

US undermining Syria revolution

205 killed nationwide on Thursday

AFP, Damascus

Syria's main anti-regime group yesterday accused Washington of undermining the country's revolution by seeking an opposition overhaul, as rebel forces made important gains in the northwest.

Criticism mounted meanwhile of a video purported to show rebel fighters executing Syrian soldiers, with the UN human rights body saying it appeared to show a war crime.

Two days ahead of key talks among the opposition in Qatar, the Syrian National Council lashed out at US accusations that it was not fully representative of the country's diverse dissent forces.

"Any discussions aimed at passing over the Syrian National Council or at creating new bodies to replace it are an attempt to undermine the Syrian revolution by sowing the seeds of division," the SNC said in a statement.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton this week voiced frustration with the SNC, saying it was not representative of on-the-ground opposition forces and that it "can no longer be viewed as the visible leader of the opposition".

Reports have emerged that Washington will be pushing for an overhaul of the opposition at Qatar meeting, with longtime Syrian dissident Riad Seif touted as the potential head of a new government-in-exile dubbed the Syrian National Initiative.

Rebel forces were making progress on the ground, however, with their fighters reported to have taken full control of a strategic crossroads yesterday in a move that will further limit the regime's ability to reinforce its troops in the northern commercial hub Aleppo.

At least 203 people, including 83 soldiers, were killed in fighting across Syria on Thursday, said the Observatory, which relies on a countrywide network of activists and medicals in civilian and military hospitals.

The rebels also faced criticism yesterday after a video appeared to show opposition fighters beating and executing soldiers after Thursday's attacks on the Saraqeb checkpoints.



PHOTO: AFP

President Barack Obama greets supporters during a campaign rally in Boulder, Colorado on Thursday.

Obama, Romney duel on final leg

AFP, Las Vegas

Barack Obama and Mitt Romney began their final frenzied dash across America beginning from Thursday, offering closing presidential arguments to the faithful and the undecided.

After a rare political truce that allowed Obama to preside over federal response to this week's superstorm Sandy, the incumbent and challenger made 11th-hour appeals to undecided voters in key battleground states and reminding their supporters to get out and vote.

President Obama dashed to Wisconsin, Nevada and then Colorado on Thursday, while his challenger hit up voters in Virginia.

To chants of "four more days," Republican Mitt Romney yesterday vowed a new beginning for America, urging voters to compare his record to President Barack Obama's.

"We are four days away from a fresh start," Romney told a raucous crowd in Wisconsin, one of several states the Republican nominee is hoping to pry away from the Obama column in an election going down to the wire on November 6.

For months, Romney has hammered away at his rival's record, stressing the president's inability to speed up the sluggish economic recovery while touting his own achievements in business and as a Massachusetts governor.

"Candidate Obama promised changed, but he could not deliver it. I promise change, and I have a record of achieving it," he said.

Later Friday, the two rivals converge on critical toss-up state Ohio.

Among the key issues circulating in the feverish pre-election mix was yesterday's jobless report, which showed the unemployment rate ticking up to 7.9 percent and the US economy adding a better-than-expected 171,000 new jobs.

Romney was dismissive of the report and said Americans would choose on Tuesday between prosperity and stagnation.

"We have made real progress," Obama said, in his first rally of the day, in Hilliard, a small town in crucial electoral territory around the city of Columbus, in Ohio, which could be a tipping point state in a tied-up election.

Obama, perhaps mindful of millions of Americans suffering from the

lingering impact of the worst recession since the 1930s, avoided a triumphal tone on data which sent relief rippling through his campaign team.

On Thursday, addressing a crowd in Las Vegas, Nevada, Obama praised citizens for coming together in the wake of the storm and urged voters to give him four more years in office.

The rivals are dead even on a national level but Obama holds a slight edge in three of the most hotly contested states in Tuesday's election, according to a Reuters/Ipsos poll released yesterday.

Obama leads Romney among likely voters by a margin of 3 percentage points in Virginia and 2 percentage points in Ohio and Florida, the online tracking poll found.

None of the polls indicates a clear lead for Obama because each falls within the survey's credibility interval, a tool used to account for statistical variation in Internet-based polls.

The two candidates are tied in Colorado, the tracking poll showed.

Nationwide, they are tied at 46 percent each. Neither candidate has held a clear lead in the four-day national tracking poll since early October.

Myanmar enacts investment law as World Bank returns

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's leader yesterday signed into law an eagerly awaited foreign investment bill, while the World Bank pledged to resume aid to the country as it emerges from decades of military rule.

