

Deadly fighting over Syria grips Lebanon

8 killed; France extends hand to rebels

AGENCIES

At least eight people were killed and 75 wounded yesterday in the Lebanese city of Tripoli in clashes between opponents and supporters of Syria's president as the crisis threatens to spill out of Syria.

Leaders of the Sunni Muslim district of Bab al-Tabbana and the Alawite district of Jabal Muhsin have declared a ceasefire from 17:00.

Earlier, the army tried to bring a halt to the fighting, which began on Monday night, but it was forced to retreat.

Sectarian tensions in Tripoli have been aggravated by the conflict in Syria.

President Bashar al-Assad is an Alawite and members of the heterodox Shia sect occupy key positions in the government and security forces.

The fighting has rattled the already fragile security situation in Lebanon, which lived under three decades of Syrian hegemony and remains deeply divided between supporters and opponents of Damascus.

Intermittent gunfire continued to be heard in Tripoli yesterday, following a second night of fighting between rival gunmen.

The army deployed troops in the areas in a bid to intervene, but they were forced to pull out after coming under attack and suffering casualties.

Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati appealed to both sides to end the "absurd battle".

Syria was the dominant foreign power in Lebanon for some 30 years and attitudes to the conflict which erupted there last year colour Lebanese politics beyond Tripoli.

Meanwhile, France yesterday providing the Syrian opposition with "non-lethal" military aid, Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said yesterday.

Speaking on BFMTV-RMC radio, Ayrault said France had responded positively to a request for help from the rebels seeking to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.



Congress Party General Secretary, son of Congress party president Sonia Gandhi and Trustee for Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, Rahul Gandhi and his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra meet physically disabled scooter recipients in New Delhi yesterday. Some 450 three-wheeler scooters were distributed to disabled people across the country by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation.

Egypt violating peace treaty in Sinai: Israel

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli officials said Tuesday that Egypt is violating the historic 1979 peace treaty between the two countries by deploying tanks in the demilitarized Sinai desert near the Israeli border.

The officials said they have relayed their objections to the Egyptian directly and through American mediators. An Egyptian border official confirmed that his Israeli counterparts had voiced concerns.

Egypt has been building up its military presence in the lawless area since Islamic militants there attacked an army post on Aug. 5 and killed 16 soldiers.

Under the peace accord, Egypt was only allowed to have lightly armed policemen in the zone along the border with Israel.

Ecuador stands firm on Assange

Asks UK to retract threat; whistleblower slams US

AFP, Quito

Ecuador on Tuesday called on Britain to retract a threat to arrest WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange at its embassy in London, adding that Quito remains open to dialogue.

The South American country set off a diplomatic firestorm last week by granting asylum to the 41-year-old Australian, who is wanted in Sweden for questioning over allegations of rape and molestation. Assange took refuge in Ecuador's London embassy on June 19 to evade extradition to Sweden.

Britain has refused to grant him safe passage out of the country.

In the latest in a series of strident comments, President Rafael Correa accused the British government of hypocrisy and said he was prepared for the standoff to last indefinitely even if it risked a loss of UK business and public support.

Assange is entitled to remain in the embassy for as long as he wants, he added.

Assange claims Sweden plans to hand him over to the United States,



where he fears prosecution over WikiLeaks's release of a vast cache of confidential US government files

Speaking to reporters, Correa said Britain must "withdraw the grave error it committed by threatening Ecuador to possibly raid its diplomatic mission to arrest Mr Julian Assange."

However, "despite this impertinence, this rude and unacceptable threat, we remain open to dialogue," he added.

Britain has angered Ecuador by

suggesting 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 and go in to arrest Assange.

Ecuador has proposed interrogations by Swedish investigators on embassy property and has said it would support Assange going to Sweden if it could get reassurances from the UK government that he would not then be extradited to the US.

On Sunday, making a dramatic appearance on the ground floor balcony of the Ecuadorian embassy in London, Assange attacked the United States and asked President Barack Obama to call off the witch-hunt against his whistleblower organization.

This was the first time he was seen in public since June 19 last.

Washington, meanwhile, has said it has had nothing to do with efforts by Britain to extradite Assange to Sweden, and Tuesday denied Assange's "wild assertions" it had launched a witch-hunt for him.

Iran to host 'historic' NAM summit

AFP, Tehran

Iran is to host some 30 leaders, including those of India, Egypt and Cuba, at an August 30-31 summit of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) that officials are billing as proof of the Islamic republic is not as isolated as the West would like.

"So far, more than 100 countries have said they are ready to participate, and around 30 nations will be represented by presidents, prime ministers or vice-presidents, which is a very good number," Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi told the ISNA news agency.

