

Syria peace envoy meets opposition

Gulf Arabs decry Iran 'interference'

AFP, DAMASCUS

Peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday met with internal opposition groups as he pushed a new initiative to end Syria's conflict, while Gulf Arab states urged a rapid political transition in the country.

Pope Benedict XVI meanwhile called in his traditional Christmas message for "an end to the bloodshed" and for "dialogue in the pursuit of a political solution" in Syria.

Brahimi, the UN-Arab League's special envoy to Syria, held talks at his Damascus hotel with a delegation of six people led by Hassan Abdel Azim, head of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change (NCCDC), an opposition group tolerated by the regime.

NCCDC chief Hassan Abdel Azim said after the talks that Brahimi would stay in Syria until Sunday "to try to implement an international consensus to end the crisis."

The comments come in the wake of a report by a French daily of a supposed US-Russian initiative for a transition in Syria, which has caused rage among opponents who reject any compromise with the regime.

Le Figaro newspaper said a solution in the offing would involve keeping Assad in power until 2014 while preventing him from further renewing his mandate.

On Monday alone, at least 126 people died in violence across Syria, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, adding to its figure of more than 44,000 people killed since an uprising against Assad erupted in March last year.

Brahimi met with Assad on Monday, saying afterwards that they had "exchanged views on the many steps to be taken in the future" regarding the "always worrying" Syrian crisis.

Meanwhile, six US-allied Gulf Arab states yesterday demanded that Iran end what they called interference in the region, reiterating a long-held mistrust of their main rival.

A communique issued at the end of a two-day summit of the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) also urged action to halt mass killings and violations of international law in Syria.

"The council expressed its rejection and condemnation of the continuing Iranian interference in the affairs of the Gulf Cooperation Council's states and called on Iran to stop these policies," the communique said.

The communique did not elaborate on Iran, but the most common Gulf Arab complaint about alleged Iranian meddling in the region relates to Bahrain, which has repeatedly accused Tehran of interference in its internal politics.

Egypt awaits poll result

Credit downgrade adds to political crisis

REUTERS, Cairo

Egypt yesterday prepared to announce the result of a vote on a new constitution that Islamist President Mohamed Morsi hails as a step toward stability in a country beset by political and economic crisis.

But critics say that by ramming through the basic law, Mursi has angered his liberal, leftist and Christian opponents, and may have squandered any chance of building a broad consensus on tax rises needed to rein in a crushing budget deficit.

Unofficial tallies from Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood showed the charter was approved by a 64 percent majority. The electoral commission will announce the official result at 1700 GMT, with the final numbers

widely expected to confirm earlier estimates.

Morsi believes the constitution will end a protracted period of turmoil that has haunted the most populous Arab nation since the fall of military-backed strongman Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

But, on the political front, tensions remain high. The opposition says the constitution, crafted mostly by Mursi's Islamist allies, fails to guarantee personal freedoms and the rights of women and minorities. The government denies this.

Once a darling of emerging market investors, Egypt's economy has taken a hammering since Mubarak's fall.

The budget deficit surged to a crippling 11 percent of gross domestic product in the financial year that

ended in June 2012 and is forecast to exceed 10 percent this year.

In a further worrying sign, Egypt has made it illegal for travellers to carry more than \$10,000 in cash in or out of the country amid growing fears the government may not be able to get its fragile finances under control.

Reflecting investor concerns, Standard and Poor's cut Egypt's long-term credit rating this week and said another cut was possible if political turbulence worsened.

Adding fuel to people's worries, the central bank also said it was taking steps to safeguard bank deposits, in a statement which emerged after some Egyptians said they had taken out cash out of concern their accounts would be frozen by authorities.



PHOTO: AFP

Do not lose hope of peace: Pope

Prays for Syria, Nigeria

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Pope Benedict used his Christmas message to the world to say people should never lose hope for peace, even in conflict-riven Syria and in Nigeria where he spoke of "terrorism" against Christians.

Marking the eighth Christmas season of his pontificate, the 85-year-old read his Urbi et Orbi (to the city and the world) message to tens of thousands of people in St Peter's Square and to millions of others watching around the world.

"This good earth exists, and today too, in 2012, from this earth truth has sprung up! Consequently, there is hope in the world, a hope in which we can trust, even at the most difficult times and in the most difficult situations," he said.

In his virtual tour of the some of the world's trouble spots, he reserved his toughest words for Syria, Nigeria and Mali.

"Yes, may peace spring up for the people of Syria, deeply wounded and divided by a conflict which does not spare even the defenceless and reaps innocent victims," he said.

"Once again I appeal for an end to the bloodshed, easier access for the relief of refugees and the displaced, and dialogue in the pursuit of a political solution to the conflict."

The leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics also condemned conflicts in Mali and Nigeria, two countries where Islamist groups have waged violent campaigns.



Sri Lankan Christians gather around a nativity scene depicting the birth of Jesus during a Christmas mass in Colombo yesterday. Christians all around the world celebrated the birth of Jesus yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN brief

Virbhadra named Himachal CM

PTI, Shimla

An old war horse, who could not be put down by allegations of corruption or infighting in the Indian Congress, Virbhadra Singh steered the party back to power in Himachal Pradesh with a spirited campaign this time.

The seventy-eight-year-old veteran became chief minister of the state for the sixth time, setting a record.

In his five-decade long political innings, he has been a seven-time MLA, a five-time MP and five-time chief minister. He has also been a four-time president of the state Congress and represents the Mandi seat in the present Lok Sabha.

Sick Mandela in good spirits

BBC ONLINE

Nelson Mandela, 94, is in good spirits and doctors are happy with his progress, President Jacob Zuma yesterday said after visiting the former leader in hospital.

He was admitted to hospital in the South African capital, Pretoria, two weeks ago and has been treated for a lung infection and gallstones.

Mandela spent 27 years in jail for fighting against the apartheid regime. He served as South Africa's first black president from 1994 to 1999 and is regarded by many as the father of the nation.

Saudi writer jailed for Islam 'insults'

AFP, Jeddah

A Saudi Arabian liberal writer was arrested on Monday for making comments on his Twitter account that were allegedly insulting to Islam, family members said.

Turki Ahmed was arrested on orders of Interior Minister Prince Mohammed bin Nayef bin Abdel Aziz, who was tipped off by a religious organisation, they said.

Ahmed on his Twitter account attacked radical Islamists he said were twisting the Prophet Mohammed's "message of love," and what he described as "a neo-Nazism which is on the rise in the Arab world -- Islamic extremism".

Philippines faces new storm

AFP, Manila

A tropical storm set to hit the Philippines on Christmas Day could spark floods and landslides, forecasters warned, even as the country struggles to recover from a typhoon that killed hundreds.

Tropical Storm Wukong is expected to bring strong winds and heavy rain to southern island Dinagat from 10:00 pm, as well as nearby islands Samar and Leyte, the state weather service said.

Floods and landslides unleashed by Bopha, which hit on December 4 and was the strongest storm to batter the disaster-prone country this year, killed more than 1,000 people and hundreds

US ARSON 'TRAP'

Two firefighters shot dead in NY

AFP, New York

A convicted felon shot dead two firefighters and wounded two others Monday after luring them to a blaze that police said he had apparently set as a trap in a small town in New York state.

The 62-year-old shooter -- who was found guilty of manslaughter and jailed for 17 years for his grandmother's death in 1980 -- then fatally shot himself in the head, said police in Webster, a suburb of Rochester on the shores of Lake Ontario.

His sister, who lived with him, was nowhere to be found, according to police. Investigators had not yet determined the gunman's motive.

The incident, which comes as debate rages in the United States about gun control following the Newtown school massacre earlier this month, happened shortly before 6:00 am in a small lakefront residential community.

"It does appear that it was a trap that was set for our first responders," Webster police chief Gerald Pickering told a press conference, his voice breaking with emotion.

The firefighters were shot as they approached the scene of the blaze -- a car and a house engulfed in a fire that they now believe was set intentionally by the shooter, identified as William Spengler.

NEW SETTLER HOMES

Israel approves 1,200 more in Jerusalem

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's interior ministry has approved the building of 1,200 new homes in the east Jerusalem settlement neighbourhood of Gilo, the latest in a slew of such approvals, Israeli watchdog Peace Now said.

The approval, which came late on Monday night, follows Israeli committee approvals for thousands of units in neighbourhoods across east Jerusalem and in the West Bank last week.

"This approval from the interior ministry for the construction of 1,200 homes in Gilo comes after a meeting on Thursday by the planning committee for the Jerusalem district to hear objections to the project," Hagit Ofran of Peace Now told AFP.

The approval applies to the Mordot Gilo extension of Gilo, a settlement neighbourhood in southern Jerusalem near the

Palestinian city of Bethlehem.

"In the past seven days alone, Israel has approved 5,350 new settler units in East Jerusalem, a pace unprecedented since 1967," Daniel Seidemann of the Terrestrial Jerusalem settlement watchdog group wrote on his official Twitter account.

Israel captured east Jerusalem during the 1967 Six Day War and later annexed it in a move never recognised by the international community.

It considers all of Jerusalem its "eternal, undivided" capital and defends construction in all parts of the city.

But the Palestinians want east Jerusalem for the capital of their promised state, and they -- along with the international community -- consider settlement construction in east Jerusalem and the West Bank a violation of international law.

