

HURRICANE SANDY Fuel, power crisis hamper recovery

REUTERS, New York

New Yorkers awoke to the rumble of subway trains for the first time in four days yesterday in one sign of recovery from Sandy's devastating blow. But elsewhere in the storm-struck US Northeast, gasoline shortages persisted and emergency teams struggled to reach the worst hit areas and restore power to millions of people.

At least 76 people in North America died in superstorm Sandy, which rampaged through the US Northeast on Monday night, and officials said the count could still rise as rescuers searched house-to-house through coastal towns. It has killed 69 people in the Caribbean.

In New York, limited train service returned on some train and subway lines, but more than half of the gas stations in the city and neighbouring New Jersey remained shut due to

power outages and depleted fuel supplies. Even before dawn, long lines formed at gas stations that were expected to open.

Subway rides were free as authorities encouraged commuters to use mass transit rather than drive. Mayor Michael Bloomberg and state Governor Andrew Cuomo said private cars must carry at least three people in order to enter New York, after the city was clogged by traffic on Wednesday.

The New York Stock Exchange, running on generator power after the first weather-related two-day closure since an 1888 blizzard, reopened on Wednesday.

LaGuardia airport in New York was scheduled to reopen on Thursday with limited service. John F Kennedy and Newark, New Jersey, airports reopened with limited service on Wednesday.



A man waits in line at a gas station with jerry cans in Hazlet township, New Jersey yesterday. Lines formed at gas stations amid fuel shortages around the US Northeast and emergency utility crews struggled to reach the worst hit areas and restore power to millions of people yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Israel 'admits 1988 killing of PLO's no2'

AFP, Jerusalem



Israel has for the first time admitted assassinating the PLO's former number two, Abu Jihad, in a raid on the movement's Tunis headquarters in 1988, a newspaper reported yesterday.

The report, published in Israel's top-selling Yediot Aharonot, said the operation was planned by the Mossad spy agency and carried out by the Sayeret Matkal elite commando unit.

Abu Jihad, whose real name was Khalil al-Wazir, was shot dead in the early hours of April 16, 1988 in a commando raid on the PLO headquarters by what was presumed to be Israeli agents.

"Israel killed the number two man in the PLO, Abu Jihad, in Tunis in 1988, it can now be reported. The intelligence part of the assassination was overseen by the Mossad, and the operational side was carried out by Sayeret Matkal," the paper said.

Mossad did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the article.

Saudi gas truck blast kills 22

AFP, Riyadh

A gas tanker truck exploded on a main road in the Saudi capital yesterday, killing at least 22 people, injuring about 111 others and leaving a trail of destruction, officials said.

The lorry veered into a bridge pylon at a junction on Khurays Road in Riyadh at about 7:30am, causing a gas leak that burst into flames, destroying nearby cars and a business, the officials told AFP.

Another truck fell off the bridge due to the impact of the explosion.

Amateur video footage posted on the Internet showed thick black smoke billowing from different spots around the flyover whose pylons were also damaged.

Iraq VP sentenced to death for 2nd time

REUTERS, Baghdad

An Iraqi court sentenced fugitive Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi to death for a second time yesterday on a charge of involvement in a plot to assassinate an interior ministry official, a judicial spokesman said.

Hashemi, a Sunni Muslim who fled to Turkey earlier this year when Shia-led Iraqi authorities sought his arrest, was subsequently sentenced to death in absentia on charges of running death squads, which he denies.

"The central criminal court issued a death sentence against Tareq al-Hashemi and his son in law for incitement to attach a sticky bomb to the car of an interior ministry officer," said Abdul-Sattar al-Birqdar of Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council.

Hashemi could not immediately be reached for comment on the latest sentence.

Hashemi has said the first case was built on testimony extracted under torture and accuses Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, a Shia Muslim, of conducting a political witch-hunt against Sunni opponents.

Many Iraqi Sunnis say they see a sectarian hand behind Hashemi's case, accusing Maliki of shoring up his position at their expense. The case has caused a crisis in the power-sharing government grouping Sunni, Shia and Kurdish blocs.

