

Peace envoy pushes truce plan with Syria leaders

Paper reveals US-Turkey contingency plans on Damascus

AFP, Damascus

Peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday pressed Damascus for a truce to break the cycle of bloodshed, as Lebanon's opposition blamed President Bashar al-Assad for a deadly Beirut bombing.

But even as Brahimi went into a meeting with Foreign Minister Walid Muallem in Damascus, fighting raged on northern battlefields, where regime jets resumed bombarding the key town of Maaret al-Numan which rebels captured on October 9.

UN-Arab League envoy Brahimi is hoping to secure a ceasefire during the four-day Eid al-Adha Muslim holiday starting October 26, which he believes could pave the way for other, more permanent peace initiatives.

He is also expected to hold talks with Assad at a later date.

Brahimi is backed by UN chief Ban Ki-moon and Arab League head Nabil al-Arabi who believe that if a truce is agreed during Eid, it could be extended to bring some respite in the 19-month conflict that has already killed



Lakhdar Brahimi

more than 34,000 people.

Washington too has backed the truce call. Damascus has said it is ready to discuss the truce plan with Brahimi, while the opposition says the regime must take the first step and halt its daily bombardments.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 133 people were killed in nationwide violence Friday -- 55 civilians, 45 soldiers and 33 rebels.

With the fallout from the conflict reverberating across the region, Washington has reportedly stepped up intelligence cooperation with Turkey, whose ties with Assad's regime have rapidly deteriorated.

The Washington Post reported that military officials from the United States and Turkey have drawn up contingency plans for no-fly zones over Syria and discussed seizing Syria's stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons.

The paper reported that a tip from US intelligence agencies had led the Turkish military to intercept a Syrian passenger jet en route from Moscow to Damascus last week.

That incident sparked a diplomatic row between Turkey, Russia and Syria.



Lebanese men block a road leading to the airport in Beirut to protest against the assassination of top intelligence official Wissam al-Hassan on Friday.

Israel navy seizes Gaza-bound ship

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli troops yesterday boarded a boat carrying pro-Palestinian MPs and activists seeking to run its naval blockade on the Gaza Strip, blocking the latest attempt to reach the enclave by sea, the military said.

The operation, which the military said was concluded peacefully, ended the latest bid by activists to breach Israel's tight maritime embargo on Gaza which prohibits all naval traffic in and out of the Palestinian coastal territory.

On board the ship are 17 passengers, among them five parliamentarians from Europe and a former Canadian lawmaker, organisers said.

It was also carrying a shipment of humanitarian aid and 30 doves, which the passengers had been intending to release on arrival in Gaza.

ONE YEAR SINCE GADDAFI'S DEATH Libya leader admits failure

AFP, Tripoli

The new Libyan authorities said on Saturday the country has not yet been "fully" liberated, exactly a year since the killing of Muammar Gaddafi and against the backdrop of clashes in one of his last bastions.

"The campaign to liberate the country has not been fully completed," Mohammed Megaryef, the head of Libya's national assembly, said in remarks broadcast on state television.

He singled out the oasis town of Bani Walid, scene of deadly clashes over the past week and one of the final strongholds of Gaddafi's dictatorial regime during the 2011 revolution that ousted and killed him.

Megaryef, president of the democratically elected General National Congress, gave a sombre assessment of the post-Gaddafi period and warned that remnants of the former regime still pose a threat.

He pointed to "delays and negligence" in the formation of a professional army and police force, and the failure to disarm

and integrate former rebels into state institutions.

The weakness of the state, he continued, has allowed groups with or without ties to the former regime to defy the law and carry out arbitrary arrests, torture, blackmail and looting.

"They even dared to establish their own prisons," Megaryef said in apparent reference to armed militias, some of which have their own detention centres and act as a law unto themselves.

Libya's top official reserved his sharpest criticism for the town of Bani Walid, which is seen by many as a hide-out for regime loyalists and criminal gangs, and endorsed military operations there.

Forces linked to the army, the majority of them former rebels, encircled the hill-top town this month in a bid to bring to justice the men who kidnapped and allegedly tortured an ex-rebel credited with capturing Kadhafi.

Fighting around Bani Walid this week has killed more than 10 people.



Muammar Gaddafi

British minister quits after swearing at cops

AFP, London

British cabinet minister Andrew Mitchell resigned on Friday after launching a foul-mouthed tirade at police officers guarding the gates of Prime Minister David Cameron's Downing Street office.

Mitchell, who as the government's chief whip was supposed to enforce discipline in Cameron's Conservative party, handed in his resignation after nearly one month of intense pressure over his behaviour.

He denied accusations that he had called police "plebs" but admitted using bad language to the officers after they stopped him going through the main gate on his bicycle, directing him to a side gate instead.

The row was damaging for the Conservatives as they face growing accusations that the privileged backgrounds of Cameron and other senior party members including Mitchell are out of touch with voters.



Andrew Mitchell

LINCOLN'S ASSASSINATION Last witness reappears on YouTube

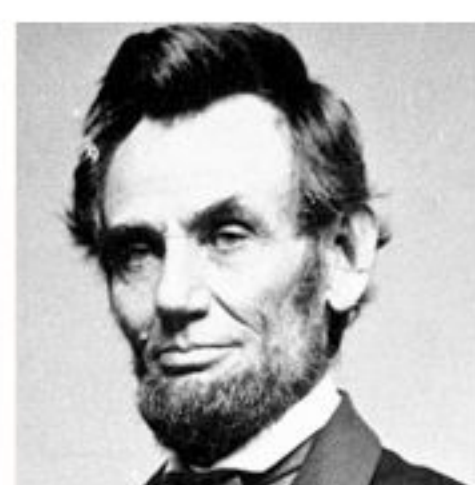
THE DAILY MAIL ONLINE

A rare TV appearance of the last surviving person to witness the assassination of Abraham Lincoln's assassination has turned up on YouTube.

