

We are facing global war

Says Syria FM in Iran; opposition says transitional govt soon

AGENCIES

Syria's foreign minister met with his Iranian counterpart yesterday, with both sides decrying what they call an international plot against the Syrian regime.

"I can tell you that we are facing a global war against Syria, and as a proud Syrian I can tell you that it is a great honour to be part of a great country that is facing a ferocious attack by certain countries," Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem told reporters in Tehran.

He also described a "media campaign" by the United States and others about chemical weapons in Syria.

Moallem also delivered ominous words about the battle for Aleppo, Syria's largest city that has seen more than a week of clashes between regime and rebel fighters.

"Since last week, (opposition fighters) planned for whatever they called the 'great Damascus battle,' but they have failed after one week. That's why they moved to Aleppo, and I can assure you that they will fail," he said.

"Syria is now stronger and will move ahead in facing the aggression against our nation," Moallem said.

The Iranian foreign minister showed his support for the Syrian regime, saying Israel is behind "a conspiracy against Syria."



Walid Moallem, left, with Ali Akbar Salehi

"It is completely ridiculous and delusive to believe that there is a possibility of creating a vacuum in the leadership in Syria," Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi said.

"We call upon the people of the region to be fully aware and not to move in the wrong direction because there will be severe consequences that will go beyond the borders of the region to the outside world," Salehi warned.

Meanwhile, the head of the Syrian National Council (SNC), the main umbrella group for

opponents of President Bashar al-Assad, said yesterday that talks would be held within weeks to form a transitional government that would in time replace Assad's ministerial team.

Abdelbasset Sida, president of the SNC, said such a government would run the country between Assad's ousting and democratic elections. Most of its members would be drawn from the opposition, but some members of the current Assad government might also be included, he added.

"This government should come about before the fall (of Assad) so that it presents itself as an alternative for the next stage," Sida told Abu Dhabi-based Sky News Arabia television in an interview broadcast on Sunday.

"The committees that we have set up have their own schedules. Obviously, the matter should be concluded within weeks."

"There are some elements in the current regime who are not bloodstained, who were not part of major corruption cases. We will discuss (including them) with other parties, but there should be a national consensus to accept them."

However, criticism about the SNC's legitimacy may complicate its efforts to form a transitional government. It has sometimes struggled to overcome internal divisions and critics have accused the Istanbul-based organisation of being out of touch, overly influenced by Turkey, and not fully representative of the opposition.

Libya rebels join battlefield in Syria

CNN ONLINE

Their war for freedom in Libya may be over, but almost a year after they won the battle for the Libyan capital, a group of fighters have a new battlefield: Syria.

Under the command of one of Libya's most well known rebel commanders, Al-Mahdi al-Harati, more than 30 Libyan fighters have made their way into Syria to support the Free Syrian Army rebels in their war against President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Al-Harati, who commanded the Tripoli Revolutionary brigade -- which was the first group of rebels to enter the Libyan capital last August -- has been in Syria for months leading some of his former men and Syrian military defectors who have joined his "Liwa al-Umma" or "The Banner of the Nation" brigade.

Al-Harati, who has dual Libyan and Irish citizenship, said: "With the prior success in Libya I decided to leave nationality aside and, just like world organizations helped Libya in its time of need, I decided to pass my experience to others to benefit."

However, he said there were no active efforts to recruit Libyans.

Last month, a senior Libyan security official told CNN the government was aware of Libyans fighting in Syria, but they were individuals and not government sponsored.

Earlier this year, Russia's ambassador to the United Nations, accused Libya of hosting and training Syrian rebels. A claim denied by the Libyan prime minister.

Libya was one of the first countries to recognize the opposition Syrian National Council in February.



Egypt PM to announce govt on Thursday

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt's new cabinet will be announced on Thursday, state media said on Saturday, ending what was seen as a long wait for a new government following the swearing-in of President Mohamed Morsi three weeks ago.