Extremism on focus as fighting rages in Syria

AFP, Beirut

The head of the main opposition Syrian National Council yesterday blamed the international community's failure to react to the country's conflict for fuelling Islamic extremist sentiment.

The comments came a day after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the opposition should "strongly resist the efforts by the extremists to hijack the Syrian revolution".

Hillary on Wednesday also criticised the SNC, saying it "can no longer be viewed as the visible leader of the opposition."

"They can be part of the opposition, but the opposition must include people from inside Syria and others."

And China yesterday said it had proposed a new initiative to head off an escalation of violence in Syria, including a phased, region-by-region ceasefire and the establishment of a transitional governing

body.

The plan, proposed on Wednesday to Lakhdar Brahimi, the visiting United Nations-Arab League joint peace envoy on Syria, "is an extension of China's effort to push for a political resolution of the Syrian issue", a Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

Speaking to AFP by telephone from Turkey, SNC chairman Abdel Basset Sayda said the situation resulted from the international community's inaction on Syria.

"The international community is responsible, through its lack of support for the Syrian people, for the growth of extremism in Syria," said the head of the mainly exiled opposition group.

"The international community should criticise itself, and ask itself: What did it give the Syrian people? How has it helped the Syrians to stop the regime's crazy killing?" he added.

He also said the SNC needed more tangible assistance to better influence developments on the ground.

Obama, Romney wage parallel elections

AFP, Washington

Campaign chiefs behind Barack Obama and Mitt Romney do not just conjure conflicting visions for America: they have irreconcilable diagnoses of the true nature of next week's election.

Republicans believe the president is an incumbent crippled by approval ratings below 50 percent, low enthusiasm for a dented brand, and high unemployment set to be evicted from the White House by a Romney wave.

Obama's team views that traditional electoral model as delusional, promises a huge turnout of the president's multi-ethnic coalition on Tuesday, and sees Romney's map as full of deadends that leave him short of the White House.

But the time for bluffing is running out: in five days, one campaign will face the sickly realization that it misread the moment, while the other tastes victory.

Reflecting the stakes of a knife-edge race, each side gets more bullish as election day nears -- there is none of the usual caveating. "We're very happy where we are, and we think that we're going to have a big victory next Tuesday," Romney senior advisor Russ Schriefer said.

Obama's team, however, has all but called the election. "This time next week, President Obama will have been re-elected for a second term. We have the math and they have the myth, the Romney campaign is selling illusion and delusion," Obama campaign manager Jim Messina said Tuesday.

The schizophrenic nature of the White House race is also revealed in polls. Romney's team prefers national surveys of the popular vote, which have often shown the Republican up several points, and see growing nationwide momentum.

Obama headquarters endlessly points out that US elections are a state-by-state drive to 270 electoral votes: and Obama leads enough state surveys to allow a route

back to the White House.

Democrats also dismiss surveys like Gallup's daily tracking poll, which has often had Romney up five points but which they say takes a shrunken snapshot of likely Democratic turnout.

Romney's camp disputes the central assumption of Obama's re-election bid -- heavy turnout among African Americans, Latinos and young voters.

The campaigns also feud over live data from states permitting early voting. Obama's team believes the results validate their theory of the race. Romney world says Democratic numbers are down from 2008.

A new wrinkle has arisen just days from polling day, after weeks when the race was confined to tight battles in swing states like Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, Nevada, Virginia, Florida, New Hampshire and Wisconsin.

Romney's Boston braintrust has now made big ad buys in states seen as solidly Democratic, including Pennsylvania, Michigan and Minnesota as aides conjure visions of 300 or more electoral votes.

"We have an expanded map now to get to our electoral goal of 270," said Romney advisor Kevin Madden. "We're playing offense with the map, whereas they're playing defense."

Nevertheless, Obama has countered Romney's investment as his Chicago-based team says it is prudent to defend his turf, while painting the Republican offensive as a sign of desperation.

"They understand their pathway with the map they've been playing on since they won the primaries now no longer gets them to 270 electoral votes," said Messina.

Another top Obama aide David Axelrod bet his bushy moustache that Obama would bring the trio of states home on Tuesday.

Independent analysts lean more towards the view that Obama's position on the electoral map is superior.

