

Syria rebels receive heavy pounding

189 killed; Russia slams rebel backers

AFP, Damascus

Syria's regime unleashed tanks and warplanes against rebels as battles raged yesterday, after France recognised the newly united political opposition and raised the prospect of arming its fighters.

Tanks shelled two refugee camps in southern Damascus, where fighting has intensified since the army put down a rebel assault in the southern belt of the capital city where anti-regime sentiment runs strong, a watchdog said.

Fighter jets bombed Maaret al-Numan, a northwestern town rebels captured last month in a major blow to the regime's ability to reinforce troops under attack in second city Aleppo, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev criticised countries siding with

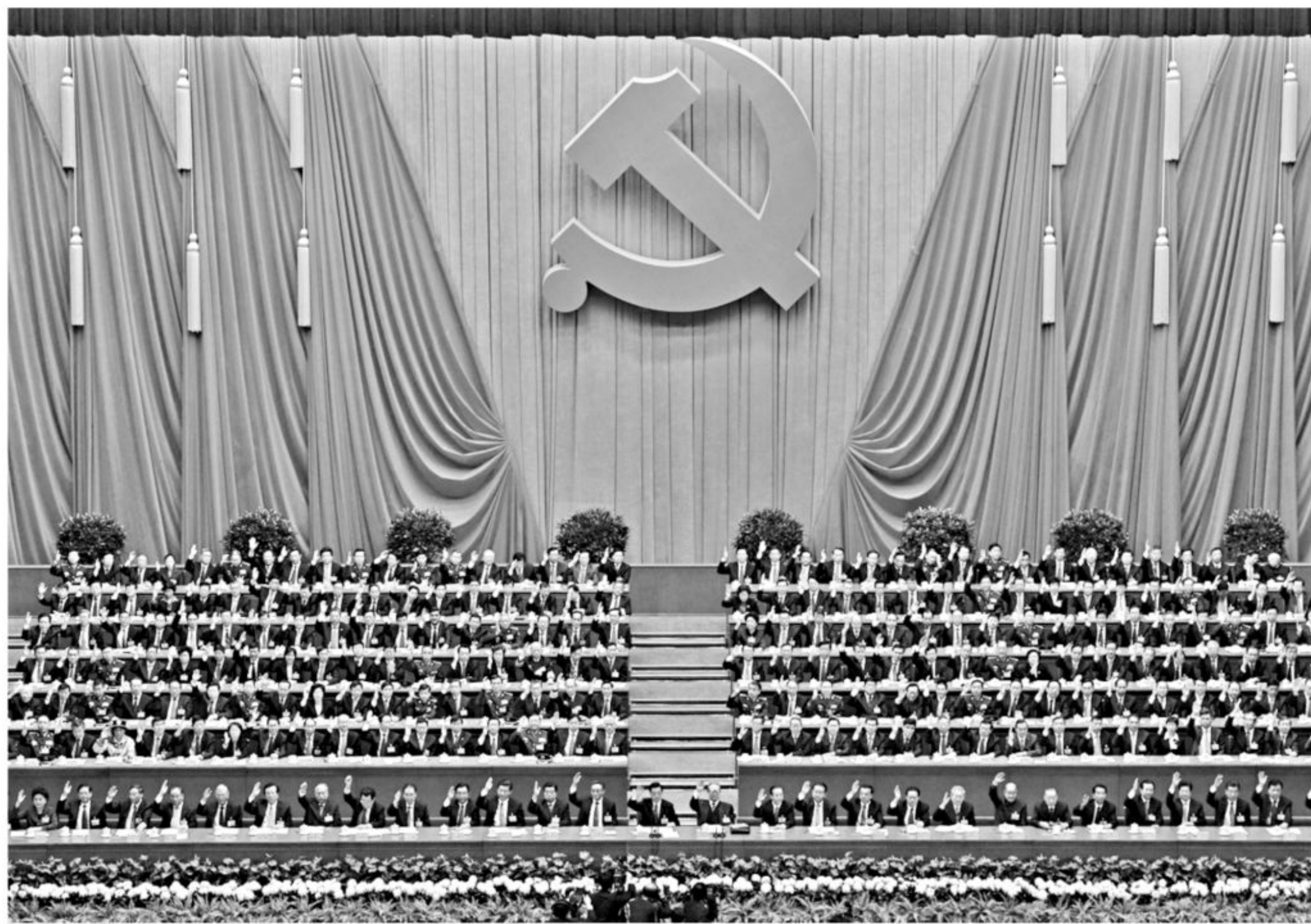
the opposition and insisted Moscow was staying neutral.