"I will announce the formation of the cabinet in its final form next Thursday," Prime Minister Hisham Kandil said in statements carried by state news agency MENA and state TV.

The former Irrigation and Water Resources Minister was designated premier last week, despite concerns the little-known technocrat may not have the political or economic experience needed for the job.

The time it took Morsi to name his prime minister underlined how Egypt is struggling to turn new political freedoms into an effective government following the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in a popular uprising a year and half ago.

A Muslim Brotherhood politician and Egypt's first freely elected civilian president, Morsi is seeking to stamp his authority on a state where the military that assumed power from Mubarak still wields enormous influence.

Kandil said Morsi was in contact with the army generals on the choice of a new defence minister, a post currently occupied by Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, who held the post for 20 years under Mubarak.

ASSAM RIOTS

No fresh clash, curfew relaxed

PTI, Assam

The situation in the strife-torn lower Assam districts is limping back to normal with authorities relaxing curfew in the worst-hit Kokrajhar district yesterday.

The indefinite curfew clamped in Kokrajhar has been relaxed for the day while night curfew between 6:00pm to 6:00am will continue in the other affected districts, official sources said.

The official death toll remained at 53 and there was no report of any fresh incident of violence.

More than three lakh people have been affected in the violence that went on for eight days.

With law and order situation improving, the district administrations are taking measures to persuade victims to return to their homes.

US briefed Israel: Romney backs strike on Iran

Reveals Israeli newspaper

REUTERS, Jerusalem

President Barack Obama's national security adviser has briefed Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on a US contingency plan to attack Iran should diplomacy fail to curb its nuclear programme, an Israeli newspaper reported yesterday.

The Haaretz newspaper said that the US adviser - Thomas Donilon - had described the plan in talks with Netanyahu earlier this month.

A senior Netanyahu aide, Harel Locker, refused to comment on the report when asked about it in an interview with an Israeli radio station. Another Israeli official reached by telephone, said "we do not comment on closed-door diplomatic meetings".

Quoting a senior US official it said spoke on condition of anonymity, Haaretz said Donilon had told Netanyahu the Pentagon was planning for a possible decision to attack Iran's nuclear sites, and had shown him some of the plans.

In their talks, the same official said Donilon had also detailed the US military's ability to penetrate nuclear facilities buried deep underground, and had said that such contingency plans were being drawn up in case of a possible deadlock in diplomacy with Iran.

Iran says its nuclear programme is solely for peaceful purposes.

AFP, Jerusalem

Mitt Romney would back unilateral military action by Israel against Iran's nuclear sites, a senior aide said as the presumptive Republican candidate held a series of high-level meetings in Jerusalem affirming his support for the Jewish nation.

The Republican challenger, who will face off against President Barack Obama in November's US election, flew in from Britain late on Saturday for a one-day visit expected to focus on Iran's nuclear programme, which Israel and much of the West believes is a covert bid to develop atomic weapons.

"Like you, we are very concerned about the development of nuclear capabilities on the part of Iran and feel it is unacceptable for Iran to become a nuclear armed nation," Romney told reporters on meeting President Shimon Peres.

"The threat it would pose to Israel,



Mitt Romney, left, with Benjamin Netanyahu

the region and the world is incomparable and unacceptable."

"Iran and its effort to become a nuclear-capable nation (is one) which I take with great seriousness, and look forward to chatting with you about further actions that we can take to dissuade Iran from their nuclear folly," Romney told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier yesterday in remarks carried on Israeli public radio.

Netanyahu told him it was important to have "a strong and credible military threat" because sanctions and diplomacy "so far have not set back the Iranian programme by one iota."

"It's important to do everything in our power to prevent the Ayatollahs from possessing that capability," he said.

Israel is widely believed to have the Middle East's only, albeit undeclared, nuclear arsenal.

Romney later met Shaul Mofaz, leader of the Israeli opposition, who warned him it was not the right time for a military strike on Iran.

