



## Brahimi likely to replace Kofi Annan

REUTERS, Washington

Veteran Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi is expected to replace Kofi Annan as the UN-Arab League joint special envoy for Syria barring a last-minute change, diplomats said on Thursday.

The former Algerian foreign minister, who has a long history as a diplomatic troubleshooter, will have his work cut out for him in Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad is using his security forces to try to crush a 17-month-old pro-democracy rebellion.

Annan, a former UN secretary-general and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, said last week he would step down as the special envoy because he was unable to do his job with the UN Security Council hopelessly deadlocked over Syria.

Brahimi's appointment could be announced as early as next week but the diplomats, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said there are sometimes last-minute changes if a key government has concerns about the choice or the candidate has misgivings.

Brahimi, 78, has served as a UN special envoy in a series of challenging circumstances, including in Iraq after the US invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, in Afghanistan both before and after the end of Taliban rule and in South Africa as it emerged from the apartheid era.

# Syrians flee Aleppo as rebels plan new push

US raps Iran on Syria conference; UK pledges more aid to rebels

AFP, Aleppo

Syrian rebels vowed to fight on in Aleppo a day after being driven out of a key district under heavy shellfire, and residents fled in cars crammed with belongings during a lull in fighting.

A rebel commander, Hossam Abu Mohammed, said his men were still fighting in parts of Aleppo's southwestern district of Salaheddin after most fled on Thursday under heavy bombing and advancing troops.

"We will not let Salaheddin go," the Free Syrian Army's Abu Mohammed told AFP by telephone as the third day of a government offensive to take the city raged.

Reuters journalists saw residents streaming out of Aleppo, seizing on a calm spell to pack vehicles with mattresses, fridges and toys.

Nearly 150,000 Syrian refugees have been registered in Turkey, Jordan,

Lebanon and Iraq since the conflict began 17 months ago, the United Nations said yesterday.

Meanwhile, Britain yesterday pledged more support for the rebels as it announced £5 million in assistance including body armour and communications equipment for their fight against President Bashar al-Assad.

Foreign Secretary William Hague yesterday said Britain would not provide weapons but would step up its contacts with opposition groups, especially the Free Syrian Army, to lay the ground for a political solution if Assad falls.

The United States on Thursday dismissed a 29 nation conference on the Syria crisis in Tehran, saying the Islamic Republic had been helping Bashar al-Assad kill his people.

The meeting included Russia, China, Cuba, Iraq and Venezuela, which are friendly to Iran but it excluded the

United States, its European allies and Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

But White House spokesman Jay Carney hit out at Iran's role in Syria when asked whether the conference was credible or helpful.

"There is vast evidence that demonstrates that Iran has been engaged in an effort to prop up Assad as he brutally murders his own people," Carney said.

On the ground, the army again bombed parts of Salaheddin on Friday, as well as the Sakhar and Hanano districts of the east of the city, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, adding that the violence killed two civilians.

Fighting on Thursday killed 27 people in Aleppo, 15 of them civilians, the Britain-based Observatory said.

They were among at least 191 people killed nationwide -- 107 civilians, 45 rebels and 39 soldiers.

# Pro-Islamist elected to head Libya assembly

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's newly empowered top legislative body elected as its president late on Thursday a veteran opponent of Muammar Gaddafi's ousted regime who is seen as pro-Islamist.

Mohamed al-Megaryef, a founding member of the Libyan National Salvation Front, which grouped exiled opponents of the now slain dictator, defeated liberal independent Ali Zidan in a run-off by 113 votes to 85 in the 200-member General National Congress.

The vote in the assembly, elected in landmark polls on July 7, came after the National Transitional Council handed over power on Wednesday, in a symbolic move marking the first peaceful transition in Libya's modern history after four decades of Gaddafi's iron-fisted rule.

The assembly is tasked with choosing an interim government that will steer the country until fresh elections can be held under a new constitution to be drafted by a panel.

Its new president is an economist with a doctorate from Britain, who held leading posts



Mohamed al-Megaryef

in the Gaddafi regime in the 1970s before defecting in 1980 to join the opposition in exile.

