

Turkey intercepts plane from Russia 'carrying arms to Syria'

Furious Moscow demands explanation; 74 killed nationwide

AFP, Moscow

Tensions yesterday flared between Turkey and Syria's top ally Russia after Ankara forced a Syrian passenger jet flying from Moscow to land on the grounds it carried Russian-supplied arms for Damascus.

As the tensions soared, rebels fighting forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad won more strategic territory in their bid to secure a "buffer zone" in a swathe of land abutting the Turkish border, an AFP reporter said.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the SyrianAir plane was carrying "equipment and ammunition" destined for the Syrian defence ministry that had apparently been provided by Russia's arms export agency.

Russia demanded an explanation, accusing the Turkish authorities of endangering the lives of passengers, while the Syrian regime furiously demanded that Turkey return the cargo it had seized at Ankara's Esenboga airport.

The incident risks not only inflaming tensions between Turkey and the



SYRIA CRISIS

Syrian government -- already at bitter odds -- but also hurting ties between Ankara and Moscow which have starkly differing views on the Syria conflict.

A source in the Russian arms export industry earlier vehemently denied claims that there had been a military cargo onboard the plane.

Turkey had scrambled two F-16 fighter jets to force down the SyrianAir Airbus A-320 after reportedly receiving intelligence it was carrying military cargo for the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The plane, carrying 35 passengers, 17 of them Russian nationals, was held at the airport for nine hours before finally

allowing it to resume its journey. But its suspicious cargo stayed in Ankara.

The Syrian foreign ministry said the government demanded "a complete and proper restitution of the contents of the plane".

Russia, a top ally of the Damascus regime and its biggest arms supplier, furiously complained that Ankara had put the lives of passengers at risk by forcing it to land in the Turkish capital.

Rebels are seeking to secure a buffer zone in northwestern Syria, and this week won control of the strategic town of Maaret al-Numan on the highway linking Damascus to the main battleground city of Aleppo.

An AFP reporter in the town said the insurgents had completely cut off the highway yesterday, choking the flow of regime troops to battlefields in the north.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said violence killed at least 74 people across Syria so far yesterday -- 32 soldiers, 22 civilians and 20 rebels -- adding to its overall toll of more than 32,000 dead in the nearly 19-month conflict.

US PRESIDENTIAL POLL

Ryan, Biden set to clash

AFP, Washington

The US vice presidential candidates face each other in debate yesterday, with Democrats itching for revenge after Mitt Romney's drubbing of President Barack Obama tightened the White House race.

After Obama's lackluster performance last week, Vice President Joe Biden, 69, was expected to mount a full-throated attack against the surging Romney ticket while striving to avoid the gaffes the veteran politician is famous for.

He will face the much younger Representative Paul Ryan, 42, a fiscal policy wonk whose controversial government-slashing budget made him a hero among conservatives but who has never debated on a national stage.

The vice presidential debate is usually something of a sideshow in the race, but this year all eyes will be on Danville, Kentucky to see whether Biden can stem Romney's sharp rise in the polls over recent days.

Obama tried to steady panicking supporters Wednesday, insisting he would win re-election despite last week's debate defeat and admitting that he had had a "bad night" and had been "too polite" to Romney.

"I got this," Obama said in a radio interview, predicting that Democratic "hand wringing" over his limp performance would



Paul Ryan

Joe Biden

fade as a memory after his next clash with Romney on Tuesday.

Recent polls show an unsettled race, with some national polls -- like Gallup's daily tracking survey which had Romney and Obama tied at 48 percent -- suggesting Romney's debate bounce was subsiding.

There was movement towards Romney in state surveys that had the race in battlegrounds like Nevada, Florida, Nevada and Ohio within a few points.

The debate at Kentucky's Centre College will be moderated by ABC News correspondent Martha Raddatz and will begin at 9:00pm EST (0100 GMT Friday).

US drone strike kills 18 in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

A US drone attack yesterday killed 18 insurgents -- mostly Afghans -- at a militant compound in Pakistan's tribal region near the northwestern border with Afghanistan, officials said.

