

West declares support for united Syrian opposition

Israel in 'direct hits' on Syria targets as fighting rages near Golan line

AFP, Washington, Jerusalem, Turkey

The United States late Sunday declared its support for the united Syrian opposition after various groups opposed to the government of President Bashar al-Assad decided to come together following talks in Doha, Qatar.

"We look forward to supporting the National Coalition as it charts a course toward the end of Assad's bloody rule and the start of the peaceful, just, democratic future that all the people of Syria deserve," State department deputy spokesman Mark Toner said in a statement.

Britain hailed the agreement as an "important milestone in forming a broad and representative opposition that reflects the full diversity of the Syrian people."

Qatar, which along with neigh-

bouring Saudi Arabia, has been a leading champion of the Syrian opposition, has already said it is ready to recognise a provisional government that the National Coalition plans to form.

Meanwhile, Israeli troops fired tank shells into Syria yesterday, confirming "direct hits" on the source of a mortar round that struck the Golan Heights as tensions flared along the ceasefire line.

The exchange marked the second straight day that Israeli troops have been drawn into the Syrian conflict and came just hours after an appeal for restraint from all sides by UN chief Ban Ki-moon.

On Sunday, Israeli troops fired a warning shot across the UN-monitored ceasefire line in response to Syrian fire, in the first instance of Israeli fire directed at the Syrian military in the Golan



A Syrian rebel

Heights since the 1973 war.

Syrian aircraft bombed the strategic border town of Ras al-Ain yesterday, killing at least four people and sending panicked residents fleeing into Turkey, an AFP photographer reported.

The blast killed four Syrians and wounded scores of others, around

20 of them seriously, according to the Anatolia news agency.

The Observatory said 12 people were killed in a blast in Ras al-Ain, although it could not immediately say if it was the same bomb.

The dead included five civilians and seven rebels -- mostly loyalists of the jihadist Al-Nusra Front, said the watchdog which bases its casualty tolls on a network of doctors and activists in civilian and military hospitals.

Syrian forces and rebels have been involved in furious fighting in the area during the past week, sending 9,000 Syrians fleeing into Turkey in the space of just 24 hours.

A total of 120 people were killed in violence on Sunday, bringing to more than 37,000 the number killed since March last year, the Observatory said.

PETRAEUS PROBE US Congress to grill spy chiefs

AFP, Washington

Fresh reports piled pressure yesterday on FBI and CIA officials to explain the circumstances and timing of an investigation that ended the storied career of spy chief David Petraeus just three days after President Barack Obama's re-election.

Petraeus resigned as head of the Central Intelligence Agency on Friday after admitting an extramarital affair, sparking concerns of a security breach.

Meanwhile, US media identified the other woman as 37-year-old Jill Kelley, a "social liaison" to a Florida air force base who apparently had a long-standing friendship with Petraeus but no official status in the military.

Xi Jinping emerges most powerful in China

Hu Jintao to step down as military chief

Pri, Beijing

China's new leader in waiting, Xi Jinping will have a surprise head-start to emerge as the most influential leader, as outgoing President Hu Jintao has reportedly decided to step down from all posts including the all-powerful post of the military chief.

Xi, 59, currently the VP is expected to be formally nominated as the general secretary of the ruling Communist Party at the end of the ongoing 18th Communist Party Congress on its last day on November 14. Scorching speculation, Hu has decided to formally relinquish his position as military chief at the end of the party Congress, Hong Kong-based 'South China Morning Post' quoted officials as saying.

Hu's decision to opt for complete retirement has surprised many analysts as he was expected to keep the top job of the chairman of the central military commission, especially in the backdrop of recent



Xi Jinping

reshuffling of military top brass, which was packed with officials who worked closely with him.

The central military commission oversees all aspects of 2.3 million strong military.

Xi is currently it's vice chairman. Turning 70 next month, Hu technically will be stepping down as party chief and as president after the

Congress on November 14.

But the formal transfer of power was expected to take place early next year.

Hu's complete departure from party and military is watched closely in India as he is widely regarded as one of post Mao Zedong Chinese leaders who rebalanced ties with India bringing an element of "strategic equilibrium" to otherwise pro-Pakistan Chinese foreign policy.

He is credited to have reset Sino-Indian ties, repairing the damage caused by the 1962 border war and improved ties.

Myanmar struggles to reach quake victims

AFP, Thabeikkyin, Myanmar

Myanmar rescuers struggled yesterday to help villagers hit by an earthquake that aid agencies said killed at least 13, injured dozens and caused a bridge and mine to collapse.

A series of powerful aftershocks rattled nerves after Sunday's 6.8-magnitude quake, which sent terrified people running from homes and hotels in the country's second-biggest city of Mandalay and surrounding villages.

Authorities said they were providing help to victims, including those without shelter after more than one hundred homes were damaged, but that communication problems made it difficult to assess the scale of the destruction.

US VETERANS DAY Obama hails end of decade of war



AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama marked Veterans Day Sunday by celebrating the fact that America's painful decade of war in Iraq and Afghanistan is coming to a close.

Under glorious autumn sunshine, Obama placed a wreath at Arlington National Cemetery in memory of all Americans who died while serving in the military, and thanked their grieving families.

Obama praised the post-September 11 generation of soldiers who came forward after the suicide airliner attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in 2001, saying they had "stepped into history" by ousting Iraq's Saddam Hussein, taking on the Taliban in Afghanistan and killing Osama bin Laden in Pakistan.

"Tour after tour, year after year, you and your families have done all that this country has asked -- you've done that and more," he said.

Obama noted his withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq and the gradual drawdown under way from Afghanistan.

"This is the first Veterans Day in a decade in which there are no American troops fighting and dying in Iraq," he said to applause.

And 33,000 US troops have now returned from Afghanistan. The drawdown is expected to be completed in 2014.

"After a decade of war, our heroes are coming home. And over the next few years, more than a million service members will transition back to civilian life," Obama said.

Ex-BBC boss starts at NY Times

REUTERS, New York

The New York Times Co said it would proceed with its plan for Mark Thompson to take over as CEO, despite an intensifying scandal at the BBC that has raised questions about his tenure at Britain's flagship broadcasting company.

"He is going to be CEO beginning November 12," a New York Times spokesman said on Sunday.

The New York Times maintained its confidence in the paper's new chief following the news that George Entwistle, the director-general of the BBC, said he was resigning from the broadcaster on Saturday. Entwistle took the blame for a news program at its flagship Newsnight, which aired a mistaken allegation that a former British senior politician sexually abused children.

The latest embarrassment comes as the BBC faces police and other investigations into claims that hundreds of people, some as young as 12, were sexually abused over the course of decades by one of their top personalities, the late Jimmy Savile.



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