

Support pours in for Palestinians

AGENCIES

Switzerland, Denmark, Spain and Norway yesterday joined a growing list of European countries that back an upgrade for Palestinians to non-member status at the United Nations, a victory that would be a diplomatic boost to their aspirations for statehood.

With overwhelming support from the developing world, the Palestinians appear certain to earn approval in the 193-member UN General Assembly for a status upgrade to "observer state" today.

Frustrated that their bid for full UN membership last year was thwarted by US opposition in the UN Security Council, Palestinians have launched a watered-down bid for recognition as a non-member state, similar to the status the Vatican enjoys.

The Palestinian proposal would implicitly recognise Palestinian statehood. It could also grant access to bodies such as the International Criminal Court in The Hague, where the Palestinians could file complaints against Israel.

Israel and its main ally the United

UN NON-STATEHOOD BID TODAY



PHOTO: AFP

Mahmoud Abbas hands over a formal letter for Palestine to be admitted as a state to the UN Secretary-General in New York on September 23, 2011.

States oppose the move.

On Tuesday, France gave its support in favour of non-member status.

"The decision to support the resolution is in accordance with Switzerland's policy to seek a negotiated, just, and durable peace between Israel and an independent and viable Palestinian state within secure

and internationally recognised borders," the Swiss Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

The Swiss decision followed a visit to Berne by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas this month as the country hesitated between voting in favour of the resolution or abstaining.

A positive vote would make it possible to "revitalise the concept of a two-state solution by placing Israel and Palestine on an equal footing in future peace negotiations", the Swiss ministry said.

In Copenhagen, the Danish foreign minister said Denmark would also vote "yes".

"It is a moderate text which clearly highlights the need for peace negotiations and negotiations for a two-state solution that can secure Palestinians a safe and sustainable state side by side with Israel, minister Villy Sovndal said.

Spain and Portugal said that they believed the Palestinian bid to upgrade its rank from a UN General Assembly observer entity to that of a non-member observer state was the best way to move towards peace.

Britain, which has been cool on the

idea, was due to announce its decision later in the day.

Israel and the United States condemn the UN bid, saying the only genuine route to statehood for the Palestinians is via a peace agreement made in direct talks with Israel.

Talks however have been stalled for two years, mainly over the issue of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which have expanded despite being deemed illegal by most of the world.

In Ramallah in the West Bank, senior Palestine Liberation Organization official Hanan Ashrawi said the response was encouraging and sent a message of hope to all Palestinians.

European countries are eager to bolster moderates such as Abbas after an eight-day conflict this month between Israel and Gaza-based Islamists estranged from more moderate West Bank compatriots and opposed to Israel's very existence.

Israel and the United States have mooted withholding aid and tax revenue that the Palestinian government in the West Bank needs to survive. Israel has also viewed options that include bringing down Abbas.

PROTEST OVER MORSI POWER GRAB

Top Egypt court goes on strike

AFP, Cairo



Egypt yesterday plunged deeper into its worst political crisis since Islamist President Mohamed Morsi took office, with a top court going on strike to protest his decision to grant himself sweeping powers.

The Court of Cassation, the country's top appeals court, said it would "suspend all work" until Morsi rescinds the decree that gave him unprecedented presidential powers that cannot be challenged by the judiciary.

The move pushes Morsi further into a corner, after crowds poured into the streets on Tuesday to denounce a decision they see as a dictatorial.

Police fired tear gas early yesterday into Cairo's Tahrir Square, where hundreds of protesters spent the night after the mass rally.

Tuesday's huge turnout for a protest rally in the iconic square in the heart of Cairo, as well as in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria and most of Egypt's 27 provinces, marked the largest mobilisation yet against the president.

Protesters are furious at the decree that Morsi announced last Thursday allowing him to "issue any decision or law that is final and not subject to appeal", which effectively placed him beyond judicial oversight.

Facebook policy changes spark row

AFP, Washington

Facebook has run into a fresh attack from privacy activists after the huge social network modified policies on how it manages users' data.

The changes unveiled last week ended Facebook's effort to allow users to vote on privacy policy, but also permits sharing of information with its newly acquired photo-sharing service, Instagram.

Additionally, the changes make it easier for advertisers and others to send messages on Facebook, limiting users' control, according to privacy rights groups.

