

ALEPPO ASSAULT

Rebels on the back foot

US, UK boosts civilian aid

AFP, Aleppo

Fighting raged in a strategic district of Syria's commercial capital Aleppo yesterday, the third day of a rebel offensive to seize the city, with state media saying rebels have suffered big losses in their latest assault.

The United States and Britain, meanwhile, pledged more than another \$55 million in funding for humanitarian aid and the civilian opposition.

The focal point of combat was Salaheddin, a rebel stronghold on the southwest side of the city where insurgents attacked an army position, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

It also warned that the wooden-doored shops of the famous souk marketplace in central Aleppo, a popular tourist destination before Syria's violence erupted in March 2011, were set ablaze in the clashes between rebels and soldiers.

Elsewhere, the army stepped up operations on the Eastern Ghuta area of Damascus.

Damascus-based citizen journalist Matar Ismail said the "army is taking revenge against Damascus, and it is mainly the civilians who are paying the price."

On Wednesday, two car bombs struck an army headquarters in the heart of Damascus, and Tajamo Ansar al-Islam was the first FSA group to claim responsibility for the operation.

Meanwhile, fighting raged in several districts of Aleppo, where rebels launched on Thursday an all-out campaign to capture the northern city,

the scene of some of Syria's fiercest violence since July 20, the Observatory said.

A total of 37 people were killed in violence across the strife-torn country, including 19 civilians, most of them in Damascus province, said the Observatory, adding that 18 soldiers were also killed in combat.

Assad's forces yesterday also shelled localities in the southern province of Daraa as well as in Deir Ezzor to the east.

The latest violence came a day after a total of 136 people were killed across Syria, according to the Observatory, among them 85 civilians, 20 rebels and 31 soldiers.

More than 30,000 people have died in 18 months of violence since the outbreak of a revolt against President Bashar al-Assad.

In New York, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton unveiled a total of \$45 million (35 million euros) in new funding for humanitarian aid and to help Syria's civilian opposition.

Some \$30 million would go towards aid, bumping up the total US funding for humanitarian relief to \$130 million, with a further \$15 million for the civilian opposition, she told a meeting of the Friends of Syria.

Washington has stuck by its refusal to provide arms and military support to the rebels, fearing it would further complicate the situation on the ground.

Hillary also attacked Iran's role in the conflict. "There is no longer any doubt that Iran will do whatever it takes to protect its proxy and crony in Damascus," she told the Friends of Syria meeting.

But in a speech to the UN General Assembly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov blamed Western powers for obstructing an international solution to the crisis.



A picture taken on Friday shows damaged buildings in the northern city of Aleppo following months of clashes and battles between Syrian rebels and government forces.

PHOTO: AFP

Blair could have stopped Iraq war: Kofi Annan

AFP, London

Former British prime minister Tony Blair was the only person capable of turning George Bush against the 2003 Iraq invasion, ex-United Nations chief Kofi Annan claimed in an interview published yesterday.

Annan argued in an interview published in the Times newspaper that Blair could have changed Bush's mind because of the special relationship between the two nations and the two leaders.

Annan said he often had contemplated what might have happened if "Blair had said 'George, this is where we part company. You're on your own,'" following the failure to secure a second UN resolution.

"I really think it could have stopped the war," added the Nobel peace laureate.

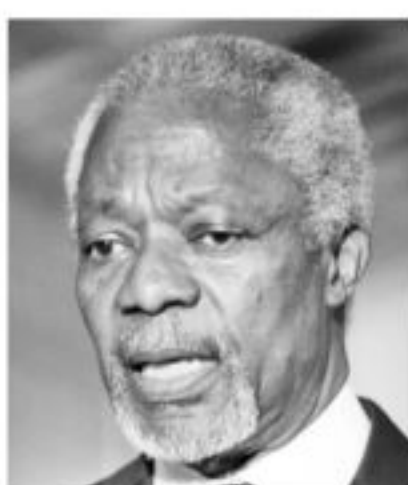
Annan was UN secretary general at the time of the crisis.

A first Security Council resolution, which offered Iraq a final opportunity to comply with its disarmament obligations passed unanimously in November 2002.

But a second resolution proposed by the US, Britain, and Spain in 2003 that called for action



Tony Blair



Kofi Annan

to be taken against Saddam Hussain's regime was withdrawn when it became clear it would be vetoed.

The US decided that the resolution was not needed before military action could lawfully take place, and the invasion commenced on March 20.

The invasion triggered eight years of sectarian conflict in Iraq, resulting in more than 100,000 civilian deaths.

Annan rejected suggestions that his resignation, or that of then US secretary of state Colin Powell, would have altered the course of history.

And he dismissed Archbishop Desmond Tutu's call for Bush and Blair to be put on trial at the International Criminal Court. Both had been democratically elected, he said, and were only acting in their national interests.

Annan was the UN Arab League envoy to Syria from February until August, but resigned after his peace plan failed to prevent further fighting between rebels and forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.

The diplomat told the Times that Assad had to go, arguing that the leader had lost all legitimacy.

