

Battle for Aleppo rages on; 175 killed

Arabs postpone Syria meet

AFP, Aleppo

The Syrian army yesterday pressed its assault on rebels in commercial capital Aleppo, while both sides reported atrocities and Arab foreign ministers postponed a planned meeting on the 17-month conflict.

The exiled opposition said pro-government militia had executed 10 civilians in a roundup in the flashpoint central city of Homs, while the official SANA news agency reported the murder of one of its staff, in the latest case of a pro-government journalist being killed.

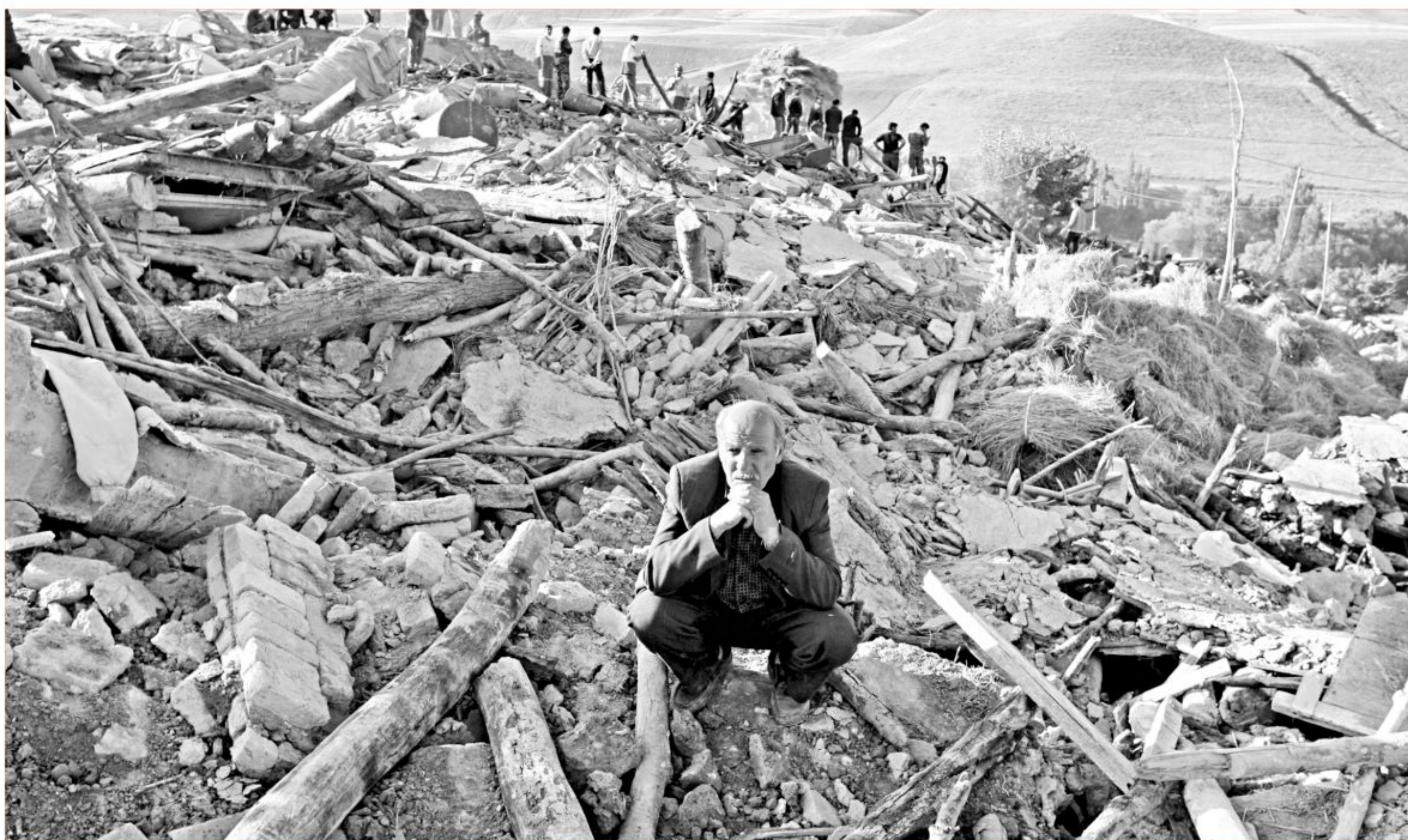
The Arab League gave no reason for the indefinite postponement of its planned meeting in Saudi Arabia that had been due to discuss a replacement for international envoy Kofi Annan who announced his resignation earlier this month.

