

NEWS IN brief

Libyan president survives attack

AP, Tripoli

Libya's interim president says he has survived an assassination attempt in an oasis city in the country's southern deserts.

Mohammed al-Megarif, who is also head of parliament, told state TV late Sunday that he was unharmed in the attack.

He says unidentified assailants opened fire on the hotel where he was staying in Sabha overnight on Saturday.

He says that three of his bodyguards were wounded in clashes that lasted nearly three hours

Bolivia accuses US of plotting

BBC ONLINE

Bolivia has "irrefutable evidence" that the US has been working to destabilise the government of President Evo Morales, a senior minister has said.

Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana said proof of improper activities involving the US embassy would be given to President Obama.

Morales expelled the US ambassador in 2008 after accusing him of plotting against his government.

Morales has had an uneasy relationship with the US, ever since he came to power in January 2006, because of tensions over drug enforcement and the nationalisation of many foreign companies.

UK would fight to keep Falklands

AFP, London

Prime Minister David Cameron said Sunday Britain was prepared to fight militarily to keep the Falkland Islands if necessary, in the face of renewed Argentinian rhetoric over their future.

Cameron said Britain had "strong defences" in place on the islands and fast jets and troops were stationed there -- comments Buenos Aires rejected as "militaristic threats."

President Cristina Kirchner said this week that Argentina was forcibly stripped of the Falklands by Britain in "a blatant exercise of 19th-century colonialism" and demanded they be handed over to Argentina.

Berlusconi in election alliance

BBC ONLINE

Italy's former Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, is to join forces with the controversial Northern League party for next month's elections.

Berlusconi said the League and his own People of Freedom movement would try to form a centre-right government.

He also suggested he might not be the bloc's candidate for prime minister.

The Northern League, recently mired in a corruption scandal, opposes immigration and wants greater fiscal autonomy for northern Italy.

Religious riot in Mumbai kills 4

AFP, Mumbai

A row over an unpaid restaurant bill in a western Indian city escalated into clashes between Hindus and Muslims that injured 175 people and left four dead, police said yesterday.

The unrest broke out in Dhule in Maharashtra state on Sunday, with 113 policemen among the injured, while four people were killed in police firing to control the violence, Special Inspector General Deven Bharti told AFP.

Officials were maintaining a curfew imposed at the scene of the trouble and said they would assess the situation later on Monday.

N Ireland violence continues

AFP, Belfast, United Kingdom

Violence flared for the fourth night running in Northern Ireland on Sunday, hours after politicians and Church leaders held talks in a bid to quell a row over the flying of the British flag.

After three nights of rioting and attacks on police, Northern Ireland's chief police officer Matt Baggott said 52 officers had been injured, but he warned his force would deal firmly with the violence for as long as it was necessary.

"You may be assured there will be sufficient resources in the event of more disorder for however long is necessary," said Baggott, the PSNI

West, opposition reject Assad plan

Only Iran backs his stance; Dutch Patriot heads for Syria border

AFP, Damascus

A defiant speech by President Bashar al-Assad calling for peace in Syria on his terms has met rejection by the opposition and internationally, with only his ally Iran yesterday backing his stance.

Assad's plan was "detached from reality," a US State Department spokeswoman said, while Britain said Assad's address was "empty".

The office of EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said Europe's position remained that Assad should step down to permit a political transition.

And Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi told CNN he would endorse any decision by the Syrian people to put Assad on trial before the International Criminal Court for war crimes.

The opposition Syrian National Coalition noted that Assad had ruled out any dialogue with the rebels, making negotiations impossible.

Only Iran, which is supplying money, military advisors and, according to the United States, weapons to Assad's regime threw its weight behind its ally.

It was "yet another attempt by the regime to



A Dutch Patriot defence missile

cling to power and does nothing to advance the Syrian people's goal of a political transition," US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said in Washington.

"His initiative is detached from reality," she said. British Foreign Secretary William Hague said Assad's first speech since June was full of "empty promises" and would "fool no one".

The United States and Europe, which have declared the National Coalition the "legitimate representative" of the Syrian people, are press-

ing Assad to leave power as the first step to any process to restore peace in Syria.

But with Russia and China blocking any UN Security Council-approved international action against Assad's regime, the Syrian war is slipping ever deeper into bloodshed with fears of lasting sectarian fractures.

Meanwhile, the Netherlands' Patriot missile batteries yesterday began their journey to fellow Nato member Turkey where they are to defend civilians near the border from a possible Syrian attack.

Around 160 vehicles carrying the missiles and equipment for 300 Dutch support troops left the Bestkazerne military base in Vredepeel in the southeastern Netherlands.

