

# UN postpones Syria vote

Obama-Putin phone talks fail to break impasse

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council yesterday postponed a vote on a Western-drafted resolution calling for sanctions against Syria following a request from international envoy Kofi Annan to give time to diplomatic solution to the crisis, diplomats said.

A threat by Russia, President Bashar al-Assad's key ally, to veto the resolution has sparked new Security Council tensions on Syria.

The vote on the resolution is now expected in the morning today, while the five permanent members of the council - Britain, China, France, Russia and United States -- hold more negotiations on the Syria crisis, diplomats said.

Annan sent a message to the Security Council powers asking for the delay a few hours before the scheduled vote. The UN-Arab League envoy "feels it is still possible to get a compromise with Russia on the resolution," said one council diplomat.

Meanwhile, Russian leader Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama were unable to resolve their differences on Syria in a phone talk yesterday following a Damascus bomb attack that killed 3 top security chiefs of the regime, the Kremlin said.

"Differences in approaches remain that concern practical steps in achieving a settlement," Kremlin spokesman



Barack Obama



Vladimir Putin

Dmitry Peskov was quoted as saying by Russian news agencies.

The bomb struck at the heart of Syria's senior command Wednesday in an attack claimed by rebels, amid fighting in the capital city.

The Kremlin spokesman provided few details of the phone call except to say that it was initiated by Obama and included a "detailed discussion of Syria in which the recent escalation was noted".

Peskov said the conversation showed that the two leaders "have a coinciding view of the general situation in Syria (and agree) on the end goal of reaching a settlement."

Britain, backed by the United States, France, Germany and Portugal, has proposed non-military sanctions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter if President Bashar al-Assad does not halt the use of heavy weapons within 10 days of a resolution being passed.

Despite the vote delay, there was no sign that Russia has withdrawn its veto threat. "We cannot accept Chapter VII and the section about sanctions," Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in Moscow.

The mandate of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria, or UNSMIS, ends tomorrow and without a resolution the UN may have to hurriedly withdraw the nearly 300 unarmed observers now in Damascus.

## WTO MEMBERSHIP

### Russia passes final hurdle

AFP, Moscow

The Russian upper house on parliament yesterday passed the bill ratifying Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization, the final legislative step required before President Vladimir Putin signs it into law.

The Federation Council voted overwhelmingly in favour of joining the world trade body, bringing Russia to the verge of finally joining the organisation after 18 years of often acrimonious negotiations.

The upper house approved the bill with 144 votes in favour and three votes against. The accession will become Russian law 30 days after Putin signs the measure.

Economists have long argued that Russia needed to join the WTO as it was the only major global economy outside the body -- following China's membership in 2001.

## LIBYA POLL RESULT

### Liberal bloc leads without majority

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's liberal coalition beat Islamist parties in the first poll since the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi, according to results unveiled Tuesday -- but it remained unclear who will dominate the next congress.

The National Forces Alliance, a liberal coalition led by wartime prime minister Mahmud Jibril, gained 39 of 80 seats open to parties in the General National Congress, the first elected authority after more than four decades of dictatorship.

The Justice and Construction Party, which was launched by Libya's Muslim Brotherhood, took only 17 seats. The remainder of party seats went to a constellation of smaller parties, according to the electoral commission's preliminary figures.

The complete tally, however, does not paint a clear picture about who will dominate the incoming congress, where the majority of seats -- 120 of 200 -- were reserved for individual candidates.

The two leading parties are courting independents and smaller entities in a bid to form a dominant bloc within the congress, where major decisions and legislation require a two-thirds majority to pass.

If liberals do manage to hold sway over the assembly, Libya, unlike neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt whose strongmen were also toppled in last year's Arab Spring, will buck the trend of electoral success for Islamist movements.

## Blast destroys 22 Nato fuel trucks

AFP, Mazar-i-sharif

A Taliban bomb attack has destroyed 22 fuel tankers carrying supplies for Nato forces in Afghanistan, local officials yesterday said.

A pre-dawn explosion triggered a fire, which engulfed the trucks, parked in northern Samangan province overnight on their way from Uzbekistan towards Nato forces in the south, Samangan deputy governor said.

Nato was forced to make increasing use of more expensive northern supply routes after Pakistan banned Nato traffic following a botched US air strike, which killed 24 Pakistani soldiers last November.

