political chaos

AFP, Cairo

Egyptians were voting yesterday in a run-off presidential election between an Islamist and ousted leader Hosni Mubarak's last premier amid political chaos highlighted by uncertainty over what powers the winner will have.

Some 50 million Egyptians are eligible to cast ballots in the two-day poll, which sees Ahmed Shafiq vying for the top job against Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed Mursi.

Queues had already formed outside some voting stations before the polls opened at 8:00 am (0600 GMT), with police and army deployed outside, according to AFP reporters.

The race has polarised the nation, dividing those who fear a return to the old regime under Shafiq from others who want to keep religion out of politics and fear the Brotherhood would stifle personal



Mohammed Mursi

Ahmed Shafiq

freedoms.

It comes against the backdrop of two controversial court rulings on Thursday, allowing Shafiq's candidacy to proceed despite his role in the old regime, and invalidating Egypt's elected

parliament.

Activists said the court rulings were the final phase of a military coup that takes the democratic transition back to square one.

What many see as a lose-lose proposition has given impetus to the boycott movement, which was largely ignored in the first round, with celebrities and high-profile activists calling on Egyptians to abstain or void their ballot.

Others believed boycotting would waste a historic opportunity.

The winner will be the first freely chosen president in Egypt's history and will succeed Mubarak, who was forced from office by a popular revolt last year and turned power

NEWS IN brief

China sends first woman into space

AP, Jiuquan

China yesterday launched its most ambitious space mission yet, carrying its first female astronaut and two male colleagues in an attempt to dock with an orbiting module and work on board for more than a week.

The Shenzhou 9 capsule lifted off as scheduled at 6:37 p.m. (1237 GMT) evening from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center on the edge of the Gobi Desert. All systems functioned normally and, just over 10 minutes later, it opened its solar panels and entered orbit.

Female astronaut Liu Yang, 33, and two male crew members veteran astronaut Jing Haipeng and newcomer Liu Wang are to dock the spacecraft with a prototype space lab launched last year in a key step

Prince Charles gets top military rank

AFP, London

Prince Charles, the heir to the throne, was promoted to top rank in all three British military services yesterday. Queen Elizabeth II appointed her eldest son to the ranks of Field Marshal, Admiral of the Fleet and Marshal of the Royal Air Force, equivalent to 5-star rank in the US.

Charles, 63, the Prince of Wales, served in the Royal Navy and the RAF throughout the 1970s.

Only two other members of the royal family hold honorary five-star rank: the queen's husband Prince Philip -- in all three services -- and her cousin Prince Edward, the Duke of Kent, who is a field marshal.

Blasts kill 32 Shias in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Car bombs targeting Shia pilgrims in the Iraqi capital killed at least 32 people yesterday, officials said, marring commemorations for a revered Shiite imam attended by tens of thousands.

An interior ministry official said a car bomb exploded at about 12:15pm on a highway near Shuala in north Baghdad, killing 14 people and wounding 32, while a second car bomb exploded at the Aden intersection near Kadhimiyah about 2:00pm, killing 18 people and wounding 36.

On Wednesday, 72 people were killed and more than 250 wounded in bomb and gun attacks across the country, with al-Qaeda's local affiliate, the Islamic State of Iraq, claiming responsibility.

Myanmar counts cost of communal unrest

Peace restored; state media says violence killed 50

AFP, Sittwe

Fifty people have been killed and scores wounded in communal clashes in western Myanmar, state media said yesterday, as the UN warned of "immense hardship" faced by thousands displaced by rioting.

State mouthpiece the New Light of Myanmar said 50 people have died, with 54 injured between May 28 and June 14 in Rakhine state, which has been convulsed by violence between local Buddhists and Muslim Rohingyas.

The report did not say whether the updated toll includes 10 Muslims beaten to death on June 3 by a Buddhist mob in apparent revenge for the rape and murder of a Rakhine woman, which sparked the violence.

Police enforced a curfew in the state capital Sittwe overnight, with New Light saying security forces were "restoring peace, stability and security" after the unrest, which poses a serious challenge to Myanmar's reform-minded government.

Nearly 31,900 people from both sides are being housed in 37 camps across Rakhine, officials in Sittwe said on Thursday, while thousands of homes have been torched.

A United Nations team witnessed the devastation on a two-day visit to the region, saying that around 10,000 displaced people were sheltering in Sittwe alone.

"It has come to the attention of the UN that the extent of the destruction of both the Rakhine and Islamic community in Sittwe is very large. These people are facing immense hardship," it said in a statement late Friday.

Blast hits Pak market, kills 26

REUTERS, Peshawar

A bomb planted in a pickup truck killed at least 26 people at a market in northwest Pakistan yesterday and wounded 65, security and hospitals officials said, in one of the largest bombing death tolls in weeks.

The target in the town of Landi Kotal appeared to be a tribal leader allied with the government against the Pakistani Taliban, the Islamist militant group blamed for many of the suicide bombings across the country, security officials said.

Hospital officials said 65 people were wounded, most of them fruit and vegetable vendors.

'Murdoch pushed Blair on Iraq war'

AFP, London

Rupert Murdoch took part in an "over-crude" attempt by US Republicans to push Tony Blair into action before the invasion of Iraq, the former British prime minister's ex-media chief claimed yesterday.

Alastair Campbell said the News Corporation media baron warned Blair in a phone call of the dangers in delaying signing up to the March 19, 2003 invasion, as part of an attempt to speed up Britain joining the military campaign.

The claim came in "The Burden of Power: Countdown to Iraq" -- the final volumes of Campbell's diaries from his years at Blair's side, which are being serialised in The Guardian newspaper.

Campbell suggested Murdoch made moves to help the right-wing Republican Party of then US president George W Bush before the March 18 vote in the British parliament's lower



Tony Blair

Rupert Murdoch

House of Commons on deploying troops to Iraq, which was passed.

