

SYRIA UNREST Rebels kill 29 soldiers

AFP, Damascus

Twenty-nine soldiers were among 46 people killed in violence in Syria yesterday, a rights group said, as UN observers said they were "morally obliged" to stay in the country despite the risks.

Russia resisted Western pleas to help remove President Bashar al-Assad from power despite escalating hostilities that have battered the UN peace mission that was supposed to start with a ceasefire by both sides from April 12.

The army suffered heavy losses in two northwestern provinces on the Turkish border, where rebel fighters of the Free Syrian Army have intensified their operations in recent weeks.

At least 20 soldiers were killed in fierce clashes with rebel fighters in Latakia province, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Five rebels were also killed in the clashes that began late Tuesday and continued through dawn yesterday in a region known as the Kurdish Mountain near the border, the Britain-based watchdog said.

"The majority died in direct fighting with the rebels, while other soldiers were killed in a rebel attack on two buildings, which the army was using to launch mortar attacks against the Kurdish Mountain," Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

In Idlib province, five soldiers were killed when a car bomb exploded at their check-point overnight. Explosions and shooting were also heard in the town of Maaret al-Numan, the Observatory said.

In the central province of Hama, clashes in the town of Kernaz left three soldiers dead. Shelling by government troops also killed a man and his wife.

In the capital, a military doctor was killed by an explosive device planted in his car. "Unidentified gunmen assassinated a Shiite cleric in Sayyida Zeinab," the Observatory said, referring to an area of south Damascus that houses a revered Shiite Muslim shrine of the same name and is home to many Iraqi refugees.

With the death toll exceeding 14,400 since the uprising against Assad's rule erupted in March 2011, according to Observatory figures, the head of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria told the Security Council that the nearly 300 unarmed UN observers were "morally obliged" to stay.

"We are going nowhere," Maj Gen Robert Mood told reporters after the closed meeting.

Highlighting the dangers faced by them, Mood told the meeting UN vehicles had been hit 10 times by "direct fire" and hundreds of times by "indirect fire." He said nine UN vehicles had been hit in the past eight days alone.



PHOTO: AFP

New Democracy party leader and newly elected Prime Minister, Antonis Samaras is congratulated by Greek President, Carolos Papoulias after a swearing in ceremony at the presidential palace in Athens yesterday.

Qaeda militant takes hostages at French bank

AFP, Toulouse

A self-proclaimed al-Qaeda militant took hostages at a bank in French city Toulouse yesterday close to where serial killer Mohamed Merah lived and was shot dead by police in March.

The man fired a shot and took four people hostage, including the bank's manager, in the southern French city and wants to negotiate with the elite RAID police unit that shot dead al-Qaeda-inspired killer Merah, police said.

"We're taking measures so we can start a dialogue" with the hostage taker, Toulouse prosecutor Michel Valet said at the scene where police have set up a 200-metre (yard) cordon around the bank.

Parents of pupils at a nearby school have been sent a text message telling them to pick up their children, witnesses said.

Mubarak in coma Tension spikes in Egypt over successor

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was yesterday in a coma on life support at a Cairo hospital, sources said, as tension spiked over who will succeed him as president and moves by the ruling military to extend its powers.

The uncertainty over the health of the ousted leader comes amid new political upheaval, with both candidates in a presidential vote claiming victory and the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) granting itself sweeping powers.

Mubarak "is not clinically dead," a medical source told AFP. "He is in a coma and the doctors are trying to revive him."

"He has been placed on an artificial respirator," the source added, in an account confirmed by a member of Egypt's ruling military council, who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity.

Egypt's state television carried a ticker item saying Mubarak was in "a coma and is not clinically dead."

State news agency MENA had earlier said the ousted strongman, 84, had been declared clinically dead after suffering a stroke in prison and being transferred to hospital.

"Hosni Mubarak is clinically dead," the report said. "Medical sources told MENA his heart had stopped beating and did not



respond to defibrillation."

