

ANTI-DRONE MARCH

Imran claims success despite obstructions

AFP, Tank, Pakistan

Cricketer turned politician Imran Khan claimed victory yesterday at the end of his march against US drone strikes, despite failing to reach his intended destination in Pakistan's tribal areas. Khan defied official warnings to lead thousands of supporters beyond Tank, the last town before the semi-autonomous area which is the refuge of heavily armed Taliban and al-Qaeda militants.

"We have given our message -- it has gone across the world," he told supporters. "We have succeeded in raising this issue. We came here to raise this issue, we came here to take a stand against drones."

He had planned to reach the village of Kotkai in South Waziristan, notorious as a place where the Taliban used to train suicide bombers, but turned back before reaching the district border after the army warned it was unsafe to stay in the area after nightfall.

More than 20,000 people thronged the streets of Tank for the final rally, according to police, and well-wishers lined the streets of villages along the route from Islamabad to welcome the convoy as it passed through on its two-day journey.

But the turnout at the final rally was well below the 100,000 predicted by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) or Movement for Justice party in the runup to the event, and the vast majority of those taking part in the march appeared to be party activists.

Khan, who is campaigning before a general election next year, has made opposition to the drone programme a key plank of PTI policy. Critics accuse him of ignoring atrocities blamed on Islamist militants and abuses by the Pakistani army.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf or Movement for Justice party gather on their arrival at Tank yesterday, the last town before Pakistan's notorious semi-autonomous area. Inset, Pakistan cricket star turned politician Imran Khan.

Syrian shell strikes Turkey again

Ankara retaliates; fighting rages in Aleppo, Damascus

AFP, Aleppo

Syrian mortar fire again struck a Turkish border village yesterday, prompting artillery retaliation for the fourth day as fierce fighting rocked the key city of Aleppo and rebels lost ground in Damascus.

The Syrian mortar round struck hit Akcakale -- site of a similar strike on Wednesday -- as Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said President Bashar al-Assad should be replaced by Vice President Faruq al-Shara.

The mortar round hit the grounds of a public building without causing casualties, Turkey's NTV news channel reported, adding that the building had been evacuated beforehand.

On Wednesday five civilians were killed in Akcakale in a mortar strike that provoked counter-fire, in the most serious incident since Syrian anti-aircraft fire brought down a Turkish

warplane in June.

That incident caused a spike in tensions between the former allies and renewed fears of a broader conflict.

Turkey's parliament on Thursday gave the government the green light to use military force against Syria if necessary.

The UN Security Council on Thursday strongly condemned cross-border attacks by Syria and called for restraint between the neighbours.

Syria's commercial capital Aleppo, meanwhile, was rocked by the heaviest fighting of an almost three-month offensive against rebels, residents said.

An AFP correspondent said warplanes were overflying the rebel-held Bab al-Hadid and Shaar neighbourhoods, where witnesses reported fierce fighting.

"This is the worst fighting we've seen here since the beginning of the Aleppo war," one Bab al-Hadid resident told AFP.

As fighting raged in Aleppo, state television said government forces had pushed rebels out of two of their strongholds in Damascus province, Qudsaya and Hameh.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the government had taken control of Hameh and said the bodies of 21 men were found there.

On July 18, rebels carried out a massive bombing in Damascus, killing Assad's brother-in-law, the defence minister and a general.

Since then, regime forces have pushed the rebels to the outskirts of the capital but have lost control of several border crossings and are battling to fully retake Aleppo.

The Observatory, which gave a toll of 50 people killed so far yesterday, also reported that regime forces pounded the rebel-held town of Tal-Abyad in the northern province of Raqa, on the border with Turkey.

Libya PM names new cabinet

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's Prime Minister Mustafa Abu Shagur yesterday proposed to the General National Congress a "crisis government" of just 10 ministers, after the GNC rejected outright his first proposed line-up.

"In face of the dangers threatening the country, I present to you a crisis government restricted to 10 ministers, rejecting all geographical considerations," the premier told the 200 members of the country's national assembly.

Abdessalem Jadallah al-Salih, a colonel under the toppled regime of Muammar Gaddafi who defected and led the rebellion in the east against the late dictator, was put forward as defence minister.