Taliban insurgents fighting to overthrow the Western-backed government of President Hamid Karzai claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that several private guards were killed.

## Lack of exercise kills 5m a year

AFP, Paris

A third of the world's adults are physically inactive, and the couch potato lifestyle kills about five million people every year, experts said in the medical journal The Lancet yesterday.

The report described the problem as a "pandemic", and said about 1.5 billion people do not reach present physical activity recommendations, which is 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five times a week, 20 minutes of vigorous activity three times a week, or a combination of the two.

A second study, comparing physical activity levels with statistics on diseases like diabetes, heart problems and cancer, said lack of exercise claimed more than 5.3 million of the 57 million deaths worldwide in 2008.

It said inactivity was a risk factor comparable to smoking or obesity.



PHOTO: AFP

United Progressive Alliance (UPA) vice presidential candidate Hamid Ansari files his nomination papers in the presence of the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress Chief Sonia Gandhi and other dignitaries at parliament in New Delhi yesterday. The vice-presidential election takes place on August 7.

# Pranab set to be Indian president

AFP, New Delhi

India's former finance minister Pranab Mukherjee is set to win presidential elections today, with some analysts predicting he may wield an unusual degree of influence in the ceremonial role.

The result of the vote by national and state lawmakers will be announced on Sunday, but Mukherjee is the candidate of the ruling Congress party and appears to have won the support of enough smaller parties to ensure his victory.

Mukherjee, 76, will take over as president from Pratibha Patil, a low-profile figure who has maintained a strictly detached stance during her five years in the job.

But with the national parliament often deadlocked by disputes among rival parties and no clear winner expected in the next general election due in 2014, Mukherjee could play a key role in overseeing who forms the next government.

"There is no permanent equation in India's coalition politics and if



Mukherjee becomes the president then his art of negotiation will be put to the test," TK Tripathi, a leading political analyst and author, told AFP.

"He can be the kingmaker in this age of complex coalition politics."

Until only last month, Mukherjee was at the heart of India's Congress-led government, which has struggled with policy paralysis, rebellious coalition partners and corruption scandals since winning re-election in 2009.

Amid such uncertainty, Congress faces a major challenge in keeping

enough coalition allies on board to push through much-needed reforms, and the party is already braced for a tough battle to retain power in 2014.

The main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is also unlikely to win a clear majority in the general election, meaning a shaky grouping including several regional parties could try to form the government.

Despite his decades at the top of the Congress party, Mukherjee commands respect from across the political spectrum and his renowned negotiating skills would be valuable after a messy general election result.

"Political ties are changing. Every party is scouting new partners to be able to form the government," Sanjay Kumar, a political analyst at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies think-tank in New Delhi, told AFP.

"It is in this turbulent scenario, Mukherjee as a president will be able to steer the ship of the state. He is a trouble-shooter," Kumar told AFP.



## Kim named 'Marshal' of North Korea

AFP, Seoul

Kim Jong-Un has been made "Marshal" of North Korea, a title previously held by his late father, Pyongyang said yesterday, as the young successor of the communist dynasty tightens his grip on power.

The move came after army chief Ri Yong-Ho was removed from his post due to "illness" and the little-known Hyon Yong-Cho promoted to vice marshal, paving the way for him to take over as head of the military.

Analysts said the new title underlined Jong-Un's efforts to reinforce control over the 1.2-million-strong military. The new leader, who is in his late 20s, has made a series of visits to military units since his father died in December.

"A decision was made to award the title of Marshal of the DPRK (North Korea) to Kim Jong-Un, supreme commander of the Korean People's Army," the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

The title of Marshal was held by both Jong-Un's father, Kim Jong-Il, and his grandfather Kim Il-Sung, the North's founding father.

KCNA said North Koreans were filled with joy on hearing the news of Jong-Un's new title. "All people throughout the country have taken the news as the nation's great auspicious event," it said.

## 'We can't deliver justice' to Afghans

Karzai admits govt failure

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai yesterday admitted his Western-backed administration was unable to deliver justice to the people, despite decade-long international efforts to rebuild the war-torn nation.

Led by the United States, the international community has pumped billions of dollars into Afghanistan since the Taliban's Islamist regime was toppled in a 2001 invasion, and Nato has 130,000 troops defending Karzai's government.