News of Mubarak's failing health came as Egypt wrapped up a presidential election runoff and faced "the most critical 48 hours in its history," said the state-owned daily Al-Ahram.

The Muslim Brotherhood said in the early hours of Monday morning that their

candidate, Mohamed Morsi, had won the runoff, and on Tuesday provided what they said were certified copies of ballot tallies to bolster their claims.

But Morsi's rival Ahmed Shafiq, Mubarak's last prime minister, has also claimed a victory, with his campaign accusing the Brotherhood of issuing false figures and insisting official results due out on today will declare him president.

The electoral committee begins yesterday looking into the appeals filed by both sides, state television said.

A group of independent judges -- headed by the ex-head of the Judges Union, Zakaria Abdel Aziz -- who monitored the voting process confirmed in a news conference that Morsi had won, according to their tally.

The new president, irrespective of the result, will not wield the near-absolute authority Mubarak enjoyed for three decades, after SCAF issued a constitutional declaration on Sunday claiming sweeping powers.

Taliban suicide attack hits Nato, kills 21

AFP, Gardez

A Taliban suicide bomber on a motorbike rammed an Afghan-Nato patrol in the town of Khost yesterday, killing 21 people, including three Nato soldiers, officials said.

Another 37 people were wounded in the blast in the eastern town close to the border with Pakistan, where Taliban and other Islamist insurgents fighting US-led troops have strongholds, hospital officials said.

It was the second major attack on Nato in Khost in three weeks. The government blamed the Taliban and a spokesman for the insurgent militia later claimed responsibility for the attack.

The bombing will only heighten fears about security as Nato prepares to hand responsibility to Afghan forces and recall the vast majority of its 130,000 combat troops by the end of 2014.

The Taliban, leading a 10-year insurgency against the Western-backed government, have begun their annual fighting season with a series of attacks that forced US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta to admit that violence was rising.

Interior ministry spokesman Sediq Sediqqi said yesterday's blast targeted a combined Afghan and coalition patrol passing through Khost, one of the most troubled parts of Afghanistan.

Khost shares a porous border with Pakistan's tribal belt, which lies outside government control, and where US officials say the Taliban and al-Qaeda have carved out bases for operations in Afghanistan.

The Haqqani network, a militant group close to al-Qaeda and blamed for some of the most daring insurgent attacks in Afghanistan, is particularly active in the province.

Amir Padsha, the director of Khost city hospital, said the bodies of three police officers and eight civilians, along with 17 wounded were brought in.

Yemen foils plot against embassies in Sanaa

AFP, Sanaa

Yemeni security forces have foiled a militant plot to attack embassies in Sanaa, state news agency SABA reported yesterday, just days after the army forced al-Qaeda out of bastions in the south.

"Security forces have managed to foil a terror plot targeting foreign embassies in the capital," SABA said, citing a top security official.

The official said "three suspects armed with weapons, explosives and maps showing the location of foreign embassies" were detained.

He said the residences of "military commanders and other important people" were also marked on the maps.

In military strikes in southern Yemen, three suspected militants were killed and four wounded in an air raid targeting a group of al-Qaeda fighters in a desert region between Abyan and Shabwa provinces, a tribal chief said.

And security officials said a local Qaeda leader in Bayda province, "dangerous terrorist" Salah al-Jawhari, was killed in a military operation along with two suicide bombers who had been planning attacks on local figures.

The reports came two days after a suicide bomber killed Salem Ali Qoton, the general who spearheaded a month-long offensive against al-Qaeda in Yemen's Abyan and Shabwa provinces in the south.

The offensive, launched on May 12, ended more than a year of al-Qaeda control in a string of towns and villages in the troubled south and east.

The jihadists are believed to have fled to the lawless mountainous regions of the eastern Hadramawt province.