"We don't support anybody in this conflict, neither President Assad nor the rebels... but unfortunately, the point of view of some states is more one-sided," Medvedev told Finnish broadsheet Helsingin Sanomat.

The United States and France said on Tuesday that the coalition was "a legitimate representative" of the Syrian people, but stopped short of recognising it as the sole representative.

Britain said it wants to see more evidence the grouping has strong support inside Syria before formally recognising it.

The Observatory -- which relies on a network of activists, lawyers and medics -- said nationwide violence killed 189 people on Tuesday, including 90 civilians, 50 rebels and 49 soldiers.



Chinese leaders gather during the closing ceremony of the party congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing yesterday. China's Communist Party will today unveil the new set of top leaders who will run the country for the next decade.

PHOTO: AFP

War cries as Israel kills Hamas military chief

REUTERS, Gaza

Israel launched a major offensive against Palestinian militants in Gaza yesterday, killing the military commander of Hamas in an air strike and threatening an invasion of the enclave that the Islamist group vowed would "open the gates of hell".

Operation "Pillar of Defence" began with a surgical strike on a car carrying the commander of the military wing of Hamas, the Islamist movement which controls Gaza and dominates a score of smaller armed groups.

Within minutes of the death of Ahmed Al-Jaabari, big explosions were rocking Gaza, as the Israeli air force struck at selected targets just before sundown, blasting plumes of smoke and debris high above the crowded city.

Panicking civilians ran for cover and the death toll mounted quickly. Seven people including two girls under the age of five were



Ahmed Al-Jaabari

killed, the health ministry said.

A second Gaza war has loomed on the horizon for months as waves of Palestinian rocket attacks and Israeli strikes grew increasingly more intense and frequent.

Israel confirmed it had carried out the attack and announced there was more to come.

Immediate calls for revenge were broadcast over Hamas radio.

"The occupation has opened the gates of hell," Hamas's armed wing said. Smaller groups also vowed to strike back.

"Israel has declared war on Gaza and they will bear the responsibility for the consequences," Islamic Jihad said.

Israel's intelligence agency Shin Bet said Jaabari was responsible for Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007, when the militant Islamist group ousted fighters of the Fatah movement of its great rival, Palestinian president Abbas.

UN NON-STATE BID Israel mulling Abbas ouster

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's foreign ministry has proposed in a policy paper "toppling" Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas if a Palestinian bid for state observer status at the United Nations is approved later this month.

The position paper is a draft document that is expected to be endorsed by Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who would then present it to the Israeli officials charged with formulating Israel's response to the Palestinian bid.

Lieberman has already reportedly expressed his view that Abbas's Palestinian Authority should be dismantled if the UN bid succeeds.

Xi set to take power in China

AFP, Beijing

China's ruling Communist Party closed a pivotal congress yesterday that put Vice President Xi Jinping a step closer to taking power for the next decade in a landmark transition.

The week-long Communist Party gathering in the cavernous Great Hall of the People ended after its 2,200 delegates from around the country selected a new leadership committee of roughly 200 party members.

Xi was renamed to the Central Committee, a widely expected development that was singled out by state media, suggesting he was firmly positioned to be announced as the party's top leader today.

The week-long forum ended with a show of unity by the delegates in the red-draped hall, who stood and sang the "Internationale," the socialist anthem.

The last word went to President Hu Jintao, who had opened the meeting with an address warning the party faces "collapse" if it cannot halt

the rampant corruption that has undermined its legitimacy.

"I now announce that the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress has come to a victorious conclusion," said Hu, the outgoing party leader.

"The congress has elected a new central committee of the party and replaced older leaders with younger ones."

The main business of the congress, which is held every five years, was to select a new circle of leaders at a time when China faces major economic challenges and growing scrutiny from its citizens.

The party did not immediately release the full Central Committee list but state news agency Xinhua reported the appointments of a number of officials from each of the two main factions believed jockeying for power.

