

Arabs agree on aid for Palestinians

Hamas, Fatah call for unity

AGENCIES

Arab League foreign ministers have agreed during a meeting to send hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to the Palestinian Authority to make up for punitive measures imposed by the Israeli government after a successful bid for recognition at the United Nations.

Israel responded by withholding some \$100m per month in taxes and customs duties it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Saeb Erekat, the chief negotiator from the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), an umbrella group of Palestinian political factions, said that Arab states agreed yesterday in the Qatari capital, Doha, to make up for the shortfall.

"We agreed that Arab states activate a resolution of providing \$100m per month," he said.

Meanwhile, Leaders of the rival Palestinian movements Hamas and Fatah yesterday called for fresh attempts to cement a reconciliation process that has been stalled for more than a year.

In Gaza, the exiled head of the Hamas movement Khaled Meshal, in his first ever trip to the coastal territory, said it was time for the bitter opponents to make good on the deal they signed in Cairo in 2011.

Meanwhile, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas -- who heads the Fatah movement -- called in Doha for reconciliation efforts to resume, saying holding the elections called for in 2011 would be the key.

## Syria rebels seize chunk of key military base

*Elect military chief; clashes kill 4 in Lebanon*

AFP, Beirut

Syrian rebels yesterday seized control of a large sector of Sheikh Suleiman base west of Aleppo, bringing them closer to holding a large swathe of territory extending to the Turkish border in the north.

The rebels took control of Regiment 111 and three other company posts located inside the base after fierce fighting overnight, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

In Turkey, a newly formed joint command of Syrian rebel groups has chosen Brigadier Selim Idris, one of hundreds of officers who have defected from Assad's army, as its head, opposition sources said on Saturday.

Idris, whose home province of Homs has been at the forefront of the Sunni Muslim-led uprising, was elected by 30 military and civilian members of the joint military com-

mand after talks attended by Western and Arab security officials in the Turkish city of Antalya.

In Damascus, the army clashed with rebels on the outskirts of Damascus and in the southern Qadam neighbourhood of the capital, pressing ahead with its bombardment of rebel-held towns, the Observatory said.

The military has for several days bombarded rebel strongholds in the suburbs from ground and air, raising fears of a looming ground assault by the army to try to establish a secure cordon around the capital.

Meanwhile, sectarian clashes linked to the 21-month conflict in Syria killed four people and wounded 40 in neighbouring Lebanon before dawn yesterday, a security official said.

## 90pc of Indians are 'idiots'!

PTI, New Delhi

Ninety per cent of Indians are "idiots" who can easily be misled by mischievous elements in the name of religion, Press Council of India (PCI) chairperson Justice Markandey Katju claimed on Saturday.

"I say ninety per cent of Indians are idiots. You people don't have brains in your heads ... It is so easy to take you for a ride," he said at a seminar.

He said that a communal riot could be incited in Delhi for as meagre an amount as Rs 2000. He said that all somebody has to do is make a mischievous gesture of disrespect to a place of worship and people start fighting each other.

"You mad people will start fighting amongst yourself not realizing that some agent provocateur is behind this," he said.

Katju said that before 1857 there was no communalism in the country but the situation was different now.

Katju said that he was saying these harsh things to make Indians, whom he loved to understand the whole game and not remain fools.

## Morsi scraps divisive decree

*Says charter referendum to go on; opposition rejects move, calls protests*

AGENCIES

Egypt's president scrapped a decree that gave him extra powers and ignited violent protests as opposition was set to decide on further possible rallies in Cairo.

A Morsi aide said that the president had agreed to immediately give up the expanded powers he assumed in the decree, which gave him immunity from judicial oversight.

However, in a meeting with other political figures on Saturday, Morsi said the December 15 referendum on a controversial new constitution drafted by a panel dominated by his Islamist allies would still be held.

But rejecting the referendum, Egypt's opposition called for mass street protests tomorrow.

"We do not recognise the draft constitution because it does not represent the Egyptian people," the opposition National Salvation Front said in a statement read out at a news conference by spokesman Sameh Ashour.

"We reject the referendum which will certainly lead to more division and sedition," he said.

The demonstrations could lead to more violence if Morsi's supporters challenge them, as occurred on Wednesday when seven people were killed and hundreds injured in vicious



clashes outside the presidential palace.

Demonstrators furious at what they saw as a power grab by Morsi and the railroading of the draft constitution have held weeks of street rallies whose demands have escalated into calls for the president's resignation.

Earlier, the April 6 Youth Movement dismissed Morsi's move as "a political manoeuvre aimed at duping the people," and called for continued protests to stop "the referendum on the constitution of the Muslim Brotherhood."

Prominent opposition leader Mohamed ElBaradei -- a former UN atomic agency chief and a Nobel Peace laureate -- tweeted after Morsi's announcement that "a constitution that curtails our rights and freedoms is a con-

stitution we will topple."

On Wednesday, clashes between pro- and anti-Morsi demonstrators outside the presidential palace killed seven people and injured more than 600.

The army stepped in, deploying tanks and troops around the palace. Soldiers reinforced barricades on access roads early yesterday, piling up concrete blocks three metres (10 feet) high, an AFP correspondent reported.

Air force F-16 warplanes also flew low over the city centre, AFP correspondents reported.

