

Rebels overrun key Syria airbase

UN peace envoy meets Russian, US officials for solution

AFP, Damascus

Rebels yesterday overran Taftanaz airbase in north Syria, a watchdog said, marking a significant advance that came as peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi met with top US and Russian officials on the Syrian crisis.

"The fighting at Taftanaz military airport ended at 11:00am and the base is entirely in rebel hands," said Syrian Observatory for Human Rights director Rami Abdel Rahman.

The base soon thereafter, however, came under aerial attack by government fighter jets, the Britain-based Observatory said in a later statement.

The capture of the base marks an important advance for the rebels, who control vast swathes of Syria's north and east and are battling President Bashar al-Assad's forces in most major cities, including on the outskirts of

Damascus.

"This is the largest airbase to be seized since the revolt began" nearly 22 months ago, Abdel Rahman told AFP by phone.

The rebels have previously taken control of the relatively small Hamdan airport in Albu Kamal on the Iraqi border in the east, and the Marj al-Sultan military airport in Damascus province.

The assault on Taftanaz was led by jihadist fighters from the Al-Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham and Islamic Vanguard battalions, as well as other rebel groups, the Observatory said.

Many soldiers and officers fled the base at dawn, while the total number of casualties for each side was not immediately available.

The rebels seized several military vehicles and a major weapons

depot.

Government forces, however, managed to pull out most of the 60 helicopters deployed at the airbase, leaving behind 20 choppers that are no longer in working condition, the Observatory said.

News of the capture of the airbase came as Brahimi, the UN-Arab League special envoy on Syria was meeting in Geneva with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and US Undersecretary of State William Burns.

They made no comment as they arrived for the closed-door talks at the UN headquarters in Geneva.

The discussions are taking place a day after Syria accused Brahimi of "flagrant bias", casting doubt on whether he could stay on as international mediator.

Damascus lashed out at the veteran Algerian diplomat after he described proposals Assad made on Sunday for a "political solution" to the 22-month conflict as "one-sided".

Brahimi attacked Assad's plan to keep fighting rebel "terrorists" and ignore opposition groups tied to them, in comments to the BBC.

Before the spat, there had been some hope that yesterday's talks in Geneva could produce a clearer idea of how to move towards a transitional government in Syria, where the UN estimates more than 60,000 people have died since the outbreak of the revolt against Assad's regime in March 2011.

In a related development, oil-rich Saudi Arabia yesterday announced it was sending aid to the value of \$10 million to Syrian refugees in Jordan affected by the worst winter storms to lash the region in the past decade.

Obama harped on all white male cabinet

REUTERS, Washington

The first black US president is coming under fire from some of his own Democratic Party for naming a stream of white men to key cabinet and leadership posts in his second administration.

President Barack Obama on Thursday named Jack Lew as his Treasury secretary, the fourth white male he has named to the most prized cabinet posts in recent weeks.

Lew's nomination follows Obama's pick of Senator John Kerry to replace Hillary Clinton as secretary of state. He has also named former Senator Chuck Hagel to be defense Secretary and John Brennan to head the Central Intelligence Agency.

Against this, he lost the first Hispanic woman in the cabinet when Labor Secretary Hilda Solis announced her resignation on Wednesday. And last month Lisa Jackson, who is black, announced she was stepping down as head of the Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's embarrassing as hell," New York Democrat Charles Rangel, one of the most senior black members of Congress, said of the Obama appointments.

Republicans joined in the criticism with former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee accusing Obama of waging a "war on women," using the same words Democrats coined to criticize Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney during the election campaign last year.

NEWS IN brief

C Africa rivals agree to unity govt

AFP, Libreville

The government and rebels in the Central African Republic have agreed to form a government of national unity under President Francois Bozize and to hold elections in one year.

The plan, reached in the Gabonese capital Libreville, also calls for a ceasefire and for the appointment of a prime minister drawn from the opposition.

Under the plan, legislative elections will be

Japan unveils stimulus package

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's new government yesterday unveiled a \$226.5 billion stimulus plan in the latest bid to boost the world's number three economy, with plans to rebuild disaster-hit areas and beef up the military.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who came to power in a landslide election victory last month, followed through with one of his key pledges by outlining details of a big-spending plan designed

Russia to allow few US adoptions

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian children whose adoptions have already been approved by courts will go to the United States despite a blanket ban on all American adoptions, a Kremlin spokesman said yesterday.

"Those who have received a court decision will go," President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told AFP. "Those who do not have a decision will not go."

He declined to provide any details but Russian officials say that 52 children had been in the process of being adopted by US parents when the hugely controversial ban on US adoptions entered force on January 1.

US flu outbreak kills 18

AFP, Washington

The United States was in the grip Thursday of a deadly influenza outbreak that has hit harder and earlier than in previous years, and has claimed the lives of at least 18 children.