They included several tipped for further promotion to the powerful Politburo Standing Committee, China's highest decision-making

body which currently has nine members but could be slimmed to seven.

The elite committee is expected to be headed by Xi, with second place going to Vice Premier Li Keqiang who is slated to become premier in March.

However, analysts said only the make-up and pecking order of the standing committee -- which will be revealed today when members walk out before the media -- will provide certainty on the factional outcome.

In one corner is octogenarian former president Jiang Zemin, who is seen as a kingmaker after making a surprise political comeback, while the other faction comprises Hu's allies.

Xi is seen as a consensus figure who leans toward Jiang, while Li is considered to be in Hu's faction.

Analysts say that despite rivalries between the camps which are largely divided on patronage lines, they broadly agree China must reform its economy away from a dependence on exports, while maintaining a firm hand on dissent.

NEWS IN brief

Japan to hold polls on Dec 16

AFP, Tokyo

Japan will hold a general election on December 16, a senior governing party official confirmed yesterday, putting an end to months of speculation over the date of polls.

Azumi's confirmation came after a showdown in parliament between Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda and opposition leader Shinzo Abe in which the premier said he would dissolve the house on

AU backs Mali intervention

AFP, Ouagadougou

The African Union has endorsed a plan for military intervention to regain control of Mali's desert north from Islamist rebels and restore the authority of the state.

African nations and the international community have expressed growing concern over the continued occupation of Mali's north since it could provide a safe haven to al-Qaeda-linked groups.

The deal now have to be passed by the United Nations before any military move.

Spate of blasts kill 15 in Iraq

AFP, Kirkuk

A spate of apparently coordinated attacks across Iraq on the eve of a Muslim festival marking the Islamic new year killed 15 people and wounded more than 100 others yesterday, officials said.

The 11 bombings and shootings struck in Baghdad and six other cities, the security and medical officials said, and will likely raise tensions in a country mired in political deadlock and only relatively recently emerged from a brutal sectarian war.

S Korea leader's son to face probe

AFP, Seoul

South Korean prosecutors yesterday said they would refer President Lee Myung-Bak's only son to the tax authorities as they handed down indictments over a land deal for Lee's retirement home.

Although Lee Si-Hyung was not among the three people indicted, prosecutors said his tax records would be checked for possible evasion of gift tax on funds he received from family members to help purchase a plot for the home.

PETRAEUS SEX SCANDAL

Obama to meet press, backs Allen

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama is set to address the sex scandal that brought down CIA chief David Petraeus and snared a top US general when he gives his first post-election press conference yesterday.

The widening probe into Petraeus's extramarital affair has raised questions about the US commander in Afghanistan, distracting from talks over a looming budget crisis and efforts to fill high-level positions in Obama's second term.

The White House on Tuesday expressed confidence in John Allen after the four-star general was linked to the scandal, which saw Petraeus resign in disgrace.

Allen was placed under investigation after FBI agents probing email threats sent by Petraeus' mistress stumbled upon a vast trove of messages Allen sent to another married



Barack Obama

John Allen

woman at the heart of the scandal.

According to a senior Pentagon official, the married general denies any sexual liaison with 37-year-old Tampa socialite Jill Kelley.

Due to face lawmakers this week for a hearing to confirm his promotion to the post of Nato's supreme commander in Europe, Allen will now return to Kabul and remain in charge of allied forces in Afghanistan until the probe is over.

"The president thinks very highly of General Allen and of his service to his country, as well as the job he has done in Afghanistan,"

White House spokesman Jay Carney told reporters.

Petraeus resigned last week when it became clear that his affair with 40-year-old military reservist Paula Broadwell, who wrote a fawning biography of him, would become public.

FBI agents stumbled on the liaison after a complaint from Kelley -- a close friend of both Petraeus and Allen -- who told a federal agent that she had received threatening emails, which investigators later traced to Broadwell.

The Pentagon is meanwhile investigating Allen after FBI agents found 20,000 to 30,000 pages of his correspondence, including hundreds of emails to Kelley.

A Pentagon official said some of the emails were seen as "flirtatious" but that only an investigation could determine if Allen, who is married, had broken the law or violated military regulations.