In Aleppo, troops shelled rebel-held districts as fighting flared anew around a southwestern neighbourhood that rebel fighters had quit last week, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Shaar, Tariq al-Bab, Sakhur, Hanano and Bustan al-Qasr neighbourhoods all came under bombardment, as the army pressed a ground offensive it launched on Wednesday to recapture areas seized by rebels since July 20, the group said.

The Observatory said at least 27 people were killed across the country on Sunday: 15 civilians, seven soldiers and five rebels.

In Damascus, gunfire was reported in the Qadam neighbourhood. Outside the capital, machinegun fire was heard in the town of Al-Tal, where 15 civilians were killed in shelling and clashes the previous day.



An Iranian resident stands on top of the rubble of his destroyed home yesterday as rescue workers search for survivors, after twin earthquakes hit northwestern Iran on Saturday. Iran wrapped up rescue operations in hundreds of villages flattened by twin earthquakes the day before in its northwest, as officials gave a new toll of 227 dead and 1,380 injured in the disaster.

PHOTO: AFP

Coalition govt urged in Libya

REUTERS, Tripoli

Libya needs an inclusive government to build on progress made by those who have guided its transition from 42 years of one-man rule under Muammar Gaddafi, the president of a newly elected national assembly said in an interview.

Mohammed Magarief, veteran Gaddafi opponent picked by the 200-member congress as its head last week, said the North African country's new rulers needed to improve security, promote national reconciliation, tackle "unacceptable" corruption and lure back foreign investors after last year's civil war.

"Satisfaction of regional needs or aspirations also has to be considered, but this should not be at the expense of efficiency," Magarief, seen as a moderate Islamist, told Reuters on Friday when asked about the choice of the new prime minister.

The national assembly, which began life on Wednesday, will steer Libya to full parliamentary polls once a constitution is drafted next year. One of its first tasks is to appoint a prime minister within 30 days.

Calming regional rivalries is a tough problem for Libya's new leaders. Discontent has long simmered in the eastern city of Benghazi, cradle of the anti-Gaddafi revolt, and recent violence there highlights the difficulties of restoring security.

Since Magarief hails from the east, some say the new prime minister will be from the west.

Magarief, a leader in the National Front for the Salvation of Libya, the oldest anti-Gaddafi movement, said the next cabinet might retain some ministers from the interim authorities "to benefit from any positive achievement" they had made.

"It should be a coalition government, a national

POWER STRUGGLE IN EGYPT

Morsi retires Tantawi, appoints VP

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's Islamist President Mohammed Morsi yesterday ordered the surprise retirement of his powerful defence minister and scrapped a constitutional document which handed sweeping powers to the military.

Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, who ruled Egypt for more than a year after the revolution that toppled former president Hosni Mubarak, was replaced by Abdel Fattah el-Sissi.

Armed forces chief of staff Sami Anan was also retired, a week after a deadly attack on the Egyptian military in Sinai prompted an unprecedented military campaign in the lawless peninsula, the state broadcaster said.

Morsi also decided to scrap a key constitutional document which gave the military legislative powers and other prerogatives, his spokesman Yasser Ali said.

"The president has decided to annul the constitutional declaration adopted on June 17" by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, Ali said in a statement broadcast on state television.

"Given the circumstances, this is the right time to make



Mohammed Morsi



Hussein Tantawi

changes in the military institution," said Mourad Ali, a senior official with the Freedom and Justice Party which fielded Morsi in the May to July presidential election.

"He is a strong president, and he is exercising his authority," Mourad Ali said of the surprise decision that tested the balance of power between the first civilian president in Egypt's history

and the powerful army. In another move Morsi, an Islamist who rose the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood before his election in June, also decided to appoint a vice president.

Morsi appointed judge Mahmud Mekki as his deputy, the official news agency MENA reported, making him

only the second vice president to be named in Egypt in 30 years.

Yesterday's decisions were the latest in a series of shake-up by Morsi in recent days after a deadly attack on troops in the Sinai peninsula.

On Wednesday Morsi sacked his spy chief and two senior army generals, as well as North Sinai's governor, in a shakeup up military ranks after last weekend's deadly

Egypt's Sinai offensive kills six

AGENCIES

At least six suspected militant gunmen were killed yesterday by the Egyptian army in the Sinai peninsula, officials said.