It was the second US missile strike reported in as many days in the northwest considered a stronghold of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The covert US attacks are unpopular in Pakistan, where the government calls them a violation of sovereignty, but American officials believe they are a vital weapon against Islamist militants.

Meanwhile, a remotely detonated bomb attached to a motorcycle killed nine people and injured 22 others in Pakistan's Baluchistan province yesterday.

Besides, a remote-controlled bomb strapped to a donkey killed at least four people in Pakistan's tribal belt on the Afghan border yesterday, officials said.

More chocolate, more Nobel prize winners!

AFP, Washington

The more chocolate people in a country eat, the more Nobel prize winners the country produces per capita, according to a note published yesterday in the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine.

Flavonoids, antioxidants found in cocoa, green tea, red wine and some fruits, appear "to be effective in slowing down or even reversing the reductions in cognitive performance that occur with aging," wrote Columbia University professor Franz Messerli.

"Since chocolate consumption could hypothetically improve cognitive function not only in individuals but also in whole populations, I wondered whether there would be a correlation between a country's level of chocolate consumption and its population's cognitive function," Messerli wrote.

The results were surprising: according to Messerli, there was "a close, significant



linear correlation between chocolate consumption per capita and the number of Nobel laureates per 10 million persons in a total of 23 countries."

Switzerland "was the top performer in terms of both the number of Nobel laureates and chocolate consumption," wrote Messerli, who said he obtained figures on chocolate consumption from manufacturers.

The United States, France and Germany are in the middle of the list, while China, Japan and Brazil are at the bottom.

Sweden, which consumes 6.4 kilos of chocolate per capita per year, was an exception. Based on this rate of consumption "we would predict that Sweden should have produced a total of about 14 Nobel laureates, yet we observe 32."

Messerli however provides a caveat: "Obviously, these findings are hypothesis-generating only and will have to be tested in a prospective, randomized trial."

Nigerian farmers sue Shell in landmark case

AFP, The Hague

Shell broke the law by not repairing leaks that destroyed the lands of Niger Delta farmers, a Dutch court yesterday heard in a case that could set a precedent for global environmental responsibility.

The four Nigerian farmers, backed by lobby group Friends of the Earth, have brought the Anglo-Dutch oil giant into court thousands of miles away from their homes with a civil suit that could open the door for hundreds of similar cases.

"Shell knew for a long time that the pipeline was damaged but didn't do anything; they could have stopped the leaks," lawyer Channa Samkalden told the court, accusing Shell of having "violated its legal obligations".

The case relates to damage caused in 2005 and was initially filed in 2008, demanding that Royal Dutch Shell clean up the mess, repair and maintain defective pipelines to prevent further damage and pay out compensation.

In a landmark ruling, the Dutch judiciary in 2009 declared itself competent to try the case



despite protests from Shell that its Nigerian subsidiary was solely legally responsible for any damage.

Oil pollution has ravaged swathes of the Niger Delta in the world's eighth largest oil producer, which exports more than two million barrels a day.

Environmental groups accuse Shell of double standards and treating spills in Nigeria differently from pollution in Europe or North America.

Jonathan Verschuuren, an environmental law expert at the Netherlands' Tilburg University, said that a win for the farmers would set a precedent.

"If they win the case then it will be an important step that multinationals can more easily be made answerable for the damage they do in developing countries," Verschuuren told AFP.

Environmentalists want the Netherlands, and other Western nations, to pass laws forcing companies to enforce the same environmental responsibility standards abroad as at home.

US security in Benghazi weak

Former security chiefs testify before US lawmakers

AFP, Washington

The US consulate in the Libyan city of Benghazi was a sitting target with weak security as requests for extra staffing were denied despite a rising al-Qaeda threat, US lawmakers were told Wednesday.

In a testy and heated hearing, Republican lawmakers grilled three top State Department officials and the former leader of a security team into what went wrong in a September 11 attack on the mission, in which four Americans died.

Two officials testified that requests for extra support for US posts in Tripoli and Benghazi had been refused, and the regional security officer said he was frustrated by a "total absence of planning" for future security.