The video is from a February 1956 episode of the TV game show I've Got a Secret.

The show involved a notable person with a celebrity panel whose job it was to guess the secret behind what made the guest so famous.

Samuel J Seymour appeared on the show about two years after his story was written in the pages of the Milwaukee Sentinel, in which he recounted the day Lincoln was assassinated. Seymour said he did not realize Lincoln had been shot, only that he saw a man jump from the balcony. He died on April 12, 1956.



Abraham Lincoln

Al-Qaeda not behind Benghazi attack Reports LA Times

AFP, Washington

US intelligence agencies have found no evidence that last month's deadly attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, was ordered by al-Qaeda, The Los Angeles Times reported late Friday.

Citing unnamed US officials and witnesses, the newspaper said the attack, which killed a ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans, was "carried out following a minimum amount of planning."

"The attackers exhibited a high degree of disorganization," the paper quotes one of the intelligence officials as saying.

"Some joined the attack in progress, some did not have weapons and others just seemed interested in looting."

According to another official cited by the paper, "There isn't any intelligence that the attackers pre-planned their assault days or weeks in advance."

Most of the evidence suggested that "the attackers launched their assault opportunistically" after learning about the violence at the US Embassy in Cairo, The Times quotes the official as saying.

Lebanon on edge after 'Syria-backed' killing

PM offers resignation as sectarian tensions mount

AGENCIES

Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati yesterday said he had been asked by the president to stay in his post as fear and anger over the assassination of a senior intelligence chief opposed to the Syrian leadership gripped the country.

Mikati told a news conference in the presidential palace that he had offered his resignation to President Michel Suleiman to make way for a government of national unity, but had been asked to remain in office for the time being.

As he spoke, gunmen and demonstrators blocked roads with burning tyres in Beirut and other cities to protest against the killing of Brigadier-General Wissam al-Hassan in a car bomb explosion in the centre of the capital on Friday afternoon.

Wissam al-Hassan's, who blamed Damascus for a series of political assassinations including that of former premier Rafiq Hariri, assassination has shaken Lebanon's fragile political structure.

Lebanese politicians have accused Syrian President Bashar-al Assad of being behind the attack, deepening fears that Syria's sectarian-tinged civil war is spreading to its neighbour.

The opposition March 14 bloc had called for the government, which includes ministers from the Shia militant group Hezbollah, which is close to Assad, to step down.

The revolt in neighbouring Syria has deepened political and religious divisions in



Najib Mikati

Lebanon, which is split between supporters and opponents of the Damascus regime.

In keeping with a complex power-sharing arrangement in multi-confessional Lebanon, the premier is always a Sunni Muslim. But parliament and the government are dominated by the powerful Shiite movement Hezbollah, an Assad ally.

Squads of armed men gathered in the northern, mostly-Sunni city of Tripoli, where pro- and anti-Assad factions have clashed repeatedly this year.

In Beirut, troops reinforced road junctions and official buildings but many roads, including the highway to the international airport, were blocked by demonstrators.

Dozens of gunmen were in the streets and the mood was tense, witnesses said.

Despite the accusations from Lebanese politicians, both the Assad government and Hezbollah condemned the bombing, Syria's information minister called it a "terrorist act".

The bombing also heightened concern among Western powers - who have strongly criticised Assad and called on him to quit - that the Syrian war could ignite conflict across the region.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Hassan's killing was "a dangerous sign that there are those who continue to seek to undermine Lebanon's stability".

Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, whose country is a powerful backer of Assad and Hezbollah, condemned the bombing and said he planned to visit Beirut.

Romney suffering from 'Romnesia': Obama

Rivals gear up for final debate on Monday

AFP, Fairfax

US President Barack Obama and his Republican rival, Mitt Romney, yesterday began preparing for their final debate, with Obama hunkering down at Camp David and Romney staying in Florida.

The third and last of their debates is scheduled for Monday at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Florida.

On Friday, Obama set an aggressive tone accusing Romney of suffering from policy "Romnesia," a barb dismissed by the Republican as pettiness 18 days before the election.

One night earlier, both men had traded light-hearted banter at a charity dinner, but on Friday the verbal attacks turned nasty, with the Democratic incumbent taunting Romney's efforts to tack to the center as polling day looms.

"Mr Severely Conservative wants you to think he was severely kidding about everything he said over the last year," Obama said at a rally attended by some 9,000 people



Obama

Romney

at a university campus outside Washington.

"I mean, he's changing up so much and backtracking and sidestepping, we've got to name this condition that he's going through. I think it's called 'Romnesia.' That's what it's called," Obama told the crowd.

Meanwhile, Romney, accompanied by his running mate Paul Ryan, laid into the incumbent for failing to map out his plan for another four years.

"They have no agenda for the future, no agenda for America, no agenda for a second term."

An NBC News/Wall Street Journal/Marist poll put Obama on 51% and Romney on 45% in Wisconsin and 51% to 43% in Iowa.

Most polls in the two are in a dead heat nationally. Gallup, in contrast with most of the rest, has Romney with a big lead nationally, on 52% to 45%. But Public Policy Polling has Obama on 48% to Romney's 47% and Rasmussen has the two tied at 48%.

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