Libyans hand over arms to army

AFP, Tripoli

Libyans turned over hundreds of weapons at collection points in the capital and the eastern city of Benghazi yesterday following rallies which called for disarmament and the disbanding of militias.

Colonel Hussein Abdullah Khalifa, overseeing the collection of weapons in Tripoli, said the initiative was galvanised by anti-militia rallies pressing for a united army which were held in Libya's two largest cities this month.

"We are astonished by the positive turn out," he said.

Tripoli campaign organiser Ziad Hadia told AFP that hundreds of people turned in "light, medium and heavy weapons as well as vast amounts of ammunition."

In Benghazi, the army tallied some 730 light weapons, 200 hand grenades, 100 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines, along with 20,000 assorted ammunition, an AFP journalist said.

Last Westerner leaves Guantanamo

AFP, Montreal

The last Westerner held in the US prison for terror suspects in Guantanamo is returning to his native Canada, Canadian TV reported yesterday.

Omar Khadr left the prison yesterday morning on a military plane bound for Canada, CBC said, quoting a military source. It did not say if the source was Canadian or US.

Khadr was arrested as a teenager in Afghanistan and has been held at the US prison in Cuba since 2002.

Omar Khadr, who was born in Toronto and became a child soldier for Al-Qaeda, was 15 in 2002 when he was wounded and captured by US troops during a four-hour US ground and air attack in Afghanistan.

He has been eligible for a transfer to Canada since October 2011 after pleading guilty in 2010 to five war crimes, including for throwing the grenade that claimed the life of US soldier Christopher Speer.

CBC said he would serve part of his remain sentence in Canada.

There was no immediate confirmation of the CBC report from the Canadian government.



Omar Khadr

Libya attack linked to Qaeda

Says US; lack of answers over attack fuels criticism

AFP, Washington

The US intelligence community said that a deadly assault on a US consulate in Libya was a planned attack linked to al-Qaeda, but stressed that "many unanswered questions" remained.

"It remains unclear if any group or person exercised overall command and control of the attack, and if extremist group leaders directed their members to participate," Shawn Turner, spokesman for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, said in a statement Friday.

"We do assess that some of those involved were linked to groups affiliated with, or sympathetic to al-Qaeda."

The Obama administration has faced mounting criticism as top US officials revise on an almost daily basis their account of what happened in a deadly assault on a US mission in Libya.

At its core are allegations that the State Department, and by implication the Obama administration, failed to protect its diplomats caught up in an hours-long siege of the US consulate in Benghazi.

Some Republican lawmakers have alleged that the Obama administration knew almost immediately afterward that al-Qaeda was involved in the Benghazi attack, which



Susan Rice

killed the US ambassador to Libya and three other Americans.

Both Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and top US diplomat Hillary Clinton have called the assault a "terrorist attack," with the Pentagon chief also suggesting that it took days for the US government to conclude extremists had launched an orchestrated assault.

According to US media reports, the militants involved in the attacks belonged to a group called Ansar al Sharia. Its members were reportedly in contact with an al-Qaeda offshoot known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic

Maghreb.

The US military's top officer, General Martin Dempsey, also said there had been no warning of a direct threat to the American mission in Benghazi before the attack.

The US ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, on September 16 described it as a "spontaneous attack" that took place on the 11th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terror strikes on the United States.

On Friday a top Republican congressman, Pete King of New York, called for Rice to resign, charging that she misled Americans over the assault by dismissing suggestions that it was a planned terror operation.

JAPAN-CHINA TERRITORIAL ROW US urges nations to show responsibility

AFP, New York

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton insisted Friday that Asian nations have "a responsibility" to lower tensions amid a heated war of words between regional powers over disputed island chains.

As the row was plastered in ads across US newspapers, Clinton opened three-way talks with South Korean Foreign Minister Kim Sung-Hwan and Koichiro Gamba of Japan to discuss regional tensions.

"Our three nations share a strong interest in the peaceful, verifiable denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. We will discuss today what further steps we can take toward that goal," the top US diplomat said.

"We will also discuss how every nation in the region has a responsibility to work to resolve disputes peacefully, lower tensions, promote regional security and stability."

In a separate bilateral meeting with Gamba, Hillary also urged Tokyo to "move carefully, deliberately and effectively in its bilateral diplomacy with China."

China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi sparked angry exchanges with Japanese diplomats at the UN by accusing Japan of stealing the islands.

'VATILEAKS' SCANDAL

Pope's butler goes on trial

AFP, Vatican City

Pope Benedict XVI's former butler Paolo Gabriele went on trial Saturday accused of leaking confidential Vatican memos that revealed cloak-and-dagger politics among the pontiff's closest aides.

Gabriele sat quietly for the start of a closely-watched case which could see him, if convicted, receive up to four years in prison for aggravated theft. The 46-year-old father of three looked tired and wan in a greysuit.

The pope's personal secretary Georg Gaenswein, who was Gabriele's superior, will be called to testify against his former charge, the court heard.

Gaenswein, 56, one of Benedict's closest confidants, confronted the butler about the leaks early in May after being tipped off by the Vatican police.

