

Fighting rages in Syria before ceasefire

Russia accuses US of coordinating weapon deliveries to rebels

AGENCIES

Syrian troops bombarded a town near Damascus yesterday and fighting raged in and around the northern city of Aleppo, a day before a proposed truce for a four-day Muslim religious holiday.

President Bashar al-Assad's government was expected to make a statement later in the day on whether it accepts the temporary ceasefire advocated by UN-Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi.

The Syrian authorities said on Wednesday they were still studying the plan, but Russia's envoy to the United Nations said Damascus had indicated to Moscow that it would agree to it.

Syrian troops pounded Harasta, near Damascus, with tank and rocket fire, killing five people, after rebels overran two army roadblocks on the edge of the town, on the main highway from the capital to the north, opposition campaigners said. Clashes were also reported in Aleppo and other protest hotbeds defying the truce call.

Meanwhile, Russia yesterday accused Washington of

"coordinating" deliveries of arms to Syrian rebels, despite assurances by the State Department that the United States provides no lethal assistance.

Russia's top general Nikolai Makarov on Wednesday said rebels fighting against Bashar al-Assad's army in Syria are using US-made Stingers, a type of shoulder-launched missile systems also known as MANPADs.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland promptly denied that the US is delivering any such, or any other, weapons to the rebels.

Even if Assad accepts a truce, there may be no unified response from Syria's fractured opposition. Some armed groups have said they will abide by a ceasefire. Others, including the Islamist militant Al Nusra Front, have rejected it.

In Geneva, UN war crimes investigators said they had asked to meet Assad to seek access for their team, which has been excluded from Syria since it began work a year ago. There was no word on how the Syrian leader would respond.

Gaza calm as truce deal takes hold

AFP, Jerusalem

Calm returned to Gaza yesterday as a truce between Israel and Hamas took hold after a bloody 24 hours of violence that left four Palestinians dead and two Thai workers wounded in Israel.

With the Eid al-Adha festival due to start today, Gazans were enjoying a quiet day of preparation without air strikes, and Israelis were making the most of the respite in rocket fire.

Following a quiet night in which there were no reports of Israeli raids or militant rocket fire on southern Israel, schools reopened in southern Israel and Palestinians went back to work.

Late on Wednesday, Israeli and Palestinian officials told AFP that an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire would go into effect at midnight (2200 GMT).

The agreement was aimed at ending an eruption of bloodshed, which saw Israeli air strikes kill four militants and armed groups firing more than 70 rockets and mortars across the border, seriously wounding two Thai workers.

The surge in violence began on Tuesday evening, shortly after a top-level state visit to Gaza by the Qatari emir to inaugurate a multi-million dollar project to rebuild the impoverished Palestinian enclave.

NEWS IN brief

'Benghazi attack suspect' dies

BBC ONLINE

A man suspected of involvement in an attack on the US consulate in the Libyan city of Benghazi last month was killed in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, officials said yesterday.

The man was killed after an exchange of fire with security services in the Cairo suburb of Madinet Nasr.

Authorities named the man only as Hazem. Four US diplomatic officials were killed in the Benghazi attack, among them the US ambassador to Libya.

AU lifts Mali sanctions

AFP, Addis Ababa

The African Union has readmitted Mali after suspending it from the pan-African bloc following a March coup, and backed plans for authorities there to recapture the north from radical Islamists.

Mali's membership was revoked after army officers overthrew the elected government seven months ago. The subsequent chaos gave free rein to a rebellion by Islamic extremists and Tuareg separatists who took over large swathes of the

Gas supply

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British-based Tullow will keep the production of Bangura gas field in Comilla suspended for four days from Monday. The gas field produces 100 mmcf/d per day.

So, there will be a day of overlap when the two companies carry out maintenance works, Imaduddin said. "But we hope by Monday Chevron will finish off its work and get back to its operation."

The two companies earlier requested Petrobangla to shut down some power plants for the period, said Petrobangla Chairman Hossain Monsur. There was no way but to do the maintenance, he said, adding the international companies did this on a regular basis.

"The international companies conduct maintenance works during Eid vacation so that the impact remains very low."

The demand for gas goes down by a third to 1,400 mmcf/d during the vacation when most industries remain shut. So, it is the perfect time for the international oil companies -- which account for about half of the country's total gas production of 2,250 mmcf/d -- to do the maintenance.

Earlier during Eid-ul-Fitr in August, Chevron, Tullow and Australia's Santos carried out maintenance works in their fields.

Obama reveals 2nd term priorities

REUTERS, Iowa

President Barack Obama predicted passage of immigration reform and a deficit-reduction deal, offering a fresh glimpse of his second-term agenda as he fights for votes in the final stretch of the tight race for the White House.

In a newspaper interview released on Wednesday ahead of an eight-state campaign blitz that began in Iowa, Obama also suggested Republicans were bolstering his re-election effort by alienating Hispanics ahead of the November 6 vote.