"Romney was expected to express support for Israel's right to mount a pre-emptive strike when he gives a foreign policy statement later on Sunday, the New York Times reported.

Romney also met Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad in Jerusalem yesterday evening. No details on the meeting were immediately available.

ANTI-GRAFT PROTEST

Hazare starts new hunger strike

AFP, New Delhi

Indian activist Anna Hazare, who galvanised the country last year with his hunger strikes against corruption, began a new fast yesterday to press demands for a crackdown on official graft.

Hazare and his supporters want parliament to strengthen a pending anti-corruption bill and the creation of a special team to probe possible graft allegations against 15 ministers, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The 75-year-old former army truck driver threatened to fast until death if the demands are not met.

"I am confident that... the people of my country will not let me die. I draw my strength and confidence from you," Hazare told supporters gathered in New Delhi.

Some senior members of the Hazare campaign had already started hunger strikes at the same venue four days before.

Hazare became an unlikely national hero last August when he led countrywide protests that tapped into a rich seam of public anger at India's endemic corruption.

Although around 4,000 supporters turned out yesterday, observers say the campaign has lost much of its momentum since the heady days of last summer.

The media has also been less supportive, suggesting that Hazare risks overstepping in insisting that parliament adopts his campaign's input for the new anti-corruption bill.

Hazare's direct attacks on Prime Minister Singh and the ruling Congress party have also led to accusations that he and his campaign organisers were pursuing a political agenda.



PHOTO: AFP

JS panel unhappy

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"Officials of the ministry informed the committee that there are adequate supply and stocks of edible oil, onion, gram, lentil, red chilli and other essentials used for iftar items. Then why these items are selling at higher prices," chief of the House body ABM Abul Qasem told journalists after it met at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

Meanwhile, the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh says retail prices of essentials have increased by 10 percent on an average compared to those during Ramadan last year.

Visiting Karwan Bazar, Palashi and New Market kitchen markets, this correspondent found the prices of onion rose to Tk 24-35 a kg from Tk 20-28 in the last one month.

And the prices of gram shot up to Tk 80-85 a kg from Tk 65-70 a month ago. In the last one week, its prices rose by Tk 2.5 a kg on average.

Consumers started feeling the pinch of soaring prices of essentials on the eve of Ramadan.

Qasem, a ruling Awami League lawmaker, said the committee asked the commerce ministry to take necessary measures which include increasing the number of mobile teams to step up vigilance on markets.

Commerce ministry officials informed the committee that 14 mobile teams are now monitoring markets in the capital. "But we have suggested increasing the number to 40, and conducting intensive market monitoring," said the House body chief.

Qasem mentioned that the committee members noted that price of edible oil in the international market has now decreased compared to that in January. "So, price of edible oil in our domestic market should also decrease in line with that in the international market... We have asked the ministry to take steps to this end," he headed.

The committee also asked the ministry to engage deputy commissioners and upazila nirbahi officers to monitor prices of essentials during

Thousands of demonstrators yesterday marched on Japan's parliament in Tokyo to protest the use of nuclear power following the 2011 Fukushima atomic crisis.

Suspects in dock

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injuries at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) in Dhaka cantonment and then at Kings College Hospital, London.

Menon, however, could not identify any of the accused present in the court.

Judge Mohammad Anisur Rahman of the Fifth Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court recorded his deposition and fixed November 5 for the next hearing of the case filed a day after the incident.

Party leader Haidar Akbar Khan Rono, the plaintiff, and another prosecution witness Abdul Khalek also gave their depositions yesterday.

IMPEACHMENT BID Low turnout may spare Romanian president

REUTERS, Bucharest

The Romanian government's drive to remove President Traian Basescu hung in the balance yesterday as turnout in a referendum on whether to impeach him remained stubbornly low, well below the 50 percent level needed for a valid vote.