Global corporate giants from Coca-Cola to Visa are lining up to enter the impoverished but resource-rich nation, as Western nations roll back sanctions against the one-time pariah state.

The World Bank announced it would inject \$245 million of aid into Myanmar, resuming assistance after a quarter-century absence.

The Washington-based institution closed its Yangon office in 1987 and



Thein Sein

Thursday, after Thein Sein sent back an earlier draft to lawmakers amid concerns that it was too protectionist.

An earlier limit of 50 percent for a foreign investor's stake in a joint venture has been dropped, and the new version allows the investment ratio to be decided by the foreign and local partners, MPs said.

Kids, 'denied refuge'

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Buffeted by torrential rains and winds of up to 90 miles per hour, her Ford Explorer plunged into a hole. According to the account she would later give police, Moore carried her sons to a nearby tree, gripping branches along with her boys as she tried to shelter them from the storm surge.

She told police they clung together for hours, before Moore managed to make her way to a nearby property, and pleaded to be let inside. But according to her police account, rather than sheltering the desperate strangers, the occupant refused to let them enter.

In desperation, Moore told police she then went to the back of the house, and tried to break in using a flowerpot, but was unable to do so. As the storm raged on, her sons were swept away by flood-

waters. The bodies of the boys were found near each other Thursday, about a quarter of a mile from where Moore last held them. Relatives said Moore was too distraught to speak with CNN.

Meanwhile, public anger has been directed at the homeowner who allegedly failed to help Moore and her children. The man, who told CNN's Gary Tuchman that his name is Alan but did not want his full name used, disputed Moore's account, saying he saw only a man outside.

"He didn't come to the door... he must have been standing at the bottom of the stairs," said the man. "He took a concrete flower pot... and threw [it] through the door."

The man at the door didn't ask to enter the

house, he said, but instead asked him to come outside in order to help.

"What could I do to help him?" he asked. "I had a pair of shorts on with flip-flops."

The man told CNN he did not know the fate of the children. Told that their bodies had been found, he said the deaths were a tragedy, but implied that the woman was at fault.

"It's unfortunate. She shouldn't have been out though. You know, it's one of those things," he said.

He said there was nothing he could have done. "I'm not a rescue worker... If I would have been outside, I would have been dead."

The man said he had given his account to police.

Legal experts consulted by CNN said that no crime would have been committed by a failure to render assistance.

Sri Lanka targeting judges Says Amnesty

AFP, Colombo

Rights watchdog Amnesty International yesterday accused Sri Lanka's government of trying to undermine the court system, a day after ruling party lawmakers moved to impeach the country's top judge.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) party submitted a resolution demanding the sacking of Chief Justice Shirani Bandaranayake, who has been accused of flouting the constitution.

"Given recent attacks on the judiciary and the general climate of intolerance of dissent, we are concerned that the move to impeach may be politically motivated," Amnesty spokesman Olof Blomqvist told AFP.

The rights group also highlighted the case of a high court judge who was attacked and injured by armed assailants last month after he had complained of attempts to interfere with the independence of judges.

"The crackdown on dissent has extended to lawyers and members of the judiciary who speak out against abuses of power," it said.

Similar disquiet about Sri Lanka's justice system was raised when the country's rights record was reviewed at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on Thursday.

US PRESIDENTIAL POLL

The Economist endorses Obama

AGENCIES

The Economist yesterday endorsed President Barack Obama for a second term.

Explaining the reasons behind the endorsement, Chris Lockwood, editor of the US edition, cited the stabilization of the US economy. He however noted that The Economist wasn't "immensely impressed" with Obama's first term.

He said their default position was that Obama "handled the terrifying recession and the economy not too badly."

Iconic Paris bar picks Obama

AFP, Paris

President Barack Obama is leading against challenger Mitt Romney in a straw poll at Harry's Bar, an iconic Paris watering hole which has held a vote ahead of US elections since 1924 and only got the results wrong twice.

The birthplace of the Bloody Mary and the haunt of the likes of Ernest Hemingway and Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Harry's New York Bar -- a small corner of Manhattan in the heart of Paris -- is the best election soothsayer, its owner said.

The only two failed results were the 1976 election won by Jimmy Carter and George W Bush's 2004 victory.

Laden boost for incumbent!

AFP, Washington

Timing is everything in show business, but the director of the first movie about the commando raid that killed Osama bin Laden doubts its television premiere Sunday will swing the US election.

"SEAL Team Six: The Raid on Osama bin Laden" raised eyebrows when it was announced last month that it would screen for the first time on the National Geographic cable channel just two days before America votes.

However, in an interview Thursday, director John Stockwell shrugged off suggestions that his film is some kind of prime-time Obama propaganda tool to sway voters less than 48 hours before polls open.

