

Arafat's widow questioned in 'murder' probe

AFP, Paris

French investigators probing the death of Yasser Arafat questioned his widow Suha, who claims the veteran Palestinian leader may have been poisoned, in France in mid-September, a source told AFP yesterday.

France opened a murder enquiry in late August after Arafat's family launched legal action following reports he may have died from radioactive polonium near Paris in 2004.

The source said Suha, a resident of Malta, had met with investigators in the Paris suburb of Nanterre, where the family's complaint was filed. No other details were disclosed.

French investigators are due to arrive on November 26 in Ramallah, where the former Palestinian leader is entombed.

Syria dismisses truce talk without rebels

The war is risk to region, says UN envoy

AGENCIES

The Syrian government yesterday said the international envoy's call for a holiday ceasefire would likely fail because the rebels fighting to topple Bashar Assad's regime have no unified leadership to agree to it.

The envoy, Lakhdar Brahimi, had asked Iranian officials to help broker a truce during the Muslim holiday Eid al-Adha, which falls later this month.

But Syria's state-run Al-Thawra newspaper, a government newspaper, said yesterday that the biggest obstacle to the truce was the lack of an authority to sign for the rebels.

"There is the state, represented by the government and the Army on one front, but who is on the other front," the paper asked in an editorial.

All international efforts to end Syria's civil war to date have failed. Both rebels and government forces have disregarded previous ceasefires, and the scores of rebel units

fighting to topple the regime have no unified leadership. Many don't communicate with each other.

Brahimi, the joint UN-Arab League envoy, arrived in Beirut yesterday for talks with Lebanese officials on how to resolve the crisis. The visit is part of a regional tour.

Rebels downed a helicopter yesterday as troops fought to take back a key Syrian town, a watchdog said, as international peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi warned the conflict risks setting the region ablaze.

Fighting for control of the Damascus-Aleppo highway raged around the north-western town of Maaret al-Numan even as Brahimi appeared to have won tentative support for a ceasefire proposal.

Meanwhile, Pope Benedict XVI has engaged the Catholic Church in pushing for peace in Syria by dispatching a high-profile delegation to a country where Christians are divided on support for the rebels.

SYRIA CIVIL WAR

Evidence of mass murder after Gaddafi's death: HRW

AFP, Tripoli

New evidence implicating militias in executions after ousted Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi was captured and killed in Sirte last October 20 raises fresh questions over his death, a watchdog said yesterday.

"The evidence suggests that opposition militias summarily executed at least 66 captured members of Gaddafi's convoy in Sirte," his home town, said Peter Bouckaert, emergencies director at Human Rights Watch (HRW).

"Our findings call into question the assertion by Libyan authorities that Moamer Kadhafi was killed in crossfire, and not after his capture," Bouckaert said of a Human Rights Watch report documenting the executions.

Mantel makes history with second Booker Prize

AFP, London

British novelist Hilary Mantel on Tuesday made literary history by becoming the first woman and the first British author to be a two-time winner of the Man Booker Prize for fiction.

Mantel picked up the prize, one of the highest profile awards in English-language literature, for "Bring up the Bodies," part two of her Thomas Cromwell trilogy, at a ceremony at London's Guildhall.

The 60-year-old first won in 2009 with



"Wolf Hall", the first of the historical fiction saga with King Henry VIII's chief minister as the protagonist.

Accepting her prize, the winner said: "Well, I don't know, you wait 20 years for a Booker Prize and two come along at once."

She called the award an "act of faith and a vote of confidence."

She becomes just the third writer to clinch the award twice since its inception in 1969, joining Australian author Peter Carey, who won in 1988 and 2001, and the South African JM Coetzee in 1983 and 1999.

Obama claws back as race heads to wire

NEWS ANALYSIS

AFP, Washington

Barack Obama clawed his way back into the US presidential race with an aggressive performance in his second debate against Mitt Romney, as the election seemed set to go down to the wire.

With just one more debate to go, and the president performing noticeably better than he did in the opening face-off in Denver, Colorado, the race is essentially up for grabs just three weeks before election day on November 6.

"I think the president had a much better night than he had in Denver," John Pitney, professor of politics at Claremont McKenna College, told AFP.

"It was close, but I have to give the edge to Obama."

Nearly all analysts said Romney mopped the floor with a dull and

unfocused president two weeks ago, and Americans agreed; the challenger had been on the ropes after his controversial comments disparaging 47 percent of the electorate as government-dependent freeloaders, but he soared in post-debate polls.

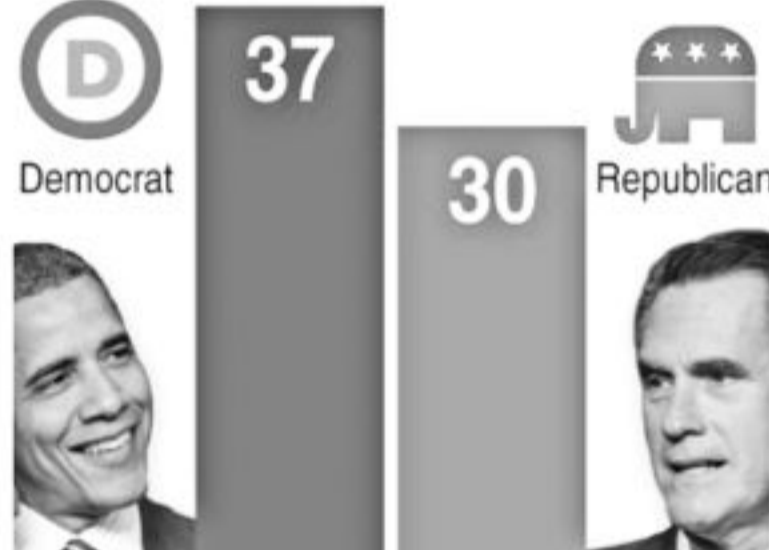
But Obama, knowing he had to raise his game to have any hope of winning a second term, charged hard out of the gate in the 90-minute town-hall showdown, attacking Romney on his economic recovery plan and delivering a fiery retort to criticism of his handling of last month's Libya attack.

"It was a morale booster for the Democrats, and Republicans will find things to cheer too, but Obama needed the morale booster a lot more," Pitney said.

Several national surveys and polls in key political battlegrounds showed Romney wiping away his deficit in recent weeks, with some having him wrestling the lead away from Obama.

US presidential 2012 debate

CBS News poll respondents say Obama won the October 16 debate in percent



But flash polls of debate watchers taken by three networks in the hour after Tuesday's encounter at New York's Hofstra University were unanimous in giving the president the advantage.

A CBS News poll showed 37 percent of respondents felt Obama won

the debate, compared to 30 percent for Romney.

Karlyn Bowman, a senior fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said that while there was no clear winner, "Obama is back in the game."

The subject matter bounced from the economy to taxes and from energy to China, but women's issues loomed larger than in the first debate.

The dispute over Libya, where US Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans were killed last month during an assault on the US consulate in Benghazi, gave Obama a chance to rebuke Romney over his continued criticism of White House's handling of the attack.

Pitney said Obama's response on the Libya issue cracked with passion and presidential mettle.

Obama and Romney meet for their third and final showdown on October 22, 15 days before the election.

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