

Russia scraps US call for Assad's exit

Washington sanctions al-Qaeda linked rebels; refugee crisis mounts

AGENCIES

Russia has resisted the most recent US appeals to Moscow to persuade Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to quit and threaten Damascus with sanctions in hopes of ending Syria's civil war, the Russian newspaper Kommersant reported yesterday.

The report in the influential daily, which cited no named source, added to public signals that Russia is not prepared to push for Assad's exit despite efforts to distance itself from its longtime ally and buyer of Russian arms.

The report said Hillary had made the appeals to Russia in meetings with Lavrov in Dublin on Thursday - where they held talks with Brahimi - and in Cambodia last month.

Hillary also expressed concern that Assad's government might use chemical weapons against rebels fighting him, or that his allies could do so after the government falls, Kommersant said.

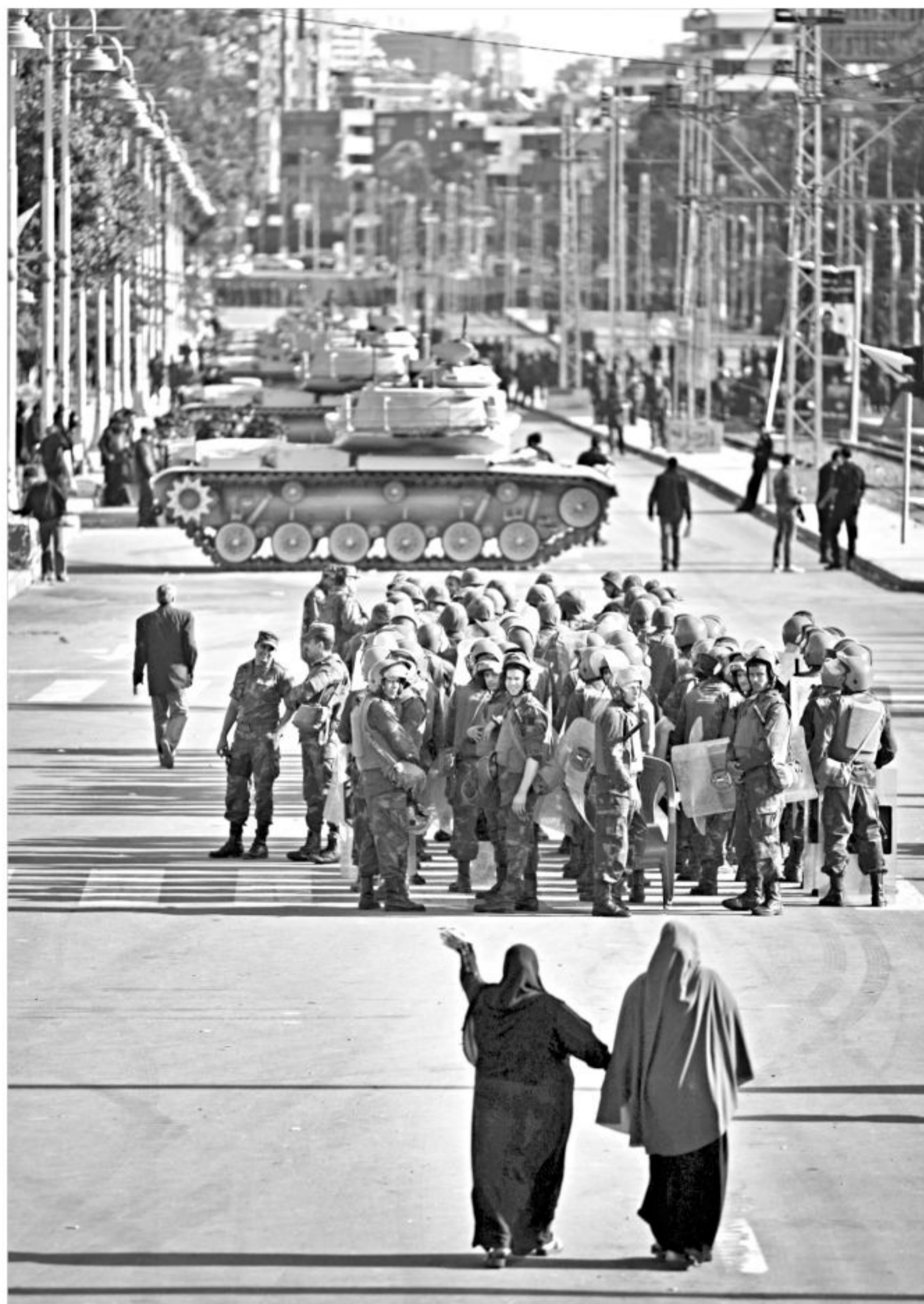
However, citing intelligence reports, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta yesterday said Syria has not taken any new steps in recent days that signal a readiness to use its chemical weapons arsenal.

