

Libya fighters seize ex-Gaddafi bastion

AFP, Bani Walid

Libyan pro-government forces yesterday seized control of Bani Walid, one of the last bastions of Muammar Gaddafi's ousted regime, an AFP correspondent in the town said.

Hundreds of fighters, mostly former rebels from the rival town of Misrata, converged on the centre of Bani Walid, firing in the air to celebrate and hoisting the Libyan flag on abandoned public buildings, he said.

Some of the fighters blasted the walls and windows with anti-tank rockets and Kalashnikov rifles.

Several rebel chiefs, whose fighters patrolled in vehicles mounted with heavy weapons, told AFP the town was "almost liberated," with only a few pockets of resistance left in its southern sector.

The town itself was deserted, with residents and foreign workers having fled since Sunday.

Fierce clashes in Bani Walid, which was accused of harbouring die-hard Gaddafi loyalists, cast a pall over celebrations for the first anniversary this week of the over-

throw of his regime in a bloody conflict.

The fighting fanned old tribal feuds and underscored the difficulties of achieving national reconciliation.

A scaled-up offensive against Bani Walid since last week came in response to the death of Omran Shaaban, 22, a former rebel from the city of Misrata who was credited with capturing Gaddafi.

Shaaban spent weeks held hostage in Bani Walid, where he was shot and allegedly tortured, before the authorities managed to broker his release.

He died in a Misrata hospital later.

Clashes between pro-government forces and Bani Walid fighters over the past week killed dozens of people and wounded hundreds, in scenes evocative of the civil war that led to Gaddafi's overthrow and death.

Tribal leaders and commanders in Bani Walid, 185 kilometres southeast of Tripoli, had accused "lawless Misrata militias" of seeking to annihilate their historic rival.

Libya was declared liberated a few days after Gaddafi's death on October 20, 2011 but it has struggled to impose their authority on armed militias.



An elderly Syrian woman crosses a street next to a long black cloth used to separate the area from Syrian government forces' snipers fire in the Bab el-Adid district in Aleppo yesterday. Peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday said that Syria and "most" rebel chiefs have agreed to a truce this week boosting hopes of a breakthrough in the conflict.

PHOTO: AFP



Assange health issue worries Ecuador

REUTERS, Moscow

Ecuador is worried about the health of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and has asked Britain to guarantee him safe passage from its London embassy to a hospital if he needs medical treatment, a senior Ecuadorean diplomat said in Moscow.

"Assange has grown noticeably thinner, and we are very concerned about his health," Voice of Russia radio quoted Vice Foreign Minister as saying in comments confirmed by the Ecuadorean embassy in Moscow.

"If he falls ill we will have to choose between two alternatives: to treat Assange in the embassy or hospitalise him," Albuja Martinez said on Tuesday. "This is a very serious situation and it can affect Assange's human rights."

Britain's Foreign Office did not comment on the remarks.

Assange, whose whistleblowing website angered the United States by releasing thousands of US diplomatic cables, was arrested in December 2010 on an extradition warrant from Sweden where he is wanted for questioning over allegations of rape and sexual assault made by two women.

He denies any wrongdoing.

Explosions hit Sudan military factory

Khartoum accuses Israel, threatens retaliation

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan yesterday accused Israel of carrying out air strikes against a military factory that killed two people in south Khartoum overnight, and threatened to retaliate.

"We think Israel did the bombing," Culture and Information Minister Ahmed Bilal Osman told a news conference.

"We reserve the right to react at a place and time we choose."

The foreign ministry of Israel, which has long accused Khartoum of serving as a base for militants from the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, refused to comment.

Osman said four aircraft were involved in the attack, which occurred at about midnight (2100 GMT) at the Yarmouk military manufacturing facility in the south of the Sudanese capital. Evidence pointing to Israel was found among rem-

nants of the explosives, he said.

Residents of the area earlier told AFP an aircraft or missile flew over the facility shortly before it exploded and burst into flames.

An AFP reporter several kilometres (miles) away saw two or three fires flaring across a wide area, with heavy smoke and intermittent flashes of white light bursting above the state-owned Yarmouk factory.

Khartoum state governor Abdul Rahman Al-Khider told official media some people were hospitalised because of smoke inhalation but he gave no numbers.

There have been other mysterious blasts in Sudan -- and allegations of Israeli involvement.

On the country's Red Sea coast in May one person was killed when a car exploded, about a year after Sudan blamed Israel for an air strike on a vehicle in the same area.

Greece wins bailout extension

REUTERS, Athens

Greece has been granted its long-standing plea for additional time to push through austerity cuts that have been finalised after months of negotiations, the finance minister said yesterday.

Yannis Stournaras also said the government would tell European counterparts that it is ready to put its latest austerity package to parliament next week after winning additional concessions from foreign lenders.

A swift deal on the package is crucial for Greece's efforts to unlock more aid under its latest bailout, with it just 3 weeks away from running out of cash.

