

Syrian aircraft strike Aleppo

Rebels claim successes, opposition figure to lead government in exile

India names new finance minister

AGENCIES

Syrian combat aircraft and artillery pounded two areas of Aleppo yesterday as the army battled for control of the country's biggest city, but rebel fighters said troops loyal to President Bashar al-Assad had been forced to retreat.

Heavy gunfire sounded from the Salaheddine district in the southwest of the city, scene of some of the worst clashes, reports Reuters.

Large clouds of black smoke rose into the sky after attack helicopters turned their machineguns on eastern districts for the first time in the latest fighting and a MiG warplane later strafed the same area of the city.

Meanwhile, Syrian opposition figure Haytham al-Maleh told reporters yesterday that he has been tasked with forming a government in exile based in Cairo.

"I have been tasked with leading a transitional government," Maleh said, adding that he will begin consultations "with the opposition inside and outside" the country.

Maleh, a conservative Muslim, said he was named by a Syrian coalition of "independents with no political affiliation", reports AFP.

The army said two days ago it had taken Salaheddine, but Syrian state television said yesterday troops were still pursuing remain-

ing "terrorists" there, in an indication that the army did not after all have full control of the area.

A rebel commander in Aleppo said his fighters' aim was to push towards the city centre, district by district, a goal he believed they could achieve "within days, not weeks".

The rebels now control an arc that covers east-

ern and southwestern districts.

"The regime has tried for three days to regain Saleheddine, but its attempts have failed and it has suffered heavy losses in human life, weapons and tanks, and it has been forced to withdraw," said Colonel Abdel-Jabbar al-Oqaidi, head of the Joint Military Council, one of several rebel groups in Aleppo.

It has not been possible to verify independently who controls Salaheddine, a district that lies on a major road that the army could use to bring reinforcements into the city.

Oqaidi told Reuters late on Monday more than 3,000 rebel fighters were in Aleppo, but would not give a precise number.

The battle for Aleppo has become a crucial test for both sides in the 16-month-old rebellion. Neither Assad's forces nor the rag-tag rebels can afford to lose if they hope to prevail in the wider struggle for Syria.

The fighting has proved costly for the 2.5 million residents of Aleppo, a commercial hub that was slow to join the anti-Assad revolt that has rocked the capital, Damascus, and other cities.

While rebels say they will turn Aleppo into the "grave" of the Assad government, thousands of residents have fled and those who remain face shortages of food and fuel and the ever-present risk of injury or death.



PHOTO: AFP

Two Syrian rebel fighters load an anti-aircraft gun in the northern town of Atareb, 25 kms east of Aleppo yesterday.

Bill Clinton to give nomination address for Obama

AFP, Washington

Bill Clinton will sprinkle his political stardust on President Barack Obama's re-election bid by giving the nominating address at the Democratic Party convention, the campaign announced Monday.

The 65-year-old former president, still a hugely popular figure more than 11 years after leaving office, will outline the economic arguments for giving Obama a second term in a speech on September 5 in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney are locked in a neck-and-neck battle for the White House ahead of November 6 elections likely to be dominated by the economic concerns weighing heavily on the electorate.

The US economy has grown slowly in recent quarters as much of Europe has slipped backed into recession. Unemployment remains stubbornly high, above eight percent, and Obama has struggled to produce lasting economic momentum.

Given the tough economic climate the address could be a tough task for Clinton, whose outspoken remarks on tax policy



Bill Clinton

Barack Obama

and one-time endorsement of Romney's "sterling" business record have frustrated the Obama campaign team.

But he is also a massively popular figure and a charismatic speaker who is seen as having a wonderful personal touch and who can appeal to certain demographics that Obama struggles with.

A Gallup poll released on Monday showed that two-thirds of Americans have a favourable opinion of Clinton, tying the record-high favourability he achieved at the time of his January 1993 inauguration.

"President Clinton oversaw the longest economic expansion in US history, pursuing many of the same policies that president Obama is proposing and implementing today," said 2012

Democratic Convention Chair, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

"That economic progress was squandered in the following decade by a set of decisions that exploded our deficit, crashed our economy, and hurt the middle-class.