He told the Des Moines Register he was confident that comprehensive immigration reform would be approved next year and predicted he would strike a deal with Republicans in the US Congress within six months to reduce the budget deficit.

He made the comments in an interview with the newspaper's editors that was originally conducted off the record. After the newspaper complained about the restriction, the White House released a transcript.

Republican challenger Mitt Romney



has joined many in his party in taking a tough approach to illegal immigration, a stance that has helped Obama open a substantial lead in polls among Hispanics.

The growing electoral clout of Hispanics, who now comprise 16 percent of the US population, could make a difference in election battleground states like Nevada, Colorado, Florida, Virginia and Ohio.

Two weeks before the election, Obama and Romney are locked in a close battle and are competing furiously for key voting blocs like Hispanics and women.

The effort to win women voters also

came to the forefront on Wednesday with a controversy over comments about rape by Indiana Republican Senate candidate Richard Mourdock.

Obama's campaign moved quickly to link Romney with Mourdock, who said in a debate with Democrat Joe Donnelly on Tuesday that pregnancy caused by rape is "something God intended to happen."

Obama believed the comment was "outrageous and demeaning to women," said campaign spokeswoman Jen Psaki, adding that she was perplexed Romney would not demand an ad he filmed in support of Mourdock be taken off the air.

Obama has criticized Romney for his opposition to abortion rights except in cases of rape, incest or the health of the mother. Romney's campaign tried to distance him from Mourdock's remark, but did not demand that the ad be pulled.

Polls show a deadlocked race nationally. A Reuters/Ipsos online tracking poll gave Romney a 1-point edge on Wednesday, 47 percent to Obama's 46 percent.

Nafis to face grand jury by mid-Nov

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for the Southern District said.

Prosecutors have 30 days from the date of his arrest to get an indictment, TimesLedger reported.

Nafis was arrested earlier that morning after he parked a van outside the Federal Reserve Bank on Liberty Street with a fake bomb provided to him by an undercover law-enforcement officer through an FBI sting operation, authorities said.

The New York Times reported the FBI arrested a man in San Diego on unrelated charges who was believed to be Nafis' co-conspirator in the alleged plot.

Neighbours on the block where Nafis lived in Jamaica said they knew little, if anything at all, about him.

M o h a m m a d

Chowdhery and his family live just above Quazi Mohammad Rezwanul Ahsan Nafis' second-floor apartment on 93rd Avenue.

"I've seen him a couple of times, like three or four times," Chowdhery said. "When I work nights, sometimes I come late like 3:30, 4. So one day I open the door around 3:30am and he's coming down. He is going out at that time. We just say, 'Hello, hi.'"

Chowdhery said Nafis was living by himself in a neighbourhood which is home to many ethnic Bangladeshis and that nothing about the young man really stood out to him as suspicious.

"I was shocked. I'm really shocked," he said. "He's very young. When I heard that, I feel like I don't believe that guys is doing that thing."

Nafis came to the United States on a student visa in January, according to a criminal complaint filed by the US attorney's office, and began attending classes at Southeast Missouri State University.

A university spokeswoman said Nafis was enrolled for 12 credits from January through July and had his records transferred to an institution in Brooklyn over the summer. He lived off campus during his six-month stay, the spokeswoman said, and was placed on academic suspension at the end of the semester.

From the time they recruited Nafis until the day they transferred his paperwork, Southeast Missouri State University officials said Tuesday they never broke protocol or proceed-

ures in their brief affiliation with the former international student charged last week with trying to blow up the Federal Reserve building in New York.

For that matter, the officials said, they never saw anything that would warrant alarm or rouse suspicion during any of their dealings with the 21-year-old native of Bangladesh who was in Cape Girardeau for the spring semester.

"If anything would have happened with this, it would have happened in New York after he left here," said Zahir Ahmed, the university's director of international education and services. "I don't see how we could have done anything different."

Ahmed and Debbie Below, vice president of

enrolment, insisted Tuesday in interviews with the Southeast Missourian that, while there was one blip during his admissions process, Nafis was in full compliance with federal rules in the five months he was here.

Most who passed by Nafis' home said they did not know him at all.

Melvin Ramcherem, who has lived in the neighbourhood for 20 years, said many of the buildings on Nafis' block were built within the past few years and many of the neighbours were new.

Just outside the door of Nafis' next-door neighbour hung an American flag.

Chowdhery, the man who lives above him, said the neighbours put the flag up because their son is in the US Army.

Over 2.5m Muslims

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al-Faisal, around 1.7 million people had travelled from abroad for the pilgrimage.

Pilgrims descended on the plain from early morning focused on the religious significance of the day.

"We came from Mecca. We walked from the Grand Mosque to Mina and then we took the buses to Arafat. All for the love of the prophet," said one Egyptian man sitting on a straw mat with members of his family.

"The more tired we get, the more God will reward us," he said.

Focus of the rituals is the "Mount of Mercy" where the Prophet Mohammed is believed to have delivered his final hajj sermon before

his death.

