

Syria pounds rebel hubs

REUTERS, Amman

Syrian warplanes bombed rebel targets with renewed intensity after the end of a widely ignored four-day truce between President Bashar al-Assad's forces and insurgents.

International envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has said he will pursue peace efforts despite the failure of his appeal for a pause in fighting for the Muslim Eid al-Azha holiday.

But it is unclear how he can find any compromise acceptable to Assad, who seems determined to keep power whatever the cost, and mostly Sunni Muslim rebels equally intent on toppling him.

Major powers and Middle Eastern countries are divided over how to end the 19-month-old conflict which has cost an estimated 32,000 dead, making it one of the bloodiest of Arab revolts that have ousted entrenched leaders in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

Violence raged again yesterday when the Syrian air force pounded the outskirts of the central city of Homs, where rebels have besieged an army base, and the northern rebel-held town of Maarat al-Numan, which straddles the Damascus-Aleppo highway.

Some activists said 28 civilians had been killed in the latest air raids on Maarat al-Numan.

Warplanes again bombed eastern suburbs of Damascus and the army fired heavy barrages of mortar bombs into the district of Hammouria, killing at least eight people, activists said.



Indian youths gather as waves pound the waterfront at Kasimedu in Chennai yesterday. Inset, Indian fishing boats are seen clustered together in a safe harbour. Authorities ordered hundreds of schools to close yesterday and fishermen to remain on land as the tropical storm barrelled towards India's southern coastal state of Tamil Nadu. PHOTO: AFP

Libya PM proposes new cabinet

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's new Prime Minister Ali Zeidan yesterday presented his 30-member cabinet to the national assembly for approval in the hope of forming a coalition government after his predecessor failed.

Zeidan told the General National Congress, in a televised address, that he had included the main political parties in his lineup, among them the liberal National Forces Alliance and the Islamist Justice and Construction Party, while some top posts were given to independents.

The assembly must approve the government team before Zeidan, a former diplomat and long-time opponent of ousted dictator Muammar Gaddafi, can assume office.

US PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

Hurricane Sandy complicates race

REUTERS, Washington

A tense and unpredictable race for the White House became even more so on Monday, as Mammoth storm Sandy created delicate political challenges for President Barack Obama and Republican rival Mitt Romney and raised the possibility of a chaotic voting process.

As the deadly storm barreled ashore on the paralyzed East Coast, the presidential campaign went into what amounted to a deep freeze just when Obama and Romney had planned to launch their final push for votes in the November 6 election.

Suddenly, the final eight days of what has been a bitter fight for the hearts of voters in a politically divided electorate has become a test of crisis leadership for Obama - and a time when harsh political rhetoric seems out of line.

Both sides promised to put aside politics to deal with the fallout from the storm. But privately, they fretted about the storm's potential impact on a week of candidate appearances and door-to-door campaigning by volunteers that is so crucial in get-out-the-vote efforts.



There also is concern about the impact on early voting - a priority for both campaigns but especially Obama's - and Election Day itself, if predictions that millions of people and their polling precincts could be without power well into next week come true.

"It's a totally unpredictable situation that can play out in many different ways, with risks and rewards for both candidates - which is exactly why political consultants on both sides are very scared right now," said Julian Zelizer, a historian at Princeton University in New Jersey.

The crisis gives Obama, who as president is chiefly responsible for the government's

response to the storm, an opportunity to show the presidential leadership that Romney frequently accuses him of lacking.

If Obama is seen as falling short, the memory of the political damage suffered by then President George W Bush and his Republicans over the government's botched response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 is a haunting reminder of the consequences.

On the other hand, a strong effort by Obama's White House in responding to the storm could provide a positive, lasting image to Americans as they head to the polls next week - assuming polling places will have power and be open.

Obama cancelled campaign rallies planned for Monday and Tuesday and returned to the White House from Florida to meet with federal emergency officials.

Romney's team, after initially making plans to continue campaigning, apparently reconsidered and announced late Monday morning that the former Massachusetts governor would cancel a rally in Wisconsin on Monday night, and its schedule on Tuesday as well.

2 Nato troops killed in insider attack

AFP, Kabul

Two soldiers in the Nato-led coalition fighting insurgents in Afghanistan were shot dead yesterday by a man in an Afghan police uniform, the alliance's International Security Assistance Force said.

"An individual wearing Afghan National Police uniform turned his weapon against ISAF forces in southern Afghanistan, killing two soldiers," a spokesman told AFP.

Taliban insurgents claimed that the shooter was one of their fighters who had infiltrated the police and that the soldiers killed were British.

NEWS IN brief

ensuing violence.

Pak road collision kills 24

CNN ONLINE

At least 24 passengers were killed in a collision in central Punjab, a province in Pakistan.

A passenger van collided with a truck on a main street near the city of Bahawalpur yesterday morning, Sohail Tajik a senior police official from the area, told CNN.

So far, 24 people have died, including seven women and one child from the same family. Twelve other people were injured and have been

Bahrain bans protests

BBC ONLINE

Bahrain yesterday banned all protests and gatherings amid clashes between police and anti-government demonstrators.

