

Tense calm returns to Damascus

Fierce clashes kill 24 across Syria; three more generals defect

AFP, Damascus

Heavy clashes raged between Syrian troops and rebels yesterday, with at least 24 people killed nationwide, while a tense calm reigned in Damascus after days of fierce fighting.

Activists reported fierce fighting in the country's second city Aleppo, with regime forces shelling several neighbourhoods.

In Damascus, residents said the city was largely calm after days of heavy clashes. However, at least seven people were reported killed in the capital, most of them by snipers.

Elsewhere in the country, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported government forces were shelling parts of the central city of Homs, adding that there were also clashes in the eastern city of Deir Ezzor and in Daraa in the south.

The pace of violence in the country has ramped up in recent days, particularly after a Wednesday bombing -- claimed by the rebel Free Syrian Army -- which killed four senior regime members, including national security chief General Hisham Ikhtiyar, who died of his wounds on Friday.



A demonstrator protests against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his regime yesterday in Istanbul.

PHOTO: AFP

After a Tuesday announcement by rebels of the "battle for the liberation of Damascus," the army has stepped up operations in the city, as well as elsewhere in the country.

The Observatory said the nationwide death toll on Friday stood at 233, including 153 civilians, 43 soldiers and

37 rebels.

It reported that Thursday was the deadliest day of the uprising so far, with 302 people killed.

Meanwhile, three more Syrian generals have crossed into Turkey, bringing to 24 the number of generals who have fled the unrest in Syria, a Turkey foreign ministry diplomat told AFP Friday.

Turkey has given sanctuary to dozens of defectors who have formed the Free Syrian Army in opposition to President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Speaking in Croatia yesterday, UN chief Ban Ki-moon said he was "deeply distressed by the rising death toll," warning that the limited extension of the UN mission showed "the onus is above all on the parties, with the Syrian government in the first place who must stop the killings.

At the United Nations, Security Council permanent members Russia and China both voted in favour of a resolution extending the mandate of the UN Supervision Mission in Syria for a "final" 30 days, after blocking an earlier text.

Mamata talks tough to Congress

Says will go it alone in West Bengal election



AGENCIES

will remain there," she said. Trinamool partners the Congress both in the state and at the Centre. In West Bengal though, the Congress is a junior partner in the government.

Raising the pitch again for a three-year moratorium on interest payments, the West Bengal chief minister said her government would wait for some time for the centre to respond to the state's demand.

She said if it was not forthcoming, then all MPs and MLAs of Trinamool along with the legislators of Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM) would march to Delhi to meet the prime minister for fulfillment of the demands.

Reacting to Banerjee's comments, Congress' Shakeel Ahmed said she had not said anything wrong and agreed that mutual respect was essential for any alliance. "She wants respect. Congress also wants respect. Mamata Ji has said right things. We agree with her. We must respect each other's sentiments," he said. Ahmed is the Congress' in-charge for the state.

The latest announcement by the Chief Minister comes in the wake of a string of episodes that have seen both parties teetering dangerously on break point.

Most recently, the presidential polls saw Banerjee standing firmly opposite the Congress as she continued to reject the latter's candidate, Pranab Mukherjee, till she finally came around to pledge her support to him - albeit with a "heavy heart".

But the incident was clearly not new to the Congress which has been held hostage by Banerjee on several occasions. Her strong opposition to key legislations and policy decisions has led to several important reforms being put on the backburner - Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in retail and pension bill being some of the notable ones.

Cameron should stop 'aping' Blair



BBC ONLINE

David Cameron should stop "modelling himself" on Tony Blair and learn instead from Margaret Thatcher, a former Tory chancellor has claimed.

Lord Lawson told the BBC Blair was a "bad role model" and the prime minister was better off trying to emulate Lady Thatcher's style of leadership.

Cameron has faced calls from backbenchers for a more distinctively Conservative approach on issues such as Europe and welfare amid recent grumblings about the coalition's direction and concessions to the Liberal Democrats.

One MP suggested recently that Cameron needed to hone his management skills and to widen his circle of advisers to include people with different political backgrounds and opinions.

Despite frequent clashes before his 1989 resignation, Lord Lawson remains a strong admirer of Thatcher.

When Cameron became Conservative leader in 2005 and set about trying to modernise the party, he reportedly described himself to political journalists as the "heir to Blair".

It was reported earlier this year that Cameron had sought the former Labour prime minister's advice since taking power, mainly on foreign issues.

But Lord Lawson said the prime minister should not be aping the style of his Labour predecessor - known for his "sofa-style" of government in which key decisions were made by an informal group of close advisers.

Road mishaps kill 27 in India

IANS, Guwahati

At least 27 people were killed and 21 others injured in road accidents in three northeastern states - Mizoram, Assam and Manipur, officials said yesterday.

At least 18 people were killed and 17 others injured when an overloaded bus carrying them fell into a gorge in Mizoram early yesterday. The accident occurred when the bus crashed into the debris of a landslide near Keifang village, about 80 km from Aizawl city, and then toppled off the road.

In Assam, five people were killed and two injured when a speeding car skidded off the road and fell into a ditch on national highway (NH)-52 in Sonitpur district, bordering Bhutan yesterday.

In another incident, at least four people, including two women, were killed and two others sustained injuries when a car in which they were travelling slid down a steep hill slope in Tamenglong district in western Manipur late Friday evening.

Somali piracy is on the decline: Nato

REUTERS, Muscat

The threat from Somali pirates is receding but the international community must continue to work together to eliminate the menace, a Nato official said yesterday.