China blames Dalai Lama for self-immolations

AFP, Beijing

Beijing blamed exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader the Dalai Lama yesterday for inciting a spate of self-immolations in China's Tibetan-inhabited regions.

Nearly 60 ethnic Tibetans, many of them monks and nuns, have set themselves on fire in China since February 2009 to protest against Beijing's rule in Tibet, with three such incidents occurring in recent days, rights groups say.

"To our knowledge most of the self-immolation cases in the Tibetan-inhabited regions are related to the instigation of the Dalai clique," China's foreign ministry spokesman Hong Lei told reporters.

"In order to realise their separatist goals, the Dalai clique has incited some people to self-immolate. This is despicable and should be condemned."

Hong did not offer any evidence that



the Dalai Lama or the exiled Tibetan government based in the Indian town of Dharamshala was inciting the self-immolations.

Many Tibetans in China accuse the government of repressing their religious freedom and eroding their culture, as the country's majority Han Chinese ethnic group increasingly moves into historically Tibetan areas.

Last year, Beijing accused the Dalai Lama, who fled Tibet for India in 1959, of instigating the burnings as a form of "terrorism in disguise".

The 1989 Nobel Peace Prize winner countered by calling China's rule of Tibet "a kind of cultural genocide" that was driving Tibetans to acts of desperation.

He has not condemned the suicides of the last few years, preferring to remain "neutral" in his words, but he recently paid tribute to the courage of the protesters.



US President Barack Obama greets people after speaking during a campaign rally at the Delray Beach Tennis Center on Tuesday in Delray Beach, Florida.

PHOTO: AFP

US PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

Obama in 8 state campaign blitz

AFP, Aboard Air Force One

President Barack Obama set off Wednesday on an eight state, 7,660 mile, 40-hour tour, in a show of confidence and commitment in battlegrounds that will decide the election.

Thirteen days before he asks voters for a second term, Obama's through-the-night, coast-to-coast trip will take in six of the most contested swing states in his toss-up race with Republican Mitt Romney.

The struggle in Iowa, Colorado, Nevada, Florida, Virginia and Ohio will decide which of the rivals masses the 270 electoral votes needed to win the White House.

Obama, who has a well appointed cabin in the nose of Air Force One,

will sleep on a red-eye flight from Las Vegas to Tampa Wednesday night.

His rival, Romney led in an average of national polls by 0.7 percent Tuesday, but Obama still held small leads in Ohio, Iowa, Nevada, Wisconsin and New Hampshire, states that could hand him a second four-year term.

Campaigning earlier Tuesday in Nevada, one of the handful of toss-up states expected to decide the election, Romney said Obama's campaign was "taking on water" after a trio of debates "supercharged" his own White House bid.

"His is a status quo candidacy. His is a message of going forward with the same policies of the last four years. And that's why his campaign is slipping. And that's why ours is gain-

ing so much steam," Romney said.

Barack Obama attempted to seize back the political initiative on Tuesday by abruptly switching to a new, positive strategy for the final stretch of the White House campaign.

After months of criticism for campaigning negatively -- with a relentless and costly stream of ads since early summer aimed at undermining Mitt Romney's character -- the Obama campaign is to emphasise what the president would do with another four years in office.

The campaign is printing 3.5m copies of a 20-page leaflet to be distributed in the battlefield states setting out his proposed agenda for economic recovery, domestic-based energy, education, tax, healthcare and pensions.

World favours Obama over Romney: Poll

AFP, London

People around the world overwhelmingly favour US President Barack Obama over his Republican challenger Mitt Romney, a poll carried out for the BBC World Service has found.

An average of 50 percent favoured Obama, against nine percent for Romney, with Pakistan the only one of the 21 countries questioned indicating they would prefer to see Romney.

France gave the strongest support to Obama, with a 72-percent approval rating.

'Gangnam-style' rapper makes UN chief jealous

AFP, United Nations

UN leader Ban Ki-moon had to admit Tuesday that he is no longer the world's most famous South Korean as he came face-to-face with "Gangnam Style" rap phenomenon Psy.

But the world body's secretary general got the bonus of an offer of a skydiving lesson from Felix Baumgartner, the first person to break the sound barrier in freefall.

Ban said he felt overshadowed by his countryman Psy, who showed off some of the wacky dance moves that have been viewed more than 530 million times on YouTube.



"I'm a bit jealous. Until two days ago someone told me I am the most famous Korean in the world. Now I have to relinquish. I have no regrets," said Ban, who tried the Gangnam Style routine.

The pop star also heaped praise on Ban, telling reporters: "So now you have first and second famous Korean in the same building."

"For all the Koreans he is the guy, you know, in everyone's heart in Korea, the best among the best," Psy said. "To be here (with him) and even the thing that he knows me is so touching right now and he's saying he saw my video, he counted my video views is just amazing," he added.