

OIC suspends, isolates Syria

China urges end to violence as rebels threaten West over inaction

AFP, Aazaz

The world community piled the pressure on Syria Thursday to end 17 months of bloodshed as the top world Muslim body OIC suspended Syria, saying it can no longer accept a regime that "massacres its people and even traditional ally China told Damascus to rapidly implement a ceasefire.

The latest moves come after dozens of people, including women and children, were reported killed in a massive air strike on civilians in a rebel bastion in the north of Syria.

Adding to the pressure on the embattled regime, an emergency OIC summit said it had agreed to suspend Syria because of "deep concern at the massacres and inhuman acts suffered by the Syrian people".

OIC chief Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu said: "This (Muslim) world can no longer accept a regime that massacres its people using planes, tanks and heavy artillery."

The United States and the opposition Syrian National Council welcomed the move, but it was rejected by the official press in



PHOTO: AFP

Syrians flee the town of Azaaz, near the northern restive Syrian city of Aleppo, following an air strike on Wednesday.

Damascus and Syria's staunch ally Iran.

Violence continues to grip many parts of the country, including the northern battleground of Aleppo, near the scene of Wednesday's air strike in the town of Aazaz.

At least 80 people were killed nationwide Thursday, including 18 civilians in shelling in Aleppo,

according to the Observatory.

The UN Security Council meets later Thursday to formally end its observer mission in Syria with world powers still in deadlock over how to end a conflict that risks destabilising the entire region.

Ahead of the meeting, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi -- whose country has joined Russia in

vetoing three UN resolutions on the crisis -- urged Damascus to implement a ceasefire and accept international mediation.

"China urges the Syrian government and all concerned parties... to quickly implement a ceasefire to end the violence and start political dialogue," Yang told visiting Syrian envoy Bouthaina Shaaban.

UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos also warned that the situation in Syria was worsening, with the number of people in need possibly as high as 2.5 million and at least a million at risk of "destitution".

Meanwhile, with the West still refusing to arm Syria's opposition in the bloody fight against the regime, rebels in the flashpoint northern city of Aleppo warn that they could turn to al-Qaeda for help.

"We don't want al-Qaeda here, but if nobody else helps us, we will make an alliance with them," said Abu Ammar, a rebel commander in the central Bab al-Nasr district of Aleppo, scene of raging battles for

Congo mine tragedy kills 60

AFP, Kinshasa

More than 60 people died this week when a quarry collapsed in an abandoned mine in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Radio Okapi reported late Wednesday.

The UN-sponsored radio said the accident happened on Monday at Pangoy, 120 kilometres from Manbasa, as illegal miners rushed to be the first in the bottom of the pit. The sides collapsed, burying them all.

The local government chief confirmed the number of dead, the radio said. He added that the mine had been abandoned after clashes between the regular army and a militia headed up by Paul Sadala, alias Morgan.

The type of mine was not immediately known. Similar accidents are all too common in the east of this enormous nation, which is rich in minerals such as coltan, used in the making of electronic gadgets, and

Wave of attacks kill 22 in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A wave of attacks across Iraq yesterday killed at least 22 people, officials said, amid warnings of a potential escalation in violence at the end of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

Officials reported more than a dozen explosions and shootings in 12 cities and towns nationwide that also left more than 120 people wounded, and which came a day after attacks killed 13 people.

The latest unrest takes the overall death toll from violence this month to 167, according to an AFP tally based on security and medical sources.

In the north Baghdad neighbourhood of Husseinayah, a car bomb killed at least six people and wounded 26, according to an interior ministry official and a medical source.

Meanwhile in the town of Daquq, north of Baghdad in Kirkuk province, a suicide attacker blew himself up at an anti-terrorism department's compound, according to provincial police Brigadier General Sarhad Qader.

In the province's eponymous capital, meanwhile, at least four car bombs were set off across the city -- including two at the offices of the state-owned North Oil Company.

Provincial health chief Sadiq Omar Rasul put the toll from the attacks in Daquq and Kirkuk city at eight dead and 56 wounded. Qader said the victims included six police killed in the Daquq attack.

Attacks also struck Al-Garma, Al-Baaj, Badush, Tuz Khurmatu, Mosul, Taji, Khales and Baquba, leaving seven

West Nile virus kills 17 in US

AFP, Washington

The southwestern US state of Texas is battling an outbreak of the West Nile virus, with 17 deaths blamed on the mosquito-borne disease, authorities said Wednesday.

Throughout the state 465 people have been sickened since the start of the year, putting it on track to have the most cases since the disease first emerged a decade ago, the Texas Department of State Health Services said.

The county incorporating Dallas, the ninth-largest city in the United States, has been the hardest hit, prompting the mayor to declare a local state of disaster.

First discovered in Uganda in 1937, the virus is carried by birds and spread to humans by mosquitoes.

Crisis spills into Lebanon

Gulf nations order evacuation amid rising tensions

AFP, Beirut

Rioters blocked the road to Beirut airport, as dozens of Syrians were kidnapped and their shops vandalised in violence Wednesday that triggered orders from Gulf nations for citizens to leave Lebanon immediately.