Interior Minister said "repeated abuse" of the rights to freedom of speech and expression could no longer be accepted.

Demonstrations were last banned during the three-month state of emergency King Hamad declared in March 2011. At least 35 people in the

Afghanistan set for polls on April 5, 2014

AFP, Kabul

Presidential elections seen as crucial to Afghanistan's stability after the withdrawal of Nato troops at the end of 2014 will be held on April 5 that year, a poll official said yesterday.

President Hamid Karzai, who is serving his second term in the war-torn nation, is constitutionally barred from running in the election and has been under pressure from opposition groups to announce the date.

Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission said in a statement that the date for the vote had been set and would be officially announced at a press conference today.

European Union ambassador Vygaudas Usackas hailed the announcement as "a positive demonstration that the Afghan authorities are taking their political commitments at the Tokyo conference very seriously".

Donor nations at the conference in July pledged \$16 billion for Afghanistan to prevent the country from sliding back into turmoil when foreign combat troops depart, with several pre-conditions including presidential elections in 2014.



Kurdish protesters, who gathered to support the hunger striking fellow prisoners, stand in front of a barricade set on fire during clashes between Kurdish demonstrators and riot policemen yesterday in Istanbul, Turkey. The justice minister said at least 680 prisoners are currently on a hunger strike in prisons across the country, but Turkey's Human Rights Association said 715 inmates are striking in 48 prisons.

PHOTO: AFP

RAJIV GANDHI ASSASSINATION

'Official suppressed vital piece of evidence'

TNN, New Delhi

The chief investigating officer of the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case, K Ragothaman, has alleged that the then IB chief, M K Narayanan, had "suppressed a vital piece of evidence": a video tape showing "human bomb" Dhanu at the Sriperumbudur venue prior to the former prime minister's arrival.

In a book authored by him, Ragothaman said that although a "preliminary enquiry" had been conducted in connection with the missing video, Narayanan, who is now West Bengal governor, had been "allowed to go scot-free" by the chief of the special investigation team (SIT), D R Karthikeyan.

The just-published book, "Conspiracy to kill Rajiv Gandhi - From CBI files", claims that the tape, which had been taken from the



videographer by IB the day after Rajiv Gandhi had been blown by Dhanu on May 21, 1991, was never shared with SIT in the investigation of the assassination.

Ragothaman wrote, "The assassin gang as per our investigation was very much in the sterile zone for more than two and half hours waiting for its target." The suppression of the video evidence helped the Tamil Nadu police get away with the claim that Dhanu had sneaked into the sterile zone after Rajiv Gandhi's arrival at the venue around 10:00pm.

The tape recovered by the Tamil Nadu police was found to have interpolations in the form of Doordarshan's news bulletins about the assassination. Ragothaman therefore asserted that the tape taken by the IB officials was "the original one and that the video given to the local police was a substituted one".

PRESIDENTIAL JET CRASH

Poland denies traces of explosive in wreckage

AFP, Warsaw

Polish prosecutors yesterday denied that any traces of explosives had been found on the wreck of a presidential jet which crashed in Russia in 2010, killing then president Lech Kaczynski and 95 other people.

Leading daily Rzeczpospolita had reported yesterday that traces of both explosives had been discovered on 30 seats and the area linking the fuselage with the wing, saying that tests had recently been carried out by Polish prosecutors and experts.

Szelag confirmed that such tests had taken place in September and earlier this month on the debris of the ill-fated Russian-made Tupolev 154 jet which went down in thick fog in Smolensk in western Russia in April

2010.

Testing by Polish and Russian investigators immediately following the crash had ruled out explosives.

A July 2011 Polish report blamed errors by the ill-trained crew for the crash. It admitted most of the blame for the disaster -- in which all 96 people on board the plane died -- lay with Poland, but also faulted Russia.

It had ruled out "extremist versions" of events, including sabotage and pressure from third parties on the crew to land despite the bad weather.

The Russian investigation concluded that there was "psychological pressure" on the crew to land in dangerous weather conditions, prompting Warsaw to criticise the report as incomplete and riddled with errors.

Britain gets 4G mobile services

AFP, London

Britain's first super-fast 4G mobile Internet service was launched in 11 cities yesterday, allowing the kingdom to catch up with the global roll-out.

Britain lags behind the global roll-out of 4G, with about 45 countries -- including the United States, Germany and parts of Asia -- already offering the super-fast service to businesses and con-

Another blow for Berlusconi

AFP, Palermo, Italy

Italian ex-premier Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom party on Monday lost a key regional election in Sicily seen as a barometer for national polls due in April, handing victory to a centre-left anti-Mafia candidate.

The defeat comes as a blow to the beleaguered PDL party, which has been struggling with internal divisions and embroiled in corruption scandals.

The billionaire, who was found guilty on Friday of tax fraud, had announced last week that he would not run for premier in the 2013 election, but later vowed to remain in politics to reform the justice system that found him guilty.