

US, Russia meet amid WMD fear

Regime slams West, says chemical scare 'pretext for intervention'

AGENCIES

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and UN peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi for talks on the conflict in Syria, a US official said yesterday.

"Secretary Clinton has accepted an invitation by UN special envoy Brahimi for a trilateral meeting on Syria this afternoon with Mr Brahimi and Russian FM Lavrov," a senior State Department official said.

The three-way talks in Dublin come amid growing concern about the 21-month conflict in Syria, and fears the regime of President Bashar al-Assad could be preparing to use chemical weapons as it battles opposition rebels.

The former Cold War foes have fought bitterly over how to address Syria's conflict.

But Syria yesterday called the western anxiety over its chemical arsenal a pretence to intervene.

Western powers are whipping up fears of a fateful move to the use of chemical weapons in Syria's civil war as a "pretext for intervention",

SYRIA CIVIL WAR



Hillary Clinton President Bashar al-Assad's deputy foreign minister said.

He spoke as Germany's cabinet approved stationing Patriot anti-missile batteries on Turkey's border with Syria, a step requiring deployment of Nato troops that Syria fears could permit imposition of a no-fly zone over its territory.

"Syria stresses again, for the tenth, the hundredth time, that if we had such weapons, they would not be used against its people. We would not commit suicide," Faisal Maqdad said.

US President Barack Obama and other Nato

leaders have warned that using chemical weapons would cross a red line and "there would be consequences".

Maqdad said Western reports that the Syrian military was preparing chemical weapons for use against rebel forces trying to close in on the capital Damascus were simply "theatre".

"We fear there is a conspiracy to provide a pretext for any subsequent interventions in Syria by these countries that are increasing pressure on Syria," he added.

Meanwhile, violence raged through the country on Wednesday. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said fighting had claimed 104 lives across the country.

The United States has been calling for some time for Russia to use its leverage with Assad to try to persuade him to step down, and open the way towards a political transition.

Last month, Erdogan said Russia held the key to the Syrian conflict, and that if Moscow took a "positive" stance in the Security Council it could push another key Damascus ally Iran to review its policies.

India's upper house to vote on FDI

BBC ONLINE

The upper house of India's parliament is debating the government's plans to open the retail sector to foreign competition ahead of a vote today.

On Wednesday, the Congress-led government won a key vote in the lower house on the controversial issue.

The UPA coalitions outside ally BSP promised to vote in favour of FDI in the Rajya Sabha, giving much relief to the government, even as the Samajwadi Party made clear its opposition.

Correspondents say a win for the coalition there would not be easy.

NEWS IN brief

Kate leaves hospital

AFP, London

Prince William's pregnant wife Catherine left a London hospital yesterday, four days after she was admitted for treatment for acute morning sickness, an AFP photographer said.

St James's Palace said in a statement that she was now heading to Kensington Palace for a period of rest.



Jordan king arrives in Ramallah

AFP, Ramallah

Jordanian King Abdullah II yesterday arrived in the West Bank city of Ramallah for the first visit by a top foreign leader since the Palestinians gained upgraded United Nations status.

The Jordanian monarch arrived by military helicopter from Jordan, landing at the presidential headquarters known as the Muqataa, where he was greeted by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and other senior Palestinian officials.

Chavez to skip Mercosur summit

AFP, Brasilia

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who traveled to Cuba for further cancer treatment a week ago, will not attend this week's Mercosur summit, host Brazil said yesterday.

Chavez, Latin America's most prominent leftist leader, was elected to another six-year term in October, but his health has been the subject of intense speculation since he was diagnosed with cancer in June 2011.

US drone kills 3 in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

A US drone fired two missiles at a compound in Pakistan's northwestern tribal district early yesterday, killing at least three militants, local security officials said.

The missiles hit a house in Mubarak Shahi village, in Mir Ali, 20 kilometres east of Miranshah, the main town in the North Waziristan tribal district, which is a stronghold of Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked militants.

"Militants were using this house as a compound. At least three militants were killed in this drone strike," a security official based in the northwestern city of Peshawar told AFP.

McAfee arrested in Guatemala

AFP, Guatemala City

US Internet security guru John McAfee, on the run from authorities in Belize over a murder probe, has been arrested in Guatemala for illegally entering the country, police said.

The arrest of the eccentric 67-year-old entrepreneur-turned-adventurer marks the latest twist in a novel-like tale of intrigue involving a murdered American expatriate and allegations of

SA military plane crash; 11 killed

AFP, Johannesburg

A military plane has crashed in South Africa's mountainous east, killing 11 people, several media said yesterday, with one unconfirmed report saying the victims were members of Nelson Mandela's medical team.

The Dakota air force plane, which crashed late Wednesday, was transporting medics making a routine visit to the 94-year-old anti-apartheid icon at his rural hometown.

PHILIPPINES TYPHOON

Call for int'l help as death toll hits 477

AFP, New Bataan

A quarter million people were homeless and 477 confirmed dead after the Philippines' worst typhoon this year, officials said yesterday, as the government appealed for international help.

Typhoon Bopha ploughed across Mindanao island on Tuesday, flattening whole towns in its path as hurricane-force winds brought torrential rain that triggered a deadly combination of floods and landslides.