The Tehran summit, foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said, "is the greatest political summit in Iran's history."

US eases sanctions for quake-hit Iran

AGENCIES

The United States on Tuesday said it would temporarily lift sanctions for US-based non-governmental organisations that want to send financial aid to help Iran's earthquake relief effort.

The US Department of Treasury order comes after several US-Iranian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) pressed the White House to lift restrictions on sending money so that they could support charities on the ground.

The US has imposed heavy sanctions on Iran because of its nuclear programme, which Washington suspects is aimed at building a nuclear weapon. Tehran has always denied these accusations.

The earthquake, which destroyed six villages and injured some 3,000 people, is one of the worst to hit Iran since 2003, when an earthquake killed 25,000 in the city of Bam.

At that time President George W Bush allowed financial aid to be sent.

Tuesday's ruling by the US Treasury will last for 45 days, until 5 October, and donors are limited to sending \$300,000 each.

Meanwhile, Iran unveiled upgrades to six weapons on Tuesday, including a more accurate short-range missile, a more powerful naval engine and an airborne testing laboratory, Iranian media reported.

The hardware was presented at a ceremony marking Defence Industry Day and attended by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Defence Minister Ahmad Vahidi.



Ethiopia mourns ruler Meles

REUTERS, Addis Ababa

Thousands of Ethiopians descended on the centre of the capital Addis Ababa on Tuesday to mourn Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, their firm-handed ruler of more than two decades, whose body was flown home after his death in a Brussels hospital at 57.

Supporters mourned him as the saviour of a long-suffering nation and Washington praised its ally, but opponents hailed the death of an autocrat one group described as a "genocidal tyrant".

US President Barack Obama offered condolences, praising Meles's commitment to the poor and calling it an "untimely loss" for Ethiopia; British Prime Minister David Cameron described Meles as an "inspirational spokesman for Africa".

Meles, whose death ended months of rumour that he was gravely ill, had seized power 21 years ago from a military junta that had become notorious around the world for policies that contributed to mass starvation.

A former guerrilla leader turned economic reformer, he had presided in recent years over some of the fastest growth rates in Africa. But Ethiopia still remains one of the poorest countries on earth.

Deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn will be sworn in as acting prime minister by parliament and the ruling party will meet to choose a successor but no date has been set.

NEWS IN brief

Man held over Obama death threat

AFP, Los Angeles

An armed man was arrested in the western United States on Tuesday for allegedly sending an email that threatened President Barack Obama, a justice official told AFP.

"He had sent an emailed threat against the president," said Emmy Langue, a spokeswoman for the US Attorney's Office in Washington state, confirming that the man was detained at a suburban apartment in Seattle.

"When the Secret Service and local police went to his apartment to investigate, they discovered that he was armed, he was taken into custody without incident."

Russia becomes WTO member

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday crowned a tortuous 18-year campaign by becoming the largest country outside the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to formally join the world's premier free trade club.

The Geneva-based institution's 156th member had spent years harbouring deep suspicions about what a flood of better Western products and services might do to the country's fitful recover from its late Soviet malaise.

President Vladimir Putin signed on July 21 the final accession document approved by all WTO countries -- a final step clearing the way for yesterday's formal entry -- after once saying that the group needed Russia more than the reverse.

Rocket hits US army chief's plane

AP, Kabul

Insurgents fired rockets into an American base in Afghanistan and damaged the parked plane of the visiting chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, the US-led military coalition said on Tuesday.

The general was safe in his quarters at the time but had to take another aircraft out of the country.

The rocket strike that hit the C-17 military transport plane of US army General Martin Dempsey was yet another propaganda coup for the Taliban after they claimed to have shot down a US helicopter last week.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the attack. Two maintenance workers were injured by shrapnel from the two

The Pak village where Indian PM was born

AFP, Gah

For years, Ghulam Muhammad Khan thought his brilliant classmate had been killed in the bloodbath that gave birth to India and Pakistan in 1947, the deadliest end to British colonial rule in history.

But when the world's biggest democracy elected the softly-spoken Manmohan Singh as prime minister in 2004 and he told an interviewer he had been born in a remote Pakistani village, Khan was over the moon.

"He was our class monitor and we played together. He was a gentle and brilliant child. Our teacher always advised us to get his help if we couldn't understand something," Khan recalled, striding through village maize fields.

Even more incredibly, Singh wanted to help the 2,500 villagers in Gah, on a plateau of muddy rock and bushy forest 100 kilometres (62 miles) southeast of Islamabad near the ultra-modern motorway that

runs almost to the Indian border.

"I never imagined Manmohan would one day bring so many blessings to our village. He did what our own government still refuses to do," recalled Khan, who is Singh's last surviving classmate left in the village.