Rioters set fire to tyres on the road, while an Air France flight was diverted to Damascus for refuelling before flying on to Larnaca in Cyprus because of the insecurity, apparently triggered by unconfirmed reports over the fate of Lebanese pilgrims kidnapped in Syria in May.

Saudi Arabia, which is opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, told its citizens to leave immediately after "clear threats against them," Lebanon's National News Agency said.

The United Arab Emirates issued a similar warning, with Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahayan tweeting: "Unfortunately, the situation is very dangerous," while Qatar followed suit.

The warnings came as dozens of Syrians were reportedly kidnapped in Beirut, after

unverified television reports claimed the Lebanese abducted in Syria in May were killed in Wednesday's air strike in the northern town of Aazaz.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, seven of the 11 pilgrims were wounded, but none was killed.

Lebanon is one of Gulf tourists' favourite destinations during the summer, as they seek to escape their searing hot climate for the cooler Mediterranean climate and the more liberal lifestyle.

But violence in Syria has spilled over into Lebanon, denting the country's already fragile security situation, with cross-border shootings, shelling by the Syrian army, tit-for-tat kidnappings and sectarian clashes between groups which are divided over the revolt.

Lebanon's sectarian make-up has Shias mainly supporting Assad's regime, and Sunnis supporting the insurgents.

Syria occupied Lebanon militarily and politically for nearly three decades until 2005, when its troops were forced to pull out under international pressure after the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri that year.

Thailand holds peace talks with militants

REUTERS, Bangkok

Thailand yesterday said talks were under way with members of insurgent groups in the south of the country, where thousands of people have been killed since 2004 in violence blamed on Muslim separatists.

The government has ruled out peace talks in the past, most recently in April, but Yutthasak Sasiprapa, a deputy prime minister in charge of security in the south,

The provinces of Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat have seen almost daily gun fights and bomb attacks since a shadowy separatist insurgency, simmering for decades, resurfaced in January 2004.

Since then, the conflict has claimed more than 5,200

Ecuador grants Assange asylum defying pressure

AFP, Quito

Ecuador granted political asylum to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange yesterday, setting up a diplomatic confrontation with Britain, which angrily insisted it would extradite him to Sweden.

Ecuadoran Foreign Minister Ricardo Patino argued the Australian activist would not get a fair trial if he is eventually sent to the United States to be tried for illegally publishing a trove of classified documents.

"The Ecuador government, loyal to its tradition of protecting those who seek refuge with us at our diplomatic missions, has decided to grant diplomatic asylum to Mr Assange," Patino said, at a news conference.

The decision escalated a crisis set in motion when Assange, 41, took refuge in the Ecuadoran embassy in London on June 19 to avoid extradition to Sweden, where he is wanted for questioning in a sexual assault case.

Britain insisted it would carry out its "obligation" to extradite Assange regardless of the Ecuadoran decision and Sweden immediately rejected Patino's argument that Assange would not be treated fairly.

"Nobody is going to scare us," Ecuador's President Rafael Correa said on his Twitter account, minutes before the decision was announced.

Patino said Wednesday that Ecuador had received "an express threat in writing" from Britain "that they could storm our embassy if Ecuador does not hand over Julian Assange."

Britain's Foreign Office has argued it could invoke the Diplomatic and Consular Premises Act of 1987, which it says allows it to revoke the diplomatic immunity of an embassy on British soil.

Patino said his government reached its decision after Britain, Sweden and the United States refused to provide guarantees that Assange would not be extradited to the United States.

In 2010, WikiLeaks obtained and published online an enormous cache of US military documents on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and diplomatic cables that



A placard is held by a supporter of Julian Assange outside the Equador embassy in west London yesterday.

deeply embarrassed the United States.

A US army private, Bradley Manning, faces trial in the US military courts later this year for allegedly passing the classified material to WikiLeaks.

Patino said that if Britain did not grant Assange safe conduct out of the country, he would remain "under the protection of our embassy."

He said the Ecuadoran action should not lead to a rupture in relations between the two countries, calling it "a sovereign decision protected by international law."

But the British Foreign Office expressed disappointment and said the Ecuadoran decision changed nothing.

"Under our law, with Mr Assange having exhausted all options of appeal, the British authorities are under a binding obligation to extradite him to Sweden. We shall carry out that obligation," a Foreign Office spokeswoman said.

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt took to his Twitter account to respond.

"Our firm legal and constitutional system guarantees the rights of each and everyone. We firmly reject any accusations to the contrary," he said.

Outside the Ecuadoran embassy in London's exclusive Knightsbridge district, police arrested three protesters and put up barricades to keep back a crowd of about 30 Assange supporters chanting "Hands off Ecuador!"

More than a dozen police wearing stab-proof vests were on guard outside the block of flats that houses the embassy, ready to arrest Assange if he tries to leave.

NEWS IN brief

UK PM's ex-aide in court

AFP, London

Andy Coulson, the former media chief of British Prime Minister David Cameron, appeared in court yesterday charged with phone hacking while he was editor of Rupert Murdoch's News of the World tabloid.