"It was abundantly clear: We were not going to get resources until the aftermath of an incident," regional security officer Eric Nordstrom told the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing, which lasted over four hours.



Left to right, Lt Col Andrew Wood, Eric Nordstrom, Charlene R Lamb and Patrick Kennedy.

Nordstrom said he sought to bolster security by asking for 12 more agents, but was told by a State Department regional director that he was asking for the "sun, moon and the stars."

The fierce and sustained attack by dozens of militants bearing heavy weapons who torched and bombarded the mission and a nearby annex has thrust President Barack Obama's foreign policy to the forefront of the bitter White House race.

Among those killed was ambassador Chris Stevens -- the first diplomatic envoy to be killed on duty since 1979 -- and three other diplomatic personnel.

The hearing was told there were 230 security-related incidents over 13 months in Libya, and in June, there was a direct threat against Stevens on Facebook.

Both Wood and Nordstrom blamed Deputy Assistant Secretary Charlene Lamb, responsible for security at some 275 US diplomatic facilities around the world, for refusing their calls for extra manpower.

UK normalises ties with Modi over riots

AFP, Ahmedabad, India

Britain yesterday said it would end a 10-year boycott of the leader of India's western Gujarat state imposed over deadly religious riots there in 2002 that left three Britons dead.

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, a right-wing Hindu nationalist, came to power shortly before the riots triggered by the deaths of nearly 60 Hindu pilgrims in a train fire that was initially blamed on a mob of Muslims.

He is accused of doing too little to prevent the blood-letting, which left more than 2,000 mainly Muslims dead in an orgy of violence and arson, according to rights groups. The government figures put the death toll at about 1,000.

Britain's junior foreign minister minister Hugo Swire has asked the ambassador to India to visit Gujarat and meet Modi to discuss a "wide range of issues of mutual interests", the British foreign office said in a statement.

Previously, British officials were forbidden from dealing directly with Modi, but there were contacts with senior bureaucrats in Gujarat. Modi is widely seen as a potential candidate of BJP for prime minister in India.



Warrant issued against Thaksin

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's Supreme Court yesterday issued an arrest warrant for ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, in the latest abuse of power charges brought against the controversial tycoon.

Thaksin, who was removed from power in a 2006 military coup and lives abroad to avoid a separate jail term for corruption, is one of 27 defendants facing trial over loans issued by the state-run Krung Thai Bank.

The former prime minister's absence from the Bangkok court "shows signs of evasion", said one of the nine presiding judges.

"The court decides to issue an arrest warrant only against the first defendant (Thaksin) and his trial will be pending until the prosecutor can bring him to court," he said.

Thaksin remains a deeply controversial figure in politically divided Thailand, where his sister Yingluck Shinawatra is the current prime minister.

He faces five charges including abuse of power and violation of banking laws along with the other defendants -- who include former executives at Krung Thai.

A total of six arrest warrants have now been issued against Thaksin since he fled Thailand in 2008, including a case in which he was convicted of abuse of power over land purchases and four pending corruption trials.



Bangladeshi sculptor

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Additional Sessions Judge Vimal Kumar Yadav gave seven years imprisonment to 75-year-old Rashid Ahmed and his accomplice Nurun Nahar Lovely for smuggling fake currency in violation of the provisions of the Customs Act and imposed on them a fine of Rs 1.5 lakh each.

Once they pay the fine, Rashid and Nurun will be able to walk out of Tihar jail in West Delhi.

They were arrested on December 20, 2004 by a team of officials of the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) along with the two Indian nationals from a hotel here. During a search of their belongings, fake Indian currency notes of Rs 45,98,000 were recovered from false cavities made in a suitcase.

Rashid and Nurun, however, maintained that they

had come to India to visit Dargah Ajmer Sharif and that they had been "implicated" in the case.

"A period of seven or eight years is a long one to change the face of mountains and the course of the rivers. They have failed to share the pleasures, pains and happiness with their families during these years," the court said.

It, however, acquitted co-accused Mohammed Aaad Ali and Imam Raja, both Indian nationals.

After the case was highlighted by the Indian media recently, the Bangladesh government expressed the hope that the courts would take a sympathetic view and release the sculptor.