They were killed during raids on hideouts in a village near al-Arish town in the north of the region, AP news agency reports.

An offensive against Islamist militants in Sinai was launched last week after 16 border guards were killed.

It was the most brazen attack against Egyptian troops in the Sinai region for years.

Yesterday's killings in al-Ghora village, some 30km south of al-Arish, are the first reported casualties among the suspected militants since the military operation began.

Afghans hold talks with key Taliban figure

REUTERS, Kabul/Islamabad

Afghan officials have held secret talks with the Taliban's former second in command who is in detention in Pakistan in a move which could help rekindle stalled peace talks with the insurgents, according to senior officials from both countries.

Afghan officials have often seen Pakistan as a reluctant partner in attempts to broker talks with the Taliban but its decision to grant access to Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar may signal Islamabad's willingness to play a more active role.

Rangin Spanta, the national security adviser to Afghan President Hamid Karzai and an architect of peace-building efforts, said an Afghan delegation had met Baradar in Pakistan two months ago.

Baradar has been in detention since he was captured in a joint operation by the CIA and Pakistani intelligence agents in the Pakistani city of Karachi in 2010.

Afghan officials have been demanding access to Baradar, the Taliban's top military commander until he was captured, but Spanta's revelation shows preliminary contact has already been made.

Rehman Malik, Pakistan's interior minister, also said that Pakistan had granted Afghan officials access to Baradar.

Baradar was the main day-to-day commander responsible for leading the Taliban campaign against US and Nato troops, plotting suicide bombings and other attacks.

Iran tensions: Israel tests war time drills

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday began testing an SMS system for warning the public of an imminent missile attack as chatter over a possible strike on Iran dominated the Israeli press headlines.

As testing began, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel had chalked up "a significant improvement" in its home front defence capabilities, mentioning its highly-vaunted anti-missile systems such as Iron Dome and Arrow 2.

"There has been a significant improvement in our level of defence capacity on the home front: with Iron Dome, with the Arrow, in terms of protection and shelters, in advanced warning systems and in other areas," he said at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting.

Pelephone and Orange.

The idea is that the SMS system could be used to warn the population of an imminent missile attack by Iran or Lebanon's Hezbollah militia if Israel strikes Tehran's nuclear facilities which it believes is a front for developing a bomb.

In recent days, talk of a possible strike on Iran has dominated the headlines, largely coming from unsourced officials quoting intelligence reports, none of which it was possible to verify.

"Iran has made progress toward nuclear warhead," was the headline in the Haaretz newspaper.

"The Iranians greatest progress recently is in the manufacture and assembly of a nuclear warhead," the paper said, quoting the official who was drawing his information from an intelligence report which an Israeli newspaper said was recently presented to US President Barack Obama.

Although US officials declined to comment on the report, Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak referred to it directly last week, saying it "brings the American assessment much closer to ours" and makes the Iranian issue "a bit more urgent."

"Not prepared for war" was the headline in Yediot Aharonot, which questioned Israel's readiness to both mount a decisive military strike and to cope back home with the expected fallout.

It quoted statistics saying 700,000 civilians did not have bomb shelters, only half of Israel's population of 7.8 million people had gas masks, and that work to fortify 70 percent of the country's hospitals would not be completed until 2015.

Although Israel charges that its arch foe Iran is driving for a nuclear bomb, the US intelligence services say only that they suspect it is seeking a weapons capability but that no decision has been taken on actually making one.

Israel is widely suspected to have the

Save 25m children from hunger: David Cameron

AFP, London

British Prime Minister David Cameron was to call on world powers to boost their efforts to tackle malnutrition across the globe.

Taking advantage of the large number of foreign officials gathered in London for the Olympic Games, Cameron was to urge international action to save 25 million children from stunted growth over the next four years.

The "hunger summit" at his Downing Street residence is being co-hosted by Vice President Michel Temer of Brazil, which will host the next Summer Olympics at Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

Olympians including Ethiopian 10,000 metres gold medalist Tirunesh Dibaba and British long jump winner Greg Rutherford have signed an open letter urging Cameron to "fire the starting gun on the biggest ever push against hunger and malnutrition".

"With world leaders gathered in London and the eyes of billions focused on Britain, the Olympics is an incredible opportunity to change the destiny of millions of children round the world," the letters said.

"As athletes, we know how essential nutritious food is for people to flourish physically and mentally.