Coulson, 44, appeared alongside six other employees of the now defunct newspaper at a brief preliminary hearing at London's Westminster Magistrates Court.

The seven face charges of conspiring to unlawfully intercept the voicemail messages of some 600 people, including Hollywood stars Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie and Jude Law as well as politicians and crime victims.

Rebekah Brooks, the former chief executive of Murdoch's British newspaper wing, will appear at the same magistrates' court on September 3 to

Japan to deport pro-China activists

AFP, Tokyo

Japan was readying to deport 14 people it arrested after pro-China activists landed on a disputed island, reports said yesterday, in what was being seen as an attempt to defuse a growing row.

Five men, who became the first non-Japanese to set foot on the East China Sea island for eight years, and a further nine arrested aboard the boat that had carried them from Hong Kong, would be sent home as early as Friday, Kyodo news and other media reported.

The 14 had all been arrested for violating Japanese immigration law. Kyodo, citing unnamed government sources said they would be handed over to immigration officials "possibly Friday".

Dozens of people protested at the Japanese consulate in Hong Kong yesterday, demanding Japan release the activists and give up its claim to the

Bahrain jails rights activist

AFP, Dubai

A Bahrain court yesterday sentenced prominent Shia rights activist Nabeel Rajab to three years in prison over "unauthorised" protests against the Sunni Al-Khalifa monarchy, a lawyer said.

"The court has sentenced Nabeel Rajab to three years in jail over three cases of taking part in unauthorised protests," lawyer Mohammed al-Jishi wrote on his Twitter page.

Jishi said that the defence team would appeal. Rajab led anti-government protests following a brutal crackdown on Shiite-led demonstrations against the regime in March 2011.



An Indian northeastern minority resident shows his mobile phone displaying a text message spreading rumours about their safety in the city, in Bangalore yesterday. Thousands of Indians from the northeast of the country have fled southern cities after rumours they would be attacked by Muslims in reprisal for recent ethnic violence, officials said yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel wraps up SMS missile alert test

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday wound up nationwide testing of an SMS warning system against missile attack, sending texts to mobile phones in Jerusalem and other parts of the country, a military spokeswoman said.

The five-day exercise, which began on Sunday, took place to the backdrop of mounting speculation over a possible Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear facilities and a resulting Iranian counter-attack.

They are meant to warn of an imminent missile attack by Iran or Lebanon's Hezbollah militia, which could become a reality if Israel decides to mount a military strike on nuclear facilities in Iran.

Israel believes the Islamic republic is trying to develop a military nuclear capability under the guise of its civilian programme which it says would pose an existential threat to the Jewish state.

Opponents of an Israeli attack said on Thursday that around 500 academics and retired military personnel had signed a petition calling on air force pilots to refuse to carry out a unilateral strike.

The statement warns that injury to Iranian civilians as a result of radioactive leakage from any of the targeted facilities could expose pilots to future war crimes charges.

A poll released on Thursday said that 61 percent of Jewish Israelis opposed a raid on Iran without US support.

The survey, published by the independent Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) think-tank, also said that 57 percent of respondents believed talk of a pre-emptive strike is simply a tactic designed to pressure the Americans to take more resolute action against Iran.

Tough desert life wins Bedouin teen fairy tale award

AFP, Wadi Abu Hindi

It was the trauma of seeing Israeli troops raze homes in the Bedouin community where she lives that inspired 14-year-old Salha Hamadin to write an award-winning fairy tale.

Earlier this year, Salha, who comes from an impoverished Palestinian Bedouin community near Jerusalem, was crowned winner of the teenage category of the Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tale Bay competition, which saw 1,200 entries from around the world by youngsters aged 11 to 16.

The competition, which is dedicated to the 19th century Danish author famed for his stories and fables, takes place every year in the Italian town of Sestri Levante, with a focus on children's literature and unpublished tales.

Called "Hantush," the story reflects the tough realities of daily life in the occupied West Bank, and starts when an army bulldozer comes to demolish her family home, prompting Salha to call on her pet lamb Hantush to take her away.



Salha Hamadin

The lamb, who can fly, takes her on an adventure to Spain, where the youngster meets Barcelona football icon Lionel Messi.

The Barcelona striker ends up returning to the West Bank with her and

promises to mend the community's local football pitch.

He also offers her a place on his team, but she refuses, saying she is the only one who can look after the family's flock of sheep because her father is in prison.

"The reality I live in inspired me to write this story," Salha told AFP on the barren rocky hillside known as Wadi Abu Hindi.

"I used to always think and dream about living a better life here."

Salha and her family are members of the Jahalin Bedouin community who live in Area C of the West Bank, which is under full Israeli military and civilian control.

Around 300 Bedouin live in Wadi Abu Hindi which is made up of tin shacks and where there is no running water or electricity.

Despite her success, Salha has no interest in moving away from her home in the hope that one day, "fantasy can become reality, that this place would become recognised and that the children would have somewhere to