On March 11, 2003, Campbell wrote that Blair "took a call from Murdoch who was pressing on timings, saying how News International would support us, etc."

"Both TB and I felt it was prompted by Washington, and another example of their over-crude diplomacy. Murdoch was pushing all the Republican buttons, how the longer we waited the harder it got."

The following day he added: "TV felt the Murdoch call was odd, not very clever." News International is News Corp's

British newspaper arm, publishing The Times, The Sun and The Sunday Times.

Blair faced a tough challenge getting his centre-left Labour Party lawmakers to back Britain's involvement. They rebelled in large numbers.

Speaking to The Guardian, Campbell said Murdoch's intervention came "out of the blue".

"On one level (Murdoch) was trying to be supportive, saying 'I know this is a very difficult place, my papers are going to support you on this'."

In response, Murdoch's company said: "It is complete rubbish to suggest that Rupert Murdoch lobbied Mr Blair over the Iraq War on behalf of the US Republicans."

"Furthermore, there isn't even any evidence in Alastair Campbell's diaries to support such a ridiculous claim."

Campbell's diaries also recorded that Blair was "thwarted" from joining the euro currency in 2003 by his finance minister Gordon Brown, who took over

Saudi crown prince dies

Bangladesh leaders express deep condolence

AGENCIES

Saudi Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, a half brother of King Abdullah and the kingdom's long-serving interior minister, died yesterday, state television announced.

The 79-year-old Prince Nayef, who recently left Saudi Arabia for medical treatment, had "died outside the kingdom," said Al-Ekhabriyah Television, quoting a statement from the royal court.

The nature of his illness has not been made public.

His funeral would be held today after sunset prayers in the Muslim holy city of Mecca, after his body is repatriated.

Prince Nayef became heir to the throne in October last year following the death of crown prince Sultan, his full brother.

No one is officially in line to replace



Nayef bin Abdul Aziz

Nayef, but his brother Prince Salman, who took over the portfolio of defence minister after Sultan's death, appears a strong candidate.

Bangladesh leaders mourn death

Bangladesh President Zillur Rahman yesterday expressed deep sorrow and grief at the death of Saudi crown prince.

In a message of condolence, Zillur recalled the role of Nayef who as the interior minister led a crackdown on terrorists.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Leader of the Opposition in parliament Khaleda Zia in separate messages also expressed sadness at the death of Prince Nayef.

The prime minister said Bangladesh has lost a good friend in his death.

Khaleda in her condolence message described Nayef as one of the major leaders

Japan PM orders nuke restart

AFP, Tokyo

Japan yesterday ordered nuclear reactors back online, defying public sentiment against atomic power following last year's meltdowns at Fukushima sparked by a huge quake-tsunami disaster.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda received approval for the restarts from Issei Nishikawa, the pro-nuclear power governor of central Fukui prefecture, which hosts the plant.

"Now that we have the approval from the autonomous body where the reactors are relocated, the four ministers (including Noda) concerned made the decision to restart the reactors," Noda told the meeting on camera.

Unlucky '13' is lucky for Pranab

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Is '13' always an unlucky number? Not so, it seems, for India's Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee who has been chosen by the country's ruling UPA to be the next president.

Mukherjee lives in a house at 13, Talkatora Road in New Delhi and is expected to be the 13th president of India.

Mukherjee's name came up as the UPA's presidential candidate and was revealed for the first time on June 13.

The addition of first two digits of the age of 76-year-old veteran Congress leader also totals up to number 13.

Asked about this figure playing a key role in his life, Mukherjee said, "I don't have any superstition. I don't believe in that. 13 is a lucky number. 13 means pure...13 (tera) is God."

He recalled that when he moved into the current Talkatora Road bungalow as a Member of Parliament, he was cautioned by many that the number 13 means unlucky. But it did not happen.

INDIAN PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

BJP-led opposition divided over Pranab

IANS, New Delhi

The BJP core group is meeting here to decide on supporting finance minister and Congress veteran Pranab Mukherjee's candidature as next President.

The meeting comes against the backdrop of Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) getting divided over pitching a candidate against Mukherjee, the ruling United Progressive Alliance's choice for the top post.

While the Janata Dal-United (JD-U) and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) do not want to pitch a candidate against Mukherjee, Subramanian Swamy-led Janata Party and the Shiv Sena are in favour of bringing an opposition candidate, say sources.

The meeting will be held at 6:00pm at BJP president Nitin Gadkari's residence, a party member confirmed.

The opposition NDA is scheduled to meet today to discuss the presidential election.



Pranab Mukherjee

Mamata seeks support for Kalam

PTI, Kolkata

Taking up the campaign for APJ Abdul Kalam online, Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee yesterday said her choice of the Presidential candidate was the choice of millions of Indians.

The TMC chief had joined hands with SP chief Mulayam Singh Yadav to propose the name of Kalam. However, the SP later broke away and pledged support to Pranab Mukherjee, leaving the West Bengal Chief Minister totally isolated.

Refusing to budge from her stand, she said, "My party is a small party. We are not a big party with none of the resources others possess. We are led by truth and conviction. All through my life I have stood by my principles. I stand by the position I have taken".

Stating that the will of the people is supreme in a democracy, Banerjee requested fellow citizens to stand up, support and vote for Kalam.

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Ms Sharifah SASAhmed, International Development Manager, and Mr Mark Sander from UEL's School of Law and Social Sciences, will be conducting on the spot admissions and counselling sessions for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as follows:

Date	Tuesday 19th June	Wednesday 20th June & Thursday 21st June	Friday 22nd June
Time	3.00pm to 6.00pm	11.00am to 5.00pm	3.00pm to 6.00pm
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