"So, there is no one better to lay out the choice in this election between moving forward with president Obama or falling backward with Mitt Romney, who supports the same failed policies that led to the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression."

Clinton addressed the convention four years ago under very different circumstances after his wife, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, narrowly missed out to Obama in a bitter contest for the Democratic nomination.

His address and endorsement of Obama, after being one of his fiercest critics, was seen as a crucial step in unifying the party behind what turned out to be a winning ticket.

In US politics, a couple of months before polling day, raucous conventions are held at which rival candidates are formally nominated and party grandees and rising stars try to whip up support with stirring speeches.

POISON CLAIM
Arafat widow lodges legal suit

AFP, Paris

The widow and daughter of Yasser Arafat yesterday launched legal action in France over claims that the veteran Palestinian leader died of radioactive polonium poisoning, their lawyer said.

Suha and Zawra Arafat lodged a civil suit for murder against persons unknown with investigating magistrates in the Paris suburb of Nanterre, said lawyer Pierre-Olivier Sur.

Yasser Arafat died at a military hospital near Paris in 2004.

Allegations that the Nobel Peace Prize laureate was poisoned were resurrected earlier this month after Al-Jazeera news channel broadcast an investigation in which experts said they found high levels of polonium on his personal effects.

Pakistan, US sign
Nato convoy deal

AFP, Rawalpindi

Pakistan yesterday signed a deal with the United States governing arrangements for Nato convoys travelling to Afghanistan, seeking to draw a line under a seven-month border blockade.

Islamabad agreed to reopen land routes for Nato goods on July 3 after the longest border closure of the decade-long war in Afghanistan in protest at botched US air raids that killed 24 Pakistani troops last November.

A few trucks made it across even before the agreement which is part of efforts by the "war on terror" allies to patch up their fractious relationship, which plunged into crisis last year over the air strikes and the US raid that killed Osama bin Laden, who was hiding in Pakistan.

It comes just a day before the head of Pakistani intelligence, Lieutenant General Zaheer ul-Islam, begins a three-day visit to Washington for talks with the head of the CIA, which has been interpreted as another sign of a gradual rapprochement.

Under the agreement inked in Rawalpindi, the home of Pakistan's powerful military, the United States will release \$1.1 billion under the Coalition Support Fund to reimburse the troubled nation for fighting militants within its borders.

Officials at the ceremony gave no details of the Memorandum of Understanding nor did they release a copy at a news conference.

Guidelines laid out by the Pakistani parliament earlier this year insisted that in future no weapons and ammunition be transported through the country, though Western officials say this never happened in the first place.

A Pakistani security official said the agreement gave Islamabad the right to refuse or reject any shipment and special radio chips would be fitted to containers for monitoring.

earlier this month and became the president of India.

Chidambaram thus got back the finance portfolio after a gap of four years.

The BJP-led opposition has targeted Chidambaram and had even boycotted him in Parliament, for what it alleges is his role in the 2G telecom spectrum scam when he was finance minister.

India's ruling Congress party also needs to decide and announce, before Parliament's monsoon session begins next week, who will replace Pranab Mukherjee as Leader of the Lok Sabha.

There has been a demand from some Congressmen that two-term MP Rahul Gandhi be elevated to that role.

Congress President Sonia Gandhi is expected to take a decision soon and among those whose names have reportedly been considered is Sushil Kumar Shinde.

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Palaniappan Chidambaram

Mali weighs
unity govt

Deadline extension likely

AFP, Bamako

The clock was ticking yesterday for Bamako to announce a unity government that mediators hope will be able to wrest back Mali's north, occupied by al Qaeda-linked extremists.

The Economic Community of West African States regional bloc gave Mali's interim authorities until yesterday to form the unity government or face sanctions, however the country is likely to benefit from an extension.

Key mediator Djibrill Bassole, foreign minister of Burkina Faso, said Monday that interim President Dioncounda Traore was likely to be granted a "supplementary extension" after his return from Paris.

The bloc had lost patience with Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra's government's inability to tackle the extremist occupation.

