

Libya's NTC transfers power to assembly

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's National Transitional Council on Wednesday handed power to a new assembly, in a symbolic move marking a peaceful transition following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's 40-year dictatorship.

"I hand over the constitutional prerogatives to the General National Congress, which from now on is the legitimate representative of the Libyan people," NTC chief Mustafa Abdel Jalil said.

Libya's interim leader passed the reins to the oldest member of the 200-seat legislative assembly elected on July 7 at a ceremony that was scheduled late in the day because of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting from dawn to dusk.

Minutes earlier the 200 congress members were sworn in by the president of Libya's Supreme Court.

Abdel Jalil welcomed what he said was "the first handover of power in Libya's history" as a "historic moment" for all Libyans.

But he admitted that "mistakes" had been made during an "extraordinary" transition

period and that security and disarmament issues had not been resolved in time.

Abdel Jalil announced that he would retire and quit his posts as NTC chief and in the country's top panel of magistrates, of which he had been a member since the days of Gaddafi who was killed in October last year.

A conference room in an upscale hotel in the Libyan capital was arranged as a makeshift venue for the assembly, which is due to begin its work a week from now, according to the official LANA news agency.

The congress decided to elect a president on Thursday pending the adoption of rules for the vote. The assembly will reconvene at 2:00pm, said congress member Mohamed Al-Megariet, a well-known Gaddafi opponent.

The General National Congress will be tasked with choosing a new interim government to take over from the NTC, and will steer the country until fresh elections can be held, based on a constitution to be drafted by a constituent authority of 60 members.



Libya's National Transitional Council's Chief Mustafa Abdel Jalil, Kamal Edhan president of the Supreme Court in Libya, Mohammad Ali Sulayem, chairman of the National Conference during the transfer of authority ceremony in Tripoli on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

New clashes hit Egypt's Sinai

AFP, Cairo

Police and gunmen clashed yesterday in the Sinai town of El-Arish, Egyptian TV said after the authorities vowed to crush a surge in Islamist militancy, although state news agency MENA denied the report.

The state-owned Nile News television said there were clashes outside a police station in the north Sinai town a day after reported air strikes killed 20 militants in a neighbouring village.

MENA said that a man driving unlicensed car had fired several shots in the air on the street housing the police station, without aiming at it.

The conflicting reports came a day after security forces launched a campaign to uproot the militants following an attack by gunmen on a guard post near the border with Israel that killed 16 troops.



Iran's atomic project getting harder to monitor: Israel

JERUSALEM, Reuters

Iran's nuclear moves are becoming harder for Israeli and US intelligence to assess, making Teheran's suspected atomic weapons drive an even more urgent matter, Defence Minister Ehud Barak yesterday said.

He was commenting a report in the newspaper Haaretz that said US President Barack Obama had received a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) saying Iran had made significant and surprising progress toward military nuclear capability.

"There probably really is such an American intelligence report -- I don't know if it is an NIE or not -- making its way around senior offices (in Washington)," Barak told Israel Radio.

"As far as we know it brings the American assessment much closer to ours ... it makes the Iranian issue even more urgent and (shows it is) less clear and certain that we will know everything in time about their steady progress toward military nuclear capability."

Israel sees an atomic armed Iran as a threat to its existence and there is persistent speculation over whether it will launch a pre-emptive military strike against the Islamic republic's nuclear facilities.

Tehran denies it is seeking to build the bomb, saying it is enriching uranium only for peaceful purposes.

Assad appoints new Syria PM

Rebels loses key areas in Aleppo as Iran seeks lead role in diplomacy

AFP, Damascus

President Bashar al-Assad has appointed Wael al-Halqi as Syria's new premier, state television reported yesterday as Iran hosted a meeting on Syria aiming a greater role in the conflict.

"The president has signed Decree 298, appointing Wael al-Halqi as the new prime minister," the broadcaster reported.

Health Minister Halqi was appointed to replace Riad Hijab, whose defection to the opposition was announced on Monday.

Hijab's was the highest-level defection from Assad's regime since the outbreak of a revolt almost 17 months ago. The defected premier arrived on Wednesday morning in Jordan with his family, according to Jordanian Information Minister Samih Maayatah.

On the ground, the rebel Free

Syrian Army withdrew completely from the embattled district of Salaheddin in the northern city of Aleppo yesterday as regime forces advanced, a rebel commander said.

"We have staged a tactical withdrawal from Salaheddin," the commander, Hossam Abu Mohammed, told AFP by phone. "The district is completely empty of rebel fighters. Regime forces are now advancing into Salaheddin."

He cited the violent bombardment by regime forces as the reason behind the FSA withdrawal.

And Iran yesterday hosted a 29-nation conference on Syria with the aim of stopping bloodshed there and forging a role for Tehran as peace-



Wael al-Halqi

broker for its beleaguered Arab ally.

Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi opened the meeting by calling for "national dialogue between the (Syrian) opposition, which has popular support, and the Syrian government to establish calm and security," according to state television.

He added that Iran was prepared to host any such dialogue.

Salehi said Iran was opposed to "any foreign interference and military intervention in resolving the Syrian crisis" and supported efforts extended by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

Excluded from the Tehran meeting were Western and Gulf Arab nations

that Iran has accused of giving military backing to the bloody near 17-month insurgency seeking to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

State media said the foreign ministers of Iraq, Pakistan and Zimbabwe were present.

Lower-ranking diplomats, most of them ambassadors, represented the other nations.

Salehi listed those nations as: Afghanistan, Algeria, Armenia, Benin, Belarus, China, Cuba, Ecuador, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Maldives, Mauritania, Nicaragua, Oman, Russia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan and Venezuela.

A representative of the United Nations was also present.