The convoy is headed for Eemshaven port in the north of the country from where it will sail for Turkey and is expected to arrive around January 22.

The United Nations estimates more than 60,000 people have been killed since a brutal crackdown by Assad's forces on peaceful protests 21 months ago stirred the violence.



Abbas orders official use of 'State of Palestine'

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas gave orders Sunday for work to begin on new passports, ID cards, drivers' licences and stamps reading "State of Palestine," official media said.

The decree, carried by the official Wafa news agency, came in the wake of the Palestinians' successful bid late last year for non-member observer state status at the UN over intense Israeli and US opposition.

Abbas said the changed language on official documents would help strengthen the Palestinian state "on the ground and build its institutions... and its sovereignty over the its land." Last week, he ordered the foreign ministry and embassies around the world to begin using "State of Palestine" in official correspondence.

Previously, official documents issued by Abbas's government, including passports and other identification documents, had been labelled as issued by the Palestinian Authority, which he heads.

Israel has criticised the Palestinians for their successful bid for enhanced UN status, saying Palestinian statehood can only be achieved through bilateral talks.

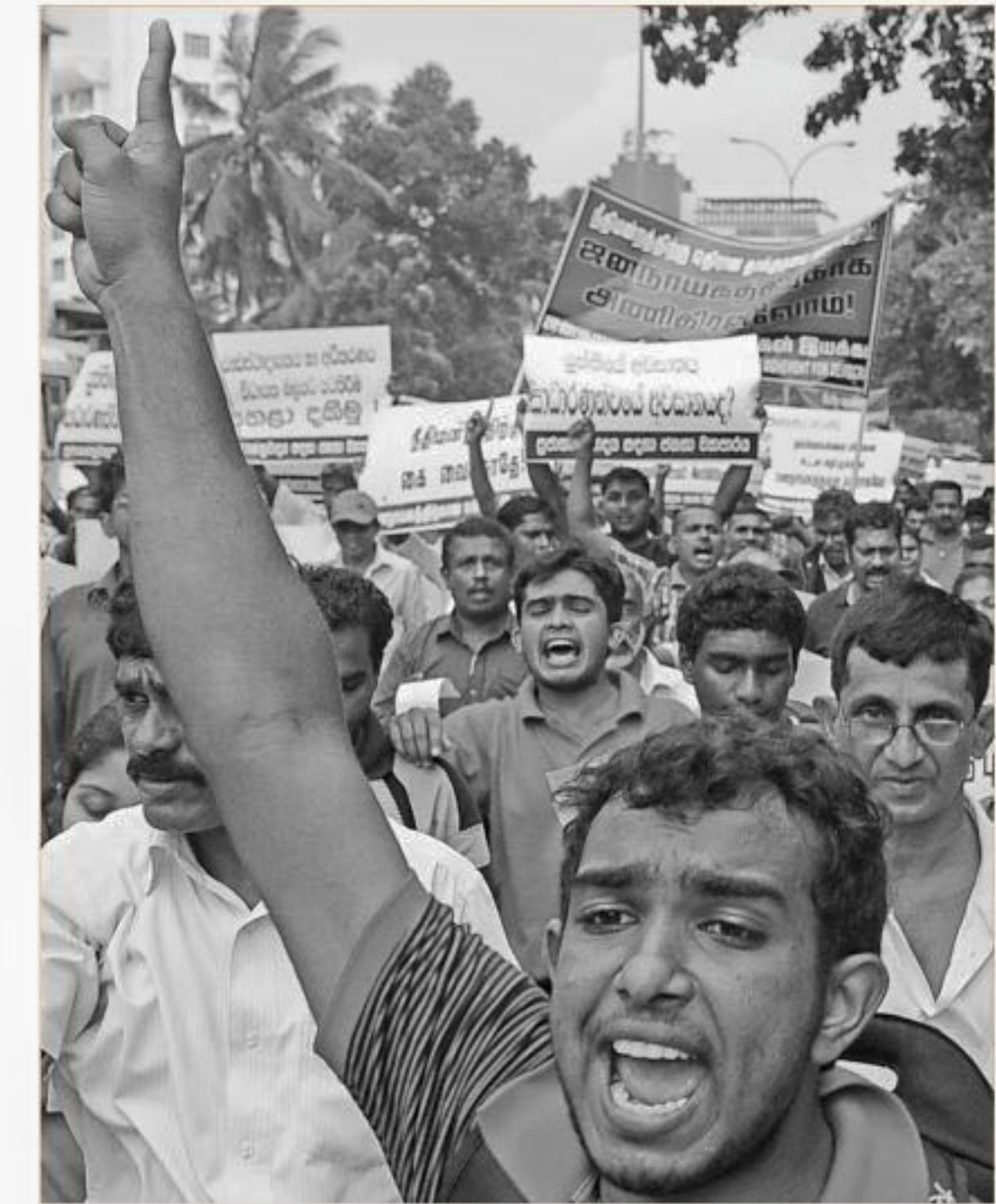


PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Marxist JVP party activists carry placards and shout slogans during a protest against government moves to sack the country's first woman chief justice amid allegations that her impeachment was a blow to democracy, in the capital Colombo yesterday. Sri Lanka's Court of Appeal yesterday ordered parliament to drop its controversial impeachment of the country's top judge.

CRISIS IN IRAQ

Elections seen as only answer

AFP, Baghdad

Massive rallies, a powerful cleric predicting an "Iraq spring" and Arabs and Kurds at loggerheads: Iraq is mired in a cycle of interlocking crises with elections increasingly seen as the only solution.

Almost since the moment the last US troops withdrew in December 2011, the country has been locked in a wave of disputes between political, ethnic and religious factions, with no significant laws passed since polls in March 2010.

And now, talk has revived of early elections in a bid to break a deadlock that only appears to be getting worse.

"Early elections might be the best solution," said Ihsan al-Shammari, a professor of politics at Baghdad University. "If these matters deepen, they will worsen divisions, and that's a very dangerous matter."

Provincial elections are set for April, with national polls not due until next year,

but politicians in Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law bloc have revived talk of dissolving parliament, initially mooted by the premier last June.

For the moment, the cabinet and parliament continue to meet, and while Maliki supporters may back new elections, an absolute majority of lawmakers is required to dissolve the 325-member Council of Representatives.

Analysts say Maliki has managed to survive thanks to tactical guile and poor organisation by his opponents, although he reportedly had to rely on Iran's backing to see off an effort to withdraw confidence from his government last year.