"At this point the intelligence has really kind of levelled off. We haven't seen anything new indicating any aggressive steps to move forward in that way," Panetta told reporters aboard his plane before landing in Kuwait.

Meanwhile, the United States yesterday blacklisted the Al-Nusra Front, a rebel group in Syria linked to al-Qaeda in Iraq, and sanctioned its leaders.

In designating the group a foreign terrorist organization, the State Department said that while al-Nusra portrayed itself as part of the legitimate Syrian opposition, "it is, in fact, an attempt by AQI to hijack the struggles of the Syrian people for its own malign purposes."

And the UN High Commissioner for Refugees said it had either registered or was in the process of registering 509,550 Syrians in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey and North Africa.



Egyptian women walk past tanks belonging to the Republican Guard and members of the military police deployed outside the presidential palace in Cairo yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Egypt crisis mounts as army seeks unity

IMF withholds loan; rivals on collision course

AGENCIES

Egypt's army chief called for talks on national unity to end the country's mounting political crisis after a vital loan from the IMF was delayed and thousands of pro- and anti-government demonstrators took to the streets.

The meeting scheduled for today afternoon was called in response to an increasingly destabilising series of protests that has unfolded since President Mohamed Mursi awarded himself sweeping powers on November 22 to push through a new constitution shaped by his Islamist allies in a referendum on Saturday.

Armed forces chief and Defence Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi called for a meeting of "national unity for the love of Egypt to bring together partners of the country in the presence of the president of the republic", the army spokesman said.

An aide said Mursi had supported the call for talks. The Muslim Brotherhood said it would be there, while the main opposition coalition said it would decide on Wednesday morning whether to attend.

Earlier, the finance minister disclosed that a \$4.8 billion (3 billion pounds) International Monetary Fund loan, a cornerstone of Egypt's economic recovery hopes, would be delayed until next month.

The announcement came after President Mohamed Mursi on Monday backed down on planned tax increases, seen as key for the loan to go ahead.

Opposition groups had greeted the tax package, which had included duties on alcoholic drinks, cigarettes and a range of goods and services, with furious criticism.

On the streets of the capital, tensions ran high after nine people were hurt when gunmen fired at protesters camping in Tahrir Square, according to witnesses and Egyptian media.

The opposition has called for a major demonstration it hopes will force Mursi to postpone a referendum on a new constitution.

Outside the presidential palace, dozens of protesters succeeded in pushing down two giant concrete blocks forming a small part of a wall blocking access to the site.

There was no violent confrontation.

Thousands of flag-waving Islamist Mursi supporters, who want the vote to go ahead as planned on Saturday, assembled at a nearby mosque, setting the stage for further street confrontations in a crisis that has divided the nation of 83 million.

The competing demonstrations carried the risk of further violence, after street clashes last week between opposition and Islamist supporters left seven people dead and hundreds hurt.

Mursi has ordered the army to support police in keeping security during the protests and until results are given from the referendum, which is due to take place on Saturday.