The court, after a first session of just over two hours, mainly addressing preliminary legal questions, fixed the next hearing for Tuesday.



Paolo Gabriele

A once loyal servant who said he grew disgusted by the "evil and corruption" he witnessed, Gabriele has told investigators he was acting as an "agent" of the Holy Spirit to help put a scandal-weary Catholic Church back on track.

He is accused of passing investigative reporter Gianluigi Nuzzi copies of secret papers earlier this year under the codename

"Maria". Gabriele is expected to defend his actions at Tuesday's hearing.

Evidence confiscated from the butler's apartments -- including copies of confidential documents, electronic copying equipment and gifts intended for the pope including a gold nugget -- filled 82 boxes, the court was told.

Gabriele has confessed and written a letter begging the pope for forgiveness, but that is not legally considered definitive proof for a conviction because he could have lied to protect fellow whistleblowers.

US pushing Gulf states on missile defense

AFP, New York

The United States is pushing Gulf countries to develop missile defense plans, amid what they see is a rising threat from Iran, US officials said Friday.

"It's the United States' goal, to encourage the GCC countries to develop this missile defense architecture, because... to truly protect the region by missile defense, it requires a regional approach," a senior US official said ahead of talks with the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council.

"To be able to defend against a missile in your territory often requires radars and other types of capabilities outside your territory."

Defense Secretary Leon Panetta had been due to attend the New York talks alongside US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, but bad weather forced him to abandon his travel plans.

The US official said Washington has already expressions of interest from some of the Gulf nations in developing missile defense capabilities and they hoped to have some announcements of contracts in the coming months.

Asked whether the plan was also to protect against any missile threat from Iran, he said "our aim is to help our Gulf partners with their defense needs. And so there is a missile threat that they face. We want to help them face that threat as best we can."

Stay united, back party

China PM urges people amid row

AFP, Beijing

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao called on Saturday for his people to unite in support of the Communist Party and its outgoing leader, President Hu Jintao, ahead of a pivotal congress to usher in new leadership.

The announcement comes amid a damaging political scandal involving Bo Xilai, a senior party boss who is to stand trial for a litany of crimes including abuse of power and improper sexual relations.

"Let us rally more closely around the CPC central committee with comrade Hu Jintao as the general secretary," said Wen in a speech that came two days before the 63rd anniversary of the proclamation of People's Republic.

Hu will handover power as head of the party to Vice President Xi Jinping during the congress on November 8, but will remain the country's president until next March.



Wen Jiabao

The congress will allow the party to "open new perspectives on development," Wen told an audience of some 2,000 diplomats and officials gathered at the Great Hall of the People in Tiananmen Square.

Both Bo's fate and the date of the congress had been the subject of intense speculation over whether China's biggest political intrigue in decades would unsettle the highly choreographed leadership change.

The announcement on Bo marked an unprecedentedly harsh public rebuke for a Chinese Communist official as authorities looked to lay to rest the damaging episode that shocked China and saw Bo's wife convicted of murder.

State media yesterday lauded the party for putting on a forceful display of unity by expelling Bo, but web users denounced the case as a sign of deep-rooted corruption.

NEWS IN brief

Floods in Spain kill eight

AFP, Madrid

At least eight people, including a young girl and an elderly woman, have died in Spain as a result of floods brought on by downpours, regional officials said yesterday.

Four people died in the Andalusia region, including a woman in her 80s, a couple found in their car and a man who died of a heart attack.

Some 500 people remained evacuated from their homes in the area early on Saturday after the torrential rains caused rivers to break their banks and flooded roads and railways, regional authorities said.

Key Indian policy guru dies

AFP, New Delhi

India's first national security advisor Brajesh Mishra, who played an instrumental role in shaping the South Asian giant's foreign policy, has died, officials said yesterday.

Mishra, who died late Friday, served as national security advisor and principal secretary to former Indian PM Atal Behari Vajpayee during his government from 1998 to 2004, acting as troubleshooter.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid tribute to Mishra, calling him "one of the most able and influential public servants of his generation" who brought "a

Jesus wife a hoax: Vatican

TNN, Vatican City

An ancient papyrus fragment which a Harvard scholar says contains the first recorded mention that Jesus may have had a wife is a fake, the Vatican said on Friday.

"Substantial reasons would lead one to conclude the papyrus is indeed a clumsy forgery," the Vatican's newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, said in an editorial by editor, Gian Maria Vian.

Joining a highly charged academic debate over the authenticity of the text, written in ancient Egyptian Coptic, the newspaper published a lengthy analysis outlining doubts about the manuscript and

Venezuela launches satellite

CNN ONLINE

China launched a second satellite for the Venezuelan government yesterday, state media reported, days before President Hugo Chavez runs for re-election.

The observation satellite named Miranda launched from the northwestern Chinese province of Gansu.

It is Venezuela's second satellite in orbit, according to the Venezuela State News Agency, AVN. The first one -- a telecommunications satellite -- was launched by China in 2008. It is named after Venezuelan independence hero, Simon Bolivar, the