While delivering its verdict, the court considered the submission of their counsel and amicus curiae Dhirender Singh and took a lenient view

saying, "Rashid Ahmed is stated to be a renowned artist".

"The newspaper reports also vouch for it, which all goes to strengthen the fact that the convicts were the victims of circumstances, and that temptation of easy money lured them and they could not ward off the temptation of earning a quick buck with a religious trip to India as bonus," said the court.

Following the arrest, a case was registered against all four by the Central Bureau of Investigation, on a complaint by the DRI, for possessing counterfeit currency, using counterfeit currency notes as genuine and criminal conspiracy.

The prosecution alleged that Nurun and Rashid had smuggled in fake Indian currency while Aaad and Imam were entrusted with responsibility of using the fake notes in the market. It

was part of a larger conspiracy of smuggling fake currency at the instance of some Pakistani nationals.

The court, however, held that the agency had failed to prove any such conspiracy involving Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationals. As for Aaad and Imam, the court said the prosecution could not prove that they had gone to the hotel to collect the contraband.

"The element of conspiracy is missing as accused Aaad Ali and Imam Raja are not shown cogently being part of the same as no evidence has been brought on record conclusively and comprehensively beyond doubt."

The court also observed that one of the premier investigating agencies involved even attempted to unearth the so-called conspiracy involving the Pakistani and/or Bangladeshi nationals.

NEWS IN brief

Court asks for govt reply over Vadra

IANS, Lucknow

The Lucknow bench of the Allahabad high court yesterday asked the central government to respond to charges levelled against Robert Vadra, son-in-law of Congress president Sonia Gandhi, by India Against Corruption (IAC) member Arvind Kejriwal.

The court, which was hearing a public interest litigation (PIL) by activist Nutan Thakur, fixed November 21 as the next date for hearing.

The PIL sought a thorough probe into the charges levelled by Kejriwal and his colleagues.

US embassy staff killed in Yemen

AFP, Dubai

Unidentified gunmen shot dead a senior Yemeni security official employed by the US embassy in Sanaa in a hit-and-run attack on Thursday, a security official and a US diplomat said.

Qassem Aqlan was shot dead by gunmen on a motorbike as he drove along Sittin Street, a main artery of the Yemeni capital, the official said, adding the assailants managed to escape.

A US diplomat said Aqlan was in charge of coordinating a US and Yemeni probe into an attack last month on the embassy by protesters angry over an anti-Islam film that triggered a wave of deadly dem-



UNESCO faces acute budget crisis

AFP, Paris

The United States' decision to cut its funding to UNESCO has left the UN cultural, education and science agency "crippled" and facing its worst ever financial crisis, its director general said yesterday.

Washington suspended its funding to the UN body, which oversees World Heritage sites and works in areas from literacy and media freedom to environmental issues, when it admitted the Palestinians' last year.

But Bokova said that UNESCO's financial situation was "unsustainable" unless the US, whose cash freeze deprived the body of 22 percent of its budget,

India foils Delhi 'militant attack'

AFP, New Delhi

Indian police yesterday said they had arrested three Islamist militants suspected of planning bomb attacks in New Delhi during the upcoming Hindu festival season.

The men were members of the home-grown Indian Mujahideen outfit and were behind a series of blasts in August in the western city of Pune that left one person injured, New Delhi police commissioner Neeraj Kumar said.

He said the arrests followed the interrogation of Syed Zabiuddin, who was arrested in June in connection with the 2008 Mumbai attacks by Pakistan-

Assange looks to sue Aussie PM

AFP, Sydney

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange said in an interview published Monday he has hired a legal team to establish whether he has a case to sue Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard for defamation.

The Australian founder of the whistleblowing website says comments Gillard made in 2010 that the leaking of US diplomatic cables was "illegal" and "grossly irresponsible" had hurt WikiLeaks' financial viability.

"We are considering suing for defamation so I have hired lawyers in Sydney and they are investigating the different ways in which we can sue Gillard over this statement," he told Australian activist group GetUp in an interview.



Julia Gillard