

Jihadists accuse US of keeping Assad in power

Russia urges Assad to talk to opposition; warplanes raid Damascus

AFP, Beirut, Moscow

Syrian jihadist group the Al-Nusra Front, blacklisted by Washington as a terror outfit, has accused the United States of seeking to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power.

"The continued US and international support for prolonging the regime's lifespan by giving extensions (for a political transition), sending observers and trying to negotiate peace is clear to everyone," the group's leader, Abu Mohammed al-Jawlani, said in a voice recording posted online.

The United States is expressing its failure in the region by putting the Al-Nusra Front on its terror list (merely) for helping the (Syrian) people," he added.

Washington formally designated Al-Nusra as a "foreign terrorist" organisation earlier this month.

Jawlani said the blacklisting had prompted "popular anger among Muslims," including "condemnation from 100 organisations."

In his message, entitled "People of Syria, we sacrifice our souls for you," Jawlani told Syrians: "We have offered you our blood in defending your religion and your lands, and will continue to sacrifice ourselves one after the other."

Meanwhile, Russia, the only world power with ties to the Syrian regime, on Friday urged President Bashar al-Assad to talk to the opposition as Moscow itself put out feelers to the rebels.

The new pressure from Russia on the Assad regime came as Moscow revved up its bid to save a tattered peace process by

first hosting a top government envoy and then planning for a meeting Saturday with Syria peace mediator Lakhdar Brahimi.

Russia also invited the head of the opposition National Coalition for its first public meeting with the group that was formed in November and is recognised by the West as a legitimate representative of the Syrian people.

The fast-paced diplomacy came against the backdrop of air raids by Syrian warplanes on a Damascus province from which the regime's forces had to withdraw the night before.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Moscow still refused to back

international calls on Assad to step down and expected the Syrian people to decide their own country's fate.

But he made explicit that Moscow wanted Assad to put all options on the table after 21 months of violence that have claimed more than 45,000 lives.

"We actively encouraged... the Syrian leadership to maximally put into action its declared readiness for dialogue with the opposition," Lavrov told reporters when asked about his meeting Thursday with Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Muqdad.

He noted that Russia hoped to see Assad's government "underscore that they are open to discussing the widest range of items in line with the agreements reached in Geneva on June 30."

Syrian warplanes launched air raids in Damascus province yesterday after overnight bombardments and clashes across the country, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights watchdog said.



Iraqi protesters hold banners during a demonstration demanding the ouster of Premier Nuri al-Maliki yesterday and calling for the release of prisoners they claim were arrested on sectarian grounds by Iraq's Shia-led authorities in Samarra, the capital of Salaheddin province. The protesters also blocked the main highway to Syria and Jordan for the sixth consecutive day, a move Maliki slammed as "unacceptable."

PHOTO: AFP

Iran starts war games in Strait of Hormuz

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran started yesterday six days of naval drills in the Strait of Hormuz, the official IRNA news agency reported, maneuvers aimed at showcasing its military capabilities in what is a vital oil and gas shipping route.

Naval commander Habibollah Sayyari said the "Velayat 91" drills would last until Wednesday across an area of about 1 million square kilometers in the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman and northern parts of the Indian Ocean, IRNA said.

Sayyari said the goal of the maneuvers were to show "the armed forces' military capabilities" in defending Iran's borders as well as sending a message of peace and friendship to neighboring countries.

Iranian officials have often said Iran could block the strait - through which 40 percent of the world's sea-borne oil exports pass - if it came under military attack over its disputed nuclear program.

Iran held a similar 10-day drill last December and sent a submarine and a destroyer into the Gulf four months ago just as U.S. and allied navies were conducting exercises in the same waters to practice keeping oil shipping lanes open.

Pakistani Taliban wants negotiation

REUTERS, Dera Ismail Khan, Pakistan

The head of Pakistan's Taliban said his militia is willing to negotiate with the government but not disarm, a message delivered in a video given to Reuters yesterday.

The release of the 40-minute video follows three high-profile Taliban attacks in the northern city of Peshawar this month: an attack by multiple suicide bombers on the airport, the killing of a senior politician and eight others in a bombing and the kidnap of 22 paramilitary forces on Thursday.

The attacks underline the Taliban's ability to strike high-profile, well-protected targets even as the amount of territory it controls has shrunk and its leaders are picked off by U.S. drones.