The army's role in the crisis could prove decisive. Thus far, it has sought to remain neutral.

NEWS IN brief

DSK strikes deal with maid

AFP, New York

Former International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn on Monday agreed a financial settlement with a New York hotel maid who had accused him of sexual assault.

A judge ordered that details of the deal between Strauss-Kahn and Nafissatou Diallo, a 33-year-old illiterate migrant from Guinea, be kept confidential.

Strauss-Kahn's lawyers have dismissed reports that the maid would receive several million dollars, but experts said a substantial pay-

Mandela responding well

REUTERS, Johannesburg

Former South African President Nelson Mandela, who is 94 and has been in hospital since Saturday for tests, has suffered a recurrence of a lung infection but is responding to treatment, the government said yesterday.

The revered anti-apartheid leader and Nobel Peace laureate is spending his fourth day in a hospital in the South African capital Pretoria. He remains a hero to many of South Africa's 52 million people and two brief stretches in hospital in the last two years made front page news.

2 Tibetans die in self-immolations

AFP, Beijing

Two more Tibetans burned themselves to death in protest at China's rule of the Himalayan region, a rights group said yesterday, as state media accused the Dalai Lama of turning Tibetan Buddhism into "an evil cult".

Both immolations happened on Saturday in restive Tibetan-inhabited regions of China, bringing the number of Tibetans who have set themselves ablaze since 2009 to 95, the International Campaign for Tibet said in a statement from London.

Gayoom could run for president

THE HINDU ONLINE

Former Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who ruled the country for over 30 years before he was unseated by Mohamed Nasheed in the 2008 elections, has said that he may consider running for president again.

Elections are expected to be held in the Maldives by the end of August or early September 2013.

Saying that he preferred not to run, Gayoom, however, clarified: "Things change very frequently. So I am keeping my options open."

Malala father made UN advisor

PTI, London

The father of Pakistani schoolgirl Malala Yousufzai, who was shot by the Taliban for advocating girls' right to education, has been named as the Special UN Advisor on Global Education. The announcement was made by Gordon Brown, who is the United Nations' Special Envoy for Global Education. He said that once Malala gets well, she too will join the campaign.



ROYAL PRANK CALL Nurse's family to receive compensation

AFP, Sydney

An Australian radio station yesterday pledged at least Aus\$500,000 (US\$523,600) to help the grieving family of a nurse duped by a royal prank phone call, after coming under sustained scrutiny over the hoax.

Nurse Jacintha Saldanha, who fielded the hoax call from Sydney station 2Day FM to London's King Edward VII Hospital, was found dead Friday after apparently committing suicide.

The Indian-born mother-of-two put the call through to a colleague, who divulged details of the recovery of Prince William's pregnant wife Kate from severe morning sickness.

Despite the offer, the station remains under renewed pressure to fully explain how its royal prank call was cleared to air after the shattered hosts said they were not ultimately responsible.

The case has triggered demands for tougher regulation of the electronic media although Australia's press regulator has not commented on whether the station broke any rules.

Israel raids West Bank NGOs

Abbas warns over new settlement plans

AFP, Ramallah

Israeli forces raided the West Bank offices of three Palestinian non-government organisations overnight, confiscating computers and other material, one of the groups said yesterday.

"At 3:00 am this morning, 11 December 2012, the Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights office was raided by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF)," the Addameer group said on its website.

"Four laptops, one hard disk and a video camera were taken among other materials. The IOF destroyed the office," the group added, saying desks and "ransacked filing cabinets" were left scattered after the raid.

The Israeli military said it was checking reports of the raids, which Addameer said also targeted the Ramallah offices of the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees and the Palestinian NGO Network.

Although the West Bank city of Ramallah nominally falls under full Palestinian administrative and security control, Israeli forces regularly carry out raids in the city and its surroundings.

Meanwhile, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas on Monday vowed to respond if Israel moves ahead with plans to build 3,000 settler homes in east Jerusalem after the Palestinians won non-member observer status at the United Nations.