Kuwait and Lebanon had said before the meeting they would not send representatives.



Shigeo Iwamoto, who survived the 1945 atomic bombing of Nagasaki, offers prayers for the victims in front of the Peace Statue in Nagasaki's Peace Park in Nagasaki yesterday marking the 67th anniversary of the atomic bombing of the city.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Noda survives confidence vote

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's prime minister survived a no-confidence motion yesterday after reaching an 11th hour deal with a major opposition party over his much-cherished sales tax bill.

Yoshihiko Noda brushed off the attack by a phalanx of minor parties, including former rebels from his own disintegrating bloc, which comes ahead of an expected vote Friday on his plan to double consumption tax.

The main opposition Liberal Democratic Party had, in recent days, begun to renege on its promise to back the legislation, which independent commentators say is a good first step on the long road to overhauling Japan's huge debt pile, worth twice its GDP.

NEWS IN brief

July hottest month on record in US

AFP, Washington

July was the hottest month in the contiguous United States since record-keeping began in 1895, government scientists have said, a trend that meteorologists attribute to climate change.

The average temperature in the contiguous United States -- excluding Hawaii and Alaska -- was 77.6 degrees Fahrenheit (25.3 Celsius), 3.3 degrees higher than the average for the entire 20th century, NOAA said.

The previous hottest July on record was July 1936, when the average temperature was 77.4 degrees.

India test fires ballistic missile

ANI, Odisha

India yesterday successfully test-fired its surface-to-surface 2000 km range ballistic missile Agni-II.

The missile was successfully flight tested for the Strategic Forces Command at 8.46am from Wheeler's Island in the Bay of Bengal off the coast of Odisha.

The two-stage solid propellant Agni-II launched as a part of regular strategic Forces Command (SFC) exercise, as they reached the pre-designated target

14 killed across Mexico

AFP, Mexico City

Three brutal killings on Wednesday claimed at least 14 lives across Mexico, in the latest bloodshed of a years-long crime wave fueled by warring drug cartels.

Just outside Mexico City, armed gunmen burst into a bar in the early morning hours and opened fire on the crowd, shooting dead four men and two women, police said. Two other people were

Punk protest: Russia slams Madonna

AFP, Moscow

A Russian deputy prime minister referred to pop icon Madonna as a "former whore" on Twitter after she called for the release of jailed members of punk group Pussy Riot at a Moscow concert.

"Every former whore seeks to lecture everyone on morality as she gets older. Especially during tours and gigs abroad," deputy prime minister Dmitry Rogozin said on his Twitter account.

At her packed concert in a Moscow stadium yesterday night, the US Queen of Pop said she dreamt of a world where everyone had the right to express themselves freely.

She called on the Russian authorities to release the three members of all-girl punk band who are standing trial for performing a song criticising President

High profile murder trial in China ends

Convict didn't contest charge

AFP, China

The wife of a former Chinese leader at the centre of a scandal that has rocked the Communist party did not deny murder during her one-day trial, which ended yesterday with no verdict, the court said.

Gu Kailai's murder trial is the latest stage in a scandal that has brought down her husband Bo Xilai and exposed deep divisions among China's leaders ahead of a generational handover of power that starts later this year.

Prosecutors said the former lawyer fed poison to 41-year-old British businessman Neil Heywood after going to drink with him in the hotel room where he was found dead last November, court official Tang Yigan told journalists.

Gu's government-appointed lawyer did not challenge the claim, but said that she had "made significant contributions by reporting offences by other people" and her cooperation should be taken into account, Tang said.

He gave no further detail, but state news agency Xinhua reported shortly after the hearing in the eastern city of Hefei that four police officials would go on trial for "covering up" Gu's alleged crimes.

All four worked in the southwestern city of Chongqing, where Heywood died, and where Bo was Communist party secretary until he was sacked in March.



Gu Kailai

TOXIC LEGACY OF VIETNAM WAR

Finally, US moves to clear 'Agent Orange'

AFP, Vietnam

From deformed infants to grandparents with cancer, families near Vietnam's Danang Airbase have long blamed the toxic legacy of war for their ills. Now after a decades-long wait, a historic "Agent Orange" clean-up is finally beginning.

The base was a key site in the US defoliant program during the Vietnam War, and much of the 80 million litres of Agent Orange used during "Operation Ranch Hand" was mixed, stored and loaded onto planes there.

Yesterday, the US and Vietnam began a long-awaited joint cleanup effort at the site -- using technology which will heat the contaminated soil to temperatures high enough to break dioxin down into harmless compounds.

The defoliants were sprayed over vast swathes of jungle in South Vietnam in an attempt to flush out Viet Cong communist guerrillas by depriving them of tree cover and food.

Washington still disputes the "uncertain" link between dioxin exposure and ill health.

The \$43 million project comes as the former foes draw closer in the face of rising

Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea.

The Danang Airbase is one of three "dioxin hotspots" -- alongside Bien Hoa and Phu Cat airbases -- where concentrations of extremely toxic contaminants from Agent Orange are nearly 400 times the globally accepted maximum standard.

Until five years ago, when the area was finally sealed off, Danang residents such as Binh fished, bathed and harvested lotus plants from the Sen Lake -- and ate local fish with more than three times the safe level of dioxin.

A government official said up to three million Vietnamese people were exposed to Agent Orange, and that one million suffer grave health repercussions today, including at least 150,000 children born with birth defects.

An attempt by Vietnamese victims to obtain compensation from the United States had little success, and the US Supreme Court in 2009 declined to take up the case.

For the victims, the decontamination project is long overdue.

"I think that this clean-up is too late because so many people have already been affected" by dioxin, said Nguyen Thi Hien, who heads VAVA in Danang.

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