Hounded by Gaddafi's intelligence service, Megaryef survived assassination attempts in Rome in 1981, in Casablanca in 1984 and in Madrid in 1985, his daughter Asma said.

At the session, which was broadcast live on state television and ran on into the early hours of Friday, the assembly also elected the first of two vice presidents.

Under the interim constitution, decisions in the assembly require a two-thirds majority to pass, making cooperation necessary to avoid gridlock in the delicate transition.

The majority of the assembly's 200 seats were set aside for independent candidates, many of whose loyalties and ideologies remain unclear.

Political parties were allowed to contest just 80 of the seats. The liberal National Forces Alliance of Mahmud Jibril, who served as premier during last year's conflict, won 39 on its own.

## US says Iran is not after nuke weapon

REUTERS, Washington

The United States still believes that Iran is not on the verge of having a nuclear weapon and that Tehran has not made a decision to pursue one, US officials said on Thursday.

Their comments came after Israeli media reports claimed US President Barack Obama had received a new National Intelligence Estimate saying Iran had made significant and surprising progress toward military nuclear capability.

Later, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak suggested that the new US report, which he acknowledged might be something other than a National Intelligence Estimate, "transforms the Iranian situation into an even more urgent one."

But a White House National Security Council spokesman disputed the Israeli reports, saying the US intelligence assessment of Iran's nuclear activities had not changed since intelligence officials delivered testimony to Congress on the issue earlier this year.

"We believe that there is time and space to continue to pursue a diplomatic path, backed by growing international pressure on the Iranian government," the spokesman said. "We continue to assess that Iran is not on the verge of achieving a nuclear weapon."

US officials would not directly comment on whether there was a new National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, which is a compilation of views of the various US intelligence agencies.



People try to recover things that are being washed away by flood caused by tropical Storm Ernesto in Boca Del Rio on the outskirts of Veracruz, Mexico yesterday. The storm weakened to a depression yesterday as it hit the mainland. However, torrential rain generated flash flooding and mudslides killed three in the region.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Teesta water

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yesterday. "Of course, there were concerns on Teesta and land boundary agreement that were raised by Bangladesh.

"And I reassured the [Bangladesh] prime minister that our government is committed to both these agreements becoming a reality soon."

On Teesta water sharing treaty, Ramesh said he has assured Hasina that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh "is in touch with the West Bengal chief minister" to address the concerns raised by her.

"We are working with the West Bengal chief minister to address their concerns. We recognise the importance of the Teesta and land boundary agreements," he said.

On the land boundary agreement, Ramesh said "we are hoping that we will be able to introduce the Constitutional Amendment Bill" in the current monsoon session of parliament.

The Indian government has to get the agreement ratified by parliament before implementing it as it involves exchange of land.

At a meeting between foreign secretaries of the two countries here last month, Bangladesh had conveyed its unhappiness about non-implementation of the land boundary agreement.

Bangladesh had also raised the issue of Teesta water sharing which could not be signed last year because of strong opposition by UPA constituent Trinamool Congress.

Ramesh termed as "very productive" his visit to Bangladesh where he met with the prime minister, foreign minister, health minister, environment minister and rural development minister.

On trade relations with Bangladesh, Ramesh told PTI that Bangladesh's export to India last year was around \$500 million, and all import duties on exports from Bangladesh have been abolished except for alcohol and cigarettes.

"Bangladesh's exports to India attract no import duty. We have to buy more from Bangladesh. We are also now permitting Bangladesh FDI in India.

"Originally, four years ago, it used to be in the negative list. Now, we are permitting. We welcome Bangladesh investment in India," he said.

## NEWS IN brief

### Batman shooter 'mentally ill'

AFP, Centennial

The man suspected of gunning down 12 people at a screening of the new Batman movie last month is mentally ill, his defense lawyer said Thursday, seeking more time to assess his health.

James Holmes faces two counts of first degree murder for each person killed in the July 20 massacre in Aurora, Colorado -- one for each victim's deliberate killing and one more for killing through "depraved indifference" to life.