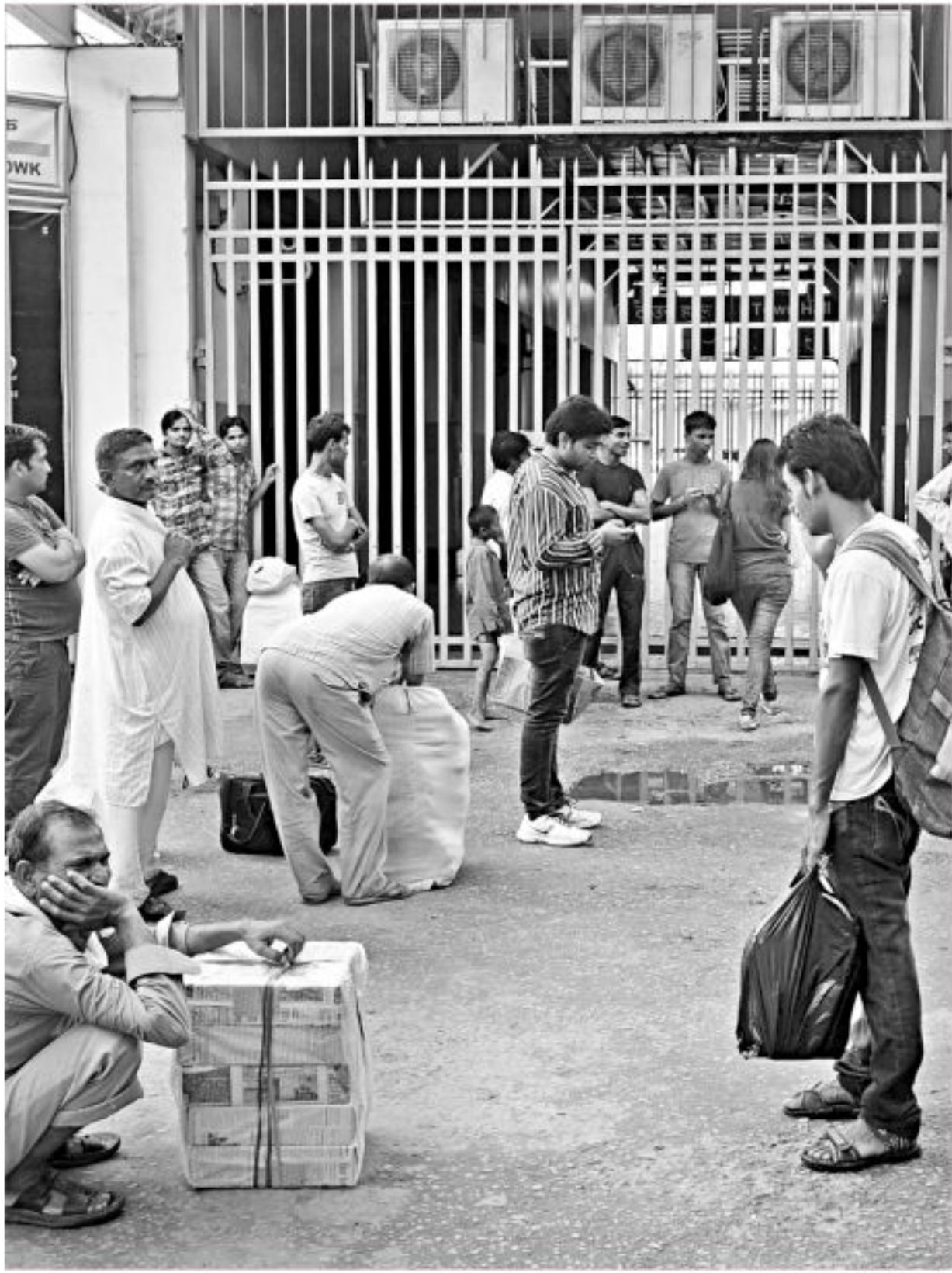


PHOTO: AFP

Indian commuters wait near the closed gate of a Delhi metro station during a power outage in New Delhi yesterday. A massive power failure hit India for the second day, blacking out more than half the country in a crisis affecting over 600 million people.