Diamond sold at record £13m

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It fetched more than double the price paid for it at auction almost two decades ago.

"It is a world record price per carat for a colourless diamond," François Curiel, director of the international jewellery department at Christie's, said.

"The market is not on the best form at the moment. The sale tonight was almost flabbergasting."

He added that the buyer wished to remain anonymous, but revealed that the underbidder was Fred Mouawad, an international dealer with offices in Dubai and Geneva.

The diamond was sold by American jeweller Black, Starr & Frost.

"My understanding is

that this stone is going to a museum and it will probably be the centrepiece," said Alfredo Molina, chairman of Black, Starr & Frost.

The diamond was the star lot at Christie's semi-annual jewellery sale in Geneva. The sale as a whole fetched £50m, with 290 of 348 lots sold.

Historical diamonds originating in the Golconda mines, virtually exhausted by the 18th century, include the Koh-i-noor, now in the British crown jewels, and the blue Hope Diamond, part of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC, Christie's said.

"The Archduke Joseph Diamond is the finest and largest perfect Golconda diamond ever to appear at

auction," Rahul Kadakia of Christie's said.

"It is comparable in its noble lineage and superb quality to the legendary Koh-i-noor."

Records show the Archduke deposited the stone in the vault of the Hungarian General Credit Bank in 1933.

"Three years later it was sold to a European banker, and kept in France, locked away in a safe deposit box, where fortunately it remained undiscovered during the second world war," the auction houses said.

It surfaced at auction in 1961 and again at Christie's in November 1993, netting £4m at the time. The stone was subsequently "slightly recut".

Hay comes to Dhaka

FROM PAGE 1

literature.

On the occasion, Bangla Academy will wear a festive look on November 16 and 17 weekend. Visitors will find themselves in a carnival atmosphere where writers, poets, lyricists and contributors to related forms of art will take the stage to share their experiences.

In 2001, the festival was described by Bill Clinton as "The woodstock of the mind". Hay Festival has been a great platform for writers from around the world to be recognised internationally.

For 25 years, the Hay Festival of Literature & Arts has brought together creative minds from around the world to debate and share stories, and to launch

BBC's 90th birthday amid testing times

AFP, London

The BBC marked the 90th anniversary of its first ever transmission yesterday beset by doubts about its future after scandals surrounding its reporting of child sex abuse allegations.

What was then known as the British Broadcasting Company cracked into life on November 14, 1922, with a radio news bulletin featuring stories about a train robbery, a "rowdy meeting" involving Winston Churchill, and billiards scores.

But 90 years later the BBC, now the world's largest broadcasting organisation, faces one of the most serious crises in its history as it seeks to defend its reputation.

The BBC was first hit by scandal last month over a decision by its flagship current affairs programme, Newsnight, to shelve an investigation into claims of paedophilia surrounding its late television star Jimmy Savile.

Weeks later Newsnight was forced to retract false allegations that a senior Conservative politician abused children at a care home in Wales in the 1970s.

The BBC's director-general George Entwistle resigned on Saturday after 54 days in the job and the corporation has launched a series of investigations into both of the scandals, while it searches for a new leader.

new authors and books.

A handful of prominent publishing houses will be attending this year's festival specifically designed to maximize the exposure of Bangladeshi writers to the international audience.

The packed programme also packs a punch. There will be famous father-son duo Saidur Rahman Boyati and Abul Bashan Abbasi singing the traditional folk genre called Kobigaan. The charm will be no less when Shadhona Sangskritik Mondal takes the stage with their dance troupe and enchanting choreography.

The programmes include recitations by Shimul Mostofa and Dahlia Ahmed, among others; stage performances directed by Naila

Azad Nupur; songs of Kazi Nazrul Islam; and poetry of Gillian Clarke, Arundhati Subramaniam and Ruby Rahman. Also look out for rhymes inspired by Bangla folklore or Vikram Seth's novel in verse.

There is even more: bilingual poetry slam, a look at poetry through the ages and bilingual story teller Shamim Azad, who combines all of the above to her unique performances.

The Hay Festival Dhaka wraps up with one of Tagore's musicals by Pallavi Dance Centre, and the soulful music of mystical bard Lalon Fakir sung by Arif Baul.

The details of the programme is available at hayfestivals.org/dhaka.