Rescuers said they were looking for 380 missing while seeking help for more than 250,000 others who were sheltered in schools, gyms and other buildings after losing everything.

Bopha wiped out a fourth of the country's banana crop, according to the local industry association.

Shell-shocked survivors scrambled through the rubble of their homes to find anything that could be recovered, as relatives searched for missing family members among mud-caked bodies laid out in rows on tarpaulins.

Workers were struggling to reach villages due to destroyed roads and wrecked bridges, but finding corpses was not a problem due to the overpowering stench everywhere, said Francisco Macalipay, a soldier involved in the rescue.



Indonesian demonstrators dramatize Garut district chief Aceng Fikri, right, towing his second spouse representing Fany Octora, left, during a protest march to the Garut district office in West Java province yesterday. Protesters continued demanding the dismissal of District Chief Aceng who divorced his 18 year old wife Fanny via text message days after they married, alleging she lied about her virginity.

PHOTO: AFP

Aussie PM in doomsday row

AFP, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday weighed into the debate about whether the world will end on December 21 under the Mayan calendar in a spoof video about Korean pop and flesh-eating zombies.



Julia Gillard

In a one-minute video address recorded for the youth radio station Triple J, a sombre-looking Gillard said the pending apocalypse was at hand despite there being no proof found by the "best and brightest" government scientists.

"My dear remaining fellow Australians, the end of the world is coming," she said, tongue in cheek.

"Whether the final blow comes from flesh-eating zombies, demonic hell-

beasts or from the total triumph of K-Pop, if you know one thing about me it is this - I will always fight for you to the very end."

"Good luck to you all."

Gillard recorded the message for a special "end of the world" programme being broadcast on Triple J Friday after Australian science writer Karl Kruszelnicki warned December 7 was the world's real end-date.

Kruszelnicki, a renowned author and science commentator, said he reached the date by putting the Mayan and Gregorian calendar into a complex algorithm combining mathematics and comedy.

The video went viral on social media after being uploaded to YouTube, with most people seeing the funny side.

'Abbas still partner for peace'

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas is still a "serious partner" for peace despite his successful bid for UN non-state membership, Israeli President Shimon Peres told AFP in an exclusive interview yesterday.



Shimon Peres

"I tried to influence him not to do it right now. I told him: look it's not the proper time to do it," Peres said. "But I still believe he's a serious partner and a serious man and I have respect for him."

Abbas, he said, had shown "courage" by seeking the status upgrade at the United Nations in the face of strong opposition from Israel and the United States, which say a Palestinian state can emerge

only out of bilateral talks.

Abbas's attempt to secure upgraded UN status was harshly criticised by many in Israel's ruling rightwing coalition, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself saying it "violated" existing agreements with the Palestinians and that his government would "act accordingly."

A day after the November 29 vote, Israel announced plans to build 3,000 new settler homes, some of them in an extremely sensitive area of the West Bank near Jerusalem, prompting a major diplomatic backlash against the Jewish state.

But he said negotiations would only be possible after next month's general election.

UN climate talks near end line with no deal

AFP, Doha

Negotiators from nearly 200 countries entered the penultimate day of UN climate talks in Doha on Thursday divided on near-term finance for poor nations' global warming mitigation plans.

The issue is key to the adoption of a package of plans by Friday for limiting climate-altering greenhouse gas emissions, as scientists warn that the world is headed for calamitous warming levels.

On Tuesday, the European Union and United States refused to commit to concrete, new climate funding for the 2013-2020 period, as poor nations and those most at risk from global warming insisted on seeing new numbers.

Pledges from individual countries did begin to trickle in, but the EU said tight finances prevented it taking on binding near-term commitments as a bloc, while Washington insisted it was already "doing what we agreed to do."

The talks in the Qatari capital are meant to extend the life of the Kyoto Protocol, the world's only binding pact on curbing Earth-warming greenhouse gas emissions, whose first leg expires on December 31.

The Kyoto deal binds developed nations to emissions curbs, excluding major developing polluters such as China and India -- as well as the US which refused to ratify it.

In Doha, developed nations are also being asked to show how they intend to keep a promise to raise climate funding for poor countries to \$100 billion per year by 2020 -- up from a total of \$30 billion in 2010-2012.

Ex-Thai PM to face murder charge

AFP, Bangkok

Former Thai premier Abhisit Vejjajiva is to be charged with murder over the death of a civilian during 2010 "Red Shirt" rallies, officials said yesterday, the first government figure to face court over the bloodshed.

Abhisit, who was prime minister during the mass anti-government rallies and oversaw a military crackdown on the protests, will be questioned next week and charged over the fatal shooting of a taxi driver by soldiers during the unrest.

The Department of Special Investigation (DSI), police and Thai prosecutors jointly decided to charge the former leader and his deputy Suthep Thaugsuban under article 288, the section of the Thai criminal code that deals with murder, said DSI chief Tarit Pengdith.

He said the group based their decision on further witness testimony as well as a court's decision in September that taxi driver Phan Kamkong was shot by troops -- the first completed inquest into the around 90 deaths during the country's worst political violence in decades.

Abhisit and Suthep will be summoned by letter to hear the charges and to be questioned on December 12, Tarit said, adding that authorities would not seek court permission to detain the men, who are both now opposition lawmakers.

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