On Saturday, the military issued its first statement since the crisis began, urging the rival camps to talk to stop the situation deteriorating -- "something we will not allow."

Hours later, Morsi's adviser Selim al-Awa announced the president was annulling the November 22 decree, but that the referendum would still go ahead.

The opposition has consistently demanded that both the decree and the referendum be scrapped before it will begin talks with Morsi.

Analysts have said the referendum will probably see the draft constitution adopted, given still strong public support for Morsi and the Brotherhood's organisational skills.



An Indian Hindu devotee prays near polluted foam in the Yamuna river in New Delhi at dawn yesterday. India's Supreme Court said on Saturday that all parameters of water quality of river Yamuna indicate that it resembles a drain and urged authorities to make it pollution-free. Over 2,400 million liters of untreated sewage flows into the Yamuna every day.

## Chavez admits cancer relapse Designates heir apparent

AFP, Caracas

Leftist Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez admitted a relapse of his cancer late Saturday and designated vice president Nicolas Maduro as his heir apparent in case "something happened" to him.

Speaking on national television, an emotional Chavez said a return of cancer cells was detected during his most recent visit to Cuba for medical examination, and said he will return to the communist-ruled island for another round of surgery.

He did not offer details, but his cancer was first detected in the pelvic area. Neither the Venezuelan leader, nor his Cuban doctors have ever disclosed what kind of cancer that was.

In what appeared like a presentation of his final will, the president also indicated he would like Maduro to take over the reins of power in a post-Chavez period, urging Venezuelans to vote for him in the next presidential election.

"You choose Maduro as president of the republic," said Chavez told the nation. "I am asking you this from all my heart."



Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari (L) visit Malala Yousafzai at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, central England. Zardari with his daughter Asifa Bhutto (C) visited the Pakistani schoolgirl who was shot by the Taliban for campaigning for girls' education.

## NEWS IN brief

### Mandela 'comfortable': S Africa

AFP, Johannesburg

Nelson Mandela is "comfortable", the South African government said yesterday after the former president spent the night in hospital, for medical tests described as "consistent with his age".

The anti-apartheid hero and Nobel Peace Prize laureate was flown from his home village of Qunu in the southeast of the country to a

### US drone kills 3 in Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah, Pakistan

US drones targeting a militant compound killed at least three people in a restive Pakistani tribal region near the Afghan border yesterday, officials said.

The strike took place in Tabbi village, five kilometres north of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan which is known as a bastion of

### Monti to resign as Italy PM

AFP, Rome

Italian Prime Minister Mario Monti is stepping down, the president's office announced Saturday, just hours after the man he replaced, Silvio Berlusconi, said he would run again for head of government.

The announcement came after Monti met with the president. He would step down after the

### Bus plunge kills 13 in Taiwan

AFP, Taipei

Thirteen people were killed and ten others injured yesterday when a bus they were travelling on plunged into a ravine in a mountainous area of northern Taiwan, rescue workers said.

The bus, carrying 22 passengers, veered off the road and rolled down a steep mountainside in

### Afghans attack Iran consulate

AFP, Herat

Hundreds of angry demonstrators tried to storm the Iranian consulate in the western Afghan city of Herat yesterday in protest at the alleged killing of Afghan immigrants by Iranian security forces.

The crowd claimed 13 Afghans were seized and later shot dead by Iranian security forces about three months ago.

### Somalia captures rebel bastion

AFP, Nairobi

African Union troops and Somali forces seized the formerly Islamist-held town of Jowhar yesterday, wresting control of one of the largest remaining towns held by the al-Qaeda linked Shebab, officials said.

The loss of Jowhar is a significant blow to the Shebab, who have lost a string of towns in recent months to the 17,000-strong AMISOM force, as

## ROYAL PRANK CALL TRAGEDY Australian radio station to review practices

AFP, Sydney

The owners of an Australian radio station at the centre of the British royal prank call scandal Sunday said the tragic death of a nurse was "unforeseeable" and vowed to review its broadcasting processes.

Executives at Southern Cross Austereo, owners of 2Day FM, held an emergency meeting to consider a letter from Lord Simon Glenarthur, chairman of London's King Edward VII's Hospital, protesting the "appalling" hoax.

In his letter, Glenarthur urged the company to ensure that such calls never happen again.

Britain has reacted with horror to the death of mother-of-two Jacintha Saldanha, 46, who is believed to have



Jacintha Saldanha

taken her own life after being duped by two 2Day FM presenters seeking news on the pregnancy of Prince William's wife Kate.

She was found dead on Friday, days after she answered a call at the hospital from hosts Mel Greig and Michael Christian, posing as Queen Elizabeth II and William's father Prince Charles.

The nurse's death unleashed a torrent of online anger directed at the presenters who have been taken off air and are in hiding.

Reports said Saldanha and her family had moved from India around a decade ago.

While reports have referred to suicide, British police said the death remained unexplained ahead of a post-mortem.

## IMPEACHMENT ROW C'wealth probe urged in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition party asked the commonwealth yesterday to investigate the impeachment of the country's chief justice.

The demand came a day after President Mahinda Rajapakse's lawmakers found the nation's first woman chief justice, Shirani Bandaranayake, guilty of three charges of professional misconduct.

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