The premier also proposed police general and lawyer Ashur Shwayel for the interior ministry.

The GNC, which late on Thursday rejected Abu Shagur's first proposed line-up, gave him 72 hours to build consensus and deliver an amended cabinet list.

It will now discuss the proposed new cabinet, but if the new list is rejected, Abu Shagur will be relieved of his duties and the GNC will have to elect a new prime minister within the next three to four weeks.

Venezuelans vote in key polls

BBC ONLINE

Voters in Venezuela were going to the polls yesterday in what was predicted to be the country's most tightly contested presidential election in a decade.

Left-wing incumbent Hugo Chavez, first elected in 1998, was being challenged by opposition leader Henrique Capriles.

Chavez wants to continue what he calls his socialist revolution while Capriles has promised to restore economic growth.

Almost 19 million Venezuelans are eligible to vote in the election.

Chavez - who is seeking a fourth term in office - was diagnosed with cancer last year but says he has now fully recovered.

A colourful and often controversial figure on the international stage, President Chavez, 58, has nationalised key sectors of the economy.



Hugo Chavez Henrique Capriles

Venezuela is a major oil producer and high oil prices over the past decade have allowed his government to fund health-care, education programmes and social housing.

He says he needs another term to complete his "Bolivarian Revolution" towards socialism.

However, Capriles, 40, and the opposition say the president's policies have led to bureaucracy, inefficiency and shortages.

They also accuse Chavez of authoritarianism, and of suppressing the judiciary and silencing critics in the media.

Capriles says a lack of investment in

Venezuela's crucial oil industry has led to a decline in production.

Both candidates held huge final rallies on Thursday - the last day of campaigning.

The two candidates have also used social media to encourage voters to cast their ballots.

"Good morning to all, one day left to open the door to the future!" Capriles wrote on his Twitter account on Saturday. "Comrades across the world: Be assured that Bolivar's people will continue to work to make another world possible, that is, a socialist one!" President Chavez tweeted.

Almost 140,000 soldiers will be deployed to guard more than 10,000 voting centres.

While polls are scheduled to close at 18:00 local time, National Electoral Council President Tibisay Lucena said that the hours could be extended if voters were still queuing to cast their ballots.

Sudan military plane crash kills 13

AFP, Khartoum

Thirteen Sudanese military personnel died and nine others were injured when their transport plane crashed west of Khartoum yesterday on its way to conflict-plagued Darfur, state media reported.

"Thirteen were killed instantly, and nine were taken to hospital," Sawarmi Khaled Saad, the Sudanese army spokesman, was quoted as saying by the state SUNA news agency.

It is the worst toll in a series of Sudanese military aviation incidents since early last year, and follows a recent surge of unrest in Darfur, the far-west region where a rebellion began nearly a decade ago.

A dangerous new world of drones

US monopoly on drones is past; 70 nations have them

CNN ONLINE

A decade ago, the United States had a virtual monopoly on drones.

Not anymore. According to data compiled by the New America Foundation, more than 70 countries now own some type of drone, though just a small number of those nations possess armed drone aircraft.

The explosion in drone technology promises to change the way nations conduct war and threatens to begin a new arms race as governments scramble to counterbalance their adversaries.

Late last month, China announced that it would use surveillance drones to monitor a group of uninhabited islands in the South China Sea that are controlled by Japan but claimed by China and Taiwan.

In August 2010, Iran unveiled what it claimed was its first armed drone. And on Tuesday, the country's military chief, Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, disclosed details of a new long-range drone that he said can fly 2,000 kilometers, which puts Tel Aviv easily in range.

But without an international framework governing the use of drone attacks, the United States is setting a dangerous precedent for other nations with its aggressive and

secretive drone programs in Pakistan and Yemen, which are aimed at suspected members of al-Qaeda and their allies.

Just as the US government justifies its drone strikes with the argument that it is at war with al-Qaeda and its affiliates, one could imagine that India in the not too distant future might launch such attacks against suspected terrorists in

Kashmir, or China might strike Uighur separatists in western China, or Iran might attack Baluch nationalists along its border with Pakistan.