Activists have raised a ruckus over the changes, saying they could violate some laws or Facebook's agreement with US regulators earlier this year after complaints from privacy groups.

The latest spat highlights Facebook's quandary on how it can monetize data from its billion users worldwide by sharing information and still live up to its pledge to protect privacy.

Thai PM survives no-confidence vote

AFP, Bangkok

Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra Wednesday easily survived a no-confidence vote orchestrated by her opponents in parliament who accused her of failing to crack down on graft.

Yingluck, Thailand's first female premier, won 308 of the 467 votes, securing support even from outside her six-party coalition which commands about three-fifths of the seats in the lower house.

The former businesswoman took office in August 2011 after a decisive election victory by her Puea Thai party which has close links to her brother, ousted former premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

Deputy Prime Minister Chalermpol Yubumrung, Defence Minister Sukumpol Suwanatat and Deputy Interior Minister Chat Kuladilok also survived censure motions.

Yingluck was accused by the main opposition Democrat Party of overseeing corruption -- particularly in a controversial government rice purchase scheme -- and of being the puppet of her brother.

Thaksin was toppled by royalist generals in a coup in 2006.



Pakistan set for polls in May

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan will hold general elections in May, state media quoted a cabinet minister as saying Tuesday, although a spokesman for the presidency said a date had yet to be finalised.

Information Minister Qamar Zaman Kaira told reporters in the eastern city of Lahore that the next election would be held in May 2013, state news agency APP reported.

It would mark the first time that a democratically elected civilian government in Pakistan completes a full term in office and hands over to a new, elected administration.



Members of the Tibetan Youth congress hold placards and flags as they shout slogans during a protest in New Delhi yesterday. Tibetans living in exile organised a rally to express their opposition to China's policies in Tibet where four more set themselves alight taking the number to 20 this month.

PHOTO: AFP

Susan Rice admits Benghazi error

BBC ONLINE

A US diplomat hotly tipped to replace Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has admitted releasing incorrect information after September's attack on the American consulate in Libya that killed four Americans, including Ambassador Christopher Stevens.

UN Ambassador Susan Rice said there had been no attempt to mislead the public, but Republicans were unconvinced.

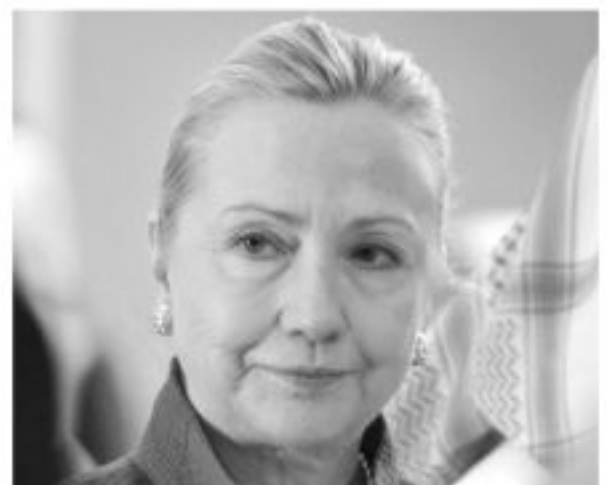
The 11 September assault on the US consulate triggered a major political row over who knew what and when.

Days afterwards, Rice, 48, said in a series of TV interviews that it seemed to have developed out of protests over an anti-Islamic film. Later intelligence reports suggested it was possibly tied to al-Qaeda affiliates.

On Tuesday, Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Kelly Ayotte met privately with Rice and acting CIA Director Michael Morell to discuss the attack.

After the meeting on Capitol Hill, the Republicans said questions remained unanswered.

White House Press Secretary Jay Carney said on Tuesday there were "no unanswered questions" about Rice's response to the Benghazi incident, accusing Republicans of being obsessed with it.



PALESTINIAN AID Israeli group sues Hillary

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the State Department are being sued for allegedly allowing American aid money meant for the Palestinian Authority to be used by terror groups like Hamas.

The lawsuit was filed on Monday in Washington on behalf of 24 US citizens living in Israel by the Israel Law Center, a Tel Aviv-based legal group that specializes in fighting "terrorist organizations and the regimes that support them," according to its website.

The suit accuses the defendants of having "authorized, sanctioned, encouraged, and/or facilitated funding to the Palestinian Authority without imposing the controls and oversight mandated by federal statute," especially the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act of 2006.