Israel receives first
contact from Mursi

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Egypt's President Mohamed Mursi told Israel yesterday he wanted to work for peace in the Middle East, in the first official message sent by the Arab state's new Islamist leadership to the Jewish state.

Politicians in Israel had expressed alarm in private over the election of the Muslim Brotherhood's Mursi in June's presidential vote and fear that over time their country's peace treaty with Egypt could be eroded.

"I am looking forward to exerting our best efforts to get the Middle East peace process back to its right track in order to achieve security and stability for all peoples of the region, including (the) Israeli people," Mursi said in the letter to Israeli President Shimon Peres.

A spokesman for Mursi in Cairo could not be reached for comment on the letter, written in English and released by the office of the Israeli president.

An Israeli official who spoke on condition of anonymity said Mursi's letter was "a general message with a positive spirit, but did not indicate any new direction" in bilateral relations.

Egypt's ousted President Hosni Mubarak had guaranteed the 1979 peace treaty with Israel for decades.

The Muslim Brotherhood is ideologically hostile to the Jewish state and linked to Hamas Islamists who run the Gaza Strip. Hamas refuses to recognize Israel's right to exist.

The presidency in Israel is a largely ceremonial post. Nobel peace-prize-winner Peres had sent Mursi two letters, his office said, one congratulating him for winning the vote and a second letter of greetings to mark the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

Romney takes swipe at state
of freedom in Russia

AFP, Warsaw

White House contender Mitt Romney, in Poland on his first visit behind the former Iron Curtain, took aim yesterday at the state of freedom in Russia.

Hailing his hosts as "an example and defender of freedom" and pledging to cement close ties with Warsaw, Romney said: "In Russia, once-promising advances toward a free and open society have faltered."

Romney wrapped up his three-stop foreign tour in Poland, which made a peaceful, if difficult, transition from communism in 1989 and is now an economically flourishing pillar of the EU and Nato, but has testy relations with communist-era master Moscow.

In an address earlier this month outlining his foreign policy approach, Romney criticised President Barack Obama's administration for what he termed its "abandonment of friends" in the region still wary of Russia.

He also had harsh words for Moscow, doubting the legitimacy of the March presidential election which returned Vladimir Putin to the Kremlin and accusing Russia of



Mitt Romney

arming the Damascus regime.

"Unfortunately, there are parts of the world today where the desire to be free is met with brutal oppression," Romney said in his speech in Warsaw yesterday.

"Just to the east of here, the people of Belarus suffer under the oppressive weight of dictatorship. The Arab world is undergoing a historic upheaval, one that holds promise, but also risk and uncertainty."

"A ruthless dictator in Syria has killed thousands of his own people. In Latin America, Hugo Chavez leads a movement characterized by authoritarianism and repression. Nations in Africa are fighting to resist the threat of violent radical jihadism."

A staunch free marketeer, Romney hailed EU member Poland's reform-oriented economy, which has flourished since the demise of communism while others in Europe are mired in debt.

"The world should pay close attention to the transformation of Poland's economy," said Romney, who met Poland's top political leaders during his trip.

Chavez in Brazil on first
foreign trip in a year

BBC ONLINE

The Venezuelan president, Hugo Chavez, has travelled to Brazil on his first official trip abroad since being diagnosed with cancer over a year ago.

Chavez will take part in a regional summit where Venezuela will become a member of the Mercosur trading bloc.

He says he is now healthy and fit to run for a third term in October's elections.

He kept a low profile during his cancer treatment, travelling only to Cuba for medical reasons.

The BBC's Sarah Grainger in Caracas says

Chavez has increased his public appearances recently.

"This trip is the latest sign that the president is cranking up his election campaign," she says.

On his 58th birthday on Saturday, he spoke for several hours at a rally in one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Caracas, dancing, singing and sharing a birthday cake with party supporters.

Many doubted that Chavez would be able to recover from cancer, details of which have remained secret.

But he always maintained that he would be ready to run in October's vote.

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