Not long after taking office, Singh wrote to Pakistan's then ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, asking that Gah be earmarked for development.

Musharraf, at the time working on peace talks that he hoped would resolve India and Pakistan's conflict over Kashmir, was happy to oblige.

The provincial government in Punjab built a decent road from the motorway to the village, high schools for boys and girls, a hospital, veterinary clinic and hooked the



village up to the water supply.

Singh sent an Indian firm to install solar-powered street lights, solar-powered lights to 51 households that did not have electricity and a water heating system at the mosque close to the site of his destroyed home.

But the project stalled after elections in 2008 swept former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N party to power in Punjab, booting out of office Pakistan Muslim League-Q and Musharraf stepped down.

The high schools and hospital stand empty. No teacher or doctor has been appointed, because the villagers say, credit for the development would have gone to the previous regime and not the new government.

Villagers young and old are united in their hope that the return of their lost boy sometime later this year will be the spur.

The mayor hopes that if Punjab chief minister Shahbaz Sharif, brother of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, attends village celebrations for Singh's 80th birthday in September, development work will resume.

No matter Pakistan and India's bitter rivalry, most people in Gah are proud of Singh for going on to govern 1.2 billion people in the world's largest democracy.

"He is the son of our soil and we want him to become the hero of India-Pakistan friendship. We would like him to solve the Kashmir issue and I will talk to him about this when he comes here," Khansaid.

In Singh's old primary school, which unlike his home is still standing, his mark sheet has been put up on the wall, exhorting the next generation of children to take his lead, and go ahead and rule the

Unrest spreads in South Africa mining belt

REUTERS, Rustenburg

Labour unrest in South Africa's platinum belt spread yesterday, raising concerns that anger over low wages and poor living conditions could generate fresh violence after 34 striking miners were shot dead by police last week.

The strike that started last week at Lonmin's Marikana mine has pushed up platinum prices and stoked worries about investing in Africa's biggest economy, where chronic unemployment and massive income disparity threaten social stability.

The world's top platinum producer, Anglo American Platinum, said yesterday it had received a demand for a pay increase from its South African workers, while a trade union said miners at Royal Bafokeng Platinum's Rasimone site were blocked from reporting to work by colleagues.

The price of platinum leapt to its highest since early May yesterday, driven by concern about supply from South Africa, which holds 80 percent of the known reserves of the metal, which is used in jewellery and for

catalytic converters in cars.

The labour troubles were touched off by a violent turf war between labour unions at the Marikana mine.

Ten people had been killed last week before police opened fire on striking miners on Thursday, shooting dead another 34 in the worst such bloodshed since the end of apartheid white rule in 1994. President Jacob Zuma has ordered an inquiry.

"Over the past couple of years, South Africa has witnessed a number of extremely violent strikes and protests partly due to worsening poverty, increasing social inequality, low wages, and poor social service delivery," US-based Human Rights Watch said in a statement yesterday.

Workers have trickled back to Lonmin's Marikana mine this week, but most have stayed away for fear of being caught in the conflict between the long-established National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the militant breakaway Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union.

IMPEACHMENT BID Romania president survives

BBC ONLINE

Romania's top court on Tuesday ruled that a referendum on the impeachment of President Traian Basescu was invalid, because turnout failed to reach 50%.

The decision thwarts efforts by Prime Minister Victor Ponta to oust Basescu, a bitter rival.

It means Basescu, who was suspended from his post pending the referendum, can now return to the presidency.

In the 29 July referendum, more than 87% voted for impeachment - but only 46% of registered voters took part.

The chief judge of the court, Augustin Zegrean, confirmed that the ruling against the referendum was passed "with a legal majority of 6-3".

Gu gets suspended death sentence

REUTERS, Hefei

China sentenced the wife of fallen Politburo member Bo Xilai to death on Monday but suspended her execution, setting the stage for a possible final purge of Bo himself in a scandal that has shaken Beijing ahead of a leadership transition.

It also brings a curtain down on China's most sensational trial in three decades, yet opens a new and more politically dangerous act for the ruling Communist Party -- how to deal with Bo, an ambitious and well-connected provincial leader whose downfall exposed rifts in the party.

"I feel the verdict is just and fully reflects the court's special respect for the law, its special respect for reality and, in particular, its special respect for life," Gu said of the sentence in official television footage of the hearing.

Gu, 53, stood expressionless, hands folded in front of her, as she spoke, pausing at one point to find the right words. At her trial on August 9, Gu admitted to poisoning Heywood last November, and alleged that a business dispute between them led him to threaten her son, Bo Guagua, according to official accounts published by state media.

Gu could still face execution if she commits a new offence over the next two years.