Fighters besiege Libya assembly

AFP, Tripoli

Nearly 100 Libyan fighters backed by artillery kept the national assembly under siege yesterday in protest at the new premier's cabinet lineup and alleged links of some ministers to Muammar Gaddafi's regime.

The protest which erupted on Wednesday night has drawn dozens of former rebels from Tripoli and other cities, some of them formally affiliated with the defence and interior ministries.

"What is happening and the scale of what is going on is very grave," said Othman Ben Sassi, an official linked to the national assembly, which was not in session on Thursday.

He said ex-rebels were occupying the assembly and other official buildings.

The ex-rebels are rejecting the new cabinet on the basis that it has pro-Gaddafi members and has no representation of the forces that fought the war against Gaddafi.

The main ministers to have sparked controversy are those of health, foreign affairs, international cooperation, higher education and religious affairs.

India scraps RTI bill

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Facing criticism from anti-graft activists, the Indian government yesterday decided to abandon a move to dilute the Right to Information Act that had sought to restrict disclosure of notings in official files only to social and developmental issues.

After this, all file notings by officials can be made public except those explicitly exempted, such as the ones related to national security, privacy and protection of commercial interest.

The cabinet had in July, 2006 approved the amendments but they did not make it to parliament because of stiff opposition from activists and a cross section of the people who accused the government of diluting the transparency law.

Graft claims target Sonia, Rahul

TNN, New Delhi

Janata Party president Subramanian Swamy yesterday accused scion of Nehru-Gandhi family and ruling Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi of running a fraud company and of misusing government facilities.

Addressing a news conference, Swamy alleged that Rahul and Sonia jointly owned 76 percent of a company called Young Indian.

He also accused Rahul of not disclosing about this company in his affidavit to the election commission while filing his nomination for the 2008 Lok Sabha elections.

He said that public funds were converted to finance the privately-owned company. He has also claimed that meetings of the company were held at 10 Janpath, Sonia Gandhi's govt-allotted official residence, which was against the law.

He said that Young Indian now 'owns' the Herald House in Delhi and two floors of it have been rented out to passport office that pays the company Rs 30 lakhs a month as rent, of which, 76 percent goes to Rahul and Sonia.

Swamy has demanded a CBI inquiry into the case.

Cyclone kills eight in India

AFP, Chennai

Rescuers in southern India yesterday searched for six tanker crew missing after their lifeboat capsized as a cyclone slammed into the coast overnight, forcing thousands to flee and killing eight.

One other person drowned, two were killed when a wall collapsed, one person was electrocuted and three died when a tree fell on their hut.

Government authorities said the storm had weakened substantially.

Cyclone Nilam struck the historic port of Mahabalipuram on Wednesday evening before moving inland.

NEWS IN brief

4 injured in US campus shooting

AFP, Los Angeles

At least four people were wounded overnight in a shooting on the campus of the University of Southern California, police said yesterday.

An officer with the Los Angeles Police Department confirmed there had been a shooting on campus and said four people had been taken to hospital, but could not immediately provide further details.

Japanese city puts its name on sale

AFP, Tokyo

A debt-ridden Japanese city is offering to rename itself after the highest bidder, an official said yesterday.

The city in the western prefecture of Osaka -- currently called Izumisano -- owes its creditors well over 100 billion yen (\$1.25 billion), the official said, adding the presence of nearby Kansai International Airport was partly to blame.

Officials originally announced the plan in June but had no takers, the official said, adding so far the bulk of inquiries had been from some of the

Tunisia extends state of emergency

AFP, Tunis

Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki on Wednesday extended the country's state of emergency through January, continuing special intervention powers for the police and army after a recent series of Islamist attacks.

Extensions of the state of emergency -- which has been in place since January 2011, when a revolution ousted long-time president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali -- had only been made for 30 days at a time since July.

Argentina lowers voting age to 16

AFP, Buenos Aires

Argentina late Wednesday approved a law to lower the legal voting age to 16 in a move that could strengthen President Cristina Kirchner's populist bloc ahead of next year's legislative elections.

The Chamber of Deputies approved the bill -- which was sponsored by Kirchner's former chief of staff and had already passed the Senate -- by 131 votes in favor to two against and one abstention.