"No doubt there has been lots of progress in governance, in delivering service to the people. The government, the parliament and the courts have better capabilities compared to 10 years ago," Karzai said in a speech as he inaugurated an association of Afghan women judges.

"But we are in the place that the people desire, we are in the place to heal the pains and suffering of the Afghanistan people in a way that the people desire? No."

"The reason that the people of Afghanistan in the villages and across the countryside, (even) in the cities, still seek justice through the traditional method is because the government neither has the ability to provide that justice nor can it be addressed on time.

"And sometimes -- I hope it's only sometimes, not most of the times -- instead of getting justice, they are getting injustice," admits the Afghan president.

## Rahul to decide his role in party

Says Sonia Gandhi

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Congress party President Sonia Gandhi yesterday said it is for her son Rahul Gandhi to decide for himself on playing a larger role in the party.

"No one can take a decision on his behalf. He has to take a decision," she said in Parliament House after Hamid Ansari filed his nomination papers for vice presidential elections scheduled for August 7.

Sonia's remarks come in the backdrop of a growing chorus among senior Congress leaders like Digvijaya Singh and Law Minister Salman Khurshid that Rahul, the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi clan, should play a bigger role in the party's politics.

"Finally the time has come for him to assume a larger role... He has been confining himself to Youth Congress and the student wing of the party. He should come into the mainstream... This is the demand of all Congressmen. We all want him to start working proactively," Digvijaya Singh, party general secretary, had said earlier this week.

Rahul, 43, has, however, refused to comment on the speculation and has declined invite to join the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Rahul had led Congress in recent elections to state assembly in Uttar Pradesh but his party failed to do well and he accepted the blame for the party's poor performance.

## Suu Kyi to get highest US honour

AFP, Washington

The United States will present its highest award to Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi in September when she makes her first US trip in more than two decades, congressional aides said Tuesday.

Suu Kyi, who was elected to parliament this year in a dramatic sign of Myanmar's reforms, will travel to Washington in September to receive the Congressional Gold Medal, the aides told AFP.

The medal is the top honor bestowed by the US Congress, with the ceremonies often bringing together the president and top lawmakers. Congress voted to give the medal to Suu Kyi in May 2008 when the prospect of her leaving Myanmar looked remote.

It will be the 67-year-old Suu Kyi's first visit to the United States since she was put under house arrest following her party's victory in 1990 elections, the results of which the military junta refused to accept.

Suu Kyi did not travel abroad again until May this year when she went to Thailand. Last month, she made an extensive tour of Europe, where she belatedly accepted her Nobel Peace Prize, and received a rapturous reception.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton invited Suu Kyi to Washington when the top US diplomat paid a landmark visit to Myanmar, also known as Burma, in December.

## NEWS IN brief

### Ethiopian PM in 'critical' state

AFP, Brussels

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was in a Brussels hospital in a "critical" state yesterday, several diplomatic sources told AFP, but the Ethiopian government denied he was unwell.

"He is in a critical state, his life is in danger," said a diplomat who asked not to be named.

But several diplomats in Brussels said he had been undergoing regular treatment on a private basis at one of the city's major hospitals and had been in hospital for some days.

In Brussels, the Ethiopian embassy refused to

### US names new Afghan, Pak envoys

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama yesterday named veteran diplomats to be the US ambassadors to Afghanistan and Pakistan, tasking them with shaping highly sensitive relationships after US troops pull out.

Two months after the incumbents resigned, Obama named Richard Olson, a former ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, to serve in Pakistan and James Cunningham, the number two at the US embassy in Kabul, to be the ambassador.

The two men will need confirmation by the Senate. They would serve as the US prepares to withdraw combat forces from Afghanistan in 2014, a transition that also profoundly impacts rocky relations with Pakistan.

### Nuke fuel removed from Fukushima

AFP, Tokyo

Workers at Japan's crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant yesterday removed nuclear fuel for the first time since last year's tsunami-sparked crisis, media said.

Television footage showed dozens of operatives, all wearing white protection suits, atop the heavily damaged building at unit No. 4, extracting a fuel rod with a crane.

Yesterday's operation was the first time TEPCO has been able to remove any nuclear material since disaster struck at the plant in March 2011.

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