China, Japan citizens back Obama

AFP, Hong Kong

Citizens of China and Japan overwhelmingly support President Barack Obama to win a second term, according to an AFP-Ipsos poll which suggests Mitt Romney's tough talk on the Asian powers could have dented his image.

The US elections may be a toss-up at home but the survey carried out by Ipsos Hong Kong found a whopping 86 percent of Japanese back the Democrat incumbent compared to only 12.3 percent for Republican party candidate Romney.

Chinese respondents were less emphatic, but still a hefty 63 percent said they wanted Obama to serve out another four years, according to the online poll conducted in September and October.

NEWS IN brief

'Libya mission was CIA base'

AFP, Washington

The US mission in Benghazi that came under attack by militants on September 11 was mainly a secret CIA operation, the Wall Street Journal reported Friday, shedding new light on the deadly assault.

The Wall Street Journal said the mission was mainly a CIA operation, adding that of the 30 American officials evacuated from Benghazi following the assault, just seven worked for the State Department.

Nigeria executing youths: BBC

BBC ONLINE

Dozens of young men have been shot dead in Nigeria by the military in Maiduguri, residents in the north-eastern city have told the BBC.

An imam told the BBC about 11 youths from his street alone were killed, including four of his own sons.

The alleged extrajudicial executions happened as Amnesty International accused the security forces of abuses in its crackdown on Islamist militants.

UN chides China over Tibet

REUTERS, Geneva

The top UN human rights official urged China yesterday to address deep-rooted frustrations that have led to desperate forms of protest by Tibetans, including some 60 self-immolations since March 2011.

"Social stability in Tibet will never be achieved through heavy security measures and suppression of human rights," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said in a rare statement critical of China.

'Gangnam' 2nd most-viewed video

AFP, Seoul

South Korean pop sensation Psy's "Gangnam Style" has become the second most-watched YouTube video of all time with more than 620 million hits as the quirky rapper continues to take the world by storm.

The 34-year-old singer, whose real name is Park Jae-Sang, rocketed to international fame after "Gangnam Style" -- a techno ode to a trendy Seoul neighbourhood -- become a worldwide hit following its debut in July.

The video on Friday ousted singer Jennifer Lopez's dance hit "On the Floor" from second place. But it still trails behind Canadian teenage heartthrob Justin Bieber's "Baby".

Concern over Thackeray's health

PTI, Mumbai

Shiv Sena executive president Uddhav Thackeray held a meeting of party MPs and legislators yesterday afternoon amid reports of deteriorating health of saffron outfit's patriarch Bal Thackeray.

Normally a meeting of party MPs is held just ahead of Parliament session but in this case, the winter session is almost three weeks away, so there was speculation over the reason for calling the meeting.

HILLARY CLINTON Rock-star diplomat or future president?

AFP, Washington

As Hillary Clinton prepares to step down as America's top diplomat, no one quite believes she and husband Bill will disappear from the US political scene they have dominated for some two decades.

Despite questions over whether the secretary of state was to blame for security lapses before September's attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Hillary remains the most popular figure in the administration.

The New York Times dubbed her the "rock star diplomat" and she has been met by cheering crowds in places as different as the Mongolian presidential palace and Georgetown University in Washington.

In her four years at the helm of US diplomacy, Hillary has criss-crossed the world, racking up more countries than any of her predecessors and tirelessly pushing democracy and what she calls "smart power".

And, despite her repeated denials, many people remain convinced that she will once more try to run for presidential office.

Amid the bitter political climate of a close election year her approval ratings still stand in the high 60s, and some analysts believe the Democratic Party nomination in 2016 could be hers for the asking.

She came close in 2008 only to see Barack Obama snatch the nomination from her, leaving her to claim the votes she won amounted to "18 million cracks" in the glass ceiling which has so far denied women the nation's highest office.

But Hillary Clinton, 65, has been steadfastly loyal to Obama, even in many minds taking a bullet for him by assuming responsibility for the deaths of four diplomatic staff in the September 11 attack on the Benghazi mission.

If Obama wins Tuesday's presidential election, Hillary says she will stay on only until a successor is found. "I'm aiming to leave shortly after the inauguration. That's my plan," she told The Washington Post recently.

Obama said he would love for her to remain in post, but "despite my begging" she has decided to move on. "I have been on this high wire of national and international politics and leadership for 20 years," she told Marie Claire magazine recently.

"It has been an absolutely extraordinary personal honor and experience. But I really want to just have my own time back. I want to just be my own person. I'm looking forward to that."



Hillary Clinton