The latest crises reflect the lack of long-term solutions to years-old disputes, between Arabs and Kurds, between the central government in Baghdad and local authorities, and between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

ROW OVER CHAVEZ INAUGURATION

Opposition plans protests in Venezuela

AFP, Caracas

A top Venezuelan opposition leader called Sunday for street protests if the government delays the inauguration of ailing President Hugo Chavez, who has suffered complications following his latest round of cancer surgery.

Julio Borges, national coordinator of the opposition Justice First party, also promised to file complaints with unspecified international organisations, if the constitutionally-mandated January 10 swearing-in ceremony does not take place.

The opposition move came as it emerged as all but certain that illness will keep Chavez from being sworn in to a new six-year term on Thursday.

Chavez was re-elected on October 7 despite his debilitating battle with cancer and the strongest opposition challenge yet to his 14-year rule in Venezuela, an OPEC member with the world's largest proven oil reserves.

Since then, Chavez has undergone a fourth round of surgery in Cuba and, according to the government, developed a "serious pulmonary infection" that has led to a "respiratory insufficiency."

In the wake of word that Chavez was suffering complications, Vice President Nicolas Maduro called the swearing-in ceremony a "formality" and said the 58-year-old's inauguration can be indefinitely delayed without him having to give up the powers of the presidency, even on a temporary basis.

Obama picks Hagel for defence, Brennan for CIA

REUTERS, Washington

President Barack Obama yesterday nominated former Republican Senator Chuck Hagel as his next defense secretary and counterterrorism adviser John Brennan to head the CIA, potentially setting up a Senate confirmation battle on two fronts and establishing a tough tone to start his second term.

Mindful of the concerns about both Hagel and Brennan on Capitol Hill, Obama spoke at length about each in a White House ceremony, then turned over the microphone to outgoing Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and acting CIA Director Mike Morell to provide testimonials about their chosen replacements.

Obama urged the Senate to move quickly in confirming Hagel, a military veteran who served in Vietnam, and Brennan, who spent 25 years at the CIA.

"I hope that the Senate will act on these confirmations promptly. When it comes to national security, we don't like to leave a lot of gaps between the time that one set of leaders transitions out and another transitions in. So we need to get moving quickly on this," Obama said.

If confirmed by the Democratic-controlled Senate, Hagel and Brennan would fill out a national security team that Obama is building for his second term in office. He has already nominated Democratic Senator John Kerry as his



John Brennan

Chuck Hagel

secretary of state to replace the well-regarded Hillary Clinton.

Hagel clearly faces the toughest fight.

While senators are normally inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to someone from their ranks, this was not the case with Hagel, a maverick former senator from Nebraska.