Many pilgrims made themselves comfortable between the huge rocks, tears streaming down their faces as they prayed.

A preacher urged pilgrims not to climb the slippery stone staircase leading up the hill, bellowing over loudspeakers "Neither the prophet, nor his followers have ever climbed the hill. Please do not climb it."

Pilgrims have in previous years slipped and fallen while attempting the ascent, and others have been killed in stampedes.

After sunset, the pilgrims headed to Muzdalifah, between Mina and Arafat, where they collected stones to throw at the devil, one of the last rituals which takes place

today and marks the first day of Eid-ul-Azha, the feast of sacrifice.

The symbolic "stoning of the devil" is followed by the ritual sacrifice of an animal, usually a lamb.

During the remaining three days of the hajj, the pilgrims continue the stoning ritual before performing the circumambulation of the Kaaba shrine in Mecca and heading home.

The hajj is one of the five pillars of Islam that every capable Muslim must perform at least once.

More than 1,00,000 members of the security and civil defence forces have been deployed to ensure the safety of the pilgrims, while some 3,000 CCTV cameras have been installed across hajj sites.

20 killed in fresh Myanmar unrest

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struggled to reach remote areas where the clashes occurred.

The United Nations said in a statement it was "gravely concerned" at the resurgence of violence and called for calm.

"The UN is alarmed by reports of displacements and destruction," said its chief in Yangon, Ashok Nigam, adding that the new unrest in Rakhine had "resulted in deaths and has forced thousands of people, including women and children, to flee their homes".

He appealed for "immediate and unconditional access to all communities in accordance with humanitarian principles".

About 75,000 people are estimated still to be displaced following the June unrest. The UN expressed fears over large numbers of people fleeing to the "already overcrowded" camps near the state capital of Sittwe.

Soldiers were helping provide security to affected areas, including around the state's main tourist attraction of Mrauk U and the island of Kyaukpuyu, where a major pipeline to transport Myanmar gas to China begins.

Myanmar's 800,000 Rohingya are seen as illegal immigrants from neighbouring Bangladesh by the government and many Burmese -- who call

them "Bengalis".

Rights groups fear the real death toll could far exceed official figures.

"The way in which the situation has developed is very worrying," said Chris Lewa, head of the Arakan Project which campaigns for Rohingya rights.

"It seems that there is a desire to eliminate Rohingyas from all the townships where they are a minority, continuing what occurred in Sittwe."

AFP journalists visiting Rakhine in recent days saw thousands of Muslim Rohingya trapped behind barbed wire and armed guards in a ghetto in the centre of the capital.

Tens of thousands more are housed in camps

beyond the city limits as segregation between the two communities intensifies.

There have been a series of protests by Buddhists in Myanmar against the stateless Muslim group, long considered by the United Nations to be one of the most persecuted minorities on the planet.

The country's main Muslim organisations have opted to cancel celebrations for the four-day Eid ul-Azha holiday.

Intercommunal bloodshed in Rakhine has cast a shadow over widely praised reforms by President Thein Sein, including the release of hundreds of political pris-

oners and the election of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi to parliament.

The Rohingya, speaking a Bengali dialect similar to one in neighbouring Bangladesh, face tight restrictions on their movements and limited access to employment and public services.

Bangladesh yesterday mobilised extra patrols along its river border with Myanmar amid reports of dozens of boats carrying Rohingya Muslim refugees fleeing the clashes.

"We've stepped up vigilance to make sure they can't enter our territory," Border Guard Bangladesh commander Colonel Zahid Hasan told AFP.

US detention policy exposed

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human rights abuse in the West with good reason," said Assange, the founder of the website.

He added: "The 'Detainee Policies' show the anatomy of the beast that is post-9/11 detention, the carving out of a dark space where law and rights do not apply, where persons can be detained without a trace at the convenience of the US Department of Defence.

"It shows the excesses of the early days of war against an unknown 'enemy' and how these policies matured and evolved, ultimately deriving into the permanent state of exception that the United States now finds itself in, a

decade later."

US President Barack Obama vowed within hours of taking office in January 2009 that he would close Guantanamo Bay, saying it was acting as a recruiting tool for Islamist extremists.

But Obama has so far failed to do so in the face of deep opposition in Congress to moving inmates to the US mainland, and several people accused of involvement in the 9/11 plots are on trial at the camp.

WikiLeaks first enraged Washington in 2010 by publishing a flood of secret military files on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as a huge cache of diplomatic cables from US

embassies across the world.

Assange, 41, walked into the Ecuadoran embassy in London on June 19 seeking asylum in a bid to avoid extradition to Sweden, where he faces questioning over alleged rape and sexual assault.

He was granted asylum on August 16 but Britain has refused to grant him safe passage out of the country, and he remains in the embassy.

Ecuador said on Wednesday it has requested a meeting with Britain to discuss the health of Assange, who it says is losing weight and suffering vision problems.