When President George W. Bush declared a "War on Terror" 11 years ago, the Pentagon had fewer than 50 drones.

Now, it has around 7,500.

Since then, the CIA has used drones equipped with bombs and missiles hundreds of times to target suspected militants in Pakistan and Yemen.

Only the United States, United Kingdom and Israel are known to

have launched drone strikes against their adversaries.

Drone technology is proliferating rapidly. A 2011 study estimated that there were around 680 active drone development programs run by governments, companies and research institutes around the world, compared with just 195 in 2005.

In 2010, US-based General Atomics received export licenses to sell unarmed versions of the Predator drone to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates.

An official in Turkey's Defense Ministry said in July that Turkey planned to arm its own domestically produced drone, the Anka.

Israel is the world's largest exporter of drones and drone technology, and the state-owned Israeli Aerospace Industries has sold to countries as varied as Nigeria, Russia and Mexico.

Building drones, particularly armed drones, takes sophisticated technology

and specific weaponry, but governments are increasingly willing to invest the necessary time and money to either buy or develop them, as armed drones are increasingly seen as an integral part of modern warfare.

States are not alone in their quest for drones. Insurgent groups, too, are moving to acquire this technology. Last year, Libyan opposition forces trying to overthrow the dictator Muammar Gaddafi bought a sophisticated surveillance drone from a Canadian company for which they paid in the low six figures.

You can even buy your own tiny drone on Amazon for \$250. (And for an extra \$3.99, you can get next-day shipping.)

As drone technology becomes more widely accessible, it is only a matter of time before well-financed drug cartels acquire them.

Given the relatively low costs of drones -- already far cheaper than the costs of a fighter jet and of training a fighter jet pilot -- armed drones will play a key role in future conflicts.

The time has come for some kind of international convention on the legal framework surrounding the uses of such weapons, which promise to shape the warfare of the future as much as tanks and bombers did during the 20th century.

NEWS IN brief

Vladimir Putin turns 60

AFP, Moscow

Russia's President Vladimir Putin turned 60 yesterday, the official retirement age in the country he has dominated for the past 12 years, as his supporters celebrated his leadership and machismo.

Putin flew to his native northwestern city of Saint Petersburg to spend the day with "friends and family", according to his spokesman Dmitry Peskov.

Putin's sports hobbies are also featured in a rare up-close-and-personal special made by the NTV channel, to air during prime time. The filmmakers trailed Putin for a week, even taking the camera to a swimming pool.

Kuwait dissolves parliament

REUTERS, Kuwait City

Kuwait's ruler ordered the dissolution of parliament yesterday, a senior government minister said, opening the way to a parliamentary election in the major oil-producing Gulf Arab state after months of political deadlock.

The emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, had been widely expected to take the decision following a cabinet request to dissolve the assembly. Elections now need to be held within 60 days under constitutional rules.

Israel downs unmanned aircraft

BBC ONLINE

The Israeli air force shot down a small unmanned aircraft after it entered the south of the country, the military said on Wednesday.

The aircraft crashed in the north of the Negev desert. It is not clear where it came from. Military officials said the aircraft had flown in from the west, but not from the Gaza Strip.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak said Israel viewed the incident "very severely".

"We will consider our response later," he said, raising the possibility of retaliatory action.

India test-fires supersonic missile

PTI, Panaji

The Navy today successfully test-fired the 290-km range BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, capable of carrying a conventional warhead of 300 kg, from a warship off the Goa coast.

Sources said the missile performing high-level manoeuvres successfully hit the target ship which was still on fire.

Brahmos Aerospace, an Indo-Russian joint venture company, is also working to develop the air as well as the submarine launch version of the missile system and work on the project is in progress.

Iraq executes 11 despite outcry

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi authorities executed 11 more people yesterday -- 10 Iraqis and one Algerian -- despite widespread international calls for a moratorium on Baghdad's use of the death penalty.

The latest executions bring to at least 113 the number of times Iraq has followed through on death sentences so far this year, according to an AFP tally, already far outpacing 2011 when 68 people were put to death.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay expressed shock earlier this year at the number of executions, criticising the lack of transparency in court proceedings and calling for an immediate

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