"We believe in dialogue but it should

not be frivolous," Hakimullah Mehsud said. "Asking us to lay down arms is a joke."

In the video, Mehsud sits cradling a rifle next to his deputy, Wali ur-Rehman. Military officials say there has been a split between the two men but Mehsud said that was propaganda.

"Wali ur-Rehman is sitting with me here and we will be together until death," said Mehsud, pointing at his companion.

Pakistani officials did not immediately respond to calls seeking comment.

The Taliban said in a letter released Thursday that they wanted Pakistan to rewrite its laws and constitution to conform with Islamic law, break its alliance with the United States and stop interfering in the war in Afghanistan and focus on India instead.



Lawmakers, Obama meet on cliff edge

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama was yesterday set to press top lawmakers for a deal to avert huge tax hikes and growth-sapping spending cuts next week, but hopes for an end to the fiscal cliff crisis appear thin.

Wall Street reflected pessimism over prospects for a deal in bitterly divided and stalemated

Washington, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average slipping 88.45 points or 0.68 percent an hour into trade.

Obama will meet Republicans, House Speaker John Boehner and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, and Democratic Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi at the White House at 3:00 pm (2000 GMT).

But the last-ditch talks to head off the fiscal time bomb due to come into force on January 1, may be more about apportioning blame after weeks of political grandstanding.

Going into the talks, neither side showed any sign of shifting from their entrenched positions, in a crisis that threatens to reverse the fragile US recovery, rattle financial markets and cause global economic shockwaves.

Obama, now banking on a stopgap solution after talks on a grand debt and tax bargain with Boehner failed, wants taxes on American families earning more than \$250,000 a year to go up but to spare the middle class.

Photos show N Korea nuclear readiness

AP, Seoul, South Korea

North Korea has repaired flood damage at its nuclear test facility and could conduct a quick atomic explosion if it chose, though water streaming out of a test tunnel may cause problems, analysis of recent satellite photos indicates.

Washington and others are bracing for the possibility that if punished for a successful long-range rocket launch on Dec. 12 that the UN considers a cover for a banned ballistic missile test, North Korea's next step might be its third nuclear test.

Rocket and nuclear tests unnerved Washington and its allies because each new success puts North Korean scientists another step closer to perfecting a nuclear warhead small enough to put on a missile that could hit the mainland United States.

Another nuclear test, which North Korea's Foreign Ministry hinted at on the day of the rocket launch, would fit a pattern. Pyongyang conducted its first and second atomic explosions, in 2006 and 2009, weeks after receiving UN Security Council condemnation and sanctions for similar long-range rocket launches.

North Korea is thought to have enough plutonium for a handful of crude atomic bombs, and unveiled a uranium enrichment facility in 2010, but it must continue to conduct tests to master the miniaturization technology crucial for a true nuclear weapons program.

Analysts caution that only so much can be determined from satellite imagery, and it's very difficult to fully discern North Korea's plans. This is especially true for nuclear test preparations, which are often done deep within a mountain. North Korea, for instance, took many by surprise when it launched its rocket this month only several days after announcing technical problems.

Thatcher was ready for Falklands deal

National archives papers show

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

Margaret Thatcher was prepared to do a deal with Argentina after the invasion of the Falklands over the status of the islands, including the question of sovereignty, as she came under intense pressure from the US to avoid a military response, government papers released on Friday reveal.

UK government declarations and rhetoric at the time gave the impression that nothing short of the withdrawal of all Argentinian forces, the reaffirmation of British sovereignty and a return to the position as it was before the invasion would be acceptable. But the papers show Thatcher and her senior ministers were privately adopting a more flexible approach, including allowing a continuing Argentinian presence.

Less than two weeks after the Argentinian invasion on 2 April 1982, Thatcher described a "diplomatic solution" as being "a considerable prize". She was responding specifically to a plan whereby in return for withdrawing its troops Argentina would be represented on an interim commission and on Falkland Islands councils.

Francis Pym, the foreign secretary, is



recorded as saying: "It would be a remarkable achievement if this could be brought about, at a time when Britain's military position was still weak."

Asked in private evidence to the subsequent Franks committee of inquiry about her reaction to the invasion, Thatcher said: "I just say it was the worst, I think, moment of my life," the papers reveal. Asked if she was prepared to cede sovereignty over the islands if the islanders agreed, she replied: "Yes".