"Despite an abundance of food worldwide, one person in seven goes to bed hungry every night and it is children who are often hit hardest."

Cameron was set to pledge £120 million (\$188 million, 153 million euros) yesterday for research into drought-resistant and vitamin-enhanced crops for Africa and South Asia.

"One in three child deaths are linked to malnutrition. And 171 million children are so malnourished by the age of two that they can never physically recover.

"Even if malnourished children are able to fight off sickness and infection in their earliest years, their bodies and minds never fully develop," he said.

World sport stars including Ethiopian runner Haile Gebrselassie and Brazilian footballer Pele were due to attend the summit, along with ministers and international organisations.

Out of limelight, Castro celebrates 86th birthday

AFP, Havana

Fidel Castro, who led Cuba for a half century and became known worldwide for decades of Cold War-era clashes with the United States, will celebrate his 86th birthday today far from the limelight.

Officially, there are no plans to publicly honour the communist country's one-time "commander-in-chief," who tightly orchestrated public life there from January 1959 until he suffered a health crisis in 2006 and delegated his duties to his brother Raul Castro.

On Monday, youth organizations plan to mark not the anniversary of Castro's birth but rather that of Rene Gonzalez, one of five Cuban secret service agents imprisoned in the United States considered "heroes of the war on terror" in their homeland.

And in another sign of the times, Idalys Ortiz, who claimed Cuba's first Olympic judo



title for 12 years, thanked her family, friends and Raul Castro, 81, before referencing the former president.

Fidel Castro has kept a low profile for months.

The father of the Cuban revolution last appeared in public in March, when he met Pope Benedict XVI on the pontiff's visit to the Caribbean country.

The longtime leader has also fallen behind in his once prolific publications.

His long "reflections" -- totaling 398 to date -- were once regularly published in state media and read in full on state broadcasters.

Now, he pens just several lines every few months on topics that leave even his most loyal supporters perplexed.

While Castro once wrote about issues of international importance -- such as the environment and nuclear war -- he now extols the virtues of the protein-rich tropical moringa shrub. His latest piece appeared on



The Iron Dome system in Israel.

"But all the threats which are directed towards the Israeli home front are dwarfed by another threat -- different in both its scope and its essence. And so I repeat: Iran must never be allowed to get nuclear weapons."

With front page stories in two papers suggesting Tehran had made progress towards the manufacture and assembly of a nuclear warhead, Israel's Home Front Command began final tests of the SMS warning system which is expected to be operational by September.

"The Home Front Command will today start conducting nationwide testing of the 'Personal Message' alert system, which will end on Thursday," said a statement indicating that SMS texts in Hebrew, Arabic, English and Russian would be sent to subscribers on Israel's three main networks: Cellcom,

NEWS IN brief

Brits want mayor Boris as PM

REUTERS, London

Impressed by his success in hosting the Olympic Games, nearly three-quarters of Britons now want London mayor Boris Johnson to become prime minister, according to a survey on Saturday.

In the UK-wide survey conducted for Ladbrokes bookmakers, 71 percent of respondents said they would like him to become premier.



Boris Johnson

Bahrain returns envoy to Tehran

AFP, Dubai

Bahrain yesterday said it has reinstated its ambassador in Iran, more than a year after recalling the envoy over Tehran's strong condemnation of Manama's brutal crackdown on Shia-led protests.

Manama recalled its ambassador from Iran on March 15 last year in protest at the time at Tehran's "blatant interference" in the Gulf kingdom's internal affairs. Tehran retaliated by recalling its envoy from

Five killed in Iraq attacks

AFP, Baghdad

Twin bombings and a shooting in and around Baghdad yesterday killed five people, including three Iraqi policemen, security and medical officials said.

In the predominantly Sunni town of Jurf al-Sakhr, 60 kilometres south of the capital, an initial roadside bomb blast at 10:00am killed three policemen.

When another police unit arrived at the scene of the attack, another explosion went off, wounding three more people, the officials said.

Thousands flee Spanish wildfire

AFP, Vallehermoso

Scores of villagers spent the night in hotels and student halls after fleeing wildfires that continued raging out of control yesterday on the Spanish Canary Islands.

The fires on the Atlantic islands of La Gomera and Tenerife have forced the evacuation of more than 4,700 people in the past two days, the regional government said.

They have ravaged more than 3,000 hectares of land on La Gomera where they first broke out a week ago, including part of the Garajonay nature reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site.