Holmes, 24, until recently a neuroscience student, allegedly burst into a midnight viewing of "The Dark Knight Rises" and opened fire.

Ten of the 58 people who were wounded in the attack remain hospitalized and four are in a critical condition, leaving open the possibility that the huge charge sheet could yet grow longer.

### Philippine flood toll climb to 60

AFP, Apalit

Thousands more Philippine flood survivors yesterday crammed into evacuation centres as waist-high water covered vast farming regions and the death toll from a week of misery rose to 60.

The flooding that submerged 80 percent of Manila early in the week had largely subsided, allowing people to return to their homes, but vital rice-growing areas to the north remained submerged as more rain fell there.

Nearly two weeks of monsoon rains across the Philippines' main island of Luzon peaked with a 48-hour deluge earlier this week that battered Manila

### Japan votes to double sales tax

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese lawmakers yesterday voted to double sales tax to 10 percent in a move the government hopes will help close the country's huge budgetary hole.

The House of Councillors approved the government bill with a majority of 188 to 49 in the final hurdle for a proposal that has been debated for years and riven the ruling party of Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda.

The legislation, which will also revamp the country's teetering social security system, has been the main focus of Noda's 11-month premiership and is thought by international bodies and most commentators as a sensible step on the road to overhauling

## Egypt masses troops in tense Sinai

Checkpoint attacked; 6 arrested

AFP, El-Arish

Gunmen attacked a checkpoint in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula overnight, causing no casualties, as the army massed troops to quell increasingly deadly Islamist militants, a security source said yesterday.

At the same time, security sources said six "terrorists" had been arrested in the Sinai.

And Egypt temporarily reopened the Rafah border crossing into the Gaza Strip, which was closed after militants attacked troops on Sunday and killed 16 soldiers.

There were no further details on the overnight attack outside the town of El-Arish in a region that has been increasingly on edge since Sunday's raid.

On Thursday, trucks carrying dozens of armoured personnel carriers mounted with machineguns rolled through El-Arish heading to the east, where Bedouin Islamist militants have established a presence in villages near the borders with Gaza and with Israel.

El-Arish and its environs were calm yesterday, an AFP journalist said.

A number of armoured vehicles had taken up positions in the town, and a tank sat behind a barrier of sandbags painted with Egypt's black, white and red national colours on which was written the slogan "victory or death."

The build-up comes after state television reported that military helicopters and soldiers killed 20 militants on Wednesday in the first such operation in the Sinai in decades, in retaliation for the raid.

## Hackers breach Aussie spy agency

AFP, Sydney

Hacking group Anonymous yesterday claimed to have shut down a computer server belonging to Australia's domestic spy agency ASIO, reportedly briefly closing down access to its public webpage.

The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) acknowledged some disruption to its website.

Micro-blogging site Twitter has carried comments in recent days that ASIO and Defence Signals Directorate (DSD) sites were being targeted by Australian hackers linked to Anonymous.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported that ASIO's website was down for at least 30 minutes yesterday morning, but it appeared to be loading normally in the afternoon.

## Japan recalls envoy to Seoul over Lee visit

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak yesterday paid a surprise visit to islands at the centre of a decades-long territorial dispute with Japan, which recalled its ambassador from Seoul in protest.

Lee was making the first-ever visit by a South Korean president to the rocky volcanic outcrops in the Sea of Japan (East Sea), roughly midway between South Korea and its former colonial ruler Japan.

Disregarding Tokyo's warnings that the visit would strain already prickly relations, Lee toured the main island and shook hands with coastguards as a South Korean flag fluttered in the breeze.

"Dokdo is indeed our territory and a place worth staking our lives to defend. Let's make sure to safeguard it with pride," pool reports quoted him as saying.

The South has stationed a small coastguard detachment since 1954 on the islands known as Dokdo in Korea and Takeshima in Japan.

Japan reacted angrily, recalling its envoy indefinitely and calling in Seoul's ambassador to Tokyo to receive a strong protest.

Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda said the trip was "extremely deplorable".

Foreign Minister Koichiro Gamba upbraided his South Korean counterpart by phone and said the visit "would have a major negative impact on our people's sentiment".

The trip was made just before the men's bronze medal Olympic soccer match between Japan and South Korea, and days before the August 15 anniversary of Japan's World War II surrender, which ended its 35-year rule over Korea.

## One among billions

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and the IPL by proclaiming that he had got the wicket of Chris Gayle and also found time to state his complete and utter lack of respect for Carl Lewis. Oh, and he also spoke about love.

If you were looking for insight into what really makes Bolt tick, the press conference was not the right place to do so. At times, while listening to Bolt, you felt like you were indulging the dreams of a wide-eyed teenager, full of innocence and belief. The only difference is that with Bolt, you almost believed him. It is ridiculous, true, but the magic of Bolt is that he made you really believe that he could one day be playing alongside Wayne Rooney in the red of Manchester United or even be opening the bowling for one of the glorified IPL franchises. With that celebration

and with his achievements Bolt could probably even win the gold in archery.

Perhaps, everything is indeed in the context. Bolt had just gone where no sprinter in history had gone before, by completing the double-double of 100 and 200 metre sprints in two consecutive Olympics. He was not fully fit, yet he managed to equal Michael Johnson's one-time feat of 19.32 that was often lauded as unbeatable. Bolt had just transcended the barriers that bind mere mortals. If he now told you he could play for Manchester United, who are you to deny it?

The stardust that sparkles around Bolt is reminiscent of some of the most iconic athletes of the past. It is not just about talent, Bolt has that in droves, but it is also about charisma. Bolt does

not just break records; he demolishes them with a sort of dismissive panache while at the same time retaining a sense of innocence and song that has long since been consigned to the scrap-heap of professional sports.

Yesterday, many compared him to Muhammad Ali, others to Michael Jordan, and others still to Diego Maradona; Bolt has just been elevated to exalted company.

With Bolt there is also a freshness that should not be there. For one of the most famous athletes in the world, he is not afraid to let his feelings be known. He doesn't like Justin Gatlin, anyone who attended the press conference following his 100-metre triumph would know that. On Thursday too, he made his feelings about Carl Lewis clear; the American star's drug-related com-

ments without any proof had led Bolt to lose all respect for him. With Bolt, it is all in black or white, there are no shades of grey.

Watching Bolt run is so thrilling, so emphatic, so crushing and yet so casual that it makes you want to get up and just embrace the person next to you, if just for having the pleasure to have collectively witnessed something so unique and so special. With Bolt, there is always the 'I was there' moment. Which is why the stadium roars every time he is in attendance and which is also why flashbulbs go off like neurons firing in a brain when he hits his stride. It is also why, in the words of the advert, for twenty seconds, the world stops to watch one man run.

Inexplicably, there are critics of Bolt and of his

exaggerated celebrations. But by doing that Bolt is just being true to character. "I am going to party like it's my birthday," he said on Thursday. And if his utterly cool self-confidence is galling, consider these lines that are in his autobiography.

"It is said that the population of the earth is 6.8 billion, and that approximately 107 billion have lived on this planet since man came into being," says Bolt in his autobiography. "It doesn't get any cooler than knowing you are the fastest of them all."

There really isn't. There is no one in this world who has ever mastered the primal, elemental skill of running fast better than he has. If this doesn't give one man confidence, nothing ever will.

Bolt's achievements are almost alien but in a rare moment during yesterday's frenzy Bolt provided a stark moment of insight into how he himself views his elevation to the pantheon of legends.

"To have set a goal for yourself, to become a legend, and to achieve that, it is not something you can explain," said Bolt. "It won't sink in until I sit down with my friends and family back home, right now I am just happy and hyped."

"But when I get back I will reminisce, and we will say 'remember when Yohan beat you,' and 'remember when you were injured?' And I will think about the journey I have been on. I am not saying I'll cry... but."

But he might just cry. And when Usain Bolt is gone, so might we.