"We are getting more successful in reducing the Somali piracy threats with our constant patrolling but the international community must continue to exchange ideas and increase efforts to completely eradicate the problem," Commodore Ben Bekkering, Nato's counter-piracy commander, said at a news conference on Dutch war vessel HNLMS Evertsen in Muscat.

According to the International Maritime Bureau, there were 69 hijacking incidents by Somali pirates from January 1 to July 12 this year, a drop of 32 percent compared to the same period in 2011.

"We are happy to say that Oman's navy is cooperating and helping us to find the hijackers but it is like looking for a needle in a haystack," Bekkering said.

Pirate gangs can stay out at sea for long periods using captured merchant vessels as mother ships and have been using Yemen's remote island of Socotra as a refueling hub.

Oman lies at the mouth of the Gulf, a strategic, heavily patrolled waterway which channels the bulk of the world's crude shipments.

"The Somali piracy crisis is costing world trade billions of dollars a year. It is important we all work together to stop it," Bekkering said.

Nato said earlier that increased use of armed security guards, and other defences like water cannon and razor wire are also helping reduce the number of successful attacks on merchant ships.

NEWS IN brief

Obama delivers Ramadan message

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Friday praised the courage of dissidents fighting for democracy in Muslim countries, in a message marking the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

"On behalf of the American people, Michelle and I extend our warmest wishes to Muslim Americans and Muslims around the world at the start of Ramadan," Obama said in a statement.

Although he did not mention by name the "Arab Spring" uprisings against authoritarian Arab rulers, Obama said "this year, Ramadan holds special meaning for those citizens in the Middle East and North Africa who are courageously achieving democracy and self-determination and for those who are still

Putin signs Russia into WTO

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin yesterday signed the bill ratifying Russia's entry to the World Trade Organization after 18 years of often acrimonious negotiations, the Kremlin press office said.

Economists have long argued that Russia needed to join the WTO as it was the only major economy outside the body -- following China's membership in 2001 -- and the government hopes accession will stimulate growth.

The measure making Russia the 156th WTO member will become law within 30 days, after the lower house of parliament approved it on July 10 and the

Japan to probe nuke cover-up claim

BBC ONLINE

The Japanese government yesterday said it will investigate a report that workers at the stricken Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant were urged to disguise their exposure to radiation.

Build-Up, a subcontractor for plant operator Tepco, admitted one of its executives told workers to put lead shields on radiation detection devices.

Otherwise, they would have rapidly exceeded the

PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

India awaits result today

IANS, New Delhi

Victory of Pranab Mukherjee, the ruling UPA's candidate for the presidential poll held Thursday, is a foregone conclusion, but the final outcome will be announced after counting of the ballots today at Parliament House.

"The results of the presidential election will be known immediately after counting is over Sunday," Rajya Sabha Secretary General and returning officer for the poll VK Agnihotri said here.

Rajya Sabha officials, who have been entrusted with the conduct of the presidential poll, said all the ballot boxes from the states have reached Parliament House, where a strong room for storing them had been prepared.

India's lawmakers, belonging to both the national parliament and the state legislative assemblies, had cast their ballots Thursday to elect the nation's 13th president.

About 95 percent of the total 4,896 electors - 776 MPs and 4,120 assembly members - exercised their franchise at the polling centres set up at Parliament House and 30 other state and union territories with assemblies.

Mukherjee is expected to bag 735,000 of the 1,097,000 votes, bagging the support of the United Progressive Alliance constituents such as the Congress, Nationalist Congress Party, Trinamool Congress, DMK, and National Conference, apart from supporting parties such as the Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal and others.

His rival Purno Sangma, is expected to garner about 313,000 votes.



Relatives of the massacre victims cry during a candlelight vigil on Friday in Denver, Colorado, USA.

US mourns massacre victims

Call grows to restrict civilians' access to firearms

AFP, Aurora

Bomb squad experts were trying yesterday to enter a gunman's booby-trapped apartment, hours after a late-night vigil for the 12 killed in a US cinema massacre that also injured 70.

Hundreds of mourners held candles, many sobbing and hugging each other in an outpouring of grief for those who died when the gunman opened fire in a packed cinema showing Batman movie "The Dark Knight Rises."

The shooting drew expressions of concern from political leaders led by President Barack Obama, and revived the perennial debate about gun control in the United States.

On Saturday, Obama promised justice to the residents of Aurora, Colorado, saying: "The federal government stands ready to do everything

necessary to bring whoever's responsible for this heinous crime to justice."

He said the government "will take every step possible" to ensure the safety of all Americans.

Bomb squad experts had been trying for much of the day Friday to gain entrance to the apartment since shortly after the shooting in the town of Aurora just outside Denver.

But they gave up shortly before sundown, and said they would resume again Saturday, when they hope to make a breakthrough that could also reveal clues as the motives of 24-year-old gunman James Holmes.

Later Friday the town gathered for two vigils, including a midnight one, as it emerged that Holmes bought more than 6,000 rounds of ammunition on the Internet, and four guns, in the two months before the shootings.

The masked, black-clad shooter burst into a movie theater barely 20 minutes into the midnight screening, throwing two tear-gas type devices before opening fire.

In an end-of-day update, he amended slightly the number of victims of the shooting at a midnight screening of the latest Batman movie from 71 to 70. Twelve of them died, including 10 in the theater.

A local children's hospital reported six young victims, the youngest of whom was aged only six. At least three of the wounded were US military members, the Pentagon said.

Police arrested Holmes -- who was wearing full body armor and a gas mask, apparently to protect him from effects of his own tear gas -- without encountering resistance by his car at the rear of the theater.

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