The election bureau said turnout was 26.9 percent by 5:00pm, suggesting that Prime Minister Victor Ponta's leftist Social Liberal Union (USL) would find it hard to get half the electorate to vote by the time polls close at 11:00pm.

Opinion polls show some 65 percent of Romanians want to remove the former sea captain from office, but the opposition has called for a boycott of the vote.

Suspects in dock

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The Criminal Investigation Department in January, 2002 pressed charges against four members of a faction of the Workers Party-- Kamrul Hossain, Abul Kalam Azad, Delwar Hossain and Kabir Master-- in the case. The court framed charges against them in October, 2003.

Azad, Kamrul and Delwar are on bail while Kabir is on the run. Azad and Kamrul were present in the courtroom.

Earlier in September, 1992, Delwar gave a confessional statement to a magistrate. He said he along with several others had attempted to kill Menon as he (Menon) failed to minimise conflicts between two factions of the party in Barisal.

It was Indian

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to carry the consignment to Bangladesh.

Kolkata police also arrested 13 people, including two Bangladeshi workers of the vessel.

"It was absolutely the fault of the exporter. The consignment of wheat was loaded under the supervision of the Kolkata Port Customs," Tareq said.

"We sent the vessel after the opening of LC (letter of credit) and obtaining permission from the inland water transport authorities of both countries," he said.

Sheikh Mahfuz Hamid, owner of Gulf Link Seaways, the prime carrier of goods on inland water routes between Bangladesh and India, said "Around 30 barges (vessels) have already been unloaded at the Mongla port with wheat imported from India.

"These barges went to Kolkata port with proper documents to carry wheat," he said.

"The exporter has committed the crime of buying (Indian) government wheat meant for the poor. The vessel owner has nothing to do with it," said Hamid, who has been in the business for nearly two decades.

Mofizur Rahman, director of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority, also confirmed to The Daily Star that the documents under which the vessel had been permitted to carry the wheat were all right.

"We will discuss the issue with the government today," said Rahman.

Ashok Shal, an employee of LMG International, who was in Dhaka yesterday, could not be contacted as he did not receive phone calls from this correspondent despite several attempts.

Ahmed Hossain Khan, director general of the Directorate of Food, Bangladesh, also did not respond to this correspondent's phone call.

NEWS IN brief

Ebola outbreak in Uganda kills 14

AFP, Kampala

An outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus that erupted in western Uganda at the start of July has killed 14 people, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said on Saturday.

The latest outbreak was in the western Kibaale district, around 200 kilometres west of the Ugandan capital Kampala, and around 50 kilometres from the border with Democratic Republic of Congo.

"We have confirmed 20 people who have contracted the virus of which 14 have died," Joaquim Sewaka, WHO Uganda representative, told AFP.

Assange's mom seeks Ecuador's help

AFP, Quito

The mother of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange arrived in Ecuador on Saturday for talks with top government officials after her son had found refuge in the Ecuadoran embassy in London, a government website reported.

Ecuador will respond to Assange's request on August 12, Patino said, after the 2012 London Olympics.

US drone kills 7 in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

A US drone attack yesterday killed at least seven militants in Pakistan, officials said, days before the country's intelligence chief visits Washington with the contentious raids likely to be discussed.

Drone strikes are likely to be a major issue when Pakistan's spymaster, Lieutenant General Zaheer ul-Islam, holds talks in Washington on August 1-3 with his CIA counterpart.

In yesterday's attack, the second in the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, missiles struck a compound in Khushhali Turikhel village of the troubled North Waziristan tribal district, which lies on the border with Afghanistan.

Dozens killed in N Korea floods

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday warned that more rainstorms will hit the country's north and western coastal regions this week, after recent flooding killed 88 people and left tens of thousands homeless.

Heavy rains are expected in most parts of the country on Sunday and Monday, state-run KCNA said, particularly warning of downpours set to deluge the west coast and the northern province of Jagang.