The disclosure that Thatcher was contemplating a peaceful solution to the Falklands dispute, even after the British taskforce had set sail, is contained in confidential annexes to cabinet minutes released under the so-called 30-year rule.

Egypt opposition leaders face 'incitement' probe

BBC ONLINE

Egypt's public prosecutor on Thursday ordered an inquiry into three prominent opposition leaders.

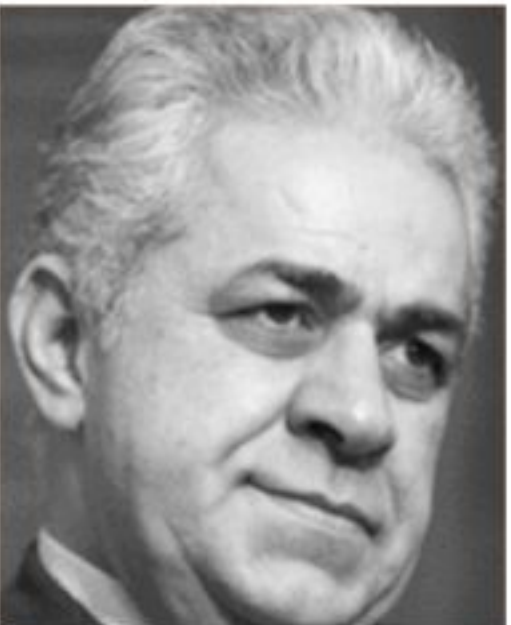
The men will be investigated over charges they "incited the overthrow" of President Mohammed Morsi.

The three men - Mohammed ElBaradei, Amr Mousa and Hamdeen Sabahi - formed an opposition coalition amid protests against Morsi last month.

There are fears the inquiry may worsen tensions between Morsi's supporters and his opponents.

The three opposition leaders had recently formed a coalition, the National Salvation Front, to take part in protests against Morsi.

Some of those rallies then turned violent when opposition protesters



Hamdeen Sabahi



Amr Mousa



Mohammed ElBaradei

Mahsoub, of the moderate Islamist Wasat party, is the second minister to resign this week.

The public prosecutor Talaat Ibrahim was appointed by Morsi last month, after his predecessor was sacked.

The move angered senior judges, who saw it as an attack on their authority.

US evacuates CAR embassy

AFP, Bangui, Central African Republic

The United States evacuated its embassy in the Central African Republic as President Francois Bozize's appeals for French and US help against rebels who have seized much of the country fell on deaf ears yesterday.

The United Nations on Thursday demanded that the rebels halt their nearly three-week offensive and urged Bozize's government to ensure the safety of civilians amid fears in the capital Bangui of a breakdown in law and order.

Washington said Thursday it had evacuated its embassy and temporarily halted all operations there.

NEWS IN brief

Putin makes US adoption ban law

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin yesterday signed into law a ban on the adoption of Russian children by American families that activists slammed for making orphans pawns in a diplomatic row between Moscow and Washington.

The law -- retaliation for a US law punishing Russian officials implicated in the 2009 prison death of the whistle-blowing attorney Sergei Magnitsky -- will come into force on January 1, the Kremlin said in a statement.



Gulf War era US general dies

AFP, Washington

Norman Schwarzkopf, the US general who drove Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait in 1991 as commander of the lightning campaign known as Operation Desert Storm, died Thursday at the age of 78.

Schwarzkopf, an American hero known popularly as "Stormin' Norman," died in Tampa, where he retired after his last posting as head of US Central



China tightens rules on internet

BBC ONLINE

China tightened its rules on internet usage to enforce a previous requirement that users fully identify themselves to service providers.

The move is part of a package of measures which state-run Xinhua news agency said would protect personal information.

But critics believe the government is trying to limit freedom of speech.

The announcement will be seen as evidence China's new leadership views the internet as a threat.

Hillary still resting in home

AFP, Washington

Outgoing US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who fell ill in early December and hasn't been seen in public since, will be back at her desk on Monday, her closest aide said Thursday.

"She's recuperating at home," and will take up her official duties again "next week" Philippe Reines wrote in brief email to AFP when asked about the health of Washington's most traveled