"It looks like the worst year we've had since 2003-2004," said Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

The epidemic, which broke out in early December, has caused some 2,200 hospitalizations across the United States, federal health

IAEA chief not hopeful on Iran

AFP, Tokyo

The UN nuclear chief yesterday said he was not hopeful of much progress in obtaining access to facilities the West believes Iran is using as part of an atomic weapons programme.

Yukiya Amano, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said "the outlook is uncertain, as to whether we can reach an agreement on January 16", when his officers meet with their Iranian counterparts.

42 killed in China landslide

AFP, Beijing

A landslide killed at least 42 people including seven from a single family when it smashed into a remote village in southwestern China yesterday, state media said.

Another two people were sent to hospital after being rescued from the debris while at least two more were still missing after the landslide engulfed 16 homes in the village of Gaopo, the official news agency Xinhua said.

Photos posted on Yunnan Web, run by the Yunnan provincial government showed rescuers in orange uniforms digging in wide swathes of clumpy mud against a backdrop of snow-covered, terraced hills.

"The landslide, which brought about several hundred thousand cubic metres of watery mud to the village, buried all of the houses there," Xinhua quoted a local rescue team leader, Sun Anfa, as saying.

More than 1,000 rescuers were sent to the site of the landslide, which was estimated to be 300 metres long, 80 metres wide and 30 metres deep, according to authorities.

Snow was visible in images of the rescue, in an area that has experienced unusually low temperatures in recent weeks, with China suffering what authorities have called its coldest winter in 28 years.

The Communist Party's top leaders Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, along with Premier Wen Jiabao, ordered "all-out efforts to rescue victims", Xinhua said.



Palestinian activists set up an "outpost" in the highly disputed E1 area, an area Israel said it would build thousands of new settler homes, of the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday. Six weeks ago, Israel announced plans to build thousands of settler homes in the largely uninhabited E1 area, in a move which sparked a global outcry.

PHOTO: AFP

Heroics prevent another US school shooting

AFP, Los Angeles

A high school student in California walked into class on Thursday armed with a shotgun, shot one classmate and missed another before staff "heroics" helped prevent further bloodshed.

The 16-year-old gunman's victim was airlifted to hospital where he was in a "critical condition" after the shooting at a high school in Taft, north of Los Angeles, said Kern County Sheriff Donny Youngblood.

After the shots were fired, a teacher and a campus supervisor arrived and engaged the shooter in conversation, allowing the rest of the 28-member class to get out safely.

"The student was still armed with a shotgun, and they stayed and... distracted him in a conversation, allowing the students to get out of the classroom and ultimately talking the student down," Youngblood told reporters.

The incident happened around 9:00am and the suspect was taken into custody about 20 minutes later, according to the Los Angeles Times. Taft is some 120 miles north of Los Angeles.

The shooting comes weeks after the massacre of 26 people including 20 young children at a school in Newtown, Connecticut, which has revived America's perennial debate about gun control.

Savile 'predatory' sex offender

REUTERS, London

The late British TV presenter Jimmy Savile physically abused hundreds of people over six decades, according to a police-led report on Friday which said he carried out attacks at the BBC and at hospitals where he did voluntary work.

Of his victims, 73 percent were under 18 and 82 percent were female. The oldest was 42 and the youngest just 8.

"Savile's offending footprint was vast, predatory and opportunistic," Commander Peter Spindler told reporters.

Savile, one of the BBC's biggest stars of the 1970s and 80s received a knighthood from the Queen for charity work. He died in 2011, aged 84, a year before allegations about his abusive behaviour emerged in a TV documentary.

Yesterday's report said he had commit-



ted 214 criminal offences including 34 rapes or serious sexual assaults across the country.

His offending first occurred in 1955 in the northern English city of Manchester and the last attack was in 2009, the report said. He abused people at the BBC from 1965 including in 2006 at the last recording of popular weekly show Top of the Pops.

He also targeted people at hospitals over 30 years from 1965, including at the renowned Great Ormond Street children's hospital in London.

In all, 600 people had come forward to police with information of which 450 related to Savile. The report, issued jointly by London police and the NSPCC children's charity, said it was likely there would be more victims who did not feel able to come forward.

Friday's report is one of 14 launched

Mali forces launch attack on Islamists

AFP, Bamako

Malian government forces yesterday launched an offensive against Islamists who control the north of the country with backing from the French and other foreign military, military and political sources said.

The attack was aimed at stemming advances made by al-Qaeda-linked radicals who this week triggered international alarm with a push south towards the capital, Bamako, a military officer told AFP.

"Our offensive has started," the officer said on condition of anonymity. "The objective is to retake total control of the town of Konna and to proceed from there."

He added that "military planes from friendly countries" were being used in the offensive while a Malian government official said the operation had the support of French and European armed forces.

With the situation on the ground developing rapidly, France advised all its expatriates not involved in essential services to leave Mali immediately.

French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian was in contact with US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta and was due to talk to his British and German counterparts later in the day.



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