The suit calls for the defendants, including Hillary, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department, to be adjudged to have "violated federal statutes."

US State Department could not confirm that the lawsuit had been filed, but said that if it had it would be a matter for the Justice Department.

Blasts kill 38 near Syria capital

Russia PM plays down ties with Assad; rebels down warplanes

AFP, Damascus

Simultaneous car bombings in a mostly Christian and Druze town near Damascus killed at least 38 people yesterday, as rebels downed a military aircraft for the second successive day.

The blasts occurred when explosives-packed cars were detonated at daybreak in a pro-regime neighbourhood of the town of Jaramana, residents, state media and a rights watchdog reported.

The death toll mounted as the morning wore on, with the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights giving tallies of 20, then 29 and finally at least 38. The interior ministry put the count at 34.

Meanwhile, Russia, which has blocked UN resolutions critical of Bashar al-Assad's regime, said it only has a "working relationship" with the Syrian president and insisted special ties were a thing of the past.

"There are no special or privileged

relations with President Assad," Medvedev said during an official visit to France.

However, Medvedev had on the eve of his visit slammed as "unacceptable" the recognition and support by France and other states of the Syrian opposition battling Assad.

Moscow has been sharply criticised abroad for not abandoning the Syrian regime.

The failure of international diplomacy has enabled it to press on with its all-out military campaign to crush the rebellion, and the fighting has resulted in more than 40,000 deaths, according to the Observatory.

In the latest violence, an AFP correspondent on the Syria-Turkey border reported that rebel fighters shot down a fighter jet in the embattled northwest.

The aircraft was hit by a missile and crashed at Daret Ezza, said the Observatory.

It came a day after rebels downed an army helicopter for the first time with a newly acquired ground-to-air missile, in what the Observatory said had the potential to change the balance of military power in the conflict.

Little more than a week ago, the rebels seized tanks, armoured vehicles, artillery, 120-mm mortars and rocket launchers when they took the government forces' sprawling Base 46, about 12 kilometres (eight miles) west of Aleppo.

The rebels, a mix of military defectors and armed civilians, are vastly out-gunned but analysts say they are now stretching thin the capabilities of Assad's war machine and its air supremacy by opening multiple fronts.

This was evident again on Tuesday, as rebels further tightened the noose around the key northern city of Aleppo, and violence across the country killed at least 132 people, 58 of them civilians, said the Observatory.

Exceptional Einstein had 'complicated' brain

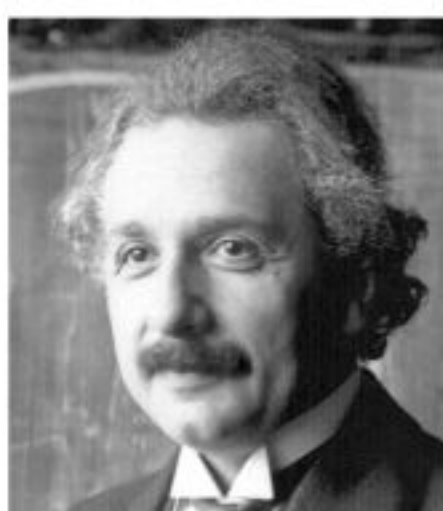
THE TELEGRAPH ONLINE

Although the Nobel Prize-winning physicist's brain was divided into 240 blocks and distributed to researchers after his death in 1955, most of the specimens were lost and little was written about its anatomy.

Now scientists have used photographs of the brain before it was segmented to produce a "road map" connecting the 240 sections and the 2,000 thin slivers into which they were later split.

The photographs, taken from the private collection of Thomas Harvey, the pathologist who divided the brain up, reveal a number of peculiarities about Einstein's brain.

A comparison with 85 other brains showed that, although the



great scientist's brain was only of average size, weighing 1,230 grams, certain areas contains an unusually high number of folds and grooves.

In each of the brain's lobes, anthropologist Dean Falk of Florida State University found "regions that are exceptionally complicated in their convolutions".

The finding confirms reports in two previous papers which suggested that an unusual pattern of ridges in the brain could have been linked to Einstein's remarkable ability to solve problems in physics.

Further study could help determine whether Einstein originally had an extraordinary brain which gave him his talent at physics, or whether his remarkable work caused his brain to expand in an unusual way.