Cold snap kills 123 in Russia

AFP, Moscow

A bitter cold spell in Russia has claimed 123 lives in the past 10 days, an official said yesterday, with the unseasonably early freeze testing authorities in a country used to notoriously tough winters.

Temperatures have plunged to up to minus 30 degrees Celsius in the Moscow region and up to minus 60 degrees Celsius in Eastern Siberia.

"Since the start of the cold, 123 people have died of exposure and frostbite," a medical source was quoted by the Interfax news agency as saying.

In the past 24 hours, 201 people had to be hospitalised to be treated for hypothermia and frostbite, including 14 children, the source added.

Since the start of the cold snap, 1,745 people were affected, and over 800 had to be hospitalised.

Philippines fires kill 8

AFP, Manila

Eight people were killed and thousands left homeless as two fires struck the Philippine capital on Christmas Day, with one of the blazes sparking a riot in a slum, officials said.

Seven charred bodies, all believed to be from one household, were recovered after a blaze razed a row of old apartments in northern Manila at dawn, fire officer Francisco Mabunga told AFP.

The cause of the blaze is under investigation, officials said.

A second blaze broke out at a sprawling shantytown, sparking riots that left one man dead and led to two suspected rioters being arrested, said Manila fire marshal Santiago Laguna.

The shantytown blaze left some 2,000 families homeless, Laguna said.

'Lost tribe' returns home

Israeli tribe completes migration from India

AFP, Tel Aviv

Fifty members of an Indian community believed to be descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel arrived on Monday in the Jewish state, completing their immigration.

Linking up with family members who have already settled in Israel, they are among the first wave of the 7,200-strong Bnei Menashe community's mass immigration to the Jewish state.

The Indians say they are the descendants of the 10 tribes who lived in the kingdom of Israel in Biblical times and who were dispersed, according to the Bible, after the invasion of the Assyrians in 721 BC.

"After thousands of years of exile, we have returned home at last," said Nachshon Gangte, 47, waiting for an older sister he has not seen for 12 years.

After hours of patiently waiting in the arrival hall of Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion airport, he could no longer hold back his tears when she appeared. "It's great, God is great. He has allowed me to meet my family on holy land," he said.

His niece, Zimra, said he was "happy to see my family and my land".

Michael Freund of the Shavei Israel group (meaning "those who return to



Israel" in Hebrew), which arranged their journey, said more than 7,000 people have sought help from the Israeli government to emigrate from India.

They were welcomed at the airport by dozens of family members, amid a festive atmosphere.

More than 1,700 members of the Bnei Menashe community already live in

Israel, the majority of whom were already practising Judaism in India.

The Israeli government had approved in October the arrival of some 275 members of the tribe, for the first time since 2007.

The Bnei Menashe are members of the Kuki-Chin-Mizo tribe who live in the northeastern Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur near the border with Myanmar.

Their oral history tells of a centuries-long exodus through Persia, Afghanistan, Tibet and China, all the while adhering to certain Jewish religious practices, like circumcision.

In India, they were converted to Christianity by 19th-century missionaries and, in reading the Bible, recognised stories from their own traditions that convinced them they actually belonged to the Jewish faith.

NEW REGULATIONS FEAR

US gun sales soar

AFP, Washington

US firearm sales have sky-rocketed since the Newtown school massacre, as debate over gun control rages and enthusiasts fear certain assault weapons and high-capacity magazines could be banned.

President Barack Obama basically has put gun enthusiasts on warning, Larry Hyatt, owner of a gun shop in Charlotte, North Carolina, told AFP, referring to efforts to outlaw some firearms in the wake of the Newtown shooting.

A semi-automatic Bushmaster AR-15 assault rifle was used in the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in which a disturbed local young man shot dead 20 young children, six adults and his mother before taking his own life.

"Right after it, anti-guns (activists) started talking. The president said he wanted quick action, and so that is going to fuel the buying frenzy, and it is," Hyatt said, describing the rush as largely "politically motivated."

"We have been in business for 50 years, and we have seen (fear-based buying) before," Hyatt said. "But this is more intense because the president got in the media and basically said, 'if you want a gun, you better get it now.'"

That means bigger business for an already huge industry: the gun and ammunition manufacturing industry in the United States groups about 300 companies with combined yearly sales estimated at around \$7 billion.

There were an estimated 310 million non-military firearms in the United States in 2009, roughly one per citizen, and people in America are 20 times more likely to be killed by a gun than someone in another developed country.

The United States has suffered an explosion of gun violence over the last three decades including 62 mass shooting incidents since 1982. The vast majority of weapons used have been semi-automatic handguns and rifles obtained legally by the killers.