Annan bows out amid raging violence

Rebels bombard airbase in Aleppo as regime forces kill dozens in Damascus raids

AGENCIES

International envoy Kofi Annan is stepping down, UN chief Ban Ki-moon announced yesterday "with deep regret," as his April peace plan for Syria in tatters in the face of raging violence.

Rebels shelled an air base used by regime forces to pound the northern city of Aleppo.

And in Damascus, government forces launched two operations to root out rebel activists on Wednesday, killing at least 70, the opposition has said.

Troops reportedly went from house to house demanding to see people's papers. Activists say the soldiers summarily executed many of their victims.

Syrian state TV said "dozens of terrorists" surrendered or were killed in the operation.

The UN chief paid tribute to Annan for his efforts in the "most difficult" assignment of ending the bloodshed that human rights monitors say has claimed more than 20,000 lives in Syria since an uprising against President Bashar al-Assad's rule erupted in March last year.

But he said the former UN chief would now step down at the end of the month and the search had begun for a successor.

"I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Mr Annan for the determined and courageous efforts he has made as the Joint Special Envoy for Syria," Ban said.

"Kofi Annan deserves our profound

SYRIA Crisis

admiration for the selfless way in which he has put his formidable skills and prestige to this most difficult and potentially thankless of assignments," he added.

The UN and Arab League named Annan as its envoy on the Syria conflict on February 23 and he brokered a six-point peace plan that was supposed to begin with a ceasefire from April 12.

But the truce never took hold and the United Nations has begun winding down an observer mission that was supposed to oversee it ahead of the expiry of its mandate later this month.

Ban's announcement came as rebel forces shelled the Menagh air base, 30 kilometres northwest of Aleppo, as the battle for Syria's commercial capital intensified.

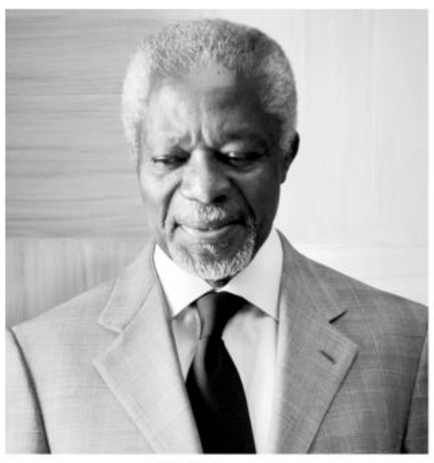
An AFP reporter who witnessed the bombardment said the rebels told him it was "an attack to take this airport being used by helicopters and planes that are firing on Aleppo."

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said a tank the rebels had captured from the army was used in the morning shelling.

Mobile phone and Internet services, cut since Wednesday night, were being gradually restored in Aleppo by yesterday afternoon.

Thursday's air base assault came after US President Barack Obama was reported to have signed a covert document authorising US support for the rebels.

The directive was contained in a "finding"



Kofi Annan

-- a device authorising clandestine action by the Central Intelligence Agency, NBC and CNN said, citing unidentified sources.

Nationwide, at least 51 people were killed yesterday -- 30 civilians, 11 soldiers and 10 rebels, said the Observatory, which has estimated that more than 20,000 people have died since mid-March last year.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin and British premier David Cameron failed to hide their differences on the Syrian crisis before the two leaders watched the Olympic judo together on Putin's first visit to Britain for seven years.

Britain has strongly criticised Russia's repeated blocking of any threat of UN sanctions against the Assad regime. Moscow has accused Western governments of bias towards the rebels.

The UN General Assembly will vote on a largely symbolic Arab-drafted resolution today calling on Assad to stand down.

Three million of Syria's 22 million people need food, crops and livestock assistance, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation said, citing a survey by the United Nations and the Syrian government.

The FAO said figure included 1.5 million Syrians who "need urgent and immediate food assistance over the next three to six months, especially in areas that have seen the greatest conflict and population displacement."

Afghan forces foil Kabul attack; 5 killed

REUTERS, *Kabul*

Afghan security forces killed five insurgents and wounded one during a pre-dawn raid in Kabul yesterday, with authorities saying they had thwarted a mass attack and captured intelligence pointing to the militant Haqqani network.

Soldiers from Afghanistan's spy agency, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), launched the raid just after midnight, entering a single-story house compound on the fringes of Kabul which the insurgents were using as a base.

The Taliban issued a statement denying that yesterday's operation.

The NDS said target maps and telephone numbers recovered from the compound had numbers for the Haqqani network based outside Afghanistan.

Assange would face death penalty in US

Fears his mother

Christine Assange

AFP, *Quito*

The mother of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who is lobbying Ecuador to grant him asylum, says she is worried her son could face execution if extradited to the United States.

Christine Assange met Wednesday with President Rafael Correa, who is considering whether to grant political asylum to Assange.