As Hagel's name was floated for the post in recent weeks, many Republicans and some Democrats reacted with alarm, expressing deep concerns about past statements the moderate Republican has made. He has offered controversial views on key U.S. ally Israel, once complaining about the power of "the Jewish lobby" in Washington and urging direct talks with Iran over its nuclear ambitions.

Past remarks seen as disparaging to gays have drawn the ire of gay rights groups. A group called the Log Cabin Republicans published a full-page ad in The Washington Post that attacked "Chuck Hagel's record on gay rights."

Obama could also face opposition from human rights groups over his choice of Brennan, a CIA veteran who withdrew from consideration for the spy agency's top job in 2008 after questions were raised about his views on "enhanced interrogation techniques" - which are widely considered to be torture - that were used on terrorism suspects during the Bush administration.

Hillary Clinton back at work

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was set to return to work yesterday after a month-long absence caused by a series of health scares, including a blood clot in her head, the State Department said.

Hillary has been sidelined for four weeks, since she was taken ill on her return from a trip to Europe on December 7, and briefly hospitalised for a few days in New York last week.

But the State Department's schedule for the week ahead released late Sunday revealed the top diplomat will meet at 9:15 am (14:15 GMT) on Monday with her assistant secretaries in Washington. The talks will be closed to the press.

A series of other meetings is planned through the week, including talks at the White House on Tuesday with Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and National Security Adviser Tom Donilon, which will also most likely not be open to TV cameras.



'Laden film torture is fiction'

AFP, Washington

Bloody interrogations like those depicted in Hollywood's take on the hunt for Osama bin Laden "Zero Dark Thirty" never really happened, according to the former CIA official who ran such programs.

"The truth is that no one was bloodied or beaten in the enhanced interrogation program which I supervised from 2002 to 2007," Jose Rodriguez wrote in a Washington Post article headlined: "Sorry Hollywood. What we did wasn't torture."

The former CIA official was weighing in on the controversy over the depiction of US intelligence practices in "Zero Dark Thirty," which hits most US theaters on January 11.

Directed by Academy Award-winning Kathryn Bigelow, the movie tells the story of the decade-long search for Bin Laden



scene showing the torture of detainees, who eventually provide critical information for locating bin Laden.

But Rodriguez said the torture scenes were pure fiction.

"Nobody was hung from ceilings. The filmmakers stole the dog-collar scenes from the abuses committed by Army personnel at Abu Ghraib in Iraq. No such thing was ever done at CIA 'black sites,'" he said, highlighting careful monitoring of the interrogations.

"To give a detainee a single open-fingered slap across the face, CIA officers had to receive written authorization from Washington," Rodriguez said.

after the 9/11 attacks, climaxing in the dramatic, deadly raid in May 2011 on his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

Already generating major Oscar buzz, "Zero Dark Thirty" begins with a

11 fishermen

FROM PAGE 1

Pathuarterk area in Ukhia around 8:00pm Sunday.

They later handed the arrestee over to the Ukhia police, added the SI.

Hamidul told police that their trawler had gone fishing in the deep sea with 16 fishermen -- 11 Bangladeshis and five Rohingyas. On Wednesday, the Rohingyas on board swooped on the Bangladeshis.

According to Hamid, his fellow Rohingya fishermen were Ali Chand, 25, Bashir Ahmed, 35, Sabbir Ahmed, 24, and Shaheen, 26. They along with their families had been living illegally in Kolatoli, Boidderghona and Fishery Ghat areas of Cox's Bazar, and in Mohipur area

of Patharghata.

SI Sayeed Miah said the Rohingya fishermen had been heading towards Myanmar with the 74-horsepower trawler.

But, the engine broke near Patuarterk. On information police with the help of local fishermen recovered the trawler and arrested Hamidul. The four other Rohingya fishermen had managed to flee, said the SI.

Officer-in-Charge of Ukhia Police Station Appela Raju Naha said they had gleaned important information from Hamidul.

Assistant Sub-Inspector Joynal Abedin of Inani Police Outpost said they had identified eight of the victims from Hamidul's

description. They are Jasim Uddin of Gorakghata in Moheshkhali, Rafiq, Belal, Syed Alam, Sohag, Jafar, Abbas and Abul Mistry of Patharghata.

Ukhia police sources said the owners of the attacked trawler, Babul and Sentu of Patharghata upazila, had filed a General Diary (GD) with the local police in connection with the robbery.

When Babul was contacted over mobile phone, he said he did not have any trawler and that he did not know anything about the robbery or the killing.

Additional Police Superintendent of Cox's Bazar Babul Akter said he would interrogate the arrestee again.