"If it becomes a reality ... we will then respond through other means," Abbas told the Turkish parliament, without elaborating.

Last month, the UN General Assembly backed a resolution to recognise Palestine as a non-member observer state.

Israel has criticised the UN vote as an obstacle to efforts to reach a peace accord and revealed plans to build the 3,000 new homes a day after the Palestinians' historic success at the United Nations.

Scientists invent solar-cell fabric

AFP, Tokyo

Clothes that could literally light up your life were unveiled yesterday by Japanese researchers who said their solar-cell fabric would eventually let wearers harvest energy on the go.

The new fabric is made of wafer-thin solar cells woven together that could see people powering up their mobile phones and other electronics with their sweater or trousers.

But its creators conceded there was work to do before taking the fabric to market.

"We still have things to solve before commercialisation, such as coating for the conductive wires and improving the fabric's durability," said an official at the Industrial Technology Center in central Japan's Fukui Prefecture.

The centre developed the fabric with a Kyoto-based solar cell maker and other private firms, the official said.

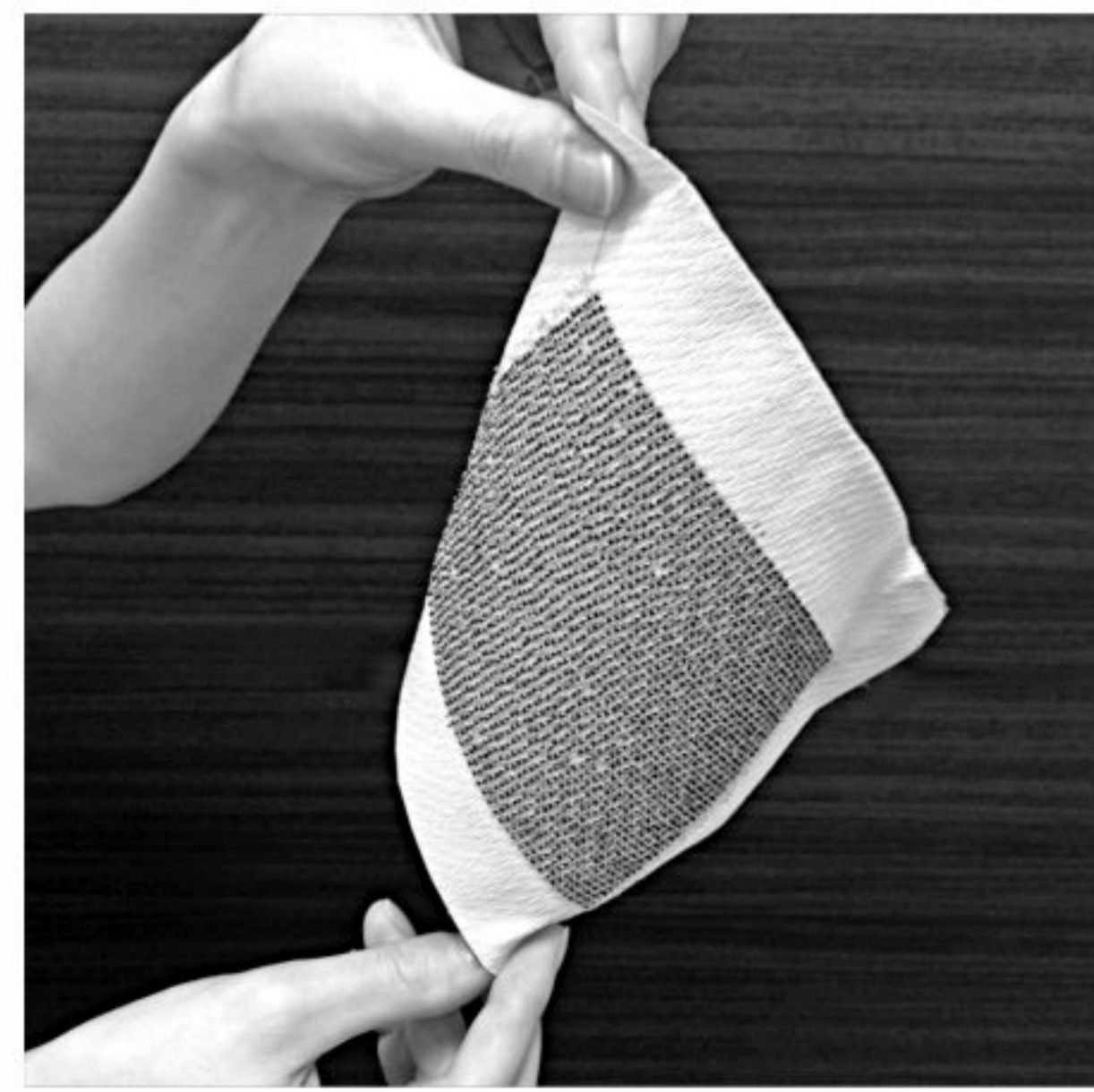


PHOTO: AFP

Stephen Hawking's wins £1.8m physics prize

GUARDIAN ONLINE

His mind has grappled with space and time, and explored the strange beauty of black holes aglow, but in recent days a more earthly problem has occupied the world's most famous scientist.

Stephen Hawking, the former Lucasian professor of mathematics at Cambridge University, must ponder how to spend \$3m (£1.8m) that has landed in his bank account after winning the most lucrative science prize ever established.

The renowned physicist who missed his 70th birthday celebrations through illness in January, has won the Special Fundamental Physics Prize for a lifetime of achievements, including the discovery that black holes emit radiation, and his deep



contributions to quantum gravity and aspects of the early universe.

In an email to the Guardian, Professor Hawking said he was "delighted and honoured" to receive the prize. "No one undertakes research in physics with the intention of winning a prize.

Nevertheless prizes like these play an important role in giving public recognition for achievement in physics," he wrote.