Greek conservative head sworn in as PM

AP, Athens

Greek conservative party head Antonis Samaras was sworn in as prime minister yesterday at the helm of a three-party coalition that will uphold the country's international bailout commitments.

The move ends a protracted political crisis that had cast grave doubt over the country's future in Europe's joint currency and threatened to plunge Europe deeper into a financial crisis with global repercussions.

Samaras, an American-educated 61-year-old economist, was sworn in three days after his party won the second national elections in six weeks but without enough votes to form a government on its own.

His New Democracy party will join forces with the socialist PASOK party, which came in third place, and the smaller Democratic Left led by Fotis Kouvelis. Discussions on the lineup of ministers were expected to be completed by yesterday night.

"I will ask the new government that will be formed tomorrow to work hard so that we can offer tangible hope to our people," Samaras told reporters as he left the presidential mansion.

Greek stocks rose marginally in response to the news, with Athens shares closing up 0.5 percent, limiting earlier gains.

The new prime minister was to meet with outgoing Finance Minister Giorgos Zaniias, PASOK head Evangelos Venizelos and

Kouvelis on yesterday evening.

All three parties broadly back Greece's pledges to bailout creditors for further austerity and reforms, although they have pledged to renegotiate some of the terms for the rescue loans.

New Democracy and PASOK are also looking for an extension of at least two years in the deadlines for implementing fresh cutbacks worth a total (EURO)14.5 billion (\$18.42 billion).

Democratic Left leader Fotis Kouvelis went a bit further yesterday, saying that Greece should eventually "disengage" from the austerity commitments and "lift those measures that have literally bled society."

Greece has been dependent on the loans from other Eurozone countries and the International Monetary Fund since May 2010. In return, it has imposed deep spending cuts, slashed salaries and pensions, and repeatedly hiked taxes.

The measures have left the country struggling through a fifth year of recession, with unemployment spiraling to above 22 percent and tens of thousands of businesses shutting down.

Earlier yesterday, hundreds of poverty-stricken Greeks queued in a central Athens park for free vegetables. Cretan farmers handed out some 2,700 10-kilo packages of produce, in cooperation with the capital's municipal authorities.



Sand sculptures representing chariots of Hindu deities are pictured on the Beach on the eve of the annual chariot festival at Puri, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Suu Kyi receives Oxford University honour

AFP, Oxford

Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded an honorary doctorate by Oxford University yesterday, in the city where she studied and brought up the family she would later leave behind.

The Myanmar democracy icon was presented with the doctorate in civil law at the prestigious seat of learning where she studied politics, philosophy and economics in the mid-1960s.

Wearing a traditional longyi skirt under her scarlet academic robes, and flowers in her hair beneath her black velvet cap, Suu Kyi smiled as she received the honour at Oxford's grand 17th century Sheldonian Theatre.

University chancellor Chris Patten, the former governor of Hong Kong, handed her a gilded scroll as around 100 Oxford dons and students applauded, along with other recipients of honorary degrees including spy novelist John le Carre.

He said in Latin: "Unbowed champion of liberty, who have given your people and the whole world an example of courage and endurance, I on my own authority and that of



the whole university admit you to the honorary degree of doctor of civil law."

Suu Kyi was to make a speech after the presentation ceremony. Receiving the honorary doctorate was one of the highlights of her week-long trip to Britain, part of her first trip to Europe since 1988.

Today, she will address both houses of the British parliament -- a rare honour bestowed on only four foreign dignitaries since World War II.

In an interview with BBC television yesterday, she confirmed her desire to lead the people of Myanmar "if I can lead them in the right way."

She rejected the suggestion that her release from more than two decades of house arrest in 2010 had been a "confidence trick" aimed at getting sanctions on the country lifted.

She also warned foreign companies rushing to invest in Myanmar since the military-backed civilian government began to implement reforms that they would be closely watched.

They would be exposed if they did not behave in a "democracy-friendly, human rights-friendly" way, she warned.



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