The Australian campaigner took refuge in the Ecuadoran embassy in London in mid-June to avoid extradition to Sweden.

Swedish investigators want Assange to answer questions about allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women in August 2010 after WikiLeaks began releasing classified US documents.

Christine Assange echoed her son's fears that Sweden would extradite him to the United States to face charges for releasing masses of US military and diplomatic documents into the public domain.

"The US government feels that it can seek to try my son for espionage, and possibly executing him simply for doing the job of a good investigative journalist, which is telling the truth about power," she said in an interview with AFP at the Carondelet presidential palace after she met with Correa.

The United States has opened a criminal investigation into the leaks and is prosecuting US army private Bradley Manning in a military court. But it has not said whether it intends to bring charges against Assange as well.

India probes series of blasts in Pune

AFP, *Pune*

Federal anti-terror agents joined local police in the western Indian city of Pune yesterday to probe a series of low-intensity blasts the night before when the new home minister had been due to visit.

The four explosives went off in succession beginning shortly after 7:30pm on Wednesday, targeting a bustling restaurant and shopping area in the town in central Maharashtra state and injuring one person.

National security and forensic teams arrived in Pune early yesterday and were examining two unexploded devices, Home Secretary RK Singh told reporters.

"Even though the blasts were very small, the fact that they happened in a one-kilometre area and went off in a 40 minute period shows that there was planning behind it," he said.

He said investigators were looking at possible "terror links" to the blasts.

US hails progress in talks with Pakistan

AFP, *Islamabad*

The US commander in Afghanistan yesterday said that "significant progress" was being made in improving cooperation with Pakistan, after his first visit since Islamabad ended a blockade on Nato supplies.

The talks between General John Allen and General Ashfaq Kayani focused on improving security along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and cooperation between Afghan, Pakistani and Nato troops, said a statement released by both sides.

"I look forward to these visits and am pleased with the upward spiral in our relationship they represent," Allen said.

"We are making significant progress toward building a partnership that is enduring, strategic, carefully defined, and that enhances the security and prosperity of the region."

Allen's visit is a further sign of efforts to repair the fractious anti-terror alliance with Pakistan, which plunged to its worst crisis after US air strikes killed 24 Pakistani soldiers and American troops killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan last year.

Both sides signed a deal Tuesday governing Nato convoys travelling through Pakistan into Afghanistan until the end of 2015.

Kayani was quoted as saying that yesterday's meeting had "helped towards improving strategic and operational understanding between the Pakistan military and ISAF," using the acronym for the Nato mission in Afghanistan.

The statement made no mention of the specific problems and difficulties that have increasingly characterised relations between Afghan, Pakistani and Nato troops.

Lieutenant General Zaheer ul-Islam, the chief of Pakistan's spy agency, is also currently in the United States, the first visit by a head of the Inter-Services Intelligence agency to Washington in a year.

China slams US over Iran sanctions

AFP, *Beijing*

Beijing reacted furiously Wednesday to new US sanctions imposed on a Chinese bank over transactions with Iran, urging Washington to revoke them and saying it would lodge an official protest.

China's foreign ministry urged the United States to lift the sanctions on the Bank of Kunlun, which it said violated the "norms of international relations" and damaged relations between Beijing and Washington.

US President Barack Obama on Tuesday imposed new economic sanctions on Iran's oil export sector and on a pair of Chinese and Iraqi banks accused of doing business with Tehran.

In a statement, China's foreign ministry expressed "strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition" to the US move, called it "groundless" and said it would officially protest the decision.

SYRIA UPRISING

Hopes fade as crisis turns into proxy war

REUTERS, *Damascus*

Regional powers are pouring in money and guns, jihadists are joining rebels battling to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, while his own well-armed but hard-pressed forces are fighting back ruthlessly with combat aircraft and artillery.

Gruesome scenes of slaughtered civilians or executed rebel fighters provide daily snapshots of the worsening conflict in Syria. Video apparently showing rebels gunning down Assad militiamen in cold blood suggests the insurgents are capable of brutality to match their enemies.

After almost 17 months of revolt against the Assad dictatorship, Syria's conflict is turning into a regional proxy war between Sunni and Shia Islam that could splinter the country along sectarian lines unless a unified rebel leadership emerges as a credible opposition to the beleaguered government.

Few observers of Syria see any sign of an opposition ready to run the country if or when Assad and his clan, whose power base lies in the esoteric Shia sect of Syria's Alawite minority, lose overall control.

With the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran behind Assad, and Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Muslim states backing the rebels, Syria could become the arena in which the regional Sunni-Shia cold war becomes an open-ended civil war with the potential to destabilise its neighbours - Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Jordan.

"We most definitely have a proxy war in Syria," says Ayham Kamel of the Eurasia Group political risk consultancy.

NEWS ANALYSIS

"Syria is an open field now. The day after Assad falls you (will) have all of these different groups with different agendas, with different allegiances, with different states supporting them yet unable to form a coherent leadership."

Kamel believes Syria is already fragmenting, and that the Free Syrian Army, the umbrella for a plethora of armed groups fighting to overthrow Assad, is little more than a franchise of Sunni Muslim groups.

"I don't think there is anybody to take over," said George Joffe, a Middle East expert at Cambridge University. "The really big problem is that there is no credible opposition."

On the ground, the picture is getting darker.

It is complicated by Syria's religious divisions. The Alawites form about 12 percent of Syria's 23 million people but are reckoned to make up 40 percent of the army and the bulk of the pro-Assad Shabbiha militia. Sunnis, who account for the majority of the opposition, form 75 percent of the population.

As the conflict rages on without any solution, Syrians say homegrown Islamist jihadists and groups of fighters from al Qaeda have been taking an active role.

Most analysts agree that there is no "good or happy scenario" and that the chances of a negotiated settlement under the auspices of UN envoy Kofi Annan are nil.

With no Western appetite for military intervention and no prospect of an internationally mediated political resolution, many see the civil war spreading and tearing the country apart.

Lebanese columnist Rajeh Khoury predicted: "Syria could plunge into a long protracted civil war that could last years. The civil war in Lebanon, with its much smaller population of five million, lasted 15 years due to foreign interference so Syria would be much more complicated.

NEWS IN *brief*

Typhoon kills 6 in Taiwan

AFP, *Ilan, Taiwan*

Typhoon Saola pounded Taiwan with fierce winds and torrential rain that left six people dead and forced nearly the entire island to shut down yesterday, rescuers and media said.

Nearly 200 international and domestic flights were cancelled and authorities suspended trading on financial markets due to the extreme weather.

The slow-moving typhoon, which killed at least 23 people in the Philippines, lost momentum and weakened into a tropical storm after it made a second landfall in the northeast around 0600 GMT, the Central Weather Bureau said.

More than 1.0 metre of rainfall has fallen in parts of the island since Tuesday, according to the bureau.

Israel PM's popularity at record low

AFP, *Jerusalem*

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's popularity has plummeted to its lowest point since his election in 2009 after he pushed through a series of tough austerity measures, a poll showed yesterday.

Asked if they were satisfied or dissatisfied with Netanyahu's performance as prime minister, 60 percent said they were unhappy, while 31 percent said the opposite. The rest had no opinion.

The result of the Dialog poll, carried out on behalf of Haaretz newspaper, showed a fall of 10 percentage points in just a month.

Until recently, Netanyahu has enjoyed consistently good ratings, but his public approval began to slide over plans to change the law on military conscription, which saw him back moves to continue exempting tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Al-Qaeda trio arrested in Spain

BBC ONLINE

Police in southern Spain arrested three suspected al-Qaeda members in possession of explosives and poison, Spanish media yesterday said.

They said the suspects are a Turk and two men possibly of Chechen origin, and were held in two Spanish towns.

They are thought to have been planning an attack in Spain. It is reported to be the first time such suspects have been found with explosives.

Interior Minister Jorge Fernandez Diaz is expected to give details soon.

Police suspect at least one of those arrested has attended training camps in Pakistan, reports said.

Facebook has more than 83m 'fake' users

BBC ONLINE

Facebook has revealed that it believes there are now more than 83 million fake users on the social network.

In company filings published this week, it said 8.7% of its 955 million active users might not be real.

Duplicate profiles made up 4.8% of the fakes, user-misclassified accounts amounted to 2.4%, and 1.5% of users were described as "undesirable".

In total, the company said it estimated there were 83.09 million fake users, which it classified in three groups.

The largest group of "fakes" were duplicates, which the company defined as "an account that a user maintains in addition to his or her principal account."

Others were described as "user-misclassified" where, Facebook explained "users have created personal profiles for a business, organisation, or non-human entity such as a pet".

Finally, "undesirable" accounts were profiles deemed to be in breach of Facebook's terms of service.

Antarctic had rainforest 52m years ago

AFP, *Sydney*

Drilling of the seabed off Antarctica has revealed that rainforest grew on the frozen continent 52 million years ago, scientists said yesterday, warning it could be ice-free again within decades.

The study of sediment cores drilled from the ocean floor off Antarctica's east coast revealed fossil pollens that had come from a "near-tropical" forest covering the continent in the Eocene period, 34-56 million years ago.

Kevin Welsh, an Australian scientist who travelled on the 2010 expedition, said analysis of temperature-sensitive molecules in the cores had showed it was "very warm" 52 million years ago, measuring about 20 degrees Celsius.

Welsh described the findings as "very significant" in understanding future climate change, particularly given how important Antarctica and the "very large" volume of water stored on its surface would be for the entire planet.

He said there would also be major impacts to global temperatures were the ice to recede, because it is an integral cooling mechanism for the planet, regulating the temperature by reflecting the sun's energy into space.