The physicist, who rose to fame with his 1988 book, A Brief History of Time, and made guest appearances on The Simpsons and Star Trek, has not settled on how to spend the windfall. "I will help my daughter with her autistic son, and maybe buy a holiday home, not that I take many holidays because I enjoy my work in theoretical physics," he wrote.

Mali PM resigns after army arrest

BBC ONLINE

The prime minister of Mali yesterday resigned on state television, hours after being arrested by soldiers who were behind a military coup in March.

Cheick Modibo Diarra was detained on Monday at his home in the capital Bamako, reportedly on the orders of the coup leader, Capt Amadou Sanogo.

The source said soldiers had "smashed in the door of the prime minister's residence and took him away a bit violently". He had been due to travel to France.

Diarra was made prime minister of an interim government in April after the military officially handed power back to civilians.

The 60-year-old astrophysicist has backed plans to send a West African intervention force into the northern half of Mali which was seized after the coup by Islamists and Tuareg separatists. Many within Mali's military are opposed to foreign intervention, saying they need only financial and logistical support.

US military to keep 'strong' ME presence

AFP, Kuwait City

The US military will retain a "strong presence" in the Middle East despite a strategic shift to Asia, Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said yesterday during a visit to Kuwait.

The United States plans to deploy a majority of its naval fleet to the Asia-Pacific along with other advanced weaponry but Panetta insisted that a robust American force would remain in place in the Middle East.

Panetta spoke to reporters aboard his plane before arriving in Kuwait City to discuss bolstering security ties amid tumult in the region and tensions with Iran.

"Let me assure you that the United States is strong enough that we can maintain a strong presence in the Middle East as well as in the Pacific," he said.

He acknowledged that the United States had to be "flexible" in managing its forces in a more austere era and that it would have only one aircraft carrier in the Middle East for about two months to allow for maintenance work on another carrier, the USS Nimitz.

The American military still had